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Pandemic borders policy: securitizing stateless people during COVID-19 in Sabah, Malaysia

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Abstract

Drawing on Copenhagen School securitization theory, this study investigates how the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the securitization of stateless migration in Sabah, Malaysia. Stateless communities, already excluded from healthcare, employment, and social protection, became increasingly framed as existential threats to public health during a period marked by both pandemic crisis and federal political instability. The analysis focuses on the timeframe from March 18, 2020 to August 16, 2021, when the sudden change of federal government intensified securitization rhetoric, as the new administration sought to consolidate legitimacy through migration control. This research identifies two interlinked securitization strategies. First, punitive measures such as mass arrests, prolonged detention, and deportations symbolized state authority while addressing public anxieties. Second, deterrence mechanisms including reinforced border patrols, visible security deployments, and integrated security operations expanded surveillance and control over marginalized populations. While these measures temporarily reduced unauthorized border crossings, they also deepened the marginalization of stateless communities, producing family separations and heightened social tensions. By situating stateless migration at the intersection of public health and national security, this study underscores the urgency of examining how political crises shape securitization processes and contributes to broader debates on human security, migration governance, and state legitimacy under pandemic conditions.

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Introduction

The transnational movement of undocumented migrants across sovereign borders represents a persistent global phenomenon with deep historical roots, challenging traditional notions of state sovereignty and border control (Wahab, 2020). The outbreak of World War II significantly curtailed international migration patterns, but the post-war era, particularly the 1970s, witnessed a resurgence of cross-border mobility, predominantly characterized by economic migration. This trend reflects the complex interplay between push and pull factors in an increasingly interconnected global economy.

In Malaysia, the influx of migrants mirrored global trends, illustrating the country's integration into transnational labor networks. Prior to the Federation of Malaya's independence in 1957, the British colonial administration facilitated large-scale immigration, particularly from India and China, to address labor shortages in the plantation and mining sectors of Peninsular Malaysia (then known as Tanah Melayu). This colonial-era policy of labor importation laid the groundwork for future migration patterns and demographic shifts. These immigrants were subsequently granted

Malayan citizenship under the principle of jus soli (Low, 2017), a decision that would have long-lasting implications for Malaysia's ethnic composition and political landscape. The 1970s saw a rapid increase in immigration, coinciding with the implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP). This policy initiative, aimed at industrializing the Malaysian economy, was formulated in response to the political tensions of May 1969. The NEP sought to eradicate poverty and restructure society to eliminate the identification of race with economic function (Jomo, 2004), representing a significant shift in Malaysia's approach to economic development and social engineering.

The influx of immigrants became a significant policy concern for the Malaysian government following the introduction of the nation-state concept, highlighting the tension between economic imperatives and national identity formation. However, cross-border activities in the region predated the colonial-era establishment of nation-states, underscoring the artificial nature of some political boundaries. Even after Malaysia's formation, many immigrants continued to enter the country through informal routes across land and maritime borders, challenging the state's ability to control its territorial boundaries.

Immigrants can be broadly categorized into two groups: documented migrants and undocumented migrants, a dichotomy that reflects the state's attempt to regulate human mobility. The drivers of undocumented immigration include political instability in countries of origin, pursuit of improved living conditions, and employment opportunities. While the general factors influencing the surge of undocumented migrants nationwide are similar, such as demand for foreign labor, individual motivations vary. Nonetheless, under the Immigration Act 1959/63 (Malaysia: Immigration Act, 1969), any individual entering Malaysia without proper documentation is classified as an undocumented migrant, illustrating the legal framework's role in constructing this category. There are two types of statelessness: de jure statelessness (individuals that have no legal nationality) and de facto stateless (people that have no "effective" nationality) (Chickera, 2010). Three groups of de facto stateless populations identified in Malaysia are Orang Asli, Indians in Peninsular Malaysia, and the children of IMM13 pass holders (the Filipino refugees) (Duraisingam, 2016).

Prior to the establishment of the nation-state concept, unauthorized migration was primarily viewed as a social phenomenon. However, as the stateless population grew and associated negative externalities emerged, it began to be framed as a security threat, elevating public concern. This shift in perception reflects the securitization of migration, a process by which human mobility is increasingly viewed through the lens of national security. While the dynamics of migration differ between Peninsular Malaysia and the Bornean states, both Sabah and Sarawak have experienced significant impacts from migrant inflows. Notably, Sabah, situated on the northern part of Borneo Island, has the highest proportion of non-citizens in Malaysia, with 1.2 million out of its 3.9 million population (Miwil, 2020). The majority of migrants in Sabah originate from neighboring Philippines and Indonesia, a consequence of the state's geographical proximity to these nations. This demographic reality poses unique challenges to state-building and national identity formation in Sabah.

