Hegemonic Distortions: The Securitisation of the Insurgency in Thailand's Deep South

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Abstract

The conflict between the Thai state and the Malay-Muslim insurgency in the country's Deep South is one of Southeast Asia's most persistent internal security challenges. The start of the current period of violence dates back to the early 2000s, and since then, a significant number of studies exploring the renewed escalation have been published. In this study, we argue that existing scholarship has not adequately accounted for the external environment in which political decisions were taken on how to deal with the southern insurgency. We seek to show how the internationally dominant, hegemonic security agenda of so-called non-traditional security (NTS) influenced the Thai government's approach to the conflict. Building upon the Copenhagen School's securitisation theory, we show how the insurgency became securitised under the dominant NTS narrative, leading to the adoption of harsh measures and alienating discourses that triggered the escalation of violence that continues today. The specific NTS frameworks that 'distorted' the Thai state's approach of one that had been informed solely by local facts and conditions were those of anti-narcotics and Islamist terrorism, albeit in different ways. Based on the findings from the case study, the article concludes with a reflection on the role of the hegemonic NTS agenda and its implications for Southeast Asian politics and scholarship.

KEYWORDS: Thailand, Deep South, non-traditional security, securitisation

INTRODUCTION

THE CONFLICT IN THAILAND's Deep South has its historical roots in the Thai annexation of the Patani Kingdom in 1902, whilst the organised Malay-Muslim insurgency dates to the 1950s (McCargo 2008). After a period of ebbing tensions, during which some declared the insurgency terminated (Senate Committee on Armed Forces Presentation, quoted in HRW 2007: 17), violence resurged in the early 2000s, and this violence remains unabated to this day. Since then, what has been called the region's "most serious security threat" (Storey 2008b: 31) has claimed at least 1865 lives in the southern provinces of Narathiwat, Yala, and Pattani, as well as in parts of Songkhla (UCDP

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2018). The increased violence, which reached particularly high levels between 2004 and 2015, sparked a considerable number of studies on the conflict (Abuza 2011; Ball and Farrelly 2012; Funston 2008b; Jitpiromsri and Sobhonvasu 2006; Liow 2006; Liow and Don Pathan 2010; McCargo 2008, 2009, 2010b; Melvin 2007; Ukrist 2006). Three groups of explanations for the crucial period of conflict intensification in the early 2000s dominate the literature (Funston 2008b): first, entrenched enmities against the Thai state due to repression, discrimination, and exploitation; second, what we call the 'Thaksin factor'—the mishandling of the conflict by the then Prime Minister of Thailand, Thaksin Shinawatra; and third, the transnational terrorist influence of international terrorist networks such as Al-Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), following the dramatic attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001 (hereinafter, 9/11).

These standard accounts are unable to comprehensively explain the rise in violence in the Thai southern conflict in the early 2000s. By itself, the structural explanation of entrenched enmities boiling over falls short of accounting for the timing of the increase in violence (Jitpiromsri and Sobhonvasu 2006). Why did the violence only surge in the early 2000s? This question can possibly be answered by the transnational terrorism explanation highlighting the proliferation of international terrorist networks post-9/11 and their agitation of the Malay-Muslim insurgents in the Thai south. Where this account fails however, is in the evidence. To date, no convincing causal links have been established between international terrorist organisations and the separatist actors in Thailand (Connors 2006b). The Thaksin factor explanation remains the sole alternative.

However, whether it was Thaksin's contestation against the established elites (McCargo 2006b) or his mismanagement of the conflict by replacing the Thai south's security instruments or personnel (Ukrist 2006), this article contends that the Thaksin factor is an incomplete explanation. Based on a qualitative examination of the conflict, we contend that this purely domestic argument mistakenly ignores crucial external mechanisms. Indeed, of the three explanations typically found, the only one focusing on external causes is the problematic transnational terrorism account. This article takes a step in a similar direction but focuses on the external international environment that affected the Thaksin government during the conflict. Rather than providing a solely internal vindication of the conflict, we argue that the Thaksin government securitised the conflict and that such securitisation was influenced by the dominant global security narrative, which we refer to as the hegemonic 'non-traditional security' (NTS) agenda.

Security is a social construct. An issue becomes a security issue because it is treated as such. Actors treat something as a security issue because they hold a particular understanding of what may threaten their dominant values, including their lives (Baldwin 1997). The process through which this understanding is created is best captured by the securitisation framework of the Copenhagen School (Buzan *et al.* 1998). Proceeding inductively by drawing upon the Copenhagen School's securitisation framework, we show that the conflict in Thailand's

Deep South was securitised based on two narratives belonging to the NTS agenda: drugs and the global war on terror (GWOT). The insurgency was effectively securitised in 2003 by mapping it onto the 'war on drugs' declared by Thaksin. Within the GWOT frame, substantial and sustained security measures were enacted in response to the violence in the south, although interestingly, Thai policy-makers avoided talking about potential links between the Thai insurgency and internationally operating Islamist networks. As a consequence of both of these NTS narratives, the securitisation of the separatist conflict in Thailand's Deep South suffered from what we call 'hegemonic distortions', understandings that emerge within incentive and belief structures defined by a hegemonic discourse, in ways that affect the formation of locally informed understandings.

What exactly is the NTS agenda, and in what sense is it hegemonic? Existing definitions of NTS refer to three mutual features (Emmers and Caballero-Anthony 2006: xiv). First, NTS threats have a non-military character, though this does not imply that the military is irrelevant. Second, they are transnational, hence potentially disrupting Westphalian norms of state sovereignty and non-interference. Third, their referent objects go beyond the state to also embrace others such as the individual or the community. Given these characteristics, different NTS threats such as civil strife, natural disasters, transnational crime, pandemics, resource scarcity, irregular migration, human or drug trafficking (Caballero-Anthony 2010: 312) often do not appear alone but easily link up with each other. Since NTS threats are generally difficult to trace to an identifiable source of authority, they are ideally met in cooperation with other states. NTS, which is today "firmly ensconced within security studies" (Hameiri and Jones 2013: 463; see also Buzan and Hansen 2009), dates back to the end of the Cold War and bipolarity, when scholars and practitioners alike emphasised the need to develop new strategies to meet 'novel' types of 'non-traditional' security challenges that confronted the world (Baldwin 1995; Buzan and Hansen 2009). The watershed of the new millennium, the 9/11 attacks on the US, reinforced the emphasis on threats that were allegedly different in nature, for which the international community was unprepared.

