

## Trilateral Counterterrorism Cooperation in the Sulu-Sulawesi Seas: Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines as a Model of Inclusive Governance for Regional Security

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### ABSTRACT

Since its establishment in 2017, the *Trilateral Cooperative Arrangement (TCA)*, commonly known as Indomalphi, has marked a significant milestone in the collective effort of Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines to address terrorism and transnational crime in the Sulu-Sulawesi Seas. This maritime zone remains one of Southeast Asia’s most volatile areas, frequently exploited by transnational armed groups such as Abu Sayyaf and ISIS-affiliated networks for kidnappings, arms smuggling, and illicit recruitment. While initially centered on coordinated maritime patrols and intelligence sharing, Indomalphi has gradually evolved into a platform embodying *inclusive governance* in regional security: combining military coordination, maritime diplomacy, intelligence cooperation, and civil society participation through deradicalization programs and local capacity building. Employing a qualitative approach through literature review and policy analysis, this study evaluates the extent to which Indomalphi can be considered a model of inclusive governance in promoting *good governance on peace and security*. Findings indicate that the initiative has enhanced transparency and accountability among its member states, reduced bilateral security rivalries, and strengthened the legitimacy of counterterrorism policies through multi-actor engagement. Nevertheless, challenges remain, including limited resources, uneven military capabilities, and reliance on shifting domestic political commitments. Ultimately, Indomalphi serves not only as a short-term security response but also as a regional diplomatic laboratory to test the effectiveness of inclusive security governance in conflict-prone maritime zones. The study concludes that Indomalphi’s relative success provides an important precedent for other Global South states in designing inclusive security cooperation frameworks that align with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

**Keywords:** *Indomalphi, counterterrorism, inclusive governance, regional security, ASEAN, Sulu-Sulawesi*

### INTRODUCTION

The Sulu-Sulawesi Seas constitute one of the most complex maritime spaces in Southeast Asia. This tri-border zone, encompassing southern Mindanao in the Philippines, Sabah in Malaysia, and North Sulawesi in Indonesia, has long been associated with piracy, arms trafficking, and insurgent mobility. The porousness of maritime borders makes the area a fertile ground for transnational crime and terrorism, particularly for groups such as the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), Jemaah Islamiyah, and more recently ISIS-affiliated cells (Batongbacal, 2019). Empirically, or in *das sein*, this maritime space represents a persistent security dilemma: while states attempt to consolidate sovereignty, non-state actors exploit weak enforcement capacity, creating cycles of violence and mistrust. Ideally, or in *das sollen*, the region is envisioned as a stable and

cooperative maritime commons under the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC), which emphasizes regional peace and stability through dialogue, inclusivity, and rule-based cooperation (Acharya, 2014). The discrepancy between these two realities underscores the urgent need for innovative governance approaches. Historically, maritime security cooperation in Southeast Asia has concentrated on the Malacca Strait, where Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore conducted coordinated patrols to combat piracy and armed robbery (Collins, 2019). The Sulu-Sulawesi Seas, however, remained under-governed for decades, largely due to domestic insurgencies in the Philippines and overlapping territorial sensitivities between the three littoral states (De Castro, 2020). The emergence of the Trilateral Cooperative Arrangement (TCA) in 2017 marked a critical shift, as Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines institutionalized their security coordination in this maritime frontier. Known as Indomalphi, the arrangement initially emphasized maritime and aerial patrols, but it soon expanded to include intelligence sharing, capacity building, and civil society engagement.

