

Paradiplomacy at the Sarawak–Kalimantan Border through SOSEK-MALINDO

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Sarawak's participation in the SOSEK-MALINDO (Kerjasama Sosial Ekonomi Malaysia-Indonesia) framework as an example of subnational involvement in cross-border governance. While foreign affairs and border security remain under federal jurisdiction in Malaysia, Sarawak has engaged actively in SOSEK-MALINDO through collaboration with Kalimantan at both the state-province and technical levels. Drawing on qualitative data from in-depth interviews with key state and federal officials, the study investigates Sarawak's external engagement within a federally institutional framework. The findings indicate that SOSEK-MALINDO functions as a multi-level and multi-sectoral governance platform, enabling subnational participation while maintaining federal authority. At the state-province level, Sarawak contributes to agenda-setting and coordination on border development and socio-economic priorities. At the technical level, Sarawak's involvement centers on implementation-oriented collaboration among various ministries and departments. This study argues that Sarawak's involvement in SOSEK-MALINDO is better understood as paradiplomacy grounded in strategic complementarity rather than driven by subnational assertiveness. It further contributes to the paradiplomacy literature by illustrating how subnational external engagement can occur within centralized, asymmetrical federations through practical cooperation.

Keywords: *Paradiplomacy; SOSEK-MALINDO, Sarawak, Malaysia-Indonesia relations, Border governance*

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INTRODUCTION

The Sarawak-Kalimantan border is one of the most complex land frontiers in Southeast Asia. It stretches across mountainous terrain, dense forests, and remote rural settlements. Governing this border presents persistent challenges, particularly in relation to security, mobility, and socio-economic development (Brunet-Jailly, 2005; Horstmann, 2016). Although border control and foreign affairs fall under federal jurisdiction in Malaysia, the practical management of this frontier depends heavily on local and state-level involvement (Hutchinson, 2014). In East Malaysia, the significant geographical distance from the federal centre has shaped governance patterns. Malaysia's centralized federal system places key decisions on security and external relations at the national level. However, federal agencies operating along the Sarawak-Kalimantan border encounter practical challenges related to terrain, accessibility, and local expertise (Hutchinson, 2014). Within this context, the Sarawak state government plays a critical operational role by providing infrastructure, logistical support, and coordination that facilitate federal agencies' on-the-ground responsibilities. These practices illustrate governance arrangements influenced by administrative capacity and territorial proximity, rather than by formal jurisdiction alone (Ziblatt, 2004).

Sarawak's involvement in cross-border governance has become increasingly significant in recent years. Interactions between Sarawak and Kalimantan are routine and deeply embedded in the daily lives of border communities. These communities share longstanding kinship ties, economic activities, and social practices that predate the formal establishment of the international boundary (Horstmann, 2016). Furthermore, Indonesia's decision to relocate its national capital to Nusantara in East Kalimantan is anticipated to intensify mobility, connectivity, and economic exchange throughout Borneo. Such developments impose new demands on existing governance arrangements and underscore the necessity for sustained cross-border cooperation (Yeoh, 2024).

One of the key institutional platforms for Malaysia-Indonesia cooperation in border regions is the SOSEK-MALINDO framework. Established to address social and economic issues along the border, SOSEK-MALINDO operates through several levels, including federal, state, provincial, and technical committees. While federal authorities lead government-to-government relations, subnational actors play a significant role at the operational level, particularly in addressing issues that directly affect border communities (Keating, 1999; Cornago, 2010). In the Malaysian context, Sarawak is deeply involved at the state-province and technical levels, where many practical aspects of cross-border cooperation are discussed and implemented. Despite this active involvement, Sarawak's role has received limited scholarly attention. Much of the existing literature on Malaysia-Indonesia relations focuses on national diplomacy, security concerns, or federal-level institutional arrangements (Loh, 2010; Yeoh, 2020). Less attention has been given to how subnational actors contribute to cross-border governance in practice, particularly within a centralised federal system such as Malaysia's. This gap is significant, as it overlooks the everyday cooperation and institutional arrangements that sustain border stability in Borneo.

This article addresses this gap by analyzing Sarawak's role as a subnational actor in cross-border governance through the SOSEK-MALINDO framework. It examines the mechanisms of Sarawak's participation in cross-border cooperation, the internal and external roles it assumes, and the influence of paradiplomacy and federal-state relations on these roles. Drawing on qualitative data from in-depth interviews, fieldwork in selected Sarawak-Kalimantan border communities, and documentary analysis, the article argues that Sarawak's involvement constitutes a pragmatic and functional form of paradiplomacy. This engagement complements federal authority and enhances the effectiveness of Malaysia-Indonesia cooperation in Borneo.

