

CONTESTED WATERS, CONTESTED FUTURES: THE SOUTH CHINA SEA SECURITY COMPLEX AND MALAYSIA'S SABAH DILEMMA

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Abstract

Non-traditional security risks, including smuggling, human trafficking, arms proliferation, and kidnapping-for-ransom (KFR), as well as militant organisations' actions, are highly concentrated in Sabah due to its strategic location along the Tri-Border Area (TBA) and the Sulu Sea. These threats are further exacerbated by regional geopolitical tensions. Porous maritime borders, limited intelligence sharing, and evolving transnational crime networks and hybrid threats, among other intricate non-state actors' strategies, continue to challenge Malaysia's enforcement measures, despite initiatives such as the Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM) and ASEAN-led security frameworks. Applying the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), this paper examines how multilateral cooperation, external geopolitical pressures, and regional interdependencies shape Malaysia's security governance. Findings indicate that a unilateral approach is insufficient, necessitating enhanced maritime surveillance, stronger regional security cooperation, and socioeconomic strategies to address the root causes of crime, while also dealing with the difficulties presented by hybrid threats and extremist organisations. By integrating security enforcement with sustainable development and regional diplomacy, Malaysia can strengthen its governance in Sabah and reinforce its role as a key security actor in Southeast Asia."

Keywords: International relations; Traditional and non-traditional security threats; Human trafficking; Regional security complex

Introduction

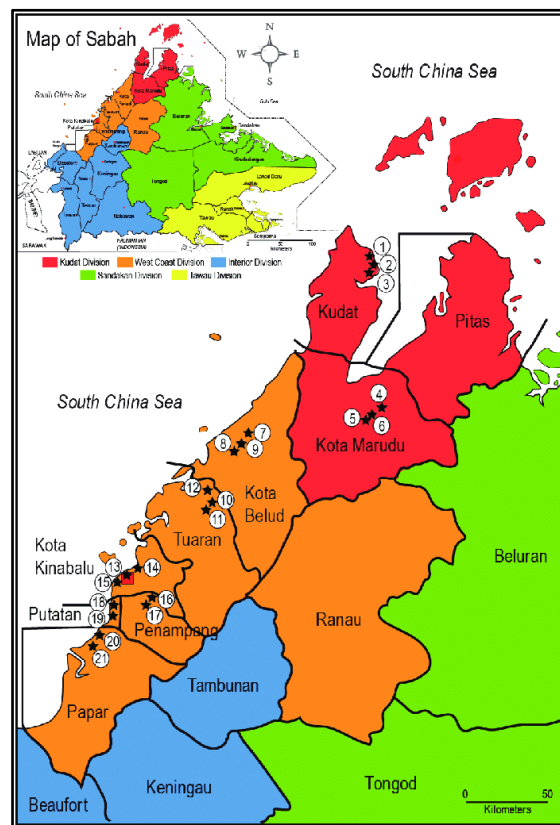
Security observers argue that the South China Sea (SCS) faces an amalgamation of international criminality, contested water disputes, and geopolitical rivalry that could potentially become the frontier of United States (US) and China confrontation (Buzan & Hansen, 2009; Kissinger, 1994; ASEAN Secretariat, 2024; Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia, 2022). We contend that Sabah faces three significant issues that require diverse instruments from the state, tripartite cooperation, regional bodies like ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) and UNCLOS (United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea) to fully implement the outcomes of the Permanent Court of Arbitration in view of implementing a rules-based order in the SCS (Eliezer, Hakim, Amir, & Budianto, 2024).

Additionally, the spillover effects of Sabah's waters being constantly mired with piracy, organized crime networks, and disputed territorial claims have made maritime security a serious issue that threatens government initiatives (Storey, 2023; U.S. Department of Defence, 2023). The East Malaysian states, both Sarawak and Sabah, have experienced a newly invigorated form of state nationalism and have not been in sync with the Pakatan Harapan (PH) government, continuing to push for the honoring of the MA63 (Malaysian Agreement 1963) (Chin, 2018). The decentralization of Sarawak and its implications for continuous resource management autonomy can be observed in the state's move to renegotiate Sarawak's Oil Mining Ordinance of 1956 with the federal Petroleum Development Act of 1974, culminating in the formalization of Petros, Sarawak's state petroleum company - indicating that

states increasingly seek regional decentralization of national resources, particularly petroleum (Samirul, 2024).

