
**CUSTOMS STRATEGY IN PREVENTING CROSS-COUNTRY NARCOTICS
SMUGGLING VIA SEA ROUTES: A CASE STUDY OF THE INDRAGIRI
HILIR INDONESIA-MALAYSIA BORDER (2022-2025)**

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Abstract

This study analyzes the Customs and Excise strategy in preventing cross-border narcotics smuggling through sea routes in the waters of Indragiri Hilir, Indonesia-Malaysia. Due to the high potential for narcotics smuggling utilizing sea routes and limited supervision in border areas, this study uses a neo-realist perspective, the concept of international security, non-traditional security, transnational crime, and the Pentahelix strategy concept. The research method used is descriptive qualitative with the types and sources of data namely secondary data and primary data namely interviews and field observations. The results show that the Customs and Excise strategy in preventing narcotics smuggling through sea routes is carried out through internal strategies such as mapping vulnerable routes, sea patrols, analysis and profiling of people and vessels, and strengthening information and informant networks. Then, an external strategy is carried out namely strengthening the role of local governments, businesses, academics, mass media, and also communities. However, these efforts are still not running optimally due to facing several inhibiting factors such as limited human resources, geographical conditions, limited facilities and budget constraints. This condition makes supervision unable to reach all routes that have the potential to be used for smuggling activities.

Keywords: Strategy, Non-Traditional Security, Smuggling, Narcotics

INTRODUCTION

The cross-border trafficking of narcotics has become a growing global threat, impacting security, the economy, and public health. The World Drug Report 2024, published by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, estimates that the number of drug users worldwide will reach approximately 292 million in 2022, a 20% increase compared to the previous decade. (Vienna, 2024).

Pada tahun 2023 the number has risen again to around 316 million people or around 6% of the global population aged 15-64 years (Harvey, 2025). This data shows that the drug problem is no longer limited to individual issues. It has evolved into a non-traditional, transnational security threat that requires a response and cooperation between countries.

In Southeast Asia, the threat of transnational drug trafficking is increasingly worrying due to the region's strategic and vulnerable geographic location. One region that plays a crucial role in global drug production is the Golden Triangle, the border region of Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar. This region has long been known as a center for drug production and distribution. Since the early 2000s, production in the region has shifted from opium to synthetic narcotics such as methamphetamine (Chouvy, 2014). Drug trafficking networks from the region often utilize sea routes as their primary distribution route. Perpetrators exploit the vastness of Southeast Asian waters and limited surveillance at several border points. This makes sea routes easily exploited for smuggling activities. In this distribution pattern, Malaysia often acts as a transit country before drugs enter Indonesia via sea (Yasid, 2023).

Indonesia, as one of the world's largest archipelagic nations, with over 17,000 islands and thousands of kilometers of coastline, faces complex maritime surveillance challenges. Its geographic proximity to Malaysia makes it vulnerable to cross-border drug trafficking, particularly through the coastal areas of Riau, which directly borders the Strait of Malacca (Srifauzi et al., 2022). One of the most vulnerable areas in Riau Province is Indragiri Hilir Regency, known as the "Land of a Thousand Trenches." This region boasts a 339.5-kilometer coastline and a water topography consisting of rivers, estuaries, trenches, and small islands that makes comprehensive monitoring difficult (RKPD, 2025). Geographically, districts such as Pulau Burung, Kateman, and Mandah, located in coastal areas with direct access to international waterways, are particularly vulnerable to exploitation by cross-border smuggling networks. Below is a map of Indragiri Hilir Regency and its districts.

Figure 1 Map of Indragiri Hilir Regency



Data source: (Mailiza, 2022)

These geographical conditions also contribute to the high level of narcotics smuggling activity in the Indragiri Hilir area. Based on data obtained by the author from the field, Tembilahan Customs and Excise recorded nine cases of NPP enforcement between 2022 and 2025. The highest number of enforcements occurred in 2022, with five cases, followed by a decline in 2023 and no cases in 2024. However, the number of enforcements increased again in 2025, with three cases and a significantly larger number of confiscated goods. The majority of enforcements occurred in the waters off Burung Island and Sungai Guntung, with the type of goods predominantly being methamphetamine (shabu).