The argument proposed here does not necessarily contradict existing explanations but should be read as complementing the literature with a novel perspective on international influences. Our approach recognises the relevance of local interpretations and brute facts such as geopolitical pressures and actual problems related to what is being securitised as an NTS threat, be it drug addiction or terrorist violence. Hence, hegemonic distortion is only one amongst several factors defining Thailand's security agenda in the south and may not necessarily be the most important one. Nevertheless, we hold that, without the enabling hegemonic narrative and the politics it justified, individual actions and facts on the ground would have had different meanings and consequences.

The remainder of the article is divided into four sections. The first outlines Copenhagen School securitisation. In particular, on top of the classical

securitising speech act proposed by the Copenhagen School scholars (Buzan *et al*. 1998), we highlight the role of security practices in the process of securitisation (Bigo 2002; Floyd 2016; Haacke and Williams 2008). The second section reviews the existing explanations of the resurgence in violence in Thailand's Deep South. In the third section, we then qualitatively examine the Thai case study, drawing out the distortions the hegemonic NTS agenda caused in the Thaksin government's securitisation of the southern conflict. Consequently, the implications of hegemonic distortions are highlighted and discussed; and a more detailed examination of the hegemonic NTS agenda is provided in the conclusion of this article.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF SECURITY AGENDAS: COPENHAGEN SCHOOL SECURITISATION

To understand the Thai state's response to the insurgency, we draw upon the Copenhagen School's securitisation framework, the dominant analytical approach to the social construction of security (Croft 2012: 76–77). Securitisation turns an issue into a matter of security, seen as a "special kind of politics" or a "more extreme version" of politicisation (Buzan *et al*. 1998: 23). According to the classical Copenhagen School scholars, the speech act is crucial in the process of securitisation. The "enunciation of security *itself* creates a new social order wherein 'normal politics' is bracketed" (Balzacq 2005: 171, emphasis in the original) by the *existential* threat against the referent object and the consequent *emergency* measures to deal with the threat. Classical securitisation takes the securitising speech act by the securitising actor as an illocutionary one, whereby the performance of saying 'security' consequently creates security (Balzacq 2005: 175), akin to the pronouncement of a marriage. Consequently, the illocutionary speech act and the exceptional measures that follow, in response to the threat, are vital elements in the securitisation framework of constructing security.

The use of the securitisation framework has proliferated since its introduction by the Copenhagen School (Gad and Petersen 2011: 316). It has been applied in studies throughout the world (Bilgin 2011; Jones 2011) and with respect to different issue areas, from traditional security (Stritzel and Chang 2015), to the entire gamut of NTS threats (Emmers 2003; Febrica 2010; Marchand 2017; McDonald 2012). Furthermore, securitisation can also operate across borders. For instance, Holger Stritzel (2014) showed how the securitisation of organised crime was 'translated' when it travelled from Italy and the US to Germany. This is similar to Amitav Acharya's (2009) argument that discourse and ideas are adapted locally when transmitted to distinct environments and adopted in relation to particular events. The widespread use of the securitisation

framework has also garnered a host of critiques that served to further improve several of its elements (see Balzacq *et al.* 2016; McDonald 2008).

One especially prominent strand of criticism disparages the classical focus on both the speech act and the exceptional or emergency security practices in response to a threat. This critique is inspired by the Paris School, another branch of critical security studies that also views security as socially constructed, although in this case by the practices of security practitioners (Bigo 2002; see also Croft 2012: 76–77). Whereas classical Copenhagen School securitisation was linguistically oriented and discourse-centric, the Paris School sees security as "designed through different technical or physical modalities" (Balzacq *et al.* 2016: 504). Issues thus become security matters through implementing security practices, rather than by simply labelling something as a security issue; and the securitising actors are therefore the security practitioners (Bigo 2002; Salter and Mutlu 2013). For instance, in his study of transnational crime in Southeast Asia, Emmers (2003) emphasised that whilst transnational crime became a matter of security debate in the region, especially within the region's primary international organisation, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the threat of transnational crime nevertheless only remained at the level of rhetoric without tangible regional security practices in place to combat the threat. As Pouliot (2008: 265) highlighted: "the Copenhagen School asserts that security is practice; but in restricting its focus to traditional discourse analysis, it evacuates the practical logics that make the securitizing discourse possible".

The practice-oriented Paris School further claims that when dealing with a security threat, exceptional measures may not even be necessary or preferred; instead, the mundane and repetitive become important measures to guard against the threat that is being securitised (Bigo 2002; Huysmans 2011). As Bigo (2002: 73) of the Paris School put it: "Securitization works through everyday technologies, through the effects of power that are continuous rather than exceptional, through political struggles, and especially through institutional competition within the professional security field in which the most trivial interests are at stake" (see also Huysmans 2011; Wæver 2012). For example, Huysmans's (2006) study of migration in the European Union (EU) highlighted how regular and banal practices such as border controls generated insecurity, which consequently enabled the securitisation of migration and asylum seekers in the EU. Moreover, it is possible for the exceptional to subsequently become routine. Israel and Singapore are interesting cases in this regard. In Israel, securitisation has taken place so 'deeply' that "*to politicize is to securitize*"; "normal politics" are "immersed in the discourse and praxis of 'existential threats'" (Abulof 2014: 400, emphasis in the original). As for Singapore, the securitisation of the island-state's vulnerabilities in the immediate years after decolonisation has been so successful and become so entrenched that such a "discourse of vulnerability" has thoroughly pervaded Singapore's strategic culture, resulting in an ever-present "siege mentality" (Chang 2019).