Despite this progress, academic literature remains limited in its treatment of Indomalphi as a case of inclusive governance. Much of the scholarship evaluates its effectiveness in reducing kidnappings-for-ransom or enhancing interoperability among naval forces (Laksmana, 2018). Less attention has been devoted to its governance dimension: how Indomalphi not only coordinates state-centric military responses but also integrates non-military actors, fosters trust, and legitimizes policies through participatory approaches. This gap in the literature provides a strong justification for the present study, which seeks to conceptualize Indomalphi as a laboratory of inclusive governance in counterterrorism cooperation. This research argues that Indomalphi represents a pioneering model of security governance in the Global South. Unlike conventional counterterrorism frameworks that focus exclusively on hard power, Indomalphi incorporates diplomatic dialogue, civil society participation, and community-based resilience programs. By doing so, it transcends the narrow scope of military cooperation and evolves into a governance-oriented initiative. The contribution of this article lies in framing Indomalphi not simply as a tactical counterterrorism tool but as an experiment in inclusive governance, which can provide theoretical and practical lessons for other conflict-prone maritime zones. The purpose of this research is therefore twofold: first, to evaluate the extent to which Indomalphi can be considered a model of inclusive governance in regional security, and second, to assess its implications for broader debates on security governance in Southeast Asia and the Global South.

## **METHODS**

This study employs a qualitative descriptive-analytical method. The research is primarily based on secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, government policy documents, official statements from the Ministries of Defense and Foreign Affairs of Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, as well as reports from international organizations such as ASEAN and the United Nations. In addition, credible media reports were analyzed to capture recent developments in Indomalphi's implementation.

The type of data is therefore predominantly textual and policy-oriented. Literature review was used as the main technique for collecting data, systematically identifying patterns and themes relevant to counterterrorism cooperation and inclusive governance. Policy analysis was employed to examine official documents, joint communiqués, and agreements, providing insight into the institutional design of Indomalphi. Content analysis was further conducted to identify discourses around transparency, accountability, and inclusivity.

The analytical framework of this study rests on three variables: security cooperation (encompassing military and intelligence measures), inclusive governance mechanisms (involving transparency, civil society participation, and capacity building), and regional security outcomes (reflected in the reduction of violence, enhancement of trust, and policy legitimacy). Data analysis involved thematic coding of sources into these variables, allowing for triangulation between academic literature, policy documents, and media reports. This methodological design ensures a comprehensive understanding of Indomalphi not only as a counterterrorism mechanism but also as a governance experiment.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Evolution of Indomalphi: From Military Patrols to Inclusive Governance**

The establishment of the Trilateral Cooperative Arrangement (TCA) in 2017, popularly known as Indomalphi, signaled a watershed moment in regional maritime security cooperation. Unlike previous bilateral arrangements which were often ad hoc and fragmented, Indomalphi introduced a formalized trilateral mechanism between Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. At its inception, the initiative sought to address the acute threat of kidnappings-for-ransom and the movement of terrorist networks across porous maritime boundaries, particularly in the aftermath of the Marawi siege in the Philippines in 2017, when ISIS-linked fighters exploited maritime routes for logistics and escape (De Castro, 2020). The agreement represented a practical recognition that no single state could secure the Sulu-Sulawesi maritime space in isolation, and that cooperative security measures were indispensable.

From a governance perspective, Indomalphi reflects a progressive shift from state-centric defense policies toward more inclusive and participatory forms of regional security. As Acharya (2014) argues, the concept of security communities in Southeast Asia is rooted in the idea of collective responsibility and shared norms, rather than traditional balance-of-power dynamics. Indomalphi embodies this principle by attempting to harmonize diverse national interests into a collaborative framework. Yet, the initiative's success has not only been in tactical deterrence of maritime crimes but also in fostering a new governance model that integrates transparency, accountability, and even civil society participation. The evolution of Indomalphi can be divided into several distinct phases, each marked by different emphases and institutional innovations. Table 1 below outlines this development, while the narrative that follows elaborates on the governance dimensions of each stage.