Sabah, Malaysia's easternmost state, is crucial to national security governance due to its porous borders and susceptibility to infiltration by external forces (Singh, 2023). It is a hotspot for both traditional and non-traditional security threats due to its proximity to the Sulu Sea and Tri-Border Area (TBA). The region remains vulnerable to ongoing security threats including armed rebellions, smuggling, maritime invasions, and piracy, especially from terrorist groups like the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) (Malay Mail, 2024). Particularly concerning are Sabah's shared porous maritime borders with Indonesia and the southern Philippines, which enable criminal networks and terrorist organizations to exploit lax enforcement (ESSCOM, 2024).

WEST COAST OF SABAH



Source: https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Location-of-study-sites-in-Kudat-and-West-Coast-Division-Sabah-Malaysia-1-Taman-Seri_fig1_326302018

Geopolitically, Sabah's west coast is susceptible to geopolitical confrontations due to its location adjacent to Natuna Island and exposure to the contentious Spratly Islands, which Brunei, China, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam have made overlapping claims to. The Code of Conduct (COC) negotiations in the South China Sea and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) constitute two ASEAN-led initiatives that Malaysia utilizes to manage its security diplomacy (ASEAN Secretariat, 2024). Furthermore, Indonesia's decision to relocate its capital to Nusantara (Borneo) introduces new security and economic factors that further influence border security dynamics in the area (Caballero-Anthony, 2022).

To address non-traditional security threats, Malaysia has implemented several security measures, chief among them being the creation of the Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM). ESSCOM's mission is to enhance maritime surveillance and border control throughout Sabah's eastern seaboard (ESSCOM, 2024). Despite these efforts, security vulnerabilities persist. Permeable borders continue to facilitate human trafficking, gun smuggling, and militant incursions, as well as the intricate complexities presented by hybrid threats, challenging the viability of enforcement-centric tactics and highlighting the necessity for closer regional collaboration to effectively address evolving threats (Acharya, 2021).

Figure 1: East Coast of Sabah



Source: https://www.researchgate.net/figure/The-Location-of-East-Coast-of-Sabah-Source-Collins-et-al-2014_fig1_303179715

Despite its strategic importance, little is known about Sabah's place in Malaysia's broader security framework, particularly regarding regional security interdependencies. Existing studies on Malaysia's security governance typically focus on internal security issues or broader maritime disputes, notably the South China Sea conflict, rather than Sabah's unique security challenges encompassing the interplay between state and non-state entities as well as the proliferation of hybrid threats (Buzan & Waeber, 2003; Emmers, 2018). To address this gap, this paper examines how multilateral cooperation, external factors, and regional security interdependencies shape Malaysia's security governance in Sabah through the lens of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) (Buzan & Waeber, 2003; Emmers, 2018). By situating Sabah within the broader Southeast Asian Regional Security Complex, this study provides insights into Malaysia's evolving security policies and their regional implications. Through this theoretical lens, Malaysia's strategic approach in Sabah is critically assessed, focusing on balancing maritime enforcement with diplomatic and multilateral security cooperation (Caballero-Anthony, 2022). This research contributes to the broader discourse on security governance in Southeast Asia and offers valuable insights for policymakers, defense analysts, and security specialists in the region (Acharya, 2021). One of the main contributions of this study is advocating for a state-centric yet multinational approach to incorporating and addressing climate change security measures, which include socio-economic development initiatives in its narratives to foster positive peace in the east coast of Sabah.

Regional Security Complex Theory and Maritime Vulnerabilities: Understanding Sabah's Position in Southeast Asian Security Dynamics

In international relations, security continues to remain a major concern. It has expanded beyond conventional military threats to include a wide range of issues, such environmental hazards, terrorism,

transnational crime, and economic security (Buzan & Hansen, 2009; Caballero-Anthony, 2022; INTERPOL, 2023; UNODC, 2023). Security has traditionally been viewed through a state-centric prism, with a focus on territorial disputes, military conflicts, and national defense (Buzan, 1983; Collins, 2007; Bellamy, 1981; Kissinger, 1994). However, security studies have expanded to incorporate non-traditional security challenges including cyber threats, human trafficking, and maritime security issues in the post-Cold War era (Buzan & Waever, 2003; Caballero-Anthony, 2005; ReCAAP Information Sharing Centre, 2023).

Barry Buzan's securitization theory first proposed that security is a socially constructed concept influenced by political discourse and the framing of threats rather than being an objective state (Buzan & Weaver, 2003). According to Emmers (2018), this is especially pertinent to Southeast Asia, where challenges including organized crime, transnational terrorism, and piracy are increasingly perceived as existential security concerns that necessitate regional and global cooperation (Abuza, 2019; Singh, 2023; Maritime Institute of Malaysia, 2023). The Tri-Border Area (TBA), comprising Kalimantan (Indonesia), Sabah (Malaysia), and Mindanao (Philippines), represents a significant security hotspot requiring comprehensive regional efforts to address both traditional and non-traditional security threats (ESSCOM, 2024; Philippine Coast Guard, 2023).

