

Reimagining Cross-Border Cooperation From Indonesia-Malaysia Experiences: A Thematic Literature Review

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Abstract

The research aimed to explore the scientific discourse of cross-border cooperation in Southeast Asia, particularly on the Indonesia-Malaysia border area. Through thematic literature review, this research collected and analyzed journal articles, books, book chapters, and doctoral dissertations. The literature review find the gaps in literatures on cross-border cooperation which focus more on physical connectivity on land border area with less attention to institutional and people-to-people dimensions. This research also shows that Indonesia-Malaysia and Southeast Asia in general pose a less-structured and informal form of cross-border cooperation, which is different with an institutionalized and formal form of cross-border cooperation posed by Euroregion. The literature review also synthesizes new insights to the existing cross-border cooperation understanding. These insights shows that cooperation can address various purposes in complement to socio-economic sector, can be expanded to include subnational, national, subregional level, and should adopt more inclusive goals by considering the interests of all parties involved and affected.

Keywords: connectivity, cross-border cooperation, Indonesia, Malaysia, thematic literature review

Introduction

Cross-border cooperation is defined as an institutionalized collaboration among multiple networks of public, private, and civil society actors across national borders on various socio-economic initiatives at local or subnational level (Perkmann, 2003; Scott, 2017; Usui, 2019). It is essential for border area development, as a case study in Europe showed that doubling the number of cross-border cooperation projects is correlated with a 2.3% increase in regional gross value added per capita in border regions (Basboga, 2020). Another research study shows that cross-border cooperation has fostered regional development and addressed common challenges in economic dynamism, job creation, and entrepreneurship in the border region (Chamusca, 2024).

Research on cross-border cooperation has been extensively conducted in various regions worldwide, including Europe, North America, Latin America, Africa, East Asia, and South Asia (Brunet-Jailly, 2022; Scott, 2017). Among these regions, Europe is a model for the development of institutionalized cross-border cooperation for others. Several reasons underpin this viewpoint. First cross-border cooperation has its origins in the economic core of continental Europe (Scott, 2017). Second, cross-border regions have flourished throughout Europe over the past 50 years (Brunet-Jailly, 2022). Third, cross-border cooperation has played an essential role in the regional integration of the European Union (Lina & Bedrule-Grigoruta, 2009). Fourth, European countries have developed the concept of Euroregion as a platform for cross-border cooperation (Jeřábek et al., 2018).

Meanwhile, research on cross-border cooperation in Southeast Asia remains limited compared to Europe. Some previous research studies compile and refer Southeast Asia with other regions to analyze cross-border cooperation. For instance, Wang and Wei (2022) explore the practice of cross-border cooperation between Southeast Asian countries and China within the framework of the Greater Mekong Subregion. Nadalutti (2022) compares cross-border cooperation in Europe and Southeast Asia as the building block of regionalism.

Another challenge for research studies on cross-border cooperation in Southeast Asia is that many researchers from the region publish their work in their respective national languages. Despite containing in-depth data and field-based analysis, these studies are dispersed in languages such as Malay (Awang et al., 2013; Sarjono, 2018) and Indonesian (Septaria, 2023; Yanti & Muawanah, 2020), limiting their accessibility for international readers.

The discourse on cross-border cooperation, which has been predominantly shaped by the experiences of European countries, tends to place excessive emphasis on institutionalization. This focus may lead to conceptual pitfalls in defining functional cross-border areas (Molak & Soukopová, 2022), or may encounter administrative inefficiencies (Fogarasi, 2025). Moreover, the institutional approach to cross-border cooperation often prioritizes formal mechanisms, overlooking the persistence of informal cross-border practices—particularly along the borders of developing countries in Southeast Asia. Therefore, the research argues that the conceptualization of cross-border cooperation may differ between Europe, which is largely composed of developed nations, and Southeast Asia,

which is predominantly made up of developing countries. In Europe, cross-border cooperation generally refers to formal, structured arrangements. In contrast, in Southeast Asia, such cooperation may remain relatively flexible, accommodating non-institutionalized initiatives and informal cross-border activities.

Among the 11 countries located in Southeast Asia, cross-border cooperation between Indonesia and Malaysia stands out as an intriguing topic of discussion. Firstly, Indonesia and Malaysia share both land and maritime borders. The land border is situated on Borneo/Kalimantan, while the maritime borders are located along the Malacca Strait, the Eastern Singapore Strait, the South China Sea, and the Sulawesi Sea. In contrast, other Southeast Asian countries generally share either land or maritime borders. Secondly, the length of the border between Indonesia and Malaysia is among the longest in Southeast Asia. The land border in Kalimantan spans approximately 2,004 kilometers. On the other hand, the maritime border encompasses the territorial sea, continental shelf, and exclusive economic zone, resulting from Indonesia's status as an archipelagic state and Malaysia's status as a coastal state under UNCLOS 1982 (BNPP RI, 2015). Thirdly, these two countries are among the founders of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and have initiated cross-border cooperation since 1967 through the Basic Arrangement on Border Crossing Agreement on Border Trade between the Government of the Republic of Indonesia and the Government of Malaysia, 1970). An in-depth thematic literature review on cross-border cooperation between Indonesia and Malaysia are expected to reveal the unique characteristics of cross-border cooperation specific to these two countries and Southeast Asia in general, distinguishing them from cross-border cooperation characteristics in other regions of the world.

