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Security Perception of Sabah's Maritime Community Against Threats

Radziah Abdul Rahim[a,*] , Mohd Zaini Salleh[a], Zamri Ismail[a], Jegak Uli[a], Ariffin Ismail[a], Fatimah Kuzi[a]

[a] *Universiti Pertahanan Nasional Malaysia, Kem Sungai Besi, 57000, Kuala Lumpur*

*Corresponding author: *radziah@upnm.edu.my*

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ABSTRACT: *Territorial security has always been a concerned of sovereign states especially those with long stretches of coastal area. In Sabah, with a 1,600km coastline to cover, Malaysia's security forces have their work cut out for them. Codenamed Op Pasir (short for Pandanan and Sipadan Island Resorts operation), the concerted efforts of the three services of the armed forces (and other security-related agencies) were put in place since 2000 to address external threats following the kidnapping incidents at Pandanan and Sipadan islands. This paper highlights the result of a joint-study conducted in 2012 to determine security perception amongst the maritime community in the east coast of Sabah since then. The exploratory study examines the perception covering four areas – threats and general security, politics, economic as well as social. Data were collected using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Interviews were held with and questionnaires were distributed to important stakeholders and islanders off the coast of Sabah. The study revealed that from the security perspective most of the respondents felt safe and confident with the presence of the security forces and agencies. However, there were those who were still uneasy about the security of the area concerning issues such as sea robberies, smuggling and undocumented immigrants. This group constituted about 30% of the respondents registering high threat index. Politically, the presence of the illegal immigrants, undocumented and stateless people as well as sea communities such as the Suluk, who come and go, posed a big headache to the local leaders and the security agencies. Problems emerging from the above situation also became a challenge to local authorities in providing public infrastructure and in dealing with crimes. Economically, the presence of the security forces and agencies acted as a catalyst to the development of Sabah's east coast and its community. The study also revealed the need for a more united and coordinated cooperation by all agencies, security or otherwise, involved in the safety of Sabah.*

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1. Introduction

The protection of a state's physical borders against any form of foreign intrusion is never an easy task for its security forces. The protection is vital to maintain peace, generate stability and spur growth in a state. The responsibility is twice as challenging when the land mass is separated by a large body of water. This is evident in the case of Malaysia which is divided into Peninsular Malaysia to the west and the eastern states of Sabah and Sarawak in North Borneo. The two land masses are separated by the South China Sea.

Unlike Sarawak, Sabah is nearer to the Philippines and the many islands that are located within the vicinity of both countries. This can be both a blessing and a challenge to the state government.

The east coast of Sabah, in particular, has great development potential given its geo-strategic location and geo-political advantage. The waters off the coastal area serve as a hub centre for international sea lanes connecting the Sulu Sea and the South China Sea as well as the Celebes Sea and the Pacific Ocean. On a positive note, this also makes Sabah easily accessible to its nearest neighbours, Indonesia and the Philippines, facilitating economic ties and commercial activities with each other. Meanwhile, the islands within its vicinity, some of which are known as divers' paradise, have become the main attraction in its eco-tourism industry. Today, the tourism industry remains one of Sabah's major earners. In 2013, the *Borneo Insider* reported that Sabah raked in RM$5.2 billion in revenue from the industry.

Figure 1: East coast Sabah, the area of study.
Source: www.worldatlas.com

However, with a coastline that stretches to about 1,600km, monitoring the security of Sabah to ensure that there would be no disruption to her economic interests, development and peace requires a concerted effort on the part of, not only the Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF), but other security-related agencies like the Royal Malaysian Police (RMP) and the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA). This is because, in today's context, the threat against the security of a country does not come in the form of physical invasion by the country's enemy alone but has extended to other forms of threats such as illegal movements of people, piracy and other form of crimes.

The porous border of Sabah, as evident in the invasion of Lahad Datu in 2013 as well as the kidnappings of foreign tourists at the Singamata Reef Resort and a manager of a fish farm near Pulau Baik this year, showed that much needs to be done to secure the safety of her people and the sovereignty of the state and its surrounding waters. The above incidents were not the first security-related challenges that the Sabah government, in particular, and the Malaysian government, in general, had to deal with. Similar kidnappings took place in 2000 at the Pandanan and Sipadan Islands, off Sabah, causing panic and fear amongst the locals and foreign tourists. The kidnappers were linked to Abu Sayyaf group, an Islamist separatist group based in Southern Philippines.

