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Transnational Crime of Cross-Border Narcotics Smuggling between Riau and Malaysia

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Abstract: Transnational crime refers to criminal activities that involve multiple actors and span across more than one country. Such crimes violate the legal regulations and territorial jurisdictions of each affected state. One of the most common forms of transnational crime occurring within the jurisdiction of the National Narcotics Agency of the Riau Islands Province (BNNP Kepulauan Riau) is drug smuggling. This drug smuggling is driven by various factors, one of which is the geographical location and condition of Batam City, which consists of numerous small islands and several ports that facilitate smuggling activities. This study aims to analyze the causal factors, operational patterns, and criminological characteristics of transnational narcotics smuggling activities occurring between Riau Islands and Malaysia. The study applies subjective utility (rational choice) theory to explain how offenders rationally evaluate economic benefits, operational risks, and opportunities for successful smuggling before engaging in transnational narcotics trafficking. The findings reveal that economic incentives, weak maritime supervision, and the strategic geographical position of Batam significantly encourage organized transnational narcotics smuggling networks, thereby reinforcing the importance of integrated cross-border law enforcement and maritime surveillance policies.

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INTRODUCTION

Currently, Indonesia continues to experience a significant increase in narcotics-related crimes, as reflected in the growing number of drug trafficking cases and narcotics abuse reported annually by the National Narcotics Agency (BNN). Etymologically, drugs are referred to as *narcose* or commonly known as narcotics, a term derived from English vocabulary meaning to numb or induce sleep. In Narcotics are psychoactive substances that can create dependency and are frequently associated with organized criminal activities, including transnational trafficking and smuggling network (Onzer et al., 2022). In general terms, narcotics are a type of drug or anesthetic that can produce the effect of pain relief due to their numbing properties. From a terminological perspective, narcotics are substances which, when consumed, affect the

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nervous system by inducing calmness, eliminating sensation and pain, causing drowsiness, and producing other stimulating effects. Furthermore, narcotics are classified as substances that can cause side effects for users, such as reducing pain, inducing anesthesia, and weakening bodily functions (Khoirunnisa et al., 2025).

Any misuse of drugs can be categorized as an act that violates the law. Such actions may be classified as criminal offenses and crimes. Recent studies and UNODC reports demonstrate that narcotics trafficking has evolved into a sophisticated form of transnational organized crime involving international syndicates, digital communication networks, and cross-border distribution system (Apriyanto et al., 2024) . In criminological terms, this condition is referred to as organized crime, which falls under transnational crime, characterized by sophisticated and modern modus operandi and involving various facilities and infrastructures such as transportation systems and advanced technologies.

Indonesia has regulations concerning narcotics as stipulated in Law No. 35 of 2009 on Narcotics. The law explains that any individual or entity involved in the misuse of narcotics will face legal consequences, including arrest, sentencing, and rehabilitation measures. Indonesia has become a prime target and one of the countries frequently used as a destination for illegal drug smuggling. This is caused by several factors, one of which is the level of demand. In the context of drug smuggling and distribution in Indonesia, it is generally driven by the high demand for narcotics among consumers. As a result of this high demand, the need for narcotics requires greater stock and supply, leading to importation efforts from other countries.

Indonesia is an archipelagic country. Indonesia's archipelagic geography, combined with limited maritime surveillance and numerous unofficial sea routes, creates structural vulnerabilities that facilitate transnational narcotics smuggling activities. These geographical conditions strongly support the distribution and smuggling of narcotics and are considered a promising business field for conducting drug transactions (Prayuda, 2020). The majority of Indonesia's territory is maritime, resulting in numerous vulnerable points that are often used by drug trafficking syndicates to carry out their activities and smuggle narcotics into the country (Al-Khaled et al, 2020). This is also due to limited surveillance caused by the vast maritime area of Indonesia, creating opportunities for drug syndicates to carry out their operations. This can be observed from data obtained from the performance of the National Narcotics Agency (BNN) as the state institution authorized to combat drug trafficking in Indonesia. The following presents data on efforts to handle narcotics cases in Indonesia:

