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## **THE SOUTHERN PROVINCES IN BILATERAL COOPERATION DURING THE MAHATHIR AND ABDULLAH YEARS**

*Malaysia's relations with Thailand can be described as paradoxical. On the one hand, bilateral ties had been the least 'problematic.' On the other, the situation in the Southern Provinces had constrained relations and this could be seen during the administrations of Mahathir and Abdullah which became preoccupied with finding solutions. In 'aggregating' these two polar states together ('superposition'), one could construe or amplify bilateral relations within a broader range of so-called overall 'benign neglect' that to a certain extent – characterised the approach of successive administrations of both countries. The objective of this paper as conditioned by archival sources as well as interviews seeks, therefore, to highlight the under-appreciated and overlooked role of the leadership factor in bilateral relations. This is in turn co-related to developments in political contestations and reconfigurations centred in Bangkok ("national politics") which whilst promising little hope on the resolution for peace and stability in the Southern Provinces – contributes to the (unchanging) broader narrative. In short, directions in bilateral relations have been – to a critical extent – determined, influenced and constrained by the inability to achieve a breakthrough to the situation in the Southern Provinces.*

**Keywords:** Mahathir Mohamad, Abdullah Badawi, Southern Provinces, Bilateral Cooperation, Autonomy

### **Introduction**

At the risk of over-simplification and over-generalisation, it could be stated that Malaysia's relation with its northern neighbour, Thailand, is considered the least problematic compared with bilateral ties with the two other immediate neighbors, namely Singapore and Indonesia. Likewise, Thailand also seems to have the least issue with Malaysia as compared with its other immediate neighbours Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar. Except for a brief period in 2004 when the incidences of violence in the Southern Provinces<sup>1</sup> (Deep South) of Thailand escalated, Malaysia-Thai relations were relatively free from tensions. Thus, despite the problematic nature of the Southern Provinces, the state of

bilateral ties was to a significant degree unimpaired, that is to say, reasonably maintained.

It cannot be overstated that the principle of non-interference *ala* the “ASEAN Way” has informed Malaysia’s attitude towards the situation in the Southern Provinces (Funston, 2000<sup>2</sup>). At the same time, it also cannot be over-emphasized that the “ASEAN Way” allows for or accommodates “constructive engagement” (Haacke, 2007<sup>3</sup>) subject to the consent of the member states concerned and influenced by emerging/ evolving developments or trends in the region (Katsumata, 2004<sup>4</sup>; Khoo, 2004<sup>5</sup>; Snitwongse, 1998<sup>6</sup>) within the framework of non-interference. In fact, such approach pre-dated the formation of ASEAN and was simply a natural exercise of bilateral conduct on the part of the then Malaya that harboured no territorial aspiration or ambition. Malay nationalism in the mainstream as represented by the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) was preoccupied with retaining and strengthening the political status and privileges of the Malays *vis-à-vis* the Chinese (and Indians) rather than with their ethnic counterparts *outside* British-administered Malaya. In other words, the carving out of the respective spheres of influence – under the auspices of colonialism – that undercut the historical kinship within the Malay Archipelago which makes for ethnic identification was both implicitly and explicitly accepted as a “given” by UMNO.

It is interesting to note even the founding father and first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, who led the country to independence did not at the time consider the issue of Singapore’s incorporation into Malaya as a priority despite the historically deep linkages between the peninsular and the island.<sup>7</sup> It was the “left-wing” Malay nationalists who dreamt of and pushed for the ideal of a Malaya/ Indonesia Raya.<sup>8</sup> The irony is that by adopting the principle of non-interference (in the era of post-colonialism), Malaysia (and ASEAN) can be considered to have “overtaken” the West as defender of an “absolutist” conception of national sovereignty which historically was alien to the “tributary” system practiced in the Southeast Asian region. The constructivist, rationalist and subaltern realist theories can all in varying degrees be discerned or found in the “ASEAN Way” of non-interference tempered by constructive engagement (Jones, 2009<sup>9</sup>) – what Katsumata (2004) termed “the eclectic” view.<sup>10</sup>

This paper then focuses on the impact/ influence of the situation in the Southern Provinces in Thailand on Malaysia-Thai bilateral relations within the conceptual framework of (the “ASEAN Way” of) “non-interference” and the coordinating ancillary of “constructive engagement” (as two sides or dimensions of the same or identical, *i.e.* singular and monistic approach). The direction of the paper will be mainly (though not exclusively) from the perspective of Malaysia, and “periodised” from 1981 until 2008. A brief historical background to bilateral attitudes is provided as a prelude to the main body of the paper. Only then is this followed by an overview and highlights

of bilateral relations during the Mahathir Mohamad and Abdullah Badawi administrations. This has the advantage of *combining* the assessment of the foreign policy and diplomacy of Malaysia towards Thailand up until 2008 in terms of continuity and discontinuity *with* an analysis of the leadership factor.

As such, an analysis and comparison of the leadership style and approaches of these two Malaysian Prime Ministers can be situated within the conceptual framework of “non-interference” and “constructive engagement”. That is, the leadership factor as epitomised (pre-) eminently by Mahathir and Abdullah will serve as the discretely concrete variable (independent, primary and ultimate) determining and shaping the extent of the influence and impact of the conceptual framework of “non-interference” and “constructive engagement” (as the dependent, secondary and penultimate variable) in Malaysia-Thai bilateral relations.

## **Research Methodology**

This research data obtained in the course of preparing this paper was derived mainly from archival sources as well interviews (as part of the field survey of leaders, experts and stakeholders) in order to fill in the gaps in research on Malaysia-Thai bilateral relations during the periodisation presented in this paper. Thus, the research methodology in this paper is strictly and exclusively conditioned by qualitative analysis with empirical data obtained solely from secondary sources. The secondary data obtained corresponds to the periodisation (1981-2008). This is at the same time supplemented and complemented by more contemporary sources to enhance the critical analysis and evaluation of the bilateral relations.

