

Building Mosques and Bombing Churches

A Structured Focused Comparison of Negotiation Willingness in
Thailand and Myanmar Separatist Conflicts



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Abstract

This study examines why some separatist insurgencies negotiate while others continue armed struggle, focusing on BRN-C in Southern Thailand and the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) in Myanmar. Despite similar ethnoreligious, peripheral, and long-standing conflicts, BRN-C entered negotiations with the Thai state in 2025, while KIO continued its insurgency. Using a Most Similar Different Outcome design and a Structured Focused Comparison grounded in Azar's Protracted Social Conflict theory and complemented by natural resource theories, the study analyzes five variables: communal content, human needs, state governance, natural resources, and international linkages. The findings suggest that negotiation outcomes are primarily shaped by the interaction of state capacity, resource endowments, and external involvement. BRN-C's negotiations are linked to relatively stronger state capacity, limited rebel resource autonomy, and facilitating external mediation, while KIO's continued conflict reflects weak state legitimacy, resource-financed resilience, and sustaining external support from China. The study concludes that separatist negotiation behavior is best explained by structural interactions rather than single factors, while identity and grievances primarily explain conflict persistence rather than divergence in outcomes.

Key words: Protracted Social Conflict, separatist conflict, conflict duration, natural resources, Thailand, Barisan Revolusi Nasional-Coordinasi, Myanmar, Kachin Independence Organization

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List of Acronyms

BRN-C	Barisan Revolusi Nasional-Coordinasi
EAOs	Ethnic Armed Organizations
KIA	Kachin Independence Army
KIO	Kachin Independence Organization
NUG	National Unity Government
SBPs	Southern Border Provinces

1. Introduction

Political instability has been the name of the game in Southeast Asia since the end of colonial rule, as diverse ethnic and religious communities were forced into the mold of newly-formed nation-states. This process has frequently generated civil conflict, particularly in the form of separatist insurgencies. Such dynamics are evident in countries including the Philippines, Indonesia, Myanmar and Thailand. While some separatist movements fail to achieve their objectives, others, most notably in the Philippines and Indonesia, have secured forms of regional autonomy through negotiated settlements (Gindarsah, 2013). These successful cases of autonomy have led to an increased interest in separatist movements in the region. The Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) in Myanmar and Barisan Revolusi Nasional Koordinasi (BRN-C) in Thailand, as separatist actors involved in lengthy, peripheral, ethnic insurgencies (ibid), are increasingly relevant cases in this field.

BRN-C committed to negotiations with the Thai state at the end of 2025, expressly stating that its goals were regional autonomy and not full independence. KIO has similarly stated their goal as regional autonomy in a federal Myanmar, yet continues its armed struggle without negotiating with the state (Chalermripinyorat, 2026; Martin, 2025). In light of this recent progress toward peace in Southern Thailand, this paper aims to explore the underlying factors and dynamics that shape these varying outcomes. Previous studies have explored the underlying factors for successful autonomy movements in Bangsamoro in the Philippines (Gindarsah, 2013). The comparative approach of this paper instead entails focusing on providing broader explanations for the field of ethnoreligious prolonged separatist conflicts. The time period this paper explores begins in 2021 when the military coup in Myanmar and an increase in violence in the Southern Border Provinces (SBPs) in Thailand took place, until the end of 2025 when BRN-C started their negotiations with the Thai government (ICG, 2022; Chalermripinyorat; 2026, Martin, 2025).

1.1. Purpose and Research Question

Recent progress towards peace in Southern Thailand raises the important puzzle of why two similar insurgencies have had such diverging developments. The aim of this paper is to examine the differences between KIO and BRN-C in their respective struggles for autonomy, in order to derive the conducive dynamics of conflict that lead separatist movements to the negotiating table. The findings of this paper will be theoretically relