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Malaysia's role in two South-East Asian insurgencies: 'an honest broker'?

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ABSTRACT

The conflicts in Thailand's southern border provinces and Mindanao have not only posed a challenge to the Thai and Philippine governments, but have also affected the respective governments' relations with Malaysia. From a comparative perspective, this article aims to illustrate how a complicated web of interactions between domestic and international factors has not only shaped domestic decision-making, but also influenced how states interact with one another in regard to the conflicts, which has resulted in a mix of cooperation and contention. It is argued that despite past downturns in bilateral relations, various developments have paved the way for Malaysia to play a role in the current peace processes in Thailand's southern border provinces and Mindanao. However, Malaysia has been able to accomplish more in Mindanao's peace process due to several favourable conditions, including the Philippine government's openness towards third-party involvement, regional security concerns and politics that have been less polarised until 2016.

KEYWORDS

conflict and security; Mindanao; relations between ASEAN countries; Thailand's border provinces

Introduction

Despite claims made by states that ethnic conflicts are purely a domestic issue, they can often have an international dimension (Ryan 1995). Ethnic conflicts become internationalised because they can spill over borders and cause mass migration to safer ground. Minority groups with affective links with groups in neighbouring countries can muster support and complicate interstate relations. Moreover, globalisation can facilitate arms trade and illegal businesses to generate the essential funding for ethnic wars. While numerous theories have focused on how domestic politics affect foreign policy and international relations, various situations have shown that international politics can also have a reverse effect on domestic politics. This is illustrated in Gourevitch's (1978) 'Second Image Reversed', in which he seeks to re-examine the relationship between international and domestic politics by showing how theories of international politics that place domestic politics as an independent variable are problematic. As the title suggests, Gourevitch begins by reversing Kenneth Waltz's second image to reveal that international politics can affect the domestic political arena. As such, domestic politics can affect international politics as much as international politics can have an impact on the domestic stage.

The conflicts in Mindanao and Thailand's southern border provinces are no exception. Various overarching factors at both the domestic and international levels have had an impact on Thailand's and the Philippines' relations with Malaysia in the light of the respective conflicts. Due to the geographical location of the conflicts, as well as affective links and historical factors, the states under study are compelled to strike a balance between the principle of non-interference upheld by member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), domestic stability and national interests. These overarching factors are contextual and fluid, thus resulting in a dynamism of tensions and cooperation. In the following sections, this article will examine these policy dilemmas as well as domestic and international factors that have resulted in Malaysia's involvement—both contentious and cooperative—in the two cases of conflict. It is argued that despite past complications in bilateral relations, Malaysia has managed to carve out a role in the current peace processes in Thailand's southern border provinces and Mindanao. However, Malaysia has been able to accomplish more in the case of Mindanao due to several factors. These include the Philippine government's more open attitude towards third-party mediation and peacekeeping; Philippine domestic politics, which have been less polarised until 2016; and regional security concerns stemming from terrorism and mass migration that have compelled the two countries to advance the peace process.

Security collaboration between Malaysia and Thailand during the Cold War

As a result of the Anglo-Siam Treaty of 1909, the former Sultanate of Patani (Negri Patani Darussalam) was incorporated into Siam, carved into three provinces, and renamed Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat.¹ The three southernmost provinces of Thailand are home to 1.3 million Malay Muslims. This is equivalent to 80 percent of the population of the three provinces, but only accounts for 3 percent of Thailand's total population, which is predominantly Buddhist (McCargo 2012, 217). Malay Muslims are proud of their distinct cultural identity and speak Malay Pattani as a first language. However, the complexity of the problem does not only lie within historical, cultural, ethnic and linguistic ties with northern Malaysia, but also the fact that many people hold dual citizenship (Thai and Malaysian), enabling them to cross the border with relative ease.

Like Mindanao, the conflict in the south of Thailand consisted of a multiplicity of armed groups, some of which had separatist underpinnings, but many of which still lacked clear goals, while others have morphed into criminal groups. Due to ethnic and religious ties, the insurgency in Thailand's southern border provinces often attracted support and sympathy from the population and political parties with support bases in Kelantan. However, the position taken towards the insurgency within the Malaysian state has been a bit more complicated. While high-ranking government officials, as well as members of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), have been vocal in support of the insurgency in Thailand's south (Surin 1985, 263; Funston 2010, 238), the government's official policy was to support Thailand's territorial integrity. Yet, due to a certain level of mistrust, Malaysia did retain links with the insurgency groups while allowing the insurgents to set up their headquarters on Malaysian soil. All this was done for fear that Thailand would provide assistance to the Communist Party of Malaya (Funston 2010,

238). Considering the delicate balance of interests and concerns involved, Malaysia maintained friendly relations with Thailand.