For this study, we move beyond the contentious classical Copenhagen School position to a reworked securitisation framework, whereby securitisation can take place either through: (1) discourse, in the form of the speech act; and/or (2) the security practices themselves, whether these are exceptional or routine (Floyd 2010, 2016). In considering the Thai case study, we analyse the discourse of Thaksin and his government to identify securitising speech acts regarding the separatist threat as well as the security practices the administration pursued in relation to the Deep South. Thus, we are able to provide a more holistic examination of the upsurge in violence in the early 2000s, which proved crucial to determining the future course of the conflict (Ball and Farrelly 2012: 15) and is relevant to understanding the current situation. Prior to this, the next section first discusses the most widely cited explanations of the surge in violence.

Prevalent Explanations of the Thai Southern Conflict

Existing explanations of the revived conflict in Thailand's Deep South fall into three broad clusters. The first group of arguments is the 'entrenched enmities' explanation. These arguments are predominantly concerned with the historical roots of the insurgency and highlight discrimination against the southern Muslim population and exploitation of the resources of the former Patani sultanate as driving factors of the resurgent violence (Croissant 2005; Jory 2007; Thanet 2006). The armed insurgency that emerged in the 1950s was basically defeated after a shift from a military response to a more comprehensive political approach in the 1980s (HRW 2007: 16). Public development programs, amnesty offered by the government, and institutional reforms designed to address inequalities and maltreatment, along with other instruments, proved effective measures to end support for the rebels. Nevertheless, despite this recess, southern Muslims continue to harbour grievances, especially regarding their lack of opportunities in education and employment (McCargo 2006a: 3). Croissant (2005) cited economic deprivation, continued political subordination, and social discrimination as direct causes giving rise to the new episode of conflict that began in 2001. Similarly, a detailed report by the Human Rights Watch (HRW 2007) attributes part of the violence to revenge for the state-sponsored abuse of Malay Muslims. Statements made by protagonists in the conflict further back up such a conclusion. Wan Kadir Che Man, a former leader of the umbrella group of separatist organisations, Bersatu, stressed "internal colonialism" as the main driver of insurgent indignation (cited in Funston 2008a: 8). In a similar vein, Surayud Chulanont, who was appointed Prime Minister after Thaksin's ouster in 2006, started his term by publicly apologising for the Thai state's failure to deal with existing grievances in the south (Harish and Liow 2007). Based on this reading, the reasons for the violent resurgence of the conflict were similar to those underlying previous waves of extremism: the perception that an exclusive

central state threatened the religious, cultural, and linguistic identities in the south (Thanet 2006).

If it is true that the insurgency never effectively disappeared and that the militants were, instead, simply waiting for the right conditions to re-launch their struggle, what were the catalysing effects that emerged in the early 2000s? In an aptly named article subtitled "The Poverty of Structural Explanations", Jitpiromsri and Sobhonvasu (2006) examined the structural variables and found no strong correlation between these and the resurgence of violence in the early 2000s. Two issues that make the 'entrenched enmities' explanation less likely are significant herein. First, in a March 2005 survey conducted by the Assumption University and the Prince of Songkla University in Pattani, almost half the respondents from the three southern border provinces thought that separatism was a "far-fetched" idea, and only eight per cent agreed that they would "support the removal of the three southern border provinces from Thai sovereignty" (Jitpiromsri and Sobhonvasu 2006: 101–102). Second, in 2005, Muslim victims of the attacks began to exceed Buddhist victims (Jitpiromsri and Sobhonvasu 2006: 116), a trend that has since continued (Abuza 2014). Considering these conditions, the 'entrenched enmities' explanation clearly falls short of accounting for the upsurge in violence in the early 2000s.

Besides historical animosities, a second set of explanations, the 'transnational terrorist influence', represent the renewed armed struggle as being carried out by an Islamist unity against the Thai state. Observers agree that the religious consciousness in the south has risen over the past two decades (Funston 2008a: 11; ICG 2005: 32; Jory 2007). Unlike in previous periods of the resistance, calls for solidarity are made under the banner of Muslim unity, fused with Patani nationalism (Melvin 2007: 23), and use religious metaphors to justify the insurgency. However, a narrative of the conflict in line with global or regional jihad is absent both in public statements (Farrell 2014) and in Islamic schools (Liow 2006). As Liow and Don Pathan (2010: 30–44) noted, the religious language used to justify the struggle draws upon oral instructions of religious teachers and not, as has been the case in Indonesia, for instance, on established theological theories or the teaching of foreign clerics. Neither can a global, jihadist narrative be read in the way the insurgency is fought. In contrast to Islamist international terrorism, foreigners or other Western targets have rarely been in the sights of Thai insurgents. Except for the incidents on the island of Koh Samui in 2014 and 2015, a series of bomb attacks on popular tourist destinations that were attributed to southern rebels, the conflict theatre has remained limited to the southern provinces.

Other contributions that emphasise religious aspects approach the conflict from the perspective of terrorism studies (Abuza 2009, 2011; Gunaratna and Acharya 2013; Gunaratna *et al.* 2005). These works all point to personal relations and interactions between militants in the Thai south and members of the transnational Al-Qaeda and/or JI networks. However, experts on the insurgency have

criticised their work for presenting shaky evidence to sustain such linkages (Liow and Don Pathan 2010: 70–73; McCargo 2009). Contact between foreign jihadists and Thai radicals has existed since the late 1980s, but after almost two decades of armed conflict, there has still not been any proven involvement. Newspaper reports corroborate the inconclusive nature of the available evidence. In January 2007, *The Australian* read: "Members of Thai intelligence were reported *to believe* that a JI figure based in the south was behind the New Year's Eve bombings in Bangkok" (quoted in Funston 2008a: 13, emphasis added). Similarly, in early 2008, the closest to a proof reported by the *Bangkok Post* was that a "security source" said that "insurgents *probably* received funding from, and shared their ideology with, international terrorist groups" (Bangkok Post, 30 January 2008, quoted in Funston 2008a: 13, emphasis added).