**Table 1. Evolution of Indomalphi (2017–2023)**

Phase	Year(s)	Key Characteristics	Governance Dimension
Launch Phase	2017–2018	Establishment of coordinated maritime and air patrols; designation of transit corridors	State-centric military cooperation; sovereignty-sensitive trust-building
Consolidation Phase	2019–2020	Creation of Intelligence Fusion Centers (IFCs); increased frequency of joint meetings	Information-sharing, institutional transparency, and interoperability
Expansion Phase	2021–2022	Inclusion of civil society groups in deradicalization and awareness programs; livelihood support for coastal communities	Multi-actor engagement and community resilience
Regional Integration Phase	2023–Present	Alignment with ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC); dialogue with external partners (e.g., Japan, Australia)	Regional legitimacy, institutionalization, and inclusivity

Source: Compiled by the author based on official documents and secondary literature, (ASEAN, 2017; Makmur, 2020; Irawan, 2022; ASEAN Secretariat, 2023).

As shown in Table 1, the trajectory of Indomalphi reveals a gradual transformation from narrow military cooperation toward inclusive security governance. The launch phase was understandably dominated by military concerns, as the three states were responding to immediate threats of terrorism and piracy. During this stage, sovereignty sensitivities were paramount, and therefore, the focus remained on coordinated but carefully delimited patrols in designated transit corridors. Transparency was minimal, but trust-building efforts began through regular meetings among defense ministers. In the consolidation phase, the initiative progressed to the establishment of Intelligence Fusion Centers (IFCs) in Tawau (Malaysia), Bongao (Philippines), and Tarakan (Indonesia). These IFCs served as hubs for real-time information exchange on suspicious vessels, terrorist movements, and piracy incidents (Laksmana, 2018). The institutionalization of information-sharing enhanced transparency and accountability, reducing the risk of misunderstandings and bilateral suspicion. Importantly, this phase demonstrated that inclusive governance does not only mean involving non-state actors but also strengthening inter-state accountability mechanisms.

The expansion phase marked a turning point. Recognizing that military patrols alone could not address the root causes of insecurity, Indomalphi began to involve civil society and local communities. Non-governmental organizations, religious leaders, and community associations in Mindanao and Sabah were engaged in deradicalization campaigns and counter-narratives against extremist propaganda (Tan, 2022). Livelihood programs supported by local governments were integrated into security policies, thereby reducing communities' vulnerability to terrorist recruitment. In this sense, inclusive governance was operationalized by connecting counterterrorism with socioeconomic development. Finally, in the regional integration phase, Indomalphi sought to anchor itself within the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC). Dialogues with ASEAN and

external partners such as Japan and Australia have been initiated, ensuring that the initiative is not seen merely as a trilateral arrangement but as part of broader regional security architecture (Collins, 2019). This phase represents the maturation of Indomalphi into a model of inclusive governance that bridges national, regional, and even global security frameworks. The inclusive governance dimension of Indomalphi can be further illustrated by examining three key mechanisms: transparency and accountability, civil society participation, and capacity building. Transparency was institutionalized through trilateral ministerial meetings, which produced joint communiqués and publicly announced initiatives. This openness helped reduce bilateral mistrust, especially between Malaysia and the Philippines, whose relations have historically been strained by the Sabah territorial dispute (Acharya, 2014). Civil society participation was evident in community-level deradicalization initiatives, where local religious leaders played an important role in delegitimizing extremist narratives and promoting peaceful coexistence. Capacity building, meanwhile, involved livelihood assistance to fishermen and coastal dwellers, whose economic vulnerabilities often made them susceptible to recruitment or exploitation by armed groups (Batongbacal, 2019).

Nevertheless, Indomalphi is not without limitations. The most glaring challenge is the asymmetry of military capabilities. Indonesia possesses relatively robust naval and air assets, while the Philippines struggles with limited resources and outdated equipment (De Castro, 2020). This imbalance creates dependency and risks undermining perceptions of equality within the arrangement. Domestic political transitions also pose difficulties, as demonstrated by shifts in Philippine counterinsurgency policies under different administrations. Furthermore, the sustainability of the initiative is jeopardized by limited financial resources, since the three states have yet to establish a permanent funding mechanism. Despite these constraints, the initiative offers important theoretical and practical lessons. First, it demonstrates that inclusive governance in counterterrorism is not only possible but necessary in fragile maritime zones. Second, it shows that regional security cooperation in the Global South can be innovative and context-sensitive, rather than simply imitating Western models. Third, Indomalphi contributes to the broader agenda of the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 16 on peace, justice, and strong institutions.