At the state level, the UMNO-led government pursued policies based on moderate nationalism for fear of a backlash from minority groups such as the Chinese and the South Asians in Malaysia. As such, conducting a foreign policy based on Pan-Malayan nationalism would alienate Malaysia's minority groups. In contrast, Parti Se-Islam Malaysia (PAS), Malaysia's largest opposition party, championed the cause to protect Malay interests. During the Cold War, political parties dominant in Kelantanese politics referred to disadvantages endured by their Muslim brothers in southern Thailand. The state of Kelantan, located on the east coast of the Malay Peninsula, had always been a closed society, where local traditions and Islam played a major influence in its politics. The Kelantanese speak a distinct dialect from that spoken by Malays outside the state and interpret Islam much more strictly than their counterparts on the west coast (Chin 1997, 108). The population of Kelantan is overwhelmingly Malay (more than 95 percent) and, traditionally, political contests here have always been between the moderate or secular Muslims, represented by UMNO, and fundamentalist Muslims, represented by PAS, who openly advocate the creation of an Islamic state in Malaysia (*ibid.*). Within this context, a handful of political parties dominant in Kelantanese politics supported the inclusion of Thailand's southernmost provinces, such as Partai Sosialis Rakyat Malaysia and PAS in the 1960s (Che Man 1990, 159).

Although these political parties lent support to their ethnic brethren across the border, the Malaysian UMNO-led government believed that maintaining friendly relations with the Thai government would best serve its interests both domestically and internationally. Much to the advantage of UMNO, PAS's political fortunes began to change after the race riots of 1969. Due to ethnic tensions, the Malaysian government made a conscious effort to support Malay interests, formerly championed by PAS, through affirmative action in the form of the New Economic Policies. Furthermore, political restructuring after 1969 meant that PAS was incorporated into the UMNO-led coalition, the Barisan Nasional, which resulted in a decrease of support for PAS in the northern Malay states. Consequently, from 1978, the more moderate UMNO expanded its political base, thus nudging out the Islamic parties which formerly lent support to the insurgency groups in Thailand's southernmost provinces.

At the international level, Thai–Malaysian security interests coincided with a secure border. During the Cold War, both countries were aligned with the non-communist bloc in South-East Asia. This kept Thailand and Malaysia on friendly terms, although suspicions did arise at various junctures between the two neighbours due to a difference in prioritising security concerns along the joint border. While Thailand accused Malaysian authorities of half-hearted attempts to limit the insurgency in Thailand's southernmost provinces, the Malaysians believed that Thai officials had deliberately allowed the Communist Party of Malaya to launch its operations on Malaysian soil from behind the Thai border. In fact, this was part of a wider policy pursued by consecutive Thai governments that provided assistance to political dissidents in neighbouring countries in order not only to expand Thai influence in the region, but also create buffers against potential threats (Fineman 1997, 138). Yet a greater security threat compelled the two neighbours to set aside their mutual suspicions of one another. With China and Vietnam to the north of Thailand, Thailand became a buffer state for Malaysia. As such, Malaysia had as much at

stake in Thailand's security and stability concerns as Thailand had itself (Thomas 1977, 372). Consequently, there was more to lose than to gain had Malaysia supported separatism or irredentism in Thailand's southern border provinces. Furthermore, there was not much evidence that Western powers would have supported it post-World War II (Christie 2000, 177–179; Suhrke 1975, 196). It was because of these common interests in securing the joint border that the two countries exchanged intelligence.

The situation changed in the 1980s when the Thai government began implementing policies with a good degree of accommodation. The General Prem Tinsulanonda administration (1980–88) began pursuing policies of economic development and increased political participation, as well as offering broad amnesty to the insurgents. As a result of these counter-insurgency measures, a number of groups disbanded, while some began to splinter. Thereafter, violence gradually subsided.

Malaysia's role in dialogue initiatives in Thailand's southern border provinces post-2004

However, relative calm was short-lived and hostilities re-emerged in 2001 in the form of small sporadic incidents. In January 2004, the conflict resurfaced in the form of well-coordinated attacks on the army camp in Narathiwat. These attacks were followed by two other major incidents, including the shootings at the historical mosque of Krue-Ze and the demonstrations at Tak Bai. Both incidents resulted in a considerable loss of lives. It was at this juncture that relatively good bilateral relations soured in light of the conflict.

The negative turn in bilateral relations had much to do with the Thai and Malaysian leaders, who vocally expressed what they thought of one another in the press, as well as domestic and international considerations. Luckily, the divergence in good bilateral relations did not have a long-lasting effect. The Thaksin Shinawatra government (2001–06) at the time responded to renewed violence with military means, which not only affected Thailand's relations with Malaysia, especially in 2005, but was also subjected to criticisms by various international organisations such as the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC).² Thaksin's hawkish approach had much to do with his team of policy advisors, who endorsed a more hard-line approach. Furthermore, Thaksin was keen to convince foreign tourists and their governments that Thailand was safe after the Bali bombings that occurred in 2002 (Ukrist 2006, 75).