METHOD AND APPROACHES

This study employs a qualitative research approach to investigate Sarawak's role in cross-border governance through the SOSEK-MALINDO framework. A qualitative design is appropriate for exploring institutional roles, coordination processes, and governance practices within a formal bilateral mechanism, aspects that are not readily captured by quantitative methods (Creswell, 2013). The research is structured as a case study of SOSEK-MALINDO in the context of the Sarawak-Kalimantan border. Case study methodology is well-suited for analyzing contemporary governance arrangements within their real-life institutional settings, especially where policy, practice, and administrative context are closely interrelated (Yin, 2018). SOSEK-MALINDO serves as a pertinent analytical focus, representing a long-standing institutional platform for Malaysia-Indonesia border cooperation, with Sarawak actively engaged at operational and coordination levels.

Data collection was conducted through three primary methods: semi-structured interviews, field engagement in selected border areas, and documentary analysis. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with officials directly involved in border governance and SOSEK-MALINDO coordination. These interviews focused on institutional roles, coordination mechanisms, and Sarawak's involvement in facilitating cross-border cooperation. The semi-structured format allowed informants to elaborate on their operational experiences while ensuring consistency across interviews. All informants were anonymized due to the institutional sensitivity of border governance. Informants coded as A1 and A2 refer to senior state-level officials from Sarawak involved in border governance and cross-border coordination. These informants provided insights into Sarawak's policy orientation, administrative roles, and engagement within the SOSEK-MALINDO framework. Informants A3 and A4 represent federal-level officials involved in SOSEK-MALINDO coordination and border security management. Their perspectives were used to contextualize federal-state interactions and operational dynamics at the border. Additional insights from federal enforcement agencies were used to enhance understanding of border operations and coordination practices.

Field engagement was conducted at selected locations along the Sarawak-Kalimantan border to provide contextual grounding for the institutional data. Observations focused on physical infrastructure, accessibility, and the operational environment in which cross-border governance takes place. This engagement helped situate SOSEK-MALINDO discussions within the practical realities of border management. Documentary analysis constituted the third data source. Official documents related to SOSEK-MALINDO, including policy papers, meeting records, and relevant government reports, were examined to understand the framework's structure, objectives, and operational processes. These documents were used to triangulate interview findings and field observations, thereby strengthening the analysis's credibility.

The data were analyzed using a thematic approach. Interview transcripts, field notes, and official reports were systematically coded to identify recurring themes related to Sarawak's roles, coordination dynamics, and institutional interactions within SOSEK-MALINDO. Particular attention was given to how subnational agencies and federal-state relations intersect to shape Sarawak's participation in cross-border governance. Ethical considerations were addressed throughout the research process. Given the sensitivity of border governance and security-related issues, confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained. Informed consent was obtained prior to all interviews, and all data were handled in accordance with established qualitative research ethics.

SCOPE AND LIMITATION

This study examines Sarawak's involvement in cross-border governance through the SOSEK-MALINDO framework along the Sarawak-Kalimantan border. The analysis is limited to institutional roles, coordination

mechanisms, and governance practices at the state and federal levels in Malaysia, with particular emphasis on Sarawak's participation as a subnational actor within a centralized federal system. The study's qualitative, case-specific design limits its generalizability. Findings are based on a targeted set of institutional informants and documentary sources related to SOSEK-MALINDO and border governance in Sarawak. Consequently, the analysis does not seek to generalize to all Malaysian states or border regions, nor does it offer a comprehensive assessment of community-level impacts. Rather, it provides a focused examination of Sarawak's role within a specific border governance context.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

SOSEK-MALINDO as a Multi-Level Cross-Border Governance Framework

An understanding of Sarawak's roles in cross-border governance requires first an examination of the SOSEK-MALINDO framework itself. SOSEK-MALINDO was established as a bilateral cooperation mechanism between Malaysia and Indonesia to address socio-economic and development-related challenges along their shared border. In his early assessment of Malaysia–Indonesia border cooperation, Saru Arifin (2012) explains that SOSEK-MALINDO was conceived as a platform to complement traditional diplomatic arrangements by focusing on development and welfare issues in peripheral border regions.

