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COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN NATIONAL DEFENCE: THE COMPREHENSIVE DEFENSE CONCEPT (HANRUH)

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Abstract:

This article explores the involvement of the East Malaysian public in national defence through the Comprehensive Defence or *Pertahanan Menyeluruh* (HANRUH) concept, based on interviews with community in Sabah and Sarawak. The HANRUH concept emphasizes that national defence is a shared responsibility, extending beyond the military to include civilians, public sector workers, and community members. This study investigates key themes such as the public's understanding of HANRUH, the ways individuals can contribute to national defence, challenges in implementing the concept, and the role of technology and innovation in strengthening national security. The findings reveal that while the concept of HANRUH is not widely understood, there is recognition among respondents that individuals, especially those in community and educational roles, can contribute by promoting safety awareness and participating in emergency preparedness. However, challenges like limited resources, inadequate training opportunities, and a lack of awareness are significant barriers. The study also highlights the role of social media and mass communication in raising awareness, with respondents agreeing that these

platforms can help engage the public in defence activities. Additionally, the involvement of youth in national defence is seen as crucial, with many respondents advocating for early education and training to build long-term security awareness. In conclusion, this study calls for greater public education, accessible training, and the strategic use of technology to encourage widespread participation in national defence, ensuring a more resilient and united Malaysia.

Keywords:

Awareness, Community, Defense, HANRUH, Knowledge

Introduction

Total defence, also known as comprehensive defence is a "whole-of-government" and "whole-of-society" approach, maintains a vital position, including interoperability between its military forces and those of its allies and partners (Fiala, 2020, Stringer 2022). Nowadays, the term is employed to describe a concept of collective defence theory that highlights citizens' contributions to national security and social cohesiveness within governments (Bērziņa, 2020). It is now an official government strategy that includes a public, private, and civic sector approach to safeguarding the country from possible threats. This approach necessitates trust, unity, and motivation throughout society, all of which each sector contributes to (NATO Special Operations Headquarters, 2020). In simple terms, "Total Defence" or "Comprehensive Defence" is an official government plan that includes a whole-of-society approach to safeguarding the nation from any potential threats. This all-encompassing strategy to defence is distinguished by the coordinated participation of government agencies, the private sector, civic organisations, and private individuals in defence strategy development and execution.

The HANRUH (*Pertahanan Menyeluruh)*, which is the Malaysian version of Total Defence was created by the National Security Council in May 1986 in order to provide a comprehensive and credible security policy (Mohd Kamarul Amree, et al., 2023 & 2024). A comprehensive strategy to national security and defence, total defence entails coordinating and integrating various government agencies, private sectors, and citizens as a whole. HANRUH focusses on the effective use of human resources, economic stability, and integrated efforts by all government agencies, and the development of strong regional and international relationships as a means of maintaining the nation's integrity and sovereignty at all times. The concept of defence has been expanded to encompass psychology, social, civil, military, and economic defence. The Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF) is the first line of defence. With support from other security personnel, MAF acts as the main security organisation. While paramilitaries and volunteers make up the second line, the community, business sector, and other government agencies make up the third line, which is responsible for safeguarding the nation using government-provided strategies, psychology, logistics, and equipment.

According the HANRUH concept, the MAF are not the only entity tasked with defending the nation's sovereignty, integrity, and interests in any given circumstance. However, it requires thorough and coordinated collaboration between all societal levels, the private sector, non-governmental organisations, and government authorities. In response to the need to increase everyone's knowledge of their individual duties and responsibilities in preserving national security, the Malaysian Ministry of Defence drafted the National Defence White Paper, which was inspired by the National Defence Policy.

The National Defence White Paper (2020) is a more transparent, structured, and open defence and security policy which incorporates input from all Malaysian government agencies. The primary objectives of an all-encompassing defence are to eliminate threats and maintain long-term stability and national security. To do this, various government agencies must better coordinate with one another, develop synergies to make sure that resources and policies are used effectively, and involve a variety of stakeholders in the defence effort as a whole. Although Malaysia's adaption of HANRUH was first presented in 1986, its effective execution necessitates the coordinated engagement of all sectors, including the public, business sector, government agencies, and civic organisations. There remains limited public awareness and involvement in HANRUH, despite its longstanding inclusion in national policy and its reaffirmation in the National Defence White Paper (2020). Many people don't know what the idea is or don't know how they can contribute to national security.

The "whole-of-society" approach that HANRUH advocates is undermined by this awareness and engagement gap. Effective complete defence relies on public trust, community cohesiveness, and resource mobilisation at all societal levels in addition to military readiness. HANRUH's capacity to increase Malaysia's resistance to security threats is greatly diminished in the absence of broad understanding and dedication. Thus, it is crucial to find out how well the public at large understands HANRUH, identify engagement barriers, and look into measures to increase participation in national defence initiatives.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to: (1) to assess the level of public understanding of the HANRUH concept and its relevance to Malaysia's national defence strategy; (2) to identify the challenges and barriers that hinder public participation in HANRUH initiatives; (3) to examine the perceived roles and responsibilities of different societal groups including government agencies, private sector, NGOs, and citizens in supporting HANRUH; and (4) to explore potential strategies, including communication and outreach methods, to enhance awareness and public engagement in HANRUH.

Total Defence Concept

To ensure Malaysia's comprehensive, continuous, and sustainable defence, the Defence White Paper states that collaboration and integration between the defence agency and Malaysian civilians are vital (Mohd Kamarul Amree, et al., 2024). Government agencies are required to collaborate together closely to increase overall strength by creating creative solutions to challenges and uncertainties in order to guarantee defence readiness. Citizens must be very aware of security issues while taking part in defence and security initiatives. This will guarantee the achievement of the nation's total resilience. In a world where the need to quickly identify, integrate, and utilise the assets of many agencies is becoming more and more important, the best strategy to counter today's threats is good interagency coordination. Effective interagency collaboration is essential to Total Defences' effectiveness. Different organisations and agencies have varying resources, strengths, and capacities. By collaborating, they can take advantage of each other's advantages and generate greater outcomes they could have achieved on their own. In order to prevent effort duplication and guarantee that resources are used effectively, interagency collaboration entails exchanging information, resources, and expertise as well as coordinating activities (Bogdanos, 2005; Rogulis, 2025; Grigalashvili, 2023).

Additionally, several security analysts have a negative view about HANRUH's adoption. The KESBAN (*Keselamatan dan Pembangunan*) strategies were adopted in 1970, leading to the creation of the HANRUH strategy, which took into effect in May 1986 (Muhamad Ridzuan et al., 2020). Nevertheless, there is still uncertainty around the National Defence Policy's execution of total defence. This is because only a small number of agencies and the military are aware of these defence strategies. The overarching defence plan, which involves all government agencies and society, must be communicated to all communities and agencies. The implementation of HANRUH is still not completely understood or communicated to certain government agencies. Only MAF is aware of these strategies; non-military people are unaware of HANRUH. Another government agency or community interest should have even embraced this concept. The negative viewpoint and lack of commitment of the community can be used to evaluate the acceptability of the HANRUH strategy and the concept of self-reliance in Malaysia. As consequence, this problem shows that the government needs to carry out the defence plans outlined in the strategy. The concept of self-reliance defence will be impacted by this circumstance since its implementation would be discouraged by the defence plan's failure.

According to Muhamad Ridzuan et al. (2020), the governments, non-governmental organisations', corporate sectors, and the public's all-encompassing and concerted efforts to protect national sovereignty. Even if the armed forces are in responsible for protecting the country, it is the national responsibilities to ensure that they have the capacity to confront challenges and threats. This means that all individuals, regardless of race, religion, political affiliation, or class of employment, has responsibility for national security. Many countries, such as Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Singapore, Indonesia, Singapore, Switzerland, etc., have implemented the concept of Total Defence in various ways, all striving to mobilise the nation's resources and strengths in terms of public, political, social, and economic defence as well as bolstering the military defence system to strengthen national deterrence (Muhamad Ridzuan et al., 2020).

The concept of comprehensive defence was first presented in May 1986 under the name Total Defence, or HANRUH, a doctrine that outlined the use of all national resources and assets to increase the country's ability to withstand any attack, whether internal or international attack (Keling et al., 2011). One of the most obvious aspects of the total defence concept is the activation of reserved security and defence units in each affiliated organisation. In order to protect the country, Malaysia employs a concept known as "Total Defence," which combines material and immaterial elements, such as the people's sense of patriotism and nationalism. Thus, as a strategic asset for Malaysia's defence, the whole defence concept encompasses all government-based and civilian (Voluntary Defence Corps) security and defence agencies. In reality, the country's defence may be strengthened and Malaysia may be protected from threats with the development and use of the HANRUH concept, which involves military and civil defence elements.

