

# ENGAGEMENT OF MALAYSIA AND INDONESIA ON COUNTERINSURGENCY IN THE SOUTH OF THAILAND



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## Executive Summary

Negotiation is an important component of conflict resolution. When it comes to addressing the insurgency in the south of Thailand, enhancing security cooperation with Malaysia and Indonesia is vital, but poses numerous challenges. While Malaysia agreed to serve as a facilitator for the peace dialogue between the Thai government and leaders of insurgent groups, obstacles continue to hinder the process. A peace dialogue, however, is not the only one way to solve the crisis in the southern provinces. Military operations to win the hearts and minds of the populace, bilateral and trilateral cooperation with neighboring countries, and regional cooperation are also integral. This paper will explore various means of addressing the southern insurgency and provide an in-depth examination as to how to best engage Malaysia and Indonesia to further these efforts.

## Introduction

For over a decade, Thailand has been working to address the violence and counter-insurgency operations in its south using military operations. The situation remains intractable, resulting in more than 10,000 injuries and 5,300 deaths of soldiers, police, authorities, teachers, monks, local people, and insurgents between 2004 and 2014. [1] Reports suggest that there are only 10,000 - 15,000 insurgents; this in contrast with the 60,000 troops deployed in the three southern provinces.[2] In spite of these deployments, Thai soldiers have been unable to gain victory in this asymmetric conflict.

Recognizing this dilemma, the Thai government agreed to a peace dialogue and for the first time, asked its neighbor Malaysia to facilitate between the Thai government and leaders of the insurgent groups. The Thai government also reached out to Indonesia to assist in dealing with insurgents thought to be training within Indonesia's borders.

This paper will provide an analysis of the best means for Thailand to engage both Malaysia and Indonesia in enhancing cooperation to counter the insurgency in southern Thailand and provide an overview of the benefits and the costs of such cooperation for all three countries. This

analysis shows that insurgencies are often not contained within any one border and can destabilize an entire region.

### **Challenges for Thailand**

More than 5,000 soldiers, police, authorities, and civilians have been killed in the south of Thailand. The instability causes not only locals in the three southern provinces to live in fear, but also people in the other parts of the country who worry about family members deployed to the region.

More than 60,000 soldiers and authorities of the Internal Security Operation Command (ISOC) have been sent to southern Thailand since 2004. The Royal Thai Army has recently set up a new division dedicated to deal with the violence with around 30,000 soldiers currently in the fight.<sup>[3]</sup> In spite of these adjustments, the insurgency remains.

The crisis in southern Thailand remains intractable because of its complex and changing nature. For example, among insurgent's demands is separation of three provinces from Thailand - Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat - and parts of another, Songkla. This desire stems in part from historical claims, but also a host of other socio-economic reasons that intersect with ethnicity, religion, and development.

There is a growing view in Thailand that the insurgency's goal is to go against Thailand's constitution and establish an autonomous principality known as Malayu Patani Darussalam, separate from the Kingdom of Thailand. And while many politicians and political parties have proposed creation of a special administrative region in the south, the majority of Thai people continue to oppose this idea.

Another factor contributing to the crisis is the Muslim populace's continued opposition to what they view as unfair treatment by authorities, particularly the police. Thai authorities in southern Thailand tend to be viewed as a symbol of the historical Siam government that occupied their territory.

Thai security agents view violence in the region as fueled by a generation of radicalized Malay Muslim youth. This young generation, much of whom feels discriminated against and exploited by the Buddhist-dominated Thai state, wants to establish an independent Islamic state. In doing so, their methods are often violent and involve shootings, bombings, and beheadings, carried out by autonomous cells against the Thai government.

Other analysts within the Thai government and military also maintain these insurgent groups are directly tied to illegal businesses, oil smuggling, and drug trafficking. They also suspect insurgents receive support from Thailand's neighboring countries in the form of money, training, shelter, and moral support. Thai authorities also point to possible links to regional and extra-regional terrorist networks, such as Jemaah Islamiya, which is an Indonesia-based clandestine network. The lack of political stability within Thailand has hindered the peace dialogue process and efforts to address these various factors.

### **Challenges for Security Agents**

Thailand's insurgency shares characteristics, tactics, and objectives with insurgencies found in many countries within Southeast Asia. The insurgents attack both soft and hard targets in Yala, Pattani, Narathiwat, and four districts of Songkhla province. Their tactics include car bombs and explosions in the city of Hat Yai, which is an economic and tourism center in the south. The difficulty for Thailand's security agents is that insurgents are secretive and never declare themselves responsible for any violence.

Additionally, they do not occupy bases in the south from which they fight Thai soldiers. Instead, they hold secret meetings and conduct their planning and training in the jungle near the Malaysian border. In doing so, they disguise themselves as villagers whenever conducting an attack, making it difficult to distinguish villagers from combatants.

