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DISCUSSION PAPER

A New Approach to Thailand's Insurgency

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Introduction

The three southernmost provinces of Thailand, near the Malaysian border, have been battered by an insurgency dating, in its current iteration, to 2001. More than 6,500 people have died as the insurgents' actions have become increasingly brutal: setting off bombs near hospitals, beheading victims, and murdering families and children. Since August 2016, the Thai insurgents also have begun trying to strike with bombing attacks nationwide, threatening a large-scale civil conflict in the kingdom. Making matters worse, a significant risk exists that the insurgency will be infiltrated by foreign militants, particularly from the self-proclaimed Islamic State, which has recruited over one thousand Southeast Asians to travel to territory held by the Islamic State in Syria.

Successive Thai governments have compounded the problem in the south. The Thai military has used brutal tactics, further alienating many southerners. These tactics have not only helped fuel the insurgency, but they have also fostered a mindset of impunity within the entire culture of the Royal Thai Army. Units from the south have subsequently deployed in Bangkok and other parts of the country where their members have committed abuses. Torture and arbitrary detention, practiced in the south for more than a decade, have become common strategies in dealing with antigovernment protestors nationwide. Thai generals who played a major part in developing the southern policy have risen to top command posts and were leaders of the 2014 coup.

The intensification of the southern insurgency and Thailand's general political regression has come at the same time that the United States is attempting to deepen its strategic relations with Southeast Asia as part of the "rebalance to Asia." Thai governments, which once led Southeast Asian security and diplomatic alliances, have taken a less active role in the region and Thailand has become a less reliable partner in counterterrorism, combating human trafficking, narcotics interdiction, and other U.S. priorities. Moreover, the cultural divide between the Royal Thai Army and U.S. military officers has grown as control over economic policymaking in Thailand has increasing shifted into the hands of a few generals who have shown little ability to manage Southeast Asia's second-biggest economy. The United States has a significant stake in seeing the insurgency ended and Thailand's political regression reversed. To that end, the United States should work with the Thai government to help adopt a new approach to the southern insurgency.

To help resolve the southern Thailand insurgency, Bangkok and Washington could look to examples both from other Southeast Asian nations and from Thailand's own history, which includes success in ending a Thai communist insurgency during the Cold War. Indonesia and the Philippines have taken major steps toward resolving their own insurgencies, and Myanmar has pacified much of the country in the past four years.

Any strategy to resolve the southern Thailand insurgency should include an initial guarantee by the Thai military that senior flag officers, including junta leader and Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha, will meet and discuss the insurgents' demands, if the insurgency's top leaders come out of hiding. In addition, the new approach should include comprehensive peace talks with insurgent leaders based on the idea of gradually ceding greater political power to the deep south. Considering decentralization would challenge insurgent leaders to respond; if they still refuse to discuss peace, the Thai government will win greater southern public support for tough counterinsurgency measures. The new approach should focus on punishing officers whose units have been involved in atrocities and on eventually allowing elected politicians to oversee the military's actions.

The United States should also encourage the Thai military's return to the apolitical path, which it appeared to be on in the 1990s and early 2000s. This would enable Thailand to return to a path toward democracy, and might prove an example for other civil conflicts in Southeast Asia. Even if the Royal Thai Army wants to remain influential in Thai politics, allowing officers to abuse civilians is not in the army's interest. Abuses sustain the insurgency, stain the army's reputation, lead to isolation by foreign governments, and make it harder for Thai officers to control their units.

It is time to push Thailand to revamp its approach to the deep south. The insurgency, although lethal, remains relatively contained to the southern provinces, but that has begun to change since August 2016. The regular killings of Thai soldiers in the south demoralize the enlisted ranks and junior officers and make it harder for the Royal Thai Army to recruit. The United States has close strategic ties to the Royal Thai Army and the Thai armed forces are dependent on U.S. training and arms; therefore, the United States enjoys significant influence over Thailand. Such clout might not exist ten years from now if the U.S.-Thailand relationship continues to deteriorate.

The South Thailand Insurgency

The south Thailand insurgency is emblematic of broader governing failures in Southeast Asia—except in Thailand these failures are more pronounced and their consequences, on people's lives and on U.S. strategic interests, are greater. In addition, in Thailand the military is more dominant in politics than in any other country in the region, and in southern Thailand the army is far more powerful than the armed forces are in other war-torn parts of Southeast Asia.

The three southern provinces were incorporated into Thailand (then called Siam) in 1902. Prior to 1902, the southern provinces were part of a Malay sultanate. They are majority Muslim and ethnically Malay in a country where the population is 95 percent Buddhist and overwhelmingly ethnic Thai.

Thai governments have been highly centralized and have perpetuated a single idea of citizenship. They have instilled the idea that only Thais who demonstrate loyalty to "religion [i.e., Buddhism], nation, and king" can be full citizens.[1] Many Thai government officials rhetorically affirm that Thailand should remain a highly centralized state dominated by ethnic Thais. The fact that Thailand's royals have a prominent palace in the south and regard themselves as protectors of Thai identity made it harder for any elected politician to promote federalism. Although Thailand's monarchs are, in theory, constitutional heads of state with only symbolic powers, in reality they wield significant power. According to numerous academic studies of the monarchy, since King Bhumibol Adulyadej was crowned in 1950, the palace has influenced, directly or indirectly, the course of Thai politics on multiple occasions. Queen Sirikit actively involved herself in the southern Thai conflict until she suffered a severe stroke in 2012.

Southern Thailand also has long been one of the poorest regions in the country. The economic boom that enriched much of Thailand between the 1950s and the late 1990s only barely touched the deep south. Thai southerners launched an insurgency in the 1960s and 1970s. By the early 1980s, that insurgency had mostly died out.

The exact reasons why the south Thailand insurgency flared up again in 2001 and 2002 remain obscure. Some southern civil society activists have suggested that a new generation of young southerners has come of age, seen little progress in southerners' position in Thai society, and possibly been influenced by increasingly hardline, pro-separatist religious schools in the southern provinces. Some analysts suggest that the new insurgency started because of internecine southern conflicts over smuggling weapons, drugs, or other illicit goods, and that some of these conflicts may have spiraled into violence against the state.

What is certain is that in December 2001 militants suddenly launched coordinated attacks on Thai police and military posts throughout the southern provinces, surprising the army and killing six people. In later years, as the conflict grew and became deadlier, groups of insurgents made public demands: that Bangkok grant significant autonomy to the south, respect southerners' cultural differences, and reduce the number of security forces operating in the region.

Whatever the genesis, the insurgency quickly grew into what is now the deadliest civil conflict in East Asia. To date, approximately 6,500 people have died in the south since 2001, and the insurgents have become more sophisticated in their abilities to make bombs, attack military guard posts, and kill large numbers of people at once.[2] In the early period of the insurgency, southern militants usually did not take their war to other parts of the country, but they have demonstrated the ability to strike outside the south. Thai military officials believe

that southern insurgents masterminded a bombing in Koh Samui, a resort island, in 2015.[3] The insurgents can draw on significant local support despite killing mostly civilians. According to the International Crisis Group, "Official Thai estimates consistently indicate about 3,000 trained fighters and 10,000 active supporters . . . [but the] number of those 'who view the struggle favorably and may be prepared to provide logistical and intelligence support' [is] 100,000 to 300,000."[4]

By the late 2000s, the insurgents had developed a loose structure, although they continued to be splintered. One of the largest groups, called the National Revolutionary Front-Coordinate (BRN), appeared to have the most influence over southern fighters. Ultimately, most Thai security experts believe, any plan for resolving the insurgency should include winning the support of BRN leaders.

