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## **The Thai Southern Insurgency: External Views of the Way Forward**

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## Abstract

As insurgency continues in the Thai Southern Border Provinces (SBP), external commentary, overwhelmingly in academia, remains the primary source of suggestions for how Bangkok should proceed. Discussion falls into three major threads, ranging from designating a special status (e.g., autonomy) to improving the efficiency of the “counterterrorism” effort, with the most relevant treatment distinguished by its specific knowledge of the insurgents themselves within the larger SBP context. Though Thai short-term approaches have been adequate, they throw open the long-term possibility of internationalization of the conflict through institutionalizing process at the expense of a search for a viable political solution.



(Figure 1. Southern Border Provinces (SBP) of Thailand; originally available [here](#):  
(accessed 5 May 2017).

Insurgency in the Thai Southern Border Provinces (SBP; see Figure 1) has again made the news. Last month (April 2017), an explosion of violence reminded the world that the challenge remains in a struggle that since 2004 has left more than 6,500 dead, most civilians.<sup>[1]</sup> After more than a decade of what is too often labelled “counterterrorism,” the question remains: just what is Bangkok doing or, phrased in a different manner, what *should* it be doing?

Such a question was avidly pursued some years ago in both Thai official and nonofficial circles. Conferences proliferated, and discussion within Thailand were robust. This is no longer the case, which has left external views those most in the public domain. These necessarily are overwhelmingly academic, though they are an accurate reflection of policy stances, and focus overwhelmingly upon the legitimacy of the structures and mechanisms whereby the Malay-speaking Muslim minority (a minority even within Thailand’s Muslim population) is incorporated into the larger Thai-speaking, Buddhist kingdom.

Though a strong body of external thought supports some form of autonomy as a “solution” for the SBP challenge, Thailand’s strategic insistence upon national integrity has avoided serious challenge. The generally correct conduct of security forces engaged in counterterrorism and counterinsurgency has resulted in critique remaining focused upon operational shortcomings. Acceptable perhaps in the short-run, this posture creates long-term strategic vulnerability.

- First, in the absence of moving towards a solution, the state asks its population to fight *against* but not *for* something. This fails to generate legitimacy and forces the insurgents towards ever more radical options.
- Second, these radical options are certain to have second and third order consequences beyond immediate damage (especially to the tourist industry). These could include a demand for a turn to harsher security measures, which would inevitably alienate members of the SBP population and support heightened calls for external intervention, most prominently by the likes of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) but possibly also by Muslim states and populations (especially

those within Southeast Asia). The way forward is a political solution of incorporation built upon legitimacy gained by popular empowerment.

### **Search for Roots of Conflict**

Much that is said about the insurgency in the SBP either lacks adequate operational grounding or proceeds as if what it has to offer is *sui generis*. This is principally because of the limitations placed upon fieldwork, without which the most basic questions pertaining to an insurgency cannot be addressed; to wit: who joins, who stays, who leaves? Be that as it may, there does exist a fairly extensive body of literature on the SBP challenge by external scholars.

This material is overwhelmingly in English. There does not appear to be an equivalent or even similar body of work in other foreign languages or in Thai. The English-language material posits three explanations for the SBP situation. These “threads” are not mutually exclusive, but each has a dominant theme. Neither should the illustrative works chosen be considered the only works available, though certainly they are among the most widely available.

- Most common is the view which states issues of geography, history, economics, status (social), and politics have marginalized the Malay-speaking Muslims of the SBP, hence what is at hand is the latest of a more-or-less continuous effort to separate the larger Thai-speaking Buddhist kingdom that is Thailand. The violence is a manifestation of historical separatism rather than terrorism *per se* or a classic insurgency (using terrorism as one of its weapons). This approach is best illustrated by the work of Duncan McCargo, who is Thai-speaking and well-informed on the non-security aspects of the situation in the South.<sup>[ii]</sup> Necessarily, these works advance Malay-speaking Muslims as a community that is grappling with Thai oppression, which has taken various forms since the imposition of direct rule over “Patani.” The solution is posited as some form of special status or autonomy.<sup>[iii]</sup>
- This is in contrast to the second body of material, which does not focus upon the contested nature of Thai unity but rather examines the challenge to that unity as posed by insurgency using terrorism (or, as often presented, of terrorism which

includes aspects of insurgency). The focus is much more upon the threat posed to the state by radical challenge and the approach of the state in meeting that challenge. Mistakes loom prominent in this narrative, because the focus is upon a security battle between contending sides. This necessarily requires examination of Malay Muslim marginalization and alienation.<sup>[iv]</sup>