Figure 1.1 Handling of Narcotics Cases in Indonesia

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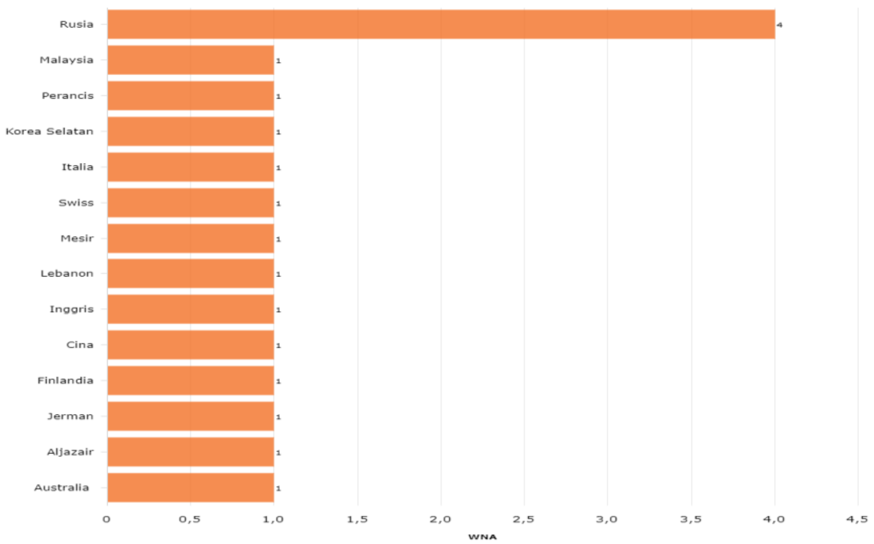
Sumber: https://databoks.katadata.co.id/ diakses pada 02 Maret 2023

The increase in narcotics case handling between 2009 and 2018 may indicate both the expansion of transnational narcotics networks and the intensification of law enforcement operations conducted by Indonesian authorities. However, in recent years there has been a decline. In 2021, the number of narcotics cases handled by the National Narcotics Agency reached 1,184 suspects, with a total of 766 cases recorded. The graph illustrates that the circulation of narcotics in Indonesia is supported by smuggling carried out by foreign nationals, given that Indonesia's geographical conditions make it a potentially suitable location for transactions and smuggling activities.

Figure 1.2 Foreign Nationals Involved in Narcotics Smuggling



Source: https:databoks.katadata.co.id/ accessed on March 2, 2023

Based on Figure 1.2, it can be seen that the role of foreign nationals (WNA) in smuggling narcotics into Indonesia is quite high. The National Narcotics Agency explains that, in general, foreign nationals from Russia constitute the largest group of WNA involved in these smuggling cases, followed by foreign nationals from various other countries. According to reports held by the National Narcotics Agency, *shabu* (methamphetamine) is the type of narcotics most frequently handled and uncovered in Indonesia, followed by marijuana and other types of narcotics.

The data presented above indicates that Indonesia has become one of the countries targeted as an illegal market for narcotics transactions Al-Khaled. One of the regions frequently used as a site for narcotics smuggling is Batam City, Riau Islands Province, Indonesia. Batam is a strategically located city, as it lies along international shipping routes. Geographically, Batam is relatively close to Singapore and Malaysia, which is one of the factors contributing to the high number of narcotics smuggling incidents into Indonesia. This can be seen from the data summarized in the following table:

Table 1.1 Distribution of Narcotics by International Networks Handled by BNNP Kepulauan Riau

	News	Information	Sources
	BNN Kepri Arrests 11 kg Methamphetamine Dealer from an International	The Provincial National Narcotics Agency of Riau Islands (BNNP Kepri) succeeded in arresting and securing three perpetrators who acted as dealers of methamphetamine-type narcotics, with a total of 11,094 grams of evidence, in the waters of Lingga Regency, Riau Islands Province.	https://kepri.antaranews.com/berita/117941/bnn- kepri-tangkap-pengedar- 11-kg-sabu-jaringan-internasional accessed March 2, 2023
	Network Disclosure of International Narcotics Network Case and Destruction of 26 kg of Methamphetamine Evidence	The disclosure of the narcotics case was followed by the destruction of evidence in the form of methamphetamine with a gross weight of 25,824.28 (twenty-five thousand eight hundred twenty-four point twenty-eight) grams, originating from three narcotics case reports, with a total of 10 suspects involved in the illicit international narcotics trafficking network operating in the region.	https://kepri.bnn.go.id/pengungkapan-kasus- narkotika-jaringan-internasional-dan-pemusnahan-barang- bukti-narkotika-jenis-sabu-seberat-26-kg/ accessed March 2, 2023

Source: Modified by Researchers 2023

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In responding to narcotics smuggling cases, the Regional Narcotics Agency of the Riau Islands Province (BNNP Kepulauan Riau) takes firm measures and steps in implementing prevention, enforcement, and other related actions.