In addressing this threat, the Directorate General of Customs and Excise (DJBC) plays a crucial role as the vanguard in monitoring the flow of goods, particularly along Indonesia's maritime borders. Based on Law Number 17 of 2006 concerning customs and Law Number 39 of 2007 concerning Excise, the DJBC not only functions as a collector of state revenue, but also as a law enforcement officer against illegal goods including narcotics as regulated in Law Number 35 of 2009 concerning narcotics (Republik Indonesia, 2006) (Republik Indonesia, 2007). The Directorate General of Customs and Excise (DJBC) also has a special unit, the Narcotics Interdiction Directorate, which carries out intelligence operations, maritime patrols, and uncovers smuggling networks, supported by maritime surveillance technology and a K-9 dog unit.

Although the issue of narcotics smuggling in Indonesia has been extensively studied, most research focuses on legal, social, and security aspects.

Research specifically focusing on Customs' strategies in the Indragiri Hilir waters border area remains very limited. This limitation has resulted in a suboptimal academic and practical understanding of the effectiveness and challenges of the DJBC's surveillance strategies in the field.

Based on these issues, this research is formulated into two questions: (1) What is the strategy of Tembilahan Customs and Excise in preventing cross-border narcotics smuggling through the sea lane at the Indragiri Hilir Indonesia-Malaysia border during the 2022-2025 period? (2) What are the factors hindering Tembilahan Customs and Excise in implementing its strategy to prevent narcotics smuggling through the sea lane? Scientifically, this research is expected to contribute to the development of non-traditional security studies and transnational crime in International Relations, while also providing practical recommendations for strengthening Indonesia's maritime surveillance capacity in border areas.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This study uses a neo-realist perspective as the primary foundation for explaining state responses to transnational drug smuggling. Kenneth N. Waltz states that the international system is anarchic, requiring states to rely on their own capabilities to maintain security through internal and external balancing strategies (Dugis, 2016). In this study, the strengthening of patrols, surveillance, and intelligence at Tembilahan Customs reflects internal balancing, while cooperation with Malaysia demonstrates external balancing in facing transnational threats. These threats are understood as part of non-traditional security in international security studies because they are not military in nature but have a direct impact on state stability and public security. Narcotics smuggling through sea routes also reflects the character of transnational crime, which is cross-border, organized, and exploits limited inter-state oversight, as seen in the Indragiri Hilir region. To analyze the response, this study uses a strategy concept that emphasizes the interconnectedness of goals, methods, and resources, where Tembilahan Customs optimizes patrols, technology, and human resources in prevention efforts. In addition, this study also uses a pentahelix approach to understand external strategies that involve collaboration between local governments, the private sector/business, academics, communities/society, and the mass media. This allows prevention efforts to be more integrated in facing the threat of transnational narcotics smuggling (Rendi Prayuda, Fitrisia Munir, 2022).

METHODOLOGY

This research uses a descriptive qualitative research method, namely an approach used to describe phenomena as they are without manipulating the variables being studied, with the researcher playing a direct role as the main instrument in collecting and interpreting data (Sugiyono, 2017). This approach was chosen to describe in depth the Tembilahan Customs' strategy in preventing cross-border narcotics smuggling through sea routes in the Indragiri Hilir waters of Indonesia and Malaysia. The data types and sources used consist of two types: primary data obtained directly from the field through interviews, observation, and documentation with parties directly related to the research object (Bakry, 2016). Secondary data is obtained from books, scientific journals, official reports, and other supporting documents to strengthen and complement primary data (Fiantika et al., 2022). The informants in this study consisted of the Head of the KPPBC TMP C Tembilahan Office, the Head of the Enforcement and Investigation Division (P2), the Head of the Narcotics Investigation Unit of the Indragiri Hilir Police, the Head of the National Unity and Politics Division, the Head of the Inhil National Anti-Narcotics Movement (GRANAT), the Head of the Inhil Indonesian Journalists Association (PWI), and shipping agents. Data collection techniques used included interviews, observation, documentation, and literature studies. The data analysis technique used was qualitative data analysis, namely examining all data obtained from interviews, observations, documentation, and literature studies in depth to then draw conclusions that were in accordance with the research findings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