In the context of increased violence, a group of villagers from Narathiwat sought refuge in Kelantan in August 2005. In the past, border crossings were not uncommon. When these occurred, Thailand and Malaysia had managed these incidents amicably at the provincial or the state level. However, much to Malaysia's dismay, Thaksin took the toughest line by labelling the 131 Muslims who fled across the border as terrorists. The Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs adopted a slightly softer tone by calling them separatists. The Thai defence minister, Thamarak Isarangura, accused Malaysia of allowing the insurgents to hold several meetings in Langkawi in an effort to plot attacks in Thailand (*The Nation* 10 September 2005). However, what did occur in the months to come was the Langkawi Process, an effort initiated by former Malaysian leader Mahathir Mohammed between late 2005 and early 2006 to resolve the conflict via peace talks. Despite there being representatives from the Thai side, including Armed Forces Security Centre chief Lieutenant General Vaipot Srinuan, General Winai Pathiyakul of the National Security Council

and representatives from a few civil society groups, the process was not openly acknowledged by the government due to Thaksin's refusal to endorse the process (Chanintira and Pinn 2016).

In responding to Thai accusations, Malaysia permitted the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to get involved in the issue, thereby adding fuel to the fire. Thaksin lashed out at the organisation at the ASEAN–United Nations summit in New York for allowing itself to be exploited for political purposes which had resulted in an international misunderstanding (*Bangkok Post* 15 September 2005). The way in which Thaksin and his advisors handled the whole situation not only showed their insensitivity towards the problem, but also exemplified a lack of understanding with respect to neighbourly relations with Malaysia.

Another factor that contributed to the downturn in bilateral relations was the difficult position Malaysia was in particularly with regard to striking a balance between domestic and international considerations. Domestically, the rift between Malaysia and Thailand also spilled over to the societal level in the form of demonstrations. In October 2005, Malaysian civil society groups lodged a petition with the Thai Embassy in Kuala Lumpur against the suppression of Muslims in Thailand's southern border provinces (*Bangkok Post* 5 October 2005). Some 300 members of PAS also protested in front of the Thai Embassy in Kuala Lumpur, denouncing Thaksin's handling of the situation in the south (*Bangkok Post* 10 September 2005). This was reciprocated by a group known as the Patriots of Siam, who rallied in front of the Malaysian Embassy in Bangkok to oppose what they perceived as Malaysian 'interference' in Thailand's internal affairs (*The Nation* 12 October 2005).

At the international level, as chair of the OIC, Malaysia was duty-bound to respond to the flight of the 131 Malay Muslims. Furthermore, Malaysia also wanted to increase its profile among Islamic countries. To complicate matters, Malaysia was also the chair of ASEAN at the time. However, the tense bilateral relations began to ease after a face-to-face meeting in November where Thaksin and Mahathir both agreed to refrain from 'megaphone diplomacy' (Asohan 2005). Neighbourly relations further improved after the September 2006 coup, which ushered in a new military government led by General Surayud Chulanont. Not only did Surayud apologise for the past injustice afflicted on the Malay Muslims—although it was only to an audience he was speaking to at the CS Pattani Hotel—but he also sent a delegation to Kelantan. The government promised to guarantee the safety of the Malay Muslims who had fled across the border and assured them jobs upon their return (*Bangkok Post* 6 November 2006).

Consecutive Thai governments post-Thaksin have responded to the violence with a clumsy mix of military and conciliatory means. Peace talks with insurgent representatives have long remained a sensitive subject for officials and politicians. Thus, it is no surprise that attempts to resolve the conflict by third-party mediation in the past have happened with and without the sanction of the Thai government. Most importantly, talks have occurred in secret locations away from the media. However, talks that occurred in 2013, mediated by Malaysia, signified three interesting developments. Firstly, it was the first time that peace talks were formally endorsed by the Thai government and publicised in the media. As such, the appearance of the Thai prime minister, Yingluck Shinawatra, at a joint press conference with Malaysia's prime minister, Najib Razak, can be viewed as a significant break from the past initiatives, including the Langkawi Process. Secondly, the

2013 talks were ironically initiated by the self-exiled former prime minister Thaksin in collaboration with Najib, although it must also be noted that the Thai government allowed Malaysia to play a comparatively limited role compared to the one that Malaysia played in Mindanao's peace process. This can be attributed to the Thai military's fear of foreign intervention in what it perceives as purely a domestic issue. Thai military leaders are largely uncomfortable with peace talks as they perceive the whole process as a step towards international intervention and eventual partition (ICG 2012, 20). Thirdly, despite a certain level of mistrust that has existed between the two countries, the initiation of talks has implied that the Thai government conceded to the fact that it cannot resolve the conflict without Malaysia's support. As such, recruiting Malaysia as a facilitator was not only a significant step for Thailand and its relations with Malaysia, but was also beneficial for conflict resolution. The role of a facilitator refers to a third party that encourages the conflicting parties to participate in open-ended talks aimed at confidence-building. This differs from the role of a mediator, who can foster a conducive environment for talks, while offering options to help resolve the conflict (Ryan 1995, 108). Although Malaysia had continuously lobbied for an increased role, in practice Malaysia's actions seemed to push the boundaries of its responsibilities to reflect those of a mediator as opposed to those of a facilitator (McCargo 2014, 10).

