


Traditional and Non-Traditional Security Issues in Southern Thailand: Impacts on Malaysian Border Development and Governance

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the multifaceted security dynamics along the Malaysia–Thailand border, focusing on Southern Thailand's traditional and non-traditional threats. These include insurgency, economic disparity, human trafficking, education inequity, and cross-border crime, all of which significantly impact Malaysia's border governance and socio-economic development. Employing a qualitative research approach through interviews and document analysis, the study highlights the need for holistic strategies integrating military, economic, and social responses. It also explores bilateral mechanisms such as the General Border Committee (GBC), Malaysia–Thai Border Coordination Office (MTBCO), and Southern Border Provinces Administrative Centre (SBPAC) as critical instruments of cooperation. The findings suggest that sustainable peace and development require a balanced approach between decentralisation, inclusive policies, and socio-cultural recognition. Malaysia's role as a peace facilitator and economic partner emerges as vital to conflict resolution and long-term regional stability. This research contributes to understanding borderland security governance and regional collaboration in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Border Governance, Cross-Border Crime, Malaysia–Thailand Cooperation, Non-Traditional Threats, Southern Thailand

INTRODUCTION

In the ever-evolving dynamics of security and development, the line between traditional and non-traditional threats has blurred, with both types of threats now intricately linked to a region's stability and socio-economic growth (Spear & Williams, 2012). This is particularly evident in border areas, where geographical proximities often translate into shared security and development challenges. Our research focuses on one such critical region, the Malaysia–Thailand border, where the implications of traditional and non-traditional security issues on the Southern Thailand Provinces are explored

The border between the northern states of Perlis, Kedah, Perak, and Kelantan in Peninsula Malaysia and the southern region of Thailand, specifically Satun, Songkhla, Yala, and Narathiwat as Figure 1, is defined by several officially appointed international entry and exit points (Anuar & Omar, 2023). These include Wang Kelian–Wang Prachan, Padang Besar–Padang Besa, Bukit Kayu Hitam–Danok, Durian Burung–Ban Prakop, Pengkalan Hulu–Betong, Bukit Bunga–Ban Buketa, Rantau Panjang–Sungai Kolok, and Pengkalan Kubur–Tak Bai. Road transportation is pivotal in connectivity between Kedah, Songkhla, Perlis, and Satun. The official border crossing

checkpoints for Perlis and Satun are at Padang Besar-Padang Besa. At the same time, the Bukit Kayu Hitam-Danok crossing serves as the entry/exit point for Kedah and Songkhla.

Furthermore, a railway connection between Perlis and Songkhla through the Padang Besar-Padang Besa crossing checkpoints exists. The maritime border between Perlis and Satun is between the Kuala Perlis Ferry Terminal and the Satun Ferry Terminal at Tammalang Pier. Additionally, there is a maritime link between the Kuah Jetty in Langkawi, Kedah, and the Satun Ferry Terminal at Tammalang Pier.

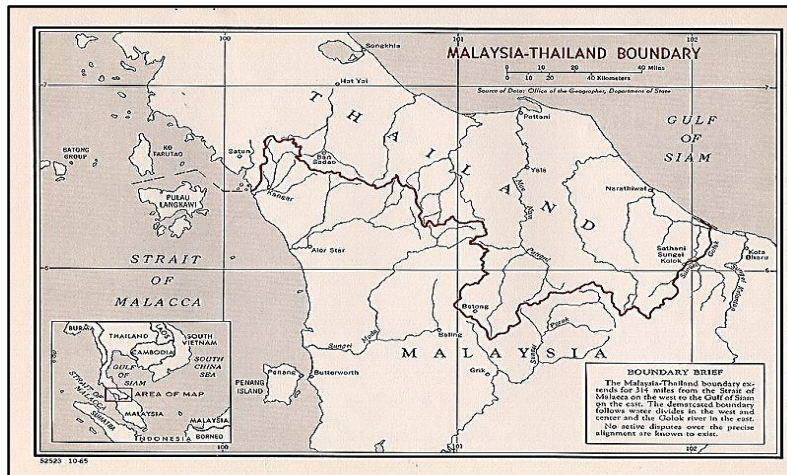


Figure 1: Malaysia-Thailand Boundary

Source: Anuar & Omar (2023)

The provinces of Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, Songkhla, and Satun, all situated in the southernmost region of Thailand bordering Malaysia, are distinct for having a majority Muslim population (Nutrada, 2019). This population is predominantly Malay Muslim, with a culture and language that shares strong similarities with neighbouring Malaysia. Songkhla's Muslim population is primarily in the districts of Chana, Na Thawi, Saba Yoi, and Thepha, while Satun has concentrated in the district of Thung Wa. Though Muslims account for about 5.4% of Thailand's population, they form the majority in these five provinces. This significant religious divide between the Muslim-majority south and the predominantly Buddhist rest of the country has created tension. In recent years, there have been numerous violent incidents fuelled by this tension, particularly in these five provinces, highlighting the ongoing strife between the Muslim majority and the Buddhist minority in these areas.



Figure 2: Southern Province of Thailand

Source: Nutrada (2019)

The Southern Thailand Provinces, despite their vast potential for socio-economic growth, have been historically marked by a range of traditional and non-traditional security threats (Jenne & Chang, 2019). This region has been a centre for various conflicts, political instability, ethnic tensions, and migration pressures, fuelled by shared ethnicity, religion, and the attractive economic growth of Malaysia. The proliferation of non-traditional threats, such as human trafficking, smuggling of contraband items, illegal immigration, and maritime security threats, further compounds these issues.

Problem Statement

The border region between Malaysia and Thailand, particularly the Southern Thailand provinces, has witnessed a complex interplay of traditional and non-traditional security issues that have significantly impacted socio-economic development. Over time, these security issues, ranging from territorial disputes and political instability to non-traditional challenges like illegal immigration, human trafficking, cross-border crimes, environmental degradation, public health concerns, and extremism, have not only threatened the safety and well-being of communities in the region but have also hampered sustainable economic growth (Chambers & Waitoolkiat, 2019)

Moreover, the spill-over effects of political turmoil and internal conflicts in the Southern Thailand districts have exacerbated these security challenges, with many refugees and migrants crossing into Malaysia. Based on a statistics report from the Malaysia Army Headquarters Operation Branch involved in the northern border operation area, most immigrants crossing the Malaysia/Thailand border come from Myanmar, shown at 85.42% as the highest case record at the border area of operation. This influx has posed additional challenges to Malaysia's national security and socio-economic stability. Despite efforts to manage and mitigate these security issues, they persist, impacting various economic development areas along the border and extending to Malaysia's maritime boundaries, including Langkawi Island, a significant contributor to Malaysia's tourism industry (Azrul Azlan Abd Rahman, 2023).