Maritime security has emerged as a major strategic issue, particularly in the South China Sea, where great power rivalries and competing territorial claims further complicate regional stability (Santino, 2023; Emmers, 2016; Storey, 2023). The securitization of maritime disputes has led to militarization of contested waters and heightened diplomatic tensions, exacerbated by the involvement of external actors, notably the United States and China (U.S. Department of Defense, 2023; ASEAN Secretariat, 2024; Singh, Nisar, & Haq, 2024). These interconnected security challenges necessitate a comprehensive regional security framework that encompasses both state and non-state security threats within a broader geopolitical context (Caballero-Anthony, 2005; ASEAN Secretariat, 2023).

The Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), developed by Ole Waever and Barry Buzan, provides a systematic framework for understanding regional security interdependencies. RSCT argues that security threats are best analyzed within regional security complexes rather than as isolated national concerns, as states within a given region often face interconnected security dynamics requiring regional approaches instead of unilateral responses (Buzan & Weaver, 2003). These security complexes are characterized by patterns of amity and enmity, shaped by historical conflicts, power dynamics, and shared security concerns (Buzan & Hansen, 2009).

RSCT categorizes regional security complexes into four classifications based on the level of external influence and interconnectedness. Standard security complexes feature deep security interdependence between states, as exemplified by Northeast Asia, where longstanding tensions between South Korea, Japan, and China continue to influence regional stability (Buzan & Waever, 2003; Emmers, 2018). In contrast, overlay security complexes emerge when external great powers dominate a region's security dynamics. Europe during the Cold War illustrates this phenomenon, where regional security policies were largely determined by NATO and the Warsaw Pact, often superseding local security concerns (Buzan & Waever, 2003; Acharya, 2016). States in loose security complexes maintain weaker security ties and prioritize internal security issues over perceived regional threats. Latin America has most effectively demonstrated this approach, where internal challenges rather than cross-border conflicts typically drive security concerns (Caballero-Anthony, 2005; Collin, 2007). Finally, regional security subcomplexes consist of smaller clusters of states sharing localized security issues within larger security complexes. The Southeast Asian Maritime Security Subcomplex exemplifies this category, characterized by challenges including territorial disputes, transnational crime, and piracy that shape the region's security landscape (Singh, 2023; Storey, 2023).

Sabah forms part of the Southeast Asian Maritime Security Subcomplex due to its vulnerability to maritime conflicts, cross-border intrusions, and regional security threats (Abdul Hamid & Dollah, 2020; ESSCOM, 2024). Its security challenges are compounded by spillover effects from instability in Indonesia and the southern Philippines, particularly in the form of armed insurgencies, smuggling, and piracy (Emmers, 2016; Philippine Department of National Defense, 2023). The porous maritime borders of the Tri-Border Area (TBA) between Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines further exacerbate Sabah's vulnerability as criminal syndicates and militant groups exploit enforcement gaps (Maritime Institute of Malaysia, 2023; Abuza, 2019). This study examines how regional security dynamics, including interactions with neighboring states and external actors, influence Malaysia's security policy in Sabah through the lens of RSCT. Analyzing Sabah's security challenges through the RSCT framework reveals that regional security initiatives and multilateral collaboration are more critical than isolated national efforts in addressing the evolving threats within this maritime security subcomplex (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia, 2022).

Malaysia's Security Strategies in Sabah; Regional Dynamics and Policy Responses.

Combining hard and soft security measures, Malaysia's security strategies in Sabah are intended to counter both conventional and unconventional security threats. On the front of hard security, Malaysia has taken major steps to improve regional stability through its military and law enforcement efforts. Establishing the (ESSCOM), which is responsible for coordinating maritime patrols, border monitoring, and intelligence sharing with regional partners to mitigate cross-border threats, is one of the most noteworthy initiatives (ESSCOM, 2024). Malaysia has also bolstered border security in an effort to combat smuggling networks, illegal migration, and arms trafficking, which continue to pose threats to national security. To combat transnational security threats in the Tri-Border Area, Malaysia has signed bilateral defense agreements with Indonesia and the Philippines, acknowledging the value of regional cooperation. These agreements enable joint maritime patrols and intelligence-sharing initiatives (Emmers, 2016).