It has to be reiterated also that this paper is period-specific but simultaneously and concomitantly in its concrete-specificity focussed on the role of the actors themselves in the form of the leadership factor. That is, instead of critically evaluating the other (typical) trends and factors as such and then highlighting how the actors fit into the narrative, this paper looks at the role played by the actors themselves set against a particular period.<sup>11</sup> This paper is therefore almost unique in its analysis of Malaysia-Thai bilateral relations by inter-posing the leadership factor as mediating between the inter-play between the problem of the Deep South and cross-border exchanges.

For a long time Malaysia and Thailand seem contented with the current state of affairs in their bilateral relations although there were many potential areas of bilateral cooperation which could be explored further by both sides. For many decades, bilateral relations have suffered from benign neglect and complacency and both sides seem contented to allow relations to be biased toward developments in the Southern Provinces. In other words, it would appear that much energy and attention in bilateral relations over the years have been focussed on trying to resolve the long-standing conflict in the

Southern Provinces. It is here argued that on the one hand, continuing concern for this non-Thai Buddhist (Malay-Muslim) majority region especially on the part of Malaysia has probably held back bilateral developments (from achieving its “full prospects”), and made the issue of the Southern Provinces the “organising principle” and diplomatic norm in relations between the two countries.

At the same time on the other hand, there is a deeper basis for the bilateral complacency, more so the part of Bangkok, due to geographical proximity and historical outlook.<sup>12</sup> Paradoxically, this has bred disinterest and presumptuous familiarity bordering on contempt (as the English proverb goes) at the “unofficial” level of bilateral relations, *i.e.* the people-to-people attitude. Even more fundamental has been the self-perception of Thailand (traditionally known as the Kingdom of Siam) that influenced its attitude towards the surrounding countries, including Malaysia. For centuries, Thailand (Siam<sup>13</sup>) was a regional hegemon in its own right. And Perlis, Kedah, Kelantan and Terengganu, from the northern region of (what is now) Malaysia, were once under its suzerainty until the Anglo-Siamese Treaty (1909). Prior to the Treaty, these Malay states had paid homage to Thailand by sending the annual tribute (เครื่องราชบรรณาการ) of *bunga mas* (literally “golden flower”).<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, unlike Malaysia (*i.e.* both the peninsula and the Borneo states of Sabah and Sarawak), Thailand had never been subjected to colonial incursion or occupation before. Hence, it had maintained its sovereignty throughout the period of Western imperialism. Furthermore, Thailand under the reign of Chulalongkorn (Rama V) was also the first Southeast Asian geo-political entity to be modernised through the adoption of Western-type administration, and introduction of bureaucratic reforms which were progressive and forward-looking.<sup>15</sup>

These factors provide the historical background to the general observation that amongst the political elite in Bangkok as well as the larger Thai society, there exist a level of condescension and patronising attitude towards the southern neighbour that *had* been quite prevalent to a certain extent. It could be pointed out, albeit, that such outlook no longer dominates the thinking of Bangkok and the mainstream Thai citizenry as greater people-to-people exchanges facilitated by air and land travel contribute to correcting misconceptions.

In effect, the customary outlook has been that there is not much to learn from neighbouring Malaysia which was seen to be little different from the then less developed Indochinese states. It has to be highlighted, however, that dynamic social and economic cross-border exchanges *parallel* the broader apathetic and condescending outlook.<sup>16</sup> This is particularly salient in the land border areas connecting the Southern Provinces of Thailand with the north-eastern state of Kelantan in Malaysia where historic and socio-cultural bonds have long existed.

Perhaps rather unsurprisingly, the rationale or motivation for the lacklustre approach could be framed as that of ensuring the situation in the Southern Provinces would not escalate into a *high*-intensity conflict. This is set against the backdrop of roadside bombings and shootings that have seared the geographical and social landscape.<sup>17</sup> Hence, security concerns were always lurking in the background of bilateral diplomacy. Security concerns, therefore, became “engrossed” with the need to focus on *containing* the conflict bilateral relations became negatively defined. The movement of internally displaced persons (IDP) across the border (prompted by a humanitarian crisis) would jeopardise bilateral relations and serves only to aggravate tensions and heighten suspicions (triggering a diplomatic crisis).

### **Bilateral relations (1981-2009): A Malaysian Impression**

The two Malaysian Prime Ministers from 1981 to 2009 took a keen interest in the situation in the Southern Provinces and in their own distinct ways sought to contribute towards improving the situation there. Arguably, Abdullah Badawi (2003-2006) could be considered as having moved beyond the “indirect” approach practiced under Mahathir Mohamad (1981-2003) during which Malaysia limited its contributions to offering sanctuary (short- and long-term) and provision of human capital training (capacity-building).

Instead, Abdullah sought to involve Malaysia’s role and contribution “directly” in the Southern Provinces through the 3Es schemes education, employment and entrepreneurship.<sup>18</sup> Ironically, however, such approach implicitly regards and factors the situation in the Southern Provinces as a normative shape in the bilateral equation which when compared to the Mahathir era is somewhat regressive and retrogressive. This is because it constitutes an explicit recognition (by the Malaysian government) that bilateral relations have not yet progressed *beyond* the unrest in the Southern Provinces.

Indeed, the Southern Provinces as a problem seem to be an inevitable factor in bilateral cooperation not least given the fact of their location in the border region. Thus, throughout the Communist insurgency in Malaysia (1948-1989), successive Prime Ministers have been concerned about the security dilemma of separatist movements operating in and out of both countries. Malaysia had played off the militants *vis-à-vis* the Communists as a “hedge” against Thailand.<sup>19</sup> It was feared that Thailand might make use of the Communists to complement security and intelligence measures against the militants.<sup>20</sup>

Ganesan (2010) argues that bilateral relations between Malaysia and Thailand from 1975 to 1988 have been very much informed by security concerns and structural cohesion of regional integration (ASEAN).<sup>21</sup> Implicit in this periodisation was that the twin substances of bilateral relations – security and regionalism – were deeply intertwined, and not so neatly distinguished.<sup>22</sup> Joint-

security measures reflected the broader foreign policy outlook and orientation of both countries which in turn was grounded in the inter-relationship between the national and regional dimension of the Communist spectre.

