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The Sovereignty and Kinship Challenge: Addressing Indonesia-Timor Leste Border Security in the Post-Conflict Era

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Abstract

Border security in post-conflict regions faces fundamental paradoxes between state sovereignty and socio-cultural realities. This study examines the Indonesia-Timor Leste border security in Belu Regency through the qualitative method using a case study design. The data were obtained from literature reviews, interviews with 11 key informants from security institutions, and secondary sources that are relevant to the study. Findings reveal three simultaneous border typologies—antecedent, subsequent, and superimposed boundaries—creating structural complexities beyond technical solutions. Kinship networks function as double-edged swords: they provide social capital for reconciliation, yet vulnerabilities are exploited for transnational crime when security policies overlook the social legitimacy of these networks. Institutional coordination remains reactive-informal, relying on personal relationships rather than systematic integration. The study extends Portes' social capital theory by demonstrating how state policies themselves transform social capital into security liabilities. Three practical recommendations emerge: reactivating biometric-based Border Crossing Permits with guaranteed accessibility, developing integrated Border Management Systems connecting six agencies, and institutionalizing community-based border management. Comparative lessons from Indonesia-Malaysia borders confirm that effective security requires balancing territorial sovereignty with legitimate community needs through formal coordination platforms and soft border approaches.

Keywords: post-conflict borders, border typology, social capital, institutional coordination, Indonesia-Timor Leste, transnational crime

INTRODUCTION

State borders in the post-conflict era present a fundamental paradox. On one hand, political boundaries necessitate the enforcement of sovereignty and strict security controls; on the other hand, the socio-cultural realities of society allow for mobility and cross-border interactions that cannot be completely restricted by lines on a map. This phenomenon is not new in international border studies. The experience of the Northern Ireland-Republic of Ireland border after the 1998 Good Friday Agreement illustrates that reconciling state security demands with local communities' mobility needs requires a more complex approach than simply deploying guard posts and security personnel (O'Dowd, 2002). Similarly, Bosnia-Herzegovina's borders with

Serbia and Croatia, after the Bosnian War, demonstrate that ethnic ties and cross-border kinship can serve as both assets for reconciliation and sources of security vulnerability if not managed carefully (Newman, 2006).

Indonesia's border with the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste (DRTL) is another post-conflict border case that offers unique complexities for study. This border stretches 268.8 km in East Nusa Tenggara Province and is a result of a long and turbulent decolonization process. It reflects the colonial division created by the Dutch East Indies and Portuguese Timor through the Treaty of Lisbon of 1859 and the Hague Convention of 1913. The border underwent further changes during the controversial annexation of East Timor by Indonesia from 1976 to 1999, and it was ultimately re-established after East Timor's independence in 2002, leaving lasting traces of conflict on both sides (Simarmata et al., 2019). Over two decades after Timor-Leste's independence, portions of the border remain undelimited, including disputed areas in the Oekusi enclave and several neutral zones, making this region a natural laboratory for understanding dynamic border security issues in post-conflict contexts (Kase et al., 2018).

Studies on the management of the Indonesia-Timor Leste border in the past two decades have developed rapidly. However, the literature often emphasizes hard security aspects, such as troop deployments, infrastructure development, and the management of transnational crimes, including smuggling and human trafficking (Yahya et al., 2024; Gunawan et al., 2024). While these aspects are important, they overlook the socio-cultural dimensions crucial for effective border security. Previous studies have not thoroughly examined how the typology of colonial borders inherited by Indonesia and East Timor creates a structural dilemma for security. Colonial powers established these boundaries without considering settlement patterns, customary land ownership, and prior and superimposed boundaries, which now conflict with social realities that have evolved over centuries (Hartshorne, 1951; Newman, 2006).

Moreover, existing literature has not comprehensively analyzed how cross-border kinship ties, which ideally serve as social capital for fostering peace and cooperation, can also be double-edged swords in the context of border security. Social capital theory, as developed by Putnam (2000) and Coleman (1988), generally views social networks and norms of trust as positive assets for community cohesion and economic development. However, Portes (1998) highlights the dark side of social capital, noting that strong social networks can be misused to undermine broader collective interests, including facilitating transnational crime. In the context of the RI-DRTL border, familial, linguistic, and cultural ties between communities on both sides create informal mobility networks that are difficult for security forces to control. These networks are also susceptible to being exploited by criminals for smuggling illegal goods, undertaking undocumented border crossings, and facilitating undetected deportations (Raharjo & Pristiyanto, 2021; Palmer & Carvalho, 2021).

Finally, the literature has not adequately examined patterns of institutional coordination in border security. Managing the Indonesia-Timor Leste border involves multiple institutions with varying mandates and organizational cultures, including the Indonesian National Army (TNI), the National Police (Polri), the State Intelligence Agency (BIN), the Ministry of Law and Human Rights (Immigration), the Ministry of Finance (Customs), and the National Border Management Agency (BNPP). Multi-level governance theory emphasizes the importance of horizontal coordination among institutions and vertical coordination between central and local governments for addressing complex border issues (O'Dowd, 2002; Villanueva et al., 2022; Syafe'i et al., 2020). However, to date, there has been no in-depth study examining whether inter-agency coordination at the RI-DRTL border is systematic and effective or merely reactive and informal. This question is significant because the effectiveness of border security relies heavily on the integration of information, the speed of response, and the consistency of inter-agency policies (Villanueva et al., 2022).

To address this gap in the literature, this study poses three research questions as follows:

1. How does the typology of colonial borders—specifically antecedent, subsequent, and superimposed boundaries—affect the complexity of securing the RI-DRTL border?

2. How can cross-border kinship bonds be both beneficial and detrimental in terms of security, serving as social capital for peace while also presenting vulnerabilities that can be exploited by transnational crime?
3. Is the coordination among institutions such as the TNI, Polri, BIN, Immigration, and Customs systematic and planned or simply reactive and informal?

