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Assessing The Whole-of-Government Approach in Malaysia's Defence

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Abstract

The Whole-of-Government (WoG) approach introduced as a key framework in the 2019 Defence White Paper reflects Malaysia's effort to transform its defence ecosystem from a military-centric model to one that emphasizes inter-agency coordination. However, how this approach has been operationalised in Malaysia's defence remains unclear. This paper provides an exploratory assessment on WoG practice in Malaysia's defence sector using Ansell and Gash's Collaborative Governance framework for analysis. It utilises a qualitative case study method to examine how the WoG approach has been embedded in Malaysia's defence and identifies the main challenges limiting its operationalization. Data was collected through document analysis of policy documents, government reports and academic publications. Additionally, six semi-structured interviews were conducted to further supplement the data gathered. The analysis examines five key dimensions: starting conditions, institutional design, facilitative leadership, collaborative process and outcomes. The findings reveal that while Malaysia possesses a strong legal and conceptual base for inter-agency cooperation as its starting condition, a key pattern across the other dimensions is that WoG implementation in Malaysia is generally crisis driven. The paper argues that Malaysia's WoG approach still lacks continuity and institutional maturity required for long-term effectiveness. It concludes with several recommendations to address the challenges and improve the implementation of Malaysia's WoG approach.

Keywords: Defence; Malaysia; Whole of Government; Collective Governance; Inter-Agency Cooperation

Introduction

Just as the contemporary understanding of security has changed, most countries' defence policies have also evolved, moving from the traditional military-focused approaches to more integrated and strategic approaches. This transformation is in line with the understanding that contemporary security challenges are no longer defined by conventional state boundaries and security concerns stem from human concern rather than territories (UNDP, 1994). The increasingly complex security landscape encompassing both traditional and non-traditional security requires coordinated responses across multiple sectors and levels of governance.

One of the important evolutions in national defence is the Whole-of-Government (WoG) concept. The idea arguably came about in the United Kingdom during the late 1990s public sector reforms, notably in connection with the UK Cabinet Office's Modernising Government White Paper of 1999. The related term "Joined-Up Government" was used during the Tony Blair administration beginning in 1997, emphasizing greater inter-departmental collaboration and breakdown of bureaucratic silos.[1] This approach promotes collaboration between government agencies to address national security problems more effectively.[2]

Recognition of WoG defence and security efforts have also become more important in the United States, for example, where President Barack Obama noted that "Homeland Security is indistinguishable from National Security" in his choice to merge Homeland Security Council and National Security Council.[3] Nordic states, including Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Finland, have converged through platforms such as NORDEFCO, reflecting a tradition of civil-military integration, inter-agency routines, and public buy-in, underpinned by consistent legal frameworks.[4] In Southeast Asia, Singapore's Total Defence strategy rapidly formed the foundation for public education campaigns and policy integration across government, supported by robust legal and financial frameworks.[5] In contrast, Indonesia's '*Bela Negara*' (State Defence) programme represents a more recent, yet ambitious, effort to engage society and integrate national defence objectives with the territorial function of the armed forces, formalised through its 2015 Defence White Paper and a multi-stakeholder action plan.[6]

In Malaysia, this recognition has been formalized through the concept of Comprehensive Defence (*Pertahanan Menyeluruh* or HANRUH for short), which has evolved to encompass both 'Whole of Government and Whole of Society (WoGoS) approaches as outlined in the 2019 Defence White Paper.[7] The WoGoS approach extends this collaborative framework to include not only governmental actors but also private sector stakeholders, civil society groups, and the general public. Malaysia, like many countries, faces new and complex security challenges such as cyber threats, terrorism, pandemics, and natural disasters. Additionally, cross cutting issues like human and civil rights and these issues cannot be solved by the military alone.

That being said, the key factor to achieving WoGoS is to ensure that the WoG aspect of it is strong and effective. So far, there is limited academic research that focuses specifically on how the WoG approach is working or failing in Malaysia's defence sector. Most existing studies rely on theoretical discussions or case studies from Western contexts that may not reflect Malaysia's unique political and administrative system.[8] Therefore, this paper ask, 'how has the WoG approach in Malaysia been operationalised since the introduction of the 2019 Defence White Paper?' and 'what are the challenges faced which limits its institutionalisation and effectiveness?' It contends that Malaysia's WoG approach in its defence is mostly driven by necessity and lacks long term continuity and institutionalisation.

The paper employs a qualitative case study method when conducting this research as it best covers the breadth and type of information needed. Data was first collected through document research which included official policy documents such as the Malaysian Defence White Paper (2019), the National Security Policy (2021-2025), and National Security Council Act 2016 (Act 776), as well as parliamentary reports, strategic reviews, and academic publications. Additional sources of documents were also included, and this comprised of institutional reports from organizations like the OECD (2021-2022), Transparency International (2020, 2024), and the National Cyber Security Agency Malaysia (NACSA), along with credible media articles and think tank analyses (e.g., The Diplomat, RSIS Commentary). This was supplemented with six semi-structured interviews with individuals directly involved in Malaysia's defence and security policymaking. Permission for the interviews was obtained during the colloquium as part of the UKM-MPAT programme batch

2025. Interviewees were identified based on their expertise and roles within the Ministry of Defence (MINDEF), the National Security Council (MKN), the Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF), and policy institutions. All interviewees provided consent to be cited by name in this study, except one who preferred to be identified by the callsign 'Gambit'. Three of the interviews were conducted face-to-face and three were conducted over Google Meet and all the interviews were recorded. The details for the interview can be found in Table 1.

Table 1: Interviewees and Interview Details

No	Details
1	Ms Zetty Noor Akmar Abd Majid, Chief Assistant Director of the National Intelligence and Crisis Management Division, National Security Council (MKN), via Google Meet on 8 October 2025
2	Mr Sahipulhijaiman, Deputy Undersecretary (Policy and Planning), MINDEF Malaysia at MINDEF Kuala Lumpur, on 18 Sept 2025
3	Cdr Dr Muhamad Zafran Wahab RMN, Assistant Chief of Staff (Training and Development), NTDC; Former Staff Officer 1 (Operations), NTF, via Google Meet on 16 October 2025
4	Brig Gen Muzafar Shah Mosam Shah, Director, Kor Perkhidmatan Diraja Former Director Future Force Sec at PUSPAHANAS on 26 September 2025
5	Gambit, Former Staff Officer Air Safety (Operations), Exercise COMSEC 2024 via Google Meet on 16 October 2025.
6	Professor Dr Adam Leong Ko Hwee, Director, Centre for Defence and International Security Studies (CDISS), UPNM at PUSPAHANAS on 10 October 2025

Source: As Compiled by Authors.

Following that, the information from the documents and interview is then analysed thematically, utilizing a collaborative governance theory to evaluate the implementation of Malaysia's WoG approach in its defence. The next section begins by looking at the idea of collaborative governance and explaining the theoretical framework used for analysis. This is followed with an assessment to Malaysia's WOG approach in defence, focusing on the efforts carried out during the COVID 19 pandemic and recent disaster management, in particular. Finally, it considers the prospect and way forward for Malaysia.

Collaborative Governance for Assessing WoG Approaches

One of the challenges in assessing any WoG approach is the lack of a clear framework. Aoki (et al.) noted that the WoG term is used across a variety of sectors such as public service, health as well as safety and security, all of which can have a variety of strategies to implement WoG approaches.[9] In the defence and security sector, Doyle notes that a WoG approach refers to "military and civilian agencies working across boundaries to achieve shared goals and an integrated government response."[10] On this basis, the WoG approach is also generally considered in conjunction with the idea of collaborative governance.[11]

Collaborative governance marks a clear shift away from old, top-down styles of public administration where instead of one central authority making all the decisions, it is about building partnerships, sharing information, and making decisions together as noted in Ansell and Gash.[12] This kind of approach is especially important in the field of security, where no single agency is capable

of handling the growing complexity of threats on its own. Institutions can combine their strengths, avoid duplication, and respond more effectively through working jointly. As pointed out in Cook, the WoG approach is "a collaborative and coordinated approach" and "a blending of civilian and military power."[13]

The discourse on collaborative governance spans various sectors of governance, from e-government,[14] public health,[15] and crisis management.[16] For example, looking at the research on crisis management, Boin and Bynander argue that collaboration helps governments become more resilient, and successful collaboration comes from preparation, need for formal platforms that work, effective communication as well as the help of modern information tools.[17] Parker (et al.) adds that public private partnerships (PPPs) are particularly valuable, since they bring in the resources, expertise, and networks of the private sector to strengthen disaster preparedness and response.[18] In e-governance, Breaugh (et al.) looked at five case studies across Europe, focusing on "cross-organisational digital platforms to improve government services" and found that institutional design matters in the early stage of implementation but leadership matters more through the latter stages.[19]

Global governance studies also reinforce this view. Christensen and Lægreid present collaborative governance as part of wider reform efforts aimed at breaking down rigid bureaucracies.[20] Similarly, the OECD identifies the conditions that help collaboration succeed: strong political leadership, clear rules and structures, incentives that encourage cooperation, and robust systems for monitoring and accountability.[21] These ideas are useful benchmarks for judging how collaborative approaches work in security settings.