Despite the mutual recognition that the Communist ideology was a common security threat which potentially undermines national sovereignty and destabilises the political systems of both countries, the problem of the Patani Malay militant groups was qualified as Thailand's domestic affair (Nair, 1997).<sup>23</sup> Ironically, this in turn would affect Malaysia's attitude and understanding on the precise approach towards resolving border issues arising out of the movement of the militant groups refugees.

The setting up of the General Border Committee (GBC) in 1977 belies the mutual mistrust tacit in the level of effort to combat the dual-problem of Communist insurgency and Patani Malay militancy. The climate of intermittent festering tension in bilateral relations was to find full expression in not-so subtle and less diffident terms during the Abdullah-Thaksin's premierships where hitherto Thailand was merely inclined to point out its concerns about the operational presence of militants in Malaysia without necessarily implying collusion.<sup>24</sup>

## **The Mahathir Years**

In addition to movement of militants, an understated but persistent issue was that of the refugees. The issue resurfaced in Malaysia-Thai relations in early 1981 when more than approximately 1,250 Patani Malays fled to northwest Kedah and also Perak.<sup>25</sup> Again, both countries had differing perceptions of the issue. Malaysia was more predisposed to treat the self-exiled Patani Malays as bona fide refugees; Thailand regarded them as "agents of PULO" (Patani United Liberation Organisation) who enjoyed Malaysian support and protection, albeit unofficial<sup>26</sup> Thailand had all along suspected that PULO rebels were embedded amongst the refugee group(s) with the full cognizance of the Malaysian government.

When Mahathir Mohamad (1981-2003) became Prime Minister soon afterwards, he "confirmed" the refugee status of the 1,250 Patani Malays but not without extensive consultations with the Thai government. In fact, according to Nair (1997), approaching the issue was a delicate balance for Mahathir in assuaging public opinion, particularly from within his own party ranks (United Malays National Organisation/UMNO) and also ensuring that diplomatic channels continue to be kept open and engaged.<sup>27</sup> This showed that the Mahathir administration was sensitive to both domestic and diplomatic viewpoints. At the same time however, the issue exposed the inability of both countries to arrive at a concrete and permanent resolution.

Nonetheless, there were conscious and concerted efforts made during the administrations of Mahathir and his Thai counterpart, Prem Tinsulanond

(1980-1988) in the 1980s to extend and develop bilateral relations focusing on economic cooperation. The Mahathir and Prem administrations sought to leverage on the technical capabilities of the other country, and pool resources through public-private joint-venture initiatives involving or backed by state-owned enterprises (or government-linked companies) in the areas of fisheries, petrochemicals and oil and gas.

The geographical scope of cooperation earmarked was the area by the Gulf of Thailand and South China Sea. However, such joint-collaborations were not fostered and expanded, and hence eventually no longer in vogue as both countries competed to vie for foreign direct investments (FDI) as well as transforming (some of) their state-owned enterprises into holding entities entrusted with portfolio acquisition functions to build up the country's reserves and sovereign wealth.

Although Mahathir did not go so far as to directly involve Malaysia in the situation in the Southern Provinces, he was instrumental in forging a more cooperative relationship through the establishment of the Joint Commission (1987);<sup>28</sup> the Malaysia-Thailand Joint Authority (MTJA) in 1990;<sup>29</sup> the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT) in 1993;<sup>30</sup> and framing the Joint-Development Strategy (JDS) plan in 2003.<sup>31</sup>

As a reflection of the lack of real progress towards developing bilateral relations which was characteristic of Mahathir's predecessors, it was only under him that the first ever joint-cabinet meeting was held in 2002, and that also rather late in his administration.<sup>32</sup> One outcome of the talks was finalizing the details of constructing a 352km long bi-national (Trans Thai-Malaysian) pipeline which runs through the Songkhla Province to transmit petroleum from the JDA.<sup>33</sup> Thus, the Southern Provinces which is geographically adjacent to the JDA holds out the potential of policy congruence and convergence based on mutual and shared interests – in this case that of energy security.

The close but low-profile cooperation on the situation in the Southern Provinces naturally continued to include traditional security concerns. When Chatchai Choonhavan (1988-1991) took over as Prime Minister of Thailand, a new national security policy was approved in 1988.<sup>34</sup> Nonetheless, despite the overall bilateral good-will, mutual frustration at perceived inaction and half-hearted measures tackling the Communist guerrillas (as well as the Patani Malay militants), respectively, continued unabated.

During the 1990s, *i.e.* the post-Haadyai Accord<sup>35</sup> – that followed the official renunciation of armed struggle by the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) – enabled both countries to focus security cooperation on tackling the militants. Mahathir had an excellent working relationship with Chuan Leekpai (1992-1995 & 1997-2001), and concerns also shifted to cracking down on the militants which posed a threat to Malaysia's *domestic* security, particularly at the time *vis-à-vis* the Al-Arqam deviant sect.<sup>36</sup> Malaysia concurrently withheld its covert support to the militants – hence, reciprocal cooperation was enhanced.