Hardly any observer would disagree that the possibility of direct involvement of JI/Al-Qaeda exists, yet this is insufficient to sustain the claim that international terrorism led to the upsurge in violence. The strongest evidence against such an argument is provided by Liow and Don Pathan's (2010: 23) interviews with members of the insurgency. The interviewed insurgents cautioned against a strategy of linking up with an international network, since being associated with anti-Western global jihadism would risk undermining the legitimacy of the southern Thai cause and was likely to prompt the intervention of a Western power.

Whilst the two sets of arguments discussed thus far highlight the role of the insurgents, the third set focuses on the role of the Thaksin administration and the way it handled the conflict. It is suggestive to establish a causal link between Thaksin and the resurgence of the southern conflict, since the beginning of a new phase of violence coincided with the start of Thaksin's tenure (Ball and Farrelly 2012). In this context, different explanations have been put forward. One account submits that Thaksin manipulated Thai Buddhist chauvinism against the Malay Muslims in the south to rally support and distract attention from political shortcomings (Ukrist 2006). A related, widely cited argument holds that Thaksin, in an attempt to assert his authority against the near monopoly of control held by the Democrat Party in the south, committed a grave mistake in revamping the unique governance structure that was in place and reshuffling local commanders (ICG 2005; Liow 2004; McCargo 2007). These reforms cut existing channels for dialogue and intelligence gathering and disrupted the delicate equilibrium between security personnel, local leaders, and criminal gangs operating in the border areas, which together increased the potential for violence on all sides. The different security forces present in the south have traditionally held considerable power and prerogatives. Thaksin relied more on the police than on the military, which, according to McCargo (2006b), helped strengthen the Prime Minister's support base within the former.

According to McCargo (2007) and the International Crisis Group (ICG 2005), such ill-informed policies were grounded in Thaksin's misinterpretation and even ignorance of the conflict:

> His [Thaksin's] assessment was that separatism was no longer an issue; that disputes between disgruntled interest groups, including within and between the security services, were driving violence and that the sooner the security situation was normalised, the quicker these problems would be resolved (ICG 2005: 34).

The various arguments related to Thaksin's approach to the insurgency are conclusive and well grounded, but they tell us little about where the ideas shaping his policies came from. Because a deviation from path-dependent policies can take an ample range of forms, it is worth studying the facts, actors, and influences that determine a new approach. Based on the securitisation framework presented above, the following section puts forward a novel argument to complement the existing explanations for the surge of violence in Thailand's Deep South. As we will show, the Thaksin administration securitised the insurgency based on two narratives belonging to the hegemonic security agenda of so-called new threats: narcotics and Islamist terrorism, as part of the GWOT. This securitisation led to a violent response to the insurgency, begetting further violence on the part of the insurgents.

SECURITISING THE THAI SOUTHERN CONFLICT

To explain the increase in violence in the Deep South in the early 2000s, we focus on the external environment informing the government's behaviour in the conflict. In so doing, we treat the separatists as an aggregated actor, acknowledging that we do not account for the different organisations and loosely connected cells that make up the insurgency. Nevertheless, we do so to explicitly account for the dialectic relation between the two parties and the spiralling dynamics driving the escalation. Specifically, we ask how Thailand's political elite securitised the insurgency and why it used particular securitising moves, as opposed to others.

To answer these questions, we proceed inductively, using a macro-level type of process-tracing for two different types of inference (see Waldner 2015). The first is descriptive, showing how securitisation occurred. Second, we make causal inferences to provide an analytical explanation of whether and how the hegemonic security agenda influenced the formulation of domestic security policies. The method has its limitations, in that the evidence presented is necessarily selective, especially since it turns a blind eye to processes at the micro-level (see Askew 2007; Ball and Farrelly 2012). Nevertheless, these caveats are mitigated by the fact that we offer a complementary account rather than a rival argument (Levi 2004; Tannenwald 2015). Therefore, we believe that the following narratives provide a reliable reconstruction of the events, showing that it is necessary to take the external environment of the Thai state's approach to the southern insurgency into consideration.

Our analysis commences in 2001. Standard accounts of the recent episode of conflict establish its beginning in January 2004 (see Abuza 2011: 100–101),

"when a spectacular raid on a military arsenal in Narathiwat province saw perpetrators escape with ammunition and firearms" (Ball and Farrelly 2012: 5). Ball and Farrelly (2012: 5) rightly state: "After the raid, violence increased dramatically", even as they note that a period of small-scale attacks had already begun in 2001. According to Croissant (2005: 24), seventy-nine per cent of the "1,975 violent incidents that were recorded between 1993 and late 2004 took place from 2001 onwards". How, then, did events between 2001 and 2004 preface the qualitative change in violence that occurred in 2004? We argue that it was during this time that the Thaksin administration undertook crucial moves to securitise the southern insurgency. These were based, first, on a particular narrative belonging to the hegemonic narrative of NTS threats, namely the war on drugs. The availability of this hegemonic narrative had two implications. On the one hand, the government's approach to the insurgency could draw on a legitimising discourse. On the other hand, the narrative freed resources to pursue a policy against 'drug criminals' in the south that was blind to the needs of a region where an insurgency was taking hold again. Surprisingly, the GWOT narrative, which was prominent at the time and also part of the hegemonic NTS discourse, figured less significantly in informing the Thai state's response to the conflict, in terms of securitising moves. Whilst the GWOT led to the adoption of securitising practices against Muslim insurgents in the Deep South, in the official discourse, it failed to become a frame of reference for the insurgency despite the conflict's clearly religious overtones. In the latter part of this section, we explain this curious phenomenon and show how the GWOT narrative influenced the Thai state's policies with respect to the southern conflict, and reinforced the distorted approach adopted as a result of the war on drugs agenda.