In the article "Singapore's 'Total Defence' Strategy," Matthews and Bintang Timur (2023) claim that military security and defence are synonymous, but this idea was too restrictive for Singapore. In order to maximise on the synergies, the government established an integrative security strategy, acknowledging the relationship between security and development. In order to strengthen national identity and collective action, Total Defence was established through the integration of components that constitute soft social resilience. Due to the consequent civil-

military overlay and the government's ambition to push the bounds of innovative endeavour, Singapore experienced a huge cultural, economic, and military transformation as a result of the harsher industrial and technological dynamics of "defence capabilities." By doing this, it has surpassed the majority of contemporary postcolonial rules in terms of security and development. The Singaporean government would be well advised to recognise and take action on any potential emerging flaws in the Total Defence concept, which have been exposed by the turbulent and uncertain global environment of recent years.

As a "small country", Singapore has demonstrated remarkable effectiveness in the development of its defences (Matthews & Yan, 2007). The island nation's 'Total Defence' mentality has led to the mobilisation of limited resources to establish a strong economy, a peaceful society, and a strong military, all of which are dedicated to protecting the nation's sovereignty. A conscription and reservist manpower model, a "dual-use" approach to defence industrialisation, a force multiplier policy intended to take advantage of Singapore's demonstrated technological comparative advantage and training, and a sensible and visionary defence policy are some of the factors that have overcome the limitations of small size.

Wither's (2020) argument Nordic comprehensive defence concepts resulted in preparations for a large-scale armed conflict in the Nordic region (Finland, Sweden, and Norway) following a protracted period of strategic dereliction. Every Nordic country has implemented comprehensive defence plans. By establishing a difficult target state for an aggressor to target, total defence integrates the military and civil society in a complete, whole-society approach to security that aims to deter an attack. Since after the end of the Cold War, Finland has maintained a comprehensive defence strategy, but it has had to reevaluate its suitability in regard to the current threat landscape. Replicating Cold War-era strategy in a drastically different security and socioeconomic environment is extremely difficult for Sweden and Norway due to total defence. Wither (2020) examines contemporary Nordic security concepts from the perspective of overall defence strategies, with a focus on territorial defence and national resilience. Institutions and communities in the Nordic states must be ready to undertake the sacrifices and give up things that are required for a basic strategy of complete defence.

Table 1: Summary of Previous Research

Theme	Key Findings	Author(s)
Importance of Collaboration	Defence White Paper stresses collaboration between defence agencies and civilians for sustainable defence. Interagency coordination helps address threats effectively. Sharing info, resources, and expertise avoids duplication and improves efficiency.	Mohd Kamarul Amree et al.(2024); Bogdanos (2005); Grigalashvili (2023); Rogulis (2025);
Challenges in HANRUH Implementation	HANRUH derived from KESBAN (1970), implemented in 1986. Limited awareness beyond military (MAF), especially in non-military agencies and communities.	Muhamad Ridzuan et al. (2020)

National Responsibility	Lack of communication and community engagement leads to poor acceptance and weak self-reliance defence. Defence is a shared duty of all citizens, regardless of background. Other countries (e.g., Sweden, Denmark, Singapore, Switzerland) apply Total Defence to mobilise national resources for resilience in military, political, social, and economic areas.	Muhamad Ridzuan et al. (2020)
HANRUH Concept	Launched May 1986. Uses all national resources to withstand internal/external threats. Combines material (equipment, infrastructure) and immaterial (patriotism, nationalism) assets. Involves both military and civilian security agencies.	Keling et al. (2011)
Singapore's Total Defence	Expanded from military-only focus to integrated civil-military resilience. Promotes national identity and collective action. Mobilises limited resources for strong economy, peaceful society, and defence. Key strategies: conscription, reservist model, dual-use defence industry, tech advantage, visionary policies.	Matthews & Bintang Timur (2023); Matthews & Yan (2007)
Nordic Total Defence	Finland, Sweden, Norway integrate military and civil society to deter attacks. Finland maintained strategy since Cold War, but adjusted for new threats. Sweden and Norway face challenges adapting Cold War models to current conditions. Requires societal sacrifice and resilience.	Wither (2020)

