Stable Seas: Sulu and Celebes Seas adopts a holistic approach to analyze linkages between maritime governance themes and maritime security challenges in the Sulu and Celebes Seas. This report is timely because:

- Although piracy and armed robbery incidents in Southeast Asia have significantly declined, security concerns remain in the Sulu and Celebes Seas;
- The region’s most populous states, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, converge in an area with a complex political history and a legacy of illicit maritime activity;
- The improvement and worsening of any one issue can have repercussions that impact the region’s wider maritime security;
- Illicit maritime activities are intricately rooted in complex issues like poor coastal economic welfare, shadow economies, and organized political violence against coastal and offshore targets;
- The vulnerability of coastal regions to the boom and bust cycles of global commodities markets gives rise to troubling political actors who weaken the local rule of law and facilitate subversive activities such as piracy, armed robbery, kidnapping, and trafficking;
- The three countries are strengthening maritime enforcement and governance in the region by working independently, tri-laterally, and with international partners; and
- This report can inform stronger cooperation within and across governments in order to hamper the activities of illicit networks and cultivate sustainable maritime security.
The report is divided into nine issue areas, each exploring a different facet of maritime security. By examining these together, we can better understand how they intersect to impact the region’s wider maritime security.

**FISHERIES**
To combat illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, the littoral nations and regional stakeholders have strengthened collaboration and developed several initiatives. Though rich in marine biodiversity, widespread industrial fishing does not exist in the Sulu Sea. Significant fish catch - and the challenge of overfishing - are mostly associated with the Celebes Sea.

**RULE OF LAW**
Great distances and a complex maritime terrain undermine effective law enforcement while enabling non-state actors, smugglers, and traffickers. Though Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines have made great strides toward building political institutions, corruption remains endemic.

**MARITIME MIXED MIGRATION**
Gaps in policy and enforcement in the region’s fight against human trafficking continue to exist. The Philippines is recognized as a regional leader driving the fight, while Indonesia and Malaysia are rapidly enhancing their anti-trafficking policies.

**MARITIME ENFORCEMENT**
Regional law enforcement agencies are collaborating to establish centralized apparatus that can streamline information sharing to enhance maritime domain awareness. Violence at sea is declining, but organized illicit actors continue to undermine investment in blue economy opportunities.

**BLUE ECONOMY**
Coral reefs that support tourism, fishing, and biomedical industries, are threatened by unsustainable fishing practices and environmental damage. Multilateral cooperation was recently formalized under the 2016 Trilateral Cooperative Agreement. However, there are concerns such as information gaps, overlapping mandates, duplication of efforts, and lack of inter-agency trust.

**COASTAL WELFARE**
As the rest of the region develops, coastal welfare in the ARMM is left behind. Coastal poverty is a key driver of illicit maritime activity. State-driven maritime enforcement and coastal development is needed to break the cycle.

**ILICIT TRADES**
This region is both a transit hub and a source for the international wildlife trafficking of pangolins, exotic birds, and tortoises and turtles. If not protected, these critically endangered species may face extinction. Vital goods such as fuel, rice, and cooking oil reach coastal communities mainly through barter trade. As these exchanges are not closely monitored, illicit actors can exploit these informal trans-border networks.

**PIRACY & ARMED ROBBERY**
The number of piracy and armed robbery incidents has dropped sharply in other parts of the region such as the Malacca Straits, but the threat remains in the Sulu and Celebes seas. Kidnapping for ransom is the primary type of attack in the region.

**INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION**
Multilateral cooperation was recently formalized under the 2016 Trilateral Cooperative Agreement. However, there are concerns such as information gaps, overlapping mandates, duplication of efforts, and lack of inter-agency trust.

**CIVIL MARITIME LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES**
Currently bear the weight of maintaining maritime security, as naval assets are stretched relatively thin across the region. As priorities shift from hard national security concerns to regional collaborative goals, more information is needed on how maritime security threats are linked to coastal welfare and economic development, and vice versa.
One Earth Future (OEF) is a self-funded, private operating foundation seeking to create a more peaceful world through collaborative, data-driven initiatives. OEF focuses on enhancing maritime cooperation, creating sustainable jobs in fragile economies, and research which actively contributes to thought leadership on global issues. As an operating foundation, OEF provides strategic, financial, and administrative support allowing its programs to focus deeply on complex problems and to create constructive alternatives to violent conflict.

Stable Seas, a program of One Earth Future, engages the international security community with novel research on illicit maritime activities such as piracy and armed robbery, trafficking and smuggling in persons, IUU (illegal/unregulated/unreported) fishing, and illicit trades in weapons, drugs, and other contraband. These activities perpetuate organized political violence and reinforce each other to threaten economic development and the welfare of coastal populations.