Differentiation is further complicated by the fact that Malay Muslim civilians in southern Thailand have suffered in the past, leading them to support or sympathize with the insurgents. This poses challenges to the Thai soldiers and police. Furthermore, Thai security intelligence units do not yet really know their enemy. They are confronted by a lack of information on the insurgents' identity, leadership, and location.

To this end, insurgents have been very effective in not disclosing their organization and structure. As a result, much of the Thai government's intelligence is based on information from separatist groups dating back 30 years ago. To determine whether or not Barisan Revolusi Nasional-Koordinasi (BRN-C) is the heart of the insurgency, Thai security agents are working to identify the chain of command behind the attacks.

To this end, the Thai government wants to talk not only with BRN-C, but also the Patani United Liberation Organisation (PULO); the Gerakan Mujahidin Islam Patani (GMIP); and the Barisan Bersatu Mujahidin Patani (BBMP). To identify which groups are linked to the violence, the Thai government wants to engage in talks with four groups within PULO, and is seeking Malaysia's assistance to serve as an intermediary and contact point.<sup>[5]</sup>

### **Cooperation with Malaysia and Indonesia**

The Thai government is moving away from a primary focus on military operations to a peace dialogue with the leaders of insurgent groups. It has been engaging neighboring countries through intelligence and information sharing, as well as in negotiating with insurgent leaders.

As part of these initiatives, Thailand has engaged both Malaysia and Indonesia. It asked Malaysia to be the facilitator for peace talks in 2013. Part of its rationale in doing so was the contention that Malaysia might have information on the identity and location of insurgent group leadership. Thailand intelligence agencies claimed that the core of the insurgent groups had bases and were conducting secret meetings in Malaysia.

Responding to Thailand's request, Malaysian authorities made clear their intent to assist by inviting insurgent representatives to meetings with Thai leadership. The peace dialogue between the secretary-general of Thailand's National Security Council (NSC) and representatives of the well-known separatist movement Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN) began on Feb. 28, 2013. Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak announced the news following talks with former Thai Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra.

However, the peace dialogue was interrupted by the political crisis in Thailand that ended in a coup d'état on May 22, 2014. The newly installed Thai military government has reportedly requested to continue with peace talks and asked Malaysia for its assistance in serving as a facilitator. By most accounts, the Malaysian prime minister told Thailand's Prime Minister General Prayut Chan-Ocha that Malaysia would support the peace dialogue.<sup>[4]</sup> However, the head of Thailand's peace dialogue team has said that Thailand has been ready to resume the talks for quite some time, but continues to wait for Malaysia to take action. In light of these varying accounts, there has been no timeframe set.

Regarding Thailand authorities' engagement with Indonesia, Thai authorities claimed that some insurgents were trained within the latter's borders. Some insurgents in Thailand have even named themselves after the Indonesian Special Forces, with their small patrol units called Runda Kumpulan Kecil (RKK). The RKK is allegedly one of the armed wings of the BRN-C and has been one of the most brutal and ruthless groups within the insurgency. It consists of young and mostly Salafist militants, who routinely flee to Malaysia after carrying out violent attacks.

Facing such cross border connections Thailand's army chief, General Sonthi Boonyaratkalin, engaged in cooperation with Indonesia in 2004. While Sonthi said that the Indonesian Army has denied any involvement with the RKK, there remain questions as to the origins of its name and training.<sup>[6]</sup> This has led to information sharing and reciprocal visits among the Indonesian and Thai armies. But much like the case of Thailand's cooperation with Malaysia, these partnerships require time to cultivate.

### **Malaysia as a Partner**

Cooperation with Malaysia is a pressing issue for Thailand, as the situation in its four southernmost provinces has become increasingly violent and dispersed since 2001. These activities are also now starting to spill over into other provinces. Incidents blamed on southern insurgents have occurred in the cities of Bangkok, Hat Yai, and Phuket.

Cooperation between Thailand and Malaysia to address the insurgency in southern Thailand poses a number of opportunities and challenges.

### **Opportunities:**

- **Border Security:** Insurgencies are not limited to attacks on police or military targets. They can pose a danger to Malaysian tourists and businessman traveling in or near the four southernmost provinces, wherein lies Hat Yai. This city is one of the most popular tourism locations within Songkhla province. Thailand and Malaysia are two are taking part in joint annual exercises, such as the "Land Ex ThaMal," to foster military cooperation at their border to enhance joint border patrol and information sharing.
- **Economic Development:** The Thai government has many projects to develop rural areas at its border. If the nation is able to build peaceful settlements in its south, this will benefit trade, investment, and tourism across the border with Malaysia.

- **ASEAN Membership:** Thailand and Malaysia are both members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which strengthens their relations under the 2015 AEC-ASEAN Economic Community. This has pushed Malaysia to help Thailand to solve the problem.

