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COORDINATED FUNCTIONAL SPECIALIZATION IN THE EASTERN SABAH SECURITY ZONE: MULTI-AGENCY SECURITY GOVERNANCE IN A MARITIME BORDER ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract:

The Eastern Sabah Security Zone (ESS Zone) represents one of Malaysia's most strategically significant maritime border regions, where security governance requires continuous coordination among multiple agencies to address increasingly complex transnational threats. While previous studies have examined ESSCOM from operational and institutional perspectives, limited attention has been given to how coordinated functional specialisation contributes to effective maritime security governance. This study therefore examines how strategic coordination, operational autonomy, intelligence-led governance, and multi-agency collaboration collectively strengthen security governance within the ESS Zone. A qualitative research design was employed using semi-structured interviews with selected security practitioners directly involved in ESS Zone operations. The interview data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis with the assistance of ATLAS.ti Version 8 to identify recurring themes relating to coordinated maritime security governance. The findings demonstrate that ESSCOM functions as the strategic coordinator by integrating planning, intelligence, resource allocation, and operational priorities across participating agencies while preserving their respective statutory responsibilities and operational expertise. Intelligence-led governance, supported by Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR), enhances shared situational awareness and enables proactive

operational responses to evolving maritime security threats. The study also identifies institutional, geographical, and technological challenges that continue to influence the effectiveness of coordinated security operations, highlighting the importance of sustained interoperability, information sharing, and institutional trust. Rather than diminishing institutional autonomy, ESSCOM enables participating agencies to contribute specialised operational capabilities within a coordinated governance framework. This study contributes to the literature by demonstrating that coordinated functional specialisation provides a useful analytical perspective for understanding multi-agency maritime security governance. The findings further suggest that effective security governance depends not on institutional centralisation but on the strategic integration of complementary operational capabilities through collaborative governance.

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Border Governance, Collaborative Governance, ESSCOM, Intelligence-Led Operations, Maritime Security, Multi-Agency Coordination.



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Introduction

The maritime borders are facing new, complex security governance challenges due to the multi-agency nature of maritime security, the transnational nature of threats, and the overlapping jurisdictions. Maritime security issues, including maritime terrorism, piracy, smuggling, illegal immigration, human trafficking and cross-border incursions, frequently go beyond the scope of the operations of individual organisations, and thus necessitate coordinated institutional responses, rather than isolated actions of individual enforcement agencies. Effective maritime security governance therefore relies on multiple security agencies working within a shared security framework and characterised by the strategic integration of the various operational capabilities, the exchange of intelligence and collaborative decision-making processes (Bueger, 2015; Ansell & Gash, 2008).

The Eastern Sabah Security Zone (ESS Zone) is one of Malaysia's most strategically significant maritime border zones, with a long coast, many islands and proximity to international maritime boundaries. In response, to counter cross-border security threats including cross-border crime, kidnapping for ransom, illegal migration, piracy, and smuggling, several security agencies deployed in the land, maritime, and air domains have been set up after the formation of the Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM) following the intrusion into the state by militants from Lahad Datu in 2013 (Dollah et al., 2016). These security issues must be constantly coordinated between agencies with responsibilities for intelligence, maritime

enforcement, border control, law enforcement and community engagement in a geographically complex operational environment.

The strategic coordinating body, ESSCOM, acts as a coordinating body for the alignment of operational planning, intelligence coordination and deployment of resources among the security agencies in the ESS Zone. The role of ESSCOM is not to replace the statutory duties of individual organisations, but rather to enable decision making in a coordinated manner, while the participating agencies continue to have a specific operational mandate and expertise. The governance structure embodies the need for an interwoven operational capacity in a unified security structure that can address complex maritime security issues.

The literature available up to date on maritime security in the east of Sabah have mainly focused on border security, counterterrorism, prevention of kidnapping for ransom, maritime law enforcement, and inter-agency cooperation aspects of ESSCOM. These studies offer important insights into the practice of agencies, and their responsibilities for security, and have tended to deal with individual agencies and/or individual security functions rather than with the emergence of coordinated security effectiveness because of the interaction of specialised agencies within an integrated security governance structure. Therefore, the linkages between the organisational dimensions of strategic coordination, intelligence integration, operational autonomy and specialised functions in achieving maritime security governance are not well examined.

