

Youth perceptions of non-traditional security threats: A quantitative study in Malaysia



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ABSTRACT

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National security in the era of globalization is no longer limited to military threats alone but also involves non-traditional issues such as climate change, cyber-attacks, pandemics, and food crises. This study aims to assess the level of knowledge, concerns, and perceptions of youth towards non-traditional security threats in Malaysia. A quantitative approach was used by distributing questionnaires to 300 university students from various academic backgrounds. The study instrument consisted of 23 items on a five-point Likert scale and was analyzed descriptively using SPSS software. The results of the study showed that all three main variables were at high levels, namely the level of knowledge (mean = 4.30), the level of concerns (mean = 4.20), and the perception of national security in the future (mean = 4.40). This finding reflects the high awareness among youth towards non-traditional security issues and their perception of the need for a more comprehensive security approach that focuses on human well-being. The study discussion also relates the findings to Barry Buzan's post-Cold War security theory and the concept of human security (UNDP, 1994), and emphasizes the importance of education, new media, and global experiences in shaping the security perceptions of the younger generation. This study recommends that security literacy among youth continue to be strengthened as a foundation for building sustainable and inclusive national resilience.

Contribution/ Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature by empirically examining youth perceptions across multiple non-traditional security threats, rather than focusing on single-issue concerns. It provides one of the few quantitative analyses conducted in Malaysia, demonstrating that the country faces an increasingly complex spectrum of threats. These threats are linked to Buzan's security theory and the UNDP's human security concept.

1. INTRODUCTION

In an era of increasingly complex globalization, the concept of national security can no longer be viewed narrowly through the lens of armed conflict alone. Threats such as climate change, cyberattacks, pandemics, food crises, and disinformation are now major challenges to social and political stability (Bakri, Zarina, & Mohd, 2018).

These threats are categorized as non-traditional security threats. Youth, especially young people, will inherit the responsibility of dealing with future security issues. Therefore, it is important to understand the extent of their awareness and perception of this changing security landscape. This study aims to examine the level of understanding, concerns, and priorities of youth towards various forms of non-armed security threats, as well as to suggest how this perspective can help formulate a more inclusive and relevant national security policy.

2. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The concept of national security is no longer limited to military threats alone. Post-Cold War global changes and 21st-century challenges such as natural disasters, pandemics, cybercrime, and climate change have expanded the definition of security to include non-traditional dimensions that are more comprehensive and cross-sectoral. (Buzan, 1997) emphasized that today's security approach needs to focus not only on the state, but also on community security and human well-being.

In Malaysia, the National Security Policy has recognized the need to address these various forms of threats holistically. However, the level of public awareness of non-traditional security issues is still not sufficient, especially among the younger generation. Youth, as future policymakers and leaders, need to understand the diversity of security threats so that they can play a role in building national resilience proactively. Therefore, this study was conducted to assess the extent to which youth, especially university students, understand and respond to the concept of national security in the current context. This understanding is important in forming a more inclusive, responsive, and resilient national security approach to future challenges.

2.1. Development of Security Theory After the Cold War

In the disciplines of international relations and strategic studies, the traditional approach to security has been state-centric and emphasizes the military dimension. This concept highlights the protection of national borders, sovereignty, and defense strength as key elements to ensure national security. However, the end of the Cold War era has triggered a paradigm shift in security theory, which is now more open to a broader and more inclusive approach. Buzan (1997) a leading figure in the Copenhagen School, introduced a multidimensional security framework, encompassing five main sectors: political, economic, social, environmental, and societal security. He emphasized that security threats are no longer exclusive to military aggression or armed conflict. On the contrary, various forms of non-military threats are also capable of undermining the stability and survival of a country (Abidin & Jais, 2024). According to Buzan, security actors are no longer limited to states. Non-state actors such as civil society organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the private sector, and transnational communities also play an important role in addressing contemporary security issues. The concept of "securitization" he introduced explains how non-military issues such as public health, migration, and climate change can be raised as security issues when they are seen to threaten the survival of institutions or societies.

This development is also in line with the human security approach introduced in the UN Human Development Report in 1994. This approach brings a new perspective to the security discourse, namely by placing non-state individuals as the main focus. This aspect of human security covers economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political security (Abidin & Jais, 2024; Chaijaroenwatana & Haque, 2020).

In short, post-Cold War security theory has evolved into a more comprehensive and multi-dimensional approach. It no longer focuses solely on military threats but also involves various non-traditional risks based on humanity and the well-being of the people (Chaijaroenwatana & Haque, 2020).