While these theoretical foundations are well established in Western contexts, their application in Malaysia's security and disaster management sectors has also gained significant scholarly attention in recent years. Empirical studies of Malaysia's disaster management demonstrate WoG choreography in action, particularly in coordinating multi-agency responses during the 2021 floods in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor. Research on civil-military coordination in Kuala Lumpur's urban disaster management underscore the importance of systematic coordination frameworks in urban disaster settings where multiple stakeholders must respond rapidly to complex emergencies.[22] Coordination, communication, roles and responsibilities, and community awareness were also identified as critical determinants of effective disaster response operations.[23]

From a broader public administration perspective, the successful implementation of WoG approaches depends not merely on inter-agency willingness but on systematic structural and technical enablers. Critical success factors for implementation of WoG approach in e-government services includes leadership commitment, integrated services policy, organizational coordination, and technical interoperability. These are essential for breaking down silos and delivering seamless government services. The research framework distinguishes between technical factors (such as infrastructure, interoperability, security, and analytics) and non-technical factors (political support, budget allocation, and collaborative culture), both of which are necessary for effective cross-boundary governance.[24]

Complementary literature further illustrates the breadth of collaborative governance experiments across Malaysian policy domains. In the realm of public-sector reform and economic transformation, there is research on PEMANDU (Performance and Management Delivery Unit) as a prism to examine collaborative processes.[25] Additionally, in migration and labour policy, assessment of collaborative governance in Malaysia's foreign worker policy also found that while some administrative collaboration components exist (inter-ministerial coordination and stakeholder consultations), the overall level of collaborative governance remains low.[26]

In short, the effort to implement and assess collaborative governance and WoG approaches in Malaysia reveals a positive pivot for Malaysia's governance strategy. It is therefore important to also assess the effectiveness of Malaysia's WoG approach in its defence strategy. This research chooses to utilize the framework by Ansell and Gash which looks at five aspects of collaborative governance. These are the starting condition, institutional design, facilitative leadership, and how the collaborative process influence outcomes.[27] Overall, this framework offers a structured method to assess how Malaysia's WoG defence approach has crossed agencies such as the National Security Council (MKN), Ministry of Defence (MINDEF), National Disaster Management Agency (NADMA), and Royal Malaysian Police (PDRM).

Starting Conditions: Evolution of Malaysia's defence Policy

Malaysia's defence policy has evolved since independence, shifting from territorial protection to confronting complex, non-traditional threats such as terrorism, cybercrime, and maritime insecurity.[28] As a whole, major defence policy innovations in the country tend to happen as a reaction to significant strategic or external events, such as regional confrontation, domestic insurgencies, or external incursion (like the case of the Lahad Datu incursion), rather than being the product of continuous, long-term institutional planning.[29] The evolution of Malaysia's defence approach can be categorized into three broad phases: (1) Post Independence Dependence and Consolidation (1957-1969), (2) Nationalization and Institutionalization (1970-2009), and (3) Policy Formalization and Modernization (2010-present) as presented in Table 1.

Table 2: Evolution of Malaysia's Defence Approach (1957-2019)

Period	Leadership	Policy / Framework	Key Features
1957-1969	Tunku Abdul Rahman, Tun Abdul Razak	AMDA (1957), FPDA (1971), MAGERAN	External defense under UK, internal focus on insurgency, start of local security institution building.
1970-2009	Tun Abdul Razak, Tun Hussein Onn, Tun Dr. Mahathir, Tun Abdullah	KESBAN, NSC, HANRUH	Integration of development and security, institutionalization of inter-agency coordination, early WoG elements.
2010-2019	Dato' Seri Najib Razak	NDP 2010, NSC Act 2016, DWP 2019	Policy formalization, HANRUH transformed to Comprehensive Defence, institutionalization of WoG principles.
Post 2019 (Future Outlook)	Current government	DWP implementation, Defence Transformation Plan 2050	Ongoing effort to operationalize Whole of Government and Whole of Society coordination.

Source: Compiled by Authors.

Malaysia's post-independence defence relied on British military support under the 1957 Anglo-Malayan Defence Agreement (AMDA) which placed the country's external defence under the United Kingdom while the Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF) managed internal security and counterinsurgency.[30] After the 1969 riots, the *Majlis Gerakan Negara* or National Operations Council (MAGERAN) centralized crisis management, leading to the formation of the National Security Council

(NSC). Later, the 1971 Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) replaced AMDA, ensuring continuity in regional cooperation.[31]

The 1970s and 1980s marked Malaysia's shift from external dependence to nationally driven defence governance. The Security and Development (*Keselamatan dan Pembangunan* - KESBAN) concept was introduced, integrating socio-economic programmes with military operations to win hearts and minds. It was through KESBAN that the cooperation between civil and security agencies began, linking rural development with counterinsurgency measures.[32] During Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's administration (1981-2003), Malaysia broadened its defence priorities to include industrialization, technology transfer, and peacekeeping. For example, it was during this period that local defence industries with companies such as DRB-HICOM Defence Technologies Sdn. Bhd. (DEFTECH) and SME Ordnance were founded. Malaysia also began taking part in United Nations (UN) deployments under peacekeeping initiatives.[33]