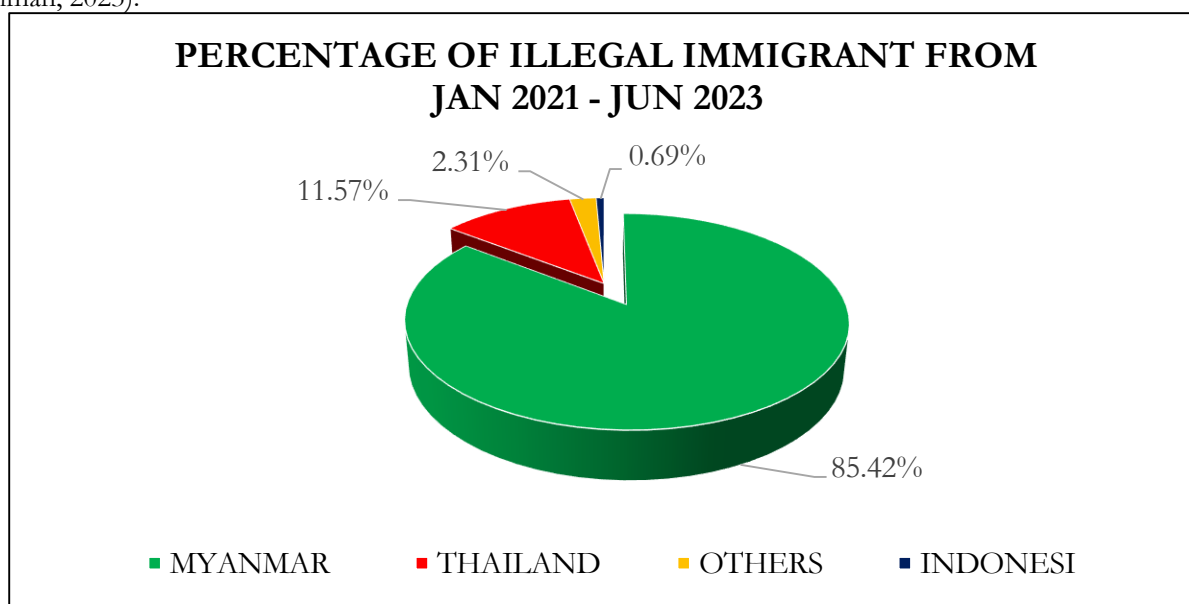


Figure 3: Statistic Illegal Immigrant Detain by Malaysia Army from Jan 2021-Jun 2023

Source: Malaysia Army Headquarters Operation Branch (2023)

These persistent security issues underline gaps and shortcomings in current border management strategies, bilateral cooperation mechanisms, and regional development policies. Furthermore, there needs to be a more comprehensive understanding and analysis of these security challenges within the broader context of regional socio-economic development, hindering effective responses and strategies. Despite the continuous efforts to address security and development challenges in the Malaysia-Thailand border region, there is a need for a comprehensive study to understand the impacts of traditional and non-traditional issues on the Southern Thailand provinces. The existing research and studies have provided valuable insights into specific aspects of the region's security and development, but significant gaps warrant further investigation. One critical gap is the need for more focus on the interplay between traditional and non-traditional security challenges and their implications for socio-economic development in the Southern Thailand provinces. While previous studies have shed light on individual security issues, such as political instability, ethnic tensions, and migration pressures, they often lack a holistic understanding of how these challenges intersect with economic development.

Furthermore, the existing research needs to fully explore the spill-over effects of these security challenges on the neighbouring regions, particularly in Malaysia. The implications of Malaysia's shared ethnicity, religion, and economic attractiveness have resulted in migration and the consequential impact on national security and socio-economic progress. Moreover, the previous studies have not adequately addressed the potential for non-traditional security threats, including human trafficking, smuggling, illegal immigration, and maritime security issues, further exacerbating the border region's security and development challenges.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

To ensure the process of acquiring research data is smooth and systematic, the technique or research design must be well planned. As noted by Kumar (1996), the design of a research study should be conducted systematically to ensure that research objectives are achieved through effective and efficient data collection methods. This research employed a qualitative data collection approach involving literature review and interviews. The study began by identifying the research problem, which indirectly shaped the aim or objective of the research. In the following phase, fieldwork was conducted to obtain data, particularly from primary sources.

Data Collection Process

The data collection process for this research involved both primary and secondary methods. Information from primary methods was obtained through interviews and questionnaires. Cresswell (1998) proposed several steps in the process of primary data collection, including identifying the site/respondents/informants, building rapport and obtaining consent, determining sampling, collecting data, recording information, resolving field issues, and storing data. Meanwhile, secondary data for this study was obtained through literature review.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This research utilised secondary data collected from university libraries, government departments, and museums. The materials referred to included academic books, journals, theses, working papers, brochures, pamphlets, and relevant magazines. Official government websites related to the research topic were also utilised as additional sources. In addition, official documents and reports from responsible bodies such as the Ministry of Defence Malaysia, Ministry of Home Affairs Malaysia, the Thailand Ministry of Defence, and the National Security Council (NSC) of Malaysia were referenced to enrich the study. Document analysis was conducted to obtain data from final project reports, relevant acts and policies, conservation guidelines, and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs)

Interviews

The purpose of interviews was to obtain valid feedback and record responses accurately and completely (Azizi Yahaya et al., 2007). Denzin (2001) asserted that interviews should function beyond just information-gathering tools; they should be reflective and capable of capturing the real situation in the field. Therefore, this method offers researchers the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the research topic through detailed communication with respondents. As Patton (1990) noted, interviews allow researchers to understand the opinions, views, or thoughts of informants. Similarly, Taylor and Bogdan (1984) stated that in-depth interviews enable researchers to understand how informants react to perspectives, experiences, or social phenomena in their own words and expressions.