- Finally, a third body of material blends the two threads above and distinguishes itself by insisting upon examination of the individual/local level (*micro*) to support the conclusions at the organizational (*meso*) or societal (*macro*) levels. This may confuse, but the scholars concerned are emphatic that meta-narratives, whatever their validity, do not explain just who is doing the rebelling and just what their objectives are. Further, they take issue with the notion that the “Thai South” or “Thai Muslims” are in revolt, highlighting that no published work delimits well geographic areas of alienation or even particular segments of population who are disaffected. Rather, these scholars see a highly complex situation in which numerous factors have come together to result in the present violence. This necessarily makes solution far more complicated than that advanced by the discussions of either the first or second thread. The approach is perhaps best illustrated by the work of Marc Askew and Sascha Helbardt.<sup>[v]</sup>

### **Contending Narratives**

It should be readily apparent that contained in each of these approaches is the potential to offer support for a particular view of the “Southern Insurgency.” The first and second bodies of work are those most often seen as contending, since the first approach questions the legitimacy of the state in its embrace of a restive minority, while the second approach focuses upon separatist outrage. The legitimacy of the state is accepted. If the first approach, then, sees the only alternative to the present situation as some form of special status (e.g., autonomy), the second approach focuses upon more astute operational methodologies, whether these lie in better addressing roots of conflict or dealing more effectively with insurgent narrative and strategy. The first approach further is decidedly uncomfortable with the language and approach of counter-terrorism

and/or counterinsurgency, while the second approach can be said to have emerged from this language and analytical framework.

Ironically, the third approach, which is the most compelling, has received far less attention than the first and second, possibly because its published works are fewer. This is entirely logical given the difficulty of conducting fieldwork, but it serves to obscure its central tenet: absent the sort of detailed local work reflected in Askew and Helbardt, the claims of the first and second must necessarily be problematic. Indeed, there seems to be no published work that provides a coded SBP map (or even a verbal assessment) that identifies classic “go, no-go, contested” areas. If, for instance, as appears to be the case, Than To *Amphoe* (alternatively, Thanto *Amphur*) is more heavily insurgent-affected than Be Tong *Amphoe* (alternatively, Betong *Amphur*), why is this so? An explanation cannot simply identify disaffection but also loyalty. The (apparently) only effort that endeavors to do this, by Thomas I. Parks, deals with Satun, which is outside SBP.<sup>[vi]</sup> This said, the third approach does not in any way overlook what it feels is the string of state errors that has made the situation much more difficult.

Rather than go into tactical detail, it suffices to note that all three approaches express a certain frustration with Thai counterinsurgency in the SPB. In this manner, scholars mirror attitudes held at the policy level by external observers, who are overwhelmingly Western or Western-influenced (e.g., Japan). The concern voiced may be found in the growing number of works that touch directly upon the manner in which cultural interaction is based upon mutual benefit and respect.

This is a key matter, because there is no point in even assessing the policy positions of authoritarian states/dictatorships (e.g., Russia and China), since their positions are based upon a frame which holds that if there is unrest in an area, those “causing the trouble” are the problem and must be eliminated (as e.g. in Tibet and Xinjiang or Chechnya). This is diametrically opposed to the Thai CSOC/ISOC approach which seeks the reasons for disaffection.<sup>[vii]</sup> Present operationalization of ISOC strategy in the dual SBPAC-CPM structure is to Thailand’s credit. Indeed, there are no works of which I am aware – or policy pronouncements – that label the kingdom as a *systematic* human rights abuser in the SBP.<sup>[viii]</sup>