2.2. Non-Traditional Security: The Reality of Contemporary Threats

As post-Cold War security theories have developed, the focus on non-traditional security (NTS) has increasingly gained attention among policymakers and scholars. Non-traditional security refers to threats that do

not involve direct military conflict but have a major impact on national stability and societal well-being, such as natural disasters, climate change, disease outbreaks, cross-border crime, food crises, cybersecurity, and economic uncertainty (Prime Minister's Office of Malaysia, 2021). According to Chaijaroenwatana and Haque (2020), NTS is a security approach that focuses on human survival and well-being, no longer solely on state sovereignty. These threats are transnational in nature, transcend political boundaries, and require the cooperation of various parties, including non-state actors, to be addressed effectively.

In the Malaysian context, a study by Bakri et al. (2018) shows that the country is now facing an increasingly complex spectrum of non-traditional threats. These include social tensions between races and religions, the issue of illegal immigrants (PATI), refugees, ideological radicalization, cyber-attacks, the climate crisis, global inflation, disease outbreaks such as COVID-19, and energy and food supply vulnerabilities. These threats reflect the interconnected nature of security across political, economic, social, environmental, and public health aspects. More importantly, it demonstrates that today's security challenges can no longer be addressed solely through military or border defense approaches.

Chaijaroenwatana and Haque (2020) also emphasize that non-traditional security has three main characteristics. First, it has a broader scope, covering issues such as poverty, environmental pollution, economic imbalance, organized crime, and discrimination. Second, this approach is human-centered, where security is defined based on the well-being of individuals and communities, not just national security. Third, these threats are transnational in nature, requiring regional and global cooperation to comprehensively address their impacts and implications. In conclusion, non-traditional security has not only become an important part of the modern national security agenda but also reflects the urgent need to expand the framework of security thinking towards a more holistic, responsive, and human-centered one.

2.3. The Concept of National Security in the Malaysian Context

The concept of national security traditionally focuses on the protection of a country from external threats such as military attacks or foreign invasion. National security is traditionally defined as a state in which a country is in a stable, peaceful, and free from any form of threat that could threaten the survival of its people, system of government, territorial integrity, and the stability of national institutions. Security is often associated with military strength, national sovereignty, and the use of defense strategies to repel any form of aggression against national territory and institutions. However, the understanding of national security has undergone significant development, especially after the Cold War era.

According to Chaijaroenwatana and Haque (2020), contemporary security approaches are no longer limited to military threats alone. Non-traditional threats such as economic instability, social unrest, health crises, and environmental challenges are also recognized as factors that can undermine the stability and security of a country. This marks a shift from a purely state-centered approach to a more inclusive and multidimensional security framework.

In the Malaysian context, the National Security Policy (NSP) defines security as:

"A state of being free from any threat to the core values of the country, whether from within or without" (Prime Minister's Office of Malaysia, 2021).

As a master security policy, the DKN outlines nine core values of national security, namely sovereignty and territorial integrity, socio-political stability, national cohesion, good governance, economic integrity, social justice, sustainable development, people's security, and international recognition. All of these values form a comprehensive security framework that encompasses not only military aspects but also political, economic, and social dimensions. In short, national security was originally centered on military and territorial protection but is now increasingly seen as a broader concept that encompasses traditional threats, namely military and non-traditional ones such as humanitarian, economic, and environmental issues.

2.4. Research Problem

Although global awareness of non-traditional security threats is increasing, the level of understanding and concern among Malaysian youth regarding these issues has not yet been clearly identified. Threats such as climate change, cybercrime, pandemics, and geopolitical uncertainties require responses that are not only based on government policy but also depend on the support and awareness of society, especially the younger generation. The questions that need to be discussed are:

- i. To what extent do youth in Malaysia understand non-traditional security issues?
- ii. What is the level of concern among Malaysian youth regarding various forms of non-traditional security threats in the context of national security?
- iii. What is their perception of national security in the future?

Without a clear understanding of this awareness, Malaysia may remain trapped in an outdated security paradigm that is no longer relevant to future challenges.

2.5. Objectives of the Study

This study was conducted with the aim of:

- i. Identifying the level of knowledge of youth in Malaysia on non-traditional security issues, including aspects such as climate change, cybersecurity, public health, and natural disasters.
- ii. Analyzing youth concerns on various forms of non-traditional security threats in the context of national security.
- iii. Assessing youth perceptions of a more holistic and resilient national security in the future.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study used a quantitative survey-based approach to assess the level of understanding, concern, and preferences of youth towards various forms of non-traditional security threats. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to collect data systematically and analyze it objectively to identify patterns and relationships between variables (Creswell, 2002; Ghanad, 2023).

The target population consisted of Malaysian youth across various fields of study such as social sciences, engineering, information technology, and health sciences. The minimum sample size was set at 350 respondents, selected through simple random sampling to ensure adequate representativeness and avoid selection bias. However, only 300 responses could be used.