Efforts to develop a comprehensive defence policy began in 1981 when Malaysia's Ministry of Defence drafted the first Defence White Paper proposal under Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad (Abdul Rahman Adam, 1997). The proposal was tabled in 1986, but the Cabinet rejected its publication as a White Paper. Although the document was not released publicly, it was approved internally by the National Security Council and issued as the classified *Dasar Pertahanan Negara* (National Defence Policy) in 1986. The core ideas from this early draft were subsequently carried forward through later revisions and resurfaced in the open National Defence Policy (NDP) published in 2010, Malaysia's first public defence framework.[34] The NDP introduced HANRUH as the foundation for national defence which advanced Malaysia's move towards promoting inter-agency and public cooperation (Ministry of Defence Malaysia 2010).

Institutional Design

Institutional design defines how collaboration is structured and governed, and these include frameworks that ensure inclusiveness, clear decision-making rules, and transparency.[35] Although Malaysia has well-established legal instruments and policy frameworks to guide inter-agency coordination, the actual design often reinforces hierarchy instead of genuine collaboration.

Malaysia's coordination structure is anchored in the National Security Council Act 2016 [Act 776], which empowers the National Security Council (MKN) to formulate, implement, and monitor national security policies. The Act institutionalized the Council's authority over civil and military agencies, granting it the legal basis to direct national crisis responses.[36] While the law strengthened coherence, studies found that its centralized command limited inter-agency autonomy and increased dependency on the Prime Minister's Department.[37]

Complementing this framework is *Arahan* MKN No. 20 (MKN Directive No. 20), later reclassified as *Arahan* NADMA No. 1 (NADMA Directive No. 1) which outlined disaster and crisis management procedures (MKN, 2024). These directives structured coordination during the COVID-19 pandemic through a tiered system, strategic, ministerial, and technical, ensuring a single reporting line from state to federal level according to Zetty.[38] Interviewees also noted that coordination was mainly activated during emergencies, showing that existing mechanisms remain reactive rather than routine governance practices, a pattern also observed during National Task Force (NTF) operations under the MKN,[39] a joint operation task force led by the Malaysian Armed Forces that was established in May 2020.[40]

Additionally, the Defence White Paper 2019 (DWP) and the National Security Policy 2021-2025 (NSP) form the foundation for integrating Malaysia's security and development agendas. The DWP explicitly aligns defence policy with the NSP and foreign policy priorities through a whole-of-

government and whole-of-society approach, linking national defence to broader economic prosperity and development objectives (Malaysia Ministry of Defence, 2020). The DWP framed Malaysia as a 'maritime nation with continental roots' and promoted inter-service and inter-ministerial cooperation. It also proposed that a Defence Investment Committee be led by the Prime Minister should be established, but so far bureaucratic fragmentation and the lack of a unified resource framework have hindered any significant progress from being made.[41]

The NSP 2021-2025 further outlined nine core values for Malaysia's defence, including territorial integrity, socio-political stability, and good governance (NSP 2021). It reaffirmed that security is a shared responsibility, but the NSP lacked any enforcement mechanisms to materialize this sharing of responsibility.[42]

In general, institutional coordination in Malaysia's defence involves multiple agencies beyond MINDEF. The National Disaster Management Agency (NADMA), Royal Malaysian Police (PDRM), and Malaysian Armed Forces (ATM) form the operational triangle for crisis response. At the policy level, the National Defence Policy 2010 introduced *Pertahanan Menyeluruh* (Comprehensive Defence) as a precursor to the WoGoS concept. The Defence White Paper (DWP) later expanded this into the Comprehensive Security (ComSec) model, linking military readiness with economic, social, and environmental resilience. However, implementation of this model has relied on ad hoc inter-ministerial committees with missing or temporary centralization.

For example, a study by the Integrated Inter-agency Coordination for Effective Disaster Management in Klang Valley found that there was good cooperation during exercises but in real operations there was limited information sharing and unclear command structures.[43] Similarly, Zafran also agreed that the NTF operations demonstrated how the Joint Common Operating Picture enabled shared awareness among agencies. The NTF coordinated nineteen agencies under the National Security Council during the *Op Benteng* which was a national operation established to patrol borders and enhance COVID-19 emergency measures.[44]

This coordination improved information exchange and reduced issues of overlapping patrols.[45] However, the absence of a standing multi-agency operation centre still disrupted continuity. Brig Gen Muzafar shared that during the early COVID-19 response efforts, agencies worked under separate data systems until the Joint Crisis Operations Centre (JCOC) under the *Pusat Informasi Pengurusan Operasi Nasional* (National Operation Management Information Centre - PIPON) unified coordination, showing that collaboration emerged from improvisation rather than by design.[46]

