

The Evolving Threat of Narcotics Smuggling: A Non-Traditional Security Challenge in Southeast Asian Border States

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ABSTRACT

Traditional military threats have given way to non-traditional security (NTS) issues, including human security, as the essence of international security has changed. Narcotics smuggling is a major NTS concern that presents a huge burden, especially in border regions. Covering an area of around 4.4 million square kilometers, Southeast Asia is home to the "Golden Triangle," an infamous center for the production of drugs that is situated near the borders of Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar. These locations have facilitated the growth of extensive drug smuggling operations. The dangers of drug smuggling as a NTS concern in border states are examined in this paper. The research examined the effects of drug trafficking on regional security utilizing a qualitative methodology with realism as the theoretical framework. The results show that drug smuggling poses serious security threats to Southeast Asia, especially via marine routes that cross the Malacca Strait between Indonesia and Malaysia. Smugglers mostly operate at night and use advanced techniques, such as GPS-equipped drug packages and using fishermen as couriers. This smuggling route continues to exist due to several factors, such as the close proximity of territorial waters, the existence of unofficial and illegal ports, the lack of surveillance patrols, and the difficulties in maintaining law enforcement professionalism in border areas. Stronger regional collaboration, increased marine security, and better law enforcement strategies are needed to address these problems and lessen the growing menace of drug smuggling in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: non-traditional security, narcotics smuggling, border security, Southeast Asia, maritime security

Introduction

The dynamics of the international political constellation after the Cold War around the 2000s have changed the polarization of relations among countries in the international political arena, both in terms of issues and international actors. During the Cold War, countries around the world prioritized the issue of national security, also known as traditional security. Then, after the Cold War, the issue began to move towards the security of citizens known as NTS. One area that has not escaped the threat of humanitarian security is Southeast Asia. Also, the dynamics of the international political landscape underwent significant transformations. This era marked a transition from a bipolar system (United States vs. Soviet Union) to a multipolar system, in which emerging powers such as China and other nations began to play increasingly influential roles. International organizations have increasingly played a dominant role in global politics. This trend is also evident in Southeast Asia, where shifts in regional dynamics and border disputes have become unavoidable issues due to geographical influences.

Southeast Asia is increasingly confronted by a pressing NTS threat: narcotics smuggling across its porous land and maritime borders. Unlike conventional threats that involve state-to-state conflict or military aggression, the illicit drug trade operates below the threshold of war, yet exerts profound destabilizing effects on governance, human security, and regional cooperation Caballero-Anthony (2008). Border states such as Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, Indonesia, and the Philippines are particularly vulnerable due to a combination of weak institutional capacity, vast unmonitored areas, and proximity to major drug-producing zones such as the Golden Triangle (Windle, 2016). The research argues that narcotics smuggling has evolved into a strategic NTS issue for Southeast Asian border states and requires a shift from traditional national security paradigms to more integrated, regional, and people-centered approaches. It examines the dynamics of drug trafficking in key border zones, analyzes the multidimensional threats posed, and evaluates current policy responses. Ultimately, the research calls for enhanced multilateral cooperation, inclusive development policies, and a rethinking of security governance to address the structural vulnerabilities that enable the drug trade to flourish.

Geographically, territorial borders mark the area of a country, including land, sea, and airspace above it. Legally, the national boundary determines the scope of country's national law, while politically, the state boundary marks the end of a country's highest level of power over its territory and everything within the region (Hanita, 2006). A country's territory is separated by other countries' borders and functions as a boundary for its sovereignty. The introduction and understanding of boundaries are closely related to the implementation of development, welfare, and national defense. As a "front porch" of a country, the border region of Indonesia faces several complex problems, both security-related (illegal smuggling, illegal logging, and terrorism) and socioeconomic, which can threaten Indonesia's sovereignty. This problem is further complicated by the border region's proximity to other countries. In this

case, it is necessary to have an overview of the effective management of border areas to address problems in these areas.

Drug smuggling in Southeast Asia has grown into one of the most pressing and complex NTS issues in the last decade. The region occupies a strategic position in international trade networks, while also forming part of the “Golden Triangle” route, known as one of the world's largest centers of narcotics production and distribution. This phenomenon not only contributes to increased transnational crime and social vulnerability but also has serious implications for the political stability, security, and economic development of border countries such as Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, and Malaysia. The dynamics of narcotics smuggling show an increasingly organized pattern, exploiting weaknesses in border surveillance, advances in communication technology, and disparities in law enforcement policies among countries in the region.