In addition to military enforcement, Malaysia employs socioeconomic and diplomatic approaches to promote long-term stability in Sabah as part of its soft security measures. To facilitate coordinated responses to transnational threats and enhance regional security cooperation, the nation actively participates in ASEAN-led security frameworks, such as the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) (ASEAN Secretariat, 2023). Furthermore, economic development initiatives have been implemented to mitigate local vulnerabilities that support illicit economies and radicalization, with an emphasis on enhancing livelihoods and reducing socioeconomic inequalities that exacerbate security threats (Economic Planning Unit Malaysia, 2019). Malaysia's diplomatic involvement in the South China Sea dispute further demonstrates its commitment to regional security, as it aims to maintain stability in the contested waters while balancing ties with the United States. This delicate balancing act is a prime example of Malaysia's hedging strategy, which entails interacting with rival countries to optimise its choices and stay out of great power confrontations. In addition to defending its territorial claims and sovereign rights, Malaysia strives to keep good relations with China, a significant trading partner.

However, non-state actors, which include militant organisations and illegal trafficking networks, pose serious threats to Malaysia's security plans by taking advantage of weaknesses in the government's security framework. Opportunities for these individuals to act with relative impunity are created by the weak maritime borders, scarce resources, and sporadic corruption within enforcement organisations. This demands into question the efficacy of Malaysia's security measures and prompts a more thorough and flexible strategy. In order to carry out kidnappings, bombings, and incursions into Sabah, militant organisations such as the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) have proven their capacity to take advantage of gaps in border security (START, 2021; Malay Mail, 2024). Their actions impair public trust in the government's capacity to defend its citizens in addition to endangering the state's physical security. The

smuggling of people, weapons, and drugs by illegal trafficking networks imposes an additional strain on Malaysia's security resources and fuels regional instability (UNODC, 2023; INTERPOL, 2023). With regard to these difficulties, Malaysia's security plans must constantly change in order to successfully thwart the non-state actors' changing techniques.

There are drawbacks to this tactic, though. The feasibility of hedging is being strained by the growing militarisation of the South China Sea and China's assertive actions, such as the ongoing encroachments by Chinese survey vessels into Malaysia's EEZ, most notably the protracted standoff with the Chinese survey ship Haiyang Dizhi 8 in 2020 (Storey, 2020). There has been increasing domestic pressure from the public and some lawmakers for a more forceful response to safeguard Malaysia's sovereignty as a result of Malaysia's dependence on "quiet diplomacy" that has occasionally failed to stop these incursions (Malay Mail, 2024).

Despite its propensity for hedging, Malaysia has occasionally expressed assertiveness. Malaysia, for example, has assertively sought legal means, such as filing extended continental shelf claims, to exercise its rights under UNCLOS. In an effort to demonstrate its dedication to regional security and defence cooperation, Malaysia has also taken part in combined military drills with other ASEAN nations and outside forces. In order to improve its maritime security capabilities, Malaysia has also progressively raised its defence budget and updated its military (IISS, 2023). It's arguable if hedging persists as an appropriate long-term strategy for Malaysia. The changing geopolitical environment demands that its foreign policy be reevaluated. To properly protect its interests, Malaysia must improve regional security cooperation and bolster its defence capabilities in addition to preserving economic ties with China. Diversifying its security alliances, making investments in cutting-edge defence and surveillance systems, and taking a more robust diplomatic approach when its sovereignty is questioned are some possible elements of this recalibration.

Despite these comprehensive security measures, there are inadequacies in Malaysia's security governance, particularly in the areas of law enforcement capacity, intelligence cooperation and controlling maritime incursions. Militant organizations and illicit networks tend to exploit Sabah's porous maritime borders, necessitating stronger security measures. From a RSCT perspective, Sabah's security challenges, being intricately linked to the broader Southeast Asian Regional Security Complex, cannot be adequately addressed through unilateral efforts. According to Buzan and Waever (2003), this highlights the necessity for Malaysia to increase its multilateral engagement, improve intelligence-sharing arrangements, and integrate with regional security mechanisms to more effectively counter evolving threats. Although extensive research has been conducted on Southeast Asian security, very little has specifically examined Sabah's role in the regional security complex. Most scholarly studies focus either on Malaysia's national security policy or great power competition in the South China Sea (Acharya, 2016), without sufficiently exploring how these dynamics interact at the sub-regional level. Furthermore, while Malaysia's foreign policy responses to South China Sea issues have been extensively examined (Kaplan, 2014), the direct security implications for Sabah have not received adequate attention. Given Sabah's geographic proximity to transnational security hotspots and maritime conflict zones, understanding its security dynamics in relation to Malaysia's overall defense strategy is crucial.

