RIVALRY AND COOPERATION: MILITARY RULE ON THE THAI-BURMESE BORDER

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Abstract- For much of the past fifty years, the border region surrounding the Thai and Burmese towns of Mae Sot and Myawaddy has been ruled by the military. The two countries which share this border, Thailand and Burma, have a long history of military rule. In addition, the indigenous people of the region, the Karen, have been conducting a decades-long insurrection against the Burmese government. Since the 1960s, all of the Karen military groups have been headquartered in this region. Ethnic politics in the Mae Sot-Myawaddy border region is therefore the politics of the military. Within this framework, both rivalry and cooperation are apparent. The balance of power between different Karen armed groups has shifted, and each group has made alliances and fought armed conflicts with both the state armies of Thailand and Burma and with other Karen armed groups. Since the 1990s, the trend has shifted towards greater cooperation, as the rise of Southeast Asia as a major economic region has motivated the armed groups of the Thai-Burmese border to work together to improve the region's economy.

Key Words- Thailand, Burma, borders, military rule, politics, cooperation

I. MILITARY RULE IN MAE SOT AND MYAWADDY

The three main factions in the Mae Sot and Myawaddy border region are the Thai armed forces, the Karen armed, and Burmese army. The Thai armed forces include both the Thai army and the paramilitary Border Patrol Police. The Karen armed groups are by far the most diverse of the three factions, and the most prone to internal struggle. They are also more closely involved in the region's economy and politics, as they are the indigenous people of the region. The Burmese army is a more monolithic entity than either the Thai armed forces or the Karen armed groups. Due to their recent arrival and their long-standing conflict with the Karen, they are the most prone to conflict of the region's three factions.

The Thai armed forces in the Mae Sot-Myawaddy border region belong to two organs of the Thai government. The first is the Border Patrol Police (hereafter, BPP), part of Thailand's militarized national police force. The second is the Thai army. The BPP presence in the region is at least as old as the army presence. Prior to the 1960s, Mae Sot, like most of the Thai-Burmese border, was a largely uncontrolled frontier. During the 1960s and the 1970s, the Thai government launched an extended effort to consolidate their political hold over the Burmese border regions. The key element in this expansion of power was the BPP (Race 1974). The BPP today remains a paramilitary force, responsible for day-to-day border security. As the border remains porous and undocumented border crossings occur on a daily basis, the BPP operates roadblocks and check-points along the highways leading into the Mae Sot region from Tak to the east and from Mae Hong Son to the north.

In addition to the BPP, the Thai army also has a significant presence. While the army does not engage in the same sort of day-to-day security that the BPP is responsible for, they nonetheless have a strong presence on the border. This is because the Burmese side of the border is home to numerous armed groups and a strong Burmese army presence. When fighting breaks out on the Burmese side of the border, it frequently crosses into Thai territory, and in these situations the army is the organization tasked with a response. The Thai soldiers stationed to border region are not from the region. They are drawn from different parts of the country, and their posts rotate regularly. This keeps them from developing strong ties to the region that could potentially cause corruption. However, the long-term presence of the Thai military has allowed high-ranking soldiers to embed themselves in the society and economy of the border region, opening businesses, purchasing land, and becoming prominent members of the community. Due to their personal connections and shared jurisdiction with the BPP, the Thai army frequently allows illicit cross-border activity from Karen armed groups.

The Karen armed groups include numerous independent factions, the most prominent of which are the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (hereafter, DKBA) and the Karen National Union (hereafter, KNU), the latter a predominantly Christian-led organization. The KNU is dominated by its military arm, the Karen National Liberation Army (hereafter, KNLA). The KNU's presence in the region dates back to the start of the Karen insurgency in 1948. However, Karen State in eastern Burma became the KNU's headquarters after the Burmese army defeated the KNU forces in the Irrawaddy Delta and elsewhere in lowland Burma in the 1960s. As such, the KNU's presence predates that of the Burmese army. The

DKBA first emerged as a rival to the KNU in 1994, when they split from the KNLA and aligned themselves with the Burmese army. The DKBA mutiny put the KNU on the defensive and led to the fall of the KNU capital at Manerplaw and a period in which the DKBA was the strongest Karen armed group. In 2010, the Burmese army attempted to subordinate the DKBA to the regular Burmese army as a Border Guard Force (BGF) and a brigade of DKBA soldiers mutinied and turned against the Burmese. Currently, the remaining DKBA and the KNU hold a similar degree of power.