Indomalphi's governance-oriented approach can also be contrasted with other maritime security regimes, such as the Malacca Strait Patrols. While the latter focused almost exclusively on hard security measures, Indomalphi has integrated non-military actors and development-oriented programs. This makes it a more holistic model, capable of addressing not only symptoms but also structural drivers of insecurity. In this sense, the initiative may serve as a template for other regions facing similar challenges, such as the Gulf of Guinea in West Africa.

### **Inclusive Governance Components**

The concept of inclusive governance within the Indomalphi arrangement encompasses several interrelated dimensions that collectively augment the initiative from a mere security framework to a governance-oriented mechanism. In this section,

The narrative explores three principal components transparency and accountability, civil society participation, and capacity building each contributing to a more holistic understanding of Indomalphi as a model of inclusive governance. Beginning with transparency and accountability, Indomalphi has made deliberate efforts to institutionalize intergovernmental communication and operational visibility. From the outset, the three states initiated regular trilateral defense and foreign affairs meetings, which culminated in publicly issued communiqués that communicated shared goals and progress. This practice has enhanced mutual trust, particularly between Malaysia and the Philippines, whose historical tensions were partially eased through open coordination in maritime operations (Guiang, 2018). The formal establishment of Intelligence Fusion Centers (IFCs) further reinforced transparency; these centers serve as joint platforms that facilitate real-time sharing of maritime incident reports, suspicious vessel intelligence, and threat assessments, thereby reducing misinterpretations and enhancing operational synergy (Laksmana, 2018). The de facto transparency achieved through these mechanisms reflects key tenets of inclusive governance, where accountability among member states reduces friction and promotes sustained collaboration.

Moving to civil society participation, this facet constitutes perhaps the most innovative and transformative component of Indomalphi’s inclusive governance paradigm. Recognizing that law enforcement alone cannot address the underlying social triggers of radicalization or criminal recruitment, graduate-level literature has begun documenting how civil society actors—local NGOs, faith-based organizations, and community leaders have been enlisted in deradicalization and awareness programs. Although empirical scholarship remains limited, Tan (2022) emphasizes that the inclusion of religious leaders in parts of Mindanao and Sabah has generated more socially embedded counter-narratives against extremist ideologies. This form of “bottom-up” engagement helps convey state messages in culturally resonant ways and strengthens incentives for community-level resilience. It also aligns with broader ASEAN and UN goals of integrating local actors into security governance, fostering a shift away from purely militarized responses.

Furthermore, recent studies highlight how Indomalphi’s governance strategy has extended into livelihood support for vulnerable coastal communities. In regions where poverty, livelihood insecurity, and marginalized access to economic opportunities create fertile ground for illicit recruitment, programs that provide alternative income sources can function as crime and terrorism prevention mechanisms. For instance, descriptive findings in Sitompul and Retnaningsih (2021) show that coordinated efforts on the part of local authorities to support fishers and island dwellers especially through economic empowerment programs have begun to mitigate susceptibility to criminal influence. Such initiatives illustrate a multi-actor approach in which development interventions complement security operations, embodying the inclusive governance ethos by bridging state, civilian, and local community domains. Another vital dimension of inclusive governance within Indomalphi is capacity building both at the institutional and community level. Japan’s potential entry as a capacity-building partner illustrates this trend. Analysts have advocated for a Memorandum of Understanding between Japan and Indomalphi, highlighting Tokyo’s