What is of concern is the perception among some that there is a hardening of attitude towards the alienated, focusing upon them as the problem as opposed to the challenges of legitimate state-incorporation of a Malay Muslim minority area (in which the minority is the majority). These concerns are reflected in recent work by Michael K. Jerryson, as well as the appropriate chapters in a volume edited by Vladimir Tikhonov and Torkel Brekke, which touch directly upon the role of Buddhism in the conflict.<sup>[ix]</sup> Such work has been impacted by the role of the Buddhist clergy in recent conflicts, such as that in Sri Lanka, where the nature of intercommunal strife seriously damaged the reputation of the *Sangha* and the faith in general, as is further happening today in Burma/Myanmar. The concern is reflected in charges of legal violations levelled by international human rights organizations (refer to n.3 of this review).<sup>[x]</sup> Such charges must be treated seriously and should prompt investigation and action, but they have to date not reached the level seen in the critique of Sri Lanka and Burma.

All serious academic work on the Thai South and on Thai Muslims in general – the sort that informs policymakers when they seek background knowledge – is respectful of both the majority and minority traditions and emphasizes the efforts of local communities to live together. Of particular interest has been exploring the nature, both past and present, of relations between the two communities under discussion here, with the best work disaggregating both to look at local interactions.<sup>[xi]</sup>

As the publication dates indicate, there has been a continuous interest in the nature of Thai Muslim society in general and Southern Thai Muslim society in particular as both interface with the larger Thai-speaking, Buddhist population of the kingdom. To the works just listed may be added East-West Center Policy Studies (Southeast Asia) publications (beyond Askew) that deal specifically with the insurgency and are noteworthy for their rigor and empathy.<sup>[xii]</sup> The topic of “interface” itself is not new, with the place of minority Islamic traditions within larger Southeast Asian non-Muslim polities being a subject long-explored in excellent works.<sup>[xiii]</sup> The appropriate fifth chapter (pp. 158-205) in the Brown (see n.13), “Internal Colonialism and Ethnic Rebellion in Thailand,” highlights the reality that the focus of the first approach discussed above has long been in existence. While Brown uses the Northeast for his Thai case study, his

“internal colonialism” framework addresses not only *Isan* (alternatively, *Isaan*) but also the North and South.

Further, the precise terminology (i.e., “internal colonialism”) is now widely used in academic analysis and in spirit informs much policy discussion. It advances the central question: does a diverse polity exist as a consequence of legitimacy or force? To the extent force is used by the center to incorporate peripheral social formations, a claim is advanced that there is a lack of legitimacy. This lack of legitimacy is all the more serious when an “outside” force is judged to be dominating a local population, especially seizing its land and destroying its culture. The consequent lack of legitimacy signals that the structure of the state itself may be challenged, and outside assistance to the peripheral formations can to some extent be considered under the relevant provisions of international law dealing with “liberation struggles.”<sup>[xiv]</sup>

## **Conclusion**

This leaves us at the point which appears to be of greatest concern to Thailand: the possibility of outside intervention, either tangibly (e.g., direct intervention) or intangibly (e.g., information warfare). Trends in international law, as reflected in the existence of the International Criminal Court (ICC), support the tenets of “Responsibility to Protect” (R2P); that is, the sanctity of life (as concerns a national or sub-national population) is paramount, and repression may rise to such level as to justify external intervention (in a variety of forms).<sup>[xv]</sup> This issue surfaced prominently during the conflict in Sri Lanka, especially when the 2009 destruction of the LTTE insurgency inspired a number of prominent international organizations to demand external intervention to halt the final battle.<sup>[xvi]</sup> In the event, rather than entering Sri Lankan national space, the concerned parties launched a campaign (of considerable effectiveness) to isolate Sri Lanka internationally and threaten its public servants with the prosecution inherent to universal jurisdiction.