Rather than operating solely through national-level diplomacy, SOSEK-MALINDO was designed to accommodate interaction across different administrative levels. This design reflects a broader governance pattern in which policy coordination involves multiple tiers of authority. In conceptual terms, this resembles what Marks (1993) describes as multi-level governance, where decision-making is dispersed across interconnected levels rather than concentrated at the centre. Importantly, this conceptual lens is used here to frame the operational structure of SOSEK-MALINDO, not to suggest that the framework itself was explicitly designed as a formal MLG model.

SOSEK-MALINDO operates through three interrelated levels. At the government-to-government (G-to-G) level, federal authorities from Malaysia and Indonesia establish overarching policy directions and bilateral priorities. As noted by Saru Arifin (2012), this level reflects formal diplomatic relations and provides the political foundation for cooperation undertaken at lower levels. At the state–province level, subnational governments such as Sarawak and Kalimantan Barat (Kalbar), Sabah and Kalimantan Timur (Kaltim), Johor and Riau, participate in discussions related to border development, infrastructure connectivity, and socio-economic coordination. More recent work by Yagoza and Maksum (2024) shows that subnational actors increasingly use SOSEK-MALINDO as a space to address practical cross-border issues that require local knowledge and administrative proximity. Informants A1 and A2 in this study similarly emphasised that this level allows Sarawak to raise concerns grounded in border realities and operational constraints, even though decision-making authority remains limited.

The technical level focuses on implementation and coordination among relevant agencies. As Sudiar (2019) points out in his analysis of SOSEK-MALINDO-related cooperation, the effectiveness of technical coordination is often shaped by institutional compliance requirements and jurisdictional boundaries. This observation is consistent with this study's findings, which show that while technical committees play an important role in operational coordination, their capacity remains dependent on federal approval and administrative hierarchies.

Across these three levels, cooperation under SOSEK-MALINDO is further organised into three functional fields. These include social and cultural cooperation, economic and trade connectivity, and safety and border management. The social and cultural field covers areas such as education, health, and community welfare. The economic and trade field focuses on agriculture, investment, tourism,

transportation, and cross-border economic activity. The safety and border management field addresses border infrastructure, control, and coordination to ensure that socio-economic cooperation does not undermine national security. This tripartite organisation is consistently applied across the SOSEK-MALINDO frameworks in both Peninsular Malaysia and East Malaysia, including Sarawak.

In sum, the integration of multi-level coordination and functional differentiation establishes SOSEK-MALINDO as a structured cross-border governance mechanism rather than merely a diplomatic forum. The framework institutionalizes subnational participation while maintaining federal authority. This institutional design is significant as it provides a legitimate and clearly defined platform for analyzing Sarawak's paradiplomacy engagement.

Sarawak's Paradiplomacy through the SOSEK-MALINDO Framework

In this study, paradiplomacy refers to subnational participation in cross-border governance within a framework accepted by the federal state. This understanding follows Duchacek's (1984) early conceptualisation and later refinements by Lecours (2008) and Kuznetsov (2015). Paradiplomacy, in this sense, does not imply an erosion of state sovereignty. Instead, it reflects the growing involvement of subnational governments in addressing external issues that directly affect their territories. The findings indicate that Sarawak's engagement in SOSEK-MALINDO constitutes a clear example of such paradiplomacy. Although foreign affairs and border security remain under federal jurisdiction in Malaysia, Sarawak participates actively in cross-border governance through an institutional framework endorsed by the central government. This arrangement allows the state to engage externally while remaining consistent with national authority. Sarawak's involvement, therefore, demonstrates how subnational governments can act beyond their borders without challenging the constitutional order.

This pattern of engagement aligns closely with Lecours' (2008) argument that paradiplomacy is often driven by territorial needs rather than political ambition. Border regions face distinct challenges. These challenges include security concerns, economic interdependence, and frequent cross-border interactions. In Sarawak, such issues are deeply embedded in everyday governance along the Sarawak-Kalimantan border. Centralised decision-making alone is insufficient to manage these dynamics effectively. As a result, subnational participation becomes both necessary and rational. Kuznetsov (2015) distinguishes between confrontational and cooperative forms of paradiplomacy. Cooperative paradiplomacy occurs when subnational governments engage externally with the consent or tolerance of the federal state. The aim is to improve governance outcomes rather than to seek political recognition. Sarawak's participation in SOSEK-MALINDO reflects this cooperative model. Informants A1 and A2 repeatedly emphasised that the state does not pursue an independent foreign policy role. Instead, Sarawak engages through recognised institutional channels that allow local concerns to be communicated and addressed.