One issue that presents a double-edged sword in Malaysia's defence governance is that of overlapping jurisdiction. Duplication between ministries tends to happen which causes temporary confusion during emergencies.[47] During his interview, Zafran explained that before the establishment of the NTF, overlapping patrols caused duplication of effort but it also improved coverage. When unified under NTF command, however, overlaps were reduced and efficiency increased but flexibility declined. The centralization of patrols under the NTF improved coordination during 2020 to 2022 such as the *Op Benteng* but this lacked permanence. However, overlaps can also enhance flexibility by allowing agencies to act simultaneously, reducing dependence on a single authority. The challenge lies not in the overlaps themselves but in ensuring coordination mechanisms and standard operating procedures prevent miscommunication and sustain institutional resilience. In 2024, Malaysia conducted a Comprehensive Security Exercise Programme (*Program Latih Amal Keselamatan Menyeluruh* [EX COMSEC]) where inter-agency compatibility issues came to light such as radios that do not match making communication tricky as shared by Gambit.[48]

Procedural rigidity also remains a key institutional constraint. The NSC Act provides top-level direction but limits participation from civil society and private actors. This means recommendations to included local authorities and NGOs in decision-making have never been

institutionalized.[49] Zafran observed that under the NTF, procedures were designed for government agencies but remained closed to non-government partners, with overall coordination focused on government enforcement bodies and minimal to no external collaboration. Professor Dr Adam Leong pointed out that while the 2019 Defence White Paper introduced the Whole-of-Government and Whole-of-Society concept, there was no inter-ministerial structure to make it operational.[50] Coordination existed in principle but lacked a standing body for continuity.

Altogether, the NSC Act 2016 lacks enabling mechanisms for long-term WoG institutionalization[51]. This excessive centralization limits civilian agency ownership, something pointed out by Leong in his interview. This was echoed by Muzafar, who also stressed involving NGOs such as Mercy Malaysia and the International Committee of the Red Cross. Malaysia's defence planning leaves out NGOs and community groups at the sidelines, unlike routine inclusion seen in Nordic countries.[52]

Malaysia's institutional design combines legal centralization with procedural cooperation. Frameworks such as the NSC Act 2016, Directive 20 / NADMA No. 1, DWP 2019, and NSP 2021-2025 establish a coordination architecture, yet this remains hierarchical, reactive, and limited in its inclusivity. Zafran observed that coordination improved under NTF's unified command, but this lacked permanence once operations ended, a pattern echoed by Professor Leong, who noted Malaysia's frameworks remain top-down and crisis-driven. While centralization enhances short-term efficiency, it in turn weakens agency autonomy and institutional learning.[53] Unlike Singapore which maintains regular teamwork routines backed by strong rules, Malaysia relies more on temporary measures set up for emergencies which means Malaysia's institutions excel in crises but struggle with peacetime coordination.[54]

Table 3: Institutional Design Challenges in Malaysia's WoG Framework

Dimension	Key Malaysian Elements	Challenges
Formal Foundations	NSC Act 2016, Arahan NADMA No. 1	Reactive activation- centralization limits autonomy
Policy Integration	DWP 2019, NSP 2021-2025	No unified resources- stalled reforms
Overlaps/Duplication	NTF/JCOC models	Initial turf wars- post-crisis dissolution

Source: Synthesized by Authors.

Facilitative Leadership

In the collaborative governance model, leadership serves as the bridge between institutional rules and collective behaviour. Ansell and Gash describe facilitative leaders as those who mediate conflict, promote inclusivity, and sustain commitment across organizational boundaries.[55] In Malaysia, leadership plays an even greater role because decision-making is centralized, and personality-driven. Hence, the success of WoG initiatives often depends on how leaders interpret collaboration within their political and bureaucratic context. Historically, Malaysia's defence and security leadership has followed a directive model concentrated in a few senior figures.

The Ministry of Defence and MKN depend heavily on the authority of ministers and senior commanders for coordination.[56] During the pandemic Zetty stated that the Prime Minister chaired daily MKN meetings, followed by sessions led by the Senior Ministers for Defence and Economy. This enabled rapid decision-making but deepened reliance on key individuals. The Deputy Director General of MKN noted that coordination was effective "when personalities aligned,"[57] suggesting

cooperation depended on interpersonal rapport rather than institutional design. Muzafar also stressed that leadership continuity is what sustains collaboration in Malaysia. He pointed out how the Vice Admiral, Commander of the National Task Force's facilitative style promoted joint use of assets and intelligence, describing this as a "high level coordination that allowed manpower, assets, and logistics to be optimized collectively."