This study seeks to fill this void by exploring the ESS Zone in terms of the concept of coordinated functional specialisation. The study looks at how specialised operational functions such as intelligence, surveillance, maritime interdiction, border control, rapid response and community engagement which are synchronised to deliver common security outcomes, rather than assessing the effectiveness of security based on institutional requirements. The lenses turn from the performance of individual organisations to the collaborative governance processes that allow for multiple agencies to work together in a complex maritime border environment as an integrated security system.

The study merges into the existing body of knowledge on maritime border security in a way that highlights that institutional capacity and organisational authority is not enough to explain maritime border security. Rather, security effectiveness is created through the coordination of complementary operational capabilities spread over several agencies. The study contributes to the debate on collaborative governance and multi-agency co-ordination and looks at operational relationships in the ESS Zone as a way of adding an analytical dimension to the study of security management in complex maritime border zones with overlapping jurisdictions, transnational threats and institutional diversity.

As the maritime border spaces grow more complex and interconnected, it is becoming crucial to understand how and how well specialised security agencies are able to coordinate their operational capacities. The lessons learned from the ESS Zone can thus be applicable to other maritime border regions with similar transnational security issues in strengthening collaborative security governance. Hence, this study has three research questions which will look at the strategic, operational, and institutional aspects of coordinated security governance in the Eastern Sabah Security Zone.

Research Question 1: How does ESSCOM balance centralize strategic coordination with the functional autonomy of diverse security agencies?

Research Question 2: In what ways do Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) functions shape joint operational decision-making in a maritime environment?

Research Question 3: What institutional and geographical challenges impede the seamless execution of these coordinated multi-agency operations?

Literature Review

Sabah's maritime security environment has been widely characterised as being vulnerable based on the characteristics of its coastlines, boundary and its openness to cross-border threats. idea of security in the maritime context has a broad meaning consisting of both the commercial and military aspects of Malaysia's sea power, e.g. both safety from natural hazards as well as from the use or threat of organised violence and force Maritime insecurity in the Sulu and Celebes Seas is a chronic problem. These waterways are also used recently to conduct incursions into Lahad Datu, to organized kidnap for ransom activities by militant groups like Abu Sayyaf and to facilitate illegal wildlife trafficking (Benson, 2019).

In the central government also set up the same year. ESSCOM, which is a new "security enforcement agency" of ESSZONE and created specifically to protect the sovereignty and to protect the east coast, after Sulu's intrusion terrorist in Lahad Datu. What's more, at the international level security cooperation with neighbouring countries to execute countries, especially Philippines were implemented fight terrorism and trans-border crime (Anuar et al., 2018). Harun (2024) places this concern within a wider maritime security context by highlighting Malaysia's situation in the Sulu and Celebes Seas regarding "Blue Security" in the Indo-Pacific, which sees maritime spaces as spaces of economic significance as well as security risks. As stated by Dollah et al., (2025), Sabah's large sea areas and its open sea borders remain conducive to cross border incursions and KFR operations by Abu Sayyaf. Taken together, these studies confirm that security issues in Sabah are not limited to traditional notions of border security but are embedded in a fluid and dynamic maritime space where geography, mobility and threats are transnational.

The literature, however, is increasingly growing about multi-agency governance as a needed security move to overcome these vulnerabilities. Key informants were selected for the interviews as they have an intimate knowledge of the issues, they express opinions about and a first-hand experience of the security situation in eastern Sabah. ESSCOM people shared knowledge about the operational. The following aspects were key to the success of the RMP in the region and the ACO's: Marine Police shared experiences focusing on law enforcement and inter-agency coordination (Mat et al., 2025). The authors of Zainol et al. (2024) state that ESSCOM is an important coordinating institution to coordinate the enforcement action in the fight against the ongoing security threats in East Coast Sabah. Security (not only enforcement) must also consider the socio-economic ties of coastal communities with cross-border mobility and trade in East Coast Sabah, state Mat et al (2025). This is indicative of the governance issues faced in the ESS Zone, where security controls need to coexist with social and economic sensitivities. The authors of the paper state that although maritime security cooperation in the Sulu–Celebes region has begun in earnest, it has not been without its stumbling blocks due to divergent national interests, practices and jurisdiction. Despite the commencement of maritime

security cooperation in the Sulu–Celebes area, it has not been without problems including divergent national interest, practices and jurisdiction, as mentioned by Parameswaran (2016).