As the indigenous inhabitants of the Mae Sot-Myawaddy region, the Karen are more heavily entrenched in the society and economy of the region than their Thai and Burmese counterparts. The KNU uprising began in lowland Burma, which has also historically been home to a large Karen population. However, the large Karen population of the border region, its rugged terrain suited for guerrilla warfare, and its distance from the river plains of lowland Burma, made it an ideal headquarters for the KNU after their defeat in the lowlands. Two generations later, the majority of the soldiers fighting for the KNU and the DKBA are native to Karen State, and the Karen people have a stronger attachment to the region than either the Thai or the Burmese. The Karen armed groups have the ability to undermine the policies of Thailand and Burma, disrupting trade through their control of the highway from the border and enabling illicit trade through their control of the border itself. Since the 1990s, the policies of both the DKBA and the KNU have centered around protecting their economic interests.

The third and most recently-arrived faction is the Burmese army. The extension of Burmese government control to Karen State post-dated the advent of military rule in 1962. This was a result of Ne Win's "four cuts" counter-insurgency program, which destroyed the KNU in the Irrawaddy Delta and the Burmese lowlands by denying them resources and local support. The Burmese presence was initially minimal, as the Mae Sot-Myawaddy region remained a KNU outpost for much of the 1960s and 1970s. However, by the 1980s, the Burmese army had turned the tables against the KNU (Smith 1999). The DKBA-KNU split in 1994 and the capture of Manerplaw in 1995 made the Burmese army the dominant power in Karen State and firmly consolidated Burmese control over the Myawaddy side of the border (Fong 2008).

As a military faction, the Burmese army consists of both the regular army and the irregular BGF. The BGF primarily consists of former DKBA soldiers who accepted integration into the national army in 2010. As such, while the Burmese army is a relatively recent presence, it is also ethnically diverse, including indigenous Karen in its ranks. The BGF also provides a degree of flexibility to the Burmese army, as its members are former insurgents who know the land and who are experienced in guerrilla warfare. Like the Karen and Thai factions, the primary goal of the Burmese army is to defend its economic interests. In this case, this means keeping the border open to legal trade which benefits the Burmese government, and restricting illegal trade. In addition, the Burmese army is tasked with defending the national interest of the Burmese government by suppressing ethnic separatism and insurgency.

II. ETHNIC RIVALRY AND MILITARY COOPERATION

With three major military factions, each representing the interests of a particular ethnic group, international cooperation on the Mae Sot-Myawaddy frontier takes the form of cooperation between armed forces. The relationship between the three factions is one of shifting ambiguity. There are no truly implacable rivalries, despite the long-standing conflict between the Karen and the Burmese. There are even fewer unbreakable alliances. The position of each faction towards the other two stems from a combination of government doctrine and economic pragmatism.

The Thai government views the conflict between Burma and the Karen as an internal matter of Burma, and as such, the Thai armed forces remain neutral as a matter of doctrine. Their main priority is not a specific outcome to the conflict in Karen State, but rather the defense of Thai territorial integrity. This has brought them into conflict with both the Karen and the Burmese. In the 1960s, the conservative military governments of Thailand supported the KNU over the Burmese. This was partly because the KNU were the main political force on the Burmese side of the border at the time, and as such, the only partners that Thailand had in maintaining the border in the Mae Sot region. It was also because the Thai military government felt ideologically aligned with the fiercely conservative and anti-Communist KNU. In the 1970s and 1980s, as the Burmese army cut into the Karen control over the border region, the Thai army attempted to strengthen its ties to the Burmese army. However, the use of Thai territory by Karen forces led to violation of Thai territory by the Burmese army, thus increasing tension between the two factions. This problem escalated in the 1980s, when permanent Karen refugees began to settle on the Thai side of the border, and in the 1990s, when the KNU-DKBA split led to an increase in the number of refugees (Lang 2002). On several occasions, Burmese or Burmese-aligned forces shelled retreating Karen forces on the Thai side of the border or attacked Karen refugee settlements on Thai soil.