In terms of regional security, both Thailand and Malaysia would benefit from a successful peace deal. The fact that many Malay Muslims have dual nationality and many suspected insurgents are living in Malaysia means that the Thai government cannot dismiss Malaysia's help—not only because Malaysian intelligence can help track the location of the insurgency's main figureheads, but also because Malaysia is Thailand's only neighbour with any significant leverage over the militants. Since January 2004, there have been over 6500 conflict-related deaths (Deep South Watch 2016). As such, a secure border would be beneficial not only in terms of security, but also in terms of trade, reflected in joint initiatives such as the Indonesia–Malaysia–Thailand Growth Triangle. Conflict resolution would also limit transnational crime.

At the domestic level, attitudes within the Thai public sphere towards initiating peace talks have somewhat changed over the years. In the past, although talks with insurgents occurred, this was seen as an intelligence-gathering exercise (Don 2011). Reluctance to embark on talks or implement some degree of autonomy to appease the insurgency has much to do with the Thai public's fear that autonomy is a step away from independence. Prior to 2008, decentralising governance was seen as a taboo subject to discuss. Consequently, there was very little serious dialogue about the concept, which was perceived as a threat to the unitary kingdom (Srisompob and McCargo 2008, 406–407). However, since 2008, Thailand has experienced increased debate on autonomy as a means of managing the conflict in Thailand's southern border provinces. Within this context, the Thai government came to the realisation that counterinsurgency operations alone cannot quell the Malay Muslim opposition to the Thai state. Most importantly, a peaceful resolution at the initiation of the Yingluck government (2011–14) at the time would have been a major breakthrough that the opposition Democrat Party had been unable to achieve.³ Furthermore, Thaksin was anxious to correct the past with his heavy-handed policies. A successful deal would also advance his own political interests. Likewise, the Malaysian leadership—in particular, Najib Razak—was also keen to see a deal concluded, especially due to UMNO's poor showing in the previous 2008 and 2013 elections. As such,

favourable coverage of the peace process would hopefully give his party a boost, which was badly needed at a time of declining popularity. It would also undermine PAS and win over some support from the rural Malays of Kelantan (Wheeler 2013).

Unlike the previous talks that were held in secret, the 2013 process garnered significant media attention when the National Security Council and the Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN) signed an agreement in Kuala Lumpur on 28 February 2013 to hold talks. During the talks, the insurgents had to prove to the Thai government that they were capable of controlling the situation on the ground (*Bangkok Post* 30 April 2013). However, the signs were not encouraging. One example was a bomb attack which killed Yala deputy governor Issara Thongthawat and an assistant governor in Yala's Bannang Sata district. Furthermore, banners bearing messages opposing the talks were also found (*Bangkok Post* 16 April 2013). In the end, the peace process unravelled due to several factors. There had been a lot of scepticism from both sides about the talks, much of which stemmed from Thaksin's involvement in instigating the talks. There was also the danger of each side pushing for maximalist demands rather than compromise. Furthermore, there had been nothing to entice the insurgents to lay down their weapons in exchange for a peace deal. It has also been argued that, a lack of planning and a lack of coordination between the relevant Thai agencies, as well as multiple factions and groups within the insurgency were significant obstacles to peace (McCargo 2014, 7). Another significant factor was political instability. Since 2006, successive Thai governments have been preoccupied with mass street protests, which at various junctures have not only turned violent, but have brought governments to a standstill. The fight for political survival not only puts the conflict on the back burner, but also discourages more permanent and cohesive measures for conflict resolution. Increasing instability at the national level became a justification for the military to instigate a coup in May 2014.

However, despite the change of government, by December 2014 Thailand's new prime minister, General Prayuth Chan-ocha, had paved the way for a renewed peace process, which began in early 2015. As previously mentioned, the military have not been the strongest supporters of peace talks. As such, while some stressed the importance of the continuation of communication between the actors in the conflict, it is not surprising that, during some closed-door discussions attended by the author in early 2016, many described this round of talks as a fruitless exercise considering Thailand's current political atmosphere.

Malaysian–Philippine relations: bilateral tensions over the Sabah dispute

The conflict in Mindanao has continued to pose a security challenge for the Philippine government for many decades, which has resulted in 120,000 deaths in the past 40 years and displaced hundreds of thousands of people (Asia Peacebuilding Initiatives 2016).⁴ Although there are multiple ethnic groups in Mindanao, it is the Muslim minority (otherwise known as the Moros) who have rebelled against the government. Although the Philippine population is predominantly Christian, the conflict in Mindanao cannot be solely classified as a religious conflict. The multiple armed groups, motivated by various goals which are secessionist, communist and Islamic fundamentalist in nature, not only complicate any efforts to resolve the conflict, but have also become a pressing security concern for regional neighbours as well as other states further afield, including the United States and Australia. The multiplicity of security threats has focused the spotlight

on Mindanao, especially after 9/11; consequently, the area has attracted foreign aid and support in the hope of a peace deal. Like the conflict in Thailand's southern border provinces, resolving the conflict in Mindanao converges with Malaysia's own security interests due to the proximity of the problem. Unlike the case of Thailand's southern conflict, Malaysia's past relations with the Philippines have not been as cordial as those with Thailand.

