European Journal of International Security (2025), page 1 of 16
doi:10.1017/eis.2025.10006

EJIS

RESEARCH ARTICLE

State failure and dilemma of security cooperation among neighbouring countries in the Global South: Evidence from Myanmar and Thailand

Enze Han[1] and Sirada Khemanitthathai[2]

[1]Department of Politics and Public Administration, The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong SAR, Hong Kong SAR and [2]Faculty of Political Science and Public Administration, Chiang Mai University, Chiang Mai, Thailand
Corresponding author: Sirada Khemanitthathai; Email: sirada.khe@cmu.ac.th

(Received 20 December 2024; revised 22 April 2025; accepted 28 April 2025)

Abstract
This paper argues that security cooperation among neighbouring countries in the Global South is often hampered by domestic instability and fragmented territorial control resulting from state failures. Geographical proximity, characterised by porous borders and high levels of cross-border human mobility, directly impacts the security of neighbouring states. This creates a dilemma for security cooperation when one state lacks the capacity for effective governance. Empirically, the paper examines the evolution of Thailand's security relations with Myanmar over recent decades, highlighting the profound impact of Myanmar's political instability on Thailand. It analyses how the 2021 military coup and the subsequent collapse of Myanmar's domestic political order have shaped Thailand's securitisation of non-traditional security threats. By focusing on issues such as irregular migration, public health issues, drug trafficking, and transboundary pollution, the paper explores how these challenges have been securitised in Thailand and how they have complicated security cooperation between the two countries. The paper contends that the limited territorial control and legitimacy of Myanmar's military government have significantly hindered Thailand's ability to address its security concerns effectively. It further calls for security cooperation in the Global South beyond the conventional state-to-state level.

Keywords: Global South; Myanmar; security cooperation; state failure; Thailand

Introduction

Ever since the 11 September terrorist attacks in the United States, there has been a profound shift in how the Global North countries perceive and address the issue of state failure, particularly in terms of its implications for international security. Framed as the 'most important foreign policy challenges of the contemporary era', state failure has been portrayed as posing an acute risk to US national security as well as global security.[1] Indeed, the realisation that state failure in the Global South can directly threaten the security and interests of wealthier, more stable nations in the Global North has led to a heightened focus on the interconnectedness of global security. Policymakers in the Global North have therefore recognised that weak governance, poverty, and conflict in distant regions could foster terrorism, transnational crime, and other threats that transcend borders, and have subsequently prioritised interventions aiming at stabilising

[1]Stephen D. Krasner and Carlos Pascual, 'Addressing state failure', *Foreign Affairs*, 84:4 (2005), pp. 153–63.

fragile states, including through military engagement, development assistance, and governance reforms.[2]

While existing literature have effectively addressed how state failure in the Global South have been securitised from the perspectives of Global North,[3] there has been a notable lack of adequate attention given to how securitisation of such state failure occurs among neighbouring countries in the Global South itself. Political crises such as state failure in the Global South tend to have a more comprehensive and pronounced impact on their immediate neighbours, given their geographical proximity.[4] Certainly, the geographical dimension is critical in understanding security dynamics for Global North countries too,[5] but the reality is that most countries in the Global North do not share direct borders with states in the Global South, which somewhat insulates them from the immediate spillover effects of state failure. Therefore, comparatively speaking, Global North countries are less likely to directly deal with the day-to-day impacts caused by state failure of a neighbouring country. However, for countries within the Global South, they often bear the immediate consequences of such state failures, because they are most likely to be the first port of call for refugee inflows[6] and even become victims of the spillover effect of a neighbour's civil conflicts.[7]

This paper examines challenges for security cooperation among neighbouring countries in the Global South in the context of one state's failure, by engaging with the literature on the securitisation of non-traditional security (NTS) issues. It makes a two-pronged argument. First, given the general fragility of states, Global South countries – due to geographical proximity, porous borders, and intensified cross-border movement – often have a heightened awareness of security externalities and have a tendency to securitise both traditional and NTS issues, stemming from their neighbouring states, particularly as a result the latter's domestic political instability.[8] At the same time, in situations of state failure, security cooperation among these Global South neighbouring states can be heavily hampered by the inability of the failed state to effectively govern and control its territories.[9] This presents a dilemma: how to balance engagement with the weakened and fragmented central government with collaboration with local de facto authorities on NTS issues along shared borders.

Empirically, this paper focuses on the ongoing problems in security cooperation between two neighbouring South-East Asian countries, namely Myanmar and Thailand. It contextualises Thailand's security relations with Myanmar over the past few decades, by examining how various Thai governments have historically securitised the threat from Myanmar as a close neighbour since the Cold War. It then traces how various governments have tried to work with their Myanmar

[2]Maria-Louise Clausen and Peter Albrecht, 'Interventions since the Cold War: From statebuilding to stabilization', *International Affairs*, 97:4 (2021), pp. 1203–20.

[3]Alison Howell and Melanie Richter-Montpetit, 'Is securitization theory racist? Civilizationism, methodological whiteness, and antiblack thought in the Copenhagen School', *Security Dialogue*, 51:1 (2020), pp. 3–22.

[4]Sarah Kenyon Lischer, 'The global refugee crisis: Regional destabilization & humanitarian protection', *Daedalus*, 146:4 (2017), pp. 85–97; Luke Glanville, 'Hypocritical inhospitality: The global refugee crisis in the light of history', *Ethics & International Affairs*, 34:1 (2020), pp. 3–12.

[5]Müge Kinacioglu, 'Militarized governance of migration in the Mediterranean', *International Affairs*, 99:6 (2023), pp. 2423–41.

[6]Tazreena Sajjad, 'Once we were refugees: Refugees, security, solidarity and a view from the Global South. A case study of the Rohingya reception in Bangladesh', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 35:2 (2022), pp. 753–79.

[7]Idean Salehyan and Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, 'Refugees and the spread of civil war', *International Organization*, 60:2 (2006), pp. 335–66; Enze Han, 'The Chinese civil war and implications for borderland state consolidation in mainland south-east Asia', *The China Quarterly*, 241 (2020), pp. 214–35; Enze Han, 'Myanmar's internal ethnic conflicts and their implications for China's regional grand strategy', *Asian Survey*, 60:3 (2020), pp. 466–89.

[8]Erin Zimmerman, 'Security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific: Non-traditional security as a catalyst', *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, 10:2 (2014), pp. 150–65; Xue Gong, 'Non-traditional security cooperation between China and south-east Asia: Implications for Indo-Pacific geopolitics', *International Affairs*, 96:1 (2020), pp. 29–48.

[9]Mike Bourne, 'Netwar geopolitics: Security, failed states and illicit flows', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 13:4 (2011), pp. 490–513. Stefania Panebianco (ed.), *Border Crises and Human Mobility in the Mediterranean Global South: Challenges to Expanding Borders* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

counterparts in terms of security cooperation in the context of domestic political changes in both countries. The paper further focuses on the impact of the 2021 military coup in Myanmar and the subsequent collapse of its domestic political order on how the Thai government has responded to a range of NTS threats that emanate from across the shared border.[10] By zooming in on these specific events and their negative implications for bilateral security cooperation, this paper provides a detailed analysis of how a list of NTS issues have become securitised in Thailand, and how the reality of state failure in Myanmar has prevented effective state-to-state security cooperation. It calls for security cooperation beyond the state-to-state level and emphasises the need to work with non-state actors such as rebel organisations in the context of state failure and fragmentation.

