

THE THAI WAY OF COUNTERINSURGENCY

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Abstract:

The Thai Way of Counterinsurgency

The goal of this study is to ascertain how Thailand wages counterinsurgency (COIN). Thailand has waged two successful COINs in the past and is currently waging a third on its southern border. The lessons learned from Thailand's COIN campaigns could result in modern irregular warfare techniques valuable not only to Thailand and neighboring countries with similar security problems, but also to countries like the United States and the United Kingdom that are currently reshaping their irregular warfare doctrines in response to the situations in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The first set of COIN lessons comes from Thailand's successful 1965-85 communist COIN. The second set comes from Bangkok's understudied 1980s-90s COIN against southern separatists. The third set comes from Thailand's current war against ethnic Malay separatists and radical Islamic insurgents attempting to secede and form a separate state called "Patani Raya," among other names.

Counterinsurgency is a difficult type of warfare for four reasons: (1) it can take years to succeed; (2) the battle space is poorly defined; (3) insurgents are not easily identifiable; and (4) war typically takes place among a civilian population that the guerrillas depend on for auxiliary support. Successful COINs include not only precise force application operations based on quality intelligence, but also lasting social and economic programs, political empowerment of the disenfranchised, and government acceptance of previously ignored cultural realities.

Background: In 1965, communist insurgents, backed by the People's Republic of China and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam), began waging an insurgency against Thailand in order to overthrow its government and install a Marxist regime. The Thai government struggled, both politically and militarily, to contain the movement for years, but eventually, it prevailed. Its success was based on a combination of effective strategy and coordination, plus well-designed and run security, political, and economic programs, the latter nowadays called the "three pillars of COIN," a phrase developed by David Kilcullen, a modern COIN theorist and practitioner. One of Bangkok's most successful initiatives was the CPM program (civil-military-police), which used a linked chain of local forces, police, and the military to not only provide security for villages, but also economic aid and administrative training to rural peoples. State political programs that undercut communist political programs backed by masterful diplomacy and a constant barrage of rural works helped erode the communist position.

The 1980s-90s COIN against southern separatists followed similar lines. The far South's four border provinces, comprised of 80 percent ethnic Malay Muslims, had been in revolt on and off for decades since Bangkok annexed the area in 1902. Bangkok had waged haphazard COIN campaigns against rebel groups there for decades with mixed results. But after the successful communist COIN was up and running in 1980, Bangkok decided to apply similar ways and means to tackle the southern issue. The government divided its COIN operations into two components: a security component run by a task force called CPM-43, and a political-economic component run by the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Center, or SB-PAC. SB-PAC also had a Special Branch investigative capacity. Combined, the 80s-90s southern COIN strategy relied on extensive military intelligence networks to curb violence, civilian administrators to execute local political reforms, and local politicians to apply traditional Malay and Muslim problem solving techniques to keep the peace. These programs worked well against the multitude of southern insurgent groups that conducted sporadic attacks against government and civilian targets while also running organized criminal syndicates. By the end of the 1990s, with a dose of Thailand's famed diplomacy and help from Malaysia's Special Branch, Bangkok defeated the southern separatists.

In January 2004, however, a new separatist movement in southern Thailand emerged – one based on ethnic Malay separatism and radical Islam. It is a well-coordinated movement with effective operational expertise that attacks at a higher tempo than past southern rebel groups. It moreover strikes civilian targets on a regular basis, thereby making it a terrorist group. Overall, it dwarfs past southern movements regarding motivation and scale of violence.

Thai officials think the *Barisan Revolusi Nasional* Coordinate, or BRN-C, leads the current rebellion, but there are several other groups that claim to also lead the fight. Members of the insurgency are nearly exclusively ethnic Malays and Muslims. The movement demonstrates radical Islamic tendencies through its propaganda, indoctrination, recruitment, and deeds. It is a *takfiri* group that kills other Muslims who do not share its religious beliefs, so it wrote in its spiritual rebel guidebook, *Fight for the Liberation of Patani*.

