Terrorism in Thailand: an Underestimated Threat

For most, the Kingdom of Thailand is nothing but a resort zone, a place of fun and relaxation. However, the country has many problems that international media rarely touch upon, all of their attention focused on the West, China, Russia and the Middle East as of late. One of these problems is separatism in the southern regions of Thailand, in the provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat.

In the past these provinces were a part of the Pattani Sultanate, which became a vassal of the predecessor states of the Kingdom of Thailand in the Middle Ages. In the 18-20th centuries, the Sultanate was finally absorbed by the Kingdom and was divided into provinces. There is still a strong desire among the inhabitants of the three provinces to secede from Thailand and create an independent state or, alternatively, to join the Muslim Malaysia bordering them, as most of the population comprises of ethnic Malays and followers of Islam.

Armed clashes occurred from time to time throughout the 20th century. In recent decades, the separatist sentiments of the inhabitants of Southern Thailand have become closely linked with the ideology of radical Islam, which may have been facilitated by the Middle Eastern and South Asian international terrorist agents, as well as extremists from neighboring Malaysia, infiltrating the region.

The current exacerbation of the conflict began in the early 2000s. Violent clashes came and went, and the conflict seemed insignificant compared to what was happening and is still occurring in the other hotspots around the world. As mentioned above, the problem didn’t attract much media attention. Nevertheless, the entire time period from 2004 to the present day was dubbed by several experts as the South Thai War. The government is backed by the Royal Armed Forces, the Royal Police and the Volunteer Corps of Thailand. During the conflict, Thai authorities were
supported by the United States, New Zealand, the Philippines and several other countries, including Malaysia, which was officially supporting them. Separatists have been represented by several movements whose ideology combines the demand for independence for Pattani and radical Islamism: The United Organization for the Liberation of Pattani, Islamic Movement of the Mujahideen Pattani, National Revolutionary Front, etc. Among the international terrorist groups that have supported the Southern Thai separatists is Jemaah Islamiyah (banned in the Russian Federation). This is the largest terrorist organization in Southeast Asia, and its activities have spread out over the entire region. Jemaah Islamiyah is connected to such notorious terrorist organizations as al-Qaeda and the Taliban (banned in the Russian Federation) and has been involved in a number of terrorist attacks. The headquarters of Jemaah Islamiyah (banned in Russia) is reportedly located in Indonesia, with branches in Malaysia and the Philippines, and despite the fact that these states officially support the Thai government, members of the organization operate quite comfortably within their borders.

In 2004, several terrorist attacks and armed clashes took place in Southern Thailand, killing over 500 people. The rebel groups that assaulted government forces had at least 3,000 people in their ranks, many of whom came from Malaysia. Separatists received training in camps hidden in the Malaysian jungle. At the end of 2004, Thai government forces acquired information about the separatists’ plans to carry out major attacks in the northern regions of the country, namely the main resort areas, Pattaya and Phuket, which are visited by millions of tourists from all over the world each year. Tourism is one of the vital sources of revenue for the Thai budget, and terrorist attacks could have dealt serious damage to the country's economy.

On December 31, 2006 and January 1, 2007, bombs went off in the Thai capital, Bangkok, in the midst of the New Year festivities. The explosions resulted in 3 casualties.

In September 2011, a series of explosions swept through southern Thailand, causing 4 deaths. Later that month, terrorists attacked a school in the Narathiwat Province, killing 1 student and 4 servicemen.

In August 2015, a new explosion occurred in Bangkok, victims including 20 killed and 123 injured. Most of the victims were foreign tourists. Apparently, the terrorists decided to continue trying to destabilize the situation in the country, striking at tourism as the most profitable sector of the country's economy.

In August 2016, bombs went off once more in tourist areas: on the Island of Phuket and in the cities of Hua Hin and Surat Thani. Three people were killed, and dozens were injured, among them citizens of Germany and Italy. Despite the assurances of the Thai authorities that they had strengthened security measures and taken control of the situation, the British Foreign Office recommended its citizens to refrain from visiting Thailand, while the Russian Foreign Ministry urged Russian tourists who were in the country (approximately 35,000) to steer clear of crowded places.

Throughout the years, Thai authorities have been negotiating with separatist leaders. However, ceasefires never lasted long, and when the negotiations would reach yet another deadlock, new attacks would occur. So, in August 2019, a series of explosions took place in the province of Yala. Seven people were injured, several areas were left without electric power (explosive devices were planted at infrastructure facilities). The attacks came the day after the Thai leadership had refused to release a group of captured militants, as required by the National Revolutionary Front, which is currently one of the most powerful movements in Southern Thailand. The Thai government denies the connection between these events, but it seems too obvious.

In November 2019, armed terrorists attacked a checkpoint in the province of Yala, killing 15 people.

In total, about 7,000 people died as a result of armed clashes in Thailand from 2004 to the end of 2019.

Separatist activity is already having a significant impact on the life of Thailand. For example, separatism in the southern regions was reportedly one of the reasons why Thailand rejected China’s proposal to build a canal between the Andaman and South China Sea in its territory. This canal could have become a new route between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, replacing the Strait of Malacca and significantly expediting the maritime traffic between the eastern and the western parts of the Eurasian continent. According to the PRC, Thailand could receive substantial transit profits from it.

But it is likely that the Chinese proposal wouldn’t have been accepted in any case. The construction of the canal would have caused irreparable harm to the region’s ecology and led to an economic crisis in Singapore—and one of Singapore’s main sources of income is the exploitation of the Malacca Strait. In addition, Thailand is wary of Chinese influence, which has already been exponentially increasing throughout Southeast Asia. However, even if these
factors weren’t in play, Thailand would still be unable to allow China to dig the canal. After all, it would be laid across the entire country from west to east, separating the southern regions from the north, which would sever the communication between them and become a physical barrier. This would also make the southern separatist groups much less accessible to government troops.

There seems to be no end to the war in sight; the negotiations led by the Thai leadership have yet to yield results. It is rather alarming that terrorists tend to target places crowded with foreign citizens. Despite the efforts of the authorities, this may well undermine the Thai tourism industry in the long run, and that is bound to lead to an economic crisis, further aggravating the situation in the country. The problem may also worsen due to the general increase of the terrorist threat around the globe and because of the ever-strengthening ties between representatives of the terrorist underground in different regions. There are also reports of a connection between the Thai separatists and the drug cartels of the so-called Golden Triangle, which possess enormous financial resources.

In conclusion, the conflict which has been slowly smoldering in Thailand can erupt anytime with tremendous force and set alight the whole of Southeast Asia, turning it into a ‘new Middle East.’ To avoid this, the international community represented by the ASEAN, the UN and the largest states of Eurasia should start paying attention to the problems of this region as soon as possible.

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