This paper is structured as follows. It begins by engaging with the literature on how NTS issues among neighbouring countries in the Global South can be securitised. It then discusses how state failure in one state can exacerbate security implications for its neighbours as a result of geographical proximity and porous borders. It then proceeds with a historical account of security relations between Myanmar and Thailand, with a specific emphasis on how regime changes in both countries have influenced their relational dynamics. The paper then analyses the recent political crisis in Myanmar resulting from the 2021 military coup and explores how a list of NTS issues have been securitised in Thailand and their implications for the lack of bilateral security cooperation. Finally, the paper concludes by reflecting on the theoretical implications on security cooperation in the context of state failure in the Global South.

Geographical proximity and securitisation among Global South neighbours

The Copenhagen school of securitisation theory has explored how specific issues become securitised, and under what context they would be framed as existential threats that necessitate extraordinary measures and emergency actions.[11] Rather than viewing security as an objective condition, securitisation theory considers it a socially constructed phenomenon. It suggests that anything can be turned into a security issue through the process of securitisation, which involves the use of speech acts and discourses to turn a particular issue into a security threat for the state or the general public.[12]

Historically, securitisation theory has largely been driven by the interest of actors in the Global North, reflecting the geopolitical influence and dominant perspectives within Western academia.[13] Indeed, many have criticised how the conventional securitisation literature has reinforced the power inequality for who has the ability to securitise, which has created many moments of silence among the subaltern.[14] When considering the Global South, the issues and contexts that lead to securitisation may differ significantly from those of the Global North. These variations might stem

[10]Shona Loong, 'The neoliberal borderscape: Neoliberalism's effects on the social worlds of migrants along the Thai–Myanmar border', *Political Geography*, 74 (2019), p. 102035; Mary Mostafanezhad, Tani Sebro, Elliott Prasse-Freeman, Roger Norum, 'Surplus precaritization: Supply chain capitalism and the geoeconomics of hope in Myanmar's borderlands', *Political Geography*, 95 (2022), p. 102561.

[11]Holger Stritzel, 'Towards a theory of securitization: Copenhagen and beyond', *European Journal of International Relations*, 13:3 (2007), pp. 357–83; Ulrik Pram Gad and Karen Lund Petersen, 'Concepts of politics in Securitization Studies', *Security Dialogue*, 42:4–5 (2011), pp. 315–28.

[12]Ole Wæver, 'The theory act: Responsibility and exactitude as seen from securitization', *International Relations*, 29:1 (2015), pp. 121–7; Thierry Balzacq, 'The "essence" of securitization: Theory, ideal type, and a sociological science of security', *International Relations*, 29:1 (2015), pp. 103–13.

[13]Stephane J. Baele and Diana Jalea, 'Twenty-five years of securitization theory: A corpus-based review', *Political Studies Review*, 21:2 (2023), pp. 376–89; David Brenner and Enze Han, 'Forgotten conflicts: Producing knowledge and ignorance in Security Studies', *Journal of Global Security Studies*, 7:1 (2022), pp. 1–17.

[14]Lene Hansen, 'The Little Mermaid's silent security dilemma and the absence of gender in the Copenhagen School', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 29:2 (2000), pp. 285–306; Monika Barthwal-Datta, 'Securitising threats without the state: A case study of misgovernance as a security threat in Bangladesh', *Review of International Studies*, 35:2 (2009), pp. 277–300; Sarah Bertrand, 'Can the subaltern securitize? Postcolonial perspectives on securitization theory and its critics', *European Journal of International Security*, 3:3 (2018), pp. 281–99.

from diverse security agendas and unique securitisation processes reflecting the Global South's distinct historical, socio-political, economic, and geographical circumstances.[15]

One key aspect of the Global South countries' security experiences is the element of geographical proximity among neighbouring countries,[16] unlike in the Global North, where issues of security often take on a more global perspective, and, indeed, much of their securitisation target is in fact the Global South and how the latter affects security perceptions in the former.[17] More often than not, the Global North countries do not share borders directly with Global South ones, which complicates the narrative of geographically driven insecurity. With the exception of a few places where neighbouring states exhibit stark disparities in development and stability – such as the US–Mexico border[18] or southern Europe's proximity to North Africa[19] – many wealthy nations in the Global North are insulated by distance, oceans, or buffer states away from the majority countries in the Global South.

In the Global South, however, geographical proximity, porous borders, and interconnected histories of political engagements among neighbouring countries can add additional layers of complexity to security relations among them.[20] Issues such as civil conflicts, political instability, economic crises, health emergencies, transnational crime, terrorism, and such are more likely to affect neighbouring countries.[21] Being neighbours in the Global South is to share not only borders but a long history of engagement and a memory of the deep intertwinement of each other. It means there is a clear awareness that security issues, in particular those NTS ones, are intimately intertwined among neighbouring countries.

In this context, we argue that the Global South countries often securitise threats originating from neighbouring countries because of a clear understanding of how their security can be easily affected by the spillover effects from their neighbours due to porous borders among them.[22] Smuggling, whether it be of drugs, weapons,[23] or other illegal commodities, becomes considerably easier when borders are not well guarded or regulated, which can be a prevalent problem in many parts of the Global South.[24] Similarly, transnational crime syndicates specifically target these unregulated borders as routes for their illicit activities.[25]

[15]Kwaku Danso and Kwesi Aning, 'African experiences and alternativity in International Relations theorizing about security', *International Affairs*, 98:1 (2022), pp. 67–83.

[16]Enze Han, 'Neighborhood effect of borderland state consolidation: Evidence from Myanmar and its neighbors', *The Pacific Review*, 33:2 (2020), pp. 305–30.

[17]Steven Ratuva, 'Subalternization of the Global South: Critique of mainstream "Western" security discourses', *Cultural Dynamics*, 28:2 (2016), pp. 211–28.

[18]Roxanne Lynn Doty, 'States of exception on the Mexico–U.S. border: Security, "decisions", and civilian border patrols', *International Political Sociology*, 1:2 (2007), pp. 113–37.

[19]Adolfo Calatrava-García, José Manuel Moreno-Mercado, and Javier García-Marín, 'Towards European securitization press processes? A comparison of Sahel news coverage in southern European countries', *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 31:4 (2023), pp. 1206–22.

[20]James C. Murdoch and Todd Sandler, 'Civil wars and economic growth: Spatial dispersion', *American Journal of Political Science*, 48:1 (2004), pp. 138–51.

[21]Jacob D. Kathman, 'Civil war contagion and neighboring interventions', *International Studies Quarterly*, 54:4 (2010), pp. 989–1012; Idean Salehyan, 'Transnational rebels: Neighboring states as sanctuary for rebel groups', *World Politics*, 59:2 (2007), pp. 217–42; Myron Weiner, 'Bad neighbors, bad neighborhoods: An Inquiry into the Causes of Refugee Flows', *International Security*, 21:1 (1996), pp. 5–42 (p. 5).

[22]Ernest Toochi Aniche, Inocent Moyo, and Christopher Changwe Nshimbi, 'Interrogating the nexus between irregular migration and insecurity along "ungoverned" border spaces in West Africa', *African Security Review*, 30:3 (2021), pp. 304–18.

[23]For a discussion on security cooperation on issues of trafficking of drugs and guns, see Yonique Campbell, Anthony Harriott, Felicia Grey, and Damion Blake, 'From the "War on Drugs" to the "War of Guns": South–South Cooperation between Mexico and the Caribbean', *European Journal of International Security*, this special issue.