Until the early 2010s, Thai governments occasionally attempted to contact insurgent leaders, using interlocutors in the Malaysian government or former southern insurgents now living in exile. However, Bangkok never proposed a framework for comprehensive peace talks, and the insurgency's top leaders never came out of hiding to respond to Bangkok's interlocutors.

FAILED COUNTERINSURGENCY

Under a series of administrations—that of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra between 2001 and 2006, the coup government that deposed him in September 2006, and the elected governments in the late 2000s and early 2010s—the Thai security forces took actions that ran counter to most tested counterinsurgency doctrines. Troops in the south failed to separate insurgent targets from the general population and reduced opportunities for southerners to express grievances in a peaceful manner. Under the administration of former Prime Minister Thaksin, the Thai government dismantled a popular southern local institution, the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Center. The center had allowed southerners to air grievances—about investment, security, education policy, and other issues—to a government body. The center also tried to resolve small, local disputes through cash handouts, coordination of various town councils, and informal mediation efforts.

The Thai security forces also have done little to improve the quality of their forces' knowledge of southern terrain and customs, both of which are critical components of most militaries' counterinsurgency strategies. Most Thai officials and army officers sent to the south are not Malay Muslims. They have little contact with local opinion leaders and the few elected politicians hailing from the south. The armed forces often do not consult with local police who might have more information about aspects of the insurgency.

The Thai security forces also operate with indiscriminate brutality, mirroring the brutal tactics of the insurgents. The insurgents have few boundaries. They have set off bombs outside hospitals, shot and hacked to death teachers and other civil servants, and killed hundreds of children. Insurgent cells have destroyed schools, rubber plantations, and many other institutions central to southerners' daily lives and work. At times, the insurgents have tortured victims, beheaded them, and then mutilated their bodies.

In one example of the security forces' brutality in the south, after a protest in October 2004 at a police station in Tak Bai, Narathiwat Province, security forces detained hundreds of demonstrators. Police and soldiers tossed protestors into cramped trucks and vans in stifling heat. Left for hours without enough water or air, eighty-five detainees died of suffocation and organ failure. No senior officers were prosecuted, and Tak Bai became a recruiting symbol for southern insurgents.

In part because of the armed forces' brutality, in part because of insurgent threats against informants, and in part because the security forces know so little about the south, it has become increasingly hard for Thai soldiers to find informants.[5] The security forces also have invested little in protecting Thai soldiers operating in the

south. Although Thailand's army is top-heavy with flag officers—the Royal Thai Army has more generals per capita than any other army in Asia—few senior commanders regularly travel to the south. Thai soldiers are often placed at roadblocks, at night, with insufficient weaponry and ineffective armor. There, they are easily attacked and killed.

Brutality also has not crushed the south Thailand insurgency. As a study by the International Crisis Group (ICG) noted in 2012, even after a decade of harsh Thai government tactics, the militants were still able to launch attacks virtually at will.[6] In addition, the insurgents have increasingly deployed platoon-style attacks that almost resemble a traditional military offensive: emerging from hiding in scrubland or villages, insurgents attack roadblocks and army units by swarming them and firing weapons at them. And in August 2016, the militants demonstrated that they could take their new, more aggressive tactics nationwide. On August 11 and 12, someone detonated explosives at major Thai tourist resorts including Phuket, Hua Hin (also home to a major royal palace), Surat Thani, and others. The explosions killed four people and wounded at least thirty. Many of the devices closely resembled the type of explosives used in the south, and experts with close ties to the southern insurgents, such as consultant Don Pathan, concluded that the attacks were the work of the insurgency. It was the first time the insurgency had struck so broadly, against so many targets, and so clearly attacked much of Thailand's economically critical tourism industry. The broad attacks further suggested that the insurgents were now willing to take their battle nationwide, presaging a potential broad civil conflict.

If the southern insurgents attempt to launch more attacks in Bangkok or major resorts, following on the August 2016 bombings, there is little reason to believe that the current regime can stop them. With Thai security forces focused on crushing activists opposed to the junta, the police and army have become much less effective at stopping attacks in Bangkok, no matter who is behind the killings. In August 2015, explosives were detonated at the Erawan Shrine in Bangkok, a religious site in the heart of a business and tourism district. The bombing killed twenty people and injured 125 others. After the attack, it was revealed that closed circuit cameras near the shrine had not been functioning and that the Thai authorities badly mishandled the initial investigation, missing forensic clues and locking up suspects without reason. Although the Thai authorities have now arrested the alleged ringleaders of the bombing, who the authorities suggested were linked to a Uighur militant group, it remains unclear who really masterminded the bombing.

WEAK DEMOCRACY AND POLITICAL STALEMATE

In the south, as in the rest of the country, the Thai military remains the dominant political actor. Even during a period of democratization in Thailand in the 1990s and early 2000s, when some Thai politicians and academics believed the country had shed its cycle of coups, the military never fully returned to the barracks. Since the end of the absolute monarchy in 1932, the country had been run by a palace-military alliance, other than periods from 1992 to 2006 and 2007 to 2014. A kind of "coup culture" took hold in Thailand over time, in the words of Nicholas Farrelly of Australian National University. As Farrelly notes, Thai coups breed more coups, because they teach military officers that coups are an acceptable way of changing governments and because, in Thailand, there is never any punishment for coup leaders.[7]

Between 1992 and 2014, some observers of Thai politics believed that the army was changing and beginning to accept civilian oversight and that Thailand was headed toward solid democracy. When army units under a junta in 1992 fired on demonstrators in Bangkok, King Bhumibol called in the protest leaders and junta leaders and forced the armed forces to return the country to civilian rule. The military appeared shamed. After the king's intervention, Thai military leaders publicly declared that the era of coups was over, and Thailand held

multiple free elections throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. After the end of the Cold War, coups had become much rarer internationally. Leaders of wealthy democracies, including Australia, Canada, Japan, the United States, and some countries in Europe, became far more willing to rhetorically condemn coups and to use various types of sanctions to punish coup-makers.

But Thailand only appeared to change, and its failed democratic transition exacerbated the conflict in the south. In the 1990s and early 2000s, an increase in political freedom in countries generally coincided with relaxed restrictions on freedom of movement. Yet Thailand did not effectively police borders or combat corruption in customs and immigration services. Furthermore, an increase in political freedom in Thailand did not bring high economic growth rates in the south or reductions in economic inequality between Bangkok and other, outlying regions of the country.