Therefore, this research aims to review the literature on the practice of cross-border cooperation in Southeast Asia, particularly between Indonesia and Malaysia. Given the extensive land border and the complex maritime boundaries between the two countries, this research is expected to illustrate the dynamics and complexities of Indonesia-Malaysia cross-border cooperation, along with the progress and challenges. Furthermore, this research also offers policy recommendations based on the reflection of the findings.

Research Methods

The research uses thematic literature review as a method of data collection and analysis. A thematic literature review is a methodological approach to gather information about topics of interest in order to critique, analyze, and synthesize materials to provide a foundation for further inquiry of discipline-specific phenomena (Parse, 2023). In contrast to other review formats that may arrange literature based on chronology, a thematic review emphasizes identifying recurring themes or patterns within a body of work. These themes emerge through a thorough reading and synthesis of the literature, rather than being predetermined (Hecker & Kalpokas, n.d.).

From the broad range of existing literature, this research selects sources for the literature review based on several criteria. First, the literature must be related to the topic of cross-border cooperation between Indonesia and Malaysia. Second, the research only includes literature that has been formally published as journal articles, books, book chapters, proceedings, or doctoral theses. These types of publications are considered sources with established academic rigor. Consequently, other forms of publications such as website articles, unpublished reports, as well as master's and undergraduate theses are excluded from the selected literature. Third, the research prioritizes literature published within the last decade to ensure the engagement that it engages with current debates on cross-border cooperation. Meanwhile, older publications may be cited in sections other than the results, such as the introduction.

A thematic literature review involves several steps. First, relevant research themes are identified by reading the selected literature and noting recurring themes, concepts, or patterns that emerge. The literature is then categorized based on these themes, each representing a distinct aspect of the research topic to ensure a structured and coherent review. Subsequently, the literature is synthesized by comparing findings across studies, identifying gaps, and highlighting areas of consensus and controversy. Finally, a critical evaluation of the literature within each theme is conducted, assessing the methodological quality of the studies, the robustness of the findings, and their relevance to the overall topic.

Results and Discussions

The thematic literature review collects previous research published in journal articles, books or book chapters, and doctoral theses. These research studies are subsequently categorized into four themes.

Border Related Issues for Cross-Border Cooperation

ManyNumerous border-related issues arise from the dynamic of bilateral relations, including those between Indonesia and Malaysia. Most of the traced research on this topic discusses Indonesia-Malaysia relations in three main issues, namely border dispute (Druce & Baikoeni, 2016; Hamzah et al., 2014; Mons, 2022), migrant workers (Arisman & Jaya, 2021; Elias, 2013; Maksum, 2022), and cultural contestation (Clark, 2013; Mulyana & Yaputra, 2020; Ulyana, 2018).

Regarding the Indonesia-Malaysia border dispute, Mon (2022) highlights unresolved maritime boundaries between Malaysia and its neighboring countries, particularly with Indonesia on the eastern coast of Sabah and in the Celebes Sea. These unresolved boundaries include the vulnerability of the area to various security threats, such as piracy and kidnapping for ransom. The research also examines various cooperation mechanisms involving Malaysia and its neighboring countries to maintain maritime security, such as the Malacca Straits Patrol, Trilateral Maritime Patrol, and Trilateral Air Patrol. Mon's (2022) analysis implies the importance of cooperation with neighboring countries in maintaining maritime security. In another case, Druce & Baikoeni (2016) discuss the Ambalat block dispute in the Sulawesi Sea

between Indonesia and Malaysia, which escalated in 2005 when a naval standoff between the two sides threatened to use their military force. The research identifies several factors driving this escalation, including economic interests, media and nationalist sentiments, as well as provocative comments by politicians and lawmakers. The research also notes that cross-border cooperation, particularly through joint military exercises, has been initiated as part of a conflict management mechanism. The analysis underscores the importance of cross-border cooperation between countries in the security sector.

Regarding the issue of migrant workers, Maksum (2022) highlights the differences in the relationship patterns between the national and grassroots levels. At the national level, mainstream media often depict tensions in the relationship between the two countries. However, at the grassroots level, the relationship between Indonesian migrants and local Malaysians in Penang is harmonious and cohesive. The finding suggests that shared identity is a supportive factor for this harmonious grassroots-level relationship. Although Maksum (2022) does not specifically discuss cross-border cooperation, the factor of shared identity can also be considered as a determining factor in cross-border cooperation.

Meanwhile, Arisman & Jaya (2021) discuss various foreign policies related to migrant workers between Indonesia, as the sending country, and Malaysia, as the receiving country. Using a mixed-method approach, the research finds that the protection of Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia is still weak, as indicated by the withholding of documents by employers and the denial of the right to leave. Moreover, the research recommends the need for policy improvements, but with a more unilateral dimension, rather than bilateral policies such as cross-border cooperation. Elias (2013) also discusses how disputes over the domestic workers' issue between Indonesia and Malaysia are understood in the context of foreign policy. The research can serve as a valuable reference, particularly regarding the mobility of migrant workers, which could potentially be facilitated by cross-border connectivity.