Data were collected through an online questionnaire distributed using digital platforms such as Google Forms. The questionnaire link was sent via social media and peer groups to ensure a wide reach. The study questionnaire consisted of three main sections: level of knowledge, level of concern, and perceived preferences towards non-traditional security issues. Items were constructed based on references from previous studies and administered using a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree) (Gall & Borg, 1989). The results of reliability analysis using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient showed satisfactory values as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient for each questionnaire construct.

Construct	No. of items	Cronbach's alpha value
Level of knowledge	8	0.78
Level of concern	8	0.82
Perception of priority of security threats	7	0.85
Total	23	0.88

All Cronbach's Alpha values were above 0.70, indicating good and consistent reliability (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Therefore, this instrument is considered suitable for use in real studies. Data were analyzed using the

Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26. Descriptive analysis (mean, percentage, and standard deviation) was used to describe the level of understanding, concerns, and perceptions of youth in general.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

4.1. Descriptive Analysis of Respondent Profiles

A total of 300 questionnaires were analyzed for this study. This number was sufficient for statistical analysis purposes in line with the recommendations of Hair, Black, Babin, and Anderson (2010) and Coakes and Steed (2003), who recommended a sample size of at least five to ten times the number of variables tested. Therefore, a sample size of 300 is very suitable for further analysis.

Table 2 shows a summary of the demographic background of the respondents. The majority of respondents were female (79%), while males represented 21%. In terms of age, 70% of the respondents were between 21 and 23 years old. Most were Year 1 students (93.3%), and 98% of them were pursuing their studies at the Bachelor's Degree level. In terms of field of study, youth from the social sciences field were the largest group (77.3%), followed by engineering (22.7%).

Table 2. Descriptive analysis of respondent profiles.

Profile	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	63	21.0
Female	237	79.0
Age		
18–20	41	13.7
21–23	210	70.0
24–26	38	12.7
27 above	11	3.7
Year of study		
1	280	93.3
2	3	1.0
4	17	5.7
Level of academic		
First degree	294	98.0
Diploma	6	2.0
Courses		
Social science	232	77.3
Engineering	68	22.7

4.2. Descriptive Analysis of Security Perception Variables

A descriptive test was used to determine the level of understanding, concern, and preference of respondents towards non-traditional security issues. This analysis was conducted to answer research questions 1 to 3, as stated in the study objectives. The researchers calculated the mean score and standard deviation (SD) for each main construct. For the purpose of interpreting the level of respondents' views, the mean score was divided into three categories based on the recommendations of Healey (2005), as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Healey (2005) mean score range.

Mean score	Interpretation level
1.00 – 2.33	Low
2.34 – 3.66	Median
3.67 – 5.00	High

The results of descriptive tests on the three main variables in this study, namely the level of knowledge, the level of concern, and the priority of security threats, are summarized in Table 4. All three variables show a high

mean level, with a mean value exceeding 4.00. This indicates that, in general, youth have a high level of awareness of non-traditional security issues. The highest level of agreement was recorded for the variable of priority of security threats (mean = 4.40, sp = 0.40), followed by the level of knowledge (mean = 4.30, sp = 0.45), and the level of concern (mean = 4.20, sp = 0.50). This finding suggests that youth tend to consider security issues such as food crises, cybersecurity, and climate change as important and deserving priorities in the national security discourse. Overall, the low standard deviation (SD) value indicates that youth perceptions are consistent and not significantly different from each other. This implies that the level of awareness of non-traditional security is high and nearly uniform among respondents.

Table 4. Descriptive tests for the three main study variables.

Variables	No. of items	Mean (M)	Standard deviation (SD)	Interpretation
Level of knowledge	8	4.30	0.45	Tinggi
Level of concern	8	4.20	0.50	Tinggi
Perception of priority of security threats	7	4.40	0.40	Tinggi

In general, these results reflect the readiness and concern of youth towards non-traditional security issues that are increasingly complex in the contemporary context.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The study discussion is based on the objectives and research questions that have been outlined, specifically regarding the level of knowledge, concerns, and perceptions of youth priorities towards non-traditional security threats. This discussion aims to analyze the extent to which youth understand and pay attention to current security issues that do not directly involve military conflict but still threaten the stability and well-being of the country, such as climate change, cybersecurity, health crises, and economic uncertainty. This study uses a quantitative approach in the form of a questionnaire and involves 300 civilian youth who are pursuing their studies at universities from various fields of study and academic backgrounds. The findings are analyzed descriptively to see the general pattern of youth understanding, guidance, and perception of non-traditional security issues. The discussion will also describe the findings obtained according to the main variables of the study and then discuss them with reference to contemporary security theories such as the concept of civil security and the post-Cold War non-traditional security framework introduced by Buzan (1997) and supported by the National Security Council (2021).