This study employs the qualitative method using a case study design in order to explore the complexity of securing the Indonesia-Timor Leste border from a socio-cultural and institutional perspective. Case studies were chosen because they allow for an in-depth analysis of contemporary phenomena in real-life contexts, particularly when the boundaries between phenomena and context cannot be strictly separated (Yin, 2018). This approach is relevant to understanding the paradox of border security involving the complex interactions between colonial legacies, cross-border kinship ties, and the dynamics of inter-agency coordination.

The authors utilize two primary data collection techniques: semi-structured in-depth interviews and document analysis. Face-to-face interviews, lasting 60-90 minutes, followed a protocol centered on border typology and colonial legacy, cross-border kinship ties, and institutional coordination patterns. This flexible approach allowed for exploration of emerging issues while focusing on the research questions (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). With consent, all interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Additionally, document analysis enriched the interview data by reviewing policy documents, border regulations, and bilateral agreements, using a critical hermeneutic approach to understand the historical and political contexts shaping current border security practices.

The qualitative data were analysed using a six-stage thematic analysis method by Nowell et al. (2017). The stages include: (1) familiarization through repeated readings of transcripts; (2) initial coding to identify relevant meanings; (3) theme search by grouping similar codes; (4) theme review for coherence and differentiation; (5) defining and naming the themes; and (6) report production with citations and analysis. To ensure validity, the study employed source triangulation by comparing data from various informants and institutions (Denzin, 1978), conducted member checking to confirm findings, and practiced reflexivity by documenting the researcher's assumptions that could influence data interpretation.

The research was carried out in the border area of Belu Regency, East Nusa Tenggara Province, which is directly adjacent to Bobonaro District, Democratic Republic of Timor Leste. The election of the Belu Regency was carried out purposively with three main considerations. First, this region has four official cross-border posts (PLBN Motaain, Motamasin, Wini, and Napan), which makes it the zone with the highest intensity of cross-border mobility on the RI-DRTL border. Second, Belu Regency faces complex cases of territorial disputes, especially related to the Oekusi enclave, which is an example of *a superimposed boundary*. Third, the region has the characteristics of very strong kinship ties between communities on both sides of the border, which makes it an ideal location to examine the paradox of sovereignty and kinship. Field data collection was conducted in July with one additional interview in September 2025.

The research informants were determined using *purposive sampling* techniques with criteria based on competence and experience (*criterion-based selection*). The main criteria include: (1) direct involvement in border security operations for at least one year; (2) have in-depth knowledge of the socio-cultural dynamics of border communities or institutional coordination issues; and (3) willing to provide information publicly with a guarantee of identity confidentiality. Based on these criteria, the study involved eleven key informants representing six border security institutions and one informant from border communities, namely: the TNI AD Pamtas Task Force (2 people), the Belu Resort Police (2 people), the State Intelligence Agency (1 person), the Indonesian National Army Navy (2 people), the Immigration Office (1 person), Customs (1 person), the PLBN Manager (1 person), and border community residents (1 person). The diversification of informant

institutions is intended to gain a comprehensive understanding from various institutional perspectives, while the inclusion of informants from border communities is intended to obtain *an emic* perspective (from within) on the dynamics of smuggling and cross-border mobility.

The complete categories of research informants are presented in Table 1. The distribution of informants reflects the diversity of institutions involved in border security, with representation from the TNI (36%), civil institutions such as Immigration, Customs, and BNPP (27%), the National Police and BIN (27%), and border communities (9%). The experience of informants from the security forces in the border areas varies between 6 months and 6 years, with an average tenure of 3.2 years, while informants from border communities have 26 years of experience living in the region. This diversity of backgrounds and experiences allows the research to capture a comprehensive perspective on the dynamics of border security from the perspective of *hard security*, intelligence, border administration, and the life experiences of people who are directly affected by security policies.

Table 1. Research Informant Profile

Code	Informant Categories	Sector	Experience in the Border Region
INF-01	Senior Security Officer	Security	<1 year
INF-02	Security Officer	Security	<1 year
INF-03	Senior Security Officer	Security	<1 year
INF-04	Security Officer	Security	3-5 years
INF-05	Intelligence Officers	Intelligence	1-3 years
INF-06	Security Officer	Security	3-5 years
INF-07	Security Officer	Security	3-5 years
INF-08	Government Officials	Government	1-3 years
INF-09	Government Officials	Government	3-5 years
INF-10	Government Officials	Government	5-7 years
INF-11	Border Citizens	Community	>20 years old

Source: Primary Data (2025)

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Border Typology Theory

The study of border typology has undergone significant evolution since the seminal work of Hartshorne (1951), who classified borders based on temporal relationships with the development of cultural landscapes. Hartshorne identifies three main categories that remain relevant in contemporary analysis. *Antecedent boundaries* refer to the boundary lines established before the area was inhabited by a significant population or developed into an established cultural landscape. This type of border generally follows natural geographical features, such as mountains or rivers, drawn when the area is still relatively empty of human settlements. The border between the United States and Canada in the western region is a classic example, where a parallel line of 49° N was established before a great wave of migration and settlement construction (Newman, 2006).

The second category, *subsequent boundaries*, develops after the cultural landscape is formed and reflects existing patterns of settlement, ethnic distribution, or socio-economic realities. This type of border is generally the result of bilateral negotiations that take into account the existence of local communities, customary land ownership, and traditional trade routes. Recent research shows that subsequent boundaries tend to be more

stable and accepted by local communities because they accommodate ground realities (Palmer & Carvalho, 2021). However, the process of delimiting subsequent boundaries is often complex and time-consuming, involving complex compromises between various stakeholders. The third category, *superimposed boundaries*, is a boundary line imposed by external forces without considering existing cultural, ethnic, or geographical patterns.