While various studies have shown the value of inter-agency cooperation in combating maritime security challenges, they have offered a minimal theoretical explanation of how the various specialised agencies can work together to create effective security governance. To overcome this limitation, the present study adopts the collaborative governance as its theoretical background, which is used to explain the contribution of coordinated functional specialisation in maritime security governance within the ESS Zone.

Collaborative Governance as a Framework for Multi-Agency Security Coordination

In fact, collaborative governance has emerged as one of the most widely used modes of understanding how a number of public organisations can effectively coordinate their activities to resolve complex policy problems that are too large to be effectively managed by any one organisation working alone (Emerson, Nabatchi, & Balogh, 2012). Collaborative governance is a process of joint governance, defined as a collective decision-making process in which public agencies co-ordinate, agree and share responsibility to attain common goals, according to Ansell and Gash (2008). Collaborative governance is not intended to supplant existing organisational requirements but rather allows for different organisations to bring their unique expertise and work in a unified governance structure.

This is especially important in maritime border security as modern threats of the day such as terrorism, piracy, smuggling, illegal migration and incursion across the borders are not confined to the responsibilities and capabilities of any one agency. Maritime security governance also requires coordination of complementary operational capabilities among multiple organisations as well as institutional authority. ESSCOM, as a strategic coordinator, within the ESS Zone brings together operational planning, information sharing and decision making, restricts the participation agencies' statutory responsibilities, and enables them to maintain their operational expertise.

This study does not consider the formal institutional mandate of security agencies but rather their functional specialisation, which is the coordinated distribution of specialised operational capacities by a group of security agencies. Functional specialisation is the complement of operational functions that the agencies perform, such as intelligence collection, surveillance, maritime interdiction, border management, rapid response and community engagement, within a co-ordinated governance framework, as defined by the institutional mandates. The idea grew out of the inductive thematic analysis where the respondents repeatedly spoke about the operational functions of the organisation instead of institutional identities.

Based on this, the collaborative governance is used as a theoretical basis to interpret the results of this study. It clarifies the benefits of the coordinated action by specialised agencies for security effectiveness without centralising organisational power. This view allows the study to go beyond mere descriptions of the responsibilities of those institutions and help better understand the concept of maritime security governance in complex border contexts.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design to examine how coordinated multi-agency security governance operates within the Eastern Sabah Security Zone (ESS Zone). This study used a qualitative method since it sought to understand the nature of the way security agencies coordinate their specific operational roles in a complex maritime border context. The research did not aim to scientifically measure the effectiveness of the organisations but rather to gain insight into the experiences, perceptions and professional interpretations of coordination mechanisms, intelligence sharing, operational autonomy and institutional collaboration of the participants. Qualitative research allowed for a better understanding of what coordinated governance looks like on the ground between various security agencies under ESSCOM.

The study concentrated on the operational relationship between agencies not on the performance of the individual agencies. The analysis therefore focused on the strategic coordination, integration of intelligence, maritime enforcement, rapid response and engagement with communities as interdependent functions that support the broader maritime security governance. This method was in line with the goal of finding patterns that might account for the effectiveness in the ESS Zone in achieving security by coordinated functional specialisation.

There are several limitations of this study. Findings have been reported on qualitative interviews with security practitioners in the ESS Zone and are thus context specific. Although these findings offer a valuable insight into the way coordinated maritime security governance is achieved, they are not necessarily directly transferable to other maritime border settings that have different institutional structures.

Data Collection

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with selected security practitioners directly involved in security operations within the ESS Zone. The respondents were 12 purposively selected subjects from the Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF). 12 of them who were serving and former officers who had extensive experience in operations in Angkatan Tentera Bersama 2 (ATB 2) and Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM). The respondents were in operational, command and staff positions and had first-hand experience of the security operations, inter-agency coordination and border security management in ESSZONE. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they provided sufficient flexibility for respondents to elaborate on their operational experiences while allowing the researchers to maintain consistency across interviews through common guiding questions. This interview format enabled respondents to discuss issues relating to strategic coordination, operational responsibilities, intelligence sharing, maritime enforcement, institutional collaboration, and challenges encountered during multi-agency operations.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that only individuals possessing relevant operational knowledge and professional experience were included in the study. Purposive sampling is widely employed in qualitative research because it enables researchers to obtain information rich data from participants who are directly involved in the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2015). The respondents represented security agencies involved in

maintaining security within the ESS Zone and possessed first-hand experience in operational coordination, maritime security, border management, intelligence activities, or strategic planning.