Methodology

A qualitative technique is employed in this study to examine intricate security dynamics, geopolitical interactions, and Malaysia's strategic responses to Sabah's security issues. To provide a more thorough investigation of security governance, regional security interdependencies, and policy frameworks, qualitative research utilizes interpretative analysis in contrast to quantitative research, which depends

on statistical analysis and numerical data. This approach allows for flexible assessment of historical trends, institutional responses, and strategic adjustments within Sabah's evolving security landscape.

This paper employs a case study approach to provide focused analysis of Sabah as a key security subcomplex within the broader Southeast Asian Regional Security Complex. Sabah best exemplifies Malaysia's management of both traditional and non-traditional security challenges stemming from its distinct vulnerabilities, including transnational crime, maritime intrusions, and terrorism associated with militant organizations, particularly the ASG. The case study method enables context-specific evaluation of Malaysia's security policies while offering insights into how national security frameworks adapt to Sabah's changing circumstances. By situating Sabah's security challenges within the RSCT framework, this study also facilitates systematic assessment of how regional security interdependencies influence Malaysia's strategic decisions.

This study primarily utilizes secondary sources including government documents, policy papers, academic literature, and think tank assessments. Official publications from ESSCOM, the Ministry of Defence, and ASEAN security bodies provide insights into Malaysia's security policies and defense strategies. Academic works on Southeast Asian security, particularly those by Barry Buzan, Amitav Acharya, and Ralf Emmers, form the theoretical foundation of this study. Analyses from international think tanks such as the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) and the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia further support critical evaluation of regional security trends. The implementation of a qualitative case study methodology ensures comprehensive and contextually informed analysis of Sabah's security governance within Malaysia's broader security framework.

Maritime Security in Sabah: Balancing Enforcement, Regional Cooperation, and Socioeconomic Resilience

In tandem with non-traditional security threats like smuggling, human trafficking, arms proliferation, and kidnapping-for-ransom (KFR), Sabah's marine security is influenced by geopolitical crises. According to Abdul Hamid and Dollah (2020), transnational criminal networks that operate throughout Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines exploit Sabah as a crucial maritime trade route within the Sulu and Celebes Seas. While an estimated \$40 billion in maritime traffic passes through these waterways annually, the same routes have been utilized for illicit activities. This presents a dual challenge for Malaysian authorities attempting to balance economic facilitation with security enforcement (ESSCOM, 2024).

Sabah's security vulnerabilities demonstrate the interconnectedness of regional security dynamics. Between 2020 and 2023, Malaysian authorities detained over 7,000 unauthorized migrants attempting to enter Sabah via illicit maritime routes (ESSCOM, 2024). The ongoing smuggling of weapons fuels insurgency in the southern Philippines, heightening cross-border security risks. The 50 KFR cases associated with the ASG from 2015 to 2022 illustrate Sabah's vulnerability to organized crime and terrorist incursions (START, 2021). Recognizing the transnational nature of these threats, ASEAN established the Trilateral Maritime Patrols (TMP) using the RSCT framework to enhance regional security cooperation. Following the Lahad Datu incursion, which exposed Malaysia's vulnerability to arms smuggling, human trafficking, and terrorist infiltration, the ESSCOM was established in 2013. Since its inception, ESSCOM has enhanced maritime patrols, intelligence-sharing, and interagency coordination, contributing to a 35% reduction in maritime crime between 2014 and 2018 (Abuza, 2019). Curfews implemented in high-risk coastal areas including Lahad Datu, Semporna, and Sandakan have also reduced KFR incidents linked to ASG. In Sabah, there is a complicated and multidimensional relationship between state security measures and non-state entities. The weak maritime boundaries and inadequate surveillance capabilities are used by militant groups such as the ASG to conduct kidnappings for ransom, a method that not only generates currency but also demonstrates how incapable the state is

of protecting its inhabitants. For instance, the string of kidnappings in the early 2000s and recurring KFR instances, as those reported by START (2021), indicate how difficult it is to deal with ASG even with more protection.

In contrast, illicit trafficking networks engage a more covert approach, changing their routes and tactics to avoid detection by law authorities. In spite of the substantial volume of shipping that passes through the Sulu and Celebes Seas, smuggling operations can go undetected. These networks may be able to operate more easily when enforcement authorities are corrupt because corrupt officials may be bought off to ignore unlawful activity. Since transnational criminal organisations inject more resources and complexity to their operations, their involvement in drug and arms trafficking makes the issue worse (UNODC, 2023; INTERPOL, 2023). Additionally, Sabah has to contend with hybrid threats, which blur the boundaries between conventional and unconventional warfare. Leveraging smuggling channels to move weapons or working with criminal networks to finance their activities are examples of strategies used by militant groups that combine organised crime with terrorism. A coordinated response from several state institutions, such as the military, police, and customs authorities, is necessary in this complex security situation.