On the issue of cultural contestation, Clark (2013) extensively discusses the cultural claim regarding batik between the two countries. In this case, Indonesia excels in diplomacy to gain international recognition for its culture, but has little motivation to preserve and revitalize much of its cultural heritage. On the other hand, Malaysia is more successful in emphasizing the role of history and heritage in its national cultural narrative, justified by well-maintained batik galleries and museums. The research views Indonesia-Malaysia in the context of contestation rather than cooperation. Furthermore, Mulyana and Yaputra (2020) find that Indonesian media is exaggerating the cultural conflict issue and that it is only in the interest of the mass media to find exciting news to publish. In contrast, Ulyana (2018) focuses on cultural diplomacy to improve the occasionally strained relations between the two countries, including issues related to cultural heritage claims. The research evaluates cultural diplomacy programs conducted by both countries in the fields of education, the performing arts, and literature. The research finds that cultural diplomacy has helped improve relations between the two countries, indicated by an increase in the exchange of students, tourists, and performing arts among them.

The research highlights key issues in the bilateral relationship between Indonesia and Malaysia, including political security, migration, and cultural relations. These literatures also reveal a divergence in attitudes between central governments and local communities in addressing these issues. This difference in perspectives suggests a potential gap between governmental interests and the needs of local populations in dealing with border-related matters. This gap may contribute to the development of a context-specific approach to cross-border cooperation. Raharjo (2025) indicates that Indonesia and Malaysia, both classified as flawed democracies, tend to adopt a top-down approach, largely based on what central governments deem appropriate. In contrast, this approach differs from the model of cross-border cooperation in the European Union, where, over the past three decades, an open government approach has been implemented, grounded in the three principles of transparency, participation, and collaboration. This model involves the state in building and implementing cross-border cooperation through close interactions with actors from civil society, business, and academia (Beck, 2022).

Existing Frameworks of Cross-border Cooperation

Several scholars have discussed cross-border cooperation between Indonesia and Malaysia. For example, Karim (2015, 2019) analyzed the border between Indonesia's West Kalimantan and Malaysia's Sarawak within the frameworks of micro-regionalism and cross-border regionalism, respectively. Using a qualitative approach with interviews as a data collection method, the research finds that micro-regionalism between West Kalimantan and Sarawak remained limited. Some of the inhibiting factors include the lack of coordination between local and central governments, the limited authority of local government to manage border area affairs, and the use of the issue of sovereignty by local elites which has degenerated relations between the two parties. Karim cites many examples of cross-border cooperation under the Sosek Malindo and BIMP-EAGA frameworks. Although not focusing on the connectivity sector, the research presents several examples of physical connectivity development, but is limited to the land dimension. Moreover, explanations for the failure of cross-border cooperation to foster micro-regionalism have primarily drawn on case analyses from the Indonesian government's perspective, while cases involving Malaysian actors and non-state actors remain underexplored.

Anuar and Harun (2019) describe the dynamics of cross-border cooperation between Indonesia and Malaysia at the Sebatik-Tawau border area, highlighting the impact of increasing security issues in the economic sector. The research shows that cross-border economic activities of the local population are disrupted due to the Malaysian government's implementation of security-tightening policies. While security issues are more prevalent on the Malaysia-Philippines border, these policies also negatively affect the Indonesia-Malaysia border area. Security authorities restrict the activities of fishermen in Sebatik and Tawau, limiting their fishing time and area, resulting in reduced income. The research shows that regional instability can disrupt cross-border cooperation. However, the research does not specifically describe how these security issues hinder cross-border connectivity at the

Indonesia-Malaysia border, especially regarding the operation of the Tawau-Nunukan ferry and the Tawau-Tarakan flights.

Other scholars, Sudiar and Irawan (2019), conduct research on various agreements between Indonesia and Malaysia aimed at facilitating cross-border activities. They find that not all of these agreements are implemented. Some factors hindering their implementation include the limited authority of provincial or state governments responsible for carrying out the agreements compared to the central government's authority, as well as a lack of political will on both sides to execute these cross-border agreements. Satyawati (2018) also discovers that while cross-border cooperation between Indonesia and Malaysia has brought benefits, these benefits are not felt by the people in the border areas. As a result, the relationship becomes more dependent rather than interdependent. Several contributing factors include lengthy bureaucratic processes, once-a-year coordination meetings that hinder timely and responsive decisions, conflicting policies among the authoritative agencies at the border, and limited human resource capabilities. Unfortunately, the works of Sudiar and Irawan (2019) and Satyawati (2018) do not provide further details on the specific benefits from cross-border cooperation.