During the Cold War, while several factors including ASEAN as well as security concerns ensured close cooperation between Thailand and Malaysia, such factors did not have the same effect on Philippine relations with Malaysia. Due to Thailand's proximity to Indo-China, Thailand's security and stability safeguarded Malaysia against the threat of communism at the time. Furthermore, UMNO had much to gain domestically from its cooperation with Thailand. However, the convergence of regional security and domestic interests did not exist in quite the same way between Malaysia and the Philippines. To the contrary, there was a clash of interests over Sabah, which had a negative spillover effect for the conflict in Mindanao.

The Sabah dispute originated from an agreement that allowed the 'leasing' of the territory to a British company back in 1863. The British government that succeeded the company claimed Sabah as part of the Crown Colony in 1946, which later gained independence along with other areas of East Malaysia, together forming the Federation of Malaysia in 1963. In the same year, an alleged referendum was conducted that indicated the wish of the residents of Sulu to be part of Malaysia. However, President Diosdado Macapagal of the Philippines (1961–65) disputed Malaysian claims by asserting that Sabah (which the Philippine government called North Borneo) was part of the Philippines. The Sabah dispute undoubtedly became a negative factor in bilateral relations between Malaysia and the Philippines for many years to come. This significantly differed from Malaysia's relations with Thailand, where the two countries had managed to successfully demarcate their borders (Wain 2012, 45–47). Towards the late 1960s, the region witnessed a deterioration of relations between Malaysia and the Philippines during the Bangkok talks in 1968. Unable to resolve the matter amicably, the collapse of the Bangkok talks ended with the Malaysian delegation abruptly walking out of the meeting room and the Philippine government recalling its Ambassador to Kuala Lumpur back to Manila. Relations continued to decline after President Ferdinand Marcos passed a bill in Parliament that included Sabah as part of Philippine sovereignty. The Malaysian government reacted against this move by suspending its diplomatic mission to Manila and revoking existing agreements that aimed to tackle smuggling at the time (Keesing's Record of World Events 1968). Thereafter, it was believed that Manila secretly backed Moro insurgents to challenge Malaysia's claim over Sabah and, in retaliation, Malaysia had also backed the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) with the aim of destabilising Manila's rule in Mindanao.

Manila's plan to reclaim Sabah was executed by 'Operation Merdeka', masterminded under Marcos's presidency (1965–86), which led to the Jabidah massacre in 1971. Although details of the events are unclear, it is believed that around 28–64 Moro recruits received guerrilla training in Corregidor Island in order to start a war between Sulu and Sabah. However, because the trainees refused to invade Sabah, they were massacred by the Philippine army for fear of repercussions should the secret of these operations become known (Che Man 1990, 74–75). However, the secrets of the massacre which

were later revealed had not only domestic consequences, but also an impact on relations with Malaysia. Firstly, the massacre illustrated how little regard Marcos had for the lives of the Mindanao Moros. As a result, the Muslim Independence Movement was formed just two months later. Secondly, it angered the Malaysian government, which felt that it had already made compromises for the sake of bilateral relations. Malaysia responded by pledging to fund, arm and train young Moro fighters. In 1969, the first group of Moro fighters was sent to Malaysia for training (Che Man 1990, 75). The Chief Minister of Sabah, Tun Datu Mustapha Harun (1968–76), was believed to have played a major role in supporting the Moro struggle against the Philippine government. Many of his actions resulted from his own devotion to aid fellow Muslims and his claims as a descendent of the Sultan of Sulu (Che Man 1990, 139). However, this aid ended once Tun Datu Mustapha lost the 1976 elections due to much discontent among the Sabahans, who feared a continued influx of Moros.

In the context of soured bilateral relations, the Philippine government still had an insurgency movement in Mindanao to deal with. Although the Jabidah massacre triggered a rebellion against the Philippine government, there were other sources of discontent, including economic deprivation and the increasing number of Christian settlers, which led to disputes over ancestral lands. Since the start of the conflict, violence had predominantly occurred in the Muslim-majority areas of central and south-western Mindanao. The main groups operating in Mindanao included the MNLF, which was largely active in the 1970s. Thereafter, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), a breakaway faction of the MNLF led by Salamat Hashim, became the largest insurgency group in Mindanao. It was not until the 1990s that Abu Sayyaf emerged and quickly gained notoriety for kidnapping Western tourists for ransom in the early 2000s. Despite a tense beginning to bilateral relations, Malaysia gradually moved towards a policy of increased cooperation under the ASEAN framework. While Malaysia did not have a direct role in facilitating the peace process at the time, talks were brokered by the OIC, which eventually led to the Tripoli Agreement between the Philippine government under Marcos and the MNLF in 1976. In August 1977, President Marcos announced that he had dropped claims over Sabah for the sake of regional relations (Richardson 1977). After continued efforts through the consecutive governments of Corazon Aquino (1986–92) and Fidel Ramos (1992–98), talks in 1996 eventually led to the signing of the Final Agreement on the Implementation of the 1976 Tripoli Agreement, which granted autonomy to the Muslim-majority areas. While the MNLF accepted a peace deal, the MILF became the largest insurgency movement operating in Mindanao.