promise in enhancing maritime domain awareness, surveillance capabilities, and intelligence-sharing infrastructure (Fraser, 2024). Such external partnerships enable member states to augment their technical capabilities sustainably, helping to narrow disparities in military and technological capacities among the three countries. Japan’s provision of advanced surveillance equipment and joint training programs, particularly for coast guard personnel, epitomizes how external resources can support governance enhancements without overriding domestic leadership or autonomy (Fraser, 2024). This blend of internal coalition-building and external capacity support underlines how inclusive governance in security contexts can transcend boundaries, inviting regional partners into a cooperative framework. Civil-military synergy also plays a significant role in capacity building. For instance, *The Diplomat* (2019) reported that Indomalphi’s 2019 joint land exercise in Tarakan, North Kalimantan involved army representatives from all three countries working on border cooperation, aimed at countering transnational crimes at land-sea boundaries. The exercise served not only operational readiness but also trust-building among the services, fostering institutional compatibility and procedural familiarity. Such exercises help broaden the institutional base of cooperation, ensuring it encompasses not just maritime actors but the broader security apparatus.

Despite the significant advances in inclusive governance, challenges remain. Tuned criticism has emerged regarding lingering distrust, coordination gaps, and duplication of efforts across government agencies, including defense, security, intelligence, and maritime law enforcement (Quilop, 2023). Harmonizing the roles of these multiple bureaucracies is essential in preventing inefficiencies. The Asia Pacific Pathways to Progress Foundation (APPF) and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) forum highlighted the need for deeper inter-agency coordination to make the arrangement more cohesive and to enable land-based threat responses to align with maritime policies (APPF, 2019). These critiques underscore that inclusive governance requires not only multi-actor participation but also harmonious institutional alignment across state structures. Moreover, sustainability poses another challenge. While involvement of civil society and external partners can amplify impact, it also risks over-reliance on non-state actors or donor goodwill. To ensure long-term governance integrity, mechanisms must be institutionalized through formal agreements and embedded in national defense and development planning. Otherwise, gains may dissipate with shifts in political leadership or reductions in funding. As Balderas (2024) suggests, strengthening regional cooperation practice through centralized databases, strategic development models, and expanded agency coordination as well as deeper integration with ASEAN structures will be vital to future-proof the governance inclusive model that Indomalphi seeks to embody.

In sum, Indomalphi’s inclusive governance components have evolved into a multidimensional framework combining transparency, civil society engagement, and capacity building. Transparency mechanisms such as public communiqués and IFCs have advanced accountability and trust. Civil society inclusion, particularly through grassroots deradicalization and livelihood initiatives, introduces community resilience into security strategies. Capacity building, facilitated by exercises, technical partnerships, and

institutional coordination, enhances operational integrity and adaptability. Nevertheless, enduring success of this approach hinges on institutional harmonization, sustainable funding, and deeper integration with regional governance systems. Indomalphi thus stands as a dynamic model of inclusive governance a security platform that integrates states, communities, and partners to address maritime threats in a comprehensive manner.

### **Challenges and Limitations**

Inclusive governance in counterterrorism cooperation, particularly within the trilateral collaboration of Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines in the Sulu-Sulawesi Seas, faces numerous challenges and limitations. While the initiative represents a milestone in regional security cooperation, structural, institutional, socio-political, and operational constraints hinder its effectiveness. This section critically examines these challenges and limitations, situating them within the broader literature on governance, security, and regional cooperation. One of the most significant challenges is the divergence of national interests among the three states. Although Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines share a common concern over terrorism, piracy, and transnational crime, their strategic priorities differ. Indonesia has emphasized maritime security and sovereignty protection in the North Natuna Sea, Malaysia has prioritized border control in Sabah, and the Philippines has been primarily preoccupied with internal insurgencies in Mindanao (Morada, 2020). These diverging interests complicate consensus-building, as each state seeks to frame cooperation according to its own national security agenda.

The trilateral mechanism has, at times, been undermined by this divergence. For instance, joint maritime patrols and aerial surveillance initiatives have been inconsistently implemented due to different interpretations of operational rules of engagement (Batalla & Tudio, 2021). Moreover, political sensitivities related to sovereignty issues restrict the extent of intelligence sharing and joint operations. This demonstrates that while inclusive governance emphasizes shared responsibility, the heterogeneity of interests among participating states creates enduring challenges.

