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MILITARY INTEREST GROUPS IN THE MAE SOT-MYAWADDY BORDER ECONOMYSIRINYA SIRIYANUN¹**ABSTRACT**

For most of its history, the Thai-Burmese border region of Mae Sot and Myawaddy has been peripheral to the concerns of the Thai and Burmese authorities. However, growing economic connectivity in mainland Southeast Asia promises to transform it into a regional economic crossroads, and it currently has the highest GDP of any region on the Thai-Burmese border. Rather than increasing the control of the central governments of Thailand and Burma, these economic changes have strengthened the Mae Sot-Myawaddy region's character as a border economy. A heavy and increasing military presence has led Thai and Burmese soldiers to join local non-state actors as one of the region's major interest groups, and has led to a proliferation of military-owned businesses and enterprises. The advent of a new period of military governance in Thailand indicates that the power of the military interest group will only strengthen. This raises risks of conflicts of interest with non-military interest groups and indicates that creating an equitable plan to develop the region should be made a high priority.

Key Words: Thailand, Burma, borders, border economy, military rule

FROM PERIPHERY TO CROSSROADS: MAE SOT AS A BORDER ECONOMY

As the Thai and Burmese governments consolidated control over their border regions in the twentieth century, the Mae Sot-Myawaddy region transformed from a periphery to a critical border crossing. From World War 2 until the 1980s, the Thai government was pre-occupied with events on its eastern frontier, and Burmese government was unable to control the Karen highlands. This led to the creation of a porous border and a peripheral economy in which local interest groups directed the economy to a greater degree than the central governments of Burma and Thailand. This border economy has survived the consolidation of central control over the Mae Sot-Myawaddy region.

In the decades following World War 2, the Mae Sot region, and the Burmese border in general, was a relatively minor concern of the Thai government. With the emergence of a powerful communist movement and the spread of war in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, the government's focus was instead on its eastern frontier (Lang, 2002, p. 141-2). Burma's neutralist government and the largely right-wing Karen insurgent movement meant that the Thai government did not feel ideologically threatened by events on its western frontier. In addition, the Thai government lacked the ability to control its entire border with Burma, and, indeed, was unable to effectively govern much of its northern highlands until the 1970s (Race, 1974). Limited government resources and the presence of a major Cold War battlefield on the eastern frontier thus combined to ensure a limited government presence on Thailand's western frontier.

While the Burmese government took a far greater strategic interest in its frontier with Thailand, it had even fewer resources, and even greater obstacles preventing control of the region. From the first year of Burmese independence in 1948, multiple insurgencies plagued the Burmese government, confining government control to the lowlands. The Myawaddy region lies in Karen State, which came to be the longest-lasting stronghold of the Karen

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National Union (KNU), one of the first ethnic separatist groups to rebel against the Burmese government. Under the leadership of the Karen general Bo Mya, the KNU established a de facto independent state that only began to lose ground to the Burmese government in the 1980s (Smith, 1999). The Mae Sot-Myawaddy region prior to the 1980s was thus a peripheral region, in which there was little government control. The primary economic movers on the Burmese side of the border were the Karen, and the KNU in particular. On the Thai side, local entrepreneurs and government officials served as the main economic actors.

Two major processes led to the consolidation of government control over the Mae Sot-Myawaddy region. First, increasing gains by the Burmese army in Karen State during the 1980s led to a growing Burmese military presence near the Thai border and precipitated a Karen refugee crisis that was too large for either the Thai government or the international community to ignore (Lang, 2002). Second, the end of the war in Indochina in the late 1980s and early 1990s largely resolved the humanitarian crisis on Thailand's eastern border, thus allowing the Thai government to pay more attention to consolidating control of its western border. While the Karen conflict did not come to an end, the Burmese government won a decisive victory when the government-backed Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) captured the KNU capital of Manerplaw in 1995 (Fong, 2008).

In the late 1990s and 2000s, the Mae Sot-Myawaddy region emerged as a major economic crossroads. In 1992, the border crossing was selected as a point on Asia Highway 1. In 1998, it was earmarked as the westernmost border crossing on ASEAN's East-West Economic Corridor, linking Mandalay in Burma with Danang in Vietnam. In the 2000s, the Thai government selected Mae Sot for the development of a Special Economic Zone (SEZ), a plan which accelerated under the governments of Yingluck Shinawatra and Prayuth Chan-ocha, and reached its completion in 2016. The Mae Sot-Myawaddy border crossing is currently the most active border crossing on the Thai-Burmese border, and the third most active border crossing in Thailand, accounting for 15% of all of Thailand's cross-border trade in 2013 (Royal Thai Government). The Mae Sot-Myawaddy region is no longer peripheral.

However, the economy of the Mae Sot-Myawaddy region remains a border economy. The border is porous and loosely controlled, with frequent unauthorized movement back and forth. The Thai government, rather than controlling the border directly, focuses much of its effort on controlling the highways from the border region to the Thai heartland. This necessitates a large law enforcement and military presence in the border region itself, with numerous army checkpoints between the border and the major highways, and police checkpoints along the highways. On the Burmese side, government control remains tenuous and subject to the whims of ethnic militias, which still retain considerable power.