The benefits of cross-border cooperation at the Indonesia-Malaysia border have been studied by Raharjo et al. (2018), with a focus on the case of Sebatik Island. The research shows that cross-border cooperation has had a positive impact on five out of the six capitals of social resilience of the Sebatik community. However, the research does not specifically discuss the impact of cross-border cooperation on connectivity. Issues related to connectivity are mentioned in the discussion of physical capital, such as the opening of traditional cross-border shipping routes between Indonesia and Malaysia, which unfortunately ceased in 2012 due to security and passenger safety concerns. Considering the recent developments, such as the construction of a modern Integrated Border Crossing Post on Sebatik Island, there is a need for more up-to-date research to describe the benefits of cross-border cooperation on physical capital or physical connectivity in that location.

The review of the literature reveals several key points. First, micro-regionalism or minilateralism among subnational authorities between Indonesia and Malaysia remains limited. One contributing factor is the uneven distribution of authority in managing border areas, where central governments retain predominant – if not total – control over these areas. As a consequence of this concentration of power, the institutionalization of cross-border cooperation through the establishment of supranational authorities has been difficult to realize, as decision-making in micro-regionalism remains firmly in the hands of each member state's central government. Anuar et al. (2024) confirm that the subregional institution formed through Indonesia–Malaysia–Thailand minilateralism functions merely as a coordination agency. This stands in contrast to the European model of cross-border cooperation, which has developed supraregional institutions to enable autonomous territorial governance (Ulrich, 2019).

Second, the literature review highlights that in the Indonesia–Malaysia border region, the practice of traditional border crossing remains a significant issue in bilateral cooperation.

Traditional border crossing refers to activities undertaken by local border residents for purposes such as visiting relatives, engaging in socio-cultural exchanges, and conducting small-scale trade across border areas. These practices typically bypass formal procedures, such as the use of passports and the imposition of customs duties on goods brought across the border. They are also referred to as informal border crossings. At the same times, activities are often regarded as illegal in other regions (Dzawanda & Matsa, 2023). In Southeast Asia, states tend to facilitate informal border crossings as a means of supporting the well-being of local communities.

Connectivity Development in Cross-border Cooperation

Connectivity has become a widely discussed issue in Southeast Asia, especially following the release of the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity in 2010 (ASEAN, 2010). Subsequently, in 2016, ASEAN published the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025 (ASEAN, 2016). Studies on connectivity are not only discussed within the framework of ASEAN (Fünfgeld, 2019; Yap & Zahraei, 2018) but also in the context of smaller-scale subregional cooperation (Guina, 2023; H. Idris & Hussin, 2018; Majid et al., 2022). Furthermore, this topic is also addressed in the context of bilateral relations (H. Idris & Ling, 2021), specifically between Indonesia and Malaysia (Hariyatie, 2009; R. Idris, 2018).

Within the ASEAN framework, Fünfgeld (2019) explores ASEAN's vision for the future of connectivity in Southeast Asia. By employing hermeneutic analysis on video releases that promote the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity, this research asserts that the vision of connectivity is closely tied to imaginaries of movement and modernity. However, the vision is almost exclusively urban, which may lead to more fragmentation. Furthermore, the research does not review the actual implementation of connectivity programs in ASEAN.

Yap and Zahraei (2018) conduct a more evaluative study on maritime connectivity in Southeast Asia. They analyze the impact of the increasing concentration ratio of the top ten carriers in the liner shipping industry on shipping connectivity from major container transshipment hubs in Southeast Asia. Between 2014 and 2017, the top ten carriers increased their dominance in the shipping industry from 64 percent to 82 percent. The research indicates that participation in alliance arrangements is a key factor for shipping lines to succeed in a competitive market. Furthermore, the research highlights the importance of cooperation among private actors in matters of maritime connectivity in Southeast Asia. Unfortunately, the research fails to further explain the complementing cooperation among state actors in shipping connectivity between transshipment hubs in Southeast Asia.

In the context of subregional cooperation, Majid et al. (2022) discuss air connectivity between Indonesia and Malaysia within the framework of the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT) cooperation. Using the SWOT analysis framework, the research finds the quantity and quality of human resources, government support, and mastery of information technology as strength factors. Meanwhile, the lack of diplomacy or negotiation skills and limited budgets are the weakness factors. This research also reveals that healthy competition among air transport operators presents an opportunity to increase air

connectivity, while the biggest challenge is the limited performance of the tourism sector. Majid et al. (2022) specifically focus on air connectivity in the IMT-GT area, namely between Sumatra Island and the Malay Peninsula, while land and sea connectivity in Borneo are not discussed. In addition, Majid et al. (2022) test the SWOT analysis only on civil aviation authorities on the Indonesian side.

In relation to connectivity development within subregional cooperation, H. Idris and Hussin (2018) research on intra-ASEAN connectivity and inland waterways networks in the coastal shipping and tourism sector. By examining three subregional cooperation cases, namely IMT-GT, Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), and Brunei Darussalam-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA), the research finds that the programs implemented within these cooperatives deliver significant benefits. These include cost reduction, the establishment of new regional connections, and the expansion of regional markets. Regarding the Indonesia-Malaysia border, the research also indicates initiatives for connectivity within the IMT-GT subregional cooperation, such as the building of several cross-border economic corridors, including the Songkhla-Penang-Medan economic corridor and the Dumai-Melaka economic corridor. However, the impact of these economic corridor developments on trade and tourism is not further analysed with statistical data on trade and people mobility.