The findings further support Cornago's view of paradiplomacy as a governance practice shaped by functional needs. Cornago argues that subnational external engagement often emerges in response to concrete policy problems. This is especially evident in border regions, where social, economic, and security issues intersect. In Sarawak's case, SOSEK-MALINDO provides a structured platform for managing shared border challenges with Kalimantan. The framework enables regular interaction without displacing federal control over foreign relations. Sarawak's paradiplomacy through SOSEK-MALINDO is also characterised by its practical orientation. Informant A1 described Sarawak's role as involving sustained participation, agenda contribution, and coordination through SOSEK-MALINDO's established working channels. These interactions focus on implementation and problem-solving. They are not framed as formal diplomatic negotiations. This reflects what Rodrigues and Mattioli (2017) describe as problem-oriented paradiplomacy, in which subnational actors focus on addressing specific governance challenges rather than advancing political claims.

The broader Southeast Asian context reinforces this interpretation. Research on paradiplomacy in Asia shows that subnational external engagement often operates within a strong central authority. Utomo (2022) demonstrates that Indonesian subnational governments engage externally primarily through frameworks approved by the central state. Such engagements are usually linked to development and border management. Similarly, Syuryansyah (2024) observes that paradiplomacy in Southeast Asia tends to be instrumental in nature. It is driven by governance needs rather than identity-based or autonomy-seeking agendas. Sarawak's experience within SOSEK-MALINDO reflects these regional patterns.

Collectively, the findings indicate that Sarawak's paradiplomacy is embedded, cooperative, and driven by functional considerations. Rather than challenging Malaysia's federal authority, it complements national border governance by integrating local knowledge and sustained subnational engagement. Bello-Gómez (2024) contends that such forms of paradiplomacy are increasingly prevalent within multi-level governance arrangements, where subnational action strengthens rather than weakens state capacity.

This case, therefore, contributes to the literature on paradiplomacy in centralised and asymmetrical federations. Sarawak demonstrates that meaningful subnational external engagement does not require extensive constitutional autonomy. What it requires is institutional space. SOSEK-MALINDO provides that space. Through this framework, Sarawak operates as a strategic partner in cross-border governance rather than as a competing diplomatic actor. The following subsections examine this engagement more closely by separating Sarawak's paradiplomacy at the state-province level from its technical engagement.

Paradiplomacy at the State-Province Level

At the state-province level, Sarawak's paradiplomacy under the SOSEK-MALINDO framework takes on a more strategic character. Informant A3 explained that this level functions as a coordination space where Sarawak engages directly with Kalimantan authorities on development priorities along the border. The emphasis is not on operational execution. Instead, discussions focus on planning, interest alignment, and identifying projects that require cross-border coordination.

One key area of engagement involves border infrastructure and connectivity. Informant A4 noted that projects such as the upgrading of the Tebedu–Entikong CIQS (Customs, Immigration, Quarantine and Security) are frequently discussed at the state-province level. These discussions do not replace federal decision-making. Instead, they allow Sarawak and Kalimantan to articulate local development needs and logistical constraints before implementation. This process helps ensure that large-scale infrastructure projects reflect the realities of borders on both sides. Another recurring issue raised by informant A4 concerns cross-border road connectivity, particularly routes linking Ba'Kelalan in Sarawak with Long Bawan in Kalimantan. At the state-province level, engagement focuses on aligning development priorities and addressing coordination challenges. Informants described this engagement as necessary because road connectivity affects mobility, access to services, and economic activity in remote border areas. Although construction and enforcement remain under federal authority, state-provincial coordination helps reduce policy mismatches and implementation delays.

Informant A3 also highlighted discussions on the development of small-scale cross-border trade, including planning for facilities such as the Jagoi Babang small-scale trade processing centre. At this level, Sarawak's role is not to manage trade operations. Instead, it involves coordinating development objectives, identifying potential economic benefits, and ensuring that facilities align with the needs of border communities. This illustrates how paradiplomacy at the state–province level focuses on shaping the policy environment rather than administering day-to-day activities. Importantly, these engagements occur within clear institutional boundaries. Security enforcement and border control remain firmly under federal jurisdiction. Informants repeatedly emphasised this distinction. The separation of roles reflects the broader Malaysia-Indonesia border governance architecture, which remains highly centralised and security-driven.