Participants in this study were interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol. This protocol was developed to guide and assist the researcher during interviews with informants. According to Merriam (1998), the semi-structured interview format was chosen because it allows for more flexible and detailed information gathering. This means that the responses received are open-ended and can be expanded based on the discretion of both the researcher and the informant. Schensul et al. (1999) further noted that semi-structured interviews are the best method to explore and describe factors and sub-factors in building initial hypotheses, explaining research factors in detail, linking variables, and providing a qualitative foundation for developing ethnographic surveys. Therefore, this method allows researchers to ask questions freely but within the scope of the research topic and according to the established interview protocol. The interviews were conducted orally with several government officials. The list of respondents is as follows:

No.	Agency	Speaker's
1.	University Utara Malaysia	Prof. Dr. Abdul Rahim Anuar
2.	Northern Corridor Implementation Authority (NCIA)	Mohamed Anuwar Yunos
3.	Langkawi Development Authority (LADA)	Mohd Tarmizi bin Mohamad Tajuddin
4.	Prince of Songkhla University	Prof. Srisompob Jitpiromsri
5.	HQ COMNAV 3	Kepten Herman Shahril bin Adlan RMN

6.	MMEA Kedah/Perlis HQ	First Admiral (M) Romli bin Mustafa
7.	Ministry of Investment Trader & Industry Malaysia	Faizal Mohd Yusof
8.	Perlis Economic Planning Division	Puteh Soraya bt Abdul Rahman
9.	OCPD Langkawi	ACP Shariman bin Ashari
10.	Royal Malaysia Customs Department	Mohamad Furiman bin Hattar
11.	Kedah Economic Planning Division	Junaidi bin Abdul Rani Abdul Ghani

Figure 4: List of respondents who have been interviewed
Source: Researcher (2023)

To ensure the interview sessions were smooth and conducted in conducive environments with maximum data yield, good rapport between the researcher and informants was essential. This rapport facilitates comfortable communication and potentially encourages informants to be more open in discussing the research topic (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). As a result, these descriptive discussions allow informants to elaborate more deeply on the topic.

The interview questions were constructed based on the analysis of findings from the literature review. In addition, several items or questions from scholarly studies were adapted to meet the needs of this research. Interviews followed a specific protocol or guide that included components such as title, introduction/opening remarks, key questions and sub-questions, a note section, and a reflective note space.

During the interviews, several tools were used to facilitate the research process. These included a voice recorder to capture conversations and a camera to obtain pictures and additional records such as images of informants, interview locations, and related historical buildings. The voice recorder also served as an essential tool in analyzing the opinions of informants. Keywords were noted in a notebook during the interviews for reference during the data analysis process.

Interview findings were recorded using a pre-designed coding scheme. Informants were assigned codes to help researchers identify each respondent according to their area of expertise. These codes were also used to label the themes developed during the interview analysis.

Interview Data Analysis Procedure Using NVivo 11

According to Maxwell (2005), qualitative data is dynamic, subjective, and involves a creative process of theory building. Therefore, analyzing qualitative data requires meticulousness, diligence, and patience. The systematic analysis of primary interview data involves writing field notes, conducting interviews, preparing verbatim transcripts, developing main themes (nodes) and sub-themes, coding, obtaining expert review, preparing matrix tables, analyzing themes, and explaining research findings.

A verbatim transcript means the researcher records everything stated by the respondent, including utterances such as “erm”, “er”, “ah”, “a”, “a..”, “o” and “eh”. Brief notes prepared by the researcher are not suitable due to the risk of bias, as the researcher may only record information that is relevant, preferred, or desired. This method increases the reliability and quality of the collected data.

In this study, after each interview session, the recordings were immediately listened to carefully and repeatedly using VLC Media Player to ensure clear understanding. The researcher then developed the verbatim transcript using “Word 97-2003 Document (*.doc)” format. Once completed, the transcript was stored in a dedicated digital folder titled “Transkrip Verbatim Traditional and Non-Traditional Security Issues in Southern Thailand: Impacts on Malaysian Border Development and Governance”.

Traditional and Non-Traditional Security Issues in Southern Thailand Provinces

Traditional Security Issues - Southern Thailand Insurgency

The Southern insurgency in Thailand's southernmost provinces of Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat has been ongoing for decades, but its most recent recurrence has been the fiercest. The insurgents, who are predominantly Malay-Muslim, as shown in Figure 5, have been able to perpetrate violence at will against both Buddhist and Muslim populations in the targeted areas and against Thai civilian and military authorities (Pongsudhirak, 2012). The insurgency, flared up in January 2004, has claimed more than 7,344 lives. The religious breakdown of these casualties is 51.7% Buddhists, 46.27% Muslims, and 3.03% whose religious affiliations are unclear, as shown in Figure 6. The insurgents' aims range from greater administrative autonomy to outright separatism in southern Thailand against the Thai state. The insurgency is triangulated between historiography, domestic politics, and external involvement, with considerable overlap.



Figure 6: Number of Attacks in Southern Province from 2004 until 2022
 Source: www.deepsouthwatch.org (2022)

The insurgency is rooted in historical, political, and external factors tied to the history of the old Patani Kingdom, annexed by the Anglo-Siamese Treaty 1909 (Engvall & Andersson, 2014). Though a long-standing issue, the current wave of violence has been the most severe yet, primarily contained to the Malay-Muslim provinces, suggesting an ethno-nationalist underpinning as Figure 7. Proposed solutions to mitigate the insurgency have included increased administrative autonomy, acknowledgement of local grievances, legal and bureaucratic reforms, and adopting the local "yawi" language as an official secondary language. Despite the urgency of these proposed solutions, the centralised structure of the Thai government and its focus on internal crises have hindered progress. Notably, the military's significant role in addressing the insurgency has complicated the situation further. For any substantial improvement to occur, the political leadership in Bangkok needs a firm resolve, possibly redefining government-army relations.