The War on Drugs and the Escalation

The insurgency was effectively securitised in 2003 as part of Thaksin's 'war on drugs'. Previously, after small-scale attacks had begun to hit the south in 2001, the Thai government under Thaksin did not acknowledge the existence of an insurgency but declared: "there's no separatism, no ideological terrorists, just common bandits" (quoted in Melvin 2007: 30). Instead, the government's security agenda was defined by another topic. By 2001, the trafficking and abuse of illegal substances had become a major problem for Thai society (HRW 2004). When Thaksin declared a war on drugs two years later, presenting the issue of drugs to the country as a threat to national security, the insurgency was effectively mapped onto this securitising move.

The global drug prohibition scheme dates back to the early twentieth century and is today firmly institutionalised in the governance framework of the United Nations. Herschinger (2011: 60) calls this regime, which sees drugs "as illicit and their use as deviant", a hegemonic order reflecting primarily US and European interests. In the course of institutionalising the anti-narcotics regime, drugs "were gradually construed as presenting a danger, they have not been a problem but *became* one" (Herschinger

2011: 60, emphasis in the original). Portrayed as a threat to international security as early as the 1960s and 1970s, the drug threat acquired a distinctive character under the NTS framework as it became part of a larger set of transnational threats—including crime—intimately linked to one another.

Thaksin's national war on drugs was a country-wide policy that made no special reference to the Deep South. Nevertheless, narcotics became the most consequential frame of reference to influence the southern conflict because of the pre-existing level of violence and prevailing tensions there. Order 29/2546 of January 2003 set off the anti-narcotics campaign, stating that anyone charged with drug offences "will be regarded as a dangerous person who is threatening social and national security" (HRW 2007: 29–30). This "demonizing" of "drugs and every individual or organization associated with it" was not too far-fetched, as it could readily rely on the global, hegemonic discourse depicting drugs as dangerous and, indeed, as a threat to national and international security (Herschinger 2011: 87). Thus, the securitising discourse vilifying drug dealers as "scum and vermin" (Wheeler 2003: 8) made it possible to deal with offenders outside the established judicial and legal frameworks. The toll was enormous. Within three months, security forces carried out an estimated 2500 extra-judicial killings nationwide (Funston 2008a: 9). As one of the main smuggling routes, the south was a major target of anti-drug operations (Wheeler 2009: 184). In consequence, despite the fact that the war on drugs made only a modest number of explicit references to the insurgency, the southern conflict became locked into the securitisation of drugs, enabling the insurgency to be categorised as an existential threat justifying exceptional measures.

This indirect securitisation of the insurgency under Thaksin's war on drugs, itself influenced by the global hegemonic NTS discourse, had at least three direct consequences that fuelled the violence in the south. First, the war on drugs boosted support for insurgent groups from Malay Muslims seeking protection from the prospect of arbitrary arrests and assassinations. The distribution of official blacklists gave local security forces free rein to target personal or political enemies by branding them as suspected drug dealers (ICG 2005: 35–36). Second, the war on drugs further eroded trust in Thai security forces and the rule of law, contributing to the escalation of violence that followed (HRW 2004; ICG 2005: 35–36; Liow and Don Pathan 2010: 57). Although there were only a limited number of official statements from Bangkok linking narcotics to the insurgency in 2003, some local officials claimed that southern militants recruited drug addicts or used drug money to buy off Malay youths to carry out attacks (Askew 2007: 111; Jitpiromsri and Sobhonvasu 2006: 106 and 108). Such links alleging or establishing a relation between drug criminals and insurgents became more frequent from 2005 onwards (Askew 2007: 111). Thus, although the war on drugs was not directed specifically against the south, villagers there saw it as a discriminatory instrument against Malay Muslims (HRW 2007: 30–31). In addition, some observers noted a third effect: The nationwide

campaign displaced trafficking networks from the north to the south, further aggravating violence related to illegal narcotics there (Connors 2006b: 158).

Together, these effects stemming from the war on drugs set the scene for further escalation of the southern conflict. Although the campaign had only lasted a few months—Thaksin proclaimed the first victory in the war on drugs in May 2003, and the second followed in December (HRW 2004: 11–12)—it had serious and wide-ranging ramifications. The government-sanctioned killings created a climate of fear, generally (Fullbrook 2003), and in the south, in particular. As Melvin (2007: 30) stated, the anti-drug campaign "helped to further destabilize the situation" in the three provinces where the insurgency was active. This argument is supported by a former deputy director of Thailand's Centre of National Intelligence Coordination, Lieutenant General Nanthadet Meksawat, who cited "Thaksin's attempted suppression of drugs rings [*sic*] and influence networks" as one of the main drivers of the 2004 wave of violence (Askew 2007: 115). According to Nanthadet, "extra-judicial killing of suspected individuals … 'woke up' the underworld groups who began to promote networks of youths to use as a front line in committing assassinations and attacks on police posts" (Askew 2007: 115). The consequences soon became apparent. After a series of coordinated attacks by insurgents in January 2004, the violence reached unprecedented levels (ICG 2005: 17; HRW 2007: 32). In two of the most significant incidents, those of the Kru Se mosque and Tak Bai, officials claimed that participants were acting under the influence of drugs (Jitpiromsri and Sobhonvasu 2006: 106).

The government's adoption of exceptional measures that further securitised the insurgency (ICG 2012: 10–11) was perhaps more consequential than the discursive use of the narcotics frame. Thaksin first put the southern provinces under martial law and in July 2005 decreed a state of emergency. The same month, he affirmed in a television program that "although militant Islamic ideology had clearly been a motivating force for Muslim youth to engage in violent separatist-motivated insurgency, it was 'influential figures' and their drug rings that were playing a major role in funding and manipulating these groups behind the scenes" (cited in Askew 2007: 110). The securitised approach was maintained after Thaksin was ousted in a military coup in 2006. Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont began his tenure with a public apology for the Tak Bai incident and reversed several of Thaksin's policies, for example, restoring the Southern Border Provinces Administration Centre (see Harish and Liow 2007). Yet, the routinised everyday practices of securitisation remained unchanged. The emergency regulations have been regularly renewed every three months on an almost continuous basis for most of the 37 districts in the area of the conflict. Subsequent governments mobilised additional security forces and increased efforts to enhance the capabilities of a complex web of paramilitaries now operating in parallel to the regular military and police in the south (Bangkok Post 2014).