Frequent changes in government between 2020 and 2021 exposed the fragility of Malaysia's collaborative leadership. Political transitions delayed the implementation of DWP reforms, creating uncertainty about policy ownership and continuity.[58] The NSC Act's also centralized authority which could politicize security management if leadership changes disrupt institutional routines.[59] The 80% reduction in illegal entries achieved during *Op Benteng* was undone by its 2022 dissolution amid political shifts where repeated briefings delayed coordination.[60] Zetty also confirmed that leadership shifts during COVID 19 required repeated briefings to new ministers, consuming valuable time. Despite these disruptions, she acknowledged that former Prime Minister Ismail Sabri, in his role first as Defence Minister and later as Prime Minister, provided continuity that stabilized coordination between military and civilian agencies. His experience in both roles ensured consistent policy direction and prevented fragmentation.

The concern also lies in how Malaysian leaders often equate control with efficiency, limiting consultation and decision cycles in defence governance are dominated by executive fiat, restricting innovation from lower levels.[61] Something echoed by Adam Leong who noted that 'the system only works when someone at the top pushes it and everyone else feels the urgency to cooperate.' Zetty experienced this during the pandemic, when agencies complied rapidly but struggled to interpret broad instructions, causing inconsistent enforcement.

Building trust is also an important function of leadership in collaborative settings. Muzafar recounted that the Greater Klang Valley Special Task Force (GKVSTF) succeeded because leaders at different agencies practiced what he called the '3C approach,' Coordinating, Collaborating, and Communicating. This trust-based coordination reflected facilitative leadership principles, where transparency and mutual respect replaced competition. Nonetheless, he and Hamzah agreed that Malaysia's bureaucratic hierarchy discourages horizontal communication among mid-level managers. Without leadership endorsement, collaboration reverts to vertical reporting.[62]

Leadership within Malaysia's WoG system functions as both a catalyst and a constraint. It enables rapid mobilization during crises but struggles to institutionalize collaboration beyond individual leadership terms. Lasting reform would require leadership succession planning and training to embed cooperative values across agencies.[63] Adam Leong believes that it is important for the Prime Minister's Department, through the National Security Council, to remain the apex driver for inter-agency alignment.

However, national institutions such as the National Resilience College (NRC) should include civilian officers to foster a shared strategic culture early in their careers.[64] Sahipulhijaiman also emphasized the need for "long-term thinkers" to sustain WoG approaches beyond ministerial turnover, aligning with recent calls for leadership stability.[65] Malaysia's experience shows that facilitative leadership remains the decisive link between policy design and operational collaboration as teamwork often ends when leaders change.

Table 4: Leadership Challenges in Malaysia

Dimension	Key Malaysian Elements	Challenges
Trust Building	Personality-driven senior trust; crisis task forces (NTF, GKVSTF); leadership continuity	Episodic trust; weak mid-level horizontal trust
Conflict Resolution	Centralised crisis leadership; informal mediation by respected commanders	Suppression not resolution; limited deliberative platforms
Agency Alignment	Unified command during crises; leader-driven coordination	Leadership dependence; top-down compliance culture

Source: Synthesized by Authors.

Collaborative Process

The collaborative process in the Ansell and Gash model refers to the interaction mechanisms that allow participants to communicate, share information, and develop shared understanding. In the Malaysian context, this process can be observed in the way inter-agency coordination unfolded during crises such as COVID 19, floods, and humanitarian missions abroad. While the 2019 Defence White Paper and the National Security Policy (2021 & 2025) prescribe a WoG approach to security governance, practical collaboration as discussed prior still relies on improvisation and personal initiative rather than structured systems.

Inter-agency collaboration in Malaysia operates through a multi-tier coordination system led by the National Security Council (MKN). For example, during the pandemic the COVID-19 response used a three-layer meeting structure according to Zetty, the *Sidang Khas* MKN (MKN special session) chaired by the Prime Minister, the *Mesyuarat Menteri-Menteri Kanan* (Senior Ministers Meeting) led by the Senior Ministers for Defence and Economy, and the *Mesyuarat Teknikal Antara Agensi* (Inter-agency Technical Meeting) chaired by senior civil servants. This hierarchy ensured rapid top-down communication but limited horizontal learning, as technical officers seldom joined strategic discussions. Hamzah noted these meetings ensured compliance but often became one-way briefings rather than dialogue platforms.

The study conducted on the Integrated Inter-agency Coordination for Effective Disaster Management in Klang Valley report found similar patterns during earlier disaster responses.[66] Agencies cooperated effectively under MKN command but had little sustained interaction once the central command was deactivated. This can be seen as a 'coordination by order' rather than required coordination by consensus. On the other hand, several collaborative mechanisms emerged during the pandemic that demonstrated Malaysia's potential for WoG effectiveness.