Contemporary studies of African borders show that the superimposed colonial boundaries have created long-term consequences that are still felt today. Research by Paine et al. (2024) in *the American Political Science Review* reveals that the division of colonial territories in Africa is not entirely arbitrary, but rather reflects a systematic process influenced by the existence of precolonial states and certain geographical considerations. These findings challenge conventional views of Africa's "bad borders" and provide new nuances in understanding the colonial legacy. A parallel study by Müller-Crepon et al. (2025) in *the American Journal of Political Science* shows how ethnic geography and nationalism have shaped European borders since the 19th century, with ethnic boundaries increasing the conditional probability that two locations separated by those boundaries will become, or have become, separated by state borders.

In the context of post-conflict borders such as Indonesia-Timor Leste, these three categories often overlap. The Lisbon Line of 1859 and the Hague Convention of 1913 were essentially antecedent boundaries drawn by colonial powers (the Netherlands and Portugal) without in-depth consultation with the local population. However, as time went by and settlement developed, these borders took on subsequent characteristics as the people on both sides developed adaptations to the line. At the same time, these borders retain a superimposed character because they do not fully accommodate the pre-existing ethnic, linguistic, and kinship unity (Simarmata et al., 2019).

Social Capital and Border Security

The concept of social capital has become one of the most influential theoretical frameworks in contemporary social science since it was popularized by the work of Putnam (2000) and Coleman (1988). Social capital refers to a network of social relationships, mutual norms, and trust that facilitates coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit. In the context of economic development and social cohesion, social capital is generally seen as a positive asset that increases collective efficiency and reduces transaction costs (Putnam, 2000). However, the critical literature on social capital has identified what Portes (1998) calls the "dark side of social capital"—how strong social networks can produce negative consequences. In a seminal article in the *Annual Review of Sociology*, Portes identified four potential negative consequences of social capital. Closed networks can exclude outsiders and limit access to opportunities. Strong social bonds can create excessive demands on successful group members. Group norms can limit individual freedom and innovation. In border security studies, social networks can be exploited for illegal purposes or harm the broader public interest.

In the context of borders, social capital has ambiguous implications for security. On the one hand, cross-border kinship ties can facilitate post-conflict reconciliation, promote informal trade that provides livelihoods for marginalized communities, and create networks of trust that reduce tensions. A study of the Indonesia-Timor Leste border by Palmer & Carvalho (2021) shows how identity politics and cross-border kinship bonds create a complex sense of belonging, in which border communities identify themselves within frameworks that transcend nation-state boundaries.

On the other hand, the same social ties can be security vulnerabilities. Kinship and trust networks can be exploited by transnational criminals to facilitate smuggling, human trafficking, or illegal movement across borders. Research on other borders shows a similar pattern. In the context of the U.S.-Mexico border, family and community networks have been leveraged by criminal organizations for trafficking operations. On the

borders of Eastern Europe, ethnic and linguistic ties are used to facilitate a shadow economy that avoids state control.

Social capital analysis at the border becomes more complex because the dividing line between "legal" and "illegal" activities is often blurred from the perspective of local communities. Practices that are considered illegal by the state, such as undocumented cross-border trade or *unofficial crossing points*, may be seen as legitimate habits or even survival needs by border communities that have practiced them for generations (Raharjo & Pristiyanto, 2021). This creates a dilemma for security policymakers about how to manage cross-border mobility without alienating local communities or damaging their livelihoods.

Institutional Coordination in Border Management

Modern border management involves multiple agencies, each with different mandates, organizational cultures, and operational procedures. The theory of multi-level governance, developed by European scholars, highlights the necessity of horizontal coordination between institutions and vertical coordination across various levels of government to address complex issues that extend beyond a single jurisdiction. In "New Borders for a Changing Europe," O'Dowd (2004) argues that Europe's borders represent not merely territorial dividing lines but also areas where different levels of governance interact and negotiate. In this border context, coordination is required among military, police, immigration, customs, intelligence, and health authorities, with local governments and non-state actors often involved.

The concept of Integrated Border Management (IBM) has become the dominant model in international policy discussions about border management. This model emphasizes three interrelated levels of coordination: intra-service cooperation, which refers to internal coordination within a single institution to ensure policy consistency from the central level to field operations; inter-agency cooperation, which involves collaboration between different agencies responsible for various aspects of border management; and international cooperation, which includes bilateral or multilateral agreements between neighbouring countries for joint border management (IOM, 2024).

Recent studies on IBM implementation highlight significant challenges in achieving effective coordination. Wong Villanueva et al. (2022) emphasize that successful governance in cross-border contexts depends on factors like interpersonal trust, institutional incentives, and technical capacity, rather than just formal coordination mechanisms. They suggest evaluating cross-border governance based on outcomes such as integration and cooperation. The European Union's experience with European Integrated Border Management (EIBM) underscores the need for integrated information systems and precise coordination between Frontex and national authorities. However, challenges remain, including national sovereignty, varying technical capabilities among member states, and conflicts between security measures and human rights.

Coordination challenges are particularly significant in developing countries and post-conflict regions. The Integrated Border Stability Mechanism (IBSM), launched in West Africa in 2023, highlights the necessity for partnerships among governments, civil society, and international donors to tackle transnational threats (UNODC, 2023). There is a distinction between formal coordination, involving established structures and protocols, and informal coordination, which relies on personal relationships and situational problem-solving. Research shows that in developing countries, informal coordination can often be more effective for day-to-day issues than rigid formal mechanisms (Raharjo & Pristiyanto, 2021).