The incidents sparked concerns that they would also affect Sabah's tourism industry and, hence, its contribution to the state's economic growth. The fact that it also involved invasion of Malaysian waters by a foreign militant group prompted the federal government to intensify its security operations by deploying its three armed services to the east coast of Sabah. The operation was known as the Pandanan and Sipadan Island Resorts Operation or, in short, *Op Pasir*. This paper highlights the result of a joint research conducted in 2012 by the National Defence University of Malaysia (NDUM) and the Malaysian Joint Forces Headquarters (MJFH) who funded the research and provided the logistic.

The research was carried out to determine the security perception amongst the maritime community in the east coast of Sabah against threats since *Op Pasir* took place. The exploratory study examined the security perception in four areas, that is, threat and general security as well as the political, economic and social impact. In so doing, it examined the effectiveness of *Op Pasir* and the levels of cooperation that existed among the various security and enforcement agencies, thus, establishing the strengths and weaknesses. The findings provided a glimpse of the enormous difficulties and challenges faced by the security and enforcement agencies in keeping Sabah safe and, why, despite the efforts of the federal and state governments, unwarranted incidences like the Lahad Datu incursion and the kidnappings continue to occur.

2. Methodology

The research adopted the mix method, engaging both the qualitative and quantitative approaches, to discover in-depth information which would not otherwise be possible if only one approach was employed. The field work was conducted over a five-month period beginning in May 2012 and was carried out in three phases. At the end of the field work, representatives from various enforcement and security-related government agencies were invited to give a briefing on their agencies' role and contribution in ensuring the security of Sabah against any possible threats. The agencies that participated in the briefings were the Malaysia Joint Task Force 2 (JTF 2 Hq), the MMEA, the Customs Department, the Marine Department and the Fisheries Department.

A total of 40 respondents holding senior and important posts from various enforcement and security agencies, local government authorities, interest groups such as resort operators and hoteliers and the public, including political representatives, head villages and tourists were interviewed. In addition, 205 sets of questionnaires were distributed to respondents from the above target groups in the towns of Tawau, Semporna, Sandakan and Kudat as well as islanders. These were chosen as they were among the focal points of *Op Pasir*.

A five-point Likert scale was used to interpret the security perception index of the maritime community with respondents having to choose answers ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. The responses were analyzed using SPSS. Meanwhile, the composite mean score was classified into three - 'strongly disagree', moderately agree' and 'strongly agree'. The interviews, the distribution of the questionnaire and the analysis of the interviews and survey were carried out by the NDUM team with the assistance of members of the MJFH and JTF 2 Hq.

3. The Findings

The result of the research can be illustrated as follows:

