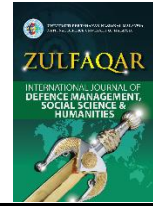




## ZULFAQR International Journal of Defence Management, Social Science & Humanities

Journal homepage: [www.zulfaqr.upnm.edu.my](http://www.zulfaqr.upnm.edu.my)



### Shut the Door! Military Cooperation at the Borders: Malaysian Initiatives and Capabilities

Mohd Zaini Salleh<sup>a,\*</sup>, Adam Leong Kok Wey<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Faculty of Defence Studies and Management, National Defence University of Malaysia, Sungai Besi Camp, 57000 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

\*Corresponding author: [zacksalleh@yahoo.com](mailto:zacksalleh@yahoo.com)

#### ARTICLE INFO

##### Article history:

Received  
30-11-2015  
Received in revised  
27-06-2018  
Accepted  
28-06-2018  
Available online  
30-06-2018

##### Keywords:

security threats,  
strategic dimension,  
security initiatives,  
close collaboration,  
mutual borders

e-ISSN:

Type: Article

#### ABSTRACT

*Malaysia has porous borders and some of these areas have significant security threats emerging from criminal smuggling activities, illegal immigration, and militant incursions. The Malaysian armed forces and security agencies are taxed to the limit with their finite resources in mitigating these threats. This paper traces the historical strategic dimension/context of these areas' security threats and their respective contexts behind it. It describes the various security initiatives to counter these threats by their regions and provides an analysis for the way forward, which is by close collaboration and sharing of resources with Malaysia's neighbouring states in securing mutual borders.*

© 2018 UPNM Press. All rights reserved.

#### Introduction

Since achieving her independence in 1957 and the formation of Malaysia in 1963, Malaysia has to contend with both the blessings and the shortcomings of having long maritime and land borders that she shares with other neighbouring states. To secure herself from both external and internal threats, Malaysia has established close military cooperation with these states and has signed various border agreements to facilitate mutual cooperation in maintaining security along the border lines, which are and still disputed in certain areas. These agreements included the Agreement on General Border Cooperation in 1965 with Thailand (initiated by the British in 1949) (*Classified Document of Bilateral Relations Malaysia and Thailand*, 2014), the Malaysia-Indonesia border cooperation agreement in 1972 (*Classified Document of Bilateral Relations Malaysia and Indonesia*, 2014), and followed by other similar agreements with the Philippines, Singapore, and Brunei. These agreements played important roles during the Cold War era in building bilateral relationship among security forces, particularly military cooperation and sharing of intelligence in combating communist and militant activities along the porous borders.

After the Cold War ended, 'new' threats have emerged that have tested the relevance of these border security cooperation initiatives. These 'new' threats, though traditional in its nature, are more rigorous in terms of cross border terrorism, human trafficking and smuggling, which have revitalised various measures in renewing the scope and spectrum of the military cooperation in securing the borders against these 'new' non-traditional security issues. This paper describes the context of these border challenges and agreements, and looks at how effective these border security arrangements in mitigating these 'new' security threats, and the challenges that lay ahead (see Fig. 1 and Fig. 2 to understand the border of Malaysia and its neighbouring countries).



Fig. 1: Map of Malaysia (aseanup.com, 2018)

## The Strategic Context

Although Malaysia has experienced vast economic development since independence, some of the neighbouring states' regions at the periphery of her borders are still lacking in terms of socio-economic development. This has resulted in a flourishing black market economy at these areas that thrives on smuggling of controlled items (in Malaysia) such as cigarettes, rice, fuel, small arms, illegal immigrants, human trafficking, and other criminal activities. The Northern borders of Peninsula Malaysia, the Straits of Malacca, the East Coast of Sabah (East Malaysia), and small portions in border areas of Sarawak (East Malaysia) with West Kalimantan (Indonesia) are critical entry points for such smuggling activities. Human trafficking and illegal entry of foreigners are mostly concentrated in the Northern borders of peninsula Malaysia, East Coast of Sabah (East Malaysia), and the Straits of Malacca. Each of these major entry points are discussed separately below:





**Fig. 2: Map of Southeast Asia Region (aseanup.com, 2014)**

#### **i. Northern Borders of Peninsular Malaysia**

The ongoing conflict at Southern Thailand has created the chaotic conditions that are ripe for the flourishing of illegal and criminal activities. The most dominant security threats from this border region which covers more than 646 kilometre of porous land borders are illegal immigrant entries, human and drug trafficking, smuggling of controlled items, and small arms including ammunition (see Fig. 3). The land border is approximately 551 kilometres, and riverine border particularly the Golok river forms the eastern most 95 kilometres stretch of the land border (thalweg system). The land border is based on the 1909 treaty between Thailand and the British. Malaysia and Thailand have a territorial sea and continental shelf boundary agreements for the Straits of Malacca which was signed in 1971 and 1979 respectively. The majority of illegal immigrants are from Bangladesh and Myanmar. The Southern Thailand region provides a convenient entry point to Malaysia due to the porous borderline. These criminal activities are usually run by both organised criminal groups from Thailand and Malaysia (Thailand signs agreement, 2000). Additionally, the smuggling of controlled items in Malaysia, such as rice and cigarettes, are creating economic losses for the Malaysian economy. Malaysian government subsidised items such as rice and fuel meant for local

consumption are being smuggled over to Thailand and sold there at higher costs resulting in handsome profits for the smugglers and economic loss for Malaysian consumers and government.



**Fig. 3: Map of Northern Border of Peninsular Malaysia (malaysiavacationguide.com, n.d.) (Illustration modified by authors)**

## ii. Sabah (East Malaysia)

The east coast divisions of Sabah which covers Kudat, Sandakan, Lahad Datu, Tawau and Semporna are facing increased security threats from the spillover of the unresolved conflict in the Southern Philippines (see Fig. 4). The protracted conflict in Southern Philippines has resulted in a security vacuum at the Philippines side of the border. Also the long 1,700 kilometres of maritime borders (NDUM-MAF Research, 2012) in eastern Sabah further facilitated the imminence of maritime crimes such as smuggling, human trafficking, and the arrival of illegal immigrants. Piracy, a traditional maritime activity in this region, has also intensified due to inefficient security enforcement at the Southern Philippines maritime areas. In the last five years, certain groups affiliated with Southern Philippines militants have also conducted kidnappings of tourists, both Malaysian and foreign workers, and recently even a Malaysian policeman (NDUM-MAF Research, 2012). The purpose of these kidnappings is usually for collecting ransoms which in turn are used for financing these militant groups. Nonetheless, some of these kidnappings have also resulted in the deaths of both civilians and policemen. By far, the major security threat in this region is the influx of illegal immigrants from the Philippines which have or are in the process of making themselves conceptual permanent residents of East Sabah (NDUM-MAF Research, 2012). It is reported by respective enforcement agencies and local authorities, there are about 400,000 Filipino illegal immigrants residing in the east coast of Sabah alone (NDUM-MAF Research, 2012). The Sulu (Mindanao Filipinos) militant incursion in Kampung Tandau, Lahad Datu, east coast of Sabah in 2013 has changed the strategic dimension of this region and the Malaysian government has made this region as a high risk area and prioritised security measures in response to this new threat.