Despite vows by some senior Thai commanders that the armed forces would return to the barracks, many instructors at Thai military academies continued to teach younger officers that the military was the only guarantor of Thailand's future. As Thaksin and his party began to dominate Thai politics, his popularity further worried some senior military officers. They, like many Thai elites, had supported the democratic transition in the 1990s, believing that power in parliament would always rotate between the Democrat Party and other Bangkok-centered, royalist parties. The rise of Thaksin and his rural and populist supporters was shocking. The possibility that a pro-Thaksin party would hold the prime minister's position during a royal transition convinced arch-royalists in the military that the armed forces could not allow civilian control until the succession had occurred. In addition, a major faction of the armed forces, known as the Eastern Tigers, was becoming increasingly and publicly disdainful of civilian rule throughout the 2000s. The Eastern Tigers had risen in power within the army, under the patronage of the conservative and politically active queen. In the 2014 coup, Eastern Tigers flag officers such as junta leader Prayuth and the junta's number two official, Deputy Prime Minister Prawit Wongsuwan, filled the major ministerial posts.

The royal palace, long the most respected institution in Thailand, did little to dissuade the military from once again dominating politics. Although King Bhumibol had compelled the armed forces to give way to a civilian government in the early 1990s, by the 2000s, the king appeared fearful that Thailand's democratic transition might undercut traditional values such as respect for order, hierarchy, and the monarchy. His senior aides quickly blessed the 2006 coup, and the queen and her aides lavished rhetorical support and royal patronage on the Eastern Tigers. The crown prince, who will now inherit the throne, appeared to increasingly support military rule, although in the early 2000s he reportedly was close to Thaksin.

Meanwhile, although the Thai middle classes had led protests against military rule in the early 1990s, by the middle of the 2000s, an increasing percentage were willing to tolerate a greater military presence in politics. Fear of consistently losing out to parties dominated by working class voters, anger at the perceived corruption and intolerance of Thaksin's government, and worries about the future of the country under a new reign contributed to rising disillusionment with democracy among the Thai middle and upper classes. For example, Chamlong Srimuang, a former Bangkok politician who had led protests in the early 1990s against military regimes, led street demonstrations against Thaksin's elected government in 2006.

YINGLUCK AND THE COUP

After becoming prime minister in 2011, Yingluck Shinawatra attempted to change course in the south. She also seemed to understand that she needed to deepen democratic reforms while keeping the military from overthrowing her government. She did little to curtail the military's bloat or scrutinize its budget. The ongoing war

in the south made it easier for the armed forces to claim that they needed annual budget increases, although the armed forces had spent a high percentage of their budget on perks for flag officers, weapons systems that were not useful in the south, and tools for suppressing dissent.

Still, Yingluck relaunched the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Center and appointed, at its head, a colonel with extensive knowledge of the south. In Bangkok, she appointed a new government body to coordinate all ministries' activities in the three southern provinces. More important, Yingluck took a step toward substantive peace talks with the insurgents—talks that might have led to a deal that changed the way Thailand is governed. For the first time, a Thai government admitted that the conflict in the south had political and cultural roots, that it was not simply a battle against bandits or militants with no real grievances—a problem that would have to be resolved through some kind of devolution. However, the government was not fully prepared for the ferocious opposition to the idea of decentralization from the military, Thailand's bureaucracy, and many other Thai opinion leaders.

Government representatives and representatives of the BRN and other insurgent groups held several rounds of talks in 2013 in Malaysia. At these sessions, the insurgents' representatives made several demands, including significant autonomy for the south. The two sides made only minimal progress toward an agreement that would have met some of these demands. In part, the talks were undermined by the fact that many senior military leaders announced that they did not support Yingluck's peace initiative.[8]

Top BRN leaders remained in hiding. Some insurgent leaders apparently believed that the Yingluck government was not stable enough to deliver any long-lasting agreement. Still, according to several observers of the peace talks, senior commanders in the BRN and other insurgent groups were receiving messages from the insurgents' representatives and were closely following the talks. If the talks had proceeded toward the outlines of a deal involving significant autonomy for the south and a reduction of the army's presence in the southern provinces, and if the insurgents believed that an elected Thai government could deliver on its promises, it is possible that a final peace deal could have been reached.

Instead, mounting tensions in Bangkok distracted the government. As anti-Yingluck protests began in Bangkok in late 2013 and early 2014, the prime minister found it almost impossible to govern, and the southern peace talks stalled. The demonstrations were publicly motivated by Yingluck's attempts to pass an amnesty bill for her brother Thaksin, who faced corruption charges in the wake of the 2006 coup and who remained in exile. However, the protests played on the Thai middle classes' growing distrust of elections, which had allowed the country's poor to vote repeatedly for the Shinawatras' political machine. Among the royalist and pro-military leaders of the demonstrations, the possibility that Yingluck would devolve power in the south added to fears about her rule. They worried that such an arrangement would result in a diminishment of the influence of Thai elites and a decentralization of power to provinces and people who were not ethnically Thai. By the spring of 2014, anti-Yingluck demonstrators had rendered the capital ungovernable. Protestors blocked roads and whole city districts. In May 2014, after a brief and staged attempt to bridge the divide between Yingluck and opposition protest leaders, army chief General Prayuth launched a coup. It was the nineteenth coup or coup attempt since the end of Thailand's absolute monarchy in 1932.

The current junta has overseen a far tougher coup than the armed forces' 2006 takeover of government. In 2006, the military followed a script similar to that of most coups in Thailand since the 1960s: it quickly announced a plan for a transition to an elected government, formed an interim cabinet full of technocrats, and generally allowed Thais to express their views about the political future as long as they did not hold large public rallies. The armed forces held an election in 2007 and stood aside when a pro-Thaksin party won. The 2014 coup-makers have followed a different script. They pursue even the minutest expressions of political dissent and have sent politicians, academics, journalists, and other civil society leaders to "reeducation" sessions in cells

at military camps. The junta has increased surveillance of internet use, in a country where the internet is policed more heavily than almost anywhere else in the world.[9] In November 2015, when Glyn Davies, the U.S. ambassador to Thailand, questioned the need for lengthy sentences for lèse-majesté, Thai authorities launched a lèse-majesté investigation against him as well. (The U.S. ambassador is protected from detention by his diplomatic immunity.)

After the coup, the junta essentially called a halt to the peace negotiations, although in late 2015 and early 2016 it broached the idea of restarting them. The military government also has not moved forward with efforts to enunciate a terms of reference for a restart of talks. Prayuth's speeches suggest that even exploratory talks about talks will go nowhere, and the junta has reduced the power of the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Center. As a new report by the International Crisis Group notes, Prayuth has publicly expressed anger and annoyance at the idea of holding substantive talks with insurgents.[10] The junta created a constitution-drafting committee that produced a charter that would severely restrict the powers of political parties and entrench the powers of unelected actors, including the military. The charter was approved by a national referendum in August 2016 but the conditions for voting on the charter were unfair. Any criticism of the referendum in the pre-voting period was harshly repressed by the military, making it nearly impossible for most Thais to hear criticisms of the charter's main clauses.

Junta leaders, and the politicians and technocrats they put in place to draft the new constitution, still refuse to consider political and economic devolution as essential to a settlement in the south. They publicly affirm the idea that Thai identity rests on adherence to a Bangkok-centered notion of religion, monarch, and nation. They also show few signs of changing the harsh legal structures in southern Thailand. Indeed, since the coup, the junta has implemented new legislation that gives the armed forces draconian powers to detain virtually anyone without charges. These powers could remain even after national elections, planned for 2017 now that the charter has been passed. The fact that Thailand has now entered a period of uncertainty with the death of King Bhumibol makes it even more likely that the military leadership will want to maintain a tight grip on power, since they fear unrest in the transition period to the rule of the crown prince. And with the Thai military wielding such influence and civilian governments repeatedly being toppled, the insurgents often do not trust that promises made to them will be kept.