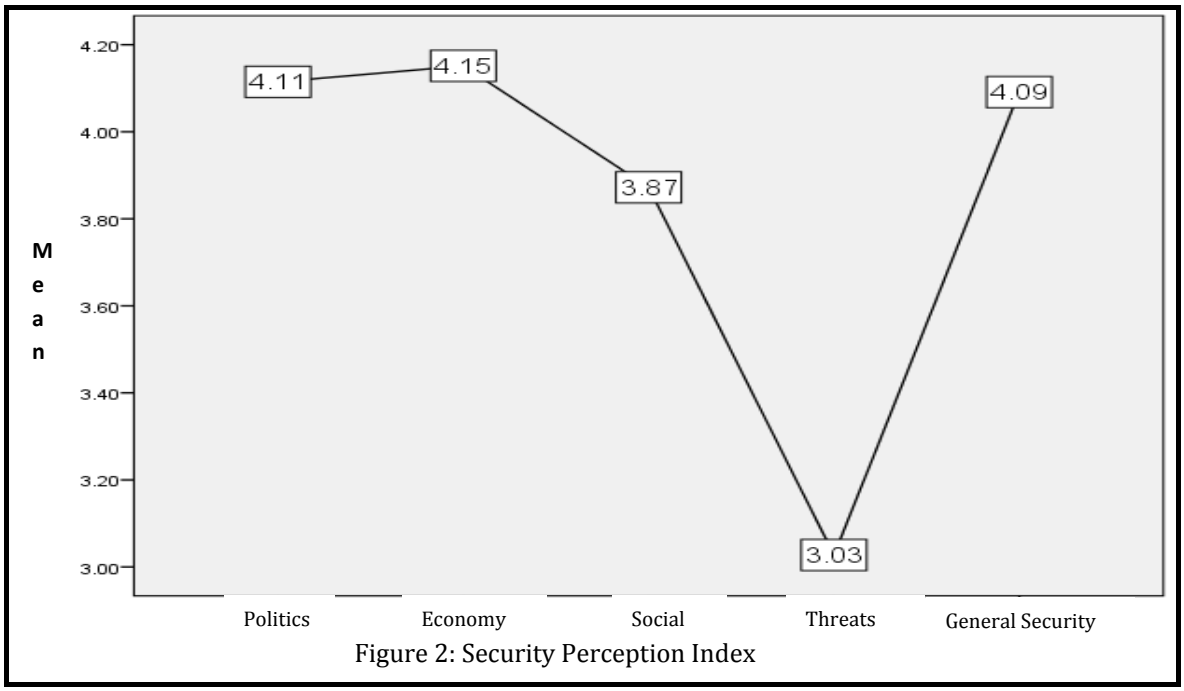

Figure 2: Security Perception Index

General security and threats

The issue of security was examined from two angles – external armed threats and separatist movements as well as general security posed by the presence of the armed forces. With respect to external armed threats and separatist movements, the findings revealed that opinions vary. Although there were a number of respondents who felt the level of threat was low (registering a mean composite score of 27.65), there were also those who were still cautious about possible threats (registering a mean composite score of 37.65 for the moderate category and 27.65 for the high category) from groups like Abu Sayyaf and Jemaah Islamiyah. These responses were received prior to the signing of the peace deal between the Philippines government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. Despite this disparity, it can be said that, on the whole, the threat index mean (of 3.03) showed that this form of threat was perceived as moderate.

On the matter of general security, it recorded a high mean of 4.09, reflecting the confidence of the public with the presence of the armed forces. They felt secured knowing that members of the armed forces were on hand to monitor the east coast of Sabah against transgression. Of main concerns to the east coast people in the four areas of research were piracy and sea robberies as the livelihood and economic activities of the majority of these people were centred on the waters off Sabah.

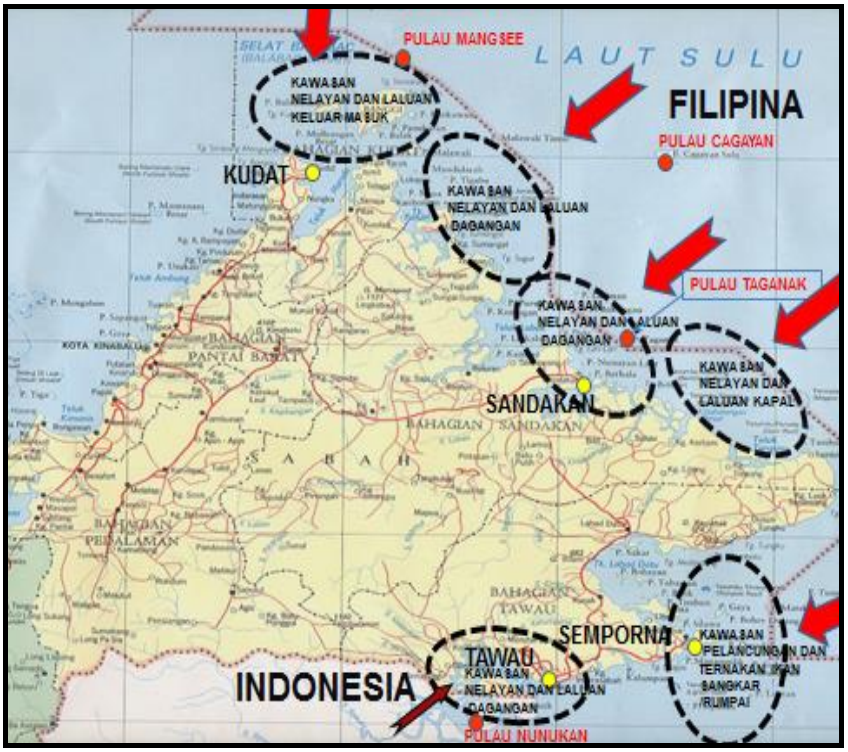

Figure 3: Hot spots in east coast Sabah that are opened to threats, including from armed groups.
Source: JTF 2 Hq

In interviews with other enforcement and security-related agencies, like the RMP, MMEA, Immigration Department and local authorities, the respondents revealed that the presence of the armed forces did not only provide the feeling of safety to the public but has enabled them to concentrate on carrying out their respective responsibilities in maintaining law and order in society. These agencies faced a host of challenges emerging from smuggling, sea robberies and illegal immigrants.

Political perspective

The political aspect of the research was included to observe how the sense of security provided by the presence of the armed forces had contributed to the quality of life of the local communities. The findings disclosed a high political index (mean of 4.11), indicating that the presence of the armed forces have not

disrupted the daily lives and normal activities of the communities in Tawau, Semporna, Sandakan and Kudat. Nevertheless, the presence of a particular group of sea-faring communities like the *Suluk*, those who lead a nomadic lifestyle and do not carry any form of identification, posed a big problem to the local authorities, the security and enforcement agencies as well as the MAF.