The Thai Army not only maintained a *de facto* veto on the conflict (Askew 2007: 109; Funston 2008a: 6; McCargo 2010a), but further consolidated its grip on the south after installing a military dictatorship in 2014. Under the armed forces' direct influence, moving the insurgency out of the security realm was unthinkable. Instead, the Army even increased both the budget and the number of security forces to deal with the conflict. As of 2015, close to 33,000 soldiers, 18,583 police, and 9680 Interior Ministry Volunteer Defence Corps were deployed to the affected provinces (ICG 2015: fn 84). So far, initiatives to start peace talks have made little headway. Focusing on the state's role in the conflict and the reaction it prompted from the insurgents, it can be concluded that Thaksin's government adopted an ill-guided approach that, at best, failed to stop the violence and quite possibly created conditions that further fuelled the conflict (Croissant 2005). Mapped on the readily available, hegemonic drug threat narrative, the insurgency became securitised when the war on drugs hit the Deep South. Once securitised, the insurgency responded with more violence, leading to further escalation of the conflict.

The Global War on Terror and Why a Distorted Approach Persisted

The securitised approach to the southern insurgency due to the war on drugs was further aggravated by the anti-terrorism GWOT frame of the hegemonic NTS agenda. International terrorism in its modern form had already come to be seen as a security threat in the 1960s and 1970s, but after the 9/11 attacks, it quickly turned into a major issue under the global NTS agenda, with a specific focus on radical Islamism and its global networks (Herschinger 2011). According to the new orthodoxy, this transnational terrorism capitalised upon existing grievances, permeating smuggling rings, drug cartels, and organised criminal networks. This interconnected deluge was exceptionally threatening to national and international security.

Rather than explicitly adopting the GWOT narrative for the southern insurgency, Thaksin's government securitised the conflict under the GWOT narrative subtly. Securitising speech acts were virtually absent. Instead, security practices plotted in accordance with the GWOT were applied in the south, especially after the arrest of Hambali, the operations chief of JI, in Thailand, in mid-2003. As Melvin (2007: 30) emphasised, by the end of Thaksin's term, it was "a concern with countering terrorism" that determined the approach to the insurgency. Under martial law, the government used excessive force in the south to respond to the insurgents' first major attacks in 2004. The measures that were implemented targeted the Muslim population, including their religious institutions, leaders and their holy sites, such as the historic Patani mosque of Kru Se (Harish 2006: 59; Liow 2004: 539). The indiscriminate, disproportionate response increased anger (Storey 2008b: 41) and dissatisfaction (Liow 2004: 539) amongst southern Muslims, regardless of whether they sympathised with the insurgents or not. These securitising practices, which provided the grounds

for further escalation in 2004, occurred against the backdrop of existing deep suspicions that the government would apply a set of newly adopted anti-terror policies disproportionately to the south, and specifically to southern Muslims.

Whilst Thailand's stance in the US-led GWOT remained ambiguous, the policies Thaksin implemented had the effect of shrinking the possibilities for rapprochement (Wheeler 2009). When evaluating the US's request for its allies' support in the 2003 Iraq war, the Thai Foreign Affairs Committee had cautioned that the country's participation "would fuel problems in the south … where a separatist movement, with Islamic tendencies, was operating" (Jiran in Connors 2006a: 143). According to several observers, this is exactly what occurred. Torture tactics against suspected terrorists introduced in secret prisons run by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) on Thai soil were subsequently used by local security forces against Muslim separatists in the south (Los Angeles Times 2018; see also Crispin 2004). Although the evidence for establishing a direct link between Thailand's cooperation in the GWOT and the level of insurgent activity is ambiguous, it can be concluded that Muslims felt they could become the real target of the government's GWOT (Croissant 2005; Wheeler 2009).

Thaksin's successor governments were careful to avoid further fuelling the violence and opted to pursue a less heavy-handed approach. Nevertheless, they continued to enact practices securitising Islam. An illustrative example of how such practices created images of a conflict that was fundamentally religious in nature is the state's militarisation of *wat*, Buddhist monastic compounds that serve as sites for religious, cultural, and social activities (Jerryson 2009). When *wat* and their monks became the target of insurgent attacks, the state reacted by visibly militarising *wat* with barracks hosting security forces inside the compound and barbed wire and blockades in the entrances (Jerryson 2009: 50). Another less visible measure of defence has been the use of 'military monks', members of the armed forces serving as monks to protect the *wat* when many were abandoned because of the attacks. Traditionally, *wat* were not exclusively used by Buddhists, but Muslims now began avoiding them. In this way, the militarisation of *wat* gave rise "to further local Muslim resentment of Buddhism in the Thai south" (Jerryson 2009: 56).

Despite the lack of official securitising speech acts, the security practices adopted by Thaksin's government effectively securitised the insurgency in the south in accordance with the GWOT narrative. Jory (2007) and Harish (2006) have shown that the insurgency developed from being defined as 'Malay' to being identified as 'Muslim'. Although this shift in identity politics dates from before 9/11, the watershed event added a "religious colouring" to the conflict (Harish 2006: 59). According to Jory (2007: 256, emphasis in the original), "[m]erely by the use of these religious labels to represent the actors involved in conflict, despite the Thai government's attempts to characterize the conflict as *not* a religious one, it is difficult for the Thai public to imagine it otherwise." Likewise, McCargo (2009: 2; 2010a: 267) noted that anti-Muslim rhetoric

became widespread, especially as media commentary and academic discussion further portrayed the insurgency as 'Islamic militancy' in line with a global trend of Muslim radicalisation. This shows that disquiet over possible links to global jihad did influence the government's approach in the south, even if officials publicly avoided linking the insurgency to transnational terrorism. By steering clear of allusions to the religious dimension of the conflict in official discourse altogether, the hegemonic NTS narrative in its GWOT frame further strengthened Thailand's reluctance to acknowledge the militants' political demands as legitimate (McCargo 2010a), limiting the range of possible solutions towards a narrow, and in this sense, distorted approach.