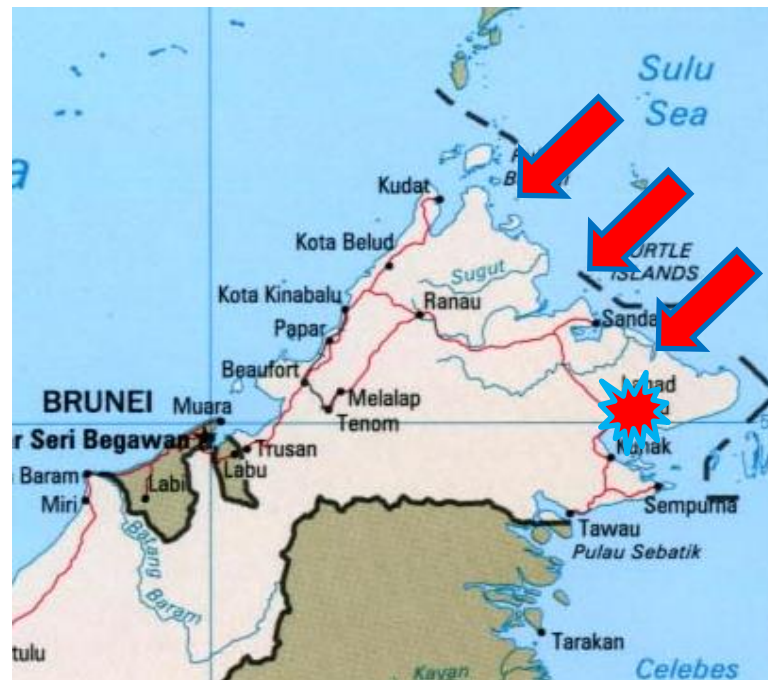


Fig. 4: Route of illegal entries from the Southern Philippines (aseanup.com, 2018)  
(Illustration modified by authors)

### iii. The Straits of Malacca

Apart from being the busiest waterway in the world, the Straits of Malacca is also a traditional sea route of communication for the people from Indonesia (particularly Sumatra) and peninsula Malaysia (see Fig. 5). Similarly, illegal immigrants, human trafficking and smuggling activities are taking place as well. Again, these illegal activities tend to be one sided with Malaysia being the biggest loser in this 'black' market trading. For example, all the illegal immigrants are headed to Malaysia for work with none going the other way.

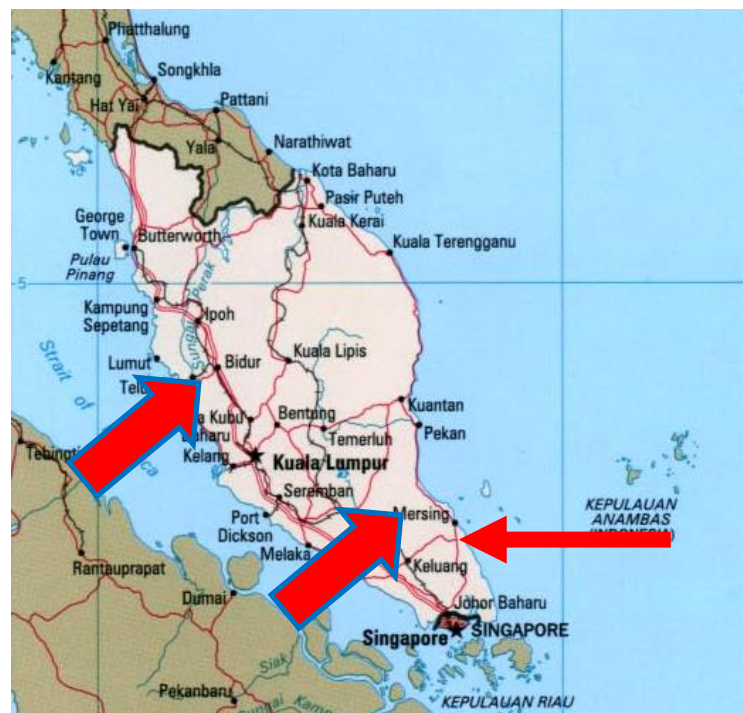


Fig. 5: Route of illegal entries through the Straits of Malacca (aseanup.com, 2018)  
(Illustration modified by authors.)



#### iv. Sarawak (East Malaysia)

Sarawak, and West and East Kalimantan shares a land border of 1,647.8 kilometres (Sanib Said, 2015, p. 262) of mostly dense tropical forests and mountainous regions as shown in Fig. 6. However, illegal activities predominant in other border areas in Malaysia, are under control in this region and taking place in a much smaller scale as compared with other areas. The strategic plan of socio-economic development in selected areas along the borderline by both Malaysian and Indonesian regional authorities have managed to reduce these illegal activities. This border has been of particular interest for both of these states since the Confrontation between Indonesia and Malaysia from 1963 to 1966 and subsequent close military cooperation in curbing the Communist threat in Sarawak and Kalimantan has resulted in continued cooperation in securing the borders thus curbing much of the illegal activities prevalent in other border regions.