Studies on Malaysia-Indonesia border cooperation, particularly those analysing GBC-MALINDO, show that military and security agencies dominate decision-making in enforcement-related matters. This context helps explain why Sarawak's paradiplomacy at the state-province level concentrates on development and coordination rather than security operations.

From a theoretical perspective, this pattern is consistent with cooperative paradiplomacy as described by Kuznetsov (2015). Sarawak's engagement does not seek to bypass federal authority. Instead, it operates within a recognised framework to enhance governance outcomes. Lecours (2008) similarly notes that subnational governments often use external engagement to address territorially specific issues that central governments may not prioritise. Sarawak's state-province engagement reflects this logic. Comparatively, similar practices can be observed in other federated and decentralised systems. In Germany, for example, Länder such as Bavaria engage in cross-border coordination on infrastructure and regional development while security remains a federal responsibility. As Gunlicks (2003) observes, such engagement is generally supported when it improves policy effectiveness without challenging constitutional authority. Sarawak's paradiplomacy under SOSEK-MALINDO follows a comparable pattern. It remains institutionally bounded, yet strategically meaningful.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that paradiplomacy at the state-province level enables Sarawak to play a substantive role in shaping cross-border development outcomes. Through SOSEK-MALINDO, Sarawak contributes to agenda-setting, coordination, and the alignment of priorities with Kalimantan counterparts. This engagement strengthens cross-border governance while maintaining Malaysia's centralized control over foreign affairs and security.

Paradiplomacy at the Technical Level

The technical level of SOSEK-MALINDO provides a key avenue for Sarawak's paradiplomacy engagement. Informant A4 emphasized that many practical border issues are resolved not through high-level political discussion, but through sustained technical coordination. At this level, Sarawak provides administrative input, operational insights, and contextual knowledge that shape the implementation of agreed initiatives. This type of engagement aligns with Halberstam's (2012) argument that subnational actors often play a decisive role in policy implementation even when formal authority remains centralized.

Technical coordination under SOSEK-MALINDO involves agencies from multiple federal ministries with operational responsibilities related to the border. For example, discussions often involve the Ministry of Home Affairs on matters such as border access procedures, movement facilitation, and alignment of administrative practices. These meetings ensure that policies agreed at higher levels can be applied effectively at border crossings. Similarly, technical coordination may involve the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture in planning activities that support cross-border people-to-people interactions, particularly where tourism and community engagement intersect with market and mobility considerations.

A concrete example of technical paradiplomacy is *Pasar Serikin*, one of the busiest informal cross-border markets between Sarawak and Kalimantan. Informant A3 noted that coordination for the market's continued operation involves agencies under the Ministry of Home Affairs to ensure regulatory compliance and safe movement. In addition, planning for a new ICQS facility at Serikin reflects inter-agency technical involvement. According to industry and government reports (Seng, 2024), the construction of an RM50 million ICQS complex is projected to begin as part of efforts to standardise border procedures and facilitate legitimate trade and travel across the Sarawak-Kalimantan border. This example illustrates how technical paradiplomacy translates cross-border understanding into concrete institutional mechanisms that affect everyday governance. Technical engagement also extends to coordination around Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for specific administrative actions. For instance, as mentioned by informant A3, Sarawak and West Kalimantan agreed technical SOPs for the repatriation of human remains during the 40th SOSEK-

MALINDO working committee meeting. This demonstrates how routine technical matters become zones of sustained cross-government interaction.

Informant A3 further noted that agencies involved in agriculture and agro-based industries are engaged in discussions that affect cross-border economic activity. While these engagements do not override national economic policy, they support the practical functioning of cross-border markets and supply chains. This aligns with Martínez-Vázquez et al.'s (2024) observation that subnational actors frequently act as implementers and facilitators in multi-level governance systems. At the technical level, Sarawak's proximity to the border provides it with contextual expertise that informs how policy is applied locally. Informant A4 described how Sarawak's technical contributions help overcome practical constraints that would otherwise hinder the implementation of cross-border initiatives. This supports the view that paradiplomacy can emerge not only through external dialogue but also through daily administrative interaction that bridges federal policy and local realities.