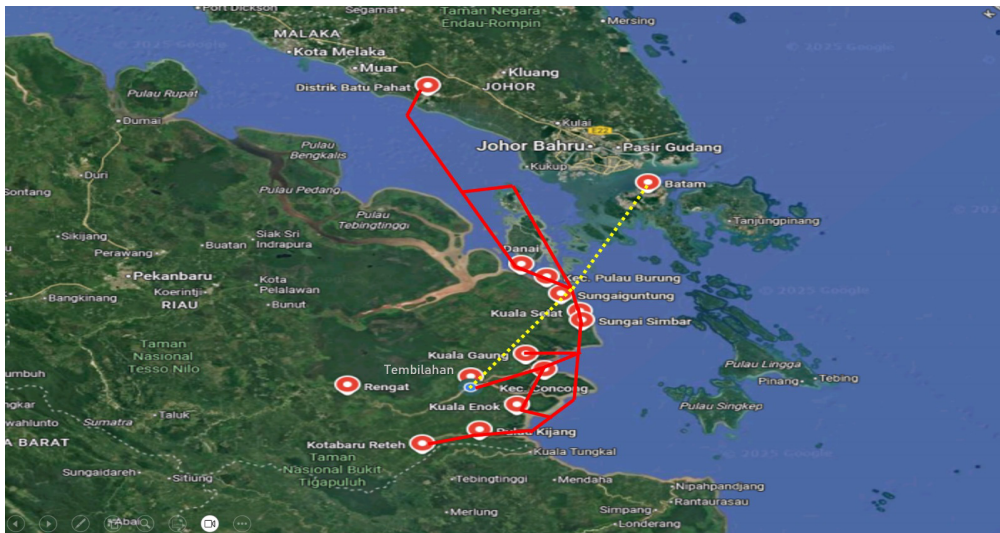
Customs Strategy in Preventing Narcotics Smuggling Through International Sea Routes

Maritime drug smuggling is a form of transnational crime that continues to grow, exploiting vast waters and limited maritime surveillance. Indragiri Hilir Regency faces high geographic vulnerability due to its coastal location with direct access to international waters, indirect borders with Malaysia and Singapore, and proximity to Batam and the Riau Islands (Firmansyah, 2025). Based on the results of an interview with the Head of the Tembilahan Customs Office, this area has the characteristics of wide and open waters, making it one of the routes prone to smuggling activities of illegal goods, including narcotics (Rosyidi, 2026). In response to these conditions, Tembilahan Customs has developed a prevention strategy encompassing two main approaches: an internal strengthening strategy and an external strengthening strategy, implemented in an integrated and sustainable manner. This aligns with the neo-realist view that states must be able to build internal strength before relying on cooperation with others, given that the

anarchic nature of the international system demands that each actor prioritize independence in maintaining the security of its territory (Rendi Prayuda, 2020).