Fig. 6: Map of Sarawak State ([www.wonderfulmalaysia.com](http://www.wonderfulmalaysia.com), 2015)

#### The Present Cooperation and Collaborative Initiatives

The Malaysian government through its various agencies, including the military and other mechanisms has taken numerous initiatives in conducting pro-active and pre-emptive actions and strategies to meet the challenges of new non-traditional threats, in particular border security. Previous bilateral agreements with neighbouring states sharing borderlines were renewed to suit with the present challenges and issues. True to its ASEAN's spirit way of collaborative measures, the Malaysian government through its armed forces, has taken certain strategies to gain the confidence among the local people at the critical border regions and neighbouring states. These strategies are:

- i. Taking serious action plans to curb smuggling activities and illegal immigrants in the border areas (*Classified Documents of Bilateral Relations Malaysia and Indonesia*, 2014; *Classified Document of Bilateral Relations Malaysia and Thailand*, 2014).
- ii. Promote cooperation in security matters through training, joint/combined exercises, visits, exchange of personnel and information (*Classified Documents of Bilateral Relations Malaysia and Indonesia*, 2014; *Classified Document of Bilateral Relations Malaysia and Thailand*, 2014).
- iii. Encourage and promote cooperation in socio-economic development activities (*Classified Document*, 2014), particularly to strengthen collaboration in the form of the Joint Development Strategy (JDS), and to expand the activities under the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT), Indonesia-Malaysia-Singapore Growth Triangle (IMS-GT), and Brunei-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA) (*Classified Documents of Bilateral Relations Malaysia and Indonesia*, 2014; *Classified Document of Bilateral Relations Malaysia and Thailand*, 2014).
- iv. Facilitate, upon request, efforts in the delineation and demarcation of boundaries by the provision of technical assistance in any such demarcation (*Classified Documents of Bilateral*

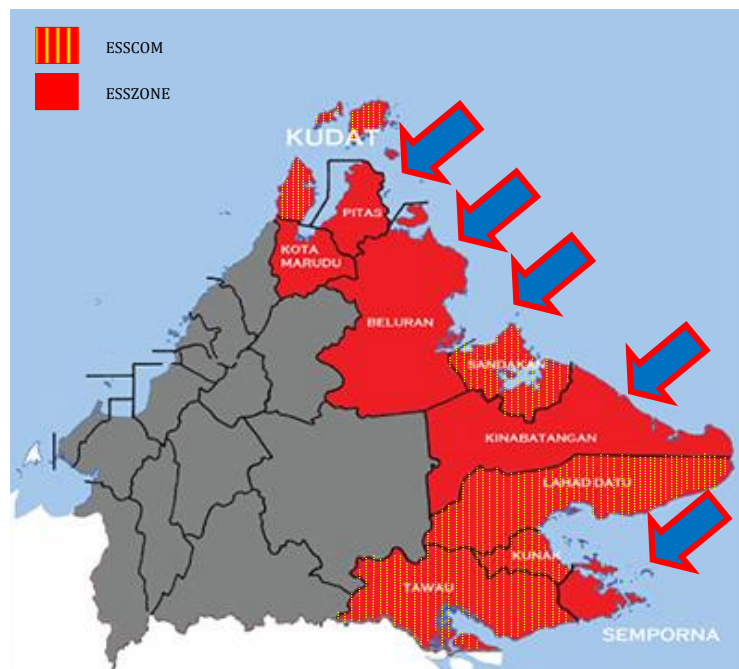
*Relations Malaysia and Indonesia, 2014; Classified Document of Bilateral Relations Malaysia and Thailand, 2014).*

- v. Facilitate, upon request other bilateral efforts in taking measures and providing assistance during disaster (*Classified Documents of Bilateral Relations Malaysia and Indonesia, 2014; Classified Document of Bilateral Relations Malaysia and Thailand, 2014).*
- vi. Any other common problems in the border areas to be agreed upon by the respective governments (*Classified Documents of Bilateral Relations Malaysia and Indonesia, 2014; Classified Document of Bilateral Relations Malaysia and Thailand, 2014).*

In order to pursue the above strategies, the Malaysian government through its various agencies, particularly the security forces has actively engaged the following actions in these regions as listed below.