The fact that the securitising discourse of the GWOT mould failed to be applied to the south at the moment it experienced great popularity across the world is explained by the nuanced interests of the Thai government. For one, the ruling elites had no intention of allowing third-party intervention in the conflict (Askew 2010: 1117). Thus, a high-ranking Army officer insisted that Western nations should stay out of what he described as an "internal matter with its roots in local history" (Davis 2006). Instead of painting the insurgency as a terrorist threat, Thailand sought to assure potential tourists that it remained a safe destination (Ukrist 2006: 75–76). Most importantly, publicly framing the insurgency in terms of (criminal) injustice, rather than as a religious issue, reflected Thailand's drive for national unity through assimilation, as opposed to pluralism (Jory 2007). Thai officials thus framed the conflict in the south in the rather abstract terms of injustice and disenfranchisement, denying it both political and religious dimensions (Askew 2010; McCargo 2010b). Askew (2007: 110) summed up Thaksin's official narrative as a "conspiracy theory that depicted the unrest as a sham separatist insurgency fomented by venal interest groups, not ideologues". The overall, prevailing state orthodoxy that followed was then one that "defines the southern turbulence as a problem to be addressed by development programs, together with equitable law enforcement" (Askew 2010: 1111), as opposed to a political dialogue dealing with religious grievances. In the same line, advocating the rehabilitation of state authority and legitimacy in the Deep South, the current military junta under Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-Ocha refers to the insurgents as "those who hold different views from the state", a position the regime persecutes, as it is viewed as subversive against national security (ICG 2015: 12).

Summary and Discussion

The securitisation of the southern conflict did not occur in a linear fashion. Through narratives and sustained practices, the narcotics frame had a direct effect on the conflict, in that it legitimised exceptional measures. Since the crucial securitisation

of the southern conflict in 2003/2004 via the hegemonic NTS agenda, in this case the war on drugs, the prevailing approach has hindered open discussion of a regional autonomy arrangement as a solution to the conflict. Under the GWOT frame, substantial and sustained security practices were enacted, despite the lack of accompanying securitising speech acts, even if their impact was less direct. The deliberate de-emphasis on the politics of religion informed by the GWOT helped to reinforce the existing erratic approach, rather than enable a new policy. Thus, the over-reliance on, and overemphasis of, the NTS agenda in the form of increased securitisation of drug and terror NTS threats in dealing with the southern separatists actually worsened the situation, leading to an upsurge of violence in the early 2000s, the consequences of which are still visible.

How did the NTS agenda become hegemonic, and what is the significance of its dominance? The new NTS contrasts with that of traditional security, which is limited to the military sector and directed towards external threats against the state's sovereignty and territorial integrity. The project to widen and deepen the traditional security agenda had begun before the end of the Cold War, for instance, by European critical security studies schools such as the Aberystwyth, Copenhagen, and Paris Schools (Peoples and Vaughan-Williams 2010: 3–11; Wæver 2012). However, it was only in the post-Cold War era that the NTS agenda took the lead amongst influential policy-makers, with the watershed 9/11 attacks reinforcing this trend (Buzan and Hansen 2009: 187–255; Peoples and Vaughan-Williams 2010: 7–9). The bipolar balance of power between the communist Soviet Union and the democratic-capitalist West had been a lid that served to keep the simmering pot of non-military threats from boiling over during the Cold War, especially in the developing 'Third World'. As Zimmerman (2016: 4) highlighted: "At the end of the Cold War, Asia faced a strategic security situation characterised by previously suppressed, unrecognised or emerging sources of insecurity". Post-Cold War, increased attention was focused on these simmering threats (Hathaway and Wills 2013: 4), and "resources once devoted to coping with military threats" were diverted to "deal with such nonmilitary threats as domestic poverty, educational crises, industrial competitiveness, drug trafficking, crime, international migration, environmental hazards, resource shortages, global poverty, and so on" (Baldwin 1995: 126).

The NTS agenda proliferated across the Asian region, as a result of increased globalisation. NTS threats have blazed headlines, filled policy papers, and crammed academic journals across the world. One example is the 'war on crime' being conducted by Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte (Channel News Asia 2018). To illustrate how widespread and hegemonic the NTS agenda has become, a simple search on Google Scholar for the period between the end of the Cold War in 1991 to this time of writing returned about 11,800 hits for 'non-traditional security', more than half of the approximately 21,100 for 'traditional security'. For the corresponding length of time prior to the end of the Cold War, only 14 hits for 'non-traditional security'

were returned, compared to 658 for 'traditional security', a mere fraction. Caballero-Anthony (2016), one of the foremost experts on NTS in Southeast Asia, attributes the spread of the agenda to an epistemic community of scholars from various think tanks and research institutes in the region (see also Zimmerman 2016).

Nevertheless, in general, "Asian nations have been slower than the United States to align budgetary resources and bureaucratic structures to reflect this new security paradigm", as "the end of the Cold War competition between Washington and Moscow did not carry the same strategic significance it held for the United States" (Hathaway and Wills 2013: 9). Today, Asian states still very much hold onto traditional security concerns such as geopolitical rivalry. Asian states can thus be seen as a "vestigial modernist remnant in a postmodern flat world", with priorities still focused upon interstate competition (Chang 2016: 138). However, even as the Asian states reacted to these 'new', NTS threats, the development of the NTS concept itself "owes much to the postcolonial approach and security thinking from the Third World" in a paradoxical and reflexive manner as well, since these so-called 'non-traditional' threats were already "representative of the kind of contemporary challenges that seriously affect people's security in the developing world" (Caballero-Anthony 2016: 5).