Based on the results of an interview with the Head of the Enforcement and Investigation Section of Tembilahan Customs, the internal strategy implemented includes four interrelated aspects, namely mapping vulnerable routes, sea patrols, analysis and profiling, as well as strengthening information and informant networks (Fahruli, 2026). Mapping of vulnerable routes is carried out by identifying points in waters with high potential as entry routes for narcotics from abroad. Based on mapping conducted by Tembilahan Customs, narcotics smuggling into Indragiri Hilir originates from Batu Pahat District, Malaysia and Batam through two route patterns: the direct route entering through the Danai River, Pulau Burung District, then moving through the Guntung River, Kuala Selat, Tembilahan, to Kotabaru Reteh for further distribution to major cities. Then the indirect route first stops at Tanjung Balai Karimun or Batam before heading to Indragiri Hilir. The method used is to hide narcotics in Chinese Tea packaging in the section of coconut-carrying merchant ships returning empty with crew members as couriers. As well as other methods using ship passengers from Batam as couriers, smuggling disguised among used clothing cargo, and the body strapping method, namely by attaching narcotics directly to the perpetrator's body using duct tape. Through this mapping, monitoring can be focused on points with high potential for vulnerability so that resource use can be carried out more effectively.

Figure 2 Mapping of Routes Vulnerable to Narcotics Smuggling via Sea Routes in Indragiri Hilir Regency



Data Source: Tembilahan Customs, 2026

The maritime patrol strategy is directed primarily at vessels originating from Malaysia as well as vessels from Batam and the Riau Islands, which are free trade areas. The Tembilahan Customs patrol fleet is operated in an integrated manner with Batam Customs and Tanjung Balai Karimun Customs in one water corridor, in line with the research findings of Rahmad Gunawan, Agus Adriyanto, and Anshori Zaini in the journal *Synergy of Maritime Agencies in the Framework of Combating Drug Smuggling on the East Coast of North Sumatra* (2020) that coordination of joint patrols between maritime agencies is an indispensable step in narrowing the gap for narcotics smuggling through the route (Gunawan et al., 2020). The Patma Berani (Joint Patrol to Eradicate the Narcotics Chain) program, a joint cross-agency operation, successfully confiscated a total of 11.3 kilograms of crystal methamphetamine and 35 ecstasy pills, with the highest achievement occurring in 2025. In addition to patrols, the Customs fleet also utilizes the K-9 unit (sniffer dogs) from the Riau Customs Regional Office, which is capable of detecting narcotics in hidden spaces within ships that cannot be reached by detection equipment. The strategy of analyzing and profiling people and ships is implemented as an early detection mechanism by analyzing the history and characteristics of incoming ships, including monitoring crew members and passengers who exhibit unusual behavior or suspicious cross-border track records through manifest data that must be reported before the ship docks. An equally important strategy is strengthening the informant network. The Head of the Enforcement and Investigation Section of Tembilahan Customs emphasized that the success of each action will not be realized without informants (Fahruli, 2026). This network was built from the community and through information exchange with the Indragiri Hilir Police and the National Police Criminal Investigation Agency (Bareskrim Polri), which combined Customs and Excise ship manifest data with police intelligence information before joint enforcement actions. The author believes that these four internal strategies are mutually supportive. Route mapping determines the direction of patrols. Patrols collect field data. Profiling processes the data into alert indicators. Informants accelerate the process, leading to enforcement actions.

In addition to internal strategies, Tembilahan Customs and Excise also implements an external strengthening strategy through the Pentahelix Integration Model approach developed by Rendi Prayuda, Fitrisia Munir, and Rio Sundari (2022). The Head of the Tembilahan Customs and Excise Office emphasized that narcotics prevention will not be successful if it is solely the responsibility of a single agency, given the dynamic and adaptive nature of transnational smuggling networks (Rosyidi, 2026). Within the Pentahelix framework, the Regional Government acts as a regulator through the formation of an integrated team for P4GN (Prevention, Eradication, Abuse and Illicit Trafficking of Narcotics), and Narcotics Precursors, secondly the preparation of a regional action plan that