Sabah faces distinctive security challenges stemming from the influx of both documented and stateless persons. Factors driving migration to Sabah include porous borders, family reunification, labor recruitment practices, aspirations for new beginnings, and persistent challenges in countries of origin (Wan Hassan et al., 2010). The security threats associated with uncontrolled migration have escalated since

Malaysia's formation in 1963, highlighting the complex relationship between state formation, border control, and national security. This is evidenced by several incidents, most notably the violent 2013 Lahad Datu intrusion, which resulted in the deaths of 10 Malaysian security personnel. Prior to this, Sabah experienced a series of high-profile criminal activities, including the 1985 armed robbery targeting Standard Chartered Bank and Malaysia Airlines offices in Lahad Datu (Jawhar & Sariburaja, 2016). In 2000, the state faced another crisis when 21 tourists and resort workers were abducted from Sipadan and Pandanan Islands by the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), a jihadist organization notorious for kidnapping and civilian attacks in the southern Philippines. These incidents underscore the transnational nature of security threats in the region and the challenges of maintaining territorial integrity in a globalized world.

Extensive research has been conducted on the determinants and impacts of unauthorized migration. The growing stateless population has exacerbated socio-economic, political, and security challenges. Stateless people are often associated with criminal activities such as human trafficking, prostitution, drug and weapons smuggling, and document forgery syndicates (Wan Hassan et al., 2010). Moreover, the uncontrolled presence of stateless persons in Sabah poses public health risks, particularly in terms of disease transmission. The poor sanitation in overcrowded informal settlements contributes significantly to these health concerns, highlighting the intersection of migration, urban planning, and public health policy. Research by Goroh et al. (2020) highlights the challenges posed by substantial marginalized communities living in overcrowded unauthorized settlements near the porous tri-border with Indonesia and the Philippines. This situation complicates efforts to monitor and control tuberculosis transmission within the population. Geographic hotspots for tuberculosis have been identified in districts such as Semporna, Pitas, Kota Marudu, Tuaran, and Kota Kinabalu, areas characterized by high volumes of cross-border movement and dense population concentrations.

The concept of state security encompasses several critical elements: the securitizing actor, the securitizing act, the audience, and the implementation of extraordinary measures beyond normal circumstances. For the purpose of this study, we analyze the use of executive powers in securitizing displaced people using the Copenhagen School of Securitization, which is observed through three analytical levels: individual, state, and international. At the individual level, the Human Development Report (HDR) states that "one of the most important aspects of human security is that people should be able to live in a society that honours their basic human rights" (UNDP, 1994).

Acharya (2001) contends that the report was a result of the Cold War arms race and independent commissions such as the Brandt Commission, the Brundtland Commission, and the Commission on Global Governance. Acharya (2001) states that human security was a form of commitment to "human dignity" as a concept, and the recognition that the source of human suffering was due to: (i) civil wars and intrastate conflicts outnumbering conventional interstate conflicts; (ii) the rise and process of democratization throughout the international system; (iii) the advent of humanitarian intervention; (iv) dynamics of globalization that inevitably cause economic crises leading to social dislocation, widespread poverty, and unemployment.

Stateless people of Mindanao in Sabah have been an issue since the 1970s due to the influx of Filipinos who found refuge in Sabah during the Mindanao insurgencies (Azizah, 2009). The offspring of their newborn children could not be registered by the National Registration Department Sabah (NRDP), which inevitably led to generations of

stateless people in Sabah. This generation of Filipino refugees are seen as stateless people since Malaysia is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention (Azizah, 2009).

The stateless populations of Sabah experience systematic social exclusion and increased susceptibility to exploitative practices (Allerton, 2017). These politically marginalized groups often face societal othering within Sabah's civic landscape, as resident communities engage in blame displacement by attributing escalating criminal activity, security vulnerabilities, environmental deterioration, and labor market pressures to their presence (Azizah, 2009). Securitization theory focuses on three fundamental variables: the process of framing an act as a threat, the speech act, and the socialization of the threat (Rahman & Abdullah, 2019). The emergence of the securitization concept was outlined by Wæver (1995), who elucidated security as a speech act, with securitization referred to as the speech act that highlights a particular issue as a threat (McDonald, 2008). Subsequently, Buzan & Wæver (1998) emphasized the role of society in legitimizing the speech act. The populace is said to consent that a particular issue poses a threat, thus requiring securitization by the state.