For example, one strand of such thinking was the notion of 'comprehensive security', which went beyond one-dimensional military security to encompass multidimensional objects and subjects of security. The idea of 'comprehensive security', developed in Japan in the 1970s, resonated with other Asian states, particularly those in Southeast Asia (Dewitt 1994: 2–4). After all, most of the so-called NTS threats have had long traditions in Southeast Asia. Take, for example, piracy, a perennial concern for the maritime Southeast Asian states, or the terrorism prevalent in various regional states. Both piracy and terrorism have been linked to separatist movements that arose from the import of the concepts of the 'Westphalian state' and 'sovereignty' into a region where before, conceptions of space and power were fluid and characterised as *mandalas* (Chong 2012; Wolters 1999). In Southeast Asia, the fact that such 'comprehensive' concepts were adopted early on had much to do with the challenges the post-colonial states faced (Alagappa 1995). Providing social order and economic development (now labelled new security concerns) were already top priorities to ensure regime survival since independence. In Malaysia, for example, the former and now re-elected Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad stated: "National security is inseparable from political stability, economic success and social harmony. Without these all the guns in the world cannot prevent a country from being overcome by its enemies" (quoted in Dewitt 1994: 4). The 'new' NTS agenda fitted the realities of most developing countries far better than the 'old' emphasis on traditional threats external to the state (Haacke and Williams 2008: 777).

Thus, whilst the end of the Cold War and 9/11 radically changed the foreign and security agendas of the US and its European allies, for Southeast Asia,

internal political violence, its links to foreign actors, and the contestation of political identities, were already long-standing concerns (Liow 2016). There was less realignment of resources to counter such threats, simply because these old threats had already been on the agenda of Southeast Asian states since they became independent. The extremely ethnically diverse state of Indonesia, for example, was so concerned with separatist threats that for decades, its armed forces were primarily focused on maintaining the internal coherence of the archipelagic state, rather than on resisting external military threats (Anwar 1996). For the states in Southeast Asia, the new threat agenda was mostly a case of packaging old wine in new bottles. Nevertheless, the 'new packaging' of the hegemonic NTS agenda, with its emphasis on security and 'contemporary' referent objects and issue areas, did trigger a change in discourse, and importantly, distorted policy adoption, as we demonstrated with our case study of the Thai southern conflict.

The Thai south is not the only instance of hegemonic distortions in Southeast Asia. Febrica (2010), for instance, examined the securitisation of terrorism in Indonesia and Singapore, in response to the US's GWOT post-9/11, arguing that in Indonesia's pluralistic political system, securitising terrorism was difficult, whereas in Singapore, a one-party state, it was relatively easy, since the government had greater control. In the case of Singapore, it can therefore be argued that securitisation of the terrorism threat was hegemonically distorted by the global NTS agenda related to the GWOT, since the issue of terrorism was far more straightforward, less political, and objectively less of a threat than in Indonesia. Similarly, Mak (2006) demonstrated that the securitisation of piracy in the Malacca Straits post-9/11 was only partial in Malaysia, despite efforts by the International Maritime Bureau (IMB) to try to persuade Malaysia, whereas Singapore took a much keener interest and adopted a hard-line stance, sending out naval patrols. One would have expected the reverse, given: (1) piracy has been a traditional danger in the Malacca Straits, (2) Malaysia's coastline makes up most of the Malacca Straits, and (3) Singapore's comparatively more successful record of law and order. Malaysia resisted the hegemonic distortion of the global NTS agenda linking terrorism to piracy, seeing "the main maritime security challenges as [traditional] illegal trafficking in people, small arms, and narcotics" (Storey 2008a: 110). In this sense, our hegemonic distortions thesis further echoes international relations scholarship on Southeast Asia, where the discipline is widely recognised as a hegemonic discipline, and "received wisdom in Asia-Pacific academic and policy circles has had it that international relations (or IR) theory bears little, if any, relevance to the region's international politics" (Tan 2002: 30). Scholarship on the region's international politics, as such, is largely a mimicry of this "American social science" of international relations (Kristensen 2015: 161–63).

In conclusion, the global hegemonic NTS agenda affects security and securitisation, with hegemonic distortions setting in and influencing what local factors would, instead, suggest. In our case study, hegemonic distortion resulted in worse consequences for the Thai south, with the increased violence continuing today.

However, adopting the hegemonic NTS agenda need not necessarily result in negative outcomes. In their study of NTS threats in Southeast Asia, Hameiri and Jones (2015) convincingly established how the NTS agenda can cause states to rescale the governance of such threats, in order to realign resources for positive outcomes, instead. The above example of Singapore securitising terrorism to actively bring resources to bear to prevent and stop terrorist attacks is a largely positive outcome, albeit with some trade-offs in liberty, resulting from its internal security act, which allows suspected terrorists to be detained without trial (Febrica 2010: 577). Nor do we make the case that hegemonic distortions was the sole reason for Thaksin's mishandling of the crisis. Rather, this external environment argument further supports the widely accepted 'Thaksin factor' explanation of domestic political contestation and incompetence. Our article thus expands the understanding of the Thai south conflict to explain the international dynamics behind the surge in violence from the early-2000s that has not abated, despite the various changes in government since.

Finally, as the NTS narrative has become a global phenomenon, there are numerous cases and policy areas for future research to submit insights induced from the Thai case study for further tests and refinement of the conditions under which securitisation takes place across different levels of analysis. Hegemonic distortions is only one effect stemming from the interlocking of global and lower-level securitisation dynamics. Furthermore, the hegemonic NTS agenda is only one of several existing global security frameworks that the Copenhagen School calls 'security constellations', which serve "to avoid a picture of isolated securitisations unrelated to social identities and political processes at other [higher or lower] levels" (Buzan and Wæver 2009: 257). Hence, other effects from other security constellations could potentially be explored in future research on how security is constructed.

Acknowledgements

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