Guina (2023) highlights the role of connectivity development through economic corridors in the IMT-GT plays in facilitating cross-border trade. The research concludes that land connectivity may not have a transformative impact on cross-border trade performance. This can happen because major commodities usually go through ports to reach their markets or destination countries. Land connectivity primarily serves as a transit route to the ports. This research is only focused on the IMT-GT cooperation area, serving as a benchmark for research in other border regions, including Kalimantan.

Regarding bilateral relations, H. Idris and Ling (2021) analyze Malaysia and Indonesia's responses and participation in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) scheme and the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity. The research shows that Indonesia is slower and more cautious in embracing the BRI compared to Malaysia. Several contributing factors include inefficiencies in infrastructure development, various red tape, and longstanding anti-Chinese sentiments. This research does not examine into bilateral cooperation between Indonesia and Malaysia but rather compares the responses of each country.

Hariyatie (2009) discusses the development of connectivity based on bilateral cooperation between Indonesia and Malaysia. One of the findings highlights the role of the Sosek Malindo cooperation between West Kalimantan Province, Indonesia and Sarawak, Malaysia in the transportation sector. The collaboration between two parties in improving transportation facilities has increased the number of vehicles crossing the border. The finding refers to the cooperation that took place before 2009, during which the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity did not exist. Also, the research only covers the Sosek Malindo cooperation between West Kalimantan and Sarawak, while the Sosek Malindo's chapter on North Kalimantan-Sabah is not discussed.

Complementing the previous research, R. Idris (2018) addresses the topic of common border through road connectivity between Sabah (Malaysia) and Kalimantan (Indonesia) and its impact on exports. Using a gravity model and trade data from 1990 to 2010, the research shows that a common border had a positive and significant association with Malaysia's exports during the 1990-2010 period. Therefore, R. Idris (2018) argues that road connectivity between Sabah and Kalimantan is projected to enhance Malaysia's exports in general and specifically the Sabah State (to Indonesia). However, the data utilized are outdated and need updating. Additionally, this research still utilizes Malaysia's overall export data rather than specific export data for Sabah. There is a need of research that focus on the specific export data from the Kalimantan region, making the data analysis more accurate.

The literature clusters suggest that cross-border cooperation between Indonesia and Malaysia, as well as among several other Southeast Asian countries, has had a positive impact on the development of connectivity – both in terms of hard and soft infrastructure – which in turn contributes to the development of border region. These findings exhibit patterns similar to those observed in cross-border cooperation practices in Europe and other regions. This further reinforces the premise that cross-border cooperation serves as an important tool in advancing cross-border governance.

Infrastructure Connectivity in Cross-Border Cooperation

Research on cross-border infrastructure has developed more in the European region. Wendt et al. (2021) highlight that transport infrastructure is critical to ensure cross-border connectivity, and ethnic diversity is an influential factor in the cross-border tourist traffic along the Romanian-Ukrainian borderland. Another research by Puka and Szulecki (2014) reveals that on Germany-Poland border, political and governance issues may pose more obstacles to cross-border infrastructure than economic factors such as inadequate financing and differing interests. Both research focus on borders among European countries.

Meanwhile, Fung et al. (2011) attempt to provide a broader perspective on cross-border infrastructure, not limited to Europe but also including the Asia-Pacific and Latin American regions. They emphasize the importance of government involvement, the need for smooth coordination among diverse stakeholder groups, and top-level support for the success of transnational cross-border infrastructure projects. The importance of government involvement in cross-border infrastructure development in the Asia-Pacific region is also noted by Bisbey et al. (2020). These research works cover a large area of the Asia Pacific, which may could not give details on each case. Nevertheless, research conducted in different regions can serve as a reference for identifying factors that support and hinder cross-border cooperation.

In the context of Southeast Asia, research on cross-border infrastructure has been carried out by Xiao et al. (2024). They examine the relative significance of the China-Laos Railway's cross-border infrastructure on land-use changes and landscape patterns. The research discovered that, from 2017 onwards, approximately 3% of deforestation is attributed to the growth of cropland (8%) and the development of construction land (38%) in the vicinity of the

China-Laos Railway. It poses a challenge in developing cross-border infrastructure, which is the potential impact of ecological threats, such as soil and land degradation, pollution, deforestation, and loss of biodiversity and ecosystems. However, this research does not include how the cross-border infrastructure is being built, except for the fact that the case focuses on land-based infrastructure only. Rana and Ji (2020) show that in the context of BRI, cross-border infrastructure development in Southeast Asia faces challenges of the China's hegemony, corruption, and debt distress. Fujimura and Edmonds (2006) research on the effects of cross-border transport infrastructure on the economies within the Greater Mekong Subregion. The research posits that the cross-border and domestic transport infrastructure can effectively reduce trade-related expenses and, thereby directly contribute to increased trade and investment. However, disparities in the distribution of benefits and costs can pose a threat to the long-term viability of cross-border transport infrastructure projects. However, research by Rana and Ji (2020) and Fujimura and Edmonds (2006) take cases in Indo-China countries as a more land-based area in Southeast Asia.

