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The Southern Insurgency: Rethinking Thailand's Military Strategy

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IN HIS most incisive public remarks since Thailand's bloodless coup, Thai Army Commander-in-Chief Sonthi Boonyaratkalin in June criticized security forces for their inefficiency, unprofessionalism and uncreative mindset that helped fan the flames of Thailand's southern insurgency. As more than 2,000 have died and the insurgency rages on into its fourth year, Bangkok's military strategy has been an unmitigated disaster, leaving the military fending off accusations of human rights abuses and engaging in mass arrests that produce little intelligence from tight-lipped insurgents. The southern region is approaching the precipice of civil war, insurgents are gaining increasing support and violence has continued unabated. In order to turn its foundering military campaign around, Thailand must address a number of critical issues relating to resources, capacities, conceptual frameworks and policies that plague its counterinsurgency effort.

Too Few Good Men

The Thai military is overstretched and under-performing. Only one out of every three or four checkpoints are manned in the insurgency-wracked provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat. The police eschew cooperation with the military due to deep interagency rivalry, while military personnel simply lack the rigour and enthusiasm to fulfill their combat duties. In some cases, the military has recruited poorly-trained villagers to supplement its depleting ranks, which only increases the chances for costly operational errors. The security vacuum is having adverse effects. Buddhists in the South, frustrated with the government's ineptitude, are increasingly taking up arms and organizing their own militias. It is no coincidence that this has led to a surge in revenge attacks this year between Buddhists and Muslims. These are ingredients for a full-scale civil war.

Gen. Sonthi's concerns about the lack of professionalism within the security forces are well-founded. Until recently, forensic teams that arrived after bomb attacks used obsolete equipment and techniques that led to dismal evidence collection. Army personnel simply refuse to wear the proper protective equipment while carrying out security duties, resulting in unnecessary casualties through bomb-related accidents. The security forces' dismissive attitude and rudimentary practice of evidence collection and law enforcement will only lead to ineffective public trials. These public prosecutions are integral counterinsurgency instruments since an increase in transparency will ameliorate the military's reputation for brutality. Furthermore, transparent verdicts will turn the tide against the insurgents, who have stepped up their campaign of using mass village demonstrations to free detainees interned under shaky evidence.

It's The Thought That Counts?

While capacity and resource problems can be quickly rectified, it will take much more to improve the deep-seated myopia of the security forces. They view counterinsurgency through the prism of short-term operational gains, rather than a long, complex process. Part of this thought paradigm is due to the special forces background of Thailand's current Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont and Gen. Sonthi, which leads them to emphasize quick, light operations that privilege arrests over the more critical goal of acquiring intelligence from villagers by 'holding' certain areas. In the last few weeks, the armed forces have engaged in 'sweep up operations' and 'manhunts' to clear areas of insurgent presence. While this has netted insurgents and weapons, it is unlikely to work in the long run. The insurgency is waged with simple weapons which are easily replenished. And insurgents are unlikely to know much more beyond their direct cell operations. Furthermore, 'sweeps' are unlikely to succeed in obtaining intelligence from villagers and informants, simply because their allegiance will stick with the ever-present, lurking insurgents rather than transient security personnel.

The few intelligence-centric operations that do exist in the villages are so ill-conceived that they are playing into the insurgent narrative rather than furthering the process of government counter-ideology. When a team leader of a psychological operations village force was asked what his most successful mission was, he enthusiastically detailed how his squad worked with Muslim villagers to plant a Thai flagpole to institutionalize allegiance to the nation-state. Soldiers seem oblivious to the fact that attempts to "Thai-ze" villagers only serve to strengthen the insurgent narrative, which stresses attempts by the Thai state to 'forcibly assimilate' Southern Muslims. As a result, insurgents are able to tighten their grip on the villagers, subduing them into a culture of silence locally known by the motto of *tidak tahu, tidak lihat, tidak dengar* (I do not know, I do not see, I do not hear). While the armed forces may win some operational battles on the ground in the upcoming weeks, the insurgents have a virtual monopoly on the hearts and minds of the Southern borderland.

Actions Speak Louder Than Words

Exacerbating these key factors is the abject failure of concrete security policies in the southern villages. Proposals are often implemented and evaluated without the inputs of Muslim villagers. For example, the recruitment of 'Rangers' or indigenous village forces is often hailed as a successful government policy to tailor security to local needs. However, most argue that these 'Rangers' consist of *Muslim buruk* (bad Muslims) who were gamblers, drunks or petty criminals. Empowering village outcasts with vital security roles is a recipe for disaster. Even more disturbing, however, is the fact that the policy has neither been revoked nor revised. It suggests a systematic lack of engagement with the local community. Many Southern Muslims, for instance, are perplexed as to why the government has not made it compulsory for all officers serving in the south to learn the local Malay dialect. This would result in more goodwill and interaction between villagers and the military, which would in turn ameliorate the long history of distrust and suspicion between the two parties.

Policies are also dogged by unbalanced implementation. Polling conducted in the South shows that village leaders are very dissatisfied with current security policies focused on 'hunting militants', while neglecting important non-military dimensions like local administration. Villagers, teashop visitors and academics interviewed all agree that "social justice" is the key to the South. Yet the government has not implemented plans related to justice – like strengthening social infrastructure and enhancing community participation. Even some government and army officers in Bangkok view the lack of implementation as the primary Southern obstacle. They offer explanations such as bureaucratic inertia, red tape, 'laziness' and, most notably, Bangkok-centric distractions including political instability and upcoming elections.

The Way Forward

The Thai government must resolve a multi-faceted array of deficiencies in order to reverse its counterinsurgency misfortunes. First, it must increase its security presence by three or four times, because only with the creation of security will villagers shift to or keep their allegiance with the government. Security leads to intelligence, which will in turn result in more successful and discriminate military operations.

But government success is also contingent upon professionalism and possessing the right conceptual framework. The former can be accomplished by enhancing inter-agency cooperation, buying more sophisticated counterinsurgency equipment, and enforcing a strict code of conduct. The latter will probably be a trial and error process in balancing the security, social and political roles of the military that is currently too heavy-handed and operational-centric.

Policy implementation must also be consistently carried out in *all* dimensions of the counterinsurgency effort. If other issues do threaten to distract Bangkok, it must remember that the insurgency has festered because of decades of alternating heavy-handedness and neglect. The Thai government would do well to understand that time is not on its side. Prospects for a regional jihad always lurk just around the corner.

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