[24]Xiaobo Su, 'Smuggling and the exercise of effective sovereignty at the China–Myanmar border', *Review of International Political Economy*, 29:4 (2022), pp. 1135–58.

[25]Usman A. Tar and Charles P. Onwurah (eds), *The Palgrave Handbook of Small Arms and Conflicts in Africa* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

Furthermore, neighbouring countries in the Global South often witness considerable cross-border human mobility, which often intensifies during times of crises. Such crisis-induced mobilities, be they due to civil conflicts, political instability, or environmental disasters, are often the agents through which securitisation of threats occurs among neighbouring countries. Such cross-border mobility and the subsequent domestic encounters between migrants and the host society shape the perceptions of NTS issues.[26] It is not uncommon for the arrival of large numbers of migrants to exacerbate societal anxieties, sometimes causing a shift in the public perception of security.[27] This change in perception can, in turn, influence government policies and the securitisation processes within these countries.[28] Consequently, this intensified cross-border human mobility renders security relations among neighbouring countries in the Global South more intimate and closely intertwined.

Dilemma of security cooperation with failed neighbouring states

As hinted above, many security problems in the Global South are caused by domestic political crises. Indeed, state failure and governance deficits are often associated with countries in the developing world and the Global South.[29] A failed state is one where the government, if there is any, lacks basic legitimacy and capacity to provide basic public goods, including security, justice, and economic opportunities.[30] In many instances, such state failure is accompanied by the fragmentation of the state and the emergence of spaces that are controlled by rebel groups and other non-state actors.[31] Especially in the periphery of the state, the emergence of such alternatively governed spaces can further destabilise the borderland regions among neighbouring states, which would make the list of NTS issues discussed above even more difficult to tackle.

However, the extant writings on security cooperation in the Global South continue to predominantly focus on state-to-state relations. As the introduction of this special issue mentions, sometimes the literature tends to romanticise South–South cooperations as normative projects and instances of solidarity.[32] Empirically speaking, much of the difficulty of security cooperation among the Global South countries, especially in situations where state authority is fragmented, has yet to receive enough attention.

State failure poses a clear dilemma for security cooperation with neighbouring countries.[33] On the one hand, states often feel compelled to maintain official diplomatic relations with the nominal national government to uphold international norms and preserve a semblance of recognition of its sovereignty. However, such an approach is inadequate for addressing the multifaceted security

[26]Gerasimos Tsourapas, 'The Syrian refugee crisis and foreign policy decision-making in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey', *Journal of Global Security Studies*, 4:4 (2019), pp. 464–81, available at: {https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogz016}.

[27]Lauren M. McLaren, 'Anti-immigrant prejudice in Europe: Contact, threat perception, and preferences for the exclusion of migrants', *Social Forces*, 81:3 (2003), pp. 909–36.

[28]Jef Huysmans, 'The European Union and the securitization of migration', *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 38:5 (2000), pp. 751–77.

[29]Chester A. Crocker, 'Engaging failing states', *Foreign Affairs*, 82 (2003), pp. 32–44 (p. 32).

[30]Robert I. Rotberg (ed.), *When States Fail: Causes and Consequences* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

[31]Cyanne E Loyle, Jessica Maves Braithwaite,Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham, Reyko Huang, R Joseph Huddleston, Danielle F Jung, Michael A Rubin, 'Revolt and rule: Learning about governance from rebel groups', *International Studies Review*, 24:4 (1 December 2022), viac043, available at: {https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viac043}.

[32]Tobias Berger and Markus-Michael Müller, 'South–South cooperation and the (re)making of global security governance', *European Journal of International Security*, this special issue.

[33]Georg Sørensen, 'After the security dilemma: The challenges of insecurity in weak states and the dilemma of liberal values', *Security Dialogue*, 38:3 (2007), pp. 357–78.

challenges that arise in the context of state failure.[34] It tends to overlook the complex political realities of fragmentation on the ground, where authority is frequently contested or divided among various non-state actors, including insurgent groups, militias, or informal power brokers.[35]

Regarding the set of NTS issues mentioned above, addressing them requires cooperation that transcends the capacities of a fragmented national government, which involves flexible and inclusive partnerships with these non-state actors as well. Thus, neighbouring states would have to navigate a delicate balance between supporting the official government while engaging with non-state actors who hold de facto power on the ground. This is the dilemma of how to effectively establish mechanisms to tackle these NTS threats. Below, we will discuss in detail Thailand's security relations with Myanmar with a particular emphasis on the dilemma faced by the Thai government in the context of the latter's domestic political crisis and state failure, and the subsequent securitisation of a set of NTS issues.

History of security relations between Myanmar and Thailand

Myanmar (formerly Burma) has long been securitised by Thailand (formerly Siam) due to their shared history and proximity. In Thailand's domestic security discourse, Myanmar occupies a central role as a perceived threat to territorial integrity and political autonomy. This perception stems from historical conflicts, most notably the 18th-century Burmese invasion that resulted in the destruction of Ayutthaya, Siam's ancient capital. The memory of this event has been woven into Thailand's nationalist narrative, framing Myanmar as an enduring adversary since premodern times.[36]

Thailand's perception of Myanmar as a security threat intensified during the Cold War, a period when the Thai government was already confronting communist insurgencies in Indochina and participating in US-led military interventions there.[37] The 1962 coup by General Ne Win in Myanmar further strained bilateral relations. His adoption of the isolationist 'Burmese Way to Socialism' policy heightened Thai concerns about potential communist spillover from Myanmar, making mutual trust nearly unattainable.[38] In response, Thailand pursued a 'buffer zone policy', when it supported a couple of ethnic armed groups along the Myanmar border that opposed the military junta. This strategy became the cornerstone of Thailand's Cold War–era foreign policy towards Myanmar. However, by supporting anti-government rebels, Thailand inadvertently reinforced the Myanmar regime's deep-seated mistrust, creating a lasting rift between the two nations.[39]

With the end of the Cold War, Thailand began moving away from its adversarial stance toward Myanmar. Under prime minister Chatichai Choonhavan in the late 1980s, Bangkok adopted a new foreign policy vision, seeking to 'turn Indochina from a battlefield into a marketplace'.[40] Despite Myanmar's international isolation due to human rights violations, Thailand chose engagement over confrontation. Throughout the 1990s, Thailand actively worked to reintegrate Myanmar into the regional community. It successfully advocated for ASEAN's adoption of a 'Constructive

[34]Stephen D. Krasner, 'Sharing sovereignty: New institutions for collapsed and failing states', *International Security*, 29:2 (2004), pp. 85–120.

[35]Wendy Pearlman and Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham, 'Nonstate actors, fragmentation, and conflict processes', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 56:1 (2012), pp. 3–15.

[36]Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, *A History of Thailand* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[37]Dhanasarit Satawedin, 'Thai–American alliance during the Laotian crisis, 1959–1962: A case study of the bargaining power of a small state', PhD diss., Northern Illinois University (1984).

[38]Robert H. Taylor, *The State in Myanmar* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2008).

[39]Pavin Chachavalpongpun, 'Thailand–Myanmar relations: Old animosity in a new bilateral setting', in N. Ganesan and Ramses Amer (eds), *International Relations in Southeast Asia: Between Bilateralism and Multilateralism* (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2010), pp.117–142.