After Mahathir stepped down as Prime Minister, he continued to play a role in conflict resolution. When tensions reached an all-time high following the infamous Tak Bai incident in October 2004, Mahathir urged Thailand to consider autonomy as a solution which is supposed to “go a long way” towards promoting peace and stability in the Southern Provinces. He was reported to have said that “The best [the Patani Malays] can hope for is the formation of an autonomous territory ... whether [autonomy] is possible or not is not the point, but it needs to be worked at.”<sup>37</sup>

In 2005, Mahathir was involved in secret talks – which lasted from 26-27 December – with representatives of the following insurgent groups: BERSATU (United Front for the Independence of Patani), Patani United Liberation Organization (PULO), Gerakan Mujahideen Islam Patani (GIMP) and Barisan Revolusi Nasional Patani (BRN)-Congress.<sup>38</sup> The Thai government also participated in the negotiations although “official policy” compelled an outright denial at the time. A Joint Development and Peace Plan for the Southern Provinces was the result but no concrete steps were pursued. The Plan was very soon abandoned altogether since it did not enjoy official approval and much interest from the Thai government under Thaksin Shinawatra (2001-2006) distracted by the domestic politicking.<sup>39</sup>

An admirer of Mahathir and Lee Kuan Yew and their brand of authoritarian-style politics, Thaksin had a less impressive attitude towards Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (2003-2009). Within less than a year of becoming Prime Minister, Thaksin was confronted with the resumption of violence in the Southern Provinces. His high-handed approach to the situation made bilateral relations testy, and characterized for a very brief period by “megaphone” diplomacy.<sup>40</sup> Intriguingly, the “timing” also coincided with the 9/11 terrorist attack on US soil.

And ironically, it was Mahathir (and not Thaksin) in what was a departure from his typical anti-Western posture – who expressly professed full support for the Bush administration’s “war on terror.” Hence, the “official narrative” on the Patani Malay insurgency – which at times could be unclear, confused and riddled with contradictions – became increasingly *linked* (though *not* assimilated or merged) with the wider resurgence of jihadist Islam as epitomized by Al-Qaeda and its regional partner, Jemaah Islamiyah (JI).<sup>41</sup> The regional import of the Patani Malay resistance movement has now become further entrenched.

## **The Abdullah Years**

Malaysia-Thai relations suffered in 2004 onwards when Abdullah was Prime Minister until Thaksin was ousted in the September 2006 coup. Abdullah’s soft demeanor, unlike Mahathir’s no-nonsense approach, did not earn a congenial or favorable impression from Thaksin – it is not unreasonable to surmise that



Thaksin was probably concerned that Abdullah's "weak" leadership would impact on his dealings with the situation in the Southern Provinces. Thus, Abdullah might vacillate on his predecessor's commitment to repatriating fugitives who had sought refuge or sanctuary in Malaysia, notwithstanding the underlying and lingering ambivalence on both sides. Perhaps also Thaksin had thought that, given Abdullah's religious credentials, the latter would be more sympathetic to the militant and separatist groups, and hence lack the firm resolve of Mahathir in dealing with them.<sup>42</sup>

Despite Thaksin's misgivings, Abdullah was conciliatory and indeed took pains to express Malaysia's commitment to cooperating with the Thai government in clamping down on "terrorism" in the Southern Provinces.<sup>43</sup> The lack of high regard for Abdullah by Thaksin contrasted ironically with the Malaysian Prime Minister's personal appeal and popularity amongst the Patani Malays. Abdullah was seen as an Islamic scholar who conducted himself with dignity and elegance, and therefore a genuine statesman.<sup>44</sup> Throughout Malaysia's dealings with Thailand on the situation in the Southern Provinces when Thaksin was in power, relations were at their *most* volatile with improvements followed by deterioration.<sup>45</sup>

As such, the personalities of the respective leaders of both countries played a significant role in holding back the positive development in bilateral relations. And thus, overall bilateral relations tended to become "range-bound" or restricted and stunted in their development. It has to be noted, nonetheless, that much of the bilateral discord arose out of the megaphone diplomacy initiated and aggravated by Thaksin that was met with similarly stringent response by the then Malaysian Foreign Minister, Syed Hamid Albar.<sup>46</sup>

Diplomatic tension reached a tipping point when 131 Patani Malays made their way across the border to Kelantan in September 2005 claiming refugee status.<sup>47</sup> This came at a time when the conflict became increasingly depicted in religious overtones (*i.e.* Buddhist versus Muslim).<sup>48</sup> In fact, the occasion for the self-imposed displacement was the death of a highly esteemed imam by the name of Satopa Yusoh.<sup>49</sup>

Amidst the bilateral tension, Malaysia tried to allay Thai mistrust by the reassurance that there was no intention to "formalize" the status of the group claiming political and religious asylum. Malaysia did however invite the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) to interview the refugees which then sparked a furor with Thailand denouncing outside interference. Thaksin's thinly-veiled response to Malaysia's decision to appeal to the UNHCR was that "Without coordination and headquarters' guidelines, a UN agency went out of its way and allowed itself to be trapped into local political exploitation that could lead to international misunderstanding."<sup>50</sup>

Malaysia's chairmanship of ASEAN (2005-2006) and the OIC (2003-2008) also profoundly affected bilateral relations with Thailand in the context of the Southern Provinces. Abdullah had sought to leverage on Malaysia's role

in the two bodies to pressure Thailand to improve its handling of the situation. The response of the Thaksin administration to Malaysia's advocacy was rather defensive and abrasive. Thaksin's threat to stage a walkout of the 10<sup>th</sup> 2004 ASEAN Summit in Vientiane, Laos (29-30 November) if the Tak Bai deaths were highlighted by Malaysia raised diplomatic eyebrows<sup>51</sup>; and Thailand also did not warmly react to the OIC goodwill delegation to the country (2-13 June 2005).<sup>52</sup>

However, Malaysia's intention has been to prod Thailand in a stronger direction of alleviating the concerns of the former and that of the OIC, and therefore not to embarrass the latter as such. Malaysia wanted to increase its profile within the OIC, and the issue in the Southern Provinces needed urgent attention at the time. Bilateral relations marked a significant improvement in the post-Thaksin era. Thaksin's immediate successor, Surayud Chulanont who acted as interim Prime Minister was on friendly terms with Abdullah.

Incidentally, approximately one year after the ouster of Thaksin in September 2006 was the fiftieth anniversary in bilateral relations. Thus, the resumption of good working relationship between the administrations of both countries was timely. Indeed, Surayud visited Malaysia only one month after the coup. He also made three visits to Malaysia in mid-2007 – an unprecedented move. In addition to attending the Eighth Langkawi International Dialogue (LID 2007) and the annual consultation in Penang, Surayud joined in Malaysia's 50<sup>th</sup> national day celebrations in Kuala Lumpur.