However, dependency on informal coordination can lead to vulnerabilities, as it may become unsustainable during personnel turnover and lacks clear accountability. An often-overlooked aspect in the literature is how post-conflict contexts influence coordination dynamics at newly formed borders. For instance, at the Indonesia-Timor Leste border, coordination faces not only technical challenges but also psychological and political hurdles. Security personnel from both countries may have a history of conflict, creating barriers to

trust. Additionally, the institutional system may still be fragile or in development, while local populations may hold complex loyalties and ambivalent views towards state authority (Palmer & Carvalho, 2021).

Colonial Heritage and Border Typology: Between the Lines on the Map and the Field Reality

The complexity of securing the Indonesia-Timor Leste border cannot be separated from the colonial historical heritage that forms the unique characteristics of the border. Using the Hartshorne (1936) border typology framework, the RI- DRTL border can be understood as a complex combination of three types of overlapping boundaries, namely: *antecedent boundary*, *subsequent boundary*, and *superimposed boundary*. These three characteristics create a fundamental paradox in border security, where the efforts to enforce state sovereignty clash with geographical, social, and historical realities that are not fully accommodated by political lines on the map.

Antecedent Boundary: The Boundary Line as a Colonial Heritage

The Indonesia-Timor Leste border is basically an *antecedent boundary* that was drawn long before the region developed intensively in the sense of the modern nation-state. This boundary line was established through the Treaty of Lisbon of 1859 between the Dutch East Indies and the Portuguese. This was made clear in the 1913 Hague Convention, which divided the island of Timor based on European colonial interests without in-depth consultation with local communities (Simarmata et al., 2019).

In strengthening the statement on the concept, one of the government officials (INF-10). Motaain explained that the colonial boundary line (border) was drawn on the map based on the division of power between the Netherlands and Portugal, with little consideration for the socio-cultural realities of the people who had lived in the region for centuries. These *antecedent characteristics* create a fundamental problem, namely: the boundaries that exist today do not reflect the patterns of settlement, land use, or social ties of border communities.

Furthermore, the process of determining colonial boundaries that is not precise leaves a number of segments that have not been clearly delineated until now. In line with this explanation, the Lantamal Operations Assistant (INF-06) explained that there are still gray zones along the border, especially in the Oekusi sector, where the boundary line on the map is not fully clear in its implementation on the ground. This ambiguity becomes a potential source of conflict and complicates security operations as field officers often do not have a definite reference to the boundaries of their jurisdiction.

Subsequent Boundary: Society's Adaptation to the Boundary Line

The Indonesia-Timor Leste border, although the boundary line is *antecedent*, over time, the border community has developed an adaptation to the existence of the line by giving the characteristics of the *subsequent boundary* to this border. A senior security official (INF-03) explained that border communities have created a pattern of life that adapts to the existence of the border, but this adaptation is not always in line with the rigid concept of state sovereignty". This practice includes the development of traditional pathways for access to farmland, water sources, and places of worship located on the other side of the border.

This *subsequent boundary phenomenon* creates a dilemma for the security forces. On the one hand, the state demanded the enforcement of strict boundary lines in accordance with the principle of Westphalian sovereignty. On the other hand, overly rigid enforcement ignores the reality that border communities have developed livelihood systems that depend on cross-border mobility. An informant from the intelligence sector described this situation by saying, "Families are separated by the boundary line, customary land is divided, traditional routes for trade and water access are cut off by lines on the map. Technically, they are breaking the law when crossing without documents, but from their perspective, they are simply continuing a practice that their ancestors have been doing for generations" (INF-05).

Superimposed Boundary: The Case of Oekusi as a Geographical Anomaly

The typological complexity of the RI- DRTL border is most evident in the case of Oekusi, an enclave of Timor-Leste that is separated from the main territory of the country and surrounded by Indonesian territory. Oekusi serves as a classic example of a superimposed boundary—a boundary established without regard for the geographical and ecological unity of the area. An in-depth explanation of the complexities surrounding Oekusi was provided by the Lantamal Intelligence Assistant. The situation in Oekusi is highly complicated, particularly concerning a disputed area around Naktuka, where the interpretation of the river's boundary line remains contested. According to Indonesia, major rivers serve as boundaries, indicating that the area north of the river belongs to Indonesia. However, Timor-Leste asserts that the entire watershed is part of its territory because it is a vital water source for Oekusi. This area is particularly fertile due to its proximity to the river, making it contentious for both parties (INF-07, interview July 22, 2025).

The Naktuka case exemplifies how superimposed boundaries can give rise to conflicts stemming from the mismatch between political borders and ecological and economic realities. Additionally, this situation is complicated by the presence of residents holding dual ID cards from both Indonesia and Timor-Leste, reflecting the ambiguity of the region's status. According to the Lantamal Operations Assistant, residents in Naktuka utilize Indonesian KTP (Identification Cards) for improved access to health and education services and Timor-Leste KTP for other purposes.

Politically, the majority of Naktuka's population favors joining Indonesia; however, the Timor-Leste government opposes this because it would result in the loss of valuable fertile land (INF-06, interview July 22, 2025). An informant from Lantamal noted that President Xanana Gusmão once proposed a boundary agreement to Jakarta, suggesting the use of a large river as a boundary—an option that would effectively benefit Indonesia. This proposal, however, was emphatically rejected by the opposition party, Fretilin, which accused Xanana of "wanting to sell the country to Indonesia" (INF-06, interview July 22, 2025). The internal political dynamics of Timor-Leste demonstrate that resolving border disputes involves not only technical and geographical considerations but is also closely tied to identity politics and post-independence nationalism.