The decline of the Karen-Burmese conflict has led to an easier and more stable position for the Thai army. Thai relations with the Burmese army are formal and bound by international agreements, while Thai relations with Karen armed groups are informal due

to the latter's unrecognized status. However, the principle governing both sets of relations is the maintenance of territorial integrity. The governing principle of Karen relations with both Thailand and Burma is ethnic security and self-governance. This principle places the Karen armed groups in direct rivalry with Burma, and has led to one of the world's longest-lasting armed conflicts between the two factions. However, this conflict has waxed and waned over the years. Between the outbreak of hostility in 1948 and the fall of Manerplaw in 1995, this was a zero sum game. Karen doctrine in this period advocated for an independent Karen nation-state called Kawthoolei between Thailand and Burma. Between the 1960s and the 1980s, Kawthoolei was a reality, an unrecognized independent state ruled by the strongman Bo Mya. The decline of Kawthoolei began with the consolidation of the Burmese presence on the border in the 1980s and was complete when Manerplaw fell in 1995. After this point, Burmese-Karen relations became more ambiguous. With the KNU largely defeated, the pro- Burmese DKBA became the primary Karen force in the border region. However, the loyalties of the DKBA were put to the test in 2010, when a significant number of its members opted to rebel against the Burmese army while the rest accepted subordination to the regular army and became the current BGF. In 2012, the KNU signed a ceasefire with the Burmese government, while the renegade DKBA forces continued their insurgency. The KNU and DKBA did not, however, engage in hostilities with one another after this point. With two relatively strong Karen groups currently active, the relations between the Burmese and the Karen are more ambiguous than ever, and it is clear that the ferocious and unrelenting military rivalry of the twentieth century is a thing of the past.

Karen relations with Thailand are considerably more ambiguous. As the KNU and DKBA do not have legal international status, the Thai armed forces largely tolerate their use of Thai territory for non-military purposes. Karen leaders often have residences in Thailand, and send their children to Thai schools. In Karen-held regions, the Thai armed forces allow them to conduct loosely regulated cross-border activities. In parts of the border region, for example, the KNU offers tours of "Karenland," bringing tourists across the Moei river to visit attractions in KNU-controlled territory. All of this requires the tacit support of the Thai military. As with the Karen, the Burmese military position has shifted from a doctrine of rivalry to one of pragmatism. The underlying principle of Burmese policy is maintaining the integrity of the Burmese state. As such, separatism and separatist factions are not tolerated. This was the logic behind the four cuts program that consolidated Burmese government control over the lowlands in the 1960s and exiled the Karen insurgency to the eastern highlands. In the 1980s and 1990s, faced with dozens of ethnic insurgencies and an active communist rebellion, all of which held on despite continuing government gains, the Burmese army adopted a new strategy of divide and conquer. This involved allying with certain armed groups against the major government rivals. The DKBA was one such group, sponsored by the Burmese army in an effort to undermine the KNU. This worked, and the Burmese-DKBA alliance effectively put an end to the main phase of the Karen insurgency. Since then, Burmese army policy has only become more pragmatic, seeking to defend the economic interests of the national government through a combination of coercion and cooperation. In addition to maintaining the integrity of the union, the Burmese army now aims to maintain trade between Myawaddy and the lowlands. Within this context, the botched integration of the DKBA into the national army led to the historic ceasefire with the KNU in 2012.

CONCLUSION

The political situation in the regions of Tak Province and Karen State surrounding the border crossing at Mae Sot and Myawaddy is driven by the relations between three military factions, representing the Thai, Karen, and Burmese people respectively. As such, military relations and ethnic relations define the rivalry and cooperation between the three factions. The strengthening of the regional economy since the 1990s has led to increased pragmatism by all three sides, as each aims to obtain and maintain a share of the booming cross-border trade between Thailand and Burma. This has demonstrated that even the most long-standing of rivalries, like that between the KNU and the Burmese army, is not truly implacable. It has also demonstrated that even the closest of alliances, like that between the DKBA and the Burmese army, can be broken. This ambiguity is exacerbated by a history of ethnic insurgency in the border region (Smith 2013).

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