The smuggling of narcotics in the region is facilitated by transnational organized crime networks that exploit jurisdictional gaps, corruption, and underdeveloped infrastructure. These networks have grown increasingly adaptive and decentralized, often overlapping with other forms of illicit activity such as arms trafficking, human smuggling, and terrorism financing (UNODC, 2022). The consequences of such criminal activities include rising domestic addiction rates, community-level violence, environmental degradation from drug production, and the erosion of public trust in law enforcement and the judiciary (Acharya, 2017). Drug trafficking in Southeast Asia is a transnational issue, involving multiple countries from production to distribution. For instance, narcotics often originate in Myanmar, transit through countries like Vietnam, and reach final destinations such as Malaysia (McNicholas & Draughon, 2016). The Golden Triangle, encompassing Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand, remains a notorious hub for opium production, complicating regional narcotics control efforts.

Although ASEAN has established various cooperation mechanisms, such as the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Drug Matters (AMMD) and the ASEAN Senior Officials on Drug Matters (ASOD), the effectiveness of their implementation remains limited by differences in national priorities, institutional capacity, and constraints cross-border coordination. This situation confirms that drug trafficking can no longer be viewed solely as a transnational crime, but rather as a NTS threat that requires a multidimensional and collaborative approach. Based on these issues, this research seeks to answer the main question: How has drug smuggling developed as a NTS threat in Southeast Asian border countries, and to what extent have regional cooperation mechanisms responded to these dynamics? This research argues that narcotics smuggling results from interactions between structural factors at the regional level and weaknesses in domestic governance, which weaken collective capacity to address non-traditional threats.

Literature Review

Research on state security in the border region has been carried out by several researchers, mainly focusing on the patterns of social development of communities and

border areas, border area security, and maritime defense in the border region. Research on traditional and NTS threats has already been carried out by other researchers, but the study still focuses on NTS threats in general and on Asian regionalism. Research on NTS threats in the border region, especially in the coastal borders of Riau Province and Malaysia, has not been conducted by other researchers, so this prompts researchers to be interested in researching the forms of NTS threats and the factors that drive the increase of NTS threats in the coastal regions of the provinces of Riau and Malacca.

This study departs from a NTS theoretical framework that views security as a condition determined not only by military factors, but also by threats arising from social, economic, political, and environmental dynamics. In the context of Southeast Asia, drug smuggling is a tangible form of non-traditional threat that transcends national sovereignty and has a direct impact on human security. Based on the ideas of Buzan (1991) and Acharya (2009), such threats require a multidimensional and collaborative response, as their sources of threats and impacts are spread across regions and institutions.

The shift in the international political paradigm from traditional to NTS is now a real security threat at the domestic, regional and global levels (Othman et al., 2016). Elaboration related to climate change, natural disasters, migration, and cross-border issues involving non-state actors currently have an impact on the security of the country and society. This paper argues that, in terms of topography, open geographical area, and strategic position, this region is vulnerable to threats. Conflicts at the domestic level that occurred in Cambodia, Vietnam, the Philippines (Mindanao), Indonesia (Aceh), and Thailand (Pattani) have provided space for these transboundary crimes. Given the geographical conditions in the territorial land and international waters, the Southeast Asian region will become a place where massive non-traditional security activities take place, so coordination efforts between countries are needed to anticipate these threats.

The concept of NTS emerged as a critique of traditional security approaches that focus on military and national defense issues. Buzan (1991) emphasizes that security does not cover only military aspects but also includes political, economic, social, and environmental dimensions. In this context, security threats do not only originate from inter-state conflicts, but also from non-military issues such as transnational crime, climate change, migration, terrorism, and drug trafficking. Acharya (2009) expands on this understanding through the human security and comprehensive security approaches in Southeast Asia, which emphasize the importance of protecting individuals and communities from various forms of non-military vulnerabilities. Within this framework, drug smuggling is understood not only as a crime but also as a threat to human welfare, social order, and political stability. Thus, addressing it requires a multidimensional approach involving cross-border and cross-sectoral cooperation.