It was difficult for the authorities to determine the status of this particular group of people, some of whom have long-standing family ties with the locals. They may fall into any one of these categories – stateless people, refugees (in which case the United Nations Commissions on Human Rights will determine confirm the status), illegal immigrants or those who entered Sabah because of the economic growth in the state. The Sandakan Municipal Council, for one, estimated that a quarter of the 400,000 people living in Sandakan is of unknown status.

This created a problem for Sabah as it became a political liability that could affect the internal security of the state. Moreover, this issue was beyond neither the jurisdiction nor the responsibility of the MAF to deal with. Ironically, this community, too, felt safer with the presence of the MAF as it provided them which the feeling of protection against harassment or threats by armed groups from Southern Philippines.

Economic perspective

The economic perspective was included to examine the impact of *Op Pasir* on the development of the east coast of Sabah, especially in the areas of Tawau, Semporna, Sandakan and Kudat. Following the 2000 kidnapping incidents, the occupancy rate at the island resorts and hotels in Sabah were badly affected. The Lankayan Resort Management revealed that about 90% of potential tourists cancelled their plans when news of the kidnapping broke out. However, the situation has improved since and the management reported that bookings for 2013 were full (Basil, H., personal communication, July 6, 2012). This tally with the research findings which revealed a high mean of 4.15, indicating that the presence of the armed forces acted as a catalyst to boost confidence among tourists, investors and businesses. The aquaculture and the fishery industries have also prospered with the seaweed industry becoming one of the main sources of income for the local communities with Semporna, Lahat Datu, Kudat and Kunak becoming the state's main producer of seaweed. The industry was once threatened by thieves who often stole the harvest.

Under Sabah's master development plan, Semporna's eco-tourism involving 600 acres of land in Tagasan and costing an estimated RM28 million is currently being developed. The project is expected to complete in 2020. In addition, new resorts were coming up on some islands, such as Pulau Billean, near the Philippines, to cater to the increasing volume of tourists pouring into the area as the nearby island of Lankayan has been operating with full capacity with the return of tourists to Sabah. Meanwhile, Pulau Bakungan Kecil has been developed into a sanctuary for turtles and other eco-tourism projects, including the marine parks of Tun Mustapha and Pulau Sipadan, were on progress ((Tinus, A., personal communication, June 6, 2012, and Ansim, M. J., personal communication, 7 July 7, 2012.). Meanwhile, Sandakan has been earmarked as the hub for processing and exporting of fish to Brunei, Hong Kong and China.

Social perspectives

This perspective addressed social matters that might arise from the presence of the armed forces personnel serving in *Op Pasir* in terms of sensitivities to the culture and tradition of the local communities. It also examined the form of cooperation that existed with local authorities and other government agencies in the east coast. Many of these servicemen came from Peninsular Malaysia and were sent to Sabah on a rotational basis. Hence, it was very important to ensure that the civil-military relation was at its best to avoid conflict between the parties concerned and to ensure that the objective of securing and maintaining peace in Sabah remained the priority.

The respondents, in general, have a great respect and trust for the servicemen involved in the security of Sabah east coast. This was indicated by the high social index mean of 3.87. Only a small number (about 0.6%) of the respondents expressed disappointment with a small number of the servicemen. Their complaints involved the issue of misconduct, personal matters and skirmishes with the law. Most of these cases were, however, not serious and were easily resolved.

At the same time, the various agencies (RMP, MMEA, Immigration Department and local authorities) claimed that a good relationship existed between them and the armed forces, especially the JTF 2 Hq. The cooperation that existed between these agencies and JTF 2 Hq, especially in the last few years, had enabled them to monitor unwarranted activities such as sea robberies, smuggling of control items in and out of Sabah and landings of illegal immigrants around the areas of operations. For example, the Fishery Department has reported that the number of cases involving fish bombings and theft of items at ports and from ships had reduced with constant patrol (Burahan, M, personal communication, June 7, 2012, and Awang, P, personal communication, July 7, 2012). Likewise, the JTF 2 Hq reported that the number of sea robberies that showed a gradual increase of five cases in 2008 to 11 cases in 2011 recorded an encouraging low figure of 4 cases in the first five months of 2012.

