

CDISS Commentaries is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical issues and contemporary developments. CDISS commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from CDISS and due recognition to the author(s) and CDISS. To contribute article and provide comment or feedback, please email the Editor at adam@upnm.edu.my

Establishing a Single Border Agency in Malaysia: Drawing Lessons from the Success of the National Task Force

By
Tharishini Krishnan

During the 2024 budget announcement in October this year, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim said that the government would set up a single border agency with the allocation of RM20 million for maintenance, repair works and procurements of assets at the country's entry points.¹ In relation to the setting up of a single border agency, a total of RM 19.7 billion was also allocated to the Ministry of Defence and a total of RM 19 billion was given to the Ministry of Home Affairs.²

The idea of shaping an integrated border security mechanism is not new in the country. During the Covid-19 pandemic, when the World Health Organisation (WHO) labelled the disease as an infectious nature detrimental to human lives, the government established the National Task Force (NTF). Although the NTF was disbanded in December 2022 with the reduction of Covid-19 pandemic, the announcement of the new budget to establish a single border agency reassures the public that the government continues to pay attention and prioritise border security enhancement in Malaysia.

There are compelling reasons that support the idea of establishing a single border agency in Malaysia and drawing lessons from the success of the NTF will reaffirm the rationale behind the government's new effort. First the ability of the NTF to curb the entries of illegal activities spiking during the pandemic. During this time, illegal immigrants challenged the country, and Malaysia was tested with a series of Rohingya groups entering the country and landing in Langkawi. Furthermore, the outbreak of Covid-19 in Sabah and Sarawak was also due to the huge number of undocumented migrants entering the country unauthorised. These problems continue to challenge the government at both land and sea borders. It is well known that the country's geographical location, porous land and water spaces make it attractive for human movement to cross the border frequently and as such Malaysia is vulnerable to the possibilities of illegal

¹ Adib, P., Nuradzimmah D., Nor Ain, M. R., & Amalia, A. (Oct 13, 2023) <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2023/10/966735/2024-budget-single-border-agency-be-set>.

² Ibid.

entries. Hence, with the threat the pandemic could pose to the livelihood of the citizens, the country had to investigate strengthening security across national borders. It is argued that a continuous lookout for illegal entry into the country is imperative. Hence, the government's effort to establish a single border agency is in line with the aim to prepare to address and mitigate illegal entries on a normal day and not wait for an emergency to respond.

Second, whilst the NTF was successful in controlling the threats coming externally from both land and water borders, it was also successful in curbing internal illegal activities within the country. Due to border movement restrictions between states in the country, organised crime syndicates were exploiting the situation to further peddle their illegal activities by adopting innovative and clever modus operandi - crime is a business in the shadow economy that thrives in conditions of lax security and for criminals, bleak times like the Covid-19 pandemic are great opportunities to expand their market. Criminals categorised as pandemic profiteers were making use of the lack of human contact as an opportunity to distribute drugs stances without being detected. One good example was using delivery services, and it was evident that during the pandemic this method was increasingly being used and the NTF managed to mitigate and reduce the movement of drug stances with so many large scales of drug smuggling busted within months. The intact and efficient coordination between enforcement agencies led to a successful mitigation of illegal activities which otherwise will have a huge bearing to the socio-economic condition of the people.

Third, with the establishment of the NTF, it was evident that the government had the ability to consolidate all relevant agencies to safeguard border security in the country. The dynamic challenges posed by the pandemic made it impossible for the government to rest solely on a specific agency and it led to the consolidation of all relevant security enforcement agencies to be integrated under one roof. Within a short period of time, the NTF was established, and it was successful in developing and executing a plan of action to contain illegal entries to the country. Although the NTF was disbanded, its success story in curbing both the pandemic and illegal entries showcases that the enforcement bodies have the capabilities and the political will to work together addressing border security management during a crisis.

Illegal entities continue to challenge the border security of the country and today, there is no doubt that the dynamics and complexity of security threats are different and change rapidly to suit the ever-changing security environment. Criminals are well-equipped with technological knowledge and always look at opportunities to benefit from the black market and challenge the government's readiness. Hence, it is imperative that there should be a long and sustainable plan of action on border security management – one should not wait for another crisis or pandemic as it would only cause a delay in response. A sustainable mechanism will lead to better reinforcement and stronger consolidation of enforcement between agencies in addressing border security challenges coming into the country in the long run.

Hence, drawing from the success and experiences of the establishment of the NTF during the Covid-19 pandemic, it is wise to say that establishing a single border agency in the country is timely and applauded. However, to ensure that this idea stays long and sustainable, it is vital for enforcement bodies relevant in shaping an integrated and consolidate effort in addressing border security in the country to breakthrough silos between agencies and seek to achieve togetherness and reduce redundancy in efforts and roles. Although they might have different working culture and chains of command, a strong political will to reduce differences and seek towards achieving a stronger collective security effort will serve better the objective of a single border agency. The government should also consider creating public awareness and improving societal perseverance through related programmes and initiatives to support government efforts towards

an inclusive resilience's towards border security. With the combination of both the government mechanisms and societal support, a much durable border security can be achieved in the country.

***Dr. Tharishini Krishnan** is a senior lecturer at the Department of Strategic Studies and a research fellow at the Centre for Defence and International Security Studies (CDISS), National Defence University of Malaysia.*

CENTRE FOR DEFENCE AND INTERNATIONAL SECURITY STUDIES (CDISS)

National Defence University of Malaysia
Sungai Besi Camp, 57000 Kuala Lumpur

Phone: (+603) 9051 3400 ext. 4618

Fax: (+603) 9051 3031

E-mail: cdiss@upnm.edu.my