

Border Security Management at Sungai Golok, Malaysia-Thailand: Challenges, Implications, and Pathways to Resolution

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SUMMARY

The Sungai Golok border, spanning Malaysia and Thailand, is a unique yet complex region where the lines between national security and local livelihoods intersect. This area has recently become the focus of intense policy discussions, with stricter enforcement measures set to take effect on 1 December under Section 5(2) of the Immigration Act 1959/1963. These measures, aimed at curbing illegal crossings, will affect everyone, including students who rely on informal routes for their education. While these laws are essential to protecting Malaysia's sovereignty and territorial integrity, they also present significant challenges to the socioeconomic well-being of border communities.

A Community Dependent on Cross-Border Integration

For generations, communities along the Sungai Golok border have relied on informal crossings for their daily lives. These routes are vital for education, trade, and familial connections. For instance, nearly 500 students from Thailand cross the border illegally each day to attend schools in Malaysia, illustrating the deep interdependence between the two sides. These activities are not merely practical -they reflect a way of life rooted in shared culture and economic necessity.

However, this cross-border integration also creates vulnerabilities. Informal crossings, while convenient for local residents, bypass official checkpoints, making the border porous and susceptible to a range of security threats. Recognising this, authorities are prioritising regulated border movement. The National Security Council (NSC) of Malaysia has emphasised the need for crossings to be limited to gazetted checkpoints and highlighted ongoing discussions with the Ministry of Education and Thai authorities to address the specific needs of students and their families.

The Socioeconomic Impact of Stricter Border Controls

Stricter enforcement measures will inevitably disrupt the daily lives of border communities. These residents depend heavily on informal crossings for economic survival. Many rely on cross-border trade to sustain their livelihoods, with goods flowing back and forth in a largely informal economy. Closing these routes could cut off their access to markets and income, pushing vulnerable families into poverty or forcing them to resort to underground economic activities.

Education is another critical area of concern. Students' reliance on informal crossings illustrates the lack of accessible formal alternatives. For many families, the nearest gazetted checkpoint is either too distant or too costly to use regularly. If students are unable to cross the border legally, their education - and by extension, their future - will be at risk. The government must address this challenge to avoid perpetuating cycles of marginalisation and lost opportunities.

Beyond economics and education, implementing stricter controls could strain the relationship between border communities and enforcement authorities. Aggressive measures that disregard residents' lived realities may erode trust and foster resentment. Without community cooperation, these policies risk being counterproductive, driving people to seek even riskier, unregulated routes.

Addressing Security Concerns

While the socioeconomic implications are significant, the Sungai Golok border also represents a major security challenge. Unregulated crossings allow illegal activities to thrive, including smuggling, human trafficking, and the drug trade. These activities endanger public safety and undermine Malaysia's national security. The border region has become a hotspot for the smuggling of subsidised goods, depriving the government of revenue and sustaining a shadow economy that thrives on weak enforcement.

Human trafficking networks also exploit the porous border, targeting vulnerable individuals and fuelling organised crime. Moreover, unchecked crossings jeopardise Malaysia's sovereignty, creating pathways to insecurity and other non-state actors infiltrating the country. These threats, if left unaddressed, could destabilise the border region and the nation as a whole over time.

Towards a Holistic Border Management Framework

Managing the Sungai Golok border requires a comprehensive strategy that balances security imperatives with the socioeconomic needs of local communities. The following steps can help achieve this balance:

1. Investing in Infrastructure and Enforcement:

Upgrading existing gazetted checkpoints and enhancing their efficiency can provide viable alternatives to informal crossings. Investments in surveillance technologies and manpower are equally critical to securing the border.

2. Tailored Solutions for Education:

The government should collaborate with the Ministry of Education to introduce special border passes for students tied to biometric data for regulated use. Alternatively, schooling facilities could be established closer to the border to reduce dependency on informal crossings.

3. Strengthening Local Economies:

Establishing Special Economic Zones (SEZs) near the border can formalise trade and provide structured economic opportunities. Such initiatives can help reduce reliance on informal economies while supporting local livelihoods.

4. Community Engagement and Awareness:

Building trust with border communities is essential. Authorities must educate residents on the risks of illegal crossings and the benefits of secure borders. At the same time, local residents should be involved in community-based security initiatives to foster a sense of shared responsibility.

5. Diplomatic Coordination:

Close collaboration with Thai authorities is critical to harmonise border policies and ensure that new measures do not disrupt cross-border relations. Joint initiatives, such as synchronised checkpoint operations and shared economic zones, can help align objectives on both sides.

Conclusion

The Sungai Golok border is more than just a line on a map - it is a lifeline for the communities that live along it. Managing this border effectively requires empathy, inclusivity, and a long-term vision. Striking the right balance between national security and the needs of local residents is not just a policy challenge but a moral obligation.

By investing in infrastructure, tailoring education solutions, and fostering trust through community engagement, Malaysia can address the pressing issues at Sungai Golok while safeguarding its people's livelihoods. At the same time, strengthening diplomatic ties and regional cooperation will be critical to achieving sustainable and secure border management. These measures will not only protect Malaysia's sovereignty but also ensure that the communities at Sungai Golok can continue to thrive within a framework of safety and stability.

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The views of the author in this commentary are his own and do not represent the official position of the AIAD or any organization.

Suggested Citation:

Mat, B. (2024). *Border Security Management at Sungai Golok, Malaysia-Thailand: Challenges, Implications, and Pathways to Resolution*. AIAD Commentary, No. 1 September-October 2024.

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