The issue of illegal immigrants has also made the jobs of these agencies more difficult. In Sandakan alone it was reported that there were about 80,000 illegal immigrants scattered over 26 squatter settlements or illegal colonies near the township (Burahan, M., personal communication, June 7, 2012, and Awang, P, personal communication, July 7, 2012). This has hampered development plans involving the building of infrastructures such as the housing project for the local hardcore poor on the areas concerned as it would attract unwanted attention from certain quarters like human rights activists. There were also concerned that these communities would also result in other problems such as the spread of diseases, the use of illegal substances and of utmost concerned, the spread of unwelcome ideologies and militant activities.

The Sabah Religious Department, for one, had reported the presence of religious groups moving freely between Sabah and Southern Philippines, one of which was the group known as Hizbolah Tarikat Al-Ghazaliah, whose presence was detected in 2009 (Adam, A. H., personal communication, September 6, 2012). However, the department has not received any negative reports from the public about their activities. In Tawau and Semporna, the Department was worried over the teachings spread by the illegal immigrants (be they from Indonesia, the Philippines or other nationalities) and their way of life that might have a negative impact on the local community in Sabah. In particular, there was also concern over cross-religion marriage, which is permissible in a neighbouring country, and the likelihood that this practice would spread amongst the local population, especially among the young generation.

Although the armed forces' responsibility and jurisdiction do not cover the issues of illegal immigrants and stateless people, the MAF has taken upon itself to engage a group of stateless people in their community service and provide free education to their children at Pulau Berhala, an island located at the entrance of Sandakan Bay. As these children do not have an identification card, they could not enter public schools like the local children. The proactive step of the MAF was meant to provide basic education to the community so that they would not be caught in a vicious circle caused by illiteracy and would not be easily hoodwinked into committing illegal activities.

The proactive step, though beyond the traditional duty the MAF in safeguarding the country's defence and security, was well-received by the locals. It was a positive move towards enhancing civil-military relations. Moreover, the action fits into the armed forces' holistic plan of ensuring peace and stability whilst creating a safe environment for progress and development in line with its Blue Ocean Strategy initiatives. Despite this, a number of respondents at the grass-root level, felt that there was still a need for closer cooperation and coordination between the MAF and existing enforcement and security-related agencies for greater efficiency.

This opinion was shared by several representatives of the agencies, who admitted that the authorities faced a daunting task, as some of the perpetrators who commit crimes, such as sea robberies, were known to have better equipment like high-powered engines that could outpace the boats belonging to the authorities. At the same time, with a long stretch of coastal area to cover, the authorities have had to stretch their manpower and capabilities thin monitoring the entry points of illegal immigrants and arresting those caught in the operations. The fact that illegal immigrants could still evade the authorities required closer scrutiny as well as the sharing of information and intelligence between the parties involved in the enforcement of security in the east coast of Sabah.

4. Conclusion

The research findings revealed that, on the whole, the presence of the MAF has had a positive impact on the population of Tawau, Semporna, Sandakan and Kudat. The locals, many of whom relied on the waters off Sabah for their livelihood, have not lived in fear as they once did following the threats posed by foreign

or militant groups like Abu Sayyaf since the Pandanan and Sipadan incidents in 2000. Their life has returned to normalcy over the years and their township has undergone progressed. The respondents believed that the presence of the MAF has contributed to the political, economic and social development that has taken place in their respective towns. The presence of the armed forces was seen as a deterrent against a security breach, providing the confidence for tourists, investors and businesses to flock to the state.

Nevertheless, there were still voices of caution amongst a few respondents who did not dismiss the possibility of similar incidence occurring in the future. Their fears were not without basis as three months after the report of this research was completed, the Lahad Datu incident took place. Of equal concerned was the presence of many stateless persons, illegal immigrants and the sea-faring communities, who led a nomadic lifestyle and did not have identification papers. The enforcement and other security-related agencies had their hands full in monitoring the situation as members of these communities, besides some locals, were reported to be involved in criminal activities such as sea robberies, theft, fish bombings and smuggling. Another worrying factor was the social effect including the spread of diseases, the use of illegal substances, the spread of unwelcome ideologies and militant activities.

Although there was some form of cooperation between the enforcement and other security-related agencies in the four east coast towns and the MAF, some of the respondents felt there was still a need to strengthen existing cooperation and increase coordination and surveillance. The MAF, on its part, has gone a step further to encourage civil-military cooperation by conducting activities that engaged the locals, including the islanders, in taking an interest in their community and safety. These findings conclude that the above efforts, however, need further attention, support and participation of other agencies and ministries at a higher level. It needs affirmative change, policy direction, as well as increased power capabilities and logistic supports for the above agencies to enable them to perform their duties in keeping Sabah safe from external and internal threats.

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