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## Why International Liaison Officers Still Matter in Maritime Security Information Sharing

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### SYNOPSIS

*Recent discussions on the future of information sharing focus on the adoption of technology to improve maritime domain awareness. Using the Information Fusion Centre as a case study, **Chong De Xian** highlights the importance of sustaining the existing system of information sharing through the physical deployment of liaison officers to regional information sharing centres.*

### COMMENTARY

There has been a resurgence of interest in Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA), particularly concerning the future of information sharing. [Recent discussions](#) highlight new developments in the information-sharing landscape, which have been significantly influenced by the proliferation of open-source information within the commercial and private sectors, as well as advancements in emerging technologies, including sensor and surveillance systems and artificial intelligence. The United States launched the [Maritime Security Consortium](#) in November 2024, which aims to bring low-cost, commercially available solutions to address the maritime security concerns of Southeast Asian states. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad)'s Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness has extended its contract with [HawkEye 360 Inc.](#) to provide space-based radio frequency (RF) data and analytics to subscribing partners.

The European Union's CRIMARIO II also launched the latest version of its [Indo-Pacific Regional Information Sharing \(IORIS\)](#) platform in October 2024, including a "lite" version for ships at sea. While current MDA efforts have tended to be technology-focused, it is important to ensure that established practical means of cooperation are not neglected, primarily the system of deploying international liaison officers (ILOs) to regional information-sharing centres (ISCs), which has served as the backbone of

regional MDA efforts over the last 15 years. This commentary will look at Singapore's Information Fusion Centre (IFC) as a case study to illustrate the merits of the ILO system, and how it continues to be relevant as the MDA space evolves with technological advances.



United States Navy Commander Pacific Fleet interacting with International Liaison Officers during a visit to the Information Fusion Centre in May 2024. *Image source: Information Fusion Centre.*

## Understanding the Value Proposition of ILOs

When the IFC was established by the Republic of Singapore Navy in 2009, its [aim](#) was to enhance maritime security in the region and beyond, by delivering actionable information to foster greater cooperation and *cue timely operational actions*. To realise these aspirations, the IFC pioneered the [then-unique initiative](#) of deploying officers from partnering navies and enforcement agencies physically in Singapore to facilitate the centre's daily information-sharing operations, a modality that would later be emulated by regional ISCs worldwide as the mainstay of information-sharing. It should therefore be recognised that the ILO's main value proposition is not solely to serve as a conduit for information-sharing to their respective countries' agencies, but more importantly, to facilitate a timely operational finish in response to maritime incidents. The latter depends on the ILOs as natural interlocutors in the information-sharing process, as they possess an inherent understanding and the necessary tacit knowledge of their country's information-sharing ecosystem and operating environment. With this in mind, one will realise that this is simply not a function that can be replicated by any technology, no matter how advanced.

It is also pertinent to note that ILO deployments to the IFC have increased significantly over the years. Starting with only seven ILOs in 2009, the IFC's [ILO subscription](#) has since expanded to 26 in 2024, evolving from a navy-dominant ILO presence to one that now includes six enforcement agencies from four countries. With the exception of Pakistan and Greece, countries that have committed to deploying ILOs to the IFC have persisted in doing so, with a growing trend of countries deploying multiple ILOs. Besides the ILOs from their navies and coastguards, the United States and Vietnam currently have officers from the Vietnam Border Guard and the United States Naval Criminal Investigative Service deployed to the IFC respectively. These developments are only possible if the partnering countries and their relevant agencies recognise that there is sustained value in physically deploying ILOs to the IFC.

## Realities of Information-Sharing Processes

There have also been [suggestions](#) to prioritise the adoption of a common information-sharing platform, one that is capable of harnessing these new information sources and technologies. While the adoption of these new technologies will no doubt bring about significant benefits for MDA stakeholders, one will have to recognise that such endeavours will have to grapple with a wide range of issues such as organisational inertia, local regulations, or systems incompatibility, just to name a few. In contrast, the ILO system represents a tried and tested means of disseminating Maritime Security (MARSEC) information between stakeholders. While it has been pointed out that ISCs currently rely heavily on the usage of emails and chat applications through the ILOs to distribute information, which is deemed to be limiting and inefficient, one might need to consider how the current information-sharing modality adopted by ISCs represents the path of least resistance to gel with the existing technological infrastructure utilised by regional stakeholders internally. While it is entirely possible for these processes to be improved or updated, much time and dedicated resources will be required. It will therefore be pertinent that the current conduit of information sharing that stakeholders are comfortable with be sustained in the interim.

There are also the entrenched geopolitical realities and the [multitude of concerns](#) that regional states and maritime stakeholders have to consider while adopting any Western-sponsored MDA technology, which will inevitably be viewed through the lens of the ensuing strategic competition between the Western world and China. For these efforts to come to fruition, there must be a basis for cooperation grounded in mutual trust and driven by a common goal. This was exactly how the current system of ILO deployment came into being, as it was able to engender the trust needed and solicit sufficient buy-in over the last decade. A core tenet that the IFC was founded upon is that it engages only in sharing non-sensitive [white shipping information](#) concerning non-military/constabulary vessels. It is also understood that the ILOs participate in the centre's information-sharing processes collectively, engaging in the collating and sense-making of open-source information within their respective research clusters. The IFC's multinational set-up and the integration of its ILOs in the centre's daily workflow ensure that all parties are aware of the centre's daily information exchanges, including Requests for Information (RFIs) sent by the IFC to any country's operations centres. These processes ensure accountability and openness, and any attempts to withhold or suppress information cannot be undertaken unilaterally.

While new technologies will inevitably play an increasingly important role in regional MDA efforts, regional stakeholders will do well to maintain the physical deployment of ILOs. The introduction of new technologies should seek to integrate within the established information-sharing ecosystem predicated on the ILO system that has already found commonality among like-minded partners.

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