The National Task Force, established under MKN in 2020, provided a single command centre that unified 21 ministries. According to Muzafar, this was the first time since the 1969 National Operations Council that agencies shared the same headquarters and operated on a single intelligence and logistics network. Improvements for collaboration were also seen with the Greater Klang Valley Special Task Force (GKVSTF) which integrated government, private sector, and research institutions to manage oxygen supply and hospital logistics. He described this as 'cross cutting integration,' illustrating collaborative governance through shared understanding and problem-solving in real time and noted that this model 'optimized manpower, assets, and logistics collectively,' mirroring the concept of jointness promoted in the 2019 Defence White Paper.

The Joint Crisis Operations Centre (JCOC) and its associated *Pusat Informasi Pengurusan Operasi Nasional* (PIPON) were also crucial for integrating data flows between the Ministry of Health (KKM) and security agencies. Muzafar explained that 'trust and information sharing were solid because we had a shared situational picture.' Despite these achievements, several challenges limited collaborative efficiency. Zetty recalled confusion at roadblocks during the early Movement Control Order (MCO) when officers struggled to interpret 'essential services,' exposing weak translation of strategic policy into field action. Malaysia's civil-military coordination also often suffers from ambiguous command boundaries, with agencies waiting for explicit authorization before acting.[67] Noor described this as "fragmented interdependence," where agencies depend on one another but lack trust to act autonomously.[68]

Another obstacle is fragmented information sharing as ministries maintain separate databases and classifications that limit data sharing thus weakening cross-agency collaboration.[69] During COVID-19, the PIPON initiative temporarily resolved this issue through integrated digital dashboards, allowing real-time coordination. What this results in is a system of temporary trust, where collaboration peaks under crisis conditions but fades once urgency subsides, highlighting Malaysia's struggle to sustain inter-agency cohesion beyond emergencies.

This confirms Ansell and Gash's view that sustained collaboration arises from repeated, face to face interaction and transparency. In Malaysia's case, these conditions were met temporarily during emergencies but lacked institutionalization after the crisis subsided. Most platforms in Malaysia only include the activation of government agencies whereas civic and private stakeholder involvement is still rare which reduces long-term readiness.

Efforts on collaborative learning in Malaysia's defence governance could be seen through simulation activities such as the Table-Top Exercises (TTX). The national TTX 'Nation Call Pandemic COVID-19' organized by the National Security Council (MKN) demonstrated how multi-agency simulations enhance preparedness.[70] Over 20 federal and state agencies tested decision -making and interoperability, revealing both coordination strengths and communication gaps. Inclusivity improved through participation from health, defence, and enforcement agencies.

Mohd Radzi Abdul Hamid and Cohort 01 NRC found that the exercise was effective in identifying overlaps and testing interoperability, while also reinforcing inclusivity by involving ministries, local authorities, and private stakeholders.[71]

Overall, the Malaysia's Armed Forces served as both executors and integrators of policy through civil-military cooperation. Muzafar described the military as "an extension of government policy," supporting civilian agencies in logistics, public health, and supply chain management. This aligns with the Comprehensive Defence (HANRUH) principle, which positions the military as a supporting pillar rather than a dominant actor. However, this support role is constrained by the absence of permanent joint structures between defence and civilian ministries, limiting institutional learning and inclusion.[72]

Malaysia risks returning to silo governance unless ad hoc experiences are institutionalized which reflects Ansell & Gash's warning that 'small wins and operational dialogue must be translated into institutional memory for lasting impact', and this is something that Malaysia has yet to achieve.[73]

Table 5: Collaborative Process in Malaysia's WoG Implementation

Process Element	Successes	Challenges
Daily Mechanisms	3 tier meetings, JCOP	Vertical vs horizontal communication
Platforms	NTF unification	Episodic trust
Learning via TTX	Identified gaps	No follow-up

Source: Synthesized by Authors.

Outcome Related Constraints and Institutional Learning

The final dimension in Ansell and Gash's framework concerns outcomes and the extent to which collaborative arrangements produce institutional learning and sustainable change. In Malaysia, the WoG approach has yielded operational success during crisis but limited long term transformation. While the Defence White Paper (2019) and the National Security Policy (2021-2025) formalized inter-agency collaboration, their implementation revealed systemic weaknesses in translating lessons into institutional reform. Malaysia's crisis responses, particularly during COVID-19, demonstrated high adaptability but low continuity.