Nevertheless, technical paradiplomacy under SOSEK-MALINDO is constrained by clear institutional boundaries. As Sudiar (2019) notes, and as informants confirm, the effectiveness of technical coordination is limited by compliance requirements and federal authority. Final decision-making authority resides with central ministries. This underscores that Sarawak's role at the technical level is cooperative and facilitative, rather than autonomous. Overall, the findings suggest that paradiplomacy at the technical level is incremental, routine, and focused on implementation. It is characterised by inter-agency coordination across multiple ministries and sectors, translating higher-level agreements into practical measures. This form of paradiplomacy sustains cross-border cooperation by ensuring the effective functioning of institutional arrangements.

Paradiplomacy as Strategic Complementarity in Centralised Federations

Collectively, the findings indicate that Sarawak's paradiplomacy through SOSEK-MALINDO is best characterized as strategic complementarity rather than subnational assertiveness. Sarawak does not pursue an independent foreign policy agenda or seek to circumvent federal authority. Instead, its engagement enhances Malaysia's capacity for cross-border governance by contributing local knowledge, administrative expertise, and sustained participation within a bilateral framework. This approach reflects a pragmatic orientation toward paradiplomacy, driven by functional needs at the border rather than aspirations for autonomy. Through SOSEK-MALINDO, Sarawak operates within institutional boundaries to address issues requiring proximity, local familiarity, and ongoing coordination. In this context, paradiplomacy functions as a governance practice rather than a political strategy.

This interpretation is consistent with comparative scholarship on subnational governance. Avellaneda and Bello-Gómez (2024) argue that subnational governments often enhance national governance outcomes by filling gaps between policy formulation and implementation. Similarly, Martínez-Vázquez et al. (2024) show that subnational involvement is frequently shaped by functional necessity rather than constitutional empowerment. Sarawak's experience aligns with these observations. Its paradiplomatic engagement responds to practical governance demands along the Sarawak–Kalimantan border. Notably, the Sarawak case challenges common assumptions in the paradiplomacy literature. Much existing research focuses on highly autonomous regions or federated systems where subnational governments possess strong constitutional authority. In contrast, Sarawak operates within a centralised and asymmetrical federal system. Despite these constraints, the findings demonstrate that meaningful paradiplomacy can still occur when institutional frameworks provide space for subnational participation. SOSEK-MALINDO serves this function precisely.

Sarawak's engagement also highlights the role of trust and cooperation in federal-state relations. Rather than generating tension or competition, paradiplomacy in this case reinforces collaboration between

levels of government. By remaining aligned with federal priorities while contributing local expertise, Sarawak positions itself as a strategic partner in border governance. This supports a more comprehensive understanding of paradiplomacy as a complementary process that can strengthen, rather than undermine, national authority. Overall, this study contributes to the broader debate on paradiplomacy in centralised federations by demonstrating that subnational external engagement does not necessarily signal fragmentation or contestation. Instead, Sarawak's experience shows how paradiplomacy can function as an embedded and cooperative practice, shaped by institutional design, functional necessity, and pragmatic federal–state relations.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Sarawak's engagement in SOSEK-MALINDO constitutes a form of paradiplomacy that is both institutionally bounded and strategically significant. Rather than challenging federal authority, Sarawak's participation exemplifies how subnational governments can serve as effective partners within a centralized system of border governance. Through sustained involvement in a bilateral framework, Sarawak facilitates cross-border coordination in ways that centralized mechanisms alone may not achieve. The article's primary contribution is to reframe paradiplomacy as strategic complementarity. Sarawak's experience shows that subnational external engagement can arise from functional necessity, administrative capacity, and proximity to border realities, rather than from constitutional autonomy or political assertiveness. In this context, Sarawak's role through SOSEK-MALINDO is notable not for circumventing federal constraints, but for operating productively within them. By analyzing SOSEK-MALINDO as a multi-level and multi-sectoral governance platform, the study highlights the importance of institutional design in enabling subnational participation. The framework offers structured opportunities for engagement at the state–province and technical levels, allowing local knowledge to inform cross-border governance while maintaining federal control over foreign affairs and security. This finding enriches the understanding of paradiplomacy in centralized and asymmetrical federations. More broadly, the Sarawak case challenges the prevailing focus in the paradiplomacy literature on highly autonomous regions or decentralized federal systems. It demonstrates that meaningful subnational engagement is possible even where formal authority is limited, provided that trust, cooperation, and institutional mechanisms are present. In this regard, Sarawak's experience serves as a valuable reference for understanding subnational roles in border governance across Southeast Asia and beyond.

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