Why the Thailand Insurgency Matters to the United States

The continued unrest in southern Thailand adds to Thailand's overall political instability, a significant challenge for U.S. strategic and economic interests in Southeast Asia. The longer the insurgency lasts, the more people in these areas are killed or wounded, and the harder it will be for Thailand to attract investors. This underdevelopment makes it harder for people living in the south to succeed and fuels further radicalization. Now, with attacks on major Thai resorts, the insurgency threatens to spread to other parts of Thailand, destroying the Thai economy and causing chaos throughout the kingdom. Abuses by security forces in these regions also entrench a culture of impunity nationwide. Soldiers who have served in the south frequently rotate to Bangkok, where they played a role in the shooting and beating of antigovernment protestors in 2010, when some eighty people were killed.

The insurgency also provides a rationale for entrenching the armed forces in politics well past the 2017 national elections. It also helps justify one of the highest military budgets in East Asia, which provides perfect opportunity for graft to the Thai military.

This deepening military control of Thai politics should be a major concern to the United States. Significant evidence shows that the United States works more effectively—bilaterally and in multilateral forums, such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)—with democracies whose decision-making processes are transparent and that share similar political cultures.

The lack of broad-based growth in southern Thailand does more than foster resentment in Bangkok and create an environment conducive to military rule. It facilitates a boom in illegal activities. With so few legitimate ways of earning money in southern Thailand and insurgents and security forces controlling local politics, human trafficking, gun running, and drug trafficking have become leading sources of income in the southern provinces. Many Thai intelligence sources believe that insurgent cells pay for their war in part through drug and weapons trafficking.

Now, the junta has mismanaged the country's economy and security situation in far more dangerous ways than any Thai government has in at least twenty years. The extreme concentration of power in the hands of Prayuth and a few other generals, who have proven mercurial and lack a nuanced understanding of the U.S.-Thailand relationship, has produced the frostiest interactions between the two countries in decades. Bangkok's decision to launch a lèse-majesté investigation against the U.S. ambassador is but one example of cooling ties; officials from a range of U.S. agencies with offices in Bangkok have reported sharply decreased cooperation from Thai counterparts since 2014.

The new constitution will ensure that the military is able to control future Thai governments from behind the scenes and, if necessary, through future coups. Most observers of Thai politics believe that the military does not intend to relinquish de facto control over politics until the royal succession has taken place, and the crown prince is both firmly established as king and demonstrates he is willing to work closely with the Thai armed forces to rule the kingdom.

Although some U.S.-Thai joint military exercises have continued in scaled-down numbers since the coup, some U.S. policymakers worry that, if the relationship continues to deteriorate, the United States may not be able to count on Thai ports in the case of a conflict in Southeast Asia and may also have to relocate Bangkok-based operations for many U.S. government agencies. This shift would consume U.S. resources and require

U.S. officials posted overseas to develop entirely new networks of relationships, replacing Thai networks that have been constructed over decades. In addition, if Thailand's security continues to deteriorate, the U.S. military may be forced to permanently reduce the size of Cobra Gold and other joint exercises, or even move them to other partners in the region.

More generally, Thailand's brutal army tactics, inculcated in the south and now used nationwide, has led to a growing culture clash between Thai and U.S. military officers. This clash has caused a breakdown in trust and a loss of contact between Thai generals and U.S. flag officers and civilian defense officials dealing with Thailand. This could be problematic if the United States faces a security crisis in Southeast Asia, such as a conflict in the South China Sea, and needs to rely on Thailand's large, modern bases and naval support. Indeed, Thailand's deteriorating relations with the United States have led the junta to cultivate much closer diplomatic links to Moscow and Beijing, further adding to U.S. concerns that the United States may not be able to utilize Thai bases for operations in the South China Sea.

With Thai leaders focused on domestic turmoil, including the insurgency, the Thai government has also proven incapable of providing leadership in regional organizations. This void cannot easily be filled by other mainland Southeast Asian nations, which are smaller, poorer, and less effective diplomatically.

Outside Actors

Although the south Thailand insurgency is having a significant impact on Thailand's overall stability, and thus on U.S.-Thailand relations, the United States remains Thailand's most important ally. As a result, Washington has the opportunity to help Bangkok shape a new strategy toward the south, one that eventually leads to a permanent southern cease-fire. But if the southern Thailand insurgency continues, and Bangkok does not abandon its current failed approach, other outside actors, such as the Islamic State and Al Qaeda, could wield more influence in the south instead.

THE UNITED STATES

The United States and Thailand have enjoyed a close strategic relationship since the early twentieth century, and during the Cold War, the two nations forged a treaty alliance. From 1960 to 1975, the Thai military was one of the largest recipients of U.S. security assistance of any armed forces in the world. U.S. governments embraced the Thai royal family as a bulwark against communism in Asia.[11]

This extremely close security relationship was a boon not only to Thailand's development but also to U.S. strategic interests at the time. Thai soldiers fought alongside U.S. troops in Vietnam and Laos, and Thailand allowed the United States to base much of its Vietnam bombing campaign at the Royal Thai Air Force's bases.

After the end of the Vietnam War, Thailand and the United States maintained a close military-to-military relationship. Thailand was one of only two U.S. treaty allies in Southeast Asia, and after the Philippines expelled U.S. forces from bases in the former U.S. colony in 1992, Thailand became even more important to the United States' regional network of bases and ports. Thailand was a leader of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and its political and macroeconomic stability made it a major draw for U.S. companies. The United States' diplomatic presence in Thailand remained one of the largest of any U.S. mission in the world. The Congressional Research Service estimates that dozens of U.S. agencies have regional offices in Bangkok.[12]

In 1982, Thailand began hosting Cobra Gold, the largest multinational U.S.-led military exercises in Asia. The United States and Thailand negotiated a deal in which U.S. forces have access to Thai military facilities, including the large and modern U-Tapao air base, which can host large aircraft for refueling and is near a major seaport. The Thai military continued to send its most promising officers to the United States for training. In addition to Cobra Gold, the United States and Thailand held more than fifty other smaller bilateral exercises yearly, across all of the military services. More recently, Thai civilian and military leaders openly supported the Obama administration's rebalance to Asia. The Obama administration's rebalance to Asia was designed to bolster U.S. strategic and economic relations with Southeast Asian nations. It planned to help make Southeast Asian nations more effective security partners both with Washington and with one another.

By 2014, three years after the rebalance was announced, total U.S. security assistance to Thailand reached levels not seen since the early 2000s, before the 2006 coup led to aid cuts. Before the 2014 coup, the Obama administration had been holding discussions with Bangkok about expanding Cobra Gold and other exercises, and Thai officials had been considering making major purchases of U.S.-made aircraft and helicopters.

To be sure, Thai governments have demonstrated a growing desire to balance relations between major regional powers, and China-Thailand military-to-military relations have expanded rapidly. Since the 2000s,

China has been hosting regular training programs for Thai officers; but leading Thai officers privately insist that they prefer to train in the United States and with U.S. forces. They prefer U.S. weaponry and training because of their quality. Some Thai officers also have concerns that growing Chinese influence in Southeast Asia is causing irreparable divisions among Southeast Asian nations, pitting countries that take a tough stance against China, such as Vietnam, against nations that appear more willing to accept China's regional hegemony, such as Cambodia. Moreover, U.S. investors remain critical to Thailand's export-driven economy, and U.S. diplomatic support is important to the Thai government.