[40]Marc Innes-Brown and Mark J. Valencia, 'Thailand's resource diplomacy in Indochina and Myanmar', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 14:4 (1993), pp. 332–51.

Engagement Policy' towards Myanmar,[41] arguing that complete isolation would only deepen the country's alienation and prolong its domestic political crisis – an approach ASEAN members broadly supported as more pragmatic than punitive measures.[42]

The principle of non-interference served as a key facilitator in Thailand's engagement with Myanmar's military regime. Recognising their shared 2,400-kilometre border as both a strategic vulnerability and an imperative for cooperation, Thailand prioritised military-to-military relations. This geopolitical reality underpinned extensive border security collaboration, institutionalised through multiple bilateral mechanisms, such as the Joint Boundary Committee (JBC) under the Thailand–Myanmar Joint Commission for Bilateral Cooperation (JCBC), the Township Border Committee (TBC), and the Regional Border Committee (RBC).

These bilateral security mechanisms were established to mitigate interstate conflicts and cross-border threats. The JBC, formed in 1981, specifically handled territorial disputes between the two nations. During the early 1990s, regular meetings strengthened border security cooperation, leading to tangible outcomes such as the construction of a friendship bridge and the institutionalisation of local coordination through the TBC and RBC. Operationally, the RBC facilitates annual or biannual meetings between regional military commands, while the TBC enables more frequent engagement – with local authorities meeting at least six times yearly. Over time, these committees have become reliable platforms for security dialogue, gradually building trust between the two countries' military leaderships.[43]

Despite these cooperative frameworks, bilateral relations remained strained. Thailand's tacit continuation of its buffer zone policy – maintaining unofficial ties with Myanmar's ethnic armed groups – fuelled distrust within the Myanmar military regime. This often prompted border closures by Myanmar authorities in retaliation. Lingering territorial disputes further exacerbated tensions between the two neighbours.[44] Following the 1997 financial crisis, Thailand proposed a 'Flexible Engagement Policy' within ASEAN, advocating for discussions on domestic issues with cross-border consequences – particularly those affecting democracy and human rights.[45] This policy revealed Bangkok's lingering concerns about Myanmar's military regime during the 1990s, even as bilateral relations showed signs of normalisation.

Since the 2000s, Thai–Myanmar relations have experienced significant improvement. Under prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra's administration (2001–6), Thailand implemented a 'Good Neighbor Policy' in 2003 aimed at fostering bilateral trust and cooperation.[46] Through this policy, Thailand assumed a mediating role between Myanmar's military government and ethnic armed groups along the border. The Thaksin administration further normalised bilateral relations by prioritising economic cooperation over security concerns. Despite international sanctions, Thailand pursued mutually beneficial economic engagement – extending soft loans to Myanmar while facilitating Thai private sector investments, particularly in telecommunications.[47]

[41] Kavi Chongkittavorn, 'Thai–Burma relations', *Challenges to Democratization in Burma: Perspectives on Multilateral and Bilateral Responses* (Stockholm: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2001), p. 122, pp. 117–129.

[42] Jürgen Haacke, '"Enhanced interaction" with Myanmar and the project of a security community: Is ASEAN refining or breaking with its diplomatic and security culture?', *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs*, 27:2 (2005), pp. 188–216.

[43] Sirimon Atipatya, 'The military and Thai foreign affairs: A case study of the role of the royal Thai Army in the Thai–Burmese relations (1996–1998)' (in Thai), Master's thesis, Department of International Relations, Faculty of Political Science, Chulalongkorn University (2001).

[44] Nicole Jenne, 'Managing territorial disputes in Southeast Asia: Is there more than the South China Sea?', *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 36:3 (2017), pp. 35–61.

[45] Jürgen Haacke, 'The concept of flexible engagement and the practice of enhanced interaction: Intramural challenges to the "ASEAN way"', *The Pacific Review*, 12:4 (1999), pp. 581–611.

[46] Pornpimol Trichote, *Myanmar's Foreign Affairs with Neighboring Countries in Ethnic Minority Context* (in Thai) (Bangkok: Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University, 2008).

[47] Pavin Chachavalpongpun, *A Plastic Nation: The Curse of Thainess in Thai–Burmese Relations* (in Thai) (Bangkok: Sameskybooks, 2018).

Meanwhile, Thailand redirected its security focus towards Myanmar's rebel groups and NTS challenges, particularly irregular migration. Bangkok intensified restrictions on Myanmar political exiles, suppressing their activities and controlling refugee movements. This shift was further institutionalised through bilateral agreements, including the 2003 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on Cooperation in the Employment of Workers, which established formal mechanisms for labour-migration management.[48]

Following Myanmar's political reforms around 2010/11, Thai–Myanmar relations remained stable. After Thailand's own military coup in 2014, the Prayut Chan-o-cha administration (under the National Council for Peace and Order) strengthened ties with both Myanmar's civilian government and military. Notably, Prayut selected Myanmar as his first official overseas destination as prime minister, which signalled both the strategic importance of bilateral relations and Myanmar's tacit endorsement of Thailand's post-coup government.[49]

However, the Thai government continued to securitise a list of NTS threats from Myanmar. For instance, irregular migration has been emphasised as a threat for Thailand's domestic stability.[50] Human trafficking also became an important issue that the Thai government was concerned about because it affected Thailand's international reputation.[51] As the following analysis will demonstrate, Myanmar's current political crisis – triggered by the 2021 military coup – has greatly intensified Thailand's securitisation of NTS challenges along their shared border.

Current political crisis and state failure in Myanmar

Myanmar's military, led by General Min Aung Hlaing, seized power on 1 February 2021, overthrowing the democratically elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi. The newly established State Administration Council (SAC) immediately declared a state of emergency, arresting Suu Kyi along with numerous government officials and activists. This triggered mass protests across the country, with demonstrators demanding democracy's restoration. The military responded with brutal force, resulting in thousands of deaths and arrests – a crackdown that has led to a full-scale civil war. As resistance movements gained momentum with support from some ethnic armed groups, analysts estimate the junta has lost control over nearly half of Myanmar's territory, reflecting both its eroding legitimacy and weakening military capacity.[52]

The Myanmar coup triggered renewed international condemnation and Western sanctions.[53] However, Thailand maintained its close military ties with Myanmar's junta, diverging from Western and some ASEAN partners' approaches to isolate the SAC. Bangkok formally recognised the military regime as Myanmar's legitimate government, facilitating multiple high-level exchanges between both countries' armed forces. Notably, Thailand included junta representatives in regional meetings despite international objections – a clear demonstration of its pragmatic approach to the crisis.[54]

Thailand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has recently been pushing for dialogue in the Myanmar political crisis, aiming to act as a bridge between Myanmar and the global community. In contrast to some other ASEAN countries, Thailand participated in several initiatives supporting the Myanmar

[48]Nucharee Srivirojana, Sureeporn Punpuing, Courtland Robinson, Rosalia Sciortino, Patama vapattanawong, 'Marginalization, morbidity and mortality: A case study of Myanmar migrants in Ranong Province, Thailand', *Journal of Population and Social Studies [JPSS]* 22:1 (2014), pp. 33–52.

[49]'Old soldiers to meet as Thai PM makes Myanmar his first foreign visit', *Reuters* (8 October 2014), available at: {https://www.reuters.com/article/us-thailand-myanmar-idUSKCN0HW25120141007}.