### **Challenges:**

- **Different Definitions:** For Malaysia, the insurgency in southern Thailand is not considered a pressing danger, since the attacks have been directed in Thai territory and not that of Malaysia. This is the case, even though Yala, Pattani, Narathiwat, and the four districts of Songkhla are next to Malaysia. Thai security agents also maintain that some insurgents are hiding in Malaysia, from where they conduct attacks into Thailand. This indicates that insurgent groups are not a common enemy for the two countries.
- **Ethnicity and Religion:** The insurgency in the south of Thailand represents ethnic and religious separatism in the Malay Patani region. Given that Malaysia has a strong Muslim and Malay character, there is a tendency to distance itself from the problem. For example, for three decades, Thailand has asked Malaysia to send the leader of a separatist group for trial in Thailand. Thailand has on numerous occasions attempted to extradite individuals from Malaysia for trial and punishment, but this has caused rancor between the two nations.
- **Mistrust and Sovereignty:** Although Thailand and Malaysia are members of ASEAN, there remains distrust between the two. Some Thai security agents argue that Malaysia has, in the past, supported the insurgency. A number of insurgent leaders remain in the Kelantan state of northern Malaysia, close to the south of Thailand. This leads to questions over Malaysia's sincerity in cooperating with Thailand and its motivation to act beyond rhetoric.
- **Political Instability:** Issues further remain over the level to which Malaysia wishes to engage with the new government in Thailand. Insurgent groups are also wary of interacting with and concluding deals with a partner in political flux. This instability suggests that moving ahead on the peace dialogue may be a slow process, during which mutual trust must be rebuilt.

### **Indonesia as a Partner**

Thailand's cooperation with Indonesia is different from that with Malaysia, as it primarily consists of military cooperation. The Royal Thai Army has asked the Indonesian Army to examine whether training sites exist for the RKK insurgency in the forest and mountains. Some Thai security agents have claimed that some arrested RKK members have confessed to receiving training within Indonesia and even from elements within the Indonesian Army. Thus, cooperation between Thailand and Indonesia poses a number of opportunities and challenges.

### **Opportunities:**

- **Border Security:** Indonesia and Thailand are engaged with Malaysia in a trilateral economic Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle. This grouping's focus on investment, technology transfer, production cooperation, and use of natural resources promotes development of infrastructure and transportation linkages in the triangle area. As a result, all members have a desire for greater regional stability.
- **ASEAN Membership:** Indonesia and Thailand are ASEAN members and conduct security and economic cooperation. Beyond this, the ASEAN commitment to countering terrorism has carried over into Thailand, where there are suggestions that there may be linkages not just to domestic insurgency, but also regional and international terrorism networks. For example, in August 2003, an Al-Qaeda member was captured in Ayutthaya, in the center of Thailand, with indications that he had spent time in hiding in southern Thailand. Efforts across ASEAN countries to deal with these common threats suggest that there is room for Thai and Indonesian cooperation on issues ranging from Al-Qaeda to the Islamic State.

### **Challenges:**

- **Questions over Involvement:** Although RKK members have been arrested and killed by the Thai military; it has been difficult to penetrate the structure of the group owing to its secrecy and great mobility. There are remaining questions as to where the group received its name and training. Some Thai security agents have even claimed that some arrested RKK members have confessed to receiving training within Indonesia and even from elements within the Indonesian Army.

### **Conclusion**

There are a number of measures available to improve Thailand's engagement with Malaysia and Indonesia on countering the insurgency in its south. They include the following:

- **Trilateral Security Meeting:** A trilateral security meeting of Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand would serve as a solid foundation for a partnership to deal with unrest in the southernmost part of Thailand. Doing so would strengthen cooperation among neighboring countries and strengthen alliances for counterinsurgency and counterterrorism in the region.
- **Security Cooperation Agreement:** Whether in the form of a memorandum of understanding or a more formalized agreement, an agreement among Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia would set up the nature of information sharing and cooperation among its signatories. It would also provide consistency, even in the face of unforeseen political shifts.

- **Clarify and Analyze Linkages:** A concerted effort is needed to establish whether or not linkages exist between insurgencies and terrorist groups. This is integral to not only understanding the conditions on the ground in Southeast Asia, but also abroad. As such, security agents must be allowed to continue their research without government intervention and to make the necessary connections, even if they are politically unpopular.
- **Continue Military Operations:** For the Royal Thai Army, military operations must continue, but there must also be an understanding of the need to win the hearts and minds of the 1.8 million Thai Muslims living within its borders and the fact that there is no short-term solution.
- **Resume the Peace Dialogue:** Regional cooperation is integral to finding the means to both mitigate and one day resolve the insurgency in Thailand's south. Domestically, resumption of the peace dialogue should be combined with a social media campaign to encourage greater understanding and support for these efforts.

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