Additionally, the rebalance has not placed a high priority on counterinsurgency strategies. Most of the increases in security assistance that have gone to countries such as the Philippines and Indonesia have been focused on maritime security, missile systems, radar, and other weaponry that could be utilized against China, not insurgents. Yet although the rebalance has not focused funding on counterinsurgencies, and Thai leaders have repeatedly denied that any foreign forces are assisting Thai counterinsurgency strategies, according to multiple conversations with Thai officials and credible reports, U.S. intelligence and U.S. officials have played a role in tracking southern militants and monitoring potential links with international terrorist networks. They also have been advising Thai flag officers and providing intelligence used in making arrests of militants operating in or transiting through the south.

Some Thai flag officers have privately sought out U.S. officers to analyze the failings of the Royal Thai Army's southern strategy. After September 11, 2001, the United States and Thailand established a joint Counterterrorism Intelligence Center, which tracks and pursues militants operating in the kingdom and throughout Southeast Asia. The joint counterterrorism center has focused partly on militants in the south, according to several Thai officials. In recent years, Thai and U.S. intelligence operatives also have focused on Southeast Asians returning from Islamic State–controlled territory through Bangkok and southern Thailand and on the Islamic State's attempts to win recruits in the south's religious schools and other religious institutions. Some U.S. officials, including defense attachés and other top U.S. military officers, have privately pushed the Thai government to adopt a counterinsurgency strategy that focuses on building trust with the southern population and reducing abuses while also attacking leaders of militant cells. Additionally, U.S. diplomats, defense attachés, and military officers have pushed the junta government, in public and in private, to reduce the army's control of politics nationwide, and to restore civilian control of the judiciary, the interior ministry, the civil service, and other institutions.

The United States can only exert limited influence over the Thai military and the Thai government as a whole; Thais will have to resolve Thailand's ongoing political crisis and the southern insurgency. Still, as the most important outside force influencing the Royal Thai Army, the United States has the greatest opportunity to shift how the Thai armed forces handle the counterinsurgency, and Thai politics in general.

Furthermore, the fact that the U.S. military, which has bolstered security relations with Vietnam and Singapore over the past decade, is less dependent on Thailand than it was during the Cold War may give Washington more influence over Bangkok. The current U.S.-Thailand relationship provides an opportunity for the United States to push the Thai military to take a new approach to the south and to Thai politics in general.

Applying this influence over Bangkok will be challenging. Indeed, the influence comes from Thai leaders knowing that the United States is becoming less reliant on Thailand while the U.S. and Thai governments still have to maintain a level of interdependence. While this interdependence lasts, Washington can wield significant power over Bangkok. Five or ten years from now, if the U.S.-Thailand relationship has significantly worsened and Thailand has become more reliant on Chinese and Russian arms and training, it will be harder for the United States to exert influence over Thai leaders.

THE ISLAMIC STATE

Over the past four years, the Islamic State has aggressively wooed militants in conflict-ridden parts of Southeast Asia. It has done so by launching a social media campaign in Malay, which is understood by many southern Thais; trying to convince Southeast Asian militant groups to pledge allegiance to the Islamic State; and creating fighting units in Syria and Iraq for visiting Southeast Asians. According to multiple estimates, as many as twelve hundred Southeast Asians have traveled to territory controlled by the Islamic State. The Islamic State also is believed to be training bomb makers to send back to Southeast Asia and to be funding cells within Southeast Asia. As the Islamic State is pushed out of its safe havens in Iraq and Syria, it has this year increased its efforts to recruit South and Southeast Asians, and has used social media to encourage South and Southeast Asians to step up the pace of attacks to compensate for the Islamic State's losses in Iraq and Syria.

The Islamic State and other foreign militant groups have historically had difficulty recruiting in southern Thailand, but that is beginning to change. Although some members of Jemaah Islamiyah, a Southeast Asian al-Qaeda affiliate, may have stayed in the Thai south in the early 2000s for short periods of time, southern insurgent leaders did not seem interested in positioning their battle as part of a global struggle. The discordance between the Sunni Islam of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State and the heterodox Shafi'i Islam of many southern insurgents created a substantial divide. Surely, Islam has played a central role in southerners' self-definition, but the southern insurgents use Islam as one component of a southern, ethnically Malay identity. As the ICG noted in an analysis of southern insurgents' recruiting:

> Recruitment appeals [for the insurgency] emphasize a history of Siamese [Thai] conquest and oppression. The struggle is couched in religious terms as a jihad that is an obligation for Muslims to support. The religious justifications are linked to a local Malay ethnic identity, which serves to underscore differences with Thais, Sino-Thais [i.e., Thais of Chinese origin] and non-local Muslims.[13]

Yet the Islamic State may eventually make significant gains in recruitment in southern Thailand. The Thai government officially denies that any Islamic State supporters have traveled through Thailand or are recruiting in the kingdom, and Thai officials often note the differences between the Islamic State's version of Sunni Islam and the Shafi'i Islam of the Thai south. Yet an ongoing failure to resolve the insurgency and militant cells that now seem willing to attack anywhere in Thailand, not just the south, dramatically increase the chance that some southern Thai fighters will look for funding and training from foreign militant groups.

Learning What Works

There is reason for optimism that the Thai government can resolve the insurgency before it spirals into a larger, possibly national, conflict. Other Southeast Asian examples offer lessons on how to handle entrenched insurgencies. In addition, the Royal Thai Army helped resolve conflict in other parts of Thailand in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

OTHER SOUTHEAST ASIAN INSURGENCIES

The south Thailand insurgency is one of four major civil conflicts in Southeast Asia—the others are in Papua province in Indonesia, northern and northeastern Myanmar, and the southern Philippines—that have not been resolved since the region began to democratize in the 1980s. The four insurgencies have several common drivers. As in southern Thailand, insurgencies have flourished in places where there are long histories of discrimination by the national government and separatist sentiment. People in Papua, northern Myanmar, and the southern Philippines are ethnic and religious minorities in states that have been highly centralized, with little power devolved to minority regions. Papua is an ethnically Melanesian and mostly Christian province in an overwhelmingly Muslim country. The south Philippines is a predominantly Muslim region of a mostly Catholic country. Northern and northeastern Myanmar are comprised largely of non-Burman ethnic minorities.

In the last few decades, democratic opening has not produced sizable economic expansion in the Philippines, Myanmar, or Indonesia, just as it has not led to higher growth in Thailand. Additionally, democracy has not led to substantial decreases in corruption, and graft remains endemic in the areas where insurgencies flourish. As in Thailand, lawlessness and graft in other parts of Southeast Asia have facilitated illegal economies, which allow insurgent groups to fund their violent activities. For years, southern Philippine insurgent groups have paid for their battles by kidnapping locals and foreigners—Indonesian and Malaysian sailors and Western tourists—for ransom. The United Wa State Army (UWSA), a Myanmar insurgent group that the U.S. Justice Department has called one of the largest armed narco-trafficking organizations in the world, reportedly controls the opiate and methamphetamine trade in Southeast Asia. Myanmar is the world's second largest producer of opium, after Afghanistan, and opium production in Myanmar has roughly tripled over the past decade, according to the United Nations.