Previous research on non-state security threats by Swanström (2010) explains that an in-depth analysis of the differences between hard (physical) and soft (non-physical) threats and security problems in Asian countries is multidimensional due to weak state and government structures. Furthermore, Srikanth (2014) only explains the causes of the emergence of NTS threats in the 21st century, such as the development of non-state actors, environmental

damage, domestic conflicts, and cyberwar. Dabova (2013) analyzes NTS threats in the border region explained that one of the biggest threats of state governments in the Southeast Asia Region is an organized transnational crime group of actors who control communication lines, jeopardize access to the country's strategic resources, control of the country's military defense and damage the environment and the regime's hegemony stability theory have limits and are unable to describe non-traditional threats. Therefore, weak monitoring by the government and regional organizations over territorial and international waters have resulted in the development of terrorist groups, piracy, environmental degradation, and other transnational crimes. Moreover, the non-military threat in Papua is the desire for the disintegration of the Papuan Community driven by economic inequality policies (Indrawan, 2017).

Furthermore, Hikam and Praditya (2015) explain that the Indonesian government must strengthen policies to increase the capacity of maritime defense forces as a means of bargaining positions against changes in the international political environment and to position itself within the world's maritime axis. Maqbool (2014) explains that NTS threats differ from traditional security threats, which typically use weapons and politics. Instead, NTS threats affect human sustainability, such as threats caused by narcotics—ranging from production and processing to trafficking—resulting in many significant loss of life, as happened in Pakistan. Therefore, based on the previous research, many studies focus on the dynamics of transnational crime actors and their development, while others emphasize the efforts to strengthen state defense in maritime area without first explain NTS threats. Particularly, existing research has not clearly explained which types that are most dangerous in the border regions, such as the Indonesia-Malaysia border in Riau as well as the factors that contribute to the increasing of NTS threats.

Transnational organized crime is one of the most pressing NTS threats in Southeast Asia. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2023), drug trafficking networks in the region have established an underground economy worth billions of dollars annually. The structure of these networks is generally adaptive, exploiting weak law enforcement, local corruption, and geographical conditions that enable smuggling by land, sea, and air. In the context of Southeast Asia, the long and open borders between Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, and Malaysia are the most vulnerable to the production and distribution of synthetic drugs. Chouvy (2013) shows that the dynamics of domestic conflict and socio-economic inequality in the region have strengthened the basis for narcotics production and distribution networks. This shows that narcotics smuggling is not only a law enforcement issue, but is also closely related to social, economic, and political structures at the national and regional levels.

Within this framework, drug smuggling is seen as the result of interactions between structural factors at the regional level and institutional factors at the domestic level. Structural factors include regional geopolitical and economic conditions, such as Southeast Asia's strategic location along international trade routes and weak border controls. Meanwhile, institutional factors include the effectiveness of national law enforcement, inter-agency coordination, and policy integration between countries. Both contribute to the formation of a

governance gap, a security governance gap, which is then exploited by transnational criminal networks to expand their activities.

This framework also utilizes ASEAN's concept of comprehensive security, which emphasizes balancing state and human security. Thus, the research's analysis focuses not only on the state's ability to crack down on criminals, but also on the region's capacity to build a sustainable system of collaboration. This includes three main dimensions of analysis. First, the structural dimension, which explains the geopolitical conditions, trade networks, and regional dynamics that influence patterns of drug smuggling. Second, the institutional dimension, which examines the effectiveness of national policies and inter-state cooperation in countering the threat of drugs. Third, the normative dimension, which examines how ASEAN's principles of non-interference and national sovereignty influence the effectiveness of regional security cooperation.

Through this approach, the research seeks to identify the extent to which drug smuggling in Southeast Asia can be understood as a NTS threat and how regional governance can be strengthened to overcome these challenges. Thus, this framework not only serves as a conceptual analysis map but also as a basis for formulating relevant policy recommendations for strengthening regional security.

Research Methods

The research applies a descriptive qualitative approach with a descriptive comparative analysis design, aiming to gain an in-depth understanding of the dynamics of narcotics smuggling as a transnational socio-political phenomenon in the Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia's border zones. This approach is chosen based on the nature of the issue being studied, namely NTS issues that are multidimensional, complex, and cannot be measured solely by quantitative indicators. A qualitative approach allows researchers to interpret social reality holistically by considering political, economic, and cultural aspects (Flick, 2018). In this context, the research not only seeks to answer the question of the scale of drug trafficking but also to explain how and why these smuggling networks have developed and survived within the regional security structure.