Figure 7: Malay-Muslim Majority in Southern Province of Thailand
 Source: Palanisamy (2023)

The insurgency in Southern Thailand is intrinsically linked to poverty and economic disparities (Bajoria & Zissis, 2008). While Thailand's economy has seen significant growth in recent decades, the wealth distribution has been uneven, particularly in the southern provinces. This economic gap is most pronounced between Buddhist and Muslim households in the border region. The poverty rate has decreased from 40%, 36%, and 33% in 2000 to 18%, 10%, and 23% in 2004 in Pattani, Narathiwat, and Yala, respectively. By 2004, these three provinces accounted for 45% of the poor population in southern Thailand, although the number of those living below the poverty line had decreased from 610,000 in 2000 to 310,000 in 2022.

Education levels among Muslims in the border provinces are generally lower than their Buddhist counterparts, with 69.8% of Muslims having only primary education, against 49.6% of Buddhists (Anantanukulwong et al., 2023). A mere 1.7% of the Muslim population holds a bachelor's degree, compared to 9.7% of Buddhists. This disparity is primarily attributed to enforcing the Thai language in government schools, leading to low literacy rates and perceived cultural antagonism. Moreover, the violence from insurgent groups has resulted in the destruction of schools and the killing of teachers, further hampering the secular educational system. These educational disadvantages contribute to limited employment opportunities for Muslims compared to Buddhists, particularly in the public sector. Only 2.4% of working Muslims hold government posts, versus 19.2% of working Buddhists.

Job opportunities are also diminished by the insurgency's attacks on economic targets, affecting employment for Muslims and Buddhists in the provinces. The attacks have targeted businesses, tourists, and infrastructure, all essential to the local economy. The attacks aim to create an atmosphere of fear and instability, making it difficult for businesses to operate and hindering regional tourism. This will harm the local economy, which is already struggling (Corben, 2014). Attribution for the bombings is commonly given to the insurgents; however further, some commentators observe that the bombing may have originated from government sources and hence warrants further investigation (Jitpiromsri., 2023).

Since 2004, the Thai government has imposed martial law and an emergency decree in response to the unceasing separatist insurgency in the Deep South of Thailand (Jitpiromsri et al., 2021). These legislative actions have provided the government with sweeping powers, including the detention of individuals without filing charges, imposition of media censorship, curfews, and curtailing the freedom of assembly. The consequences of these legislative measures have had a profound impact on the day-to-day lives of the citizens residing in the Deep South. A substantial number of individuals have been incarcerated under these laws, and it is reported that some have been subjected to human rights abuses (Jitpiromsri et al., 2021). The media's voice has been suppressed, fostering an atmosphere of fear and oppression. The government's curtailment of the freedom of assembly has prevented individuals from organising peaceful protests.

The government maintains that these laws are indispensable in preserving national security and ceasing the insurgency. However, critics argue that these measures have achieved little more than further alienating the Deep South's Muslim community, intensifying the ongoing conflict. The Emergency Decree, first enforced in 2005, has been consistently renewed every three months. The latest extension was approved in March 2023, and the duration for which the government plans to continue enforcing these laws remains unknown (Jitpiromsri et al., 2021).

Several specific outcomes have emerged due to the martial law and emergency decree in Thailand's Deep South. The region has experienced heightened militarisation as the government has deployed tens of thousands of troops, leading to a pronounced military presence in many areas (Jitpiromsri et al., 2021). Furthermore, the curfews and travel restrictions imposed require people to seek permission for movement. Accusations have been levelled against the security forces for their intimidation and harassment of civilians, including journalists, human rights defenders, and religious leaders. Freedom of expression has been severely limited through restrictions on media freedom (Jitpiromsri et al., 2021).

Non-Traditional Security Issues

Non-traditional security issues are challenges to the survival and well-being of peoples and states that arise primarily out of non-military sources, such as climate change, resource scarcity, infectious diseases, natural disasters, irregular migration, food shortages, people smuggling, drug trafficking and transnational crime. These dangers are often transnational in scope, defying unilateral remedies and requiring comprehensive – political, economic, and social – responses and humanitarian use of military force (Caballero-Anthony, 2016).

Poverty and Economic Deprivation

Poverty and economic deprivation are major non-traditional security issues in the Southern Thailand provinces. The region is among the poorest in Thailand, with high levels of unemployment and underemployment. The World Bank reported that the Deep South had become the region with the highest poverty rate for the first time in 2017. As of 2018, the poverty rates of Pattani, Narathiwat, and Yala were 39.27, 30.10 and 23.28, respectively (World Bank Group, 2020). This has led to marginalisation and resentment among the local population, which insurgent groups have exploited.

The insurgent groups, such as the Barisan Revolusi Nasional-Coordinate (BRN), have been able to recruit young people from the poor and marginalised communities in the southern provinces (Taneerananon, 2015). They have promised these young people a better future and a chance to fight for their rights. The Thai government has taken some steps to address the issue of poverty in the southern provinces. However, more needs to be done to improve the economic opportunities for the people in this region. The Thai government can only hope to resolve the ongoing conflict in the southern provinces by addressing the root causes of poverty and economic deprivation.

Inequity in Education and Healthcare

The issues of inequity in education and healthcare are substantial and critical factors contributing to the conflict and unrest in the southern provinces of Thailand (Anantanukulwong et al., 2023). There are observable disparities in these two sectors when compared to other parts of Thailand, fostering feelings of injustice and alienation among the population of these regions. Insurgent groups can also exploit such feelings, further fuelling the conflict. The education system in southern Thailand, particularly in the border provinces, tends to favour the Thai language and Buddhism, thereby marginalising the local Muslim Malay population who speak a different language (Patani-Malay) and practice Islam.

For many Malays Muslims, this matter is viewed as an attempt by the Thai government to undermine or eliminate Islamic education in Southern Thailand. The perceived marginalisation of Islamic education within the broader educational framework deepens the frustration and dissatisfaction among the Malay Muslim community. This educational divide not only hampers individual opportunities for higher education and employment but also has broader implications for the overall development and progress of the Malay Muslim community in Southern Thailand. It underscores the need for bridging the gap between the religious and academic spheres and finding a way to incorporate Islamic education into the recognised education system, enabling Malay Muslims to pursue their religious beliefs while also gaining the necessary qualifications for career advancement (Pherali, 2023).