Improved Philippine–Malaysian relations since 2001

After the MNLF became largely dormant, the security challenge posed by the main armed groups, including the MILF and Abu Sayyaf, attracted aid, security cooperation and international support for a peace process, especially post-9/11. Various states and international bodies have different motives for their involvement in Mindanao's security situation. Canberra's and Washington's interests lie with limiting groups linked to Indonesian terrorist groups and al-Qaeda. Thus, both Canberra and Washington concentrated much of their efforts on strengthening the Philippine army's counterterrorism capabilities. Mainly due to the context post-9/11, this made the Indonesian and the Philippine armed forces the

two largest recipients of the Pentagon's International Military Education and Training fund (Collier and Cook 2006, 52). From January to July 2002, in support of its efforts to combat Abu Sayyaf's operations, Washington sent close to 1300 troops and earmarked US\$93 million in military aid to the Philippines (Niksich 2007).

While Western governments were directing many of their foreign policy initiatives in South-East Asia against the threat of terrorism, Malaysia had become the main party to facilitate the peace process in Mindanao. Prior to Malaysia's involvement, President Joseph Estrada (1998–2001) had embarked on an 'all-out war' policy in 2000, which brought an end to peace talks that, at the time, were being conducted without third-party mediation. Once Estrada was ousted and vice-president Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo assumed presidency, the government announced a unilateral ceasefire and, with the MILF, explored ways to begin a peace process. The MILF proposed three conditions, which were accepted by Manila. These included that talks should be mediated by the OIC or one of its member states, parties should respect what had been agreed on in the past, and talks should be held in a foreign country. Thereafter, Malaysia began its role in 2001 as mediator with the first round of talks held in Tripoli (Bacani 2005, 6).

Since the inception of Malaysia's involvement, the peace process has oscillated between intervals of talks and armed confrontation. Fortunately for the peace process, both sides have sought new ways and mechanisms to strengthen the process after the breakdown of talks. Most importantly, the Philippine government has not been afraid of foreign involvement. This differs from the Thai case, where third-party involvement has been a recent occurrence and Malaysia's role has been relatively limited to facilitating peace talks. While some progress had been made during 2001–03, which resulted in the 2001 Tripoli Peace Agreement, talks were suspended over a disagreement about governance structures and ancestral land rights. Fighting broke out in 2003 when the government launched an offensive against the MILF headquarters in Maguindanao. As a result, the International Monitoring Team was established in 2004, led by Malaysia, to monitor the ceasefire agreement in Mindanao. The International Monitoring Team also consists of personnel from Libya, Brunei, Japan, Norway and the European Union. In 2008, talks were suspended again due to fighting, which led to the displacement of around 500,000 people (Herbolzheimer 2015). In 2009, the International Crisis Group, supported by Britain, Japan, Turkey and Saudi Arabia along with four other non-governmental organisations, was created to act as an observer during negotiations. Negotiations resumed again in 2010, which eventually led to a breakthrough in 2012. The Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro in October 2012 was hailed as a milestone in efforts to resolve the conflict, and undoubtedly Malaysia gained recognition for its success.

In March 2014, the Comprehensive Agreement was signed at the Presidential Palace, which paved the way for the establishment of new governing structures known as Bangsamoro. A committee was later tasked to draft the Bangsamoro Basic Law. Despite President Benigno Aquino III's efforts to urge lawmakers to pass the proposed Bangsamoro Basic Law before the end of his term, an unexpected turn of events derailed Aquino's exertions. National anger turned against the Bangsamoro Basic Law due to clashes between the MILF and the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (a breakaway group), which led to the deaths of 44 Special Action Force commandos in Maguindanao province on 25 January 2016 and the displacement of 148,000 people (UNHCR 2015). Furthermore, the bill was opposed by some legislators, who insisted on revising it. It is yet to be seen

how President Rodrigo Duterte's new government will continue Aquino's efforts. Although Duterte is a native from Mindanao and during his electoral campaign vowed to put the Mindanao conflict at the top of his agenda, it remains to be seen how the government will go forward and deal with various impeding challenges (Basman and Rood 2016). Despite the changes at the domestic level, in February 2016 Malaysia's prime minister, Najib Razak, assured continued support for the peace process beyond Aquino's term, which ended in June 2016 (Rosauro 2016).