Kinship as a Double-Edged Sword: Between Social Capital and Security Vulnerabilities

The results of the study show that if the colonial legacy shapes the structural complexity of the RI-DRTL border, then the cross-border kinship ties create an operational paradox that is no less challenging for border security. Communities on both sides of the border have very strong socio-cultural ties, encompassing a common language, traditional kinship systems, as well as the practice of cross-border marriage that has been going on for centuries. These ties, within the framework of social capital theory, should be an asset for building cooperation and peace in post-conflict areas (Putnam, 2000). However, the findings of this study suggest that kinship bonds are actually a *double-edged sword*: on the one hand, they facilitate social reconciliation, but on the other hand, they create a security vulnerability that is exploited for transnational crime. Furthermore, inflexible border security policies ignore these socio-cultural realities, creating tensions between border communities and the state apparatus.

The Dimension of Cross-Border Kinship: Socio-Cultural Unity Cut by Political Lines

The most basic characteristic of the RI-DRTL border is that the country's political line separates societies that are socio-culturally a single entity. The Head of the Belu Resort Police Intelligence Unit explained this phenomenon by saying that people on the border have very strong kinship ties. In fact, many are from one tribe. Their tribal home is in Timor-Leste, but they live in Indonesia. Some of them live in Atambua; their father is next *door*, sometimes the wife is here while the husband is there (INF-04).

This phenomenon is not just a distant kinship, but concerns a nuclear family separated by state borders. Informants from the intelligence sector provide historical context that explains why these bonds are so strong. From the beginning, Indonesia and Timor-Leste were one community. When the boundary line was drawn by the colonials, no one asked the people if they wanted to be separated. As a result, until now, there are still many who have families on both sides of the border, some even marry across borders (INF-05). Cross-border marriage is a practice that has been going on for generations and is seen as commonplace by border communities, although from a legal perspective, the state creates complexity in citizenship status and mobility.

Stopped Cross-Border Passes: Policies That Ignore Social Reality

The paradox of kinship ties becomes even more pronounced when state policies fail to meet the socio-cultural mobility needs of border communities. A critical issue is the termination of the Cross-Border Pass (PLB), which previously facilitated mobility for socio-cultural purposes in these areas. A security official explained the functions of the PLB, describing it as a type of passport specific to border regions, distinguished by its red cover. However, the PLB is no longer in use. This passport was beneficial for individuals with family across the border, allowing them to visit without the burden of expensive passports (INF-04).

The termination of the PLB has created a dilemma for border communities with legitimate reasons to cross, such as attending family funerals, traditional ceremonies, or weddings. Senior security officials described the situation: “When there is a wedding or a family member dies on the other side, they must cross. However, using the official route at Motaain incurs high costs and a long detour. As a result, they opt for the trail— the rat trail. Technically, they’re breaking the law, but from their perspective, it’s an urgent family need” (INF-03).

The problem is further aggravated by the high cost of obtaining passports relative to the incomes of border community members. While the official price of a passport is IDR 600,000, the actual cost can reach IDR 1,000,000 due to additional fees and difficulties in accessing immigration offices. An informant from the intelligence sector emphasized, "For the border community, which primarily consists of farmers with limited incomes, a passport costing one million rupiah is prohibitive. If multiple family members are involved, the costs can easily exceed several million rupiah. This is simply unrealistic" (INF-05).

9 Kilogram Dispensation: Pragmatism in Accommodating Customs

Interestingly, while formal policies tend to be rigid, there is a level of pragmatism at the field implementation level that accommodates the socio-cultural needs of the community. A prime example of this is the "9-kilogram dispensation" for traditional events. One security official explained this practice: there is an unwritten policy that allows individuals attending traditional ceremonies on the other side to bring goods weighing up to 9 kilograms without being considered smugglers. This practice honors the tradition of bringing offerings or donations to such events. This dispensation reflects an implicit recognition that overly strict enforcement of the law can lead to conflicts with local communities and disregard longstanding cultural practices. However, it also introduces legal ambiguity and loopholes that can be exploited. As the same informant acknowledged, "The problem is, how do we differentiate between people who actually bring goods for traditional events and those who claim to be attending traditional events but are actually smugglers? This creates a grey area that is difficult to control" (INF-04).

Daily Deportations: The Tension between State Sovereignty and Social Needs

The consequence of the termination of PLB and the high cost of passports is an increase in the number of illegal border crossers who then have to be deported. Informants from the intelligence sector explained that deportations occur almost every day. Indonesians caught in East Timor without documents will be deported to Indonesia, and vice versa. The coordination of this deportation involves all parties of PLBN, Immigration, Police, and TNI because there must be a formal handover (INF-05). Ironically, most of the people deported

are not criminals or security threats, but ordinary citizens who cross for family purposes or to seek a livelihood. Senior security officials provided a nuanced perspective on the situation. "When arresting people who cross illegally, we have to ask: is this a criminal or is this a desperate person for economic or social needs? Most of the cases we handle are secondary. They are not criminals, they are just desperate people" (INF-03).

The Dark Side of Social Capital: The Exploitation of Kinship Ties for Transnational Crime

In previous sections, we explored how kinship ties can conflict with formal security policies. Research supports Portes' (1998) argument about the dark side of social capital, where strong social networks are exploited for illegal activities. Informants from the intelligence sector revealed that smuggling syndicates use these familial bonds to transport illegal goods like fuel and used clothing, thriving on community trust that helps them avoid detection (INF-05).

A senior security official cited local fishermen with families in Timor-Leste who smuggle goods using their boats, justifying their actions as "helping the family" and not viewing it as a crime, despite the negative impact on the state (INF-01). One resident, originally from Timor-Leste but living in Indonesia, shared his experience of cross-border oil smuggling facilitated by family networks: “I dare to smuggle because there are families on both sides. We communicate with buyers in Timor-Leste by phone; they transfer dollars, and we deliver the goods” (INF-11). For many, this is a necessary economic survival strategy, with revenues from smuggling reaching three to five million rupiah per shipment, compared to only two hundred thousand rupiah as fishermen.