[50]Inga Gruß, 'The emergence of the temporary migrant: Bureaucracies, legality and Myanmar migrants in Thailand', *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, 32:1 (2017), pp. 1–35.

[51]Sarah R. Meyer, W. Courtland Robinson, Nada Abshir, Aye Aye Mar, Michele R. Decker, 'Trafficking, exploitation and migration on the Thailand–Burma border: A qualitative study', *International Migration*, 53:4 (2015), pp. 37–50.

[52]'Junta controls fewer than 100 of Myanmar's 350 towns: NUG', *The Irrawaddy* (13 August 2024).

[53]Enze Han, 'Competing regimes and multiple stakeholders: How China hedges its relations with Myanmar', *East Asian Policy*, 16:4 (2024), pp. 59–71.

[54]Sui-Lee Wee, 'Ignoring protests, Thailand opens door to Myanmar's military leader', *The Strait Times* (4 April 2025).

military regime, such as the so-called Track 1.5 and non-ASEAN meetings.[55] The Thai foreign minister also held an informal dialogue with the Myanmar junta in June 2023 and met with Aung San Suu Kyi in July 2023.[56] Overall, since the 2021 coup, Thailand's approach towards Myanmar has been primarily focused on preserving stability in bilateral relations.

The political crisis in Myanmar has produced strong spillover effects for Thailand. Ongoing violence and instability have displaced thousands of Myanmar nationals, many fleeing across the border into Thailand. While precise figures remain unclear, estimates suggest tens of thousands have sought refuge since the 2021 coup.[57] These migration waves have mirrored the escalating turmoil within Myanmar, which has created distinct influx patterns corresponding to periods of intensified conflicts.

In response, the Thai government has established Temporary Safety Areas (TSAs), with the Royal Thai Army helping supervision of the refugee flows. These facilities provide displaced persons with temporary shelter, medical care, and food assistance while awaiting more permanent solutions. Given the operation's scale and complexity – requiring coordinated logistics, management, and security – military oversight ensures both refugee safety and operational efficiency. However, TSAs remain transitional spaces rather than permanent settlements.[58] The establishment of these TSAs serves a dual purpose: providing urgent humanitarian assistance to displaced Myanmar nationals while addressing the complex logistical and security challenges of mass migration. Simultaneously, Myanmar's political crisis has exacerbated NTS concerns, which has led to heightened securitisation responses from both Thai state authorities and civil society.

Securitisation and the dilemma of NTS cooperation between Thailand and Myanmar

The securitisation of NTS issues in Thailand has been driven by the transnational nature of these threats. In recent years, the Thai government has recognised the need to adopt a comprehensive approach to address these issues, which requires the involvement of multiple government agencies and stakeholders. Specifically, Thailand's securitisation of NTS issues is reflected in various policies adopted by different government agencies. The Thai government has incorporated many NTS issues into the National Security Policy and Plan (NSPP), which covers the period from 2023–7. This plan highlights several issues, including irregular migration, human trafficking, narcotics, cybersecurity, and health emergencies, as security issues that need to be addressed. The inclusion of these issues in the national security policy indicates the Thai government's recognition of the complex interplay between NTS and conventional national security, which requires a comprehensive approach to manage and mitigate them.

The NSPP demonstrates the Thai government's clear awareness of security externalities stemming from neighbouring countries. The document frequently references the term '*ประเทศรอบบ้าน*' – literally translating to 'countries surrounding the home' (i.e. Thailand). Such a phrase constructs a discursive boundary between Thailand ('the home') and its neighbours, which then frames the latter as where many NTS issues originate that could bring risks for Thailand and warrant countermeasures to address them. For instance, on page 52, the NSPP emphasises Thailand's need to advance discussions with neighbouring states to prevent and resolve threats from many NTS issues

[55]'Myanmar, neighbors including Thailand hold Track 1.5 dialogue without ASEAN members', *Benar News (*27 April 2023), available at: {https://www.benarnews.org/english/commentaries/new-dialogues-04272023145123.html}.

[56]Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kingdom of Thailand, 'Thailand hosts an informal meeting among countries affected by the situation in Myanmar' (18 June 2023), available at: {https://www.mfa.go.th/en/content/informal-discussion-myanmar-2?cate=5d5bcb4e15e39c306000683e}.

[57]Susan Banki, 'Porosity on the Thailand–Myanmar border: Before and after Myanmar's 2021 coup', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 51:2 (2025), pp. 526–45.

[58]Sang Kook Lee, 'Security, economy and the modes of refugees' livelihood pursuit: Focus on Karen refugees in Thailand', *Asian Studies Review*, 38:3 (2014), pp. 461–79.

across common borders. The NSPP also identifies the problem of illegal migration from neighbouring countries. For example, on pages 123–4, it says Thailand should strengthen border communities to monitor illegal labour trafficking because of networks that smuggle illegal labour from neighbouring countries. It also lists that these illegal migrants can act as carriers of both existing and emerging infectious diseases.

In addition, the National Security Council (NSC) has been designated as the primary agency responsible for addressing these new security issues, including the NTS ones. The NSC is responsible for developing national security strategies and coordinating with various government agencies to address potential security threats. The Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC) also plays a prominent role in managing NTS issues. Apart from its conventional duties on border security and the conflict in southern Thailand, ISOC is tasked with dealing with migration and narcotics. This responsibility reflects the Thai government's recognition of the transnational nature of these issues and the need for an integrated approach to tackle them. Again, in the NSPP, it mentions on page 123 how drug trafficking groups use Thailand as a transit point to smuggle drugs from the Golden Triangle area along the Thai–Myanmar border to other countries.

Thailand's approach to NTS challenges from Myanmar extends beyond policy frameworks to concrete operational measures. The analysis below focuses specifically on four key NTS issues that have intensified since Myanmar's coup, while also highlighting how Myanmar's state failure has disrupted bilateral security cooperation.

Irregular migration

Thailand has long been a primary destination for Myanmar migrants due to its geographical proximity, higher wages, and demand for labour across sectors such as construction, garment manufacturing, domestic work, fisheries, and services.[59] The conflict in Myanmar, particularly following the 2021 coup, has substantively increased the number of displaced individuals seeking refuge in Thailand. Unofficial estimates suggest that about 4 million Myanmar nationals currently reside in Thailand.[60] According to Thailand's Ministry of Labour, 2.3 million Myanmar nationals are officially registered as migrant workers.[61] That means the other 2 million or so Myanmar nationals are in Thailand illegally. The ongoing political crisis has further strained Thailand's migration management system, pushing many migrants outside the legal framework. The deteriorating political and economic conditions in Myanmar have driven many to flee, often through irregular migration channels, as formal pathways remain limited.

After the coup, Thailand's 3rd Army had been actively mobilised to moniter the border and mangae displaced people from Myanmar from crossing into Thailand illegally. Fearing the intensification of conflict within Myanmar between the military junta and various resistance forces, the 3rd Army Operations Centre had to reassure the public to have confidence that the border defence would protect sovereignty and safeguard Thailand's national interests.[62] Although temporary shelters have been provided for those refugees, the Thai government has made clear that it want them to stay temporary, and it does not want to be permanently burdened with the refugees from Myanmar. For example, General Nipat Thonglet, former permanent secretary of the Ministry of Defence, called for discussion within Myanmar's government to address the root causes because of the hundreds of thousands of displaced people already in Thailand.[63]

[59]Stephen Campbell, 'Everyday recomposition: Precarity and socialization in Thailand's migrant workforce', *American Ethnologist*, 43:2 (2016), pp. 258–69.