Thus, the method allows researchers to explore the links between national policies, ASEAN regional norms, and smuggling practices in the field. The data are mainly sourced from secondary literature such as official UNODC reports, ASEAN publications, scientific journal articles, and national policy documents, which are then analyzed interpretively to identify patterns, dynamics, and policy implications.

Methodologically, the descriptive-comparative qualitative approach has the strength of producing rich contextual understanding and allowing for interpretation of socio-political dynamics that are difficult to measure statistically. This approach aligns with the constructivist security studies paradigm, which emphasizes the importance of norms,

perceptions, and interactions among actors in shaping the regional security agenda (Acharya, 2009).

However, the research also has limitations. First, the limited availability of direct empirical data from conflict and border areas makes the analysis highly dependent on secondary sources. Second, due to its interpretive nature, the findings of this study are not intended to be generalized, but rather to provide an in-depth understanding of specific phenomena. Third, the complexity of inter-state coordination in the ASEAN region means that evaluating the effectiveness of policies requires further field-based studies or policy impact assessments. This methodological reflection shows that although the descriptive-comparative qualitative approach has limitations in quantification and empirical verification (Yin, 2014). It remains the most appropriate for explaining drug smuggling as a multidimensional and cross-border NTS threat (Patton, 2015). Thus, selecting this method aligns with the research objective, which is to understand the relationship between regional structural dynamics and the institutional capacity of states to address the threat of narcotics in Southeast Asia.

The research relied on both primary and secondary data. Primary data are gathered through field observations, focus group discussions (FGDs), and in-depth interviews with stakeholders directly involved in coastal security and community resilience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Secondary data comprised official reports, academic literature, policy documents, and regulatory frameworks related to NTS threats in Indonesia's coastal border areas (Caballero-Anthony & Cook, 2017).

The research uses two primary data collection techniques, field observations and in-depth interviews. Field observations are conducted by the research team in selected sites to capture real-time conditions and document physical and social indicators of insecurity, including drug trafficking routes, illegal fishing zones, and maritime surveillance infrastructure (Neuman, 2014). These observations enriched the contextual understanding of how threats manifest at the community level. In addition, in-depth interviews apply semi-structured interviews. The interview is conducted with the following key informants: officers from Lanal Dumai (Indonesian Navy Base), officials from the Riau Regional Police Narcotics Directorate, representatives from the National Narcotics Agency (BNN) of Riau Province, local authorities from North Rupat Subdistrict, and community members and traditional leaders in Rupat Island and Dumai City.

Results and Discussion

The state border is a geographical space that, from the beginning is a territory for power struggles between countries, mainly marked by efforts to expand the borders. As part of a country's history and existence, the history of border areas cannot be separated from the history of birth and the end of various countries (Tirtosudarmo, 2002). A country's border region is the main manifestation of its territorial sovereignty. The border region of a country plays an important role in determining the territorial boundaries of sovereignty, the use of

natural resources, and the region's security and integrity. Border issues have complex dimensions. There are several crucial factors involved, such as state jurisdiction and sovereignty, politics, social economy, and defense and security.

One form of the real threat in border areas is non-traditional threat activities or humanitarian threats. Non-traditional threats are threats that use non-military factors that are deemed capable endangering state sovereignty, country's territorial integrity, and the safety of the whole nation (Indrawan, 2015). Non-military threats can have ideological, political, economic, socio-cultural, technological, and information dimensions, as well as public safety implication. Therefore, serious government attention is needed to anticipate non-traditional threats because the perpetrators of these crimes are non-state actors.

The concept of NTS emerges as a response to the limitations of traditional security frameworks, which primarily focused on military threats and the protection of state sovereignty. In contrast, NTS broadens the understanding of security by including a diverse range of challenges that threaten the survival, well-being, and dignity of individuals and communities, often across national boundaries and outside military domains (Caballero-Anthony, 2015). NTS threats encompass issues such as transnational crime, climate change, environmental degradation, pandemics, food and water insecurity, terrorism, and irregular migration (Acharya, 2009). These threats are "non-traditional" not because they are new, but because they do not originate from inter-state conflict and often undermine human security and development in less visible or indirect ways. As such, NTS challenges typically require multilateral cooperation, non-coercive approaches, and multi-sectoral responses (Buzan et al., 1998).