Nothing even remotely similar to this has surfaced in the SBP case, but a possible strategic move of the insurgents would be to work tactically to create a situation destructive and disruptive enough to internationalize the conflict. This is but a step beyond using destructive methods for the purpose of disrupting the economy, for it

simply requires focusing upon provoking a majority backlash such that the minority can claim it is threatened by genocide. Thailand's counterinsurgency doctrine, based as it is on achieving a proper mix of kinetic and non kinetic approaches, is capable to preventing any such slide into barbarism, but the danger does need to be explicitly recognized.

Similarly, the current kinetic (CPM) and non-kinetic (SBPAC) synthesis has ossified to the extent that the ultimate goal has been forgotten: legitimacy achieved through democratic empowerment. It was this objective that allowed the original CSOC/ISOC operational approach to gain traction and defeat the CPT; its absence keeps alive the possibility of a blow to Thai legitimacy and thus national integrity.

## References

[i] Figures and wording are those of the Reuters report found in "Southern Thailand Attacks Reflect Tension Over Peace Talks, Conflict Monitor Says," *The New York Times*, 20 April 2017; available at: [https://www.nytimes.com/reuters/2017/04/20/world/asia/20reuters-thailand-south-attacks.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/reuters/2017/04/20/world/asia/20reuters-thailand-south-attacks.html?_r=0) (accessed 21 April 2017).

[ii] Illustrative works are: McCargo, ed., *Rethinking Thailand's Southern Violence* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2007); McCargo, *Tearing the Land Apart: Islam and Legitimacy in Southern Thailand* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008); and McCargo, *Mapping National Anxieties: Thailand's Southern Conflict* (Copenhagen, Denmark: NAIS Press, 2012).

[iii] See e.g. McCargo, "Autonomy for Southern Thailand: Thinking the Unthinkable?" *Pacific Affairs* 83.2 (June 2010), 261-81; and McCargo and SrisompobJitpiromsri, "A Ministry for the South: New Governance Proposals for Thailand's Southern Region," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 30.3 (2008), 403-28.

[iv] Illustrative works are Rohan Gunaratna, Arabinda Acharya, and Sabina Chua, *Conflict and Terrorism in Southern Thailand* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish,

2005); and Gunaratna and Acharya, *The Terrorist Threat From Thailand: Jihad or Quest for Justice?* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2013). To this may be added the work of Zachary Abuza, *Conspiracy of Silence: The Insurgency in Southern Thailand* (Washington, DC: US Institute of Peace Press, 2009); and Abuza, *The Ongoing Insurgency in Southern Thailand: Trends in Violence, Counterinsurgency Operations, and the Impact of National Politics* (Washington, DC: INSS/NDU Press, September 2011).

[v] Illustrative works by Askew are: *Conspiracy, Politics, and a Disorderly Border: The Struggle to Comprehend Insurgency in Thailand's Deep South*, Policy Studies 29 (Southeast Asia) (Washington, DC: East-West Center, 2007); which was followed by shorter articles as he conducted fieldwork, notably Askew, "Fighting With Ghosts: Querying Thailand's 'Southern Fire'," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 32.2 (2010), 117-55; Askew, "Review Article – Insurgency Redux: Writings on Thailand's Ongoing Southern War," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 42.1 (February 2011), 161-68; and Askew and Sascha Helbardt, "Becoming Patani Warriors: Individuals and the Insurgent Collective in Southern Thailand," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 35 (2012), 779-809. Subsequently, Helbardt published *Deciphering Southern Thailand's Violence: Organization and Insurgent Practices of BRN-Coordinate* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2015). This appears to be the most complete published treatment of the insurgents available today.

[vi] Thomas I. Parks, "Research Note – Maintaining Peace in a Neighbourhood Torn by Separatism: The Case of Satun Province in Southern Thailand," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 20.1 (March 2009), 185-202.

[vii] Tragically, given the advanced ages of key personalities from the successful effort that saw reincorporation of the CPT, there is limited work, in either Thai or English (the prime linguistic candidates), that deals with Thai counterinsurgency as derived from the effort against the CPT. See e.g. Saiyud Kerdphol, *Where Did the CPT Go? The Communist Party of Thailand: Form Over Substance* (Bangkok: S. Research, 2011); in Thai. My own graduate school efforts remain adequate but dated; see e.g. Marks, *Making Revolution: The Insurgency of the Communist Party of Thailand in*

*Structural Perspective* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1994). The CPT case is compared to other Maoist cases, most recently, in my *Maoist People's War in Post-Vietnam Asia* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 2007).