**i. East Malaysia**

The Lahad Datu militant incursion in east coast of Sabah in 2013 has changed this area's security dimensions and has resulted in increased securitising measures undertaken by the Malaysian government. The mixture of both traditional and non-traditional threats has resulted in increased security threats and sustained actions to counter these threats (see Fig. 7). Due to the unresolved multi-dimensional security complex in this sub-region, immediately after the 2013 incident, the Malaysian government took action by establishing a special security operations command area, known as the ESSCOM (Eastern Sabah Security Command). Five Malaysian army infantry battalions, Royal Malaysian Navy vessels, Royal Malaysian Air Force assets, Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA), and some Royal Malaysian Police field force units are assigned for this command.



**Fig. 7: Map of Eastern Coast of Sabah (esscom.gov.my, 2018)  
(Illustration modified by authors)**

Apart from securing the Sabah eastern coastlines, ESSCOM will also give additional confidence building measures (CBMs) to the government of Philippines, which is currently embroiled in their own internal security matters in Mindanao as a bulwark against militants attempting to escape the Philippines's own military dragnet against these militants.

In contrast, the sub region of Sarawak–West Kalimantan does not face such problems. Although illegal activities are still taking place along the borderline, it is in a much smaller scale

and manageable by the enforcement agencies and security forces of both states. The previous mechanism of close military cooperation along the border has still been practised with much success. This cooperation included conducting joint and coordinated operations to gain mutual confidence and transparency, and by putting military troops together under a single command and in the same camp in selected key points along the borderline.

## ii. West Malaysia

The unresolved conflict in Southern Thailand, the porous land borders and a stretch of water way along the Straits of Malacca continues to give great challenges for Malaysian authorities to guard and to control in an efficient manner. West Malaysia being more dynamic in terms of socio-economic development, offers an attractive place for illegal immigrants to make a better living particularly from Indonesia, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia, which have used Thailand as a transit point to illegally enter Malaysia through its porous borders and dynamic smuggling networks.

In order to respond to these illegal activities along the Malaysian-Thai borders, both governments have established the Border Regiment and Border Police in January, 2008 to coordinate security operations. Challenges and problems in this area are more burdensome for Malaysia as the major inflow of illegal immigrants occurred in Malaysian borders (see Fig. 8). On the other hand, the Thai security forces have their hands full in countering the active terrorist activities conducted by the separatist movements in the area and has resulted in lower vigilance against cross border criminal activities. The Thai government has established the SBPAC (Southern Border Provinces Administrative Centre) in combating the separatist movements and concentrated its efforts in this conflict.



**Fig. 8: Route of illegal entries from north (aseanup.com, 2018)  
(Illustration modified by authors)**

The Straits of Malacca poses another difficult challenge to the Malaysian government to secure. Illegal entry of immigrants and smuggling activities are due to the lucrative returns these activities offered. One of the main reasons the Malaysian government has established the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA) in 2004 is to undertake the mitigating of non-traditional threats in Malaysian maritime waters, including the Straits of Malacca. Militarily, to support the respective maritime agencies, Malaysian, Singaporean and Indonesian governments have taken an initiative in establishing a



joint operation for combating piracy in the Straits of Malacca known as 'Eye in the Sky' (EIS) which was operational in 2005 (Ministry of Defence, Singapore, 2005). The implementation of EIS is to provide and conduct air patrolling with the aid of aerial anti-piracy surveillance. During the last Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2005 in Singapore, the Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia proposed the EIS concept to enhance the security in the Straits of Malacca and Singapore. Being a strategic channel and vital to international trade, the security of the Straits is of paramount importance to the littoral states, users states and other stakeholders. As such, the three littoral states (Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore) and Thailand had agreed to enhance cooperation by conducting combined maritime air patrols over the Straits of Malacca and Singapore while respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the littoral states.

