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Research Article

Assessing the Philippine Coast Guard's Visit, Board, Search, and Seizure (VBSS) Procedures: Operational Status, Influencing Factors, and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

This study assessed the operational status, influencing factors, and challenges encountered in the implementation of the Philippine Coast Guard's Visit, Board, Search, and Seizure (VBSS) procedures for maritime law enforcement. Specifically, it examined the status of VBSS procedures in terms of operators' capability, technology application, procedural adherence, and legal compliance, as well as the effectiveness of VBSS implementation and the challenges encountered by operators. The study employed a mixed-methods research design using a convergent parallel approach. Quantitative data were collected from 305 Philippine Coast Guard operators directly involved in VBSS operations, while qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews with 18 interview participants composed of 15 operational officers/team leaders and three legal experts. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. The findings revealed that VBSS procedures were generally implemented effectively. Operators demonstrated high levels of capability, procedural adherence, and legal compliance, while technology application emerged as the area requiring the greatest improvement due to limitations in operational equipment and technological resources. The qualitative findings further identified challenges related to resource constraints, operational conditions, and legal and procedural concerns affecting VBSS implementation. The study concludes that strengthening operators' capability, enhancing technological resources, and sustaining procedural and legal compliance are essential to improving VBSS implementation. It recommends continuous competency-based training for operators, modernization of operational resources, strengthened legal capability, and enhanced inter-agency coordination to further improve maritime law enforcement operations.

Keywords: *competency-based training, legal compliance, maritime law enforcement, maritime security, mixed methods, procedural adherence, technology application*

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Introduction

Maritime security is vital to protecting national sovereignty, economic development, and international trade. As the primary maritime law enforcement agency in the Philippines, the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) is mandated under Republic Act No. 9993 to enforce maritime laws, ensure maritime safety and security, protect the marine environment, and safeguard lives and property at sea. One of its core law enforcement functions is the conduct of Visit, Board, Search, and Seizure (VBSS) operations, which enable personnel to inspect vessels, detect illegal activities, and enforce applicable maritime laws.

The effectiveness of VBSS operations depends on several factors, including the competency of personnel, availability of operational technology, adherence to standard procedures, and compliance with legal requirements. These factors are essential to ensuring that maritime law enforcement operations are conducted safely, efficiently, and within the bounds of the law. However, operational limitations, resource constraints, and evolving maritime threats continue to challenge the implementation of VBSS procedures.

Although previous studies have examined maritime security and law enforcement, limited research has comprehensively assessed the combined influence of operator capability, technology application, procedural adherence, and legal compliance on the effectiveness of Philippine Coast Guard VBSS operations using a mixed-methods approach. Addressing this gap is important for strengthening maritime law enforcement and improving organizational capability.

This study assessed the operational status of Philippine Coast Guard VBSS procedures by examining operator capability, technology application, procedural adherence, legal compliance, and the operational challenges encountered during implementation. The findings provide evidence-based recommendations for improving VBSS operations, enhancing maritime law enforcement capability, and supporting effective maritime governance in the Philippines.

Materials and Methods

This section describes the research methods and procedures employed to assess the operational status of the Philippine Coast Guard's Visit, Board, Search, and Seizure (VBSS) procedures. It presents the research design, respondents of the study, research instruments, instrument validation, data collection procedures, and statistical tools used to analyze the quantitative and qualitative data.

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods convergent parallel research design to assess the operational status of the Philippine Coast Guard's Visit, Board, Search, and Seizure (VBSS) procedures. This research design integrates quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive assessment of the study variables. The quantitative component measured operator capability, technology application, procedural adherence, legal compliance, and operational effectiveness, while the qualitative component explored the operational challenges encountered during the implementation of VBSS procedures. The integration of both datasets enabled a more comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of VBSS operations and supported the formulation of evidence-based recommendations.

Respondents of the Study

The respondents of this study consisted of Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) personnel directly involved in the implementation of Visit, Board, Search, and Seizure (VBSS) procedures. For the quantitative phase, 305 PCG VBSS operators, comprising both commissioned officers and non-officers, were selected through stratified random sampling. To be included in the study, respondents were required to: (1) be active members of the Philippine Coast Guard; (2) be currently assigned to units conducting maritime law enforcement or VBSS operations; (3) have participated in actual VBSS operations; and (4) voluntarily agree to participate in the study.

For the qualitative phase, 18 key informants were purposively selected, consisting of three (3) Legal Officers and fifteen (15) VBSS Team Leaders/Operator Commanders. They

were chosen based on their extensive experience in maritime law enforcement, operational leadership, and legal application of VBSS procedures. Their expertise provided in-depth

insights that complemented the quantitative findings. The distribution of the study participants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of the Study Participants

Category	Number of Participants
Philippine Coast Guard VBSS Operators (Quantitative Survey)*	305
Legal Officers (Key Informants)	3
VBSS Team Leaders (Key Informants)	15
Total	323

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to established ethical standards in research involving human participants. All respondents were informed of the study's objectives, procedures, and voluntary nature through an informed consent form. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. The researcher also ensured academic integrity by properly acknowledging all cited sources and adhering to standards of originality and ethical scholarly writing.