Muzafar explained that the NTF and Greater Klang Valley Special Task Force (GKVSTF) were 'the most effective structural innovations' since the 1969 National Operations Council, yet both were dissolved after the pandemic. Their disbandment represented what Kwek termed 'short term institutional memory,' exacerbated by post-COVID political shifts and stalled DWP reforms.[74] Sahipulhijaiman confirmed that post-COVID reviews at MINDEF focused on after-action reports rather than institutional reform, where he noted, 'the momentum for collaboration fades once the emergency ends.' Nordic countries and Singapore make joint exercises a normal part of agency work, supporting steady cooperation.[75]

What this research also finds is that institutional learning in Malaysia's defence sector is constrained by leadership volatility. Political turnover disrupts policy coherence, forcing agencies to relearn coordination under each administration, and a lack of consistent leadership commitment and any reforms risk becoming a repetitive policy cycle without meaningful change.[76] Although then ruling *Pakatan Harapan* PH administration introduced the Defence White Paper (DWP), subsequent coalition changes have continued to cause implementation delays and policy drift, reflecting episodic adaptation rather than sustained strategic continuity.[77]

Malaysia has made progress in conducting Table-Top Exercises (TTX) for joint operations and producing operational reports, but post exercise evaluations are rarely codified into doctrine.[78] Similarly, Sahipulhijaiman mentioned that findings from the Defence White Paper review were distributed internally but never compiled into a central repository. The 2019 Defence White Paper proposed integrating defence, economy, and technology policies through a Defence Investment Committee, but that has yet to materialize.

Recommendation and the Way Forward

The research shows that Malaysia performs strongly in mobilizing inter-agency collaboration during crises but struggles to sustain integration in normal conditions. Overall, Malaysia demonstrates strengths in leadership, process, and outcomes but remains weak in institutional design and continuity. Leadership and shared urgency drive cooperation, while separate budgets, unclear mandates, and limited inter-agency learning weaken long-term consistency.

Reforms under the National Security Policy (2021-2025), the HANRUH (Comprehensive Defence) framework, and digital integration by the National Cyber Security Agency (NACSA) indicate that Malaysia is gradually learning from its episodic coordination. These initiatives introduce mechanisms to preserve institutional memory and embed lessons into policy routines. If implemented consistently, they could transform Malaysia's crisis-based coordination into a sustained governance model where collaboration becomes habitual rather than reactive.

To ensure that Malaysia would be able to realize its effort to achieve the goal for its WoG approach in defence, this paper makes several recommendations. Firstly, a new or amended framework is needed to clarify inter-agency responsibilities, define decision-making authority, and establish a shared fiscal mechanism. This will overcome the limitation under the NSC Act 2016 (Act 776) which provides authority to coordinate but not to compel.

It is recommended that the government develop a National Security Governance Framework or National Security (Coordination and Accountability) Act, which would legally formalise WoG principles. Such reforms would strengthen institutional design and make collaboration a legal obligation rather than a voluntary effort. This should include:

- Legislative authority for MKN to direct and monitor inter-agency actions.
- A joint 'Security Cluster Vote' within the national budget for multi-agency operations.
- Annual reporting to Parliament to ensure transparency and accountability.

Second, a Chief of Inter-Agency Operations (CIAO) post could be created as a rotating three-year appointment among key security agencies, MINDEF, MKN, PDRM, MMEA, and NADMA to institutionalise leadership. The position should have authority to oversee joint planning, training, and exercises under the Prime Minister's Office, supported by a permanent secretariat. This would distribute leadership responsibility, encourage shared ownership, and maintain coordination even when political leadership changes. The establishment of a Digital Security Integration Platform (DSIP) under NACSA as a permanent database and communication hub for crisis and routine coordination made mandatory across ministries will also lend to sustain institutional memory.

Third, an Inter-Agency Learning and Evaluation Unit should be created within MKN to collect, document, and share lessons from operations and exercises to ensure systematic and long-term learning. Additionally, a National Collaboration Report summarising best practices and challenges needs to be produced consistently either on an annual or biannual basis. This will embed continuous learning and ensure that each episode of cooperation contributes to long-term improvement.

Conclusion

Ultimately, this research concludes that there are three enduring constraints Malaysia faces. First, institutional inertia or structural resistance to reform where coordination remains procedural rather than behavioural. This limits inter-agency ownership for change. Second, there is knowledge discontinuity as lessons from the NTF and Greater Klang Valley Special Task Force were not converted into national or official doctrine for practise. Third, Malaysia faced fragmented accountability and overlaps among MKN, MINDEF, and NADMA which weaken responsibility lines. Hence, Malaysia has reactive excellence, but these factors hinder proactive resilience.

The 2019 Defence White Paper and National Security Policy (2021- 2025) provide frameworks for collaboration, yet both stop short at embedding permanent learning structures. This highlights the fact that Malaysia's WoG architecture performs best under crisis pressure but struggles

to institutionalize a culture of shared governance in routine policy environments. The key challenge ahead is translating strong operational performance into an enduring inter-agency culture that sustains collaboration beyond crises.

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