Several other milestones included the official opening of the second Thai-Malaysia bridge (better known as the "Friendship Bridge") linking Ban Buketa (Narathiwat) and Bukit Bunga (Kelantan), respectively on 21 December 2007. This bridge was constructed under the Joint Development Strategy (JDS) for Border Areas, and was expected to be a boost for cross-border trade exchanges, and promote socio-economic development. The cost of the bridge project at approximately USD2.8 million was equally borne by both governments, and the construction was jointly supervised by the Department of Highways (Thailand) and Public Works Department (PWD) of Malaysia.<sup>53</sup>

Relations with Surayud's successors, in particular, Samak Sundaravej, who was a cooking celebrity (and aligned to Thaksin, and thus regarded as his proxy), remained good at least outwardly. Prime Minister Samak made a two-day official visit to Malaysia from 23-24 April 2008 where the issue of rice imports from Thailand (food security) was top on the agenda. This came at a time of the global food crisis which saw prices of staples including rice reaching USD1000 per ton, and above.

At the same time, Prime Minister Samak pledged to uphold the 3Es concept *vis-à-vis* the Southern Provinces in recognition of the intertwining destinies of both countries. During the visit, Samak also took time off to visit a wet market in the heart of Kuala Lumpur's shopping and entertainment hub the "Golden Triangle" to compare the prices of food produce in both countries.

Ironically, Samak's passion for cooking was to result in his leaving office after only less than a year. When the food crisis abated, it had seemed that bilateral relations reverted to a lower profile, and any residual diplomatic enthusiasm fizzled out. Nonetheless, business links (*i.e.* at the people-to-people level) continued to grow with Malaysian companies emerging as one of the leading investors in Thailand in 2008.

## Conclusion

This paper has attempted to provide a general survey of Malaysia-Thai bilateral relations primarily from the Malaysian perspective in the form of spanning the two administrations of Mahathir Mohamad and Abdullah Badawi. The central argument arising from the survey is that both Mahathir and Abdullah sought to involve Malaysia as a solution to the intractable situation in the problematic Southern Provinces. But at the same time, both prime ministers knew the limits of what an outsider could do, and restrained from pursuing actions that would contribute to destabilizing conditions in the Southern Provinces. To a large extent, Malaysia treaded the issue carefully and was careful to practice the ASEAN principle of 'non-interference.' (No doubt, Malaysia-Thai relation was multi-dimensional in that it was informed and conditioned by membership of both countries in ASEAN as much as vice-versa). It could be presented thus that ASEAN was the 'external factor' in bilateral relation that allowed for semblance of diplomatic normalcy and structural cohesion. However, the situation in the Southern Provinces acted as the 'internal irritant' that could have threatened the formal continuity of diplomatic ties. At the same time, the situation in the Southern Provinces was also the 'internal factor' that bound Malaysia and Thailand together on the path towards a common solution.

## Endnotes

1. The Southern Provinces refer collectively to Narathiwat [นราธิวาส], Pattani [ปัตตานี] and Yala [ยะลา]. Songkhla [สงขลา] Province (neighbouring the Southern Provinces) have 4 districts which are Patani Malay majority. See McCartan, B. 2009. War brings profits to south Thailand. *Asia Times Online*, 12 December <[http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast\\_Asia/KL12Ae01.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/KL12Ae01.html)>, accessed 9 August 2011. The term "Pattani" (to refer to one of the Southern Provinces in their current administrative "form") reflects the Thai linguistic version of "Patani." The latter spelling is normally understood to refer to both the original inhabitants (demography) as well the region comprising the Southern Provinces and parts of Songkhla (geography). The Patani Malays are also known as "Yawi" [ภาษายาวี] – again a Thai "transliteration" deriving from Jawi which

- is the Arabic script for the Malay language. Refer for example, to Aphornsuwan, T. 2003. *History and Politics of Muslims in Thailand*. <http://www.einaudi.cornell.edu/southeastasia/outreach/resources/MuslimThailand.pdf> [9 August 2011].
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  7. This was before 1962 when Tunku had a change of heart and came to accept the logic of merger which had been strongly favoured by Lee Kuan Yew who became Prime Minister of Singapore in 1959.
  8. Literally translated as "Greater Malaya/ Indonesia".
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  10. *Op. cit.*, Katsumata (2004), see pp. 252-254.
  11. With regards to the role of external factors, see e.g., Bajunid, O. F. 2009. The conflict in Thailand's Deep South and its international implications, *Journal of International Studies*, 5, 40-56. On the role of the media in reporting the conflict, refer to McCargo, D. 2012. "Communicating conflict". In D. McCargo, *Mapping National Anxieties: Thailand's Southern Conflict*, Copenhagen: Nordic institute of Asian Studies (NIAS), 92-110. As for a brief summary of the protracted situation, consult Rustici, K. 2013. Peace talks announced