When security measures are tightened, informants do not cease smuggling out of moral concerns but due to increased operational risks. The informant emphasized smuggling as a job that requires management, not a social norm violation. Informants described an organized system for smuggling, including using specific boats, conducting operations at night, and coordinating with recipients across the border. This highlights a relatively organized informal economy based on social trust.

Local communities often do not perceive small-scale smuggling as a crime, viewing practices like transporting kerosene or rice as part of survival economics. However, these actions collectively undermine the national economy and contribute to a shadow economy (INF-05). There's a disconnection between the state's view of legality and the border community's interpretation of informal practices. Addressing this gap requires not just stricter law enforcement but also viable economic alternatives.

Institutional Coordination: Informal Pragmatism in an Unintegrated System

Colonial legacies create structural complexities, while kinship bonds lead to operational paradoxes, revealing a significant gap between the ideals and the reality of border security coordination. Ensuring the security of the Indonesia-Timor Leste border involves key institutions like the Indonesian National Army, the National Police, the State Intelligence Agency (BIN), Immigration, Customs, and the National Border Management Agency (BNPP), which operates through the Cross-Border Post (PLBN). Effective border management, as outlined in multi-level governance theory, relies on both horizontal and vertical coordination (O'Dowd, 2004). However, this study finds that real-world practices depend more on informal relationships than on established frameworks or integrated information systems.

Formal Coordination: ICTS and PLBN Meetings as Administrative Forums

At the formal level, inter-agency coordination at the RI-DRTL border operates through two main mechanisms. First is the Integrated Cross-border Terminal Services (ICTS), a coordination system at the border post (PLBN) that brings together all relevant agencies under one roof. A senior security official explained the composition of ICTS: "At PLBN, several agencies are part of ICTS, including representatives from the Police,

TNI, Customs, Immigration, the Quarantine Agency, the Transportation Service, BAIS, and Intelligence. Each agency has its specific responsibilities" (INF-03).

The second mechanism involves coordination meetings initiated by government officials to address operational issues. An informant from the intelligence sector described this process: "Formal coordination typically occurs when government officials invite personnel from the post to a meeting to discuss various problems. The frequency of these meetings varies depending on the situation; there is no fixed schedule, making it more situational" (INF-05). This indicates that formal coordination is reactive—it is triggered by specific issues rather than being proactive and systematic.

Additionally, while ICTS has all agencies located in one area, this physical co-location does not automatically lead to operational integration. Informants from various institutions acknowledged that each agency operates in "silos," maintaining its own information systems, procedures, and priorities. Currently, there is no unified information system that enables real-time data sharing between agencies regarding the movement of people, goods, or security threats.

Informal Coordination: Pragmatism in the Absence of an Integrated System

In contrast to formal coordination that is ad hoc and limited, informal coordination actually runs more intensely and is considered more effective by field actors. Informants from the intelligence sector provide a comprehensive explanation of this pattern. Informal coordination is actually more intense. Friends in Binda who are in the border area communicate every day to find out if there are border crossers who carry out illegal activities or if there are violations committed by Indonesian or Timorese citizens. This informal communication is carried out with government officials and their staff, Immigration, Customs, and also Pamtas" (INF-05).

The main medium of informal coordination is through WhatsApp groups. This is an interesting thing. When asked if there is a WhatsApp group for coordination, the informant from the intelligence sector replied firmly that there is a WhatsApp group and they have a group for coordination (INF-05). The use of WhatsApp as the main coordination tool reflects pragmatism in the absence of an adequate official communication system. On the one hand, WhatsApp allows for quick and easy communication without complicated bureaucratic procedures. On the other hand, this reliance on informal communication platforms creates vulnerabilities: there is no official documentation, there is no systematic archiving mechanism, and important information can be lost when personnel change.

Senior security officials provided further context on why informal coordination has become dominant. This is because if there is a case of deportation, for example, it must immediately coordinate with all parties. The Immigration Department for documents, the TNI for escort if needed, and the BIN for intelligence information. If you wait for the administration of official correspondence, it takes days. For efficiency and time effectiveness, direct coordination by phone or WhatsApp is quick and effective. For document matters, it will follow (INF-03). This statement suggests that informal coordination emerged as a response to the inefficiencies of formal procedures, rather than as a complement to an already well-functioning formal system.

Border Police Agreement with Timor-Leste: Limited Bilateral Cooperation

At the international level, Indonesia and Timor-Leste have a Border Police Agreement signed in 2006-2007. One of the security officials explained that the function of this agreement is to establish an agreement between the Timor-Leste Border Police and Indonesian security officers. The agreement regulates coordination in handling cross-border cases, including how to handle stolen vehicles brought across or other issues. This agreement is still in force today (INF-04). However, the implementation of the Border Police Agreement also faces limitations. Bilateral coordination is more *case-by-case* than systematic. The informant explained that

communication with *counterparts* in Timor-Leste is also more often done through personal channels, direct phone calls, or WhatsApp with familiar officers, rather than through formal, procedural diplomatic channels. This reflects the same pattern as domestic coordination, which is the reliance on personal relationships because formal mechanisms are considered too slow and bureaucratic.

Coordination Gap: Absence of an Integrated Information System

The main issue affecting coordination among agencies is the lack of an integrated border information system. Currently, there is no digital platform for real-time sharing of information regarding people, goods, or security threats. Senior security officials recognize that Immigration, National Police, and TNI do not share essential data, and Customs operates separately, requiring officials to request information from each agency individually when tracking suspects (INF-03). This disconnection leads to several problems: responses to threats are delayed due to manual coordination, agencies lack comprehensive situational awareness, data is scattered and non-standardized, and personnel turnover results in lost institutional knowledge. A senior security official pointed out, "We in the TNI focus on territorial security, while the National Police handle law enforcement, BIN deals with intelligence, Immigration oversees documents, and Customs focuses on goods. Each agency has its own priorities, sometimes misaligned, with no systematic mechanism to coordinate them" (INF-01). This highlights the critical need for strategic coordination to integrate various mandates into a cohesive border security strategy.