Table 1. Contents and Gaps in Existing Literatures of Cross-Border Cooperation

Themes	Sources	Contents	Gaps
Border related issues for cross-border cooperation	Arisman & Jaya, 2021; Clark, 2013; Druce & Baikoeni, 2016; Elias, 2013; Hamzah et al., 2014; Maksum, 2022; Mon, 2022; Mulyana & Yaputra, 2020; Ulyana, 2018	Border dispute, migrant workers, and contestation and similar cultural heritage.	More on unilateral policy by each country, framing similar cultural heritage in the context of contestation instead of cooperation.
Existing cross-border cooperation between Indonesia and Malaysia	Anuar & Harun, 2019; Karim, 2022; Raharjo et al., 2018; Satyawati, 2018; Sudiar & Irawan, 2019	Cross-border cooperation under the Sosek-Malindo and BIMP-EAGA; and their benefits on social resilience of border residents	Connectivity development only limited to the land dimension, no explanation on how security issues hinder cross-border connectivity, no specific forms of benefits from cross-border cooperation on connectivity.
Connectivity Development in cross-border cooperation	Fünfgeld, 2019; Guina, 2023; Hariyatie, 2009; R. Idris, 2019, H. Idris & Hussin, 2018; H. Idris & Ling, 2021; Majid et al., 2022; Yap & Zahraei, 2018	Connectivity development through cooperation under the framework of ASEAN, IMT-GT cooperation, BRI, and Sosek Malindo.	No further analysis on the impact of economic corridor developments on trade and tourism.
Infrastructure connectivity in cross-border cooperation	Bisbey et al., 2020; Fujimura & Edmonds, 2006; Fung et al., 2011; Puka & Szulecki, 2014; Rana & Ji, 2020;Wendt et al., 2021; Xiao et al., 2024	Political issues, corruption, and ecological threats as challenges toward cross-border infrastructure development, the importance of government involvement to deal with these issues.	The research does not specifically include what framework to build cross-border infrastructure among neighbouring countries, beside the fact that the cases are on land-based infrastructure.

Source: authors

The research works on cross-border infrastructure provide lessons about several critical factors and impacts that need to be considered for future research. Previous research in Southeast Asia has predominantly discussed land-based cross-border infrastructure, with less research on the maritime border area. Moreover, previous research is also predominantly associating cross-border infrastructure with the physical dimension (hard infrastructure). However, infrastructure in the context of institutional dimension (soft infrastructure) is also equally important. This soft infrastructure dimension can serve as a strength and differentiating factor for future study in comparison to the previous ones. Table 1 presents a summary of four the thematic literature reviews.

Discussion

Refer to the definition of cross-border cooperation introduced earlier, this literature review synthesizes key elements as a lesson learned from Southeast Asia, especially Indonesia-Malaysia border area. The definition of cross-border cooperation—an institutionalized collaboration among multiple networks of public, private, and civil society actors across national borders on various socio-economic initiatives at local or subnational level—represent elements of actor (public, private, and civil society), role of cooperation (socio-economic well-being), and level or form of cooperation (local, subnational, or subregional). In addition, this literature review also reveals supporting and inhibiting factors. These elements of form, actor, roles, and factor of cross-border cooperation are discussed in the following part.

Regarding the element of form of cross-border cooperation, the literature review shows examples of cross-border initiatives conducted by Indonesia and Malaysia. The cross-border cooperation include initiatives in the maritime security sector, such as Malacca Straits Patrol, Trilateral Maritime Patrol, Trilateral Air Patrol, and joint military exercises. They also cover cultural diplomacy sector, such as cultural exchange of students, tourists, and performing arts. The initiatives also extend to transportation and connectivity sector, such as the establishment of border crossing post, cross-border ferry routes, and direct flights. It implies that cross-border cooperation can be used to address various purposes, not limited only to socio-economic sector.

Table 2 gives the range of issues and purposes of the cross-border cooperation based on the existing agreements between Indonesia and Malaysia, as collected during this research. Moreover, Table 2 reveals that several cross-border cooperation initiatives intersect with one another. For instance, the Agreement on Border Crossing and the Agreement on Border Trade address economic and socio-cultural interests simultaneously. These agreements accommodate the traditional movement of people and goods to support the well-being of border residents. Similarly, the 1972 Security Arrangement encompasses security and defense dimensions, as it involves military and police forces. Such evidence suggests that a single cross-border cooperation initiative can accommodate multiple interests at once.