A key feature of NTS is its focus on the individual or community as the referent object of security, rather than the state. This human-centric perspective highlights the vulnerabilities of marginalized groups who may be disproportionately affected by threats such as illegal drug trade, maritime piracy, or environmental collapse—particularly in border and coastal regions Caballero-Anthony (2016). In the Southeast Asian context, NTS has been further institutionalized through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which recognizes non-traditional threats such as drug trafficking, illegal fishing, and human trafficking as priority areas for regional security cooperation (Emmers, 2004). This necessitates cooperative frameworks, not only among governments but also with civil society, local communities, and international organizations (Floyd, 2019). Collectively, these issues illustrate the shift from traditional to multi-dimensional threats affecting coastal communities in the Malacca Strait. These threats require integrated governance, regional maritime cooperation, and a broader understanding of human security. These issues have evolved into a continuous cycle with no clear resolution, further complicating the socio-economic and security landscape in the region.

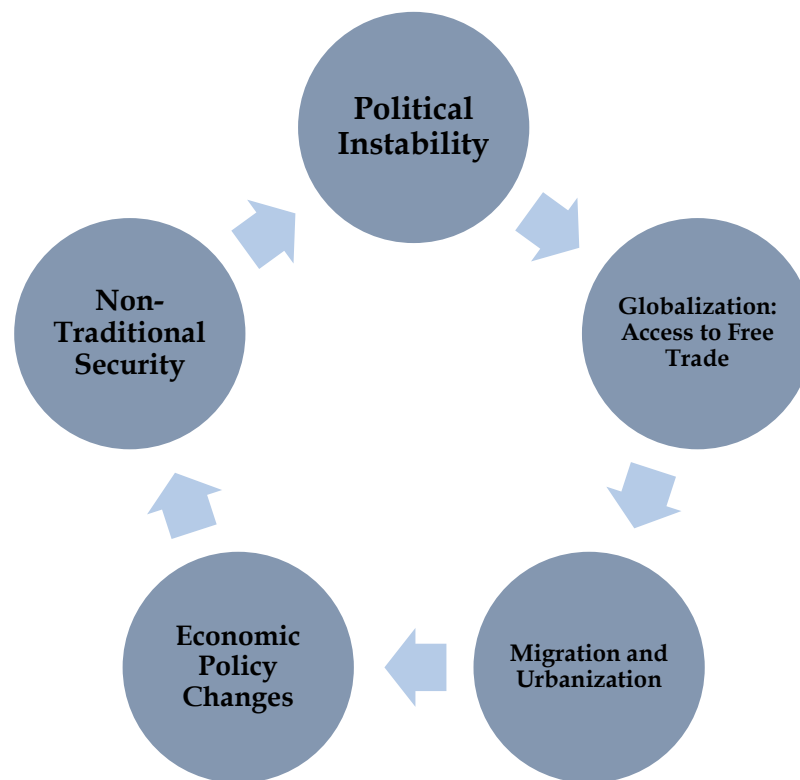


Figure 1. The Cycle of Political Instability and Its Impact on NTS in Border Areas (Caballero-Anthony, 2015).

In summary, the concept of NTS challenges the narrow definitions of traditional state-centric security and opens up a broader, more inclusive approach to understanding and responding to contemporary threats. It is relevant in Southeast Asia's border regions, where non-military threats intersect with governance challenges, economic vulnerabilities, and environmental pressures. Based on researchers' observations in the field, research findings show that non-traditional threats in the border regions of Riau and Malacca are forms of illegal economic activities such as smuggling of imported food staples (shallots and garlic from Malaysia), narcotics smuggling, secondhand clothing smuggling, and human trafficking.

The Dynamics of Drug Smuggling in the Southeast Asian Border Region

Research findings indicate that drug trafficking in the Southeast Asian border region is becoming increasingly organized and adaptive to changes in national and regional policies. The Golden Triangle region—which encompasses the borders of Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos—remains a major hub for the production and distribution of synthetic drugs, particularly methamphetamine. According to a UNODC (2023), methamphetamine production in this region has reached its highest level in five years, with the main distribution routes flowing to Thailand, Malaysia, and the Philippines. The complex geographical conditions, weak border surveillance, and the involvement of non-state actors such as armed

groups in Myanmar's conflict zones are the main factors driving the high level of smuggling activity. In addition, the development of digital communication technology and the use of online platforms for cross-border transactions have further strengthened the criminal networks' capacity to evade detection by law enforcement agencies. This situation shows that drug smuggling in Southeast Asia is not merely a matter of criminality, but a non traditional security issue that simultaneously involves economic, social, and political dimensions.

