



Use Special Forces in Thailand's Troubled South

by J.C. Lumbaca

As a major non-NATO ally, supporter of the U.S. war on terror, powerful force in the Southeast Asian region, and partner in over \$20 billion in annual two-way trade with the U.S., the Kingdom of Thailand today faces a militant Islamic insurgency that has the potential to devastate regional stability and U.S. foreign policy. The solution to Thailand's southern insurgency lies in a better understanding of the disenfranchised Muslim culture and its legitimate requirements for attention and development from the Thai government in Bangkok. It is in America's interest to implement all the elements of national power to better help our ally. A change in policy regarding the employment of the U.S. military in support of Thailand's insurgency is one step in the right direction. While improved military and police activities in the Thai south are only one of many tools required to fix the problem, they are nonetheless important and effective.

In March 2004, Thailand's national police chief and the southern regional army commander were fired for failing to control the growing unrest in the Muslim-dominated south. The Thai government was again reacting to increased domestic pressure to address the problem of Muslim unrest within the country's borders. Midway through 2004, over 200 people have been killed this year alone in southern Thailand. There is more than ever a greater need for improved police and military reform in the troubled south. In an April 2004 Bangkok University poll of over 1,000 Muslims, the Thai military came first as the state agency causing the most problems for the southern people, followed by the police, local administrative organizations, and finally village headmen. Effective police and military capabilities in the region can help identify legitimate Muslim grievances that the Thai government should address, and at the same time identify insurgent and terrorist activities being conducted by militant portions of the population.

Both U.S. and Thai intelligence and law enforcement agencies coordinate and work together continuously to locate, identify, capture, and prosecute terrorists and terrorist-sponsoring cells in the kingdom. Their surveillance in urban areas has been noteworthy: these agencies have tracked and monitored the activities of militant Islamic front companies, NGOs, and transnational terrorist leaders like Mohammed Mansour Jabarah and Hambali.

It is in the southern rural villages, however, among the indigenous populations, that Thailand could benefit most from the assistance of counterinsurgency experts from the U.S. Army's Special Forces (SF), or Green Berets. In Thailand today, SF currently work on an almost-continuous basis to train, advise, and assist the Thai military and Border Patrol Police during *Cobra Gold* exercises, Joint and Combined

Exchange Training (JCET), Counter-Drug training, Counter-Terrorism training, and other small-unit operations in support of U.S.-Thai security interests.

SF is specially organized, trained, and equipped for counterinsurgency operations. In fact, SF is the only force in the U.S. military trained to conduct counterinsurgency in the remote environments that the terrorists call home, with little or no external support. These specially trained teams also have the ability to assist local populations by administering medicine, constructing schools, and initiating other civic action projects to help legitimize and communicate the Thai government's genuine intentions to help develop and secure the south.

An advisory role for SF in Thailand involves neither a permanent nor a large-scale military campaign strategy like those found in the Middle East today. In southern Thailand, for example, SF could effectively be used to train local police and military personnel in counterinsurgency operations. This instruction includes everything from tactical operations to military-police-civilian interoperability to human rights training. Such instruction allows the authorities to become more efficient, government infrastructure is improved, development initiatives can be enacted, and violence is mitigated. As the southern police and military gain the trust of the local population, the people become more comfortable providing the Thai authorities with information about insurgents who are planning and executing violent actions.

Ultimately, the Thai government would be able to allocate more resources to development rather than continuous military and police actions. The real winner in this situation is the local population in the south, the majority of which do not support the violence. The key to counterinsurgency is understanding the population and its motivations to either support or reject violence. Once the population is understood, progress can be made. Counterinsurgency is not effective when it only involves military and police action aimed at arresting insurgents. Such tactics are extremely ineffective and rarely eliminate the true motivation for violence among the population.

At this time, U.S. Special Forces do not conduct training in the three southernmost Thai provinces of Yala, Narathiwat, and Pattani, where active insurgency flourishes today. The reason is twofold. First, the violence, instability, underdevelopment, and potential for U.S./insurgent clashes are sufficient incentives for the Thai and U.S. governments to plan joint training in other parts of the country. Second, there is the fear that a U.S. military presence in the south might ignite increased hostility and the belief that the U.S. war on terror is being brought to bear against Thai Muslims. Neither reason for choosing not to use SF is adequate.

Green Berets are experts at living and working for long periods of time with local civilian and military leaders in other countries, teaching them how to operate professionally and humanely to gain the trust of the population. SF soldiers are mature, regionally oriented, culturally aware, small groups of men with foreign language skills, who have the ability to help better prepare foreign nationals at all levels while maintaining a “small footprint.” U.S./insurgent clashes would be avoided at all costs, especially if SF were to be deployed in their optimum force structure: a handful of small, 12-man teams spread throughout the provinces several times a year, working very closely with Thai military and police authorities, maintaining a very low signature, with no other U.S. forces present.

It can not be emphasized enough that the military employment of Special Forces in southern Thailand is only one part of an overarching U.S.-Thai strategy that must encompass all instruments of statecraft to effectively confront the militant insurgency that our ally faces today. In an environment that involves an active insurgency, military initiatives are one small part in a complex interrelationship of social, political, military, and economic concerns that must be addressed.

For the military option described here to succeed, there must first be agreement among U.S. and Thai leaders and policymakers to relocate current training to the southernmost provinces. Special Forces are a useful asset that, if properly employed in a counterinsurgency role, can greatly assist in establishing regional stability and protecting the interests of the U.S. and its allies.

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