The data collection process was ongoing until a point of thematic saturation was reached, when no additional concepts or themes were identified in the various interviews that could be relevant to the objectives of the study. Thematic analysis with ATLAS.ti was then used to systematically identify and interpret patterns pertaining to security governance, inter-agency coordination and the management of cross-border security threats in East Coast Sabah from the interview transcripts and documentary evidence.

To strengthen the interpretation of the interview findings, secondary data were also reviewed. These included government publications, official reports, policy documents, academic journal articles, books, and other relevant documents relating to ESSCOM, maritime security, border governance, and multi-agency coordination. Documentary evidence provided contextual understanding and allowed the researchers to compare interview findings with existing knowledge and official policies.

Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were analysed using the six-phase thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis consisted of familiarisation of the data, systematic coding, theme development and refinement and interpretation of the recurring patterns which involved the research aims. Inductive coding method was used so that the themes could emerge from the participants experiences and not be pre-determined in the theory. The analytical process was supported by the organisation and coding of data in ATLAS.ti Version 8. Three overarching themes were identified through an iterative comparison of coded data, which help to explain coordinated functional specialisation within the ESS Zone.

Inductive coding approach was used in the analysis. The researchers themselves did not pre-define categories to analyse the data related to the agency functions. Rather, themes arose from patterns that were recurrent among the experiences of participants. Throughout the coding exercise, the respondents continued to refer to security governance in terms of specialist functions, such as intelligence collection, surveillance, maritime interdiction, border control, rapid response and community engagement, instead of just institutional mandates. The recurring patterns then fed into the analytical concept of coordinated functional specialisation, defined as how complementary operational capacities are integrated across several agencies in a collaborative governance system.

Findings

Table 1: Theme

Theme	Key Finding
Integrating Strategic Coordination and Operational Autonomy.	Strategic coordination is accomplished by bringing together agency specific operational abilities and maintaining agency autonomy. ESSCOM is a common governance platform, which allows planning, intelligence, resource allocation and operational priorities to be aligned, leading to agencies

	participating in the program adding their own expertise in a coordinated multi-agency security program.
Intelligence Led Governance	Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) functions support proactive security governance by strengthening situational awareness, intelligence sharing, and coordinated operational decision-making. Intelligence serves as a common operational reference that enables agencies to anticipate maritime threats and coordinate collective responses across the ESS Zone.
Friction Points and Implementation Challenges	Coordinated maritime security governance remains influenced by institutional, geographical, and technological challenges that affect operational coordination. These findings suggest that effective collaborative governance depends on continuous interoperability, institutional trust, adaptive coordination, and sustained information sharing among participating agencies.

The findings presented in Table 1 summarises the main themes that emerged from the findings on ESSCOM’s role in coordinating security governance in the Eastern Sabah Security Zone. The three main themes that emerged from these findings were deemed most relevant in capturing the respondents' views on the issues, which were Strategic Coordination and Operational Autonomy; Intelligence-Led Governance; and Friction Points and Implementation Challenges.

Strategic Coordination and Operational Autonomy

The findings demonstrate that ESSCOM occupies a central position within the security governance architecture of the ESS Zone by functioning as the strategic coordinator of multi-agency security operations. ESSCOM is not an administrative forum, it is the institutional forum in which security agencies in the land, sea and air domains coordinate their responses to new security challenges, coordinate their resources and align their priorities. This strategic role allows agencies having different statutory powers to function within a single operational framework with the ability to respond to the dynamic and complex security environment of Eastern Sabah. The findings show that ESSCOM can decrease fragmented responses by creating common operational goals and by making coordination between agencies involved in intelligence, maritime enforcement, border control and rapid response easy.