The coastal border region between Indonesia and Malaysia, particularly in Riau Province, has increasingly been recognized as a hotspot for illicit economic activities, including smuggling and transnational crime. Smuggling operations exploit the porous nature of this border, involving various contraband goods such as narcotics, alcohol, and human trafficking, often facilitated by organized crime networks thriving in this unstable environment. While informal trade dynamics provide economic opportunities for local communities, they also contribute to regulatory and enforcement challenges, as seen in cross-border agricultural trade, where Indonesian farmers engage in informal transactions due to better market prices in Malaysia. The post-Cold War geopolitical landscape has exacerbated political tensions among countries in the region, further complicating maritime security along borders. Political conditions that support free trade can intensify commercial activity in the Malacca Strait, thereby heightening maritime security threats such as smuggling and piracy. Ultimately, these political dynamics have significantly shifted traditional security concerns to non-traditional issues, as experienced by coastal border communities between Indonesia and Malaysia.

Political instability or shifts in economic policies can directly impact the livelihoods of border communities. Additionally, political and economic conflicts may drive migration and urbanization, leading to social and cultural transformations in coastal societies. As individuals relocate to urban areas or foreign countries in search of better economic opportunities, traditional lifestyles may undergo significant changes. Local economic conditions play a crucial role in fueling smuggling and illegal trade in Riau's coastal areas, particularly through factors such as poverty, unemployment, and weak law enforcement. High levels of poverty and unemployment create an environment where individuals may resort to illicit activities, including narcotics smuggling, as a means of survival. Riau serves as a key entry point for narcotics into Indonesia, primarily from Malaysia, facilitated by numerous unofficial ports and limited surveillance along its coastline (Prayuda et al., 2020). Furthermore, ineffective resource management and weak infrastructure exacerbate the situation, allowing smuggling operations to thrive with minimal oversight. The accessibility of illegal vessels and the lack of coordinated surveillance among bordering nations, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, further aggravate the situation, enabling widespread drug trafficking and piracy.

Narcotics Smuggling in the Malacca Straits Border Area, Geographically, Riau Province has a very strategic position, which is directly adjacent to Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand; face to face with the Malacca Strait which is the crossing point of world trade. In addition, in the regional region of Sumatra, Riau Province is located in the middle of Sumatra Island on a cross-regional movement trajectory that provides opportunities to build high access for goods, people, information and capital traffic. Riau Province is bordered directly by several regions.

Sumatra Island on a cross-regional movement trajectory that provides opportunities to build high access for goods, people, information and capital traffic.

Limitations of the National Approach and Challenges of Regional Coordination

Analysis of national policies in the region shows that repressive approaches—such as military operations or large-scale law enforcement—have not significantly deterred smuggling networks. For example, the “war on drugs” policies in Thailand and the Philippines tend to be controversial because they focus on enforcement without strengthening prevention and rehabilitation aspects. Meanwhile, in Myanmar, the weak central government authority in conflict areas has rendered supervision of drug production almost ineffective.

The implications of maritime routes used for narcotics trade on regional security are profound and multifaceted, influencing political, economic, and social stability. In regions such as the Pacific, countries like Ecuador, Colombia, Costa Rica, and Panama face significant challenges in establishing an effective multilateral security framework to combat drug trafficking, despite bilateral cooperation (Armijos & Medina, 2019). Similarly, the Indian Ocean serves as a key route for the heroin trade, complicating maritime law enforcement due to jurisdictional ambiguities and the need for integrated counter-terrorism strategies (McLaughlin, 2016). The use of advanced smuggling techniques, including drug submarines and front companies, exacerbates detection difficulties, thus increasing the volume of narcotics reaching consumer markets (Khan & Singh, 2014).

The criminalization of governance not only facilitates the strengthening of human trafficking networks but also diverts resources from essential public services, deepening poverty and underdevelopment. Consequently, without a comprehensive strategy addressing both the symptoms and root causes of this issue, such as enhancing state capacity and political accountability, the region is likely to continue facing severe governance challenges and economic instability (Minteh, 2010). Narcotics smuggling undermines state security by fostering organized crime, corruption, and the development of illegal economies.