Another limitation lies in the weak institutionalization of trilateral counterterrorism cooperation. Unlike ASEAN, which has formal structures, charters, and permanent secretariats, the trilateral arrangement is ad hoc and largely informal. It lacks a standing bureaucracy or secretariat that could provide continuity, monitoring, and evaluation of programs (Caballero-Anthony, 2018). As a result, implementation is often dependent on political will at the highest levels of government rather than institutional mechanisms. This fragility creates sustainability issues. Changes in political leadership, shifts in foreign policy priorities, or financial constraints can easily disrupt cooperation. For example, in the Philippines, transitions in government have repeatedly shifted the emphasis of counterterrorism policies, affecting coordination with Indonesia and Malaysia (Banlaoi, 2020). Without robust institutional frameworks, inclusive governance remains aspirational rather than fully realized.



Capacity gaps across the three states further limit the effectiveness of inclusive governance. Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines exhibit uneven levels of defense/capabilities, maritime surveillance technologies, and law enforcement capacities. The Philippines, in particular, faces limitations in terms of naval and air assets, making it heavily reliant on its partners for surveillance and maritime patrols (Heydarian, 2019).

These disparities create asymmetrical burdens in trilateral cooperation. Indonesia and Malaysia often contribute more resources, while the Philippines struggles to keep pace. Such imbalances challenge the principle of inclusivity, as weaker partners may be marginalized in decision-making processes. Furthermore, the lack of financial sustainability undermines long-term projects, as budgetary constraints frequently delay or suspend initiatives (Morada, 2020). Trust deficits remain one of the most enduring limitations of trilateral cooperation. While inclusive governance requires transparency, accountability, and participatory decision-making, states in Southeast Asia remain cautious about sharing sensitive intelligence. Historical mistrust, particularly between Malaysia and the Philippines over territorial disputes in Sabah, continues to affect the depth of collaboration (Collins, 2021). Intelligence sharing is often selective, slow, and limited to tactical information. This creates operational blind spots in counterterrorism, as terrorist networks in the Sulu-Sulawesi Seas exploit gaps in state coordination. The lack of robust trust-building mechanisms undermines the inclusivity and collective ownership that are central to governance-based approaches. Domestic politics in each participating country also limit the scope of inclusive governance. In the Philippines, counterterrorism is entangled with long-standing insurgencies involving groups such as Abu Sayyaf, Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), and remnants of the Maute Group. Political sensitivities around autonomy in the Bangsamoro region complicate external cooperation, as local actors are wary of foreign intervention (Banlaoi, 2020).

In Malaysia, domestic debates over the presence of foreign troops and sensitivities about sovereignty constrain the extent of military cooperation (Batalla & Tudio, 2021). Similarly, in Indonesia, public opinion and constitutional provisions limit the government's ability to engage in external security arrangements that could be perceived as undermining sovereignty. These domestic constraints highlight the difficulty of aligning national priorities with regional governance frameworks. Legal and normative differences among the three states pose further challenges. Each country has its own counterterrorism laws, rules of engagement, and legal frameworks for maritime operations. The lack of harmonization often delays responses to cross-border incidents. For instance, hot pursuit operations against pirates or terrorists are complicated by differing interpretations of international maritime law (Collins, 2021). Moreover, the absence of a binding trilateral treaty means that cooperation relies on memoranda of understanding and political declarations, which lack enforceability. This weakens accountability and reduces the predictability of collective action. Inclusive governance ideally requires a rules-based framework, but the current arrangement remains ad hoc and fragmented. While inclusive governance emphasizes participatory approaches involving non-state actors, the trilateral counterterrorism framework has largely been state-centric.

