

How Can Southeast Asia Benefit from the New U.S. Policy on Illegal Fishing?

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In September 2020, the United States Coast Guard (USCG) released a new [USCG IUUF Strategic Outlook](#). The USCG created such a comprehensive position and strategy in reiterating the U.S.'s strong commitment to the war against illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, known as IUUF, all over the world. The document recognizes IUUF as the biggest threat to maritime security, even more dangerous than piracy.

The document shows that IUUF has a huge impact not only on fisheries in the U.S. but also on fisheries stocks all over the world. For instance, it shows that [93% of the world's major marine fish stocks](#) are classified as fully exploited, overexploited, or significantly depleted, and that it also results in [tens of billions of dollars](#) of lost revenue for legal fishers every year.

Indeed, IUUF has been a huge threat to all countries all over the world. In Southeast Asia particularly, IUUF has been a major challenge. In Indonesia alone, there are several estimates for how Indonesia suffers from IUUF. It is estimated that Indonesia [suffers \\$3 billion in losses annually from IUUF](#). Mas Achmad Santosa, CEO of the Indonesian Ocean Justice Initiative (IOJI), an NGO, argues that the huge prevalence of IUUF in Indonesia is because of the economic benefit from IUUF, and weak governance and law enforcement.

During Susi Pudjiastuti's tenure as Indonesia's minister of maritime affairs and fisheries, Indonesia took serious measures in combating IUUF. The [policy](#) of sinking foreign fishing vessels that conduct IUUF in Indonesian waters was claimed to be effective in reducing IUUF practices in Indonesia. Susi, who left office in 2019, also actively championed globally at many international conferences for IUUF to be recognized as a form of transnational organized crime.

Indeed, international support and awareness to recognize IUUF as a common threat to all nations is necessary to strengthen global efforts in eradicating IUUF. Even though there have been some international conventions and measures in combating IUUF, state-to-state cooperation in any form is also necessary.

Even though the USCG outlook on IUUF does not explicitly mention any particular region as a priority, the South China Sea will surely be one of the most important regions in countering IUUF, considering the huge number of IUUF cases and overfishing in the area. Therefore, it is likely that the U.S. might strengthen cooperation against illegal fishing in the disputed area.

However, many Southeast Asian countries [view the outlook with suspicion](#), especially given the U.S.-China rivalry in the region and other tensions in the South China Sea. Indeed, IUUF in the South China Sea has been a major concern for all coastal states. Overfishing and environmental damage are getting worse and need an immediate response.

Southeast Asian states might worry that the U.S. will use the U.S.-led global effort against illegal fishing to increase its military presence in the South China Sea. Member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) surely do not expect that the U.S. will bring more militarization into the South China Sea to eradicate IUUF in the region.

Instead of increasing its military [presence in the South China Sea](#) to eradicate IUUF, what the U.S. should do to help the coastal states in the South China Sea is joint training, capacity building, sharing information, and transfer of technology to detect IUUF in the region. The USCG, therefore, could have more cooperation with the coast guards of the coastal states without immediately increase its military presence in the region and countering IUUF in the disputed area itself. Because considering the sensitiveness of the disputed area, claimant states should secure their territorial claims without any major involvement from other parties.

Yet it seems that U.S. president-elect Joe Biden will still be focusing on the U.S. presence in the South China Sea, following from President Donald Trump's policy to rebalance China in the region. U.S. strategy has to do it in the right way, by not increasing tensions in the region. Indeed, it is very important for the claimant states that peace and security are maintained in the area while the negotiation of a code of conduct for claimants is carried out. And a more militaristic U.S. approach in dealing with IUUF in the disputed region will only increase tensions in the region.

Therefore, even though more international cooperation and awareness in combating IUUF is necessary, the war against IUUF, especially in the South China Sea, should be done in the right way by having more coast guard-to-coast guard and law enforcement cooperation instead of a militaristic approach.

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Featured image: Under former minister Susi Pudjiastuti, the Indonesian fisheries ministry seized illegal foreign fishing vessels like this one and blew them up at sea. Image courtesy of the ministry.

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