- to address the conflict in Southern Thailand. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/peace-talks-announced-address-conflict-southern-thailand> [20 February 2017].
12. Ganesan has argued that Thailand's interaction with Southeast Asia could be divided into mainland (Myanmar and Indochina) and the maritime (the Malay Archipelago which includes Malaysia). See Narayanan, G. 2001. Thailand's relations with Malaysia and Myanmar in post-Cold War Southeast Asia, *Japanese Journal of Political Science*, 2(1), 127-146.
  13. This can be seen during the *Ayutthaya* period, especially in the middle phase, *i.e.* the 17<sup>th</sup> century (onwards) when the kingdom was at its height of international prominence. At the time, the "eponymous" capital (*viz.* also *Ayutthaya*) was perhaps of the more globalised and cosmopolitan city in the wider East Asia region. For reference, consult *e.g.* Ruangsilp, B. 2007. *Dutch East India Company Merchants at the Court of Ayutthaya: Dutch Perceptions of the Thai Kingdom, circa 1604-1765*, Leiden (The Netherlands): Brill; and Marcinkowski, M. I. 2005. *From Isfahan to Ayutthaya: Contacts between Iran and Siam in the 17th Century*, Singapore: Pustaka Nasional Pte Ltd.
  14. The *bunga mas* was made in the form of a tree – about 1.8 meters high. The trunk was made of teak wrapped in fine gold. The tree consisted of four boughs that were tiered upward. Each bough had three little branches, with the five golden leaves about 2.5 centimetres in size on each. At the end of each branch was a golden flower with four petals, and on top of the tree, a golden bird was perched. The *bunga mas* were sent to Siam with much splendour. A special boat called the *perahu bunga mas* (*perahu* = boat) was used as transportation. Besides the *bunga mas*, other gifts were sent such as silver flowers, four spears with golden handgrips, and two gold rings. Local craftsmen normally took six months to finish making one *bunga mas*, and because this and the other gifts were so important, the sultans personally supervised their creation. See Salleh, B. 2004. In Ooi, K. G. (ed.), *Southeast Asia: A Historical Encyclopedia from Angkor Wat to East Timor*, Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO Inc., p. 288.
  15. See, *e.g.* Vickery, M. 1970. Thai regional elites and the reforms of King Chulalongkorn. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 29(4), 863-881. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdfplus/2943093.pdf?acceptTC=true> [9 March 2012].
  16. This was confirmed in an interview with Chalermchai Yodmalai (dated 22 October 2008) and Kullada Kesboonchoo Mead (dated 10 June 2009). Mr Yodmalai is a journalist, broadcaster and lecturer in mass communications at Bangkok University <[http://www.bu.ac.th/th/index\\_en.php](http://www.bu.ac.th/th/index_en.php)> as well as Thammasat University <<http://www.jc.tu>

ac.th/bjm/professors.html>. Dr Mead – of Chulalongkorn University – has authored several scholarly books such as *The Rise and Decline of Thai Absolutism*, Abingdon (UK): Routledge (2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2009) and *Globalization & Hegemony*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), 2003. Mr Yodmalai has highlighted that Malaysians (particularly Malay-Muslims) were labelled as *kaeg/ khaek* [แขก] (the term literally means “visitor” or “guest” but has a derogatory connotation – someone who is considered culturally inferior). This view was also confirmed, albeit tacitly, by personal communications with Dr Mead. From the conversations with both individuals, the impression given was that the jaundiced attitude towards foreigners as epitomised by the term *kaeg/ khaek* is “embedded” in Thai society. For a detailed study see Bunmak, S. 2010. To be or not to be *Orang Siam* among *Patani Melayu* migrant workers in *tom yam* restaurants in Malaysia – Paper presented for the Third International Conference on International Studies (ICIS), 1-2 December 2010, and published by Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM)[Northern University of Malaysia]. <http://repo.uum.edu.my/2552> [2 August 2012]. <[http://eprints.uum.edu.my/2552/1/Suttiporn\\_Bunmak\\_To\\_Be\\_or\\_Not\\_To\\_Be\\_Orang\\_Siam\\_among\\_Patani\\_Melayu.pdf](http://eprints.uum.edu.my/2552/1/Suttiporn_Bunmak_To_Be_or_Not_To_Be_Orang_Siam_among_Patani_Melayu.pdf)>, accessed 27 January 2012; and also Thompson, E. C., Thianthai, C. and Hidayana, I. 2007. Culture international imagination in Southeast Asia. *Political Geography*, 26, 268-288. <http://profile.nus.edu.sg/fass/socect/Thompson%20et%20al%202007%20Political%20Geography.pdf> [27 January 2012].

17. As of February 2011, *i.e.* on the 7<sup>th</sup> year since the intensification of conflict in 2004, the number of casualties or victims has risen to 12,126 in which 4,631 were recorded fatalities and 7,505 injuries. See *Deep South Watch*, “The obvious trend of violent intensification in the Deep South over 7 years”. <http://www.deepsouthwatch.org/node/1603> [20 July 2011]. By July 2012, the number of deaths has risen to 5,469 and wounded at 9,653. Of the total death toll, civilians account for 4,104 (75.04 per cent). “The monitoring unit (of the military) looks at the statistics: It is not worse than expected.” [หน่วยปฏิบัติการสถิติไฟใต้...ฉันไม่กลัวร้ายอย่างที่คิด!!!]. *Isra News Agency* (29 July 2012). <http://www.isranews.org/south-news/stat-history/49-2009-11-17-18-22-35/7950-2012-07-29-04-37-26.html> [3 August 2012]. Incidents during Ramadan (fasting month for Muslims) in 2012 rose by approximately 100 per cent compared to the year before. Consult Supaporn, P. 2012. The statistics for violent incidents in the first ten days of Ramadan month (20-29 July 2012) [สถิติความรุนแรงในสิบวันแรกของเดือนรอมฎอน (20-29 กรกฎาคม 2555)]. *Deep South Watch* (31 July). <http://www.deepsouthwatch.org/node/3430> [3 August 2012]. The latest recorded data thus far as published by the Deep South