[60]United Nations Thematic Working Group on Migration in Thailand, forthcoming.

[61]Foreign Workers Administration Office, 2024.

[62]Chiang Mai News, สถานการณ์ปะทะระหว่างทหารเมียนมา กับชนกลุ่มน้อย ซึ่งส่งผลกระทบให้เกิดผู้หนีภัยความไม่สงบชาวเมียนมา (ผภสม.) ในพื้นที่ชายแดนจังหวัดตาก (9 June 2021), available at: {https://www.chiangmainews.co.th/social/1684840/}.

[63]Bangkok Business News, 9 แคมป์ 'ผู้อพยพเมียนมา' 40 ปี ไทยแบกรับ 'ภาระถาวร' (2 April 2021), available at: {https://www.bangkokbiznews.com/politics/930433}.

Several structural factors have exacerbated effective cooperation between the two countries on illegal migration. Firstly, the bilateral framework governing labour migration, which includes the official MOU between Thailand and Myanmar, has faced challenges in gaining acceptance among Myanmar migrants. The coup has eroded people's trust in Myanmar's military-controlled institutions, and many people are unwilling to engage with them to process paperwork through the formal migration channels. Additionally, Myanmar's weakened bureaucracy struggles to manage the administrative requirements of legal migration management, such as the national verification process and issuance of Certificates of Identity (CI), which are essential for Thailand's periodic migrant regularisation under its Cabinet Resolution mechanism. Moreover, the SAC introduced several measures that have been dissuading Myanmar people from registering in the system, such as deducting remittance taxes and restricting the exit of people for the sake of forced conscription. The SAC's policies and control have considerably complicated Thailand's efforts to manage legal labour migration.

Thailand's labour-migration management system relies heavily on bilateral cooperation. Despite the political instability in Myanmar, Thailand continues to engage with Myanmar's SAC through existing MOUs. These agreements aim to regulate labour migration while emphasising the temporariness of migrant workers residing in Thailand. Myanmar's embassies and consulates in Thailand remain responsible for issuing identity documents, which are crucial for maintaining migrants' legal status in Thailand. While Thailand has considered unilaterally regularising Myanmar migrants, such actions still depend on guarantees from Myanmar as the sending state.

This reliance highlights the limitations of the international migration governance framework, which often assumes that both sending and receiving states should always cooperate. International organisations, such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the International Labour Organization (ILO), have also influenced Thailand's migration agenda. These organisations promote frameworks for 'safe migration', emphasising bilateral labour agreements and migrant protections. However, such frameworks often overlook the challenges posed by sending states with compromised administrative capacity and reduced political legitimacy.

Public health issues

Public health in Myanmar has faced severe disruptions following the 2021 coup and subsequent violence across the country. The coup occurred in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, a time when the Thai government had already framed migrants as potential virus carriers. Migrant workers became a primary target of disease control measures as a result of such securitisation. From December 2020 to mid-2021, Thai authorities implemented policies such as lockdowns in migrant accommodations and workplaces, as well as restrictions on their movement. In areas where infections were detected, apartments with high concentrations of migrant workers were placed under direct surveillance, with barbed wire even erected at building entrances to enforce containment.[64] The 'No Movement of Migrant Workers' measure prohibited low-skilled foreign workers from leaving the provinces where they worked, while Thai nationals faced no such restrictions.[65] These movement controls, targeting both documented and undocumented migrants, were enforced in multiple provinces. In some areas, curfews were imposed exclusively on migrant workers, who were predominantly from Myanmar.[66]

There were also attempts to frame migrants illegally crossing the border as agents of virus spread in Thailand. For instance, on 12 September 2020, the Public Relations Department of the Ministry of Public Health posted on X: 'Thai soldiers at the Thai–Myanmar border remain steadfast in protecting Thai land and citizens without rest. This includes maintaining security and preventing illegal border crossings, especially as Myanmar faces another wave of Covid-19.' Following the

[64] https://x.com/sirotek/status/1417340955808567297.
[65] https://mgronline.com/uptodate/detail/9630000129723.
[66] https://www.thairath.co.th/news/local/2135785.

coup, the influx of refugees into Thailand intensified the Thai government's and public's perception of them as a threat. On 13 April 2021, the same department tweeted: 'The border must also be Covid-free. Rangers 36 have sprayed additional disinfectant in five more areas to accommodate Myanmar refugees fleeing unrest in their hometowns.'

At the same time, Myanmar's domestic political crisis has led to the collapse of the national healthcare system. In the aftermath of the coup, many medical professionals and healthcare workers joined the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) to resist the junta. In retaliation, the military regime intensified efforts to crackdown on these resistance efforts. Public hospitals became conflict zones where both healthcare workers and patients were targeted, attacked, and arrested. Many healthcare professionals were forced to flee, either relocating to remote areas or seeking refuge in neighbouring countries. In regions controlled by rebels, health facilities were specifically targeted by military operations, and medical supplies were frequently confiscated or blocked. Therefore, the coup has severely disrupted regular medical care, exacerbating public health risks. The disruption has heightened the transmission of diseases in addition to Covid-19, such as tuberculosis, malaria, and cholera, and compromised the treatment of HIV/AIDS due to shortages of antiretroviral drugs and supply chain failures. In rebel-controlled areas, the rising number of individuals injured in armed conflict and air strikes has increased the demand for medical treatment.

The collapse of Myanmar's healthcare infrastructure has created major challenges for Thailand's health security, particularly in border areas. Thai hospitals near the border have become the front line in addressing health issues linked to the ongoing armed conflict in Myanmar. Key challenges include limited access to primary care and disease prevention for undocumented migrants and displaced populations. Survivors of mass killings, retaliatory burnings, and torture urgently need secure medical facilities and consistent access to medical supplies. While Thai hospitals provide comparatively better healthcare services, supported by more robust medical supplies and personnel, these services often come with higher costs, posing additional barriers to access for vulnerable populations from Myanmar. Previously, Thailand's Ministry of Public Health proposed a Development Cooperation Programme on Health in collaboration with Myanmar's Ministry of Health and Sport. The programme aimed to address key public health challenges, focusing on the prevention and control of communicable diseases, zoonoses, and vector-borne illnesses, as well as the management of tuberculosis (TB) and HIV/AIDS.[67] Since the coup, although Thailand has tried to maintain formal relations with Myanmar's public health agencies, such efforts have witnessed more challenges than before due to the lack of capacity of the latter.[68]

However, some local level cooperation continued. The Thailand International Cooperation Agency (TICA), under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, has partnered with Dawei Hospital to strengthen capacity and enhance emergency preparedness along the border. TICA also collaborates with Thailand's Ministry of Public Health on initiatives to prevent disease outbreaks, such as the 'Cooperation with Neighboring Countries in Preventing Disease at the Origin'. These efforts involve coordinated public health measures between parallel border provinces of the two countries, including Tak–Myawaddy, Chiang Rai–Tachileik, and Ranong–Kawthaung.[69]

Furthermore, there has been some cooperation between Thai public hospitals and community-based healthcare providers. The notable Mae Tao Clinic (MTC) in Mae Sot District, Tak Province, which serves as a critical healthcare hub for undocumented migrants, has worked closely with Mae Sot Hospital.[70] Similarly, humanitarian organisations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), ethnic-led health groups, and volunteer ambulance services have collaborated

[67]https://cic.anamai.moph.go.th/web-upload/23xcfa0662ec139f06b2a8fd5d6d3865bbb/tinymce/KPI64_1/1_40/01%20Draft%20MMR-Thai%20Programme%202020-2022.pdf.