BRN-C seeks to separate the four southernmost provinces of Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, and Songkhla from Thailand in order to establish an Islamic republic. The separatists base their revolt on perceived military, economic, cultural, and religious subjugation going back to the early 1900s. And they have a point. The central government has, at different times in the past, indeed treated southerners with tremendous disdain and sometimes violence – especially those considered insurgents. But Bangkok has also instituted scores of economic and social aid programs in the south – mosque building, college scholarships, and medical aid, for example – so it has not been a continual anti-Muslim “blood fest” as government detractors have painted it. Still the maltreatment, certainly many times less than yesteryear, has provided today's insurgents with ideological

fodder for a steady stream of recruits and supporters. Combined with radical Islam, it has bonded the insurgents to a significant degree.

Statistically, in the 2005-07-time frame, insurgents assassinated 1.09 people a day, detonated 18.8 bombs a month, and staged 12.8 arson attacks a month. In 2005, they conducted 43 raids and 45 ambushes. The militants target security forces, government civilians, and the local population. They have killed fellow Muslims and beheaded numerous Buddhist villagers.

The insurgents' actions have crippled the South's education system, justice system, and commerce, and also have maligned Buddhist-Muslim relations. Overall, the separatists pose a direct threat to Thailand's south and an indirect threat to the rest of the country. Moreover, their radical Islamic overtones have potential regional and global terrorist implications.

The Thai Government spent much of 2004 attempting to ascertain whether the high level of violence was, in fact, an insurgency. To begin with, the government, led by PM Thaksin Shinawatra, was puzzled by the fact that the separatists had not published a manifesto or approached Bangkok with a list of demands. By mid-2004, however, the insurgents had staged a failed, region-wide revolt, and their prolific leaflet and Internet propaganda campaign clearly demonstrated that a rebel movement was afoot. By fall 2005, the separatists had made political demands via the press, all of which centered on secession. By 2006, a coup against PM Thaksin succeeded and the military government that replaced him instituted a new COIN strategy for the south that by 2008 had reduced violence by about 40 percent. Some of the tenets of this new strategy were based on Thailand's past successful COIN strategies. Whether or not the government has concocted a winning strategy for the future, however, remains to be seen.

This paper analyses these COIN campaigns through the COIN Pantheon, a conceptual model the author developed as an analytical tool. It is based on David Kilcullen's three pillars of COIN. The COIN Pantheon has as its base the concept of strategy, and then as the next edifice, coordination. Three pillars of security, politics, and economics rise from these to push against the insurgent edifice. The roof is the at-risk population. By researching the specifics of all these issues for the three COINs discussed here, the Thai way of COIN emerges. Then, by measuring these results against the tenets of COIN theorists David Galula, Sir Robert Thompson, and Kilcullen, the Thai Way of COIN is more clearly illuminated.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1	
INTRODUCTION: RATIONALE, LITERATURE SURVEY AND METHODOLOGY	9
1. Rationale	9
2. Literature Review	10
<i>Thai COIN and Associated Literature</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>Key Classic and Modern COIN Literature</i>	<i>17</i>
3. Definitions and Methodology	44
<i>Definitions</i>	<i>44</i>
<i>Methodology</i>	<i>45</i>
<i>The COIN Pantheon Explained</i>	<i>49</i>
<i>Research Method Explained</i>	<i>51</i>
4. Outline of the Thesis	55
CHAPTER 2	
BACKGROUND AND OVERVIEW OF THE COMMUNIST INSURGENCY AND COIN	57
1. Background – Thai Political History to 1965	57
2. Overview of the Communist Insurgency and COIN	62
1965-67	62
1968-73	64
1973-76	65
1977-80	66
1980-85	67
3. The Insurgents – The CPT	68
<i>CPT Strategy</i>	<i>69</i>
<i>CPT Organizational Structure</i>	<i>70</i>
<i>CPT Numbers</i>	<i>72</i>
<i>Recruiting</i>	<i>72</i>
<i>Training</i>	<i>74</i>
<i>Logistics and Sanctuary</i>	<i>75</i>
<i>Indoctrination</i>	<i>76</i>
<i>Propaganda</i>	<i>76</i>
<i>Weaponry</i>	<i>78</i>
<i>CPT Operations</i>	<i>79</i>
<i>Targeting</i>	<i>80</i>
4. People – The At-Risk Population	81