serves as a guideline for the implementation of narcotics prevention and handling at the district level, Third, the formation of regional regulations on P4GN as a legal basis for policy implementation, Fourth, reporting and reforming the implementation of PGN and PN so that the implemented policies can be evaluated and improved continuously. In addition, the regional government has the authority to coordinate through the Perkopimda (Regional Leadership Coordination Meeting) forum which serves as a forum for facilitating various developments in the regional situation, including issues of eradication and abuse of narcotics in Indragiri Hilir Regency. On the other hand, there are several obstacles faced by the Indragiri Hilir regional government in carrying out its regulatory role optimally. Based on interviews with Kesbangpol, the formation of the P4GN Regional Regulation is still in the process of implementation and has not been fully realized because it requires approval from the government above it. Furthermore, the District Narcotics Agency (BNK) has not yet been established in Indragiri Hilir Regency, so institutional coordination in handling narcotics at the regional level is still not optimal. This situation indicates that although the facilities and infrastructure have been prepared, the authority of the local government is still limited by hierarchical bureaucratic mechanisms, resulting in the process of developing the necessary regulatory instruments being slower than expected (Suprianto, 2026).

Businesses, particularly shipping agents, act as enablers by monitoring crew activities and reporting suspicious activity to Customs, using information from the port environment as the starting point for the intelligence process. Although this collaboration remains informal and reactive (Octa, 2026). Academics act as conceptors, providing scientific analysis, research-based recommendations, and conceptual standards that serve as the basis for formulating more effective and structured strategies. Academics play a role in standardization, preparing concepts and strategies to address non-military security threats, and conducting outreach and advocacy activities. Several scientific studies have made significant conceptual contributions to understanding the phenomenon of narcotics smuggling in Riau waters and the Indonesia-Malaysia border. Research by Rendi Prayuda, Cifebrima Suyastri, and Dhani Akbar (2020) in the *Andalas Journal of International Studies* identified that narcotics smuggling across the Riau-Malaysia border is carried out via sea routes, utilizing fishermen as couriers and using night ports. They concluded that synergy between law enforcement officers and coastal communities is needed to break the chain of smuggling networks. This research directly aligns with conditions found in the waters of Indragiri Hilir, where the modus operandi of coconut-carrying vessels and crew members as couriers is the most common pattern (Prayuda et al., 2020). The mass media, in this case the Indonesian Journalists

Association (PWI) of Indragiri Hilir, acts as an expender by publicizing every action taken to create a deterrent effect. This publication raises public awareness of the dangers of narcotics and smuggling activities. Information conveyed by the media also helps shape public opinion that supports law enforcement efforts. Furthermore, the media serves as an initial source of information for the Customs and Excise intelligence team in identifying potential threats. This information is then analyzed and used as supporting material in the early detection process and decision-making (Julor, 2026). Communities, particularly the anti-narcotics community, the National Anti-Narcotics Movement, play a role as an accelerator through direct outreach activities with communities in remote areas and schools regarding the dangers and impacts of narcotics on the younger generation. This community acts as an activist that reaches segments of society that cannot be reached directly and routinely by law enforcement. Through direct engagement with the community, GRANAT is able to build legal awareness within the community so that the community has a better understanding of the dangers of narcotics and the importance of reporting suspicious activity to the authorities (Budiansyah, 2026). The author believes that a pentahelix-based external strategy demonstrates an awareness that transnational threats cannot be addressed sectorally. However, implementation on the ground still requires strengthening more formal and structured coordination mechanisms between the actors involved.

Inhibiting Factors in Preventing Narcotics Smuggling Through International Sea Routes