[68]https://tica-thaigov.mfa.go.th/en/content/the-ministry-of-foreign-affairs-and-the-ministryo?page=5d7da97015e39c3fbc00b624&menu=5f4773b8afb16d3b3410ace7.

[69]https://tica-thaigov.mfa.go.th/en/content/director-of-the-international-development-cooperat?page=5d7da97015e39c3fbc00b624.

[70]https://maesot.moph.go.th/news/view/VFhwcmVVNTNQVDA9/15.

with Thai district hospitals along the border in assisting injured patients affected by the armed conflict. In collaboration among public health researchers, the Shoklo Malaria Research Unit (SMRU) has also intensified its efforts in malaria eradication and TB studies.[71] Those efforts have had some positive effects on the ground despite the lack of official bilateral cooperation at the state-to-state level.

Transboundary pollution

Transboundary pollution from Myanmar has been increasingly recognised as a security issue in Thailand in recent years. The main source of this transboundary pollution is largely the open burning of agricultural land and forests, which has been a historical practice during the dry season in mainland South-East Asia.[72] However, as a result of the recent expansion of Thai agribusiness investments in Myanmar, maize plantations have increased drastically in Myanmar's Shan State, that borders Thailand.[73] The expansion of maize plantations and the burning of stocks have caused unprecedented level of haze, leading to heavy air pollution problems in northern Thailand, particularly in Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai provinces, with hazardous levels of PM2.5.[74]

The transboundary haze crisis has been securitised in Thai public discourse, framed as an existential threat to both public health and economic stability in the country. Northern border provinces have faced severe health impacts, with hospitals documenting dramatic spikes in respiratory illnesses during peak haze seasons. A striking example occurred in 2023 when 1,700 Chiang Mai residents filed a landmark lawsuit against the prime minister and national agencies for failing to address the chronic smog. The plaintiffs argued the pollution reduces local life expectancy by five years, which indicated how citizens now perceive haze as a direct threat to survival rather than merely an environmental concern.[75] At the same time, the haze has significantly tarnished the country's reputation as an international tourism hub. The skyrocketing levels of pollution have seen international tourists discouraged from visiting, and the Thai Hotel Association Northern Chapter also warned domestic visitors were cancelling bookings in Chiang Mai during the haze season in 2024.[76]

The Thai government clearly understands much of the haze in the north come from neighbouring countries, and according to some estimates, indeed, about 70 per cent of the haze in Chiang Rai province comes from both Myanmar and Laos.[77] Thus, efforts have been made through diplomatic means to ask for cooperation among neighbouring countries to address the sources of pollution. For example, in April 2023, Thai foreign minister Don Pramudwinai visited Myanmar, where he met with the head of the military junta General Min Aung Hlaing, and they discussed the issue of transboundary haze.[78] Additionally, the Thai government has appealed through ASEAN mechanisms to encourage Myanmar to employ more sustainable agricultural practices and effective forest-fire management.

Following the 2022 ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution, Thailand hosted an online trilateral consultation in April 2023 with Laos and Myanmar to address the regional haze crisis.[79] This collaboration culminated in the launch of the 'Clear Sky Strategy' in October 2024.

[71] https://www.shoklo-unit.com/.

[72] Mary Mostafanezhad, Evrard Olivier, and Chaya Vaddhanaphuti, 'Particulate matters: Air pollution and the political ecology of a boundary object', *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, 114:4 (2024), pp. 826–43.

[73] Kevin Woods, 'Commercial agriculture expansion in Myanmar: Links to deforestation, conversion timber, and land conflicts' (Forest Trends, 2015); Enze Han and Qiongyu Huang, 'Global commodity markets, Chinese demand for maize, and deforestation in northern Myanmar', *Land*, 10:11 (2021), p. 1232.

[74] 'Thailand to tackle transboundary haze as pollution worsens', *Economist Intelligence Unit* (12 April 2023).

[75] 'Chiang Mai people sue PM for failing to tackle smog', *Bangkok Post* (10 April 2023).

[76] 'Chiang Mai tops world's most polluted cities as toxic smog engulfs Thai tourist hotspot', *South China Morning Post* (15 March 2024).

[77] https://dailynews.co.th/news/2161061.

[78] 'Foreign Minister Don meets Myanmar junta chief', *Bangkok Post* (22 April 2023).

[79] https://thailand.prd.go.th/en/content/category/detail/id/48/iid/172679.

The strategy, spanning 2024–2030, was introduced by Thailand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, in partnership with counterparts from Laos and Myanmar's military government.[80] It aims to reduce PM2.5 pollution through a variety of measures, including sustainable agricultural practices and enhanced regional coordination.

Thailand's diplomatic outreach to Myanmar's military junta has been complicated by the latter's eroding control over border regions, where much of the transboundary haze originates. Large swaths of these areas remain under the authority of ethnic armed groups and local militias, whose divergent agendas (e.g. land use, resource extraction) often prioritise economic survival over environmental concerns. This fragmentation renders traditional state-to-state cooperation ineffective, as the junta lacks the capacity to enforce anti-pollution measures in contested territories, while Thailand's own domestic political constraints prevent direct engagement with these non-state actors. Consequently, the haze crisis persists as a geopolitical dilemma, with neither centralised diplomacy nor localised solutions offering a clear path forward.[81]

Narcotics

The political upheaval following Myanmar's 2021 coup has likewise worsened the narcotics issue. The military regime's actions have spurred the growth of armed groups in border areas, including the Golden Triangle area.[82] The post-coup period has seen a significant civilian mobilisation, with many joining armed resistance groups and operating from jungle bases to challenge the military regime. This grassroots uprising has reinvigorated long-standing ethnic armed groups, which has led to intensified armed confrontations across multiple regions. The resulting escalation in conflict has created a complex security landscape where both newly formed civilian defence forces and established ethnic militias are simultaneously contesting junta control. The political turmoil has prompted some ethnic armed groups and those militias tied to the military to increase narcotics production as a revenue source, including both opium and synthetic drugs production.[83] For example, in 2022, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) noted an 88 per cent surge in opium production, covering approximately 40,000 hectares, and in recent years Thailand has witnessed a record high amount of synthetic drugs seized along its border with Myanmar.[84]

Thailand remains a key transit hub for narcotics trafficking from the Golden Triangle area.[85] Most drugs enter the country through natural border routes in Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai, facilitated by local traffickers. Drugs trafficked through Thailand are either consumed domestically or distributed to neighbouring countries and beyond. Indeed, Thailand has consistently ranked first in drug-related arrests in South-East Asia.[86] The drug epidemic has wrought devastation across rural Thailand, ravaging households and fuelling a surge in property and violent crimes. Simultaneously, transnational drug syndicates – exploiting weak cross-border law enforcement coordination – have transformed the Myanmar–Thai frontier into a hub for narcotics trafficking, directly threatening Thailand's national security. This dual crisis of public health and border security has led Thai

[80] https://www.nationthailand.com/news/world/40042833.

[81] Andrew Ong, *Stalemate: Autonomy and Insurgency on the China–Myanmar Border* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2023).