What has transformed formerly contentious bilateral relations? While historical tensions due to the Sabah conflict have created some level of mistrust, this has been overcome by the mutual benefits of resolving conflict peacefully. Due to the proximity of Mindanao to East Malaysia, Malaysia's security interests are twofold. On the one hand, Malaysia's concern has come from the growing threat of terrorism, such as the Sipadan hostage crisis, which resulted in the kidnapping of 21 Malaysians in 2000. There have been many other incidents where Abu Sayyaf's operations have affected Malaysia's own security, not to mention transnational crime such as piracy and smuggling. More recently, a Malaysian national was beheaded by Abu Sayyaf's group in May 2015, and they took a group of Malaysian seamen hostage in April 2016. The continued threat to Malaysian nationals has prompted a meeting amongst high-level officials from Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines to increase security patrols in areas that are vulnerable to hijacking and kidnapping by Abu Sayyaf (*The Jakarta Globe* 5 May 2016).

On the other hand, the influx of refugees from Mindanao is a pressing concern for Malaysia. Government estimates in 2013 suggested that there could be up to 800,000 Filipinos in Sabah, while non-governmental aid workers said that the figure could be as high as 1.4 million (Tordesillas 2013). Consequently, over the years, refugees in Sabah have become a non-traditional security issue for the Malaysian government, which differs significantly from the situation in the south of Thailand. Because of the multiplicity of security considerations, it is in Malaysia's interests to have a Moro government that, at the least, sees Malaysia in a favourable light and, at the most, becomes susceptible to Malaysian influence.

Most importantly, a successful resolution to the conflict means that the Philippine government would be more inclined to relinquish its claims over Sabah, which is a valuable source of natural resources. Sabah has long been a contentious issue between Malaysia and the Philippines. As a consequence, discomfort arose with the then Malaysian facilitator Datuk Othman bin Abd Razak as some within the government believed that he was biased towards the MILF (Peacebuilding Asia 2015). Some within the Aquino administration even called for Malaysia's role to be replaced by Indonesia. The issue was finally resolved when Othman was replaced in order to keep the process going. However, some sources note that the problem was more to do with accepting Malaysia's role as a third-party facilitator rather than a question of personality (*ibid.*). While many still question Malaysia's role as 'an honest broker', reports and those involved in the peace process have praised Malaysia's role due to the advances that have been made in the Mindanao peace process (Rood 2012). Furthermore, the peace process itself has become a means to further develop cooperation between the Philippines and Malaysia.

While the Sabah dispute has largely remained dormant, the conflict resurfaced in 2013 when more than 100 armed men from the Philippines who identified themselves as members of the Royal Sulu Sultanate Army entered Sabah with the aim of reclaiming

their ancestral lands. After three weeks, the stand-off resulted in a violent confrontation between the Malaysian security forces and the armed men, which only served as a reminder of the past turbulent relations between Malaysia and the Philippines. There are a few explanations as to why the conflict has resurfaced. Firstly, there have been reports that Nur Misuari, the founder of the MNLF, backed the rebels because he was excluded from the peace agreement between the MILF and the Philippine government. Secondly, many believe that the heirs of the sultanate staged the rebellion in order to demand an increase in rent from the Malaysian government. Regardless of the motives, both the Malaysian and the Philippine governments have much to gain from a peaceful resolution to the conflict in Mindanao. An end to the conflict, which has claimed more than 120,000 lives over four decades, would greatly enhance the standing of the Philippine government of the day. However, it remains to be seen whether the new government after the June 2016 will continue with these peace initiatives. Clearly, the Philippine government is far more accepting of international involvement in peace processes—something that has yet to mature amongst the Thai leaders. While the continuation of Malaysia's role in talks from the 2013 initiation by Thaksin to the 2015 talks supported by the Thai military leaders shows that Thai leaders are aware that the conflict cannot be resolved through the sole use of military means, there is more that needs to be done. The offer of autonomy or decentralisation of governance structures, such as in the case of Mindanao, needs to be taken into account in order to entice armed movements to lay down their weapons.

Conclusion

The comparisons show that there are multiple overarching factors and national interests at both the domestic and international levels that have, in turn, shaped how the respective states have interacted with one another, as reflected in Gourevitch's (1978) thesis. During the Cold War, although a degree of distrust existed between Thailand and Malaysia, which resulted in covert support for proxy groups pursued by both sides, certain domestic and international interests ensured cooperation between the two countries. At the time, the UMNO-led government had much to lose domestically and internationally should it decide to support the Malay Muslims' cause for independence, whereas the opposition party, PAS, stood to gain from an independent southern Thailand. Internationally, the threat of communism kept Malaysia on Thailand's side. The case of Mindanao provides the counterfactual. The territorial dispute over Sabah was the cause of contention between the Philippines and Malaysia. Consequently, Malaysia supported the MNLF in Mindanao, while the Philippines supported Moro fighters to frustrate Malaysia's claims over Sabah, which led to diplomatic tensions. Although ASEAN's multilateral framework did not resolve the conflict, it at the very least prevented the conflict from escalating into outright confrontation.