The Philippines' unresolved territorial claim adds even more complexity to Sabah's security context. This claim, which has its roots in historical ties to the Sultanate of Sulu, has long been a source of dispute in relations between Malaysia and the Philippines and continues to influence Malaysia's regional security considerations. The Philippines' claim in Malaysia has a number of significant domestic political repercussions. Political parties frequently voice strong sentiments on the matter in Sabah itself, with local leaders highlighting the need of protecting Sabah's sovereignty (Fernandez, 2007). This issue can affect state-federal ties, especially in the ongoing negotiations for increased autonomy, as the general public in Sabah is adamantly opposed to the Philippines' claim. The assertion calls for an exacting balance in foreign policy at the federal level of Malaysia. The government must uphold Malaysia's sovereign rights while simultaneously preserving cordial ties with the Philippines (Unresolved Border, Land and Maritime Disputes in Southeast Asia, n.d.). Competing political forces in Malaysia may have differing opinions regarding the best way to respond to the claim, making this matter a potential source of political contention.

Although Malaysia has made significant strides attributable to its security measures, operational limitations still prevent more advancements. Although ESSCOM's jurisdiction spans over 140,000 square kilometres, its enforcement capabilities remain limited with only one patrol boat per 1,000 square kilometres (Malaysian Army Headquarters, 2022). The MV Vier Harmoni hijacking in 2021 revealed deficiencies in surveillance and rapid response systems. Furthermore, ESSCOM's reliance on traditional patrol-based monitoring rather than advanced surveillance technologies undermines its capacity to anticipate security threats. Inadequate intelligence-sharing protocols with Indonesia and the Philippines further hamper cross-border policing, allowing criminal networks to exploit jurisdictional gaps (Malaysian Army Headquarters, 2022).

To overcome these limitations, Malaysia has been progressively enhancing its strategic approach by strengthening regional intelligence-sharing mechanisms and deploying advanced surveillance technologies. Increased emphasis is also being placed on interagency collaboration to close the jurisdictional gaps exploited by transnational criminal networks. According to RSCT, Sabah's security challenges are inextricably linked to instability in Kalimantan, Mindanao, and the broader Sulu-Celebes basin. Weak governance in the southern Philippines facilitates the penetration of gun smugglers, traffickers, and terrorists into Sabah. Despite Malaysia's participation in ASEAN-led security initiatives such as Trilateral Maritime Patrols (TMP), disparities in defence expenditure among ASEAN states and fluctuating political factors complicate enforcement efforts (ASEAN Secretariat, 2023).

Beyond conventional security issues, Sabah's security landscape is characterized by deeply embedded socioeconomic vulnerabilities that fuel illicit activities. Declining fish stocks to overfishing in coastal regions like Lahad Datu, Semporna, and Sandakan directly impact local fishing communities (Department of Fisheries Malaysia, 2023). As maritime resources diminish, numerous resort to smuggling networks as a means of economic survival (Maritime Institute of Malaysia, 2023).

Human trafficking organizations capitalize on financial distress by offering monetary incentives to individuals willing to engage in illegal activities (UNODC, 2023). With its porous maritime borders facilitating the movement of victims—predominantly women and children from Indonesia and the Philippines—Sabah has emerged as a significant transit hub for human trafficking (INTERPOL, 2023). These interconnected challenges highlight the inadequacy of enforcement-based strategies in addressing Sabah's security issues (ESSCOM, 2024; Malaysian Army Headquarters, 2023). A more comprehensive approach requires integrating stringent border control measures with regional intelligence-sharing frameworks and socioeconomic programs that provide vulnerable populations with sustainable livelihoods (UNDP, 2023). By addressing the underlying economic drivers of criminal activity, Malaysia can enhance its long-term security posture in Sabah (Abdul Hamid & Dollah, 2020; Malay Mail, 2024). Addressing Sabah's security threats, which are intricately connected to socioeconomic vulnerabilities, demands holistic approach. Sustainable solutions must incorporate security and economic resilience alongside enforcement measures to effectively address root causes. The accompanying policy offers outline strategic actions to achieve this equilibrium (Singh, 2023).