DISCUSSION

The complexity of securing the Indonesia-Timor Leste border, as revealed in this study, prompts critical reflection on the theoretical assumptions prevalent in contemporary border studies literature. Furthermore, the empirical findings challenge us to reconsider how the state should balance the demands of territorial sovereignty with the socio-cultural realities of border communities. This dilemma cannot be addressed through a purely technical or administrative approach (Sadozaï, 2024; Günay & Witjes, 2016). The study confirms that three border typologies operate simultaneously in this region, aligning with Newman's (2006) suggestion that borders are not static lines but zones of ongoing negotiation.

However, the case of Indonesia-Timor Leste reveals a more fundamental issue. In the post-conflict context, the colonial legacy does not simply create a "technical problem" of demarcation. Instead, it gives rise to a structural paradox that questions the legitimacy of the border's construction itself. The 1859 Lisbon Line and the 1913 Hague Convention were established without consultation with local communities (antecedent boundaries) and have now become a social reality that must be managed (subsequent boundaries), while still leaving geographical anomalies, such as the Oekusi enclave, that require a high level of political resolution (superimposed boundaries).

The interaction of these three typologies creates a layered complexity that Hartshorne (1951) did not anticipate, highlighting the need for a new theoretical framework that is more attuned to post-conflict border dynamics in Southeast Asia. Comparative studies of colonial divisions in Africa reveal a similar pattern, where ethnic geography and colonial decisions continue to influence contemporary border conflicts long after independence (Müller-Crepon et al., 2025; Paine et al., 2024). An intriguing and conceptually challenging aspect of this study is the ambiguity of social capital at the border.

While Putnam (2000) and Coleman (1988) argue that social networks are assets for societal cohesion, our findings suggest that, in terms of state security, the same social capital can become a liability. The negative aspect of social capital identified by Portes (1998) is not solely the result of exploitation by criminal actors but also a consequence of security policies that disregard social legitimacy. Interview data with INF-11 reveal a significant epistemological gap: what the state labels as "smuggling" is seen by the community as a legitimate "survival strategy."

This phenomenon is also noted in studies of African and South Asian borders, where the informal economy serves as a rational response to state policies that fail to accommodate local realities (Thompson, 2024; Raharjo et al., 2024). With a smuggling income ranging from 3 to 5 million rupiahs per day, compared to legal fishermen earning 200 thousand rupiahs, the community's rational choice leads to an informal economy that is criminalized by the state. This paradox reflects a broader dilemma in the study of transnational crime in Southeast Asia, where multibillion-dollar criminal networks thrive not merely due to weak law enforcement but because the state fails to provide viable economic alternatives (United States Institute of Peace, 2024).

The theoretical question that arises is: at what point should the state recognize that its own security policies contribute to the criminal activity it seeks to prevent? The termination of Cross-Border Passes without offering affordable alternatives perpetuates a cycle where policies intended to enhance security instead drive the mass criminalization of long-established socio-cultural practices. These findings contribute to the discussion regarding borderland governance (Palmer & Carvalho, 2021; Bigo, 2002), demonstrating that the legitimacy of the state in border areas cannot be taken for granted but must be continuously negotiated with local communities. Studies of securitized borderlands indicate that state efforts to assert sovereignty through strict control often create transnational spaces that challenge state authority (Rosière & Jones, 2012; Côté-Boucher et al., 2014).

The findings regarding institutional coordination, which remain informal and reactive, highlight the gap between the rhetoric of Integrated Border Management and the reality of its implementation on the ground. While the multi-level governance literature emphasizes the necessity of systemic coordination (Wong Villanueva et al., 2022; O'Dowd, 2004), practices observed at the Indonesia-Timor Leste border suggest that effective coordination relies more on personal relationships among personnel than on formal institutional systems. This pattern is also noted in Lebanese border studies, where security coordination depends heavily on informal cross-sectarian networks (Gaub, 2017).
Interestingly, WhatsApp groups have proven to be more effective than formal PLBN meetings—this paradoxical yet enlightening finding demonstrates that such pragmatism allows for essential flexibility during emergencies. However, reliance on informal coordination creates systemic vulnerabilities; when personnel change, coordination can be disrupted until new relationships are formed. More critically, there is no systematic documentation or clear accountability in informal coordination, leading to what Guiraudon and Lahav (2000) describe as "venue shopping," wherein agencies sidestep formal mechanisms in favor of operational flexibility.

The European Union's experience with European Integrated Border Management indicates that effective coordination necessitates significant investment in technological infrastructure and standardized procedures (European Commission, 2023; Kasparek, 2016). However, lessons learned from Indonesia and Malaysia in the Entikong-Tebedu area reveal that technology alone is insufficient. While PLBN Entikong benefits from a relatively integrated Cross-Border Control (CIQ) system, coordination among domestic agencies still encounters challenges, particularly with TNI's tendency to dominate and create tensions with civilian agencies (Firdaus & Umar, 2022; Syafe'i et al., 2020). This reflects common issues in civil-military relations on post-conflict borders (Caparini, 2006).

What sets Entikong-Tebedu apart from the Indonesia-Timor Leste border is the presence of a formal bilateral coordination platform—the Socio-Economy of Malaysia-Indonesia Committee (Sosek Malindo), established in 1985. This platform provides an institutional mechanism for proactively resolving issues rather than simply reacting to them (Lee & Tham, 2022). Additionally, the Border Trade Agreement, which allows trade of up to RM 600 per month without tariffs, illustrates the importance of a "soft border" approach. This approach

acknowledges that borders are not solely about security control but also serve as economic and social spaces (Martinez, 1994; Kolossov & Scott, 2013).