Regarding regional cooperation, ASEAN has established various mechanisms such as the ASEAN Work Plan on Securing Communities Against Illicit Drugs (2016–2025) and the ASEAN Narcotics Cooperation Center (ASEAN-NARCO). However, research shows that these mechanisms are still coordinative in nature and have not yet reached an effective operational stage. The principle of non-interference inherent in ASEAN norms hinders efforts to enforce more rigorous cross-border law enforcement. In addition, disparities in law enforcement capacities among member countries have led to imbalances in policy implementation, allowing smuggling networks to exploit these gaps to expand their operations.

Economic Dependency and Social Inequality as Structural Factors

Economic and social factors have also proven to be important drivers in the continuation of drug smuggling. Many communities in border areas depend on the informal economy for

their livelihoods, including the production and distribution of drug raw materials. In northern Myanmar and Laos, these activities are often the only source of income due to limited access to education, infrastructure, and legitimate economic opportunities. As a result, efforts to eradicate narcotics cannot be separated from the socio-economic development agenda at the local level.

Malacca Straits geographic characteristics that make it a strategic area for narcotics trafficking. Located on the eastern edge of Indonesia and bordering the Strait of Malacca, one of the busiest international trade routes, Riau is a vulnerable transit point for smuggling. The region's extensive coastline and numerous small islands further complicate surveillance and maritime patrols, for smuggling networks to exploit maritime routes for drug distribution. Diverse capabilities and commitment among ASEAN member states pose significant challenges to unified action. Geographical, cultural, and social factors influence the effectiveness of narcotics control measures (Wulandari & Kirana, 2023).

With this strategic position, Riau Province serves as one of the gates of international trade through ports, such as Dumai, Artificial, Tanjung Buton, Pakning River, Perawang, Pekanbaru, Selat Panjang, and Kuala Enok. However, the strategic location of this region also poses threats to the side of state security, especially in the context of human security. One real threat are transnational crimes in the form of narcotics smuggling in Southeast Asia. The distribution and drug trafficking is a transnational crime issues that are developing in the Southeast Asian. The weak factor of law enforcement and government institutional oversight is a factor why the drug trafficking business in the Southeast Asian region is very easy to develop (Cipto, 2007).

Several factors drive the development of the narcotics business in Southeast Asia, especially Indonesia. First, significant differences in selling prices across Southeast Asia countries. Second, very high unemployment rates in several Southeast Asian countries, especially Indonesia. Third, poverty conditions in several Southeast Asian countries cause the process of recruiting and courier recruitment costs are quite low. Fourth, the current number of drug users, especially in Indonesia, exceeds 5 million people (Riau Police Narcotics Director, personal communication, March 21, 2024).

Therefore, these factors certainly have an impact on the increasing circulation of narcotics in the territory of Indonesia. Based on observations, it is found that the circulation or smuggling of narcotics from Malaysia to Indonesia, especially in Riau Province, is carried out using a specific *modus operandi*. According to the Director of the Riau Police Narcotics Detective, narcotics enter the region through the official port by disguising the contents of the cargo, or through small or illegal ports using ships. In addition, another *modus operandi* involves concealing narcotics by swallowing them in the stomach, inserting them into the anus, hiding them in suitcases, travel bags, or food packaging, and then distributing them through delivery service company or a ship-to-ship transfer.

Additionally, the presence of a large fishing community plays a significant role in facilitating the movement of illicit goods. Fishing vessels and small boats are often used to transport narcotics due to their ability to move freely without attracting attention, particularly

when entering coastal and border areas that lack adequate oversight. The local fishing community in Riau is often involved in narcotics smuggling activities due to a range of interconnected factors. Fishing boats are also frequently repurposed to transport narcotics. The ability of these vessels to navigate freely along coastal and border regions makes them an effective tool for smuggling operations.

Furthermore, many fishermen are linked to broader smuggling networks, acting as couriers or facilitators who move narcotics from one location to another. Economic constraints and limited employment opportunities in the fishing sector serve as primary factor of their involvement in illegal activities, as the promise of substantial profits from smuggling providing a solution to their financial difficulties. Additionally, the geographic conditions of Riau, with its long coastline and weak oversight in certain areas, further increase the likelihood of local fishermen becoming involved in criminal activities. Law enforcement agencies often struggle to monitor the movement of fishing vessels, allowing smuggling networks to exploit security gaps and carry out their operations more freely.

