

## SECURITY THREATS IN THE EASTERN COAST OF SABAH: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

SU WAI MON\*

Apart from the Straits of Malacca where piracy cases are rampant, another problematic area in Malaysia is the eastern coast of Sabah or the “Tri-Border Area” (TBA) of Southeast Asia which comprises the territory and territorial seas of three States—the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia. Sabah’s maritime area covers “54,360 km<sup>2</sup>, constituting 30 percent of the Malaysia’s Economic Exclusive Zone (EEZ). It stretches from the South China Sea in the west and the Sulu Sea to the north of Kudat and extends to the eastern coast, covering the Sulu Sea, and the Celebes Sea in the districts of Semporna and Tawau.” A porous and extremely long border have made the place vulnerable to various security threats. The security threats in the TBA are non-traditional and from non-state actors which includes kidnapping and robberies by armed groups. The lahat Datu incident, an intrusion by Sulu militants in 2013, accentuates the need for Malaysian authorities to be better prepared and beef up security in the Sabah’s eastern seaboard. Hijacking of fishing boats and kidnapping for ransom by armed groups are found to be the most rampant in the area, although the place has also been exposed to other non-traditional security threats. The presence of small and isolated islands makes it difficult for authorities to track and monitor the area. The primary concern of this study is to identify the major security threats which are challenging sustainable maritime security in the eastern coast of Sabah. This research is mainly based on qualitative approach by means of analytical and synthesis of secondary sources such as books, journal articles, newspapers and so forth. Despite the commercial significance of the area, the Tri-Border Area (TBA) or the eastern coast of Sabah has been largely overlooked by policymakers and security strategists from all three littoral states, namely, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, perhaps to avoid tensions on the issue of sovereignty and jurisdiction. The absence of a policy framework and lack of inter-State coordination create lacuna in exercising effective law enforcement by respective authorities. This study encourages the authorities of three countries, namely Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, to strengthen cooperation and communication in order for law enforcement to be more effective and for sustaining maritime security in the Tri-Border Area.

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\* Lecturer, Faculty of Law, Multimedia University, Malaysia.