## Capabilities

Malaysia's challenge in securing her porous land and maritime borders are compounded by the lack of Malaysian armed forces assets and capabilities. Apart from the main duty of defending the security and sovereignty of the nation, Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF) with the strength of about 120,000 personnel, has deployed personnel in response to a host of multi-dimensional non-traditional issues or to carry out Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW) under the auspices of the United Nations in peace operations around the world. These continued deployments of MAF personnel in various humanitarian operations worldwide have stretched its resources. The lack of funds, equipment, transportation and high-tech equipment has resulted in significant deficiencies which were most evident during the search and rescue operation for the missing Malaysia Airlines (MAS) flight MH 370.

In order to offset such weaknesses, the MAF needs strong support from other security and enforcement agencies to share the burden in response to non-traditional challenges. It also need strong support from other security forces of neighbouring states. The Malaysian government has taken an initiative known as the National Blue Ocean Strategy (NBOS) to offset these limitations by cross sharing assets, personnel and expertise among the various government agencies and security forces (civilian and military). The cross sharing of these limited resources will cut down the setup costs of acquiring a new asset or training of personnel.

## Conclusion

Malaysia has and will continue to value her close military cooperation with her neighbouring states. Over the years, strong bilateral military cooperation with neighbouring states had been built and will continue to strengthen. Although much success has been gained in these cooperations in securing Malaysia's borders, the militaries in these region still suffers from lack of manpower, equipment and funds to address the large multitude of security issues. In order to offset such weaknesses, Malaysia will need to continue in collaborating more closely with her neighbouring states and complement each other's' strengths and weaknesses, and the sharing of resources covering each state's weak areas. Such close collaboration will inadvertently enhance the mutual trust and confidence with each. This has been, as noted earlier, practised by the Malaysian and Indonesian security forces along the Sarawak-Kalimantan border with notable success. This model should be used and enhanced in securing the shared borders by other states in other regions.

## Acknowledgement

A big portion of this paper had been presented in the 18<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Regional Forum Heads of Defence Universities, Institutions, Colleges Meeting in Seoul, South Korea (22-23 November 2014).

## References

- Classified Documents of Bilateral Relations Malaysia and Indonesia* (2014). Kuala Lumpur.  
*Classified Documents of Bilateral Relations Malaysia and Thailand* (2014). Kuala Lumpur.

- Esszone\_M* (2018). Retrieved May 25, 2018, from [https://esscom.gov.my/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/esszone\\_M.jpg](https://esscom.gov.my/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/esszone_M.jpg)
- Launch of Eyes in the Sky (EiS) Initiative (2005, September 14). Retrieved from <https://www.defencetalk.com/launch-of-eyes-in-the-sky-eis-initiative-3356/>
- Map State of Sarawak* (n.d). Retrieved on September 21, 2015, from <http://www.wonderfulmalaysia.com/maps/map-sarawak.gif>
- NDUM-MAF Research* (2012). Kajian Kes Indeks Persepsi Keselamatan Komuniti Kawasan Operasi Pasir, Sabah. Kuala Lumpur. Markas Angkatan Bersama.
- Peninsular Malaysia Interactive Map* (n.d). Retrieved September 2, 2015, from <https://www.malaysiavacationguide.com/malaysiamap.html>
- Political map of Malaysia 1998* (2018). Retrieved on May 25, 2018, from <https://aseanup.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/malaysia-political-map-1998.jpg>
- Political map of South East Asia 2003* (n.d.). Retrieved on May 25, 2018, from <https://aseanup.com/free-maps-asean-countries>
- Said, S. (2015). Membangkitkan Memori Kolektif Kesejarahan Malaysia-Indonesia (Pengalaman dan Iktibar Dalam Hubungan Malaysia-Indonesia). *Soal Peta, Bumi Atau Hati: Sejarah dan Masyarakat Perbatasan Sarawak Kalimantan*. Kuching: UNIMAS.
- Thailand signs agreement (2000), *The New Straits Times*, Malaysia.