Like the Thai armed forces, other Southeast Asian militaries also have exacerbated insurgencies through harsh, ineffective counterinsurgency strategies. In northern Myanmar, the southern Philippines, and Papua, armies operate on notoriously weak intelligence and have, in recent years, repeatedly launched attacks on alleged insurgent positions that have killed primarily civilians. Militaries in these countries also have become notorious for using torture and threats to civilians' families as misguided methods of obtaining information from locals about insurgent cells.

However, there are encouraging signs in parts of Southeast Asia other than Thailand that the insurgencies can be resolved. Indonesia already has resolved one major insurgency since the country began to democratize in the late 1990s. In Aceh province in far western Indonesia, after decades of battles between the Free Aceh Movement and government forces—and a devastating tsunami in 2004 that destroyed much of the province—

the rebels and the Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono government forged a lasting peace. In southern Philippines, the Benigno Aquino administration and the largest Muslim militant group, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), signed a deal in 2012, even though this framework has not yet passed the Congress of the Philippines.

These peace processes offer several lessons. First, a peace process can succeed only after both sides recognize that they cannot win the war. Only after both sides in Aceh understood that they could not win—the Indonesian government attempted one final massive attack to destroy the Free Aceh Movement in the early 2000s and failed—did peace become possible.

Similarly, in the southern Philippines, many top government officials recognized the armed forces could never fully destroy militants, and the MILF recognized that it could not win either. Both sides also apparently realized that ongoing conflict would remain an obstacle to development in the Philippine south.

The Aceh and southern Philippines processes also involved detailed plans for ending conflicts and devolving political and economic power. Unlike in southern Thailand, where government and insurgent leaders have only talked broadly about vague future possibilities, in the southern Philippines and Aceh, governments and insurgent groups hammered out formal and detailed agreements, although only the Aceh deal has so far passed. These peace deals offered far greater local control of tax revenues and revenues from local natural resources, new elections for provincial and local positions, and a greater recognition by the national government of these regions' unique cultural and religious backgrounds. The agreements also provide frameworks for demobilization and integrating some former insurgents into security forces.[14]

In the Philippines, President Rodrigo Duterte, despite his challenges with international diplomacy, boasts the popular legitimacy to push the peace deal through the Philippine legislature. Duterte, in his first year in office, enjoys high approval ratings. As a southerner (although not a Muslim) and someone who draws his support from Filipinos from outlying provinces, he may find it easier to use his appeal to convince members of congress to complete the peace deal.

Devolving political power also has been critical to peace processes in other parts of Southeast Asia. In Aceh, political decentralization that allowed for elected governors was a major carrot that helped convince militant leaders to end their war. Following a peace treaty signed between the Aceh rebels and Jakarta, the initial gubernatorial election, held in 2006, was won by Irwandi Yusuf, a former leader of the Free Aceh Movement. His election helped convince many Aceh residents that the national government was serious about giving Acehnese far greater control over their politics. More than any previous Indonesian president, Joko Widodo has talked of extending the national devolution project to Papua.

In Myanmar, where a national peace conference was held in late August and early September 2016, Aung San Suu Kyi's government has also broached the idea of a more federal political system, which will be essential to convincing holdout insurgent groups to give up their weapons. Such a federalized system might even include redrawing the borders of some Myanmar states and creating new states in areas dominated by certain ethnic minorities. The fact that Aung San Suu Kyi and her allies appear to have convinced top military leaders and most of the remaining insurgent groups to sit down at a national peace conference is a major step toward a permanent cease-fire, although achieving a deal with the UWSA and other powerful holdouts could take years.

President Duterte, too, has offered promises to make the Philippines a more federal and decentralized political system, created by a constitutional amendment. Such a dramatic shift in how the Philippines is governed would indicate the kind of large-scale political change that could make a peace deal work in the Philippine south.

Indeed, past peace agreements in Southeast Asia have generally taken place at the same time as political leaders have promoted broad, sweeping changes in national political systems. In Indonesia, the Aceh agreement moved forward while Jakarta pushed decentralization throughout the country, allowing for elected governors and other local leaders in many provinces. This broader political shift helped create the environment to loosen

central government control on Aceh, and also made people in other parts of Indonesia less resentful of the Aceh peace process. After all, it was not only Aceh but also other provinces and cities that were receiving new powers to raise and collect taxes, benefit from natural resources, or elect local governors and parliaments. Indonesia's democratization may also eventually make it easier for Jakarta to loosen its control over Papua.

Additionally, in successful Southeast Asian peace processes, top leaders have spent significant political capital during the course of negotiations. After broaching the prospect of peace, Indonesian President Yudhoyono and Vice President Jusuf Kalla put their prestige on the line for the deal, giving multiple high-profile speeches, in Jakarta and other cities, about the need for peace in Aceh. This consistent and high-level support for the deal was crucial to convincing Indonesian army officers, religious leaders, and legislators to back the Aceh agreement.

Both men tied their political fortunes to a successful peace deal, as Aquino did in the southern Philippines. Aquino personally conducted several rounds of negotiations, and made the peace framework a top objective of his government. It remains to be seen whether the framework passes congress, and what its impact on Aquino's political legacy will be, but Aquino clearly expended significant political capital on the deal, and Duterte appears poised to do the same.

LESSONS FROM THAI HISTORY

It is not only the lessons of other Southeast Asian nations, but also Thailand's history, that suggest peace is possible in the Thai south. Despite the constant grind of violence in southern Thailand, and the seeming intransigence of the Thai armed forces, there are reasons to believe that a way forward is possible for southern Thailand as well. Most important, neither the insurgents nor the Thai army can win the battle in the deep south. The two sides are both slowly realizing that they cannot win a conflict that has already dragged on for fifteen years, according to Thai officers and journalists with contacts among insurgent groups. This is a critical point: in Southeast Asia, and other parts of the world, governments and insurgencies usually come to the peace table only when both sides are convinced they cannot win the battle. The recent bombings in Thai tourist sites suggest that the insurgents can attack major resorts and other economic hubs with impunity, threatening the prospect of a nationwide terror campaign that paralyzes Thailand's economy and society. Senior army officers realize that they now face the prospect of a wider insurgency that could attack anywhere in Thailand and dramatically destabilize the kingdom even as the military is trying to broker a transition to quasi-civilian rule and to right a battered economy.

Thai history also suggests that the armed forces are, at times, willing to make deals with insurgent groups. The armed forces have done so when the Thai army felt that its professionalism was threatened and when making deals was beneficial for the economy, Thailand's foreign relations, and for the army's economic interests. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, army leaders ended conflicts with a group of southern insurgents, as well as with communist insurgents based in the jungles of north and northeastern Thailand. In the northeast, the army first attacked several high-ranking cells of insurgents in the early 1970s. But as the decade wore on, and the end of the Vietnam War made Thailand less fearful of communist influence, the armed forces generally allowed an amnesty for most of the insurgents as long as they laid down their arms and renounced future conflict. The Thai government increased funding for development in the northeast. The end to the battle in northeastern Thailand was publicly approved by the senior-most army leaders, who used their bully pulpit to argue to officers and the Thai public why it was necessary to allow the amnesty—for peace, for development, to take advantage of new

economic ties with formerly communist countries in mainland Southeast Asia. And indeed, peace in the northeast allowed insurgents to be reintegrated into society, with many eventually joining academia and political parties.