A similar pattern is evident in the context of the Indonesia-Malaysia maritime border on Sebatik Island. Studies show that successful security coordination depends on three critical factors, which are equally relevant to land borders: infrastructure readiness, operational integration, and human resource development (Nurisnaeny et al., 2024). More importantly, Sebatik's experience emphasizes the significance of integrating technological capabilities with local knowledge networks. This lesson is particularly applicable to the Indonesia-Timor Leste border, which relies on community intelligence for daily security operations.

These comparative findings indicate that, despite geographical differences (maritime vs. land) and different country pairs (Malaysia vs. Timor Leste), the fundamental challenges of securing Indonesia's borders are consistent: integrating formal systems with informal practices, combining technology with local knowledge, and balancing state sovereignty with the social legitimacy of border communities. These dilemmas are not unique and are faced by other borders in the Global South (van Schendel, 2005; Megoran, 2017).

However, both Entikong-Tebedu and Sebatik continue to struggle with the persistent issue of unofficial routes (rat routes), highlighting that merely having physical infrastructure and digital systems does not solve the root problem if the economic empowerment of border communities is neglected. This lesson is echoed in the Sulu-Sulawesi border study, which found that cross-border cooperation fails to tackle transnational crimes without inclusive economic development (Raharjo et al., 2024). These comparative lessons carry significant policy implications for the Indonesia-Timor Leste border.

First, it is crucial to reactivate the Cross-Border Pass (PLB) with an improved design. PLB 2.0 should use biometric technology for identity verification, have a fee cap of IDR 100,000 (compared to IDR 1 million for a passport), and allow 12 socio-cultural trips per year, with additional traditional event allowances. This aligns with the smart border concept, integrating technology with socio-cultural considerations (Ackleson, 2005; Dijstelbloem & Meijer, 2011). Implementing a fast-track clearance mechanism for PLB holders with a clean record could reduce crossing times to 5-10 minutes, decreasing the incentive to use illegal routes while upholding state sovereignty. Border policies should adapt to community needs rather than focus solely on state security (Brambilla, 2015; Johnson & Jones, 2019).

Second, developing an Integrated Border Management System connecting TNI, Polri, BIN, Immigration, Customs, and BNPP will address coordination fragmentation. This system should feature a unified database, machine learning-based early warnings, standardized procedures, and encrypted mobile apps, replacing informal communication. Although the initial investment of IDR 50-75 billion is considerable, effective management can yield significant returns (European Commission, 2023; Longo, 2018).

Finally, community-based border management is vital for security. Establishing Border Community Forums in sub-districts, providing training, and creating economic empowerment initiatives can reduce reliance on the illegal economy and build trust. This model echoes successful approaches in West Africa and effective community policing strategies in the Global South (UNODC, 2023; Goldsmith, 2005; Dupont et al., 2003).

These three recommendations complement one another and must be executed simultaneously: PLB 2.0 without a Border Management System (BMS) will create coordination gaps; BMS without community empowerment will encounter local resistance; and community empowerment without an effective control system will introduce new security vulnerabilities. This reflects a holistic security principle emphasized in the literature on human security at the border (Bilgic & Pace, 2017; Vaughan-Williams, 2015).

This research undoubtedly has limitations that need to be acknowledged to contextualize the findings. The geographical focus on Belu Regency limits the generalizability of the results to other border areas, such as Malacca and North Central Timor, which may exhibit different dynamics. The qualitative approach, involving 11 informants, provides depth but restricts the ability to make broader generalizations. These limitations are common in complex border studies but can be addressed through mixed-methods research in the future (Johnson et al., 2007; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010).

Additionally, the dimension of security technology has not been explored in depth, despite its importance in the era of digital security. The perspective of Timor-Leste and the dynamics of bilateral coordination have also not been comprehensively studied, reflecting access challenges in post-conflict border research. Follow-up research should adopt a mixed-methods design with a broader geographical focus, explore the feasibility of integrating technologies like drone surveillance and AI-based facial recognition, and engage informants from Timor-Leste to gain a holistic understanding of bilateral challenges. Only through this comprehensive research agenda can the understanding of post-conflict border security be deepened, providing a stronger empirical foundation for policy formulation that is responsive to socio-cultural complexities while maintaining state sovereignty.

CONCLUSION

The security of the Indonesia-Timor Leste border presents a paradox that raises three key questions. First, the overlap of colonial antecedents and boundary typologies creates structural complexities, as seen in the Oekusi enclave and the Naktuka dispute. Second, cross-border kinship ties can both aid reconciliation and expose communities to risks from transnational crime when security policies fail to acknowledge local social legitimacy. Third, coordination at the border is mainly reactive and informal, relying on personal relationships, which creates vulnerabilities for criminals.

This research highlights that the negative aspects of social capital in post-conflict borders are structural results of the disconnect between state sovereignty and social legitimacy. This extends Portes' (1998) theory by showing that state policies can turn social capital into a security liability. The study recommends three interventions: reactivating a biometrics-based PLB 2.0 system for accessibility; developing an integrated Border Management System for real-time information sharing among six agencies; and institutionalizing community-based border management. Successful examples from the Indonesia-Malaysia border demonstrate that effective coordination and a soft border approach are crucial, rather than relying solely on technology.

A key principle is that the legitimacy of border policy depends on balancing territorial sovereignty with community needs; states cannot secure borders if communities feel alienated. Post-conflict borders like that of Indonesia and Timor Leste will remain contentious, where state sovereignty conflicts with social realities. The challenge is securing the border without alienating interconnected communities. Future research should use a mixed-methods approach, explore modern security technologies, and include perspectives from Timor-Leste. Today's policy decisions will shape the Indonesia-Timor Leste border's future, determining whether it facilitates peace and legitimate interactions or perpetuates conflict and criminalization.

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