The government's push for the strengthening of ESSCOM after the intrusion in 2013 in Lahad Datu shows that a comprehensive institutional response is needed to address security challenges in the Eastern part of Sabah. Security coordination has become an integral part of Malaysia's maritime security strategy as evidenced by the measures taken to boost capacity in intelligence, strengthen coastal surveillance, develop maritime interception capability, and expedite operational responses (Dollah et al., 2016). The Multi-Agency Coordination (MAC) System Guide 2022 focuses on the need for participating organisations to coordinate planning, resource sharing and decision making to ensure effective security operations, rather than action by each organisation itself. Together, they provide evidence that strategic coordination is an effective coordination tool but also an integral governance tool to help address security threats in a geographically complex maritime border space. An important finding emerging from this study is that strategic coordination does not eliminate the operational autonomy of participating agencies. Instead, ESSCOM coordinates specialised organisational capabilities while allowing

each agency to continue performing its statutory responsibilities according to its institutional expertise. The Malaysian Armed Forces, Royal Malaysia Police, Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency, Immigration Department, Customs Department, and other participating organisations continue to exercise their respective operational functions while contributing to broader security objectives through coordinated planning and information sharing. Consequently, operational autonomy and strategic coordination should not be viewed as competing approaches but as complementary elements that strengthen the overall effectiveness of maritime security governance.

The finding reinforces the concept of collaborative governance that has been put forward by Ansell and Gash (2008) that complex public policy issues can be best addressed by structured cooperation amongst multiple organisations rather than by focussing authority on a single organisation. In this sense, ESSCOM does not supplant the institutional requirements of the participating agencies, but it offers a governance approach to the coordination of security response in terms of specialized operational capacities. The results confirm that maritime security governance is not just about top-down leadership, it is also built on trust with shared goals and regular engagement between the stakeholder agencies. This strengthens the case for collaborative governance to help agencies continue to be operational while helping to achieve collective security outcomes.

The analysis also shows that functional specialisation is more suited to explaining the operational effectiveness of ESSCOM than are institutional mandates. While interviewees continually referred to formal organisational responsibilities, they consistently described organisational contributions to the activities of the specialised functions they oversaw, such as intelligence gathering, surveillance, maritime interdiction, border enforcement, rapid response and community engagement. This discovery implies that security effectiveness is realized through the complementary operation capabilities that are spread throughout multiple agencies. The study does not assess the security performance of the individual organisation, but rather the nature of the interactions between both functions to achieve the coordinated operational results within the ESS Zone. Coordinate functional specialisation, an operational feature of collaborative governance, in this context, involves the deliberate coordination of specialised capacities to tackle complex maritime security issues.

The conclusions reached in this research paper also complement the wider field of maritime security governance literature, which views coordination as a process of institutionalisation, and not as a single, static organisational structure. Maritime border areas involve overlapping jurisdictions, multination threats, and ever-evolving operational environments that demand ongoing agency coordination across various agencies with distinctly different capabilities and roles. Therefore, the effectiveness of governance will be determined not just by the presence of a coordinating institution but by its capacity to maintain cooperation, provide information sharing and adjust the way it works to suit changing security concerns. In other maritime security contexts, involving institutions and conducting collective operational planning are necessary for addressing complex trans-border threats have been identified (Atkins & Lawson, 2022).

The results indicate that ESSCOM has made considerable progress in improving strategic coordination in the ESS Zone, but at the same time, it shows that governance effectiveness is not necessarily a successful institutional legacy. Participating agencies must continue to share information, communicate effectively, trust in each other, and be interoperable to facilitate

collaborative governance. There can be differences in the consistency of coordinated decision-making even in the same organisation because of differences in culture, processes and institutional priorities, especially in times of rapid change in security situations. As such, the effectiveness of ESSCOM should be considered as a process of governance that evolves over time, and not as an organisational product. This view gives a more nuanced understanding of the results, acknowledging good examples of multi-agency governance as well as the persistent difficulties of ensuring effective multi-agency collaboration in a maritime border context.

Intelligence Led Governance

The conclusions reached in this research paper also complement the wider field of maritime security governance literature, which views coordination as a process of institutionalisation, and not as a single, static organisational structure. Maritime border areas involve overlapping jurisdictions, multination threats, and ever-evolving operational environments that demand ongoing agency coordination across various agencies with distinctly different capabilities and roles. Therefore, the effectiveness of governance will be determined not just by the presence of a coordinating institution but by its capacity to maintain cooperation, provide information sharing and adjust the way it works to suit changing security concerns. In other maritime security contexts, involving institutions and conducting collective operational planning are necessary for addressing complex trans-border threats have been identified (Atkins & Lawson, 2022).