This study is one of the few that provides insights into how states deal with undocumented immigration against the backdrop of contested newly imagined nation-states like Malaysia with the inclusion of Sabah and Sarawak (albeit, Singapore was also part of Malaysia but exited in 1965), which is seen as a British imperialist construct (Anderson, 2020). It examines the effects of these complex historical and political dynamics on protecting marginalized groups, especially during health crises. By doing so, it contributes to our understanding of the intricate relationships between post-colonial state formation, migration governance, and public health management in the context of ongoing debates about national identity and citizenship in Malaysia.

Research Method

To address the research objectives, this study adopts a critical discourse analytic approach and employs content analysis to examine the securitization of irregular immigrants. This methodological orientation draws on Fairclough and Wodak (1997), who emphasize that discourse is inseparable from its context and is linked to discourses that precede, coincide with, and follow it. In this vein, Fairclough conceptualizes discourse as a social practice that shapes social identities, social relations, and systems of knowledge and meaning, while simultaneously reflecting and reproducing the assumptions through which these elements are constituted (Nielsen & Nørreklit, 2009).

The data corpus comprises online newspaper archives published between 18 March 2020 and 15 August 2021, accessed via Google. This period corresponds to the administration of former Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin (Prime Minister from 1 March 2020 to 16 August 2021), providing a coherent political context for the analysis. Consistent with Merriam's (2009) observation that qualitative research can draw on diverse documentary sources, including written, visual, digital, and physical materials, this design enables a systematic examination of the discursive construction of irregular immigrants within the Malaysian political landscape, clarifying the processes of securitization and their implications for policy formulation and public perception.

Data Collection

The advent of internet technology has revolutionized communication channels, with online platforms becoming dominant mediums for disseminating information to the public (Alivi et al., 2018). The proliferation of new media technologies, characterized by 24-hour access and borderless availability, has established these platforms as crucial sources of information.

In the Malaysian context, as of January 2021, internet users numbered 27.43 million out of a total population of 32.57 million, with internet penetration reaching 84.2 percent (Kemp, 2021). Since the 13th Malaysian General Election in 2008, new media has gained increasing credibility and trustworthiness as an information source. This evolution has enhanced the reliability of such information, leading to its acceptance as valid public data for research purposes. To achieve the objectives of this study, local online newspapers were purposively sampled. Given Malaysia's multilingual media landscape, this study focuses exclusively on English-language online newspapers. While the selection of the English language material offers biasness, translating the Malay language headlines into English will not provide full interpretation and understanding when translated into English, hence we chose to focus our efforts on the English language newspapers. This choice was predicated on the accessibility and rapidity of journalistic reporting in this medium. The data retrieval process employed five key search terms: 'illegal immigrants', 'Sabah', 'security', 'pandemic', and 'COVID-19'. This search strategy yielded seven online newspaper articles pertaining to the securitization of illegal immigrants in Sabah during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Google search engine was utilized as a comprehensive platform for accessing all relevant online newspapers. The data corpus emerged from seven online news sources: The Star, Bernama, New Straits Times, Malay Mail, Daily Express, The Rakyat Post, and Free Malaysia Today.

The study followed the seven guidelines recommended by Pytrik Schafraad, Fred Wester, and Peer Scheepers (2006). First, concepts and theories on securitization, stateless people, and irregular migration were carefully reviewed and notes were taken to establish a strong theoretical foundation. Second, relevant links on the securitization of migrants and stateless people were systematically captured and stored in a database for further reference. Third, the selection of keywords was documented as the research was operationalized to ensure consistency in data collection. Fourth, redundant keywords were eliminated to refine the search process and improve accuracy. Fifth, in order to maintain accountability, reliability, and validity in data collection, both mainstream media outlets and alternative media outlets were thoroughly examined. Sixth, all retrieved data were scrutinized, and information deemed irrelevant to the study was removed to maintain focus on the research objectives. Finally, the coding process was conducted manually by the authors to minimize the risk of misreporting and to ensure accuracy. Through this systematic keyword-based approach, the study successfully retrieved 20 articles from online newspaper archives, covering the period from March 18, 2020, to August 15, 2021. This temporal range encompasses a significant period of the pandemic response and aligns with key political developments in Malaysia. The distribution of these articles across the sampled news sources is illustrated in the table below:

Table 1. Total Data Collected from Local Online Newspaper Articles Archive

No.	Newspaper Publisher	Total Articles
1	The Star	7
2	Bernama	4
3	New Straits Times	4
4	Malay Mail	2
5	Daily Express	1
6	The Rakyat Post	1
7	Free Malaysia Today	1
Total		20

Source: processed by author

Following data collection, a rigorous content review was conducted to ensure the articles' relevance to the study's objectives. This process of qualitative content analysis involved a detailed examination of each article's substance and framing. As a result of this scrutiny, one source was excluded from the final corpus due to its insufficient focus on the securitization of irregular immigrants. Consequently, the final data set comprised 19 articles, which were subjected to in-depth analysis in the subsequent stage of the research. This refinement of the data corpus ensures a more focused and pertinent set of texts for examining the discursive strategies and rhetorical devices employed in the securitization process. The careful curation of these sources allows for a nuanced exploration of how media discourse contributes to the construction of irregular immigrants as a security issue within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia. This approach aligns with the theoretical framework of securitization theory, enabling an investigation of how language and framing in media reports potentially influence public perception and policy responses to irregular migration during a period of heightened health security concerns.

Data Analysis

This study employs thematic analysis, a versatile qualitative research method applicable across a range of epistemologies and research questions (Nowell et al., 2017). As delineated by Braun & Clarke (2006), this methodological approach involves the systematic identification, analysis, organization, description, and reporting of themes within a given data set. The process of thematic analysis encompasses two primary phases: data collection and the subsequent categorization of data into themes or conceptual categories. The collected data were systematically organized into a tabular format to facilitate theme identification. The first stage of data processing involved the identification of narrow themes related to the securitization of irregular immigrants. This micro-level analysis allowed for a granular examination of the discursive strategies employed in the securitization process. Subsequently, the data underwent a second round of filtration to identify broader, overarching themes. This macro-level analysis facilitated the recognition of larger patterns and discursive formations within the corpus, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of the securitization narrative.

This iterative process of theme refinement aligns with the constructivist approach in critical security studies, allowing for a nuanced exploration of how security threats are discursively constructed and how these constructions potentially influence policy formulation and public perception. By moving from narrow to broader thematic categories, this analysis aims to elucidate the complex interplay between media discourse, political rhetoric, and the framing of irregular immigration as a security issue within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia.

Results and Discussions

The securitization framework, encompassing the securitizing actor, securitizing act, audience, and implementation of extraordinary measures, provides a compelling lens for analyzing the politicization of migration in Sabah (Rahman & Abdullah, 2019). This approach illuminates how migration has been transformed into a security concern through discursive and institutional practices.

Table 2. Theme Categorisation

Title	Publisher	Date	Themes
MMEA combating spread of Covid-19 by illegal immigrants	New Straits Times	11-Oct-20	Punitive - Arrest
Ismail Sabri: Almost 13k undocumented migrants nabbed in Sabah so far	The Star	14-Oct-20	Punitive - Arrest
Esscom detains eight immigrants in Covid-19 prevention op	New Straits Times	5-Feb-21	Punitive - Arrest
Esscom detains 21 illegal immigrants from Indonesia	New Straits Times	30-May-21	Punitive - Arrest
MMEA nabs 5 undocumented migrants in Tawau	Bernama	28-Jul-21	Punitive - Arrest
Muhyiddin: Undocumented migrants cause of Sabah's Covid-19 situation, more detention centres to be opened	Malay Mail	3-Oct-20	Punitive - Detention
COVID-19 : Four Transit Quarantine Centres for Illegal Immigrants in Sabah - Ismail Sabri	Bernama	10-Oct-20	Punitive - Detention
Sabah wants to deport illegals as soon as possible	The Star	5-Nov-20	Punitive - Detention
Govt halts repatriation of 2k migrants in Sabah over Covid-19 risk	Bernama	5-Aug-21	Punitive - Detention
5,300 Filipino immigrants 'stranded' at detention centres in Sabah	Bernama	5-Jun-20	Punitive - Deportation
316 illegal immigrants in Sabah sent back to the Philippines	New Straits Times	7-Mar-21	Punitive - Deportation
Sabah Immigration director: 1,725 Filipino undocumented migrants deported from the state since January	Malay Mail	22-May-21	Punitive - Deportation
Covid-19 outbreak delays repatriation of illegals in Sabah, says deputy minister	Free Malaysia Today	5-Aug-21	Punitive - Deportation
Esscom activates Op Cegah Pati to curb Covid-19 spread at three Sabah east coast districts	The Star	18-Sep-20	Deterrence - Maintain Visible Presence
Sabah security forces on high alert of illegal entries from neighbouring countries	The Star	20-Sep-20	Deterrence - Border Security Operations
New regulations imposed for coastal areas of east Sabah, says Ismail Sabri	The Star	9-Oct-20	Deterrence - Border Security Operations
Harder to breach Sabah's sea border	The Star	26-Oct-20	Deterrence - Border Security Operations
No let-up in operations against illegals slipping into Covid-19-hit Tawau	The Star	27-Apr-21	Deterrence - Maintain Visible Presence
Keeping the illegals out during Covid challenge for Esscom	Daily Express	12-Jun-21	Deterrence - Border Security Operations