[82] For a discussion of criminal networks along Myanmar's northern and eastern border with China, please see also Xue Gong, 'Ponder the path of thy feet: How China's security–development nexus works in the Mekong region', *European Journal of International Security*, this special issue.

[83] United Nations Thailand, 'Outbreak! UN joins hands on Myanmar–Laos–Thailand border to speed up crackdown on transnational crime in the Golden Triangle' (in Thai) (2 August 2023), available at: {https://thailand.un.org/th/240627-ระบาดหนัก-ยูเอ็นจับมือชายแดนเมียนมา-ลาว-ไทยเร่งปราบอาชญากรรมข้ามชาติสามเหลี่ยมทองคำ}.

[84] 'Thai police seize a record haul of 50 million methamphetamine tablets near border with Myanmar', *AP News* (13 December 2023).

[85] Ko-Lin Chin, *The Golden Triangle: Inside Southeast Asia's Drug Trade*, 1st ed. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009).

[86] Nickii Wantakan Arcado, 'Ice and instability: Illicit financial flows along Thailand's borders', *Center for Strategic & International Studies* (22 September 2022).

authorities to frame drug trafficking not merely as a criminal issue, but as an existential security threat.

Thailand has adopted a multifaceted approach to combat drug trafficking, including coordination with regional partners in the Mekong Subregion. In January 2025, deputy prime minister Phumtham Wechayachai outlined the government's comprehensive strategy to combat drug trafficking through regional cooperation. The proposed policies target all stages of the narcotics trade – from production sources to distribution networks – by enhancing collaboration with neighbouring countries, such as intercepting illegal imports, controlling cross-border movements, and disrupting key trafficking route.

At the state-to-state level, Thailand has actively engaged in regional anti-drug trafficking initiatives with Myanmar. Despite the latter's political changes post-coup, bilateral coordination has persisted through regular high-level meetings. For example, there was a meeting in October 2021 between Thailand's minister of justice and Myanmar's deputy minister of home affairs, Than Hlaing, regarding joint narcotics control efforts. Operational collaboration has also been maintained through the close partnership between Myanmar's Drug Enforcement Division and Thailand's Narcotics Control Board.[87] During the 8th Thai–Myanmar High-Level Committee meeting in January 2023, senior military officials from both sides included discussions on combating cross-border drug trafficking as a key security challenge.[88]

However, despite such state-to-state engagements, it is not immediately clear what outcomes ensued. One major problem, as mentioned above, is that the drugs trade is so lucrative that it has been a long-term financial source for civil conflicts within Myanmar.[89] The post-coup security vacuum in Myanmar has led both ethnic armed groups and resistance forces to expand narcotics production as a primary revenue source. As the SAC junta's authority over border areas weakens, Thailand's anti-drug strategy confronts a fragmented landscape of armed actors, making traditional state-to-state cooperation increasingly ineffective for stemming the drug flow.

Conclusion

The geographical proximity of countries in the Global South often results in a more immediate and direct impact on their neighbours when security challenges arise. Humanitarian crises, conflicts, and political upheavals in one country can trigger significant population movements across borders, further intensifying security concerns for neighbouring states. Understanding the meaning of geographical proximity is essential for effectively addressing challenges in security cooperation among neighbouring countries in the Global South. This is particularly the case in the context of state failure, because the lack of state capacity and territorial control can frustrate and hamper any pre-existing cooperative measures.

To illustrate these dynamics, this paper presents empirical evidence from Myanmar and Thailand, and examines the interplay between domestic political crisis and bilateral security cooperation. Focusing specifically on Myanmar's post-coup political upheaval since 2021, the analysis highlights how these disruptions have shaped Thailand's security and diplomatic approaches towards its politically unstable neighbour. The coup has intensified Thailand's securitisation of a list of NTS challenges, which has created a complex policy dilemma. Bangkok faces competing imperatives: while maintaining formal diplomatic recognition of Myanmar's junta in accordance with ASEAN's principles of sovereignty and non-interference, it must simultaneously engage with non-state actors controlling contested border areas to effectively address emerging security threats. This dual approach reflects the dilemma in security cooperation between the two neighbours regarding

[87]Thailand Plus, 'International cooperation plans: Myanmar seized drugs before spilling into Thailand', (in Thai) (29 November 2022), available at: {https://www.thailandplus.tv/archives/640373}.

[88]'Thai and Myanmar armed forces' ties stepped up against drugs', *Bangkok Post* (21 January 2023), available at: {https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/2487599/thai-and-myanmar-armed-forces-ties-stepped-up-against-drugs}.

[89]Patrick Meehan, 'Fortifying or fragmenting the state? The political economy of the opium/heroin trade in Shan State, Myanmar, 1988–2013', *Critical Asian Studies*, 47:2 (2015), pp. 253–82.

balancing nominal state-to-state relations and operational necessities in managing cross-border NTS challenges.

The dual-track approach – combining formal state-to-state diplomacy with pragmatic subnational engagements – holds strong theoretical implications for understanding security cooperation in the Global South, where state fragility and contested authority are prevalent. Traditional security cooperation frameworks often tend to assume centralised state control, whereas real-world security challenges, both traditional and non-traditional, require hybrid models that engage both nominal national governments and fragmented political reality on the ground. Thailand's experience illustrates this necessity, as it faces the dilemma of security cooperation to deal with the NTS challenges emerging from Myanmar's ongoing internal conflicts. There is thus the need to move beyond the limitations of rigid state-centric models for adaptable, multilayered strategies in fragmented security environments when there is state failure in the Global South.

The findings reveal how Global South countries' security dynamics are heavily conditioned by the intersection of domestic instability and transnational spillover effects. This necessitates a reconceptualisation of regional cooperation frameworks to account for fragmented governance landscapes and the growing role of non-state actors. Through its examination of the Myanmar–Thailand case, this paper advances Security Studies scholarship by highlighting the need to reconcile conventional state-centric norms with the practical demands of managing NTS challenges – an area requiring further theoretical and empirical investigation in the Global South.

Acknowledgements. We would like to thank Tobias Berger and Markus-Michael Müller for organising the initial workshop on 'Security Cooperation in the Global South', and we thank Dr Gong Xue for her comments on an early version of the paper.

Dr Enze Han is Associate Professor at the Department of Politics and Public Administration, The University of Hong Kong. His publications include *The Ripple Effect: China's Complex Presence in Southeast Asia* (Oxford University Press, 2024), *Asymmetrical Neighbors: Borderland State Building between China and Southeast Asia* (Oxford University Press, 2019), *Contestation and Adaptation: The Politics of National Identity in China* (Oxford University Press, 2013), and more than 40 academic articles appearing in *Journal of Politics, International Affairs, Review of International Studies, World Development, The China Quarterly, Security Studies, Conflict Management and Peace Science*, and *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, among many others.

Dr Sirada Khemanitthathai is a lecturer at the School of International Affairs, Faculty of Political Science and Public Administration. She graduated with a PhD in Politics and International Studies from SOAS, University of London. Her research interests include politics of international migration, human rights in International Relations, and contemporary politics of Myanmar. Her ongoing research projects are related to internationalisation of Myanmar's political crisis, especially migration from Myanmar.

Cite this article: Enze Han and Sirada Khemanitthathai, 'State failure and dilemma of security cooperation among neighbouring countries in the Global South: Evidence from Myanmar and Thailand', *European Journal of International Security* (2025), pp. 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.10006