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The aerial surveillance and advanced ISR capabilities also reinforce the importance of intelligence-led governance. The results show that aerial resources greatly enhance the capabilities of security agencies, enabling them to keep a 'watchful eye' on vast sea areas that are hard to cover with regular patrol boats. Agencies can now monitor and verify suspicious activity, as well as monitor intelligence reports and assist in operational planning, using unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), maritime surveillance aircraft, and remote sensing equipment. Similarly, Yang et al. (2022) state that UAV remote sensing has significantly enhanced maritime monitoring by providing uninterrupted surveillance and real-time data collection over geographically dispersed operational environments. In the ESS Zone, these technological capabilities help to complement the traditional maritime surveillance methods to enhance the awareness of the maritime domain and intelligence-based operational coordination.

It also shows that the benefit of ISR is beyond the act of surveillance. The usefulness of intelligence is evident only in concurrent decision making by the security agencies. Surveillance information gathered should be analysed, shared and reported in the form of coordinated maritime interdiction, border enforcement, rapid deployment and intelligence-led policing operations. The relationship between intelligence and specialised operational functions is therefore mediated by intelligence, making it the thread that ties the two together in the overall security governance system. Participating agencies do not work alone; they create a common operational picture which enables coordinated planning and joint response to potential threats at sea.

This is aligned with the wider regional and maritime security agenda on the need for intelligence sharing and institutional collaboration to tackle increasingly complex security issues that are transnational in nature. But today's security concerns call for more information sharing and joint security arrangements, as many security risks are not contained within clear institutional and territorial lines, (Buzan and Wæver 2003). Likewise, recent research shows that the provision of intelligence coordination and timely information sharing have proven to be vital ingredients in the success of maritime security operations, especially in the context of dynamic operations where overlapping jurisdictions and changing security threats exist (Zainol et al., 2024; Subramaniam & Fernandez, 2025). These studies collectively validate the present study's results, which showed that intelligence integration improves not only institutional coordination between various agencies but also increases the operational effectiveness.

The results also show that intelligence-led governance processes are a component of maritime governance which helps agencies to shift from deterrence to predictive operational planning. Intelligence products enable agencies to determine where it is likely that illegal entry, smuggling, piracy, and kidnapping-for-ransom activity will take place before these security incidents happen. This results in maritime interdiction operations are more focused and operational assets deployed will be based on the risks evaluated, not against the pattern of routine patrols. A related study also notes that intelligence-based maritime enforcement is also a critical component in the ability to disrupt criminal activities in the waters off the coast of Sabah, and to enhance the effectiveness of operational responses (Tharishini, 2021). Similarly, ESSCOM's focus on intelligence coordination, information sharing, and proactive operational planning have helped to enhance counter-kidnapping operations and maritime security cooperation in general since its inception (Abuza, 2019; Zainol et al., 2024).

Intelligence should not be viewed as operational information but as an institutional coordination mechanism to allow multiple organisations to build a shared situational awareness from a collaborative governance perspective. Intelligence is the common denominator that enables agencies with diverse statutory responsibilities to coordinate planning, resource allocation and complementary operational functions. Intelligence integration does not just enhance the performance of individual organisations, it helps to strengthen collaborative decision-making processes that enable ongoing communication, information sharing and joint responses to operations among the participating agencies. Thus, the functional specialisation in the ESS Zone is coordinated through one of the main pathways of intelligence-led governance.

While these results are specific to the circumstances in Eastern Sabah, they help further the broader debate on maritime security governance by illustrating that intelligence integration plays an integral part of successful cooperation in maritime security governance within

complex border areas. Previous research has mainly focused on intelligence as an operational function to aid in surveillance and law enforcement, whereas the current study proposes that intelligence also has a wider governance function by bringing together specialised agencies within a coordinated security system. This is building on the ongoing debate around intelligence-led policing and recognises the institutional value of intelligence in supporting inter-agency working, operational interoperability, and groups of decision makers in various security agencies.

However, the results also show that intelligence-led governance cannot be considered as a panacea to solve maritime security problems. The integration of intelligence is still reliant on the timely sharing of information, the interoperability of the technology and the ability for the participating agencies' surveillance and communication systems to work together. Despite high capabilities of advanced surveillance systems, delays in dissemination of intelligence, lack of information systems or inter-agency communication can affect the effectiveness of coordinated operational responses. Thus, intelligence-led governance should be seen as an institutional process that is ongoing and demands a long-term investment in technology, institutional trust and collaborative operational behaviours. This equitable view underscores the fact that ISR has enhanced the capacity of agencies to coordinate maritime security in the ESS Zone, but success in the long run will largely rely on their ability to cooperate and be flexible with institutional changes to address evolving maritime threats.