[viii] This statement can certainly be challenged. A perusal, for example, of the relevant postings on Thailand by Human Rights Watch (see <https://www.hrw.org/asia/thailand>) reveals ample critique of the present actions of the state, to include in SBP, and thus could support a different conclusion. To my reading, though, such postings do not appear to claim that in SBP abuse is systematic or a matter of policy. There may be other cause-oriented positions, though, which require qualification of my assessment.

[ix] Michael K. Jerryson, *Buddhist Fury: Religion and Violence in Southern Thailand* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2011); and Vladimir Tikhonov and Torkel Brekke, eds., *Buddhism and Violence: Militarism and Buddhism in Modern Asia* (NY: Routledge, 2013).

[x] See e.g., Amnesty International, *Thailand: Torture in the Southern Counter-Insurgency* (London: January 2009).

[xi] Strong examples are: Michel Gilquin, *The Muslims of Thailand*, trans. Michael Smithies (Chiangmai: Silkworm Books, 2005); Wattana Sugunnasil, ed., *Dynamic Diversity in Southern Thailand* (Chiangmai: Silkworm Books, 2005); Chaiwat Sathanand, *The Life of This World: Negotiated Muslim Lives in Thai Society* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2005); Michael J. Montesano and Patrick Jory, eds., *Thai South and Malay North: Ethnic Interactions on a Plural Peninsula* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2008); Joseph Chinyong Liow, *Islam, Education and Reform in Southern Thailand: Tradition and Transformation* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2009); and Patrick Jory, ed., *Ghosts of the Past in Southern Thailand* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2013).

[xii] E.g. Thanet Aphornsuvan, *Rebellion in Southern Thailand: Contending Histories*, no. 35 (2007); John T. Sidel, *The Islamist Threat in Southeast Asia: A Reassessment*, no. 37 (2007); and John Funston, *Southern Thailand: The Dynamics of Conflict*, no. 50 (2008). Joseph Chinyong Liow has authored a related assessment in *Policy Studies* 24, *Muslim Resistance in Southern Thailand and Southern Philippines: Religion, Ideology, and Politics* (2006), as well as Liow and Don Pathan, *Confronting Ghosts:*

*Thailand's Shapeless Southern Insurgency* (Australia: Lowy Institute for International Policy, 2010), which was one of the subjects for review of Askew, "Review Article" (above).

[xiii] E.g. W.K. Che Man, *Muslim Separatism: The Moros of Southern Philippines and the Malays of Southern Thailand* (Manila: Oxford and Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1990); and David Brown, *The State and Ethnic Politics in South-East Asia* (London: Routledge, 1994).

[xiv] The signal case today is the Israeli presence in the Occupied Territories. Most states that condemn Israel as a "settler colonial" society are themselves implicated by the same mechanism in the theory of "internal colonialism" – yet seem quite unaware that in voting against Israel they are laying the foundation for future challenges to their own legitimacy and national boundaries. Historically, for the U.S., the case of Native Americans well illustrates the dynamic. For the legal framework mentioned, see Christopher O. Quaye, *Liberation Struggles in International Law* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1991).

[xv] Useful for approaching this complex topic are: Gareth Evans, *The Responsibility to Protect: Ending Mass Atrocity Crimes Once and For All* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2008); Anne Orford, *International Authority and the Responsibility to Protect* (NY: Cambridge UP, 2011); Philip Cunliffe, *Critical Perspectives on the Responsibility to Protect: Integrating Theory and Practice* (NY: Routledge, 2011); and Luke Glanville, *Sovereignty and the Responsibility to Protect: A New History* (NY: Chicago, 2014).

[xvi] See e.g. Damien Kingsbury, *Sri Lanka and the Responsibility to Protect* (NY: Routledge, 2012).

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