Based on previous research discussing transnational narcotics crime conducted by three researchers, namely Ma'rifah Ayu, who examined "Handling Transnational Crime through Extradition Agreements," the strength of this study lies in its explanation of resolving cases of transnational crime, including narcotics offenses (Ma'rifah., 2021). The weakness of this study is that it does not explain in more detail how transnational crimes occur. The next study is by Prayuda, who examined organized transnational crime in border areas, focusing on the modus operandi of narcotics smuggling between Riau and Malaysia. The strength of this study is its identification of the modus operandi and methods used by perpetrators in narcotics smuggling. The weakness of this study is the lack of discussion on preventive measures to minimize such criminal acts (Legrand & Leuprecht., 2021). The third study is by Dessy Rismawanarsih on criminal policy in ASEAN countries regarding human trafficking and drug trafficking as forms of transnational organized crime (TOCS). The strength of this study is its discussion of criminal policies in ASEAN countries. The weakness of this study is the lack of detailed discussion on the modus operandi of these crimes.

Previous studies primarily focused on legal policies and smuggling modus operandi, while limited research has examined the rational decision-making processes and socio-economic motivations underlying transnational narcotics smuggling in border regions such as Batam by examining the factors that cause transnational narcotics smuggling and thus classifying it as a form of transnational crime. The novelty of this study lies in its application of subjective utility theory to explain the rational economic considerations and operational calculations underlying transnational narcotics smuggling in Indonesia's maritime border regions. This study aims to identify the structural, geographical, and economic factors driving transnational narcotics smuggling in the Riau Islands in order to support more effective border security strategies and regional anti-trafficking cooperation (Ford & Lyons, 2020) and to understand why it is categorized as a form of transnational crime.

METHODS

This study adopts a descriptive qualitative case study approach focusing on transnational narcotics smuggling practices within the jurisdiction of BNNP Riau Islands, particularly in Batam as a strategic maritime border area. Qualitative research is a method applied with the main purpose of exploring, describing, and deeply understanding the meanings of a given phenomenon. In qualitative research, the researcher themselves serve as the primary research instrument. Qualitative research involves significant efforts that include several specific questions and procedures for data collection, analysis, and interpretation, using a flexible approach.

Qualitative research produces descriptive data in the form of spoken or written words that are related to the observed phenomena, events, and behaviors. The data consist of primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained through in-depth interviews with selected informants, including BNNP officers, law enforcement personnel, fishermen involved in maritime activities, and community members, selected using purposive sampling based on their

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relevance to narcotics smuggling activities in the study area (Nizmi et al., 2023). Secondary data are data obtained not directly from informants, but from supporting sources such as books, journals, articles, and other written materials. Data collection techniques in this study include observation, interviews with informants and key informants, and documentation. The collected data were analyzed through thematic qualitative analysis involving data reduction, coding, categorization, interpretation, and conclusion drawing, while source triangulation was employed to verify the consistency of information obtained from interviews, observations, and documentary evidence. Subsequently, the collected research data will be analyzed and presented in the form of conclusions so that the research findings can be easily understood.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

1. Transnasional Crime and Narcotics

The narcotics smuggling networks operating in Batam demonstrate the organized and systematic characteristics of transnational crime through coordinated cross-border distribution systems, involvement of international actors, and the utilization of maritime routes to evade law enforcement surveillance (Muhamad, 2016) . When this crime occurs, its continuity and existence can threaten various important aspects of life, including security, economy, politics, society, and global peace. If transnational crime occurs, its level is already included in the typology of serious crimes and threats that can affect the global security and prosperity system, because such crimes have impacts across many countries. Transnational crime will involve violations of criminal and civil law. It crosses the territorial boundaries of a state and may be directed at property, individuals, and other assets that influence the affected country.

The United Nations (UN) defines transnational crime as a crime that falls under the identification of phenomena from a criminal perspective and has certain characteristics carried out beyond international boundaries, resulting in legal violations in the affected states. Transnational crime has a high potential to threaten international security; in the context of its development in the international arena, this crime is classified as a serious offense that endangers global or comprehensive security. Transnational crime includes the following elements:

a. International: The threat directly targets security and poses a danger to world peace, including principles of humanity.
b. Needs: The emergence of a condition that requires cooperation among countries, each of which has a need to take countermeasures against this crime.
c. Transnational: The crime affects many countries and the activities of their citizens.

Smuggling refers to the illegal export and import of goods that violate the provisions of criminal and civil law, carried out to obtain profit and to evade obligations to pay customs-related fees. When an individual or group secretly attempts to introduce or remove goods into or out of a country, that activity is classified as smuggling. Literally, smuggling is an activity of export and import that does not meet the criteria and categories of customs procedures established in regulations. One of the basic requirements under customs law is that the import and export of goods in transportation and trade activities must be fulfilled and formally processed (Aulia & Marsingga, 2025).