Peace in the northeast boosted economic growth in that area of the country and eventually allowed it to become a trading hub as wars ended in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. It also probably enriched some army officers with companies operating in the north and northeast. An economic peace dividend would also come with a deal in the south. A deal would provide alternative sources of income that could help former insurgents give up lucrative illegal activities, and it also might provide economic opportunities for Thai officers experienced in the south.

The Thai armed forces also reached these past deals because they felt that the kingdom's future was secure enough that the military could eventually step back from direct rule in Thailand. The end of the Vietnam War helped make the military feel secure about Thailand's future. If the royal succession to the crown prince is successful, this could also make the armed forces feel secure about Thailand's future today. In addition, Thai civilian leaders could emphasize to the armed forces that a shift toward apolitical professionalism would allow the armed forces to focus on external threats, would improve the image of the military, and would allow the Thai armed forces to potentially receive larger outlays of security assistance from the United States and other partners.

The Way Forward

For Thailand's southern insurgency to be resolved, the Thai military and the insurgent groups will have to compromise. It is clear that the Thai government cannot expect the insurgents to take the first step. In a best-case scenario, the Thai armed forces would launch comprehensive peace negotiations that enjoyed the public backing of top army leaders, the way that Yudhoyono and Aquino staked their political capital on deals. Negotiations, combined with reforming the military's operations in the south, would lead to a temporary cease-fire and, ultimately, an end to fighting. Even if a new approach in the south fails to end the fighting, it would undercut public support for the insurgency and would make it easier for security forces to protect southerners, recruit informants, and obtain intelligence about militant cells. Ending the culture of impunity for the security forces in the south would improve the behavior and professionalism of the Royal Thai Army overall and make it less likely that brutal tactics from the south are exported to Bangkok and other parts of Thailand. When the armed forces are no longer under siege in the south, they might be more willing to allow civilian rule over the military, and to accept greater decentralization of power nationwide.

THE THAI GOVERNMENT

The insurgency in southern Thailand requires similar strategies as those utilized in other Southeast Asian countries as well as in Thai history, but it will be the hardest of any Southeast Asian insurgency to resolve. The recent violent attacks on Thai beach resorts, and the military's response to it, make resolving the insurgency even tougher—but the attacks should suggest to the armed forces that if they do not attempt to negotiate with the insurgents, the violence could spread throughout the kingdom, and that the southern insurgents could gain greater support from international militant groups. According to a report released in September by the International Crisis Group, the Thai government "harbors an abiding fear [that the insurgency] will be internationalized."[15]

If the Thai government hopes to win insurgent support for peace negotiations, Prime Minister Prayuth and other senior junta leaders should make publicly clear that they support comprehensive talks based on some framework of decentralization, which would be a break from the army's current stance of refusing any talks based on devolution. A Thai military secure about its future, confident in the continuation of the monarchy, and cognizant of how insurgencies have been ended in other parts of Southeast Asia may be willing to embrace the kind of local and national devolution that has worked in other parts of Southeast Asia. Without a public, Yudhoyono-style commitment by Prayuth, talks will go nowhere. Prayuth should use a high-profile address—not his regular weekly address—to announce a new peace policy. Ideally, Prayuth should travel to a southern city such as Pattani to give the address and clarify that the new approach enjoys the support of the heads of all branches of the armed forces and the royal palace.

In the address, Prayuth could inform southerners that the government is willing to discuss political autonomy, that Bangkok understands there are significant cultural differences between many regions of Thailand, and that he himself will attend the initial rounds of peace talks, which should probably be held in Malaysia. He should announce that the insurgents should respond to his offer to talk by instituting a thirty-day cease-fire in the south and by publicly accepting that talks about autonomy will not include discussions of independence.

BRN leaders are currently to even hold talks about talks with the military's representatives, but that could change if the armed forces made clear they were serious about negotiations and the prospect of devolution of power. Such a statement from BRN leaders would help Prayuth and other Thai officials convince the public that peace negotiations will not lead to a break-up of Thailand's territorial integrity. Prayuth should not mention the possibility of an amnesty for prominent insurgents or military members who have committed abuses in the south during this initial speech. But he should offer the prospect of a widespread amnesty, reminding the Thai public that the armed forces allowed a similar broad amnesty for communist fighters who turned themselves in during the late 1970s and early 1980s.

After making the address, Prayuth and army leaders should lift martial law in the south for thirty days. In addition, the security forces should announce they will allow the senior-most insurgent leaders safe passage to and from talks, without any fear of retribution for coming out into the open. It is critical that, given the murky nature of the insurgency's command structure, Thai government negotiators work with insurgent representatives who actually wield power over cells on the ground and who can implement a cease-fire.

The initial rounds of talks should focus on extending the initial thirty-day cease-fire to six months and on determining how decentralization in the south might exist in practice, with later rounds being more specific. The extended cease-fire would allow the insurgents to build up support for a final peace deal among the southern population, and would also allow leaders from the two sides to study the Aceh and southern Philippines accords. Later rounds of talks should cover issues such as percentages of state budgets to be devolved to provincial governments, whether Thailand could create provincial or regional parliaments similar to provincial governments in Myanmar or state governments in the United States, and whether the southern provinces should have directly elected governors instead of appointed local leaders, among other issues. The Thai government could invite former leaders of the Free Aceh Movement who have become local politicians to the talks to discuss their political transition.

Talks should cover time frames for the insurgents to decommission weapons and for phased withdrawals of army units from the south. The Thai government could bring back several of the senior officers involved in handling decommissioning in the late 1970s and early 1980s to oversee it this time; several are still alive and active.

The Thai government should enlist southern Shafi'i Islamic and Buddhist leaders to support the peace process. Local religious leaders should mount an aggressive public affairs campaign to emphasize to the populace of the three southern states that ending the insurgency would allow local people to more freely exercise their religious beliefs and civil liberties. During negotiations, the Thai government should propose creating a new internal affairs division within the armed forces, which would be responsible for investigating and punishing abusive behavior. The internal affairs division's staff should be drawn from both the Royal Thai Army and civil society organizations. Although it might seem unlikely that the armed forces would accept a new internal affairs division, the new division would not open old cases of alleged abuses, such as those from the Tak Bai deaths in 2004. The internal affairs division also would not investigate the May 2014 coup. Having an internal affairs division would, despite these drawbacks, give southerners some reason to believe the military is addressing its culture of impunity. Declining to address the abuses of the past would give the army security to make a peace deal. Going forward, a stronger internal affairs division also would improve the quality of the army's commanders and relieve top generals of having to control all aspects of disciplining commanders.

THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

The United States should make clear that the rebalance will increasingly include funds for helping Southeast Asian nations, including Thailand, battle insurgencies and attempt to negotiate cease-fires and formal peace deals. The new U.S. Southeast Asia Maritime Security Initiative is designed mostly to bolster navies and coast guards, so the White House should launch a new program, as part of the rebalance, focused on funding for counterinsurgency. The White House could call this new program the Southeast Asian Civil Conflict Fund. Aid given to Thailand as part of a peace deal could be drawn from this fund.