Source: processed by author

The 'securitizing actors' comprise a consortium of state agencies, including the National Security Council overseeing the Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM), Ministry of Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs (KPDNHEP), Royal Malaysian Customs Department, Immigration Department, Royal Malaysian Air Force (RMAF), and Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA). These entities operate under the National Task Force (NTF) to control illegal immigration through '*Operasi Benteng*'. They address perceived threats posed by undocumented foreign nationals (PATI) and associated illicit activities, including contraband smuggling, trafficking, misappropriation of subsidized goods, and fiscal evasion (Miwil, 2024). Claims that Sabah was a transit route for foreign fighters fleeing Southern Philippines after the 2018 Marawi siege further exacerbated negative perceptions towards undocumented migrants, reinforcing Sabah's vulnerability to tri-border security threats (Zam, 2018; Henkin et al., 2020).

Framing the pandemic as a security issue, with undocumented migrants portrayed as amplifying the risk, relied on alarmist language that elevated national security imperatives above global public health considerations (Kamradt-Scott & McInnes, 2012). Within this framing, securitizing responses coalesced into two broad categories: punitive measures, encompassing practices such as arrest, detention, and deportation, and deterrence measures, including intensified border enforcement, mobility restrictions, surveillance, and administrative barriers to entry and residence.

Punitive Measures

Punitive measures, as outlined by Bosworth (2017), encompass detention and deportation and are marked by their coercive character and connection to perceived offenses. Three subthemes emerge in the coverage of these practices: arrest, detention, and deportation. Media reports frequently employ terms such as "repatriation," "detain," "nabbed," and "deportation." While repatriation generally implies voluntary return, deportation denotes compulsory removal (Gratton & Merchant, 2013).

The COVID-19 period saw a marked escalation in the securitization of stateless people in Malaysia, as discourse shifted from viewing these populations chiefly as economic actors to framing them as existential threats to public health and national security. In line with securitization theory, extraordinary measures became normalized through sustained constructions of threat. Enforcement operations intensified in response to fears of virus transmission, and governmental actions prioritized perceived security over humanitarian considerations. The Sabah Immigration Department introduced a phased repatriation program in January 2020 with stringent health screening, including COVID-19 testing, yet the program remained exclusionary with limited attention to the vulnerabilities of stateless groups. Arrest operations carried out by agencies such as the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency and the Eastern Sabah Security Command reflected a militarized approach, treating stateless people as potential threats rather than as populations needing protection. Consistently, media language leaned on terms associated with criminality, including "nabbed," "detained," and "intercepted," further entrenching the criminalization of stateless status.

The detention facilities established during this period faced significant overcrowding, raising serious concerns about human rights violations and the potential for disease transmission within these confined spaces. The government's response to these challenges was to expedite deportation rather than address the underlying humanitarian concerns. This approach demonstrates how emergency measures can

become institutionalized and normalized, even when they may violate fundamental human rights principles.