- Watch is 137 violent incidences resulting in civilian and non-civilian fatalities and injuries. See *Deep South Watch*, August 2016, “The state of violent conflict in Southern Thailand”. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B2pyqOBxb5goQ1htaGVqckZXa00/view> [27 February 2017].
18. Funston, J. 2010. Malaysia and Thailand’s southern conflict: Reconciling security and ethnicity. *Contemporary Southeast Asia*. 32(2), August, see p. 248. Thailand and Malaysia ink 3Es accord (29 June 2007), *Public Relations Department of the Government of Thailand*. Source: <[http://thailand.prd.go.th/view\\_inside.php?id=2068](http://thailand.prd.go.th/view_inside.php?id=2068)>, accessed 1 January 2012. Zulfakar, M. 2009. Malaysia’s hope for peace in southern Thailand. *The Star*, 7 December. <<http://thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2009/12/7/focus/5253333&sec=focus>>, accessed 1 January 2012. Consult also Patcharakanokkul, S. 2010. Rethinking strategy policy of counter insurgency in Southern Thailand. *US Army War College Strategy Research Project*. See especially page 8. <<http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA518347>>, accessed 1 January 2012.
  19. Rupperecht, K. 2014. Separatist conflicts in the ASEAN region: Comparing Southern Thailand and Mindanao, *Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, 7(1), 21-40, see p. 31.
  20. *Op. cit.*, Funston (2010). See p. 237.
  21. Consult Narayanan, G. 2010. Thailand-Malaysia bilateral relations. In N. Ganesan & Ramses Amer (eds.), *International Relations in Southeast Asia: Between Bilateralism and Multilateralism*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asia (ISEAS), see p. 143.
  22. *Ibid*, pp. 143-146. This is unsurprising since both countries not only faced a common border security issue emanating from the Communist insurgency but also shared a strategic convergence in the regional context *ala* the “domino theory.” In other words, the Communist take-over of Indochina was also deemed a threat to national sovereignty because of perceived fear of the wider geo-strategic repercussions.
  23. Nair, S. 1997. Building the umma: Malaysia and Muslim minorities (Chapter 5). *Islam in Malaysian Foreign Policy*. London: Routledge, p. 174.
  24. Srivalo, P. & Hoonsara, S. 2004. Southern unrest: culprits finding refuge in M’sia. *The Nation*, 2 April. *Op. cit.* Funston. (2010), p. 239.
  25. *Op. cit.* Nair (1997), page 176.
  26. *Ibid*.
  27. *Ibid*, page 180.
  28. The Joint Commission for Bilateral Cooperation has been touted as the primary *mechanism* to expand and enhance bilateral relations and cooperation. See Opening Remarks by Surakiart Sathirathai,

- Minister of Foreign Affairs of Thailand at the *Ninth Meeting of the Joint Commission for Bilateral Cooperation between Thailand and Malaysia* (8 March 2003). <http://www.mfa.go.th/internet/document/OpeningRemarkcirc.doc> [19 October 2011].
29. The origins of the MTJA dates back to 1979 when an agreement was sealed by the two countries to promote joint-cooperation as a means of resolving overlapping claims in the Gulf of Thailand. The territory in dispute is actually 7,250 km<sup>2</sup> seabed of a continental shelf termed as the “Joint Development Area” (JDA). And the MTJA was precisely set up as a mechanism to facilitate cooperation in the exploration and exploitation of natural resources in the JDA which is particularly rich in oil and gas deposits. For more information, see the Malaysia-Thailand Joint Authority (MTJA) at <<http://www.mtja.org>>. The deposits are estimated to be 10 Tcf (trillion cubic feet).
  30. For a detailed study of the tripartite cooperation, see Expanding horizons: A study on the development of the Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand Growth-Triangle economic connectivity corridors. *Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT)*. Source: <<http://www.imtgt.org/Documents/Studies/expanding-horizons-study.PDF>>, accessed 21 July 2011.
  31. The broad aim of the Joint-Development Strategy (JDS) is to promote economic development in the border region and thereby induce a multiplier effect, including raising living standards and eradicating poverty.
  32. PM: special talks fruitful and substantial. *New Straits Times*, 23 December 2002.
  33. Tamthai, M & Boonchoo, S. 2009. National security policies on the Southern border provinces, 1974-2003. In Chaiwat Satha-Anand (eds.), *Imagined Land: The State and Southern Violence in Thailand*, Tokyo: Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa (ILCAA), Tokyo University for Foreign Studies. See pp. 34.35.
  34. For a background analysis, see Nathan, K. S. 1990. Malaysia in 1989: Communists end armed struggle, *Asian Survey*, 30(2), 210-220. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdfplus/2644900.pdf> [13 June 2011].
  35. In 1994, when *Al-Arqam* was outlawed by the government of Malaysia, Thailand “extradited” the sect’s revered leader, Ashaari Muhammad, back to Malaysia.
  36. Bomb attacks rock S Thailand. *BBC News*, 29 October 2004. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/3963889.stm> [24 June 2011]. Yet when Mahathir met Thaksin in November 2005, he had apparently changed his mind about the issue of autonomy for the Southern Provinces. Both Mahathir and Thaksin “came to an understanding



- to refrain from megaphone diplomacy and agreed that autonomy was not a solution ...” Quoted from Camilleri, R. 2008. Muslim insurgency in Thailand and the Philippines: Implications for Malaysia’s cross-border diplomacy. See p. 73. <http://www.une.edu.au/asiacentre/PDF/No27.pdf> [5 March 2012]. For a news report of the private visit and meeting, see Southern insurgency: PM consults Mahathir. *The Nation*, 22 November 2005. <http://www.nationmultimedia.com/specials/south2years/nov2205.php> [5 March 2012].
37. Storey, I. 2007. Ethnic separatism in southern Thailand: Kingdom fraying at the edge? *Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies* (APCSS). <http://www.apcss.org/Publications/APSSS/Ethnic%20Separatism%20in%20Southern%20Thailand.Storey.pdf> [9 August 2011].
  38. Mahathir felt that Thaksin’s continued personal involvement in business was a stumbling-block which finally undermined his position as Prime Minister, although he (*i.e.* Thaksin) had achieved much for the Thai people, particularly those living in the rural areas. Mahathir also highlighted that he had better working relations with Prem Tinsulanonda. Interview with Mahathir dated 22 December 2009. In an another interview *viz.* with Kasit Piromya (before his appointment as Foreign Minister in the Abhisit administration in December 2008) dated October 2008, he bluntly stated that Thaksin had a proclivity for mixing politics with business. Kasit recalled how Thaksin’s foreign policy with the People’s Republic of China (PRC) was greatly influenced by his personal business dealings and calculations.
  39. See Jitpiomsri, S. & McCargo, D. 2010. The Southern Thai conflict six years on: Insurgency, not just crime, *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs*, 32(2), 156-183. [http://mtw160-150.ippl.jhu.edu/journals/contemporary\\_southeast\\_asia\\_a\\_journal\\_of\\_international\\_and\\_strategic\\_affairs/v032/32.2.jitpiomsri.pdf](http://mtw160-150.ippl.jhu.edu/journals/contemporary_southeast_asia_a_journal_of_international_and_strategic_affairs/v032/32.2.jitpiomsri.pdf) [16 February 2017]. Pavin Chachavalpongpun argues that Buddhist chauvinism – which Thaksin exploited both in terms of socio-political rhetoric and institutionally (*i.e.* in terms of the policy structures *vis-à-vis* the “militarisation” of Thai Buddhism) has been responsible in recent years for the growth of violence in the Southern Provinces; Chachavalpongpun, P. 2010. *Reinventing Thailand: Thaksin and His Foreign Policy*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS). See “Bilateral Relations: Tailoring of Thaksinized diplomacy,” p. 185. Pavin quotes from McCargo, D. 2009. The politics of Buddhist identity in Thailand’s deep south: The demise of civil religion? *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 40(1), February: 11–32. <http://www.polis.leeds.ac.uk/assets/files/thaipol/mccargo-politics-of-buddhism-in-the-south-2009.pdf> [5