The Friction Points and Implementation Challenges

The results show that ESSCOM has made substantial improvements in coordinated maritime security governance in the ESS Zone, but there are still several institutional, operational and technological challenges which affect effective collaboration. The difficulties faced are not necessarily due to deficiencies in the agencies themselves but are due to the realities of having to coordinate co-operate between several agencies with differing statutory responsibilities, operational cultures, communication systems and resource capacities, in a geographically complex maritime environment. The results thus indicate that the concept of coordinated maritime security governance should be treated as a process of continuous institutional adaptation, and not as an organisationally fixed set-up.

One of the greatest challenges mentioned by the respondents is the issue of multiple agencies with varying legal authorities and organisation. ESSCOM offers a shared strategic framework, but each organisation continues to function as per their respective statutory duties, command and operational procedures. There may be a difference in institutional priorities that affects the speed and uniformity of coordinated operations at times, as well as decision-making procedures and practices. The results show that strategic co-ordination is not enough to ensure a smooth process of co-ordination without the support of ongoing institutional trust, clearly delineated operational procedures and the continuous communication between agencies involved.

This is not surprising as the collaborative governance perspective suggested by Ansell and Gash (2008) acknowledges that collaboration amongst multiple organisations does not occur easily through organizational integration but through continuous negotiations, trust building and institutional commitment. Institutional diversity does not need to be eradicated, rather it should be coordinated by the interaction between different organisations and common goals in the framework of collaborative governance. Therefore, it is important to recognize that the nature of the differences between approaches to organising and working are natural aspects of

collaborative governance, not failures of the institutions. ESSCOM is a key player in this coordination in the ESS Zone, but the success of collaboration relies on agencies' commitment to maintaining cooperative working relationships and adapting their operational processes to the changing security needs.

The results also indicate that maritime security governance remains seriously challenged by geographical factors. Eastern Sabah has a long shoreline, many islands, scattered coastal communities, and leaky boundaries across the sea which adds to the challenges of surveillance and enforcement. The wide operational envelope demands that security agencies need to coordinate maritime, aerial and land-based teams from many locations and deal with a variety of security challenges such as smuggling, illegal migration, kidnapping-for-ransom operations and cross-border incursions. Such geographical features only make operations more costly, logistical challenges harder to plan and room for transnational criminal gangs. The same has been noted in earlier research which highlights that geographical aspects of Eastern Sabah still play a significant role on maritime security operations (Dollah et al., 2016; Abuza, 2019).

The results, however, indicate that geographical complexity should not only be considered as a constraint on the environment. Rather, it underlines the need for co-governance, since the security environment can't be managed by a single agency due to the lack of its capacity to operate effectively. The wide maritime domain needs to be equipped with specific skills spread across a number of organisations, such as intelligence collection, maritime enforcement, border control, surveillance, and quick response. The geographical context of Eastern Sabah, therefore, reinforces rather than weakens the sense of need for cooperative governance given the fact that security efforts require complementary capabilities of the different agencies operating across these areas.

Technological interoperability and information management is also one of the major challenges that was noted in the findings. While the growing adoption of Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) technologies has greatly improved the level of maritime domain awareness, the ability to govern effectively requires the interoperability of communication systems, information-sharing platforms and operational technologies across the organisations involved. Acknowledging that the speed at which intelligence is disseminated and coordinated operational responses can be constrained by differences in technological capability and information management systems, respondents agreed that this can occasionally be a problem. The governance effectiveness of maritime security also depends on the real-time exchange of information, making technological interoperability a key factor in the effectiveness of governance in maritime security alongside traditional enforcement powers.

Similar studies have suggested that technology is pivotal in facilitating coordinated maritime security operations by promoting timely sharing of information and enhancing operational decision-making (Yang et al., 2022; Zainol et al., 2024). The present data contribute to this discussion by indicating that technology does not only have to be seen as an operational tool, but as an institutional enabler for collaborative governance as well. By enabling constant agency interaction through intelligence systems and communication networks, and surveillance technologies, the specialised operational functions of agencies can be coordinated within a single governance framework. Therefore, technological interoperability investments can not only enhance operational efficiency but also sustainability of collaborative maritime security governance in the long run.