The lack of recognition and acceptance of Islamic education within the Thai education system and the disparity in academic syllabus and language have hindered Malay Muslims' educational and career prospects in Southern Thailand (Liow, 2010). The challenges in accessing higher education and employment opportunities have resulted in a cycle of unemployment and poverty within the community. The perception that the Thai government disregards Islamic education further adds to the frustrations and concerns of the Malay Muslim population in the region.

Human Rights Abuses

The allegations of human rights abuse by Thai security forces in the southern provinces of Thailand have been a significant cause for concern. These allegations include extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, arbitrary detentions, and torture (Najish, 2017). While the Thai government has denied these allegations, international bodies like the United Nations Human Rights Council have found evidence suggesting the contrary. In 2014, the UN Human Rights Council assigned a Special Rapporteur to investigate the human rights situation in Thailand. The resulting report identified a "pattern of impunity" where human rights abuses by Thai security forces in the southern provinces went unchecked.

These alleged abuses have significantly contributed to feelings of alienation and resentment among the local population in the southern provinces (Tan-Mullins, 2009). They feel unprotected and even targeted by their government, which fosters an environment where insurgent groups can thrive and gain support. Suppose people believe their government is not respecting their fundamental human rights. In that case, they are more likely to empathise with and even join insurgent groups perceived to be fighting against these injustices. Addressing this issue is critical for the Thai government if they wish to resolve the conflict in the southern provinces. They need to instigate thorough and independent investigations into these allegations and bring those responsible to account. It is essential to end the culture of impunity and demonstrate a commitment to human rights, law, and order.

Drug Trafficking and Organised Crime

Drug trafficking and organised crime are significant non-traditional security concerns in the Southern Thailand provinces (Behera, 2013). The region is a significant drug transit point, including heroin, methamphetamine, and marijuana. The drugs are smuggled from Myanmar and Laos into Thailand and then on to other countries in Southeast Asia, East Asia, Australia and elsewhere. The drug trade is a significant source of income for organised crime groups in the Deep South. These groups are also involved in other criminal activities, such as extortion, human trafficking, and arms smuggling. The drug trade and organised crime harm the security and stability of the region. They contribute to violence, corruption, and social unrest.

Human trafficking, a bizarre infringement of human rights and contemporary slavery, involves exploiting individuals for forced labour, sexual exploitation, or other abusive uses (Whitney, 2022). Vulnerable groups like migrants, refugees, and ethnic minorities are predominantly the victims of human trafficking in Southern Thailand. The existence of these trafficking networks erodes the rule of law, feeds into the informal economy, and continues the cycle of exploitation.

The smuggling issue involving both goods and people poses a significant security threat. Organised crime organisations are deeply involved in smuggling activities, which include the unlawful movement of illegal goods, narcotics, weapons, and migrants across borders (Bernama, 2023). Smugglers exploit weaknesses in border control

systems, corruption, and lax borders to facilitate their unlawful activities. Smuggling undermines national security, contributes to economic instability by fuelling the informal economy, and distorts fair trade.

The significant influx of undocumented migrants and refugees into Southern Thailand provinces presents considerable security and socio-economic challenges. These mass migrations strain local resources and services, affecting the capacity of local communities to provide adequate healthcare, housing, education, and social services. These undocumented migrants are often subjected to exploitation, abuse, and human rights violations, potentially disrupting labour markets (Chaijaroenwatana & Haque, 2020).

Border Management Strategies and Bilateral Cooperation

Border Cooperation

The border cooperation between Malaysia and Thailand includes several initiatives and agencies working together to address various aspects of border management and bilateral relations. One important agency involved in border coordination is the Malaysia-Thai Border Coordination Office (MTBCO). It is located in Alor Setar, Kedah, Malaysia and Songkhla, Thailand. Officers are seconded by multiple agencies of interest, such as Immigration, Royal Malaysian Polis, and Malaysian Armed Forces and led by the National Security Council (MOFA, n.d.). The office is tasked as a liaison of multiple bilateral meetings hosted alternately by both Government Agencies. The MTBCO serves as a platform for cooperation and information sharing. Facilitating joint efforts between the Malaysian and Thai authorities is crucial to ensure border security, managing cross-border activities, and addressing everyday challenges. Additionally, there is the Malaysian Police Liaison Office (MPLO), which operates in Songkhla Province, Thailand. The MPLO serves as a channel for communication and collaboration between the Malaysian police and their Thai counterparts.

These agencies work closely with other relevant organisations, such as immigration departments, to facilitate border crossings and promote legal movement between the two countries. For example, the Malaysian Immigration Department issues special Border Passes that allow Malaysian citizens residing in specific states to travel across the Malaysia-Thailand border. Moreover, ongoing efforts are to enhance trade and economic cooperation across the border. Reopening all nine border checkpoints between Malaysia and Thailand has increased border trade and economic activities, further strengthening the ties between the two countries. The collaboration between the two nations is crucial in maintaining border security, facilitating legal movement, and promoting economic growth in the region (Bernama, 2022).

Security and Development

The Southern Border Provinces Administrative Center (SBPAC) is an administrative agency the Thailand government assigns to the Ministry of Interior (SBPAC, n.d.). They were established in 1981 and developed from the existing Southern Border Provinces Administration Coordination Center (SorPor.Por.) of the Department of Provincial Administration. They are performing urgent duties, supervising, coordinating, joining forces, and following up and evaluating the performance of civil and police agencies in areas to achieve the objectives and goals of the national security policy concerning the southern border provinces. Emphasis is placed on social psychology, politics, governance, and civil servants' efficiency development. It includes socio-economic development promoting good understanding and cooperation at the local level with Malaysia. SBPAC undertakes a wide range of initiatives, including local economic boosting measures, infrastructure improvement, support for education and healthcare, and strengthening security measures.

In addressing the ongoing conflict in the region, the SBPAC works closely with security forces to maintain peace and security. However, it also focuses on addressing the root causes of the conflict. This includes fostering dialogue, promoting understanding, and driving social and economic development to reduce tensions and create a more stable and prosperous region (Piyasiripon, 2015). However, the work of the SBPAC is often challenging due to the region's complexities. Striking a balance between maintaining security and promoting development is a delicate task. The ongoing efforts of the SBPAC highlight the importance of holistic approaches to conflict resolution that address not only the symptoms but also the underlying causes of unrest.