Even if smuggling is carried out by individuals who do not fully understand the regulations or the consequences of their actions, the act is still categorized as a violation of the state's rules and laws. Based on Law No. 17 of 2006 concerning Customs, smuggling is defined as: (1) goods brought into the customs area being treated as imported goods and subject to import duties; and (2) goods loaded onto means of transport to be removed from the customs area being treated as exported goods. Imported goods are subject to customs inspection, including document examination and physical inspection of the goods, carried out selectively and carefully (Setyawan., 2025).

Violations stipulated under customs regulations are categorized as criminal offenses of smuggling. This is set out in Article 102, which states that anyone who, among other acts:

a. transports imported goods not listed or recorded in the manifest as referred to in Article 7A paragraph (2);
b. unloads imported goods outside the customs area without the permission of the head of the customs office;
c. unloads imported goods not listed in the declaration as referred to in Article 7A paragraph (3);
d. stockpiles imported goods still under customs supervision outside the designated or permitted places;
e. hides imported goods unlawfully;
f. removes imported goods from the customs area or from bonded storage or other places under customs supervision before the customs obligations are fulfilled, without the approval of the customs officer, thereby causing the state levies to be unmet;
g. transports imported goods from temporary or bonded storage that do not reach the designated customs office and cannot prove that this occurred beyond their control; or
h. intentionally reports the type and quantity of goods in the customs declaration incorrectly,shall be punished for smuggling in the field of importation by a prison sentence of a minimum of 1 year and a maximum of 10 years, and a fine of at least IDR 50,000,000 (fifty million rupiah) and a maximum of IDR 5,000,000,000 (five billion rupiah).

Narcotics or drugs refer to a type of substance or medication that, when consumed or used not in accordance with health-care procedures and prescribed dosages, will have negative effects on the user (Mahendra., 2020; Saito et al., 2025). Narcotics affect the level of consciousness, provoke changes in human behavior, and are accompanied by personality changes, hallucinations, stimulation, and sedation. If narcotics are consumed continuously without medical supervision or control, they can lead to dependence (Rasidin., 2019).

Narcotics are divided into two types: synthetic narcotics and semi-synthetic narcotics. Synthetic narcotics are narcotics produced from chemical substances that are then used in medical or anesthetic procedures for individuals undergoing treatment. Examples of synthetic narcotics include methadone, pethidine (meperidine), and naltrexone. Semi-synthetic narcotics are narcotics derived from natural raw materials that are processed and transformed into addictive substances with enhanced effects, which are then used in the medical or health field, such as heroin, codeine, cocaine, and morphine (Kurniawan., 2023). When viewed from the perspective of classification, narcotics are divided into several groups (Novella & Zulherawan,

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2025). Narcotics in Group I are substances generally used for scientific research purposes but are not used therapeutically because they have a high potential to cause dependence. Narcotics in Group II are substances that have therapeutic benefits or medical utility and are used as a last-resort option in treating narcotics abuse. Narcotics in Group III are substances mainly intended for scientific research and development and may cause only mild dependence.

2. T*ransnational Crime Narcotics Smuggling in Batam, Riau Islands*

The narcotics smuggling cases that occur in Batam, Riau Islands are generally dominated by methamphetamine (shabu), ecstasy, and marijuana. Interview findings from law enforcement officers and local informants indicate that the increasing demand for methamphetamine and ecstasy among consumers has contributed significantly to the persistence of narcotics circulation networks in Batam. In the latest case uncovered, the narcotics smuggling originated from Thailand, and Batam has become a transit destination area. In most cases, the perpetrators of narcotics smuggling are fishermen by profession (Putri & Zulherawan, 2026). In their modus operandi, narcotics are smuggled through official ports such as Batam Center and Harbour Bay, often by inserting the drugs into other body parts such as the anus.

Smuggling operations frequently utilize speedboats to access unofficial maritime routes and clandestine ports that are minimally monitored by authorities, allowing organized trafficking networks to distribute narcotics while avoiding formal customs inspection (Ryan & Prastyanti, 2024). High demand, combined with Indonesia's geographical location, creates broad opportunities for narcotics smugglers. This transnational crime is very complex and well-organized. Criminal actors weigh their actions and expected economic benefits carefully.