All these results suggest that the problems mentioned in the ESS Zone are not temporary but structural. Maritime security governance is expected to continue being institutional diverse and geographically complex, as well as technologically adapted, given their inherent nature of having to coordinate between multiple agencies in a complex border environment. Instead of trying to remove these obstacles altogether, policy makers should concentrate on enhancing the institutional capacity to withstand these through ongoing collaborative training, interoperability of communications, intelligence integration and flexible operational planning. This enables participating agencies to prepare for emerging maritime security risks in a coordinated and more effective manner while maintaining the agencies' institutional capabilities and statutory mandates.

In terms of governance more generally, the results also add to the literature by showing that an understanding of implementation challenges cannot only be used as an indicator of coordination problems, but also as an example of how collaborative governance can be dynamic. It is therefore not necessarily the lack of institutional friction that makes for good maritime security governance, but the ability of the participating organisations to deal with it through ongoing cooperation, institutional learning and constant adaptations. This interpretation gives a more balanced view of co-ordinated functional specialisation as it acknowledges that achieving effective collaboration requires more than strategic coordination, it also requires an institutional capacity to act together to address shifting operational realities. As such, the ESS Zone highlights that effectiveness of governance is an ongoing institutionalisation effort that continually evolves to meet new security threats, rather than a one-time organisational feat.

Implications for Maritime Security Governance

The results show that coordinated functional specialisation offers a helpful lens to view multi-agency security governance beyond the ESS Zone. Effective maritime security governance does not have to be based on a focus of operational responsibilities in a single institution, but rather on the strategic integration of special organisational capabilities. The concept of this governance approach is especially pertinent in maritime border regions with complex governance, transboundary challenges and overlapping jurisdictions. The findings indicate that investments in physical security assets should be accompanied by investments in intelligence integration, interoperability, joint operational planning, and/or institutional coordination to be effective from a policy perspective. Future maritime security policies should therefore focus on collaborative governance mechanisms which enable information exchange, joint decision making, and flexibility in maritime operational activities of participating agencies.

Conclusion

The present study analysed the functions and roles of security agencies in the Eastern Sabah Security Zone (ESS Zone) and illustrated that efficient maritime security governance is not just one-agency-driven; but is a multi-agency coordinated interaction. The results indicate that the ESSCOM is acting as an operational and strategic coordination hub, with a broader role of coordinating planning, resources, intelligence and operational priorities, while at the same time maintaining the specialised operational capacities of the participating agencies. Intelligence-led governance, coupled with Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR), further contributes to pro-activity in decision making and coordinated maritime enforcement. The

study, however, also found that there are institutional, geographical and technological hurdles that still affect the effectiveness of the coordinated security operations.

This research has not only an empirical contribution to the literature on maritime security governance, but it also shows that in complex maritime border environments, security effectiveness is more likely to be achieved through a coordinated functional specialisation than simply through institutional mandates. The study uses the concept of collaborative governance to unfold the mechanisms through which it is possible to strategically pool specialised operational capacities that are spread out across several agencies without losing institutional autonomy. ESSCOM is not a centralised platform for operational authority; it is a collaborative governance platform that is used to integrate specific capabilities into a unified security system. This view builds on the ongoing debates on multi-agency security governance and emphasizes the importance of the mechanisms of coordination, intelligence integration, and operational interdependence to effective maritime security governance.

The results are also meaningful for those security practitioners and policy makers who are tasked with protecting Malaysia's maritime frontiers. The ongoing challenge in building collaborative governance is the need for further investment in intelligence integration, interoperable communication systems, joint operational planning, and institutional coordination among participating agencies. Future maritime security strategies should focus on mechanisms that enhance the sharing of information, coordination of decision-making and operational flexibility of the organisations in response to more fluid maritime threats, while preserving the statutory responsibilities and specialised expertise of individual organisations. In conclusion, this study reveals that effective maritime security governance in the ESS Zone does not require an institutional structure to be dominant but relies on the synergistic integration of specialised operational capabilities, intelligence-led decision-making and continued cooperation between various maritime security agencies within a complex maritime border environment.

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