Deterrence Measures

Deterrence measures focused on preventing the inflow of stateless people and penalizing those already in the state. The implementation of the Movement Control Order (MCO) significantly reduced incoming irregular immigration. Two sub-themes emerged under deterrence: maintaining visible presence and border security operations. Authorities established roadblocks and increased patrols in areas with high concentrations of stateless people. Border security operations included thorough checks at entry points, particularly the Malaysia-Indonesia shared Sebatik Island in Tawau. Sea patrols intercepted suspicious boats before they entered national waters. From January to May 2021, 104 boats carrying 347 stateless people were turned away.

The deterrence strategy implemented by Malaysian authorities represents a sophisticated approach to migration control that extends beyond traditional border enforcement. The visible presence of security forces in areas with high concentrations of stateless populations served multiple purposes: it demonstrated state capacity, deterred potential irregular crossings, and reinforced the message that stateless people were unwelcome in Malaysian territory.

The establishment of integrated operations involving multiple agencies including RMAF, RMP, MMEA, and civilian authorities created a comprehensive surveillance network that extended across land and maritime borders. This multi-agency approach reflects the securitization of migration, transforming what was traditionally viewed as an immigration issue into a national security concern requiring military-level responses.

The political context during this period was notably turbulent, which significantly influenced the securitization discourse. Tan Sri Muhyiddin came into power in February 2020 after several MPs withdrew their support from the Pakatan Harapan government led by Mahathir Mohamad, resulting in the formation of a new coalition government. This political instability created a context where strong security responses could be used to demonstrate governmental competence and legitimacy.

Despite rising COVID-19 infections in September 2020, the decision to proceed with Sabah state elections created a significant contradiction in the government's public health messaging. While stateless people were blamed for disease transmission, the government simultaneously allowed large-scale political gatherings that epidemiological evidence later showed contributed significantly to Malaysia's third wave of infections (Lim et al., 2021). This contradiction reveals how securitization discourse can be selectively applied to serve political rather than genuine security objectives.

The analysis of deterrence measures reveals the extent to which emergency powers were employed to restrict not only the movement of stateless people but also to expand state surveillance capabilities. The roadblocks and patrol operations established during the MCO created a precedent for enhanced internal surveillance that extended beyond the immediate health emergency. This demonstrates how temporary emergency measures can become institutionalized and contribute to long-term changes in state-society relationships.

Conclusions

The post Cold War era has seen a significant shift in security studies, with growing attention to nontraditional security threats. The 9/11 attacks and the subsequent Global War on Terror heightened the salience of threat narratives and security anxieties in international relations. The 2003 SARS outbreak also demonstrated how infectious diseases can disrupt global and domestic economies. Drawing on Huysmans' framework in The Politics of Insecurity, institutional and policy responses after the 2013 Lahad Datu incident have contributed to the securitization of stateless people in Sabah, particularly those from Indonesia and the southern Philippines, constructing them as potential security threats in the region.

The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 further exemplified the instrumentalization of security discourse for political purposes. Stateless people were framed as the primary vector for disease transmission, despite the fact that ill-timed state elections called by then-Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin significantly contributed to Malaysia's infection surge. This case illustrates the potential for securitization processes to be leveraged for domestic political gain. Our analysis reveals the pivotal role of news media in constructing and amplifying narratives that portray stateless people as a serious security concern.

This research highlights a critical tension in contemporary global governance: the framing of stateless individuals and their rights as a national security issue rather than a matter of global human rights and public health. We argue for a more holistic approach to addressing tri-border security challenges, one that necessitates reconfiguring resources, institutions, and policies through collaborative efforts involving state actors, academics, and media professionals. This approach aligns with the concept of human security, which emphasizes individual well-being over traditional state-centric security paradigms.

The broader geopolitical context, particularly intensifying great power competition in the South China Sea, exacerbates the vulnerability of displaced populations and increases the likelihood of their securitization. Consequently, we propose that ASEAN, particularly its Political-Security Community, should prioritize this issue as a key agenda item. This recommendation is grounded in theories of regional integration and security community building, which posit that regional organizations can play a crucial role in mitigating security dilemmas and promoting cooperative solutions to transnational challenges.

Methodologically, this study employed critical discourse analysis to examine the securitization of stateless people during the pandemic. While this approach provided valuable insights into the construction of security narratives, future research should consider a mixed-methods approach that incorporates quantitative analysis of policy changes and institutional developments. Specifically, we recommend longitudinal studies examining the evolution of security policies before and after the pandemic, with particular attention to the impacts of entities such as ESSCOM and ESSZONE.

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