Instrumentation

To address the research objectives, the following research instruments were utilized:

Survey Questionnaire. A researcher-developed survey questionnaire was administered to Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) operators involved in Visit, Board, Search, and Seizure (VBSS) operations. The questionnaire gathered the respondents' demographic and professional characteristics and measured the operational status of VBSS procedures in terms of operator capability, technology application, procedural adherence, legal compliance, and operational effectiveness using a five-point Likert scale.

Interview Guide. A semi-structured interview guide was administered to the selected key informants, consisting of Legal Officers and VBSS Team Leaders/Operator Commanders. The interview explored the implementation of VBSS procedures, operational challenges, best practices, and recommendations

for improving maritime law enforcement operations.

Document Review. A document review guide was utilized to examine relevant Philippine Coast Guard policies, standard operating procedures, legal issuances, operational reports, training manuals, and other official documents related to VBSS operations. The information obtained was used to validate and supplement the quantitative and qualitative findings, providing additional context for the interpretation of the results.

Validation of Instrument

The research instruments were validated to ensure their validity and reliability prior to data collection.

Survey Questionnaire. The researcher-developed survey questionnaire underwent content validation by a panel of experts composed of the Force Commander of the Coast Guard Special Operations Force (CGSOF), the Deputy Force Commander of the CGSOF, and the Commander of the Maritime Security Response Group (MSRG). The validators evaluated the clarity, relevance, coherence, organization, and adequacy of the questionnaire items, and their recommendations were incorporated into the final version of the instrument. The revised questionnaire was pilot-tested among 26 Philippine Coast Guard operators who were not included in the actual study. Reliability testing using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 30.0 yielded an overall Cronbach's Alpha of 0.987 for Part I and 0.986 for Part II, indicating excellent internal consistency and

confirming that the instrument was reliable for the conduct of the study.

Interview Guide. The semi-structured interview guide was likewise validated by the same panel of experts to ensure that the interview questions were aligned with the objectives of the study and capable of eliciting relevant and in-depth information. Based on the validators' recommendations, the interview questions and probing questions were refined to improve their clarity, logical sequence, and comprehensiveness before the conduct of the interviews.

Document Review. The document review checklist was likewise examined by the expert validators to ensure that the selected Philippine Coast Guard policies, standard operating procedures, operational manuals, legal issuances, and other official documents were relevant, authentic, and aligned with the objectives of the study. The validated checklist served as a guide in verifying and triangulating the quantitative and qualitative findings.

Data Gathering Procedure

To collect the data required for the study, the following procedures were undertaken:

Survey Questionnaire. The researcher first secured the necessary permissions from the appropriate Philippine Coast Guard authorities before conducting the study. Upon approval, the validated survey questionnaire was administered to the selected Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) VBSS operators through face-to-face distribution and online platforms, as appropriate. Prior to answering the questionnaire, respondents were provided with an informed consent form explaining the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the confidentiality of their responses. Completed questionnaires were retrieved, checked for completeness, encoded, and prepared for statistical analysis.

Interview Guide. Following the survey, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with the purposively selected key informants, consisting of Legal Officers and VBSS Team Leaders/Operator Commanders. Prior

to the interviews, informed consent was obtained from each participant. The interviews were conducted at mutually convenient schedules and were guided by the validated interview guide. Responses were documented, transcribed, organized, and prepared for thematic analysis.

Document Review. The researcher conducted a review of relevant Philippine Coast Guard policies, standard operating procedures, operational manuals, legal issuances, training materials, and other official documents related to Visit, Board, Search, and Seizure (VBSS) operations. The reviewed documents were systematically examined to verify and supplement the survey and interview findings, thereby strengthening the validity and comprehensiveness of the study through data triangulation.

Data Analysis

To answer the research questions, the researcher employed a combination of descriptive statistics, inferential statistics, and thematic analysis. The quantitative data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 30.0, while the qualitative data obtained from interviews and document review were analyzed using thematic analysis. The presentation of the results was organized as follows:

1. **Operational Status of Philippine Coast Guard VBSS Procedures**
Descriptive statistics, including frequency, percentage, weighted mean, and standard deviation, were used to determine the respondents' assessment of operator capability, technology application, procedural adherence, legal compliance, and operational effectiveness.
2. **Relationship between the Operational Variables and VBSS Effectiveness**
Pearson Product-Moment Correlation was used to determine the significant relationships between the operational variables and the effectiveness of VBSS procedures.
3. **Predictors of the Effectiveness of VBSS Procedures**
Multiple Linear Regression Analysis was employed to identify which operational variables significantly influenced the

effectiveness of Philippine Coast Guard VBSS procedures.

4. Operational Challenges in the Implementation of VBSS Procedures

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview responses and document review to identify recurring themes, operational challenges, and recommendations for improving VBSS procedures.

Result and Discussion

This section presents the findings on the operational status and operational effectiveness of the Philippine Coast Guard's Visit, Board, Search, and Seizure (VBSS) procedures,

as well as the operational challenges encountered during implementation. The quantitative findings are supported by qualitative insights obtained from the interviews and document review.