Table 2. The Purpose of Cross-border Cooperation Based on Existing Agreements between Indonesia and Malaysia

Main Issue	Agreement	Year	Purpose
Socio-Culture	Basic Arrangement on Border Crossing	1967	Governing movement of goods and people into and out of the border areas.
	Agreement on Border Crossing	2006	Improving the facilities to be accorded to citizens living within Indonesian border area (West Kalimantan, East Kalimantan, Riau, and Riau Islands) and Malaysian border area (Sabah, Sarawak, Melaka, Johor, Selangor, and Negeri Sembilan).
	Agreement on Border Crossing	2023	Improving the facilities to be accorded to citizens living within Indonesian border area (West Kalimantan, East Kalimantan, North Kalimantan, and Riau Islands) and Malaysian border area (Sabah and Sarawak).
Sovereignty	Agreement Relating to the Delimitation of the Continental Shelves	1969	Delimitating continental shelves to strengthen historic relations of both countries
	Treaty on Determination of Boundary Lines of Territorial Waters at the Strait of Malacca	1970	Determining the boundary lines of territorial waters of the two countries at the narrow part of the Strait of Malacca.
Economy	Agreement on Border Trade	1970	Governing the conduct of both overland and sea border trade for agricultural products and daily-use goods.
	Agreement on Travel Facilities for Sea Border Trade	1974	Simplifying the system of control for the entry and exit of citizens to conduct sea border trade.
	Agreement on Border Trade	2023	Accommodating the fulfilment of daily needs of the residents in the border area through border trade within the threshold value.
Security	MoU in the Respect of the Common Guidelines Concerning Treatment of Fishermen by Maritime Law Enforcement Agency	2012	Establishing standard guidelines for respective maritime law enforcement agencies relating to the treatment of fishermen of the parties.
Defense	Security Arrangement in the Border Regions	1972	Dealing with security problems along the common border by establishing general border committee.
	Joint Declaration of Foreign Ministers and Chiefs of Defence Forces	2016	Addressing security issues in the maritime areas of common concern and addressing the growing non-traditional challenges in the region through coordinated patrols, the provision of immediate assistance to ensure the safety of people and vessels, and the establishment of focal points and communication hotlines.

Source: Authors

Moreover, the literature review shows that Indonesia and Malaysia execute cross-border cooperation through various cooperation frameworks. In the Sosek Malindo initiative, cooperation operates at the subnational level with provinces in Indonesia and states in Malaysia serving as the main actors. Border trade and border crossing are managed through

bilateral agreements at the national level, with the participation of central government line ministries. For land, air, and sea linkages, they utilize multilateral forums such as BIMP-EAGA and IMT-GT subregional cooperation, and even through ASEAN. These findings suggest that the need to extend the definition of cross-border cooperation to include subregional and regional levels, in addition to the local or subnational level.

Regarding the role of cross-border cooperation, the literature review reveals that it can have numerous positive impacts, including increasing cross-border trade and investment, expanding regional markets, facilitating the mobility of people, such as through tourism, and enhancing the social resilience and socio-economic wellbeing of border communities. Updated export statistics support this finding. At the Nanga Badau Customs, Immigration, Quarantine, and Security (CIQS), BPS-Statistics of Indonesia recorded that Indonesia's exports to Malaysia increased significantly from USD 33 million in 2016 to USD 41 million in 2017 – an increase of over 24% following the inauguration of the facility. A similar trend continued in the following year, with exports rising by approximately 63%.

However, cross-border cooperation can also have undesirable effects, such as land degradation, pollution, deforestation, and biodiversity loss from unsustainable development of cross-border infrastructure. Fieldnotes from the fieldwork conducted between July and September 2024 confirm these findings. According to several residents around the Aruk-Biawak CIQS facility, they used to sell their crops, such as durian, pepper, and vegetables, to neighboring countries with good prices without any significant barriers. However, since the CIQS' inauguration in 2017, they have been unable to sell their agricultural products to Malaysia because of the increasing number of regulatory requirements. As a result, their only remaining option is to sell their crops domestically at lower prices. The Dayak Bakati, an indigenous community living near the CIQS, faces challenges in conducting cross-border activities, including visiting relatives in neighboring countries, especially during emergencies such as illness or death. The difficulties are due to rigid cross-border procedures that restrict crossing between 6 am and 6 pm, require specific documentation, and prohibit the use of motorbikes. The CIQS should also accommodate their sociocultural rights. Therefore, the goals of cross-border cooperation should be expanded to ensure inclusivity, considering the interests of all parties that are involved and affected.

Regarding the actors, the literature review shows several types of actors involved in cross-border cooperation between Indonesia and Malaysia. First, the national government plays a key role in making regulations to make cross-border infrastructure projects a success. Second, subnational governments play a role in implementing cross-border cooperation in border areas under their authority. Third, civil society is the perpetrator of various cross-border activities, including those involving migrant workers, tourists, and border residents. Lastly, private actors collaborate in running cross-border businesses such as shipping companies, foreign trading, and related activities. These findings introduce no new actors, as all of them already exist in the general definition of cross-border cooperation. However, these findings underline the remaining strong role of national governments in Southeast Asia amidst the discourse in other regions that emphasizes subnational governments as the main actors in cross-border cooperation.