The Thai government has made significant investments in infrastructure development in the southern region of Thailand to improve connectivity and facilitate economic growth. This includes the development of transportation networks, such as roads, railways, and expanding ports and airports (Benbourenane, 2021). Regarding roads, the Thai government has undertaken projects to improve and expand the road network in the southern region. This includes the construction and upgrading of highways and expressways, which helps to enhance connectivity within the region and connect it with other parts of the country.

The development of railways is also a key focus in the southern region. The Thai government has prioritised expanding and modernising the railway network, with plans to connect the southern provinces to major cities and economic centres (Komchornrit, 2017). This includes developing high-speed rail projects like the Bangkok-

Nakhon Ratchasima high-speed railway, which will benefit the southern region and improve transportation links. Furthermore, expanding ports and airports is crucial in supporting economic growth and trade in the southern region. The Thai government has invested in expanding and improving existing ports, such as the Laem Chabang Port and the Map Ta Phut Port, to accommodate larger vessels and increase cargo handling capacity. In addition, there are plans to develop new ports and airports in the southern region, enhancing connectivity and facilitating the movement of goods and people.

Economic development is a crucial focus of the Thai government's initiatives in the southern provinces of Thailand (Azmi, 2013). The government has undertaken various measures to attract investments, promote tourism, and support industries in the region to promote economic growth. To attract investments and encourage businesses to set up operations in the southern region, the Thai government offers incentives to investors, such as tax holidays, subsidised land leases, and access to support services. These incentives help offset the additional costs and risks associated with operating in a more remote region and make the southern provinces more attractive to investors.

Another crucial area of focus is tourism. The southern region of Thailand contains many popular tourist destinations, such as Phuket and Krabi. The Thai government has implemented measures to promote further tourism in the region, such as improving access to infrastructure, expanding hotel capacity, and enhancing the overall visitor experience (Azmi et al., 2017). This has helped to boost tourism revenues in the region, creating jobs and economic opportunities. The southern region of Thailand is also rich in natural resources, such as agriculture and fisheries. The Thai government has implemented measures to support these industries and promote sustainable development. This includes investing in infrastructure, such as irrigation and transportation systems, supporting research and development, providing financial assistance, and improving market access.

In addition to development efforts, the Thai government has implemented various security measures to address security challenges in the southern region of Thailand (Yusof & James, 2020). These measures aim to create a safe and secure environment for the local population and support the overall development goals in the region. A critical aspect of security initiatives is the deployment of enhanced security forces. The Thai government has increased the presence of security forces, such as military personnel, police officers, and paramilitary units, in the southern provinces. This increased deployment helps maintain law and order, deter illegal activities, and respond effectively to security threats or incidents.

Intelligence sharing is also a critical component of security measures in the region. The Thai government coordinates with various security agencies at the national and regional levels to gather and share intelligence information (MTBCO, n.d.). This collaboration helps to identify potential security risks, track illicit activities, and disrupt any elements that may undermine stability in the southern provinces. Community-based security initiatives play a significant role in the overall security efforts. The government works closely with local communities to build trust, promote engagement, and encourage cooperation in maintaining security. This includes community policing, neighbourhood watch programs and establishing local security committees. Involving the community in security matters helps create a sense of ownership, encourages cooperation, and enables a better response to security challenges.

The General Border Committee (GBC) Meeting between Malaysia and Thailand is a regular high-level diplomatic dialogue between representatives from both nations (Thamcheewatad & Thalang, 2019). Its primary focus is enhancing security, fostering cooperation, and managing issues along their shared border. The meetings are co-chaired by top officials from defence or interior ministries, signifying the importance of these dialogues in regional security and stability. At the meeting, they address border management issues like cross-border crime, trafficking, illegal immigration, and border disputes. They also discuss developmental aspects like economic growth, infrastructure enhancement, and improving social conditions in border regions. The committee reviews, and endorses progress on ongoing initiatives and plans for future actions. The outcomes can include plans for joint operations, information-sharing agreements, decisions on infrastructure development, and strategies to boost socio-economic development in the border areas.

The 55th General Border Committee Meeting was held in Kuala Lumpur on 26 May 2022 (MINDEF, 2022, 26 May). They discussed and were pleased with the progress of operational activities, border management, and socio-economic development initiatives. Several agreements were made at the meeting, such as enhancing information exchange among border agencies, boosting joint operations, facilitating legal border crossing activities, and appointing Liaison Officers for Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) readiness. They also agreed to conduct the 4th JCEC THAMAL exercise, which is expected to be held in 2024 and might involve ASEAN and allied countries as observers and participants. The meeting emphasised promoting the roles of female trainees and the effectiveness of Emergency Medical Services. The 56th GBC Meeting is planned for 2023 and will be hosted by Thailand.

Good Governance

Good governance is essential to any development and security initiatives in the southern region of Thailand (Ball, 2006). The Thai government recognises the importance of collaboration, agreement, bilateral engagement, and transparent policy in achieving effective regional governance. The Thai government collaborates with stakeholders, including local authorities, community leaders, civil society organisations, and international partners, to develop and implement regional policies and strategies. For example, the Thai government has collaborated with civil society organisations to promote community-based security initiatives in the southern provinces. These initiatives aim to build trust and cooperation between the local population and security forces to improve regional security.

To promote agreement and consensus-building in the southern region of Thailand, the Thai government has taken steps to establish Provincial Development Boards. These boards serve as platforms for dialogue and engagement between local authorities and community representatives. The Provincial Development Boards allow different groups and stakeholders to come together and discuss various development priorities and regional planning strategies (Athukorala & Narayanan, 2018). This inclusive approach ensures that the voices and perspectives of the local communities are heard and considered in decision-making processes. Through these platforms, local authorities, including government officials and community leaders, engage in constructive discussions with community representatives to identify key development areas, address concerns, and find common ground. The goal is to achieve consensus and agreement on important issues related to infrastructure development, healthcare, education, tourism, economic growth, and other areas of development.

The Thai government aims to build strong relationships based on trust, collaboration, and inclusivity through these inclusive platforms. The Provincial Development Boards enable all stakeholders, including government officials, community leaders, and civil society organisations, to engage in constructive discussions and find common ground (Tajendara, 2021). This approach ensures that the voices and perspectives of the local communities are heard and considered in the decision-making process. In other words, establishing Provincial Development Boards in the southern provinces of Thailand is part of the government's larger goals of community engagement, trust building, and inclusive growth.