Indeed, U.S. leaders should emphasize that a new approach to the southern Thailand conflict would be rewarded with increased aid for the south—a package worth $400 million funded by Australia, the European Union, Japan, Southeast Asian nations, and the United States' new fund for Southeast Asian civil conflicts. The United States could point to other regions of Southeast Asia as precedent. For example, Aceh has received infusions of aid from Europe and Japan since the end of its twenty-nine-year civil war in 2005. In Aceh, the promise of new aid packages helped convince militants to lay down their arms; they were given jobs after the peace process.

In addition, the United States should make clear to the Thai armed forces that it will reward them for permanently withdrawing to the barracks after the 2017 Thai national elections in the same way that Washington rewarded the Indonesian military for reducing its role in politics outside of Papua. Washington has rewarded the Indonesian armed forces by boosting training for the Indonesian army and by authorizing new sales of missiles and other weaponry to Jakarta, among other decisions. Incentives for military professionalization could include increased training for Thai military officers, greater access to programs for financing for U.S. weapons purchases, and regular meetings between the U.S. president and these nations' defense ministers and other top army officials.

At the same time, the United States should make clear to the Thai armed forces that there will be consequences for abusive and unprofessional behavior, including coups after 2017. For the Myanmar armed forces, this could mean not allowing Myanmar officers to participate in the U.S. International Military Education and Training program, a change that has been discussed but not approved by the White House or Congress. Washington also should make clear to the Thai junta that it has other options, if necessary, for U.S. agencies' regional offices if the army does not move toward civilian rule. Although the United States does not want to relocate current Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and U.S. military operations in Bangkok, closer links with Singapore make this move a viable option.

U.S. officials should simultaneously emphasize to the Thai armed forces that ending insurgencies reduces the possibility of losing Thai territory and that permanent cease-fires reduce military casualties and make it easier for the armed forces to recruit. U.S. officials also could emphasize that peace deals, like the one in Aceh and the one proposed in the southern Philippines, usually allow for significant economic development in ethnic-minority areas. Army officers with extensive knowledge of these minority regions could benefit from this economic development.

SOUTHEAST ASIAN GOVERNMENTS

Other Southeast Asian governments can support a peace process in Thailand in several ways. They should create a peacekeeping force, comprising eight hundred to one thousand soldiers in total and drawn from all ten ASEAN nations, to enforce these peace agreements. Providing a peacekeeping force is in the interest of other

ASEAN members and would not violate Thai sovereignty because the peacekeepers would be invited in by the Thai government. Peacekeeping forces would gain experience that could be essential if troops are needed in other Southeast Asian security emergencies in the future. A Southeast Asian deployment would also allow Singapore, which has the region's most professional military, to play a role in helping enforce peace deals.

Other Southeast Asian nations also could highlight how in their countries former insurgents have successfully built their networks of supporters into political parties. Such a shift happened in Indonesia's Aceh, with the transition from the Free Aceh Movement to elected political parties, and appears to be happening in the southern Philippines.

Southeast Asian governments could also work more closely with Bangkok to stop the infiltration of foreign radical groups into the region or the spread of radical ideas throughout Southeast Asia. This message of cooperation to stop foreign radicals should be reinforced by religious organizations operating in Southeast Asia. An excellent model for this strategy would be the current antiradicalism campaign launched in Indonesia by Islamic leaders, which is designed to highlight how alien the Islamic State and other radical organizations are from Southeast Asian strands of Islam. The Indonesian effort, led by the Nahdlatul Ulama organization, the largest Islamic group in the world—it reportedly has over forty million members—has been successfully in helping brand the Islamic State as un-Indonesian.

Any successful plan should offer insurgent-dominated areas in the deep south a high degree of political autonomy to convince militant groups to give up their arms. This degree of autonomy and political power will soothe minorities' fears that they can be dominated by the central government, and they need to hold onto weapons to avoid being dominated.

If negotiations between the Thai government and the southern insurgents proceed past initial talks and a short-term cease-fire in the south, Southeast Asian leaders who are trusted in Thailand, such as Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, should propose presiding over a major Thailand peace conference, which could be held in Singapore or Kuala Lumpur. They could draw on lessons from the recent high-level Myanmar peace conference and the Aceh deal, which used a series of peace conferences to bring participants and push them to make deals. At a peace conference, presided over by Lee, government leaders and insurgent representatives could use the event's short time frame, wealth of personal interactions, and media interest to discuss a deal that would include plans for political autonomy for the south and the sharing of wealth from natural resources in the south.

Conclusion

A new approach to the Thai insurgency would substantially benefit the kingdom and Southeast Asia more broadly. Greater professionalism would potentially return the Thai military to its place, alongside the palace, as one of the kingdom's most trusted institutions, and would make it easier for the military to return to the barracks after the national elections to be held in 2017. Indeed, many Thai flag officers crave this popular support. In addition, a reduction or end to the fighting in the south would not only save civilian lives but also dramatically reduce army casualties. Although some senior Thai officers may focus on wielding political power, many Thai generals do care about the lives of their soldiers.

Peace in Thailand's deep south also would allow Thai officials to take a leading role in ASEAN and other regional organizations, and in U.S.-led regional maritime security efforts. U.S.-Thailand cooperation on nontraditional security issues from counterterrorism to narcotics interdiction would improve as well. Finally, an end to the southern conflict would reduce the rationale for army control of Thai politics, helping put the country back on a path toward civilian and democratic rule.

A resolution to the southern insurgency and a reduction in the armed forces' influence over Thai politics would make it easier for the next U.S. presidential administration to more completely include Thailand in the rebalance to Asia, boosting security assistance to the kingdom once more and returning Cobra Gold and other joint exercises to complete strength, rather than the reduced numbers they have operated at since the 2014 coup. The Thai border with Malaysia could become less militarized, fostering trade and investment. Greater political stability in Thailand overall would make the kingdom attractive to U.S. companies; a more stable and legitimate Thai government might be willing to move forward on regional trade liberalization and convince the Thai public to support trade deals. The Islamic State would find it more difficult to win recruits in a south Thailand at peace.

Resolving the Thailand insurgency also would, like the successful peace process in Aceh, provide inspiration and technical details for other Southeast Asian nations facing their own civil conflicts. If the Thai armed forces achieved an end to an insurgency that has killed more people than militants have in Papua and northern Myanmar combined, it would suggest to other governments in the region that they can resolve their civil conflicts. In addition, decentralization in Thailand, a country with a long history of highly centralized rule, would show nations such as Myanmar that it is possible to devolve power to ethnic minority regions without the state collapsing.

Ending Southeast Asia's other ongoing insurgencies also would have a significant effect on the region's stability, democratic transitions, and development. Southeast Asian militaries could refocus their attention on regional security issues important to the United States, such as maritime security. Several Southeast Asian regions plagued by civil conflict, including the Philippines and Papua, are also home to vast mineral and agricultural resources; peace could unlock an investment bonanza. Peace in the Philippine south in particular could be the most important new engine for growth in that country. Northern and northeastern Myanmar, located along the border with China, could become trading hubs. Development would allow governments to address illicit activities in formerly insurgent-held areas. Ultimately, this development would create the best hope for longer-term peace in former insurgent areas and a reduction in separatist sentiment among populations in places like southern Thailand and the southern Philippines.

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