Regarding factors affecting cross-border cooperation, the literature review synthesizes two types of factors. The first are the supporting factors, which include strong political will from both parties, quantity and quality of human resources, government support, and mastery of information technology. The second are inhibiting factors, which include the lack of coordination between local and central governments, the limited authority of local government to manage border area affairs, regional instability, lengthy bureaucratic processes, and limited budgets. In the context of Southeast Asia, especially Indonesia and Malaysia, one interesting factor to discuss further is shared identity, which can be a supporting or inhibiting factor, depending on the context. In contexts related to economic interests such as trade and tourism, shared identity functions more as a supporting factor for cross-border cooperation. Meanwhile, in the context of cultural pride, shared identity can trigger contestation, as has happened in cases of cultural claims on batik between two countries.

The identification of the forms, actors, roles, and factors of cross-border cooperation—based on the Indonesia–Malaysia experience in particular, and Southeast Asia more broadly—reveals a markedly different picture compared to Europe and other regions. In Southeast Asia, cross-border cooperation often lacks formalized structures and processes, relying instead on informal or ad-hoc arrangements, or even experiencing a complete absence of structured collaboration. In some cases, cooperation is formalized through agreements but lacks practical implementation; in others, initiatives are endorsed by agencies that lack the political or administrative authority to regulate and execute them. In the Indonesia–Malaysia case, for example, subnational governments have reached certain agreements, but the authority and competence to act on these agreements lie with the central government. In contrast, European countries exemplify an institutionalized model of cross-border cooperation, characterized by established frameworks, rules, and organizations that facilitate the implementation of joint projects and policies. This model moves beyond ad-hoc agreements, aiming instead for long-term and sustainable collaboration. This contrasting pattern may be influenced by the fact that most Southeast Asian countries are classified as developing nations, while their European counterparts are developed countries, or possibly because many Southeast Asian countries are categorized as flawed democracies, whereas European countries are generally classified as full democracies.

Another significant difference lies in the approach to establishing cross-border cooperation. In Southeast Asia, central governments continue to play a key and dominant role in determining both the content and the mechanisms of cooperation. As a result, cross-border initiatives are predominantly shaped through a top-down strategy. In contrast, European countries have long adopted an open governance approach that emphasizes transparency, participation, and collaboration with other stakeholders, including civil society, business, and science, in both the development and implementation of cross-border cooperation.

Furthermore, due to the ad-hoc and short-term nature of cross-border cooperation in Southeast Asia, there remains a degree of acceptance toward informal border-crossing activities conducted by residents to meet their basic economic and socio-cultural needs. The weak level of institutionalization has resulted in uneven and underdeveloped systems of

governance. In contrast, in several other regions—particularly in countries affected by conflict—various forms of informal cross-border activities, even those rooted in traditional practices, are still classified as illegal. A perspective that distinguishes between formal and informal practices, rather than relying solely on a legal-illegal dichotomy, may be more appropriate for developing countries beyond the Southeast Asian context.

Conclusion

This thematic literature review on cross-border cooperation reveals that, in contrast to Europe—where such cooperation is institutionalized and characterized by open governance among developed and democratic countries—Southeast Asia, in general, and the Indonesia-Malaysia context in particular, exhibits a less-structured and informal form of cross-border cooperation among developing and flawed-democratic nations. The findings then generate five insights related to the existing understanding of cross-border cooperation. First, cross-border cooperation can be used to address various purposes, not limited only to the socio-economic sector, as stated in the referred definition. Second, the definition of cross-border cooperation can be expanded to also include the subregional and regional levels, in addition to local or subnational levels. Third, the goals of cross-border cooperation should be expanded to be more inclusive, considering the interests of all parties involved and affected. Fourth, the subnational government plays an important role amidst the previous discourse that emphasizes national governments as the main actor. Fifth, in Southeast Asia, shared identity can become a supporting or inhibiting factor towards cross-border cooperation, depending on the context.

The insights highlight the need for a more inclusive revision of cross-border cooperation that involves consultation with all relevant stakeholders and those affected by such initiatives, including borderland populations and Indigenous communities residing along the Indonesia-Malaysia border. It is important to address recent development of Indonesia-Malaysia cross-border cooperation by removing Riau in Indonesia, as well as Melaka, Johor, Selangor, and Negeri Sembilan in Malaysia, from the designated border area list of both countries. However, traditional cross-border activities continue in several of these regions. As a result, practices that were once tolerated may now be deemed illegal, placing local communities at risk of criminalization. Therefore, both governments need to reconsider the scope of the designated border areas in their bilateral agreements.

Furthermore, the review also reveals that there are still gaps in the existing literatures that need to be filled. First, most of the previous research do not specifically address the roles of cross-border cooperation on connectivity. Second, the connectivity discussion in most previous research tends to cover physical dimension only. Third, the locus of the research is predominantly in the land border area. Fourth, some previous research discussing the Indonesia-Malaysia border only covered one side of the perspective. Fifth, several research do not justify the argumentation with objective measurements, such as actual data on cross-border trade and people's mobility. Sixth, previous research has yet to describe the dynamics

that have occurred in recent times, especially with massive infrastructure development of the last decade. These six gaps can lead future research to offer novelty towards the existing discourses of cross-border cooperation in the Indonesia-Malaysia border area and Southeast Asia.

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