5.1. Level of Youth Knowledge on Non-Traditional Security Threats

The study findings show that youth, especially young people, have a high level of knowledge on non-traditional security issues (mean = 4.30). This knowledge is likely influenced by access to media, post-COVID-19 experiences, as well as exposure through higher education. In the context of this study, it was found that youth are active users of social media and spend a lot of time interacting through digital platforms. New media has become an important part of their daily lives, including for educational, entertainment, and social networking purposes (Ruzian, Zinatul, & Nurhidayah, 2019).

A study by Chaijaroenwatana and Haque (2020) also emphasized the importance of public awareness of contemporary issues such as pandemics, climate change, and digital security, which are now increasingly part of the national security landscape. This high level of knowledge is an important foundation in shaping a smart and effective response to cross-border threats. Furthermore, the use of new media among youth needs to be controlled so that it does not lead to cybersecurity risks such as digital bullying, online fraud, and personal data intrusion (Ruzian et al., 2019).

5.2. Level of Youth Concern for Non-Traditional Security Issues

The level of youth concern for non-traditional security issues is also high (mean = 4.20). This finding shows that youth are not only aware of current security issues but also concerned about their impact on society and the country. This concern illustrates the role of higher education institutions in shaping civic awareness and instilling the value of social responsibility among students. This finding is also in line with the concept of human security introduced in the [United Nations Development Programme \(UNDP\) \(1994\)](#), which emphasizes the well-being of individuals as the basis for a more holistic security. In addition, the results of the study show that increasing the level of youth concern can also be achieved through direct exposure such as socialization sessions. A study by [Khoirunnisa and Risnawaty \(2023\)](#) found that awareness of climate change and forest fire issues increased significantly after youth attended sharing sessions. At the initial stage, only 57% of youth were able to answer pre-test questions related to these issues, but after the session, almost all youth showed increased knowledge and concern in the post-test. This finding shows that concern for non-traditional threats can be significantly increased through appropriate and interactive educational approaches.

5.3. Perception of National Security in the Future

Perception of national security in the future was recorded as the highest among the three study variables (mean = 4.40). This reflects a high recognition among youth of the importance of issues such as cyber-attacks, climate change, food crises, and migration as major security challenges today. This finding aligns with the development of national policy as outlined in the [National Security Council \(2021\)](#) and a study by [Bakri et al. \(2018\)](#), which lists various forms of non-traditional threats that have a major impact on national stability. In the context of education and public awareness, youth are seen as a strategic group that needs to be given continuous exposure to the reality of current security because they have the potential to become leaders and policymakers in the future. Education about national territorial awareness among youth is very important. Firstly, it helps them develop a global perspective, understand international and geopolitical issues more rationally, and be able to contribute constructive ideas and suggestions for national development. Secondly, it also instills and strengthens the spirit of patriotism among the younger generation so that they are more sensitive and loving towards their homeland ([Sun, 2024](#)).

A study by [Khoirunnisa and Risnawaty \(2023\)](#) also showed that youth who attended the socialization session began to recognize climate change as a critical security issue. The post-test results in the study showed that almost all youth recognized climate change as an urgent global issue and closely related to non-traditional security threats. This proves that exposure and education can increase youth's priority towards issues that are often not given attention in the conventional security framework. Overall, the discussion in this study shows that youth have a high level of awareness of non-traditional security issues, encompassing three main dimensions: the level of knowledge, the level of concern, and the level of perception of national security in the future. This study proves that youth today are no longer limited to a conventional understanding of security but are increasingly open to new dimensions that are closely related to the well-being of the people and the stability of the country.

The high level of youth knowledge reflects the effectiveness of higher education, media exposure, and direct experience with global issues such as pandemics and the climate crisis. The high level of concern indicates that youth are not only aware of but also concerned about the long-term impact of these issues on the country and society. Meanwhile, the youth's priority on non-traditional security as the main threat today proves that young people are increasingly sensitive and willing to play a more active role in the national security discourse.

This discussion also emphasizes the importance of youth as a strategic group that deserves attention in national security policies and approaches. They are the heirs of the country's leadership and future policymakers who need to be equipped with a deep understanding of the current threat landscape, including aspects of digital security, the environment, public health, and global uncertainty. Continuous exposure through formal education and socialization programs has been proven to increase awareness and instill more inclusive and realistic values of

patriotism among youth. In conclusion, the shift in security paradigms from a military approach to human and non-traditional security is not only relevant but increasingly urgent in the current context. Thus, this study supports the need to strengthen security literacy among youth as a foundation for the sustainability of national security in the future.

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Transparency: The authors state that the manuscript is honest, truthful, and transparent, that no key aspects of the investigation have been omitted, and that any differences from the study as planned have been clarified. This study followed all writing ethics.

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