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MILITARY INTEREST GROUPS OF THE BORDER REGION

Military interest groups in the Mae Sot-Myawaddy border region can be divided into three general categories. These are, respectively, the Thai military interest group, the Burmese military interest group, and the Karen military interest group. Each of these three groups consists of soldiers who have spent a considerable amount of time in the border region and have developed a personal economic stake in cross-border trade and conflict.

Karen soldiers, by their very nature, are the military interest group most heavily entrenched in the border economy. These are participants in an uprising which has historically had its base of operations in this particular border region, and many of them are natives to the region as well. The Karen armed groups have a hand in both legitimate and illegitimate cross-border trade. In parts of the border region, the KNU offers tours of “Karenland,” bringing tourists across the Moei river to visit attractions in KNU-controlled territory. In addition, the KNU and other Karen armed groups control stretches of AH1 between Myawaddy and Yangon, and charge tolls on traffic from the border to the Burmese heartland (Weng, 2010). They are thus critical to the continual functioning of the border economy.

Thai soldiers stationed to the Mae Sot-Myawaddy border region come from many different parts of Thailand, and have their posts rotated frequently. As such, individual soldiers are unable to develop strong personal interests in the affairs of the border. However, the Thai military as a whole has a long-established presence in the region, and constitutes one of the border economy's major interest groups. Economic activities of the Thai army include turning a blind eye to cross-border activity of the Karen armed groups. Many members of the Karen leadership have residences in Thailand. Others send their children across the border daily in order to attend school in Thailand. This is all, by necessity, tacitly facilitated by the Thai authorities. In addition, many soldiers in the Thai army have opened businesses or purchased land in the Mae Sot-Myawaddy region, and maintain an economic interest in the region even after being transferred to another part of the country.

The third major military interest group is that of the Burmese army. This is the most recent of the military interest groups to establish a presence in the Mae Sot-Myawaddy border region. The Burmese military presence in the region began in the 1960s with the establishment of the “four cuts” counter-insurgency program, grew throughout the 1970s, and became dominant in the 1980s (BERG, 1998). The fall of Manerplaw in 1995 established the Burmese national army and their allies as the pre-eminent military power on the Burmese side of the border. By this point, the informal border economy was already well-established.

MILITARY GOVERNANCE AND MILITARY INTEREST GROUPS

Military governance is nothing new on the Thai-Burmese border, as both the Thai and Burmese governments have been run by their respective militaries for much of the last one hundred years. This has, quite predictably, strengthened the militaries in both countries, and in turn strengthened the military interest groups in their border regions. In recent years, the Thai army has been on the rise, while the Burmese army has retained much of its power despite co-existing with a new civilian government. This means that we are entering the latest of many periods of military governance in the border region.

The growth of Burmese military interests in the border region dates back to the start of Burmese military rule in 1962. In this period, Burma attempted to become a socialist state, with the military leaders controlling both state security and nationalizing industries as state-operated enterprises. Both Burmese and Thai military leaders in this period had a need to do business in resource-rich areas of the border which were controlled by ethnic minority militias, many of whom were hostile to the government. As such, the military leaders would form relationships with businessmen living in the border region, who would in turn serve as middle-men between the ethnic minorities and the military. Through arrangements such as this, Thai and Burmese authorities were able to obtain resources such as timber and minerals from areas which would otherwise have been inaccessible.

Military factions turn into military interest groups in times of peace. This means that soldiers in the area, regardless of affiliation, have two occupations. They defend themselves in time of war, and in peace they are tasked with providing economically for themselves, their families, and those under their protection. This means that military organizations, as well as

individual soldiers with long-standing ties to the region, need to form businesses and build economic assets in order to survive. The presence of ethnic insurgents exacerbates all of this, with ethnic insurgency being one of the major barriers to international cooperation and domestic unity in Southeast Asia. The separatist ideology of ethnic insurgents requires them to be reject cooperation with the state. At the same time, the need to survive forces pragmatic participation in domestic economies (Thitiwut, 2007).

In addition to all of this, the presence of militaristic ruling cultures in both Thailand and Burma means that even in the national heartlands, there is a strong connection between business interests and the military. As such, the Thai and Burmese militaries are more sensitive to economic needs than the military leadership of many other countries. This proves a deterrent to direct international conflict, and means that both national governments are motivated to quickly end conflict with ethnic minority militias such as the KNU.

CONCLUSION

The Mae Sot-Myawaddy border region is a rare example of an area in which all of the most influential interest groups are military in nature, and in which there are numerous influential interest groups. This is a result of a combination of domestic military rule in Thailand and Burma. It is exacerbated by a history of ethnic insurgency in the border region (Smith, 2013), and the presence of numerous armed insurgent groups in the vicinity of Mae Sot and Myawaddy. Even most of the ostensibly non-military interest groups in the area have connections with the Thai and Burmese militaries or the Karen insurgents.

While this would conventionally be considered cause for alarm, it should instead be seen as a feature of the political landscape of the Thai-Burmese border. It has potential benefits, as the alignment of military and business interests can help avoid lasting conflict. However, it has potential drawbacks, as it threatens to keep the region militarized for an indefinite period of time. Regardless, it is a factor that the international community and the national governments of Thailand and Burma must keep in mind when planning for the region's development.

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