Securing Sabah's Maritime Frontier: A Comprehensive Approach to Transnational Threats in the Sulu-Celebes Seas

It is imperative that Malaysia makes immediate investments in cutting-edge monitoring equipment and law enforcement capabilities to overcome serious security vulnerabilities in Sabah's waterways. Currently, 68% of illegal maritime activities go undetected in the Sulu and Celebes Seas, where real-time tracking of vessel movements could be facilitated by deploying satellite-based maritime domain awareness systems (Maritime Institute of Malaysia, 2023). Additionally, the deployment of 20 new fast-interceptor vessel with top speeds of 50 knots would significantly enhance response capabilities. This approach aligns with the Philippine model, which achieved a 40% reduction in piracy incidents through comparable improvements (Philippine Department of National Defence, 2023). A squadron of marine drone surveillance officers equipped with thermal imaging and AI-powered threat detection could intercept 94% of smuggling attempts at night and cover three times the area of traditional patrol boats (Defence Analytics, 2023; Jane's Navy International, 2022).

Through the analysis of historical trafficking patterns, implementing predictive analytics would enable authorities to anticipate up to 80% of illicit movements (INTERPOL, 2023). Nevertheless, this comprehensive modernization requires a significant expenditure of RM800 million, an 18-month training program for ESSCOM personnel, and enhanced regional collaboration for cross-border threat monitoring (U.S. Coast Guard, 2022). Given Malaysia's current fiscal constraints, strategic alliances and phased implementation, including defense cooperation agreements and public-private partnerships, could help balance security objectives with financial obligations. However, effective interagency coordination and appropriate defense budget allocation are essential for implementing these measures, potentially complicating their prompt execution.

With these multi-layered technological solutions, Sabah's maritime security would transition from reactive to proactive, addressing existing vulnerabilities exploited by terrorist organizations and smuggling networks. The transnational nature of Sabah's security challenges necessitates a coordinated regional response, as unilateral enforcement strategies have proven ineffective. Malaysia must take the initiative in harmonizing ASEAN member nations' maritime law enforcement practices, particularly regarding transnational crimes such as human trafficking and arms smuggling (Emmers, 2018). The

ReCAAP Information Sharing Centre (2023) underscores the critical need for harmonized legislation, estimating that 65% of maritime criminals exploit variations in national legal frameworks to evade prosecution. This legal fragmentation creates safe havens for transnational criminal networks operating in the Sulu-Celebes Seas region.

Establishing a Joint Intelligence Fusion Centre (JIFC) in the Sulu Sea would be a crucial step toward enhanced regional security. Modeled after the successful Information Fusion Centre in Singapore, this facility would enable Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines to share real-time intelligence on human trafficking, smuggling routes, and militant movements (Caballero-Anthony, 2022). The JIFC would serve three primary functions: utilizing AI-powered pattern recognition tools to automate threat detection, integrating radar and satellite surveillance data from all three countries, and expediting evidence collection for cross-border prosecutions. According to the Philippine Coast Guard (2023), similar coordination mechanisms reduced piracy incidents in designated maritime zones by 32% during pilot programs from 2021-2023.

Beyond intelligence-sharing, Malaysia should advocate for a minimum 300% increase in Trilateral Maritime Patrol (TMP) missions, as current patrols cover only 40% of high-risk areas (ESSCOM, 2024). These enhanced patrols would demonstrate regional commitment while disrupting the operational autonomy of transnational crime syndicates. However, addressing root causes requires more than military and law enforcement actions. Malaysia must simultaneously pursue diplomatic initiatives through ASEAN to improve governance and economic conditions in border regions. Successful precedents already exist, such as joint Malaysia-Philippines development programs in Tawi-Tawi and Semporna, where vocational training initiatives reduced piracy recruitment by 28% (UNDP, 2023).

Furthermore, the BIMP-EAGA subregional alliance has demonstrated how increased port security transparency can mitigate illegal maritime activity (ASEAN Secretariat, 2023). This comprehensive approach, combining enhanced patrols, intelligence integration, legal harmonization, and socioeconomic development, provides the most viable means of stabilizing Sabah's maritime security environment. Diplomatic challenges do exist, particularly as ASEAN governments maintain divergent national interests and defense priorities. To navigate these challenges, Malaysia must promote uniform maritime security standards through persistent diplomatic engagement and confidence-building initiatives. By addressing both symptoms and cause of transnational crime, Malaysia can lead the region's transition toward sustainable security architectures.