Research Methodology

This study will be utilized a qualitative research design using document analysis, semi-structured interviews and observation to explore and understand the perceptions, experiences, and challenges of the Malaysian public in contributing to national defence through the HANRUH concept. The study will be conducted in selected urban and rural areas in Sabah and Sarawak, reflecting the diversity of communities and their exposure to national defence initiatives. A qualitative approach is appropriate given the study's aim to gain in-depth insights into the social and contextual factors that influence public engagement in national defence efforts, particularly in Sabah and Sarawak. This design facilitates a comprehensive understanding of how community engagement is operationalized and perceived in real-life contexts. Qualitative methods are used to generate reliable and accurate tools for gathering thorough information, encoding, analysing, interpreting and describing a phenomenon in its

original state (Chua, 2020; Creswell, 2012; Sekaran & Bougie, 2020). This method benefits researchers by saving time, allowing for more thorough and accurate research, simultaneous data collection for analysis and reporting, and avoiding bias and reliability in evaluation, interpretation, perception, and agreement (Creswell, 2012; Sekaran & Bougie, 2020).

The purpose of the interview questions was to find out how participants understood HANRUH, how they felt about the role of technology, perceived challenges, and involvement of the community in national defence. Data will be collected orally and the researcher recorded the responses in writing, audio and other electronic format. The interview method will be semi-structured, allowing the researcher to ask formal questions prepared prior of time as well as thoroughly explore by re-questioning respondents in regard to their responses to a formal question. It allows the researcher to gather accurate information concerning a question, after that the researcher will transcribe the answers for analysis (Chua, 2020; Creswell, 2012; Othman, 2015; Zikmund, 2012).

This interview involved 38 respondents from various backgrounds, including federal and local government agencies and the community. The interview and observation procedures were carried out as follows:

Table 2: Interview and Observation

Date	Location
January 18th – 19th, 2025	Labuan
January 20th – 26th, 2025	Sabah (Kota Kinabalu, Sandakan, Lahad Datu, Kunak, Semporna, and Tawau)
April 27th – May 1st, 2025	Sarawak (Miri, Bintulu, Limbang, and Lawas)

The locations were chosen because they were particularly vulnerable to internal and external security threats, especially non-traditional threats like as border issues, illegal immigrants, human trafficking, smuggling, drugs, and so forth. Additionally, the observation is used to get a first-hand look at community dynamics and engagement processes during meetings with the community and HANRUH-related activities. Whereas document analyses include reviewing the literature, official reports, policy papers, and community documentation related to HANRUH.

Findings

The study reveals that while the HANRUH concept is not widely understood by the general public, there is a clear recognition particularly among community representatives, RELA members, and educators, of the importance of individual contributions to national defence. These contributions primarily involve promoting safety awareness, engaging in community preparedness, and supporting emergency response efforts. However, the research identifies several key challenges that hinder public participation. These include limited access to resources, insufficient training opportunities, and a general lack of awareness about the HANRUH concept and its relevance to everyday citizens. Despite these barriers, respondents strongly believe in the potential of social media and mass communication as effective tools for disseminating information and mobilizing public support for national defence initiatives.

Limited Access to Resources

The study reveals that communities, particularly in more remote or rural regions such as parts of Sabah and Sarawak, experience significant limitations in accessing the necessary resources to actively engage in Total Defence initiatives. Respondents highlighted issues such as lack of funding, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient access to defence-related facilities or materials. For example, many community organizations reported not having proper venues, equipment, or communication tools to conduct emergency preparedness drills or awareness programs. This limitation hampers grassroots mobilization and weakens the community's ability to respond effectively in times of crisis. Without the physical and financial means to support HANRUH initiatives, communities may remain passive or uninvolved, undermining the inclusive, whole-of-society approach that HANRUH promotes.

Insufficient Training Opportunities

Another key finding is the lack of structured and accessible training programs aimed at educating citizens particularly non-military actors like RELA members, educators, and youth on their roles in national defence. While respondents expressed willingness to participate in defence-related efforts, many noted that training sessions are infrequent, geographically centralized, or limited to selected groups.

This finding aligns with previous research suggesting that civilian readiness in national defence often depends on regular, inclusive, and context-appropriate training. Without sufficient training, citizens may lack the confidence and competence to act effectively during emergencies or contribute meaningfully to national resilience efforts. This issue is particularly pressing in areas with limited government presence or logistical support.