- March 2012].
40. Consult Askew, M. 2010. Fighting with ghosts: Querying Thailand's "Southern fire", *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs*, 32(2), 117-155. [http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/contemporary\\_southeast\\_asia\\_a\\_journal\\_of\\_international\\_and\\_strategic\\_affairs/v032/32.2.askew.pdf](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/contemporary_southeast_asia_a_journal_of_international_and_strategic_affairs/v032/32.2.askew.pdf) [9 August 2011].
  41. See Pak Lah refutes Thaksin's claim, *New Straits Times*, 19 December 2004. [http://www.axisoflogic.com/artman/publish/printer\\_14548.shtml](http://www.axisoflogic.com/artman/publish/printer_14548.shtml) [18 January 2012]. A cabinet minister in the Abdullah administration, Hishamuddin Hussein, was also reported to have been irked by Thaksin's comments which accused Malaysia of complicity with the insurgents – Thaksin's remarks about militants dangerous, says Hishamuddin. *Bernama*, 18 December 2004. <http://www.pataninews.net/ReadEnglish.asp?ID=2> [18 January 2012]. Unsurprisingly, the anti-Thaksin newspaper, *The Nation* commented – in an editorial – that the "overall attitude of the Thaksin administration towards Malaysia has been coloured by arrogance and condescension." Thaksin lacks diplomatic finesse. *The Nation*, 29 January 2005. [http://www.nationmultimedia.com/2005/01/29/opinion/data/opinion\\_16241702.html](http://www.nationmultimedia.com/2005/01/29/opinion/data/opinion_16241702.html) [18 January 2012].
  42. Southern unrest: KL joins border crackdown. *The Nation*, 13 April 2004. [http://www.asiaviews.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=3250:headlinealias3250&catid=1:headlines&Itemid=2](http://www.asiaviews.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=3250:headlinealias3250&catid=1:headlines&Itemid=2) [21 July 2011].
  43. Interview with Siti Maryam Samoh – Principal of *Darul Barakah Madrasah* (religious school) in Pattani, dated 28 April 2011; also personal communications with several teachers who were trained at the University of Malaya, Academy of Islamic Studies at the Nilam Puri campus in Kota Baru, Kelantan.
  44. Thaksin did however attend the funeral of Abdullah's wife, Endon Mahmood in 2005.
  45. Diplomatic flap over terrorist's arrest. *Singapore Institute of International Affairs* (1 February 2004). <http://www.siaaonline.org/?q=programmes/insights/diplomatic-flap-over-terrorist%E2%80%99s-arrest> [18 January 2012].
  46. See Hourdequin, P. 2007. Malaysia's 2005–2006 refugee stand-off with Thailand: A security culture analysis, *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 8 (2), 175-190 for an analysis of the security perspectives as viewed by Kuala Lumpur. <http://irap.oxfordjournals.org/content/8/2/175.full.pdf+html> [13 June 2011].
  47. Refer to Harish, S. P. 2006. Ethnic or religious cleavage? Investigating the nature of the conflict in southern Thailand,

- Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 28(1), 48-69. [http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/contemporary\\_southeast\\_asia\\_a\\_journal\\_of\\_international\\_and\\_strategic\\_affairs/v028/28.1harish.pdf](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/contemporary_southeast_asia_a_journal_of_international_and_strategic_affairs/v028/28.1harish.pdf) [13 June 2011]. Also see Harish, S. P. 2006. Changing conflict identities: The case of the Southern Thailand discord. *Paper No. 107, Institute of Defence & Strategic Studies (IDSS)* (now known as the Rajaratnam School of International Studies – RSIS), Nanyang Technology University (NTU), Singapore. [https://dr.ntu.edu.sg/bitstream/handle/10220/4405/RSIS-WORKPAPER\\_15.pdf?sequence=1](https://dr.ntu.edu.sg/bitstream/handle/10220/4405/RSIS-WORKPAPER_15.pdf?sequence=1) [5 March 2012].
48. *Ibid.* See p. 63.
49. Macan-Markar, M. 2005. Thai refugees embarrass Bangkok. *Asia Times Online*, 17 September. [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast\\_Asia/GI17Ae01.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/GI17Ae01.html) [21 October 2011].
50. Refer Pathmanand, U. 2006. Thaksin's achilles' heel: The failure of hawkish approaches in the Thai South, *Critical Asian Studies*, 38(1), 73-93. [http://www.ias.chula.ac.th/file\\_dl/Articles/RCRA\\_A\\_155628\\_P.pdf](http://www.ias.chula.ac.th/file_dl/Articles/RCRA_A_155628_P.pdf) [9 August 2011].
51. *Op. cit.* Harish, 2006.
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53. Rajoo, D. A. 2007. Surayud to visit Malaysia three times in August. *Bernama*, 12 July. [http://www.bernama.com.my/bernama/v3/news\\_lite.php?id=272803](http://www.bernama.com.my/bernama/v3/news_lite.php?id=272803) [21 October 2011].

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