5.	Thai Communist COIN Strategy	83
	1965 – The CPM Plan	84
	1967 – The 09/10 Plan	84
	1969 – The 110/2512 Plan	86
	Strategic Reconfiguring – Road to the 66/2523 Plan	86
	1980 – The 66/2523 Plan	88
	Overview	88
	Objective	89
	Policy	89
	Operations	89
6.	Coordination for the Communist COIN	90
	1965 – CSOC	90
	The CSOC-CPM Process	92
	Identifying Target Areas	93
	ISOC	95
CHAPTER 3		
THE THREE PILLARS OF COIN AGAINST THE CPT		98
1.	Thai COIN Security Measures	98
	The RTA	99
	The Thai National Police	100
	Local Forces	102
	Self Defense Volunteers	103
	Thahan Phran	104
	Border Security	105
	Intelligence	107
2.	Political COIN Measures	109
	Psyops	109
	Civil Affairs	111
	The Village Scouts	112
	Amnesty	113
	Diplomacy	114
	Democratic Reform at the National Level	117
3.	Economic COIN Programs	119
	Royal Projects	120
	Government Development Projects	121
	RTA CA	122

CHAPTER 4	
BACKGROUND AND OVERVIEW OF THE 1980s-90s MALAY MUSLIM INSURGENCY AND COIN	128
1. Background of the 1980s-90s Malay Muslim Insurgency and COIN	128
2. Overview of the 1980s-90s Malay Muslim Insurgency and COIN	134
1980-83	134
1984-88	135
1989-95	136
1996-98	138
3. The Thai Malay Muslim Insurgents of the 1980s-90s	140
Strategy	140
Organizational Structure	141
Numbers	142
Recruiting	143
Training	144
Logistics and Sanctuary	145
Indoctrination	146
Propaganda	147
Weaponry	148
Operations	148
Targeting	149
Personnel	149
Insurgent groups	150
<i>BNPP (Patani National Liberation Front)</i>	150
<i>PULO (Patani United Liberation Organization)</i>	151
<i>New PULO</i>	152
<i>BRN (National Liberation Front)</i>	152
<i>BRN-C (National Liberation Front-Coordinate)</i>	153
<i>GMIP (Patani Islamic Mujahidin Movement)</i>	154
<i>Black December 1902</i>	154
<i>Sabilillah ("Path of God")</i>	154
<i>Bersatu ("United")</i>	155
4. People – The At-Risk Population	156
5. The Thai Malay Muslim 1980s-90s COIN Strategy	159
<i>The Tai Rom Yen Plan</i>	159
<i>Economic Strategy</i>	162
<i>The Pitak Tai Plan</i>	163
6. Coordination for the Thai Malay Muslim 1980s-90s COIN	163

ISOC and CPM-43	164
The SB-PAC	165
<i>Tasking</i>	167
<i>Organization</i>	168
CHAPTER 5	
THE THREE PILLARS OF COIN AGAINST THE THAI MALAY MUSLIM INSURGENTS OF THE 1980s-90s	173
1. Thai COIN Security Measures	173
RTA	173
<i>COIN Operations in the Field</i>	174
TNP	175
Local Forces	178
<i>The Chor Ror Bor, (“Village Defense Volunteers,” VDV)</i>	178
<i>Thahan Phran</i>	178
Intelligence	180
SB-PAC Intelligence	181
2. Political COIN Measures	182
<i>Political Inclusion at the National Level</i>	183
<i>Political Inclusion at the Grass Roots Level</i>	185
<i>Local Advisors for the SB-PAC’s COIN Programs</i>	187
<i>Political Integration through the Education System</i>	187
<i>Diplomacy with Insurgents</i>	189
<i>Diplomacy with Saudi Arabia</i>	192
<i>Diplomacy with Malaysia</i>	192
<i>Amnesty</i>	196
<i>Quality Control – Removing Corrupt Civil Servants</i>	198
<i>Psyops and PR</i>	199
<i>ISOC and Fourth Army Psyops</i>	201
3. Economic COIN Programs	202
<i>Education</i>	202
<i>Development</i>	203
<i>Royal Initiative Projects</i>	207
CHAPTER 6	
BACKGROUND AND OVERVIEW OF THE CURRENT INSURGENCY AND COIN	210
1. Background of the Southern Insurgency and COIN to 2003	210
2. Overview of the Current Insurgency and COIN	213
2004	213
2005	216