The implementation of drug smuggling prevention strategies in the Indragiri Hilir waters has not been optimal due to four interrelated inhibiting factors. Data from the National Narcotics Agency shows that approximately 80% of narcotics smuggled from abroad enters via sea routes (Victoria, 2024). This situation demands a much greater surveillance capacity than currently available. The first inhibiting factor is limited human resources. Based on an interview with the Head of the Enforcement and Investigation Section of Tembilahan Customs, the number of personnel is still not commensurate with the area that must be covered, so that patrol and monitoring activities can only be focused on the most vulnerable points. The second factor is the challenge of geographical conditions, tidal conditions cause a number of routes to become shallow so that patrol boats cannot pass, then the potential for resistance. Second, the potential for resistance is higher if officers try to enter these routes, considering that the area has already been controlled by smugglers, as a result, surveillance can only be carried out on the main routes, while rat routes scattered across various water points are actually overlooked. This condition is reinforced by some areas in Indragiri Hilir having no land access at all, so the only way to reach the area is by water. The author assesses that the conditions of these two factors together create a gap between

the complexity of the geographical conditions of the surveillance area and the capacity of available resources, so that adjusting the surveillance pattern through cooperation with coastal communities is the most realistic approach to fill this gap. The third inhibiting factor is limited means of transportation. The Head of the Narcotics Research Unit of the Indragiri Hilir Police emphasized that the Police have limitations regarding sea transportation so that in every action in the waters the Police collaborate with Tembilahan Customs (Efendi, 2026).

The limited fleet of its own makes it impossible for the Police to operate independently in Indonesian waters. Intelligence information about suspicious movements often emerges outside the planned joint operation schedule. This situation limits officers' ability to immediately conduct pursuits or conduct field investigations. In narcotics arrest operations, speed of action and the ability to act independently are crucial for the success of the operation before the perpetrators escape or move evidence to another location. This problem was also identified in research by Anfadi (2025). These findings demonstrate that the problem of limited maritime transportation for police officers in border areas is not a problem unique to certain areas, but a persistent obstacle at various surveillance points in Indonesian waters. Facts regarding the implementation of patrol boat operations indicate that patrol effectiveness is greatly influenced by the availability of an adequate fleet. When there is a gap between operational needs and available facilities, the reach and intensity of surveillance that should be achieved are reduced (Anfadi, 2025). The fourth factor is the limited operational budget, which impacts various aspects of oversight. The cost of maritime patrols in the Indragiri Hilir region is relatively high due to the geographical conditions that require coverage to hard-to-reach areas. On the other hand, the national budget efficiency policy, enacted through Presidential Instruction No. 1 of 2025, also impacts the allocation of operational spending for law enforcement officers. (Perpajakan DDTC, 2025). The Head of the Indragiri Hilir Police Narcotics Investigation Unit stated that limited funding for maritime enforcement is a real obstacle, as operational costs in the waters are much higher than on land. The author believes that these four inhibiting factors are interrelated and mutually reinforcing. Limited human resources prevent patrols from reaching all areas, geographical conditions make many areas difficult to monitor, and limited facilities hamper the speed of response in the field. Budgetary constraints limit support for all operational activities. These conditions indicate that efforts to prevent drug smuggling in Indragiri Hilir require systemic and integrated strengthening.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research results, it can be concluded that the Tembilahan Customs and Excise's strategy to prevent cross-border narcotics smuggling

through maritime routes in the Indonesian-Malaysian waters of Indragiri Hilir is part of the state's efforts to respond to non-traditional transnational security threats. The strategy implemented involves two components: internal strengthening and external strengthening. Internally, this strategy includes mapping vulnerable smuggling routes, conducting maritime patrols, analyzing and profiling vessels and individuals, and strengthening information and informant networks. Externally, it is implemented through cross-sector synergy that integrates the five main actors within the Pentahelix framework: local governments, businesses such as shipping agents, communities such as GRANAT, academics, and the mass media as disseminators of information and public education.

The research results indicate that the implementation of the narcotics smuggling prevention strategy in the Indragiri Hilir waters has not been optimal. Four interrelated inhibiting factors collectively limit the effectiveness of supervision: limited human resources (HR), limited geographical conditions, limited maritime transportation facilities, and limited operational budgets. These four factors limit the authorities' ability to patrol and monitor vast waters. This situation means that surveillance cannot reach all potential routes used for smuggling activities.

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