The Thai government is committed to establishing clear policies, guidelines, and regulations for various sectors and development initiatives in the southern region. A critical example is the National Economic & Social Development Plans, where the Thai government provides clear policies and objectives for developing the Southern region (NESDC, 2023). The government's clear policies target connectivity, infrastructure, and regional economic development. These policies provide a roadmap for addressing the region's unique needs and challenges, improving connectivity through transportation networks, developing essential infrastructure like roads, ports, and utilities, and fostering economic growth through targeted initiatives and investments.

Economic Integration between Thailand & Malaysia

The Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT) is a dynamic initiative that promotes sustainable economic growth and development among these three Southeast Asian countries (IMT-GT, 2023, 11 January). Launched in 1993, the IMT-GT incorporates 32 provinces and states across Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand, such as the provinces of Krabi, Narathiwat, Pattani, Phatthalung, Satun, Songkhla, Trang, and Yala, as shown in Figure 8. Its key strategies to bolster economic growth are fostering and expanding connectivity, promoting investment and trade, and human resource development. Improved connectivity includes enhancing infrastructure such as roads, railways, ports, and information and communications technology. This facilitates trade and tourism and promotes cultural exchanges among the member countries. By working collectively, IMT-GT member countries can also create an attractive investment climate, encouraging foreign and domestic investments, enhancing market access and removing trade barriers.

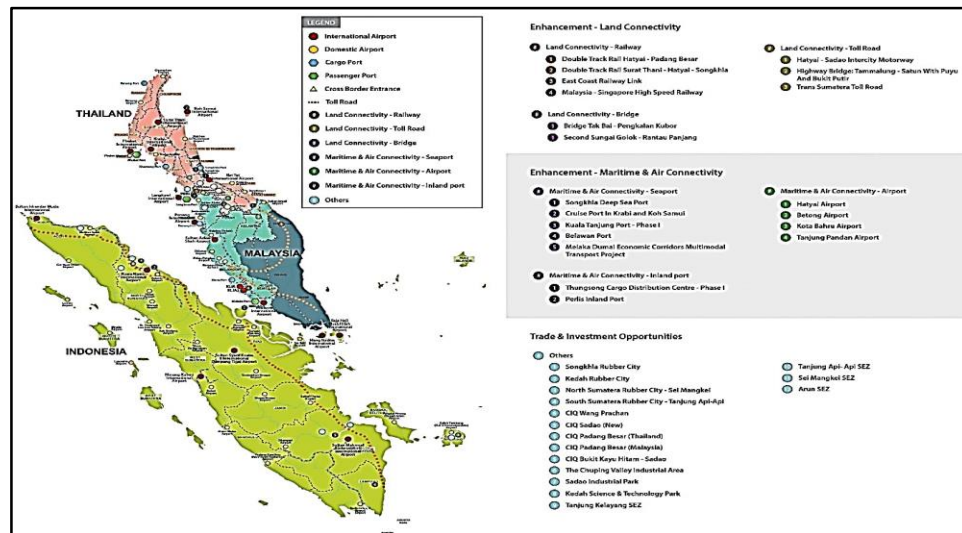


Figure 8. Physical Connectivity Project - Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT)

Source: IMT-GT (2023, 11 January)

Another pivotal strategy employed by IMT-GT is focusing on human resource development. This entails the development of skills and capabilities through vocational training and educational exchanges, which significantly improves workforce productivity and facilitates greater integration among the three nations. However, like any ambitious initiative, the IMT-GT faces some challenges. These include developmental disparities among the member provinces and states, potentially leading to unequal distribution of benefits. Policy coordination can also pose a challenge, given the differences in national interests, administrative styles, and political dynamics. Security concerns, particularly in southern Thailand, can hamper economic integration efforts. Furthermore, with rapid development, environmental degradation could become a concern, thereby underlining the need for sustainable and environmentally friendly practices.

The Thailand-Malaysia Joint High-Level Committee (JHC) on Economic Cooperation represents a significant collaborative effort between the two nations. Established in 1990, the JHC provides a structured platform for discussing and coordinating economic policies, directly contributing to the robust development of bilateral relations. Regular meetings under the co-chairmanship of the Ministers of Commerce from both countries allow for continuous dialogue on essential matters, including trade, investment, and tourism. These discussions foster cooperation and alignment on shared economic goals. The JHC also supervises several specialised sub-committees that concentrate on particular areas of economic cooperation. Their precise focus and expertise facilitate more effective and detailed policy crafting and implementation.

One of the significant accomplishments of the JHC has been its success in facilitating key agreements such as the Malaysia-Thailand Transport Cooperation Agreement and the Agreement on the Promotion and Protection of Investments. These landmark agreements have further consolidated economic ties and create favourable conditions for robust bilateral economic engagement. The impacts of the JHC's efforts are visible in various areas. Trade between Thailand and Malaysia has grown significantly, creating mutually beneficial economic dynamics. Investment climates in both nations have improved, leading to increased cross-border investments. Tourism between the two countries has surged, contributing to economic growth and cultural exchange. Furthermore, the JHC has also proven to be an effective platform for addressing regional issues, such as security and climate change.

The Thailand-Malaysia Committee on Joint Development Strategy (JDS) for Border Areas is a collaborative initiative launched in 2002 between the two nations to boost economic development and social cohesion in the border regions (Office of National Economic & Social Development Council, n.d.). The committee, co-chaired by the Ministers of Interior of Thailand and Malaysia, includes several sub-committees focusing on specialised areas of development like agriculture, infrastructure, and tourism. The JDS has succeeded in advancing economic growth and fostering social cohesion in border areas. It has played a crucial role in facilitating the execution of several development projects, ranging from road construction to establishing schools and hospitals.



Figure 9. JDS Link between Malaysia and Thailand

Source: Office of National Economic & Social Development Council (n.d.)