Climate-Adaptive Maritime Security: Strengthening Malaysia's Coastal Defense Through Environmental and Socioeconomic Resilience

Malaysia's coastal security infrastructure is becoming increasingly susceptible to the effects of climate change, especially as storm systems intensify and sea levels rise. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2023) estimates that a 0.5-meter rise in sea level by 2050 could submerge vital naval infrastructure and observation posts along Sabah's coastline, potentially rendering 30% of the current marine monitoring capabilities inoperable. Due to this environmental risk, resources must be strategically invested in climate-adapted security infrastructure, such as elevated radar stations and flood-resistant naval bases capable of withstanding centennial catastrophic storms (World Bank, 2023). According to the Maritime Institute of Malaysia (2023), simultaneous ocean warming and fisheries collapse might increase illegal fishing and smuggling activities by 40% within the decade as desperate fishing communities resort to illicit livelihoods. To overcome these dual challenges, Malaysia must integrate climate analytics into its maritime security operations through AI-powered systems that can forecast patrol asset deployment to emerging hotspots by correlating sea temperature data with historical crime patterns (IPCC, 2022).

Coastal ecosystem restoration constitutes an essential component of the climate-security approach. Mangrove rehabilitation projects in high-risk areas such as Semporna and Kunak serve multiple protective functions. Their dense root systems prevent shoreline erosion that could endanger security installations by 60%, while simultaneously creating natural barriers against smuggling vessels seeking concealed landing locations (WWF Malaysia, 2023). Implementing these nature-based solutions in conjunction with community resilience initiatives enhances engineered defenses. Vocational training in climate-adaptive aquaculture for 5,000 coastal residents could directly address the economic desperation that fuels 72% of maritime crime recruitment, reducing dependence on diminishing resources (IPCC, 2022). These proposed actions advance SDG 14 goals and align with Malaysia's National Adaptation Plan (2021), demonstrating how security reinforcement and environmental protection can be effectively implemented to stabilize Sabah's vulnerable maritime frontier. Successful implementation requires a phased investment of RM450 million over 2024-2030, prioritizing the elevation of 12 crucial radar stations, deployment of climate-crime modeling systems by 2025, and restoration of 500 hectares of mangroves—a cost-effective strategy projected to save RM1.2 billion in security and disaster damages by 2040 (World Bank, 2023; UNDP, 2023).

The persistent maritime offenses plaguing Sabah's waterways, including piracy, human trafficking, and smuggling, primarily stem from the economic hardships faced by coastal communities. Dwindling fish stocks and limited livelihood options have forced many locals into illicit activities for survival, as reported by UNDP (2023). Sixty-two percent of arrested marine criminals in Semporna District lack secondary education or vocational skills (ESSCOM, 2024). Malaysia's RM200 million annual Coastal Livelihood Transformation Program addresses these socioeconomic vulnerabilities through a tripartite strategy. Community-based fishery management approaches empower local fishermen through co-governance agreements, which have demonstrated a reduction in illicit fishing by up to 45% in comparable contexts (World Bank, 2023).

These methods are complemented by aquaculture training and subsidized sustainable fishing equipment to help fishermen adapt to environmental changes (Department of Fisheries Malaysia, 2023). Second, ecotourism development leverages Sabah's marine biodiversity with the potential to generate over 5,000 conservation-focused tourism jobs by 2030, particularly for vulnerable populations including unemployed youth and former smugglers (Sabah Tourism Board, 2023). Subsequently, blue economy training programs in marine renewable energy and eco-tourism hospitality, modeled after Indonesia's successful Coastal Community Development Program that reduced pirate recruitment by 33%, address critical vocational education gaps (ASEAN Secretariat, 2022). Implementation challenges for these programs include maintaining private sector engagement and ensuring benefits reach remote crime hotspots. When implemented for at least five years and geographically targeted to high-risk areas, effective socioeconomic initiatives can enhance community resilience and reduce maritime crime recruitment by 40-60% (UNDP, 2023). This comprehensive approach demonstrates that addressing the root causes of maritime crime requires equal attention to providing legitimate economic opportunities alongside enforcement measures.

Conclusion

Sabah's marine security continues to represent a challenging issue, influenced by non-traditional security concerns, transnational crime, and geopolitical disputes. Through its full effectiveness is still hampered by operational limitations and enforcement gaps, the creation of ESSCOM has assisted in mitigating marine crime. The ongoing dangers of smuggling, human trafficking, and the proliferation of weapons underscore the need for improved multilateral security cooperation through structures that include the Trilateral Patrols (TMP), improved regional intelligence sharing, and technological enhancements in surveillance.

Additionally, illegal activity is greatly facilitated by the economic vulnerabilities of coastal areas. Incorporating economic resilience strategies, such as employment generation in coastal communities and sustainable livelihood programs, is essential to address the root causes of marine crime. Furthermore, it is imperative to integrate climate resilience into security planning, as climate change affects marine security through rising sea levels and resource scarcity. Malaysia's long-term security strategy in Sabah must balance diplomatic engagement, robust enforcement, and economic development to establish sustainable peace in the region.

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