Although security interests have significantly changed in more recent times, the two cases show that various domestic and international considerations have led to increased Malaysian cooperation in the respective peace processes, despite contentions in the past. Although the Thaksin administration responded to the violence with hawkish measures which led to bilateral tensions between Thailand and Malaysia in 2005, relations gradually improved to the point of cooperation. The negative turn in bilateral relations was due not only to the personalities of the Thai and Malaysian leadership at the time,

but also to domestic and international pressure that led the two leaders to take a stronger stance on the issue of the conflict. Civil protests against Thailand's heavy-handed measures that occurred in Malaysia, as well as Malaysia's position as chair of the OIC, compelled Malaysia to take a more critical tone towards Thailand's handling of the situation. The Thai government was also more prone to use hawkish approaches in dealing with the growing insurgency in the south.

However, in 2013, Malaysia assumed its role as a third-party facilitator in the peace process initiated by the Yingluck government, which has continued under the present General Prayuth administration. Nonetheless, the peace process in Thailand's southern border provinces has not progressed as well as that of Mindanao. Firstly, the Thai leaders, and especially the military, have been largely uncomfortable with talking to the insurgents. Furthermore, the Thai leaders have only just begun to accept outside support in ethnic conflict resolution. As such, Malaysia's mandate has been limited to what the Thai leaders see as acceptable, although this might be seen as a positive step towards ending the conflict.

Secondly, the instability and uncertainty that have plagued Thailand's political scene have diverted the attention of its leaders from the conflict to the struggle for political survival. Consequently, domestic considerations have significantly hindered the success of the peace process. In comparison, more pressing regional security concerns such as terrorism and mass migration, which have also attracted support from further afield, have, in turn, compelled the Philippines and Malaysia to advance the peace process in Mindanao. However, increased cooperation between the Philippines and Malaysia can be attributed to other favourable factors. From 2001 onwards, Malaysia assumed the role of a third-party mediator in talks between the Philippine government and the MILF. This role later expanded with the establishment of other mechanisms of governance such as the International Monitoring Team, indicating that the Philippine government has been far more accepting than the Thai government of a third-party role in the peace process. While it remains to be seen what will happen to the Bangsamoro Basic Law under the current government, Malaysia has won praise for its role in the peace process. Parallel to the case of Thailand's southern border provinces, domestic and international factors, such as regional security and immigration, as well as a potential boost in popularity for the government, have contributed to Malaysia's role in the Mindanao peace process.

With a role in the peace processes in Thailand's southern border provinces and Mindanao, could Malaysia also carve out its own place as a peacemaker? As a small state, should Malaysia be successful in resolving the long-standing conflicts in neighbouring Thailand and the Philippines, this would greatly enhance Malaysia's regional recognition in peace-building. So far, Malaysia has won praise for its role and the advancement of the peace deal in Mindanao, despite some scepticism and concern within the Thai and Philippine administrations about Malaysia's role as 'an honest broker'.

While both conflicts are situated in South-East Asia, both to varying degrees have had an impact on the interests of or attracted the attention of actors outside the region. As such, Malaysia could gain recognition beyond the region. While the conflict in Thailand's southern border provinces has not attracted much attention beyond Malaysia and the OIC, many Western and Asian countries have focused some of their efforts in supporting the peace process in Mindanao in various ways, whether with development aid or military assistance. Furthermore, Malaysia has just the right credentials to be a third-party

mediator for both conflicts. While both are conflicts in Muslim-majority areas governed by governments of a different ethnicity and religion, Malaysia, as a moderate Muslim country and fellow ASEAN member state, could bridge the gap between the conflicting parties. Any positive developments in the respective peace processes would enhance Malaysia's position on the regional stage. However, the prospects seem highly unlikely for the time being due to domestic disruptions to the peace processes in both cases.

Notes

1. Patani spelt with one 't' has become a controversial term that is used by insurgency groups to refer to the area of the former Patani Sultanate to indicate an era prior to its formal incorporation into Siam. Others, such as historians, also refer to 'Patani' to discuss earlier or alternative versions of the region. Pattani with two 't's refers to one of the three southernmost provinces under Thai rule.
2. In 2011, the organisation changed its name to the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation.
3. Since 2005, Thailand's colour-coded politics have been polarised by intense divisions and violence, often leading to political paralysis. At the centre of the conflict is former prime minister Thaksin Shinwatra, who was ousted in the 2006 coup and has been in exile since. Thaksin enjoys much influence over his supporters, the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (also known as the 'red shirts') and the Pheu Thai Party. At the time of the 2013 talks, his younger sister, Yingluck, was prime minister, which made it easier for Thaksin to jump-start his initiatives. Opposing Thaksin is the Democrat Party, along with various anti-Thaksin groups such as the People's Alliance for Democracy (also known as the 'yellow shirts') and the People's Democratic Reform Committee.
4. This is only a rough estimate as there has been no systematic collection of data with regard to the number of deaths in Mindanao.

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