Key accomplishments of the JDS include facilitating increased trade and investment between the border regions, improving infrastructure such as roads, schools, and hospitals, promoting tourism in border areas, and strengthening social cohesion. Some specific projects delivered under the JDS include the construction of the Sadao-Bukit Kayu Hitam Friendship Bridge linking the provinces of Satun in Thailand and Kedah in Malaysia, the development of the Sadao Special Economic Zone in Thailand, the promotion of cross-border tourism, and the provision of education and healthcare services as Figure 9. The JDS signifies a beneficial asset to Thailand and Malaysia and is expected to continue to play a pivotal role in their development cooperation in forthcoming years. Besides improving people's lives in the border regions, the committee has also significantly promoted peace and stability.

The "strong villages" initiative by the Thai and Malaysian governments aims to boost border security, socio-economic development, and bilateral relations. Building prosperous communities along the border seeks to deter illegal activities and enhance regional security. The initiative includes development programs, cultural exchange, and peacebuilding efforts to improve living standards and foster community cooperation. It presents a comprehensive approach to border management that focuses on creating resilient, prosperous communities to contribute to regional stability (Bernama, 2022, 22 July). The strong village initiative was only initiated in 2022, and while promising, the results of the initiative are yet to be determined.

Exploration of Opportunities

Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, as shown in Figure 10, during his visit to Bangkok in February 2023, indicated Malaysia's willingness to mediate in the Southern Thailand conflict (Strangio, 2023). Given the predominantly Muslim population involved and the direct security implications for both nations due to the insurgency, this proposition aligns with Anwar's focus on securing economic prospects and maintaining healthy international relations. Even with the border, robust cross-border connections exist due to education, work, and familial reasons. However, southern Thailand's ongoing insurgency and socio-cultural issues bring security and political concerns to Malaysia.



Figure 10. Statement from Anwar Ibrahim, Malaysia Prime Minister

Source: Strangio (2023)

Balancing these intricate domestic and international aspects, Anwar's visit aimed to reiterate its commitment to expanding annual trade to \$30 billion by 2025 and facilitating a peaceful resolution to the Southern Thailand conflict (Strangio, 2023). This approach could boost Malaysia's regional standing and potentially Anwar's domestic approval. The Thai government recognises the importance of securing the border region through innovative approaches. Thus, they engage in bilateral meetings and joint patrols with Malaysia. Additionally, they leverage technologies like surveillance systems, biometric tools, and border control systems to enhance security and sustainable development in the region. This proactive approach aims to create a safer and more prosperous environment for the border communities.

The former Chief of the Defence Force of Malaysia, Tan Sri Zulkifli Zainal Abidin, was appointed as the new moderator for the Southern Thailand Conflict in February 2023, underscoring Malaysia's strong commitment to mediate peaceful negotiations and contributing to resolving the ongoing conflict (Mustafa & David, 2023). Since his appointment, there have been several notable developments. In March 2023, Tan Sri Zulkifli met with representatives of the Thai government and rebel groups in Kuala Lumpur. This meeting marked a crucial step forward as it was the first interaction between the two sides in over a year. In April 2023, Tan Sri Zulkifli visited the southern provinces of Thailand to engage with local community leaders. This visit allowed him to gain firsthand insight into the ground realities and the sentiments of those directly affected by the conflict. In May 2023, he announced that the mediation process, while underway, was progressing slowly. He candidly noted that the involved parties remained significantly divided on some crucial issues. In June 2023, Tan Sri Zulkifli convened a meeting with representatives of the international community in Bangkok. This gathering aimed to explore avenues to bolster support for the ongoing mediation process.

Although the mediation process is still ongoing, and it is premature to predict its success, the appointment of Tan Sri Zulkifli Zainal Abidin as the new moderator is a positive development. With his strong defence background and commitment to peaceful dialogue, there is hope that he will significantly steer the conflict towards a peaceful resolution (Mustafa & David, 2023). His actions thus far indicate a concerted effort to understand the complexities of the conflict from all perspectives, engage all stakeholders, and foster an environment conducive to peace negotiations.

According to Professor Srisombop from Prince of Songkhla University, The Thai government and Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN) initiated peaceful dialogues in 2013 to address the unrest in Southern Thailand. Even though there have been interruptions, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, progress has been made throughout the subsequent years, including the development of a joint roadmap for peace. Both sides continue to strive for progression in their talks and have endorsed the general principles of the Peace Dialogue Process, outlining key points for future discussions. Five principles for the peace process in the Deep South of Thailand are as follows (Jitpiomsri, 2023):

1. Recognition of BRN as representative.
2. Malaysia as mediator.
3. OIC, ASEAN and NGO in the peace process.
4. Right of Malay Patani Community.
5. Release of Prisoners.

BRN's primary demands include greater autonomy and increased cultural rights for the Muslim Malay population in the southern provinces. Despite the challenges and obstacles faced throughout the peace negotiations, the Thai government and the BRN maintain their commitment to achieving lasting peace in the region (Jitpiomsri, 2023). It is important to note that the situation remains fluid, and information on the peace dialogues' specific details and progress should be sought from reliable news sources or official statements. Progress in the peace process stalled in March 2023, with the BRN not attending negotiations in February as they awaited the outcomes of the Thai government elections held in May 2023 (Jitpiomsri, 2023).

Another significant expectation from the BRN is an improvement in the economic opportunities in southern Thailand, such as infrastructure development or investments in education and healthcare. The Thai government has expressed reservations about fully acknowledging BRN's demands for self-determination, albeit it has shown openness to providing more autonomy to the region (Jitpiomsri, 2023). BRN, on the other hand, while reluctant to disarm, has expressed willingness to consider it if their demands are met. Amidst complexities, the hope is that these dialogues aim to find a peaceful solution and offer a lasting resolution to the conflict in southern Thailand. This would require both sides to demonstrate a willingness to compromise and make necessary concessions to reach an agreement (Jitpiomsri, 2023).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To mitigate traditional and non-traditional threats in Southern Thailand, a balanced strategy that fuses security with socio-economic development is essential. Malaysia and Thailand must deepen cooperation through data-sharing, joint training, and people-centric policy models. Malaysia can play a larger role in peace facilitation and technical assistance in education, halal industry development, and inclusive governance.

The Thai government must also invest in decentralisation, enhance transparency in security operations, and promote cultural recognition through official status for local languages and religious education. Long-term peace and development in Southern Thailand depend on resolving historical grievances, ensuring equitable development, and institutionalising trust across ethnic and national borders.

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