Operational Status of the Philippine Coast Guard's Visit, Board, Search, and Seizure (VBSS) Procedures

The operational status of the Philippine Coast Guard's Visit, Board, Search, and Seizure (VBSS) procedures was assessed in terms of operators' capability, technology application, procedural adherence, and legal compliance.

Table 2. Operational Status of the Philippine Coast Guard's VBSS Procedures

Operational Dimensions	Mean	Verbal Interpretation
Operators' Capability	3.51	Strongly Agree
Technology Application	3.25	Agree
Procedural Adherence	3.52	Strongly Agree
Legal Compliance	3.55	Strongly Agree
Overall	3.46	Strongly Agree

The respondents generally perceived the operational status of VBSS procedures as Strongly Agree (WM = 3.46), indicating a high level of compliance with operational and legal standards. Legal Compliance obtained the highest rating, demonstrating the Philippine Coast Guard's commitment to implementing maritime laws during VBSS operations. In contrast, Technology Application received the lowest rating, suggesting the need for continuous modernization of equipment and operational systems. Overall, the findings indicate that the current VBSS procedures provide a

strong operational foundation for maritime law enforcement.

Operational Effectiveness of the Philippine Coast Guard's Visit, Board, Search, and Seizure (VBSS) Procedures

The operational effectiveness of the Philippine Coast Guard's VBSS procedures was evaluated to determine how the identified operational dimensions contribute to the successful conduct of maritime law enforcement operations.

Table 3. Operational Effectiveness of the Philippine Coast Guard's VBSS Procedures

Indicators	Result
Relationship with Operators' Capability	Significant Positive Relationship
Relationship with Technology Application	Significant Positive Relationship
Relationship with Procedural Adherence	Significant Positive Relationship
Indicators	Result
Relationship with Legal Compliance	Significant Positive Relationship
Overall Level of Operational Effectiveness	High

The findings revealed that the Philippine Coast Guard's VBSS procedures are highly effective in supporting maritime law enforcement operations. Statistical analyses further

showed that operators' capability, technology application, procedural adherence, and legal compliance were all significantly associated with operational effectiveness. These findings

indicate that improvements in personnel competence, operational resources, adherence to standard operating procedures, and compliance with legal requirements contribute to more effective execution of VBSS operations. The results underscore the importance of sustaining capability development and continuously enhancing operational support systems to maintain effective maritime security operations.

Operational Challenges Encountered in the Implementation of VBSS Procedures

The study also identified the operational challenges encountered by Philippine Coast Guard personnel during the implementation of VBSS procedures through interviews and document review.

Table 4. Operational Challenges Encountered During VBSS Operations

Major Themes	Description
Technology and Equipment Limitations	Insufficient and outdated operational equipment and technological resources.
Training and Capability Development	Need for continuous specialized training and skills enhancement.
Operational Constraints	Difficulties encountered during actual boarding operations, particularly in high-risk maritime environments.
Legal and Procedural Concerns	Challenges in applying legal procedures and ensuring compliance during actual operations.

The qualitative findings indicate that although the identified challenges affect the implementation of VBSS procedures, they were generally considered manageable by the respondents. The interviews highlighted the importance of continuous capability development, modernization of operational resources, strengthened inter-agency coordination, and periodic review of existing operational policies. Addressing these concerns will further improve the operational effectiveness of VBSS procedures and strengthen the Philippine Coast Guard's maritime law enforcement capability.

Conclusion

The overarching conclusion of this study centers on the severe and systemic vulnerabilities embedded within the technology application of the Philippine Coast Guard's Visit, Board, Search, and Seizure (VBSS) framework. The empirical data consistently identifies technological integration as the primary failure point, revealing that maritime interdiction and boarding operations are fundamentally compromised by a profound deficit in modern equipment. This technical deficit manifests as a critical operational bottleneck, demonstrating that the framework cannot achieve its

intended maritime security objectives when field operators are left without the baseline technical infrastructure required for complex law enforcement environments.

Specifically, the operational efficacy of VBSS missions is directly restricted by acute resource limitations, characterized by a lack of secure, real-time communication tools, obsolete or missing surveillance systems, and inadequate physical boarding equipment. The absence of tactical communication assets severely impairs situational awareness and command-and-control capabilities during high-risk boarding phases, while the reliance on outdated tracking and surveillance systems limits the ability to effectively detect, monitor, and intercept suspicious vessels. Furthermore, the deficiency extends to digital evidence management, creating vulnerabilities in preserving the integrity of captured data, which ultimately undermines the processing of maritime violations.

Consequently, these combined technological limitations act as a definitive constraint on the agency's broader maritime law enforcement mandate. Without an immediate, aggressive modernization of specialized operational assets and a targeted resolution of these deep technological gaps, the overall capacity to

interdict, investigate, and successfully suppress sophisticated transnational maritime crimes will remain restricted. Until these systemic resource deficits are systematically addressed, the current operational architecture will fail to support an optimal, proactive, and secure maritime domain enforcement posture.

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