Economic pressures and limited resources compel some fishermen to participate in illicit activities, as they can earn significant income by collaborating with traffickers. This situation is further exacerbated by the socio-economic challenges faced by local fishing communities, including pollution and climate change, which are diminishing their traditional livelihoods (Siregar, 2009). Thus, the intersection of economic needs and geographic vulnerabilities has made local fishermen an integral part of the narcotics trade networks operating in the region (Muhamad, 2016). The situation reinforces the argument that narcotics smuggling is a form of NTS threat rooted in structural inequality. A security approach that emphasizes law enforcement without considering the socio-economic context risks expanding the support base for illegal activities (Pulungan, 2021). Therefore, integrating security policies, economic development, and strengthening community welfare is a must for building regional resilience against the threat of narcotics.

The Urgency of Adaptive Regional Security Governance

The discussion of the research results confirms that ASEAN's effectiveness in tackling drug smuggling depends heavily on its ability to build a more adaptive regional security governance system. The concept of comprehensive ASEAN security has provided a strong normative foundation, but its implementation is still limited to information exchange and technical coordination. More binding mechanisms are needed, such as the formation of joint task forces, harmonization of legal systems, and capacity building for law enforcement agencies at the national and regional levels.

In addition, the involvement of civil society, non-governmental organizations, and the private sector needs to be strengthened within multi-stakeholder framework. This is in line with the principle of human security, which places the welfare and safety of individuals at the center of security policy. Thus, drug trafficking is not only addressed as a criminal or political issue, but as a multidimensional threat that requires comprehensive collaboration at the national, regional, and global levels.

Conclusion

The research demonstrates that narcotics smuggling in Southeast Asia's borderlands has evolved into a complex and multidimensional NTS challenge with significant social, economic, political, and security implications. The region's porous geography and vulnerable border economies—particularly in the Golden Triangle—facilitate the persistence of transnational trafficking networks that continuously adapt to national countermeasures and regional initiatives. The findings indicate that fragmented, state-centric responses are insufficient; punitive law-enforcement approaches that are not complemented by socio-economic interventions risk exacerbating vulnerabilities within border communities. At the regional level, ASEAN frameworks—such as the ASEAN Work Plan on Securing Communities Against Illicit Drugs—continue to face implementation barriers, including divergent national priorities, limited institutional capacity, and the constraining effect of the non-interference norm.

The analysis reaffirms the relevance of non-traditional and comprehensive security perspectives in explaining this issue, highlighting the need for adaptive, collaborative, and human-security-oriented governance. Effectively addressing narcotics smuggling requires not only robust enforcement mechanisms but also deeper regional trust, enhanced cross-border coordination, and sustained community empowerment. From a policy standpoint, the study emphasizes the necessity of integrating security and development approaches through strengthened law-enforcement capacity, regulatory harmonization, and the provision of alternative livelihoods in border areas. By advancing cooperative regional mechanisms and embracing broader NTS frameworks, Southeast Asia can cultivate more resilient and cohesive strategies to mitigate the evolving threat of narcotics trafficking.

This research recognizes several limitations that may affect the breadth and generalizability of its findings. The analysis relies predominantly on secondary sources—government reports, academic literature, and media accounts—that may contain gaps due to underreported cases and incomplete enforcement data. The focus on selected Southeast Asian border states also means that smuggling dynamics in other regions are not fully captured. Limited access to primary field data, restricted government information, and the covert nature of trafficking networks further constrain the analysis. In addition, differences in national legal systems and enforcement capacities across the region complicate cross-country comparison and may reduce the wider applicability of the conclusions. The study also does not examine in detail the financial infrastructures of narcotics networks, including money-laundering mechanisms and the growing use of digital currencies.

Future research can build on these findings in several ways. Field-based or participatory studies involving border communities and law-enforcement actors could deepen understanding of the social dimensions of narcotics smuggling. Comparative work across other strategic border zones—such as the Mekong, Sabah–Southern Philippines, or the Thai–Myanmar frontier—would provide a more complete regional picture. Methodological approaches like network analysis or geospatial intelligence (GEOINT) could help trace emerging trafficking routes and criminal collaborations. Further studies may also explore the

technological evolution of narcotics trade, including encrypted communication, drone transport, dark-web markets, and digital financial systems. Interdisciplinary perspectives combining security, public health, and socio-economic analysis could illuminate broader community impacts. Finally, research on regional governance—particularly ASEAN mechanisms, intelligence sharing, and legal harmonization—would help assess the potential for stronger collective responses to narcotics challenges in Southeast Asia.

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