	2006	217
	2007	219
	2008-09	221
3.	The Insurgents of the Current COIN	222
	<i>Strategy</i>	222
	<i>Organizational Structure</i>	223
	<i>Numbers</i>	224
	<i>Recruiting</i>	225
	<i>Training</i>	225
	<i>Logistics and Sanctuary</i>	226
	<i>Indoctrination</i>	228
	<i>Propaganda</i>	230
	<i>Weaponry</i>	231
	<i>Operations</i>	231
	<i>Targeting</i>	233
	<i>Personnel</i>	234
	<i>Insurgent Groups</i>	236
	<i>BRN-C, RKK (“Small Unit Tactics Group”), and Pemuda (“Youth”)</i>	236
	<i>Pejuang Kemerdekaan Patani (“Patani Liberation Fighters”)</i>	237
	<i>PULO</i>	237
	<i>Bersatu</i>	237
	<i>Al Qaeda in Southeast Asia</i>	237
	<i>Tarikah (“Truth” or “The Way”)</i>	238
	<i>Others</i>	238
4.	People – The At-Risk Population	238
5.	The Current COIN Strategy	242
	<i>2004-September 2006: Thaksin’s COIN strategy</i>	242
	<i>2006: The Surayud-Sonthi COIN Plan</i>	246
	<i>2007</i>	251
6.	Coordination for the Current COIN	252
	<i>COIN Coordination Under Thaksin</i>	252
	<i>Coordination Under Surayud and Sonthi</i>	254
	<i>ISOC</i>	254
	<i>CPM</i>	255
	<i>SB-PAC</i>	256
	<i>General Anupong’s Coordination Adjustment</i>	259
	<i>Pattana Santi</i>	259

CHAPTER 7

THE THREE PILLARS OF COIN AGAINST THE CURRENT THAI

MALAY MUSLIM INSURGENTS	261
1. Thai COIN Security Measures	261
RTA	261
<i>COIN Operations in the Field</i>	263
TNP	264
Local Forces	266
<i>Or Lor Bor</i>	267
<i>Chor Lor Bor</i>	267
<i>Komg Asa Raksa Dindaen, Or Sor ("Volunteer Defense Corps," VDC)</i>	268
<i>Thahan Phran</i>	268
Border Security	269
Intelligence	271
2. Political COIN Measures	274
<i>Political Reform at the Grass Roots Level</i>	274
SB-PAC Advisors	276
<i>Local Education System Changes</i>	277
Diplomacy	279
Amnesty	282
SB-PAC Complaint Department	284
<i>Psyops and PR</i>	284
3. Economic COIN Programs	291
<i>Multiple Development Plans</i>	292
Education	293
Development	295
RTA CA	297
<i>Royal Programs</i>	300
CHAPTER 8	
CONCLUSIONS	302
Executive Summary	302
1. Strategy	304
<i>Analysis</i>	304
2. Coordination	306
<i>Analysis</i>	306
3. Security	307
<i>Analysis</i>	307
4. Politics	309

	<i>Analysis</i>	309
5.	Economics <i>Analysis</i>	311 311
6.	Enemy Capabilities and Intentions <i>Analysis</i>	312 312
7.	Population’s Main At-risk Factors <i>Analysis</i>	313 313
8.	Comparative Analysis with Prominent COIN Theorists <i>Analysis</i>	314 325
9.	Summing Up	328
	APPENDIX 1 SOCIO-ECONOMIC INDICATORS	329
	APPENDIX 2 ANALYTICAL LOGIC CHAIN FOR THE THREE-WAR ANALYSIS THROUGH THE COIN PANTHEON	333
	APPENDIX 3 DR. DAVID KILCULLEN’S THREE PILLARS OF COIN	344
	APPENDIX 4 THE COIN PANTHEON	345
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	346