General Lack of Awareness of the HANRUH Concept

A recurrent theme among respondents is the low level of public awareness about the HANRUH concept and how it applies to everyday citizens. While some individuals in public service or education roles had a basic understanding, the majority were unfamiliar with the term or misunderstood its purpose. This gap in awareness limits public engagement and contributes to the perception that national defence is solely a government or military responsibility.

Respondents agreed that mass communication and social media could play a larger role in bridging this awareness gap. However, without targeted campaigns and formal inclusion in school curricula or public programs, HANRUH remains a relatively obscure concept to many Malaysians. The absence of public discourse on Total Defence also makes it difficult to cultivate a shared sense of national responsibility.

Importantly, the study emphasizes the strategic role of youth in ensuring long-term national resilience. Many participants advocate for early education, training programs, and youth engagement initiatives to foster a culture of security and preparedness from a young age. The study findings, implications and recommendations of this study are as stated in Table 3.

Table 3: Summary of Key Findings, Implications and Suggestions

Issue	Key Findings	Implications	Recommendations
Limited Access to Resources	Rural areas (e.g., parts of Sabah & Sarawak) lack funding, infrastructure, and defence-related facilities. Community organisations often lack venues, equipment, and communication tools for drills and programs.	Weakens grassroots mobilisation. Reduces ability to respond effectively in crises. Hampers whole-of-society HANRUH approach.	Increase funding and resource allocation to rural communities. Provide portable or mobile facilities. Establish community resource-sharing networks.
Insufficient Training Opportunities	Few structured and accessible training programs for non-military citizens (e.g., RELA, educators, youth). Training is infrequent, centralised, or limited to selected groups.	Citizens lack confidence and competence in emergencies. Readiness in national defence is reduced, especially in remote areas.	Offer regular, inclusive, and decentralised training. Tailor training to local contexts. Use online platforms for wider reach.
General Lack of Awareness of HANRUH	Most Malaysians unfamiliar with HANRUH or misunderstand its purpose. Awareness mainly among public service/education roles. Lack of public discourse and formal inclusion in schools.	Limits public engagement. Perpetuates view that defence is solely government/military duty. Weakens shared sense of national responsibility.	Launch targeted media campaigns. Integrate HANRUH into school curricula. Promote discussions via community events and social media.
Strategic Role of Youth	Youth engagement is crucial for long-term national resilience. Early exposure to defence awareness and preparedness is lacking.	Missed opportunity to build a security-conscious generation. Long-term resilience at risk without early education.	Introduce HANRUH education in schools. Organise youth-focused drills, nationhood and volunteer programs. Encourage youth-led security initiatives.

The findings may assist government agencies, non-governmental organisations, and private sector partners establish more focused, decentralised, and inclusive civilian training programs. The study identifies potential for defence-industry innovation by addressing the need for cost-effective and portable defence-related equipment, communication tools, and training technologies that may be deployed in restricted resources rural areas. Private-sector industries may contribute through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) by including HANRUH-related initiatives into their programmes, such as financing awareness campaigns or funding community preparedness projects.

The research also strengthens public-private partnerships by allowing industry to cooperate with the government and academia on resource-sharing agreements, particularly for emergency response infrastructure. Finally, the findings promote media and communication sector participation by recognising a clear role for media corporations, technology firms, and social media platforms in promoting HANRUH through campaigns, apps, and content creation.

Conclusion

These four challenges, the resource constraints, training gaps, limited awareness and involvement of youth are interconnected and collectively weaken the implementation of HANRUH at the grassroots level. The findings suggest that addressing one without the others may not be sufficient. For example, increasing training without improving awareness or access to facilities may lead to low participation rates. Therefore, a comprehensive and coordinated strategy is needed to enhance public involvement in Total Defence, especially in underrepresented communities. To strengthen the implementation of HANRUH, the study recommends increased public education efforts, greater accessibility to defence-related training, and the strategic use of digital platforms to enhance public engagement. By addressing these gaps, Malaysia can cultivate a more informed, prepared, and united citizenry, thereby reinforcing the nation's comprehensive defence posture.

The concept of HANRUH is not well understood among the Malaysian public, partly due to the lack of active engagement by the relevant government agencies in promoting this concept to society. This reactive approach is one of the reasons why the HANRUH concept is poorly understood by the public. In addition, many new government policies and programs that should be emphasized and understood by the people are often only given attention in the early stages, and eventually, all parties fail to truly understand them.

Acknowledgements

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