The interview findings support subjective utility theory, as smugglers were found to rationally calculate economic rewards, operational risks, and law enforcement weaknesses before participating in narcotics trafficking activities (Indrayani., 2022), including the effectiveness of costs and efforts required to obtain the desired results and benefits, with the aim of achieving planned goals (Prayuda et al., 2025) . This activity seeks to fulfill basic human needs such as status, money, desire, and sexual urges. To satisfy these wishes and needs, an individual will make rational calculations and decisions based on their own abilities, limitations, and the availability of relevant information related to the goals and targets they wish to achieve. The assumptions of the *subjective utilities* (rational choice theory) include the following:

a. Humans are rational beings.
b. Rationality involves calculation and weighing of both means and ends.
c. Humans have the freedom to choose either conforming or deviant behavior, and these actions are based on rational choices.
d. The central element in this context is the analysis of losses and gains, as well as pleasure compared with suffering, from an economic perspective.
e. Individuals seek to maximize their utility, assuming other conditions are equal, and will direct their choices toward the greatest possible benefit.
f. A choice can be regulated through awareness and knowledge of the risks of punishment and the suffering that will accompany norm-violating actions.
g. The state has a role and responsibility to maintain order and uphold norms and values considered good through the legal enforcement system.

h. The speed and certainty of law enforcement are regarded as key instruments in maximizing the effectiveness of the legal system.

Within this theory, it is explained that crimes, no matter how small in form, pass through a mental process in which options are weighed and compared; therefore, the decision-making process involves several factors:

a. The likelihood of achieving success (*probability of success*).
b. The magnitude of the gain or profit expected (*gain*).
c. The likelihood of failure in the process of reaching the goal (*probability of failure*).
d. The magnitude of the possible loss or cost that will be borne (*loss*).

In the context of transnational crime narcotics smuggling in Batam, Riau Islands, if viewed through the theory, the smugglers involve economic calculations and rely on other actors in their transactions (probability of success). This is supported by Indonesia's geographical location, which has extensive maritime territory that further facilitates smuggling through a variety of modus operandi, making it highly likely that the operation will succeed (Wambrauw et al., 2025). Smuggling is carried out because the expected gain is perceived as greater than the potential loss if the smuggling attempt fails. This conforms to the concept of gain-the magnitude or likelihood of the benefit that can be obtained-within the theory. The higher the demand for a commodity, the more suppliers of narcotics will increase their supply (Novella & Zulherawan., 2025).

In the event of failure in the process of achieving the goal (probability of failure), smugglers try to minimize the chance of failure by studying procedures and various smuggling methods (Saputri & Prayuda, 2026). One common modus is carried out by couriers who transport narcotics to coastal areas, after which the drugs are delivered to a pre-agreed destination area. Once the narcotics enter Indonesia, fishermen involved in the smuggling network deliver them to ports and hand them over to the relevant boss. An extreme modus encountered by the National Narcotics Agency of the Riau Islands is the practice of inserting narcotics into the smuggler's body, especially the anus, to evade detection by law-enforcement officials. Smugglers also estimate the possible extent of losses (loss) they might incur, so that, in carrying out illegal transactions or narcotics smuggling, the potential loss will not outweigh the expected profit.

Based on the analysis using this theory, it can be explained that the cause of narcotics smuggling cases lies in the geographical position of the Riau Islands, which is highly accessible to criminal actors. Compared with many inland regions in Indonesia, Batam's proximity to international maritime trade routes and the existence of numerous unregulated ports create unique vulnerabilities that facilitate cross-border narcotics trafficking between Indonesia, Malaysia, and neighboring countries. This is consistent with the subjective utilities (rational choice) theory, which holds that humans make decisions after considering the effectiveness of the effort required to achieve the desired and planned outcome. Narcotics smuggling in Batam is driven by economic value, since the narcotics trade is a business that can quickly satisfy basic human needs such as money, desire, and other material needs. For instance, interviews with informants who work as fishermen and also serve as couriers in narcotics smuggling in Batam revealed that they receive income of around IDR 20,000,000 per kilogram for each successful smuggling operation. In this context, actors from the source country must have already weighed

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the potential gains and losses; if they operated alone, the risk of being captured by law enforcement would be much higher.

CONCLUSION

Narcotics smuggling transnational crime cases occurring within the jurisdiction of BNNP Riau Islands in Batam involve various countries such as China, Malaysia, and Thailand, foreign nationals, and diverse modi operandi. The types of narcotics being smuggled include methamphetamine (shabu-shabu) and ecstasy. The smuggling is carried out by entering both legal and illegal ports, with the narcotics concealed inside the perpetrators' bodies and transported by fishermen acting as couriers. This is done by the smugglers from their countries of origin with the aim of minimizing potential losses, in line with subjective utilities theory, which explains that smugglers will consider, calculate, and take into account various supporting aspects to ensure the success of the smuggling operation. The choice of each modus operandi in the BNNP Riau Islands' jurisdiction is based on the perceived likelihood of success, the magnitude of potential profit, the possibility of failure, and the risk of losses that may be incurred.

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