Engagement with local communities, civil society organizations, and private actors has been limited. This is particularly problematic in the Sulu-Sulawesi Seas, where local communities are both vulnerable to terrorist recruitment and crucial for intelligence gathering. The absence of community engagement weakens the legitimacy of counterterrorism initiatives. Studies have shown that sustainable counterterrorism requires integrating development programs, local empowerment, and trust-building with communities (Abuza, 2016). Without these elements, counterterrorism remains militarized and fails to address root causes such as poverty, marginalization, and lack of economic opportunities. Finally, regional and global dynamics impose additional limitations. The trilateral mechanism operates in the shadow of ASEAN, which maintains the principle of centrality in regional security. While ASEAN welcomes subregional initiatives, tensions may arise if trilateral cooperation is perceived as undermining ASEAN processes (Caballero- Anthony, 2018). Globally, the involvement of external actors such as the United States, Japan, and Australia in capacity-building and maritime security introduces both opportunities and constraints. While external assistance provides resources, it also raises concerns about dependency and sovereignty. Striking a balance between leveraging external support and maintaining regional ownership remains a critical challenge.

### **Indomalphi as a Model for Regional Security Governance**

The trilateral security cooperation between Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines widely referred to as Indomalphi offers a distinctive model for regional security governance in Southeast Asia. Rooted in the shared challenges of piracy, terrorism, and transnational crimes in the Sulu-Sulawesi Seas, the framework demonstrates how neighboring states can institutionalize inclusive governance while respecting sovereignty and fostering collective responsibility. Unlike traditional security arrangements that are either heavily hierarchical or externally driven, Indomalphi illustrates a pragmatic balance between state-centered authority and regional inclusivity. The uniqueness of Indomalphi as a governance model lies in three fundamental aspects: (1) its sovereignty-sensitive approach, (2) its reliance on flexible, informal mechanisms rather than rigid legal treaties, and (3) its integration of local, regional, and international stakeholders. Together, these features show how maritime Southeast Asia, often described as one of the most fragmented subregions in the world, can still generate cooperative security solutions adapted to its sociopolitical realities (Collins, 2021). A defining characteristic of Indomalphi is its insistence on the protection of state sovereignty. The three states are historically sensitive to external interference and reluctant to allow foreign powers direct access to their maritime zones. In this sense, Indomalphi distinguishes itself from Western security regimes, such as NATO, where supranational command structures reduce the autonomy of individual states. Instead, Indomalphi emphasizes joint patrols, coordinated checkpoints, and shared intelligence,

while keeping enforcement responsibilities under the control of national security forces (Bateman, 2020). This sovereignty-centered design ensures that cooperation does not threaten national interests, thereby making participation more politically feasible. It also signals a distinct Southeast Asian approach to regional security “cooperation without integration” where unity is achieved without surrendering authority to supranational entities (Acharya, 2017). This design principle has broader implications for other regions with similar sovereignty concerns, particularly in the Global South. Indomalphi’s second innovation is its reliance on informal mechanisms. The arrangement is not codified in a legally binding treaty but rather institutionalized through memoranda of understanding (MoUs) and joint statements. While some observers argue that this undermines its durability, the informality in fact increases adaptability. It allows states to quickly adjust patrol strategies, create temporary task forces, or suspend operations when domestic conditions shift (Caballero-Anthony, 2019).

This flexible architecture reflects the “ASEAN way” of consensus-building and non-binding agreements, which prioritizes political trust over legal formalism. In practice, it helps prevent deadlocks that might arise if states were legally obliged to act beyond their capacity or political will. The emphasis on informality also strengthens inclusivity, since it lowers the political cost of participation for governments wary of long-term commitments (Haacke, 2019). Perhaps the most innovative dimension of Indomalphi is its effort to engage multiple levels of stakeholders. Beyond central governments and naval forces, the initiative gradually involves local communities, international organizations, and private actors. Local fisherfolk, for instance, are encouraged to act as “eyes and ears” for maritime patrols, reporting suspicious activity through established communication channels (Banlaoi, 2020). This bottom-up element is vital, as security threats in the Sulu- Sulawesi corridor often originate from local grievances, poverty, and weak governance. At the international level, external partners such as the United States, Japan, and Australia have provided technical training, equipment, and financial assistance. Yet, their role remains supportive rather than directive another marker of Indomalphi’s sovereignty-sensitive design. By integrating external resources while retaining local ownership, Indomalphi creates a hybrid governance model that balances domestic legitimacy with international credibility (Storey, 2021).

When compared to other regional security arrangements, Indomalphi stands out as a “middle path” between overly institutionalized regimes and ad hoc coalitions. Unlike NATO or the European Union’s security framework, it avoids supranational command. Unlike ad hoc military coalitions, such as the “coalitions of the willing” in the Middle East, it establishes continuity and regularity of operations. This middle-ground approach is particularly suited to Southeast Asia, where diversity of political systems and sovereignty sensitivities limit the prospects for rigid integration (Emmers, 2019). Moreover, Indomalphi responds directly to non-traditional security (NTS) threats, including piracy, terrorism, trafficking, and illegal fishing. Unlike conventional interstate defense pacts, its operational focus is on transnational problems that no single state can resolve alone. This makes it a functionalist model, where cooperation

grows out of shared practical needs rather than abstract commitments (Beeson & Stubbs, 2017). Despite its achievements, Indomalphi also reveals important limitations that should be acknowledged before it can be fully considered a transferable model. First, its reliance on political will means sustainability is vulnerable to changes in leadership. A decline in political interest or funding could weaken joint patrols. Second, operational asymmetries such as differences in naval capabilities and intelligence infrastructure create uneven burden-sharing among the three states (Jones, 2021).

Third, while inclusivity is emphasized, local communities still face challenges in fully integrating with security operations. Issues of trust, communication barriers, and limited economic incentives reduce the effectiveness of community-based reporting systems. Without sustained investment in human development, inclusivity risks becoming tokenistic rather than transformative (Banlaoi, 2020). Finally, the informality that enables flexibility can also limit accountability. The absence of binding commitments may weaken dispute resolution mechanisms, creating the possibility of coordination lapses in times of crisis (Haacke, 2019). These limitations highlight the need for gradual institutionalization without undermining the sovereignty-sensitive foundations of the arrangement. The Indomalphi model offers valuable lessons for other regions grappling with maritime insecurity, fragile sovereignty, and limited resources.

One of its most significant contributions lies in its ability to balance sovereignty and cooperation. Despite the traditional sensitivity of states in guarding their autonomy, Indomalphi demonstrates that meaningful collaboration is possible when mechanisms are carefully designed to respect national prerogatives. Equally important is its reliance on informality, which provides the flexibility needed in a context where political trust among states remains limited. Rather than depending on rigid treaty-based commitments, informal arrangements allow the initiative to adapt to changing dynamics while remaining functional. Another crucial feature is the integration of local communities and non-state actors, which broadens the scope of security governance beyond purely military responses. This inclusion reflects an understanding that sustainable maritime security must account for the perspectives and participation of coastal populations. Furthermore, Indomalphi highlights how external partners can be engaged without creating dependency, maintaining both local ownership and regional legitimacy. Taken together, these elements show that Indomalphi is not only a security arrangement but also a governance innovation, offering inspiration for other complex maritime regions, such as the Gulf of Guinea in West Africa or the Caribbean Sea.

## **CONCLUSION**

The evolution of the Trilateral Cooperative Arrangement (Indomalphi) from 2017 to 2023 illustrates a gradual but significant transformation in regional maritime security governance. Initially driven by state-centric concerns over sovereignty and counterterrorism, the initiative progressively expanded to incorporate institutional transparency, community engagement, and eventually regional legitimacy. The trajectory demonstrates that maritime security cooperation in the Sulu-Sulawesi Seas is no longer confined to military responses but increasingly reflects multidimensional governance involving states, communities, and regional organizations. By aligning with the ASEAN Political-Security Community and engaging external partners, Indomalphi has positioned itself as a potential model of inclusive regional security governance. Nonetheless, sustaining this trajectory requires continued trust-building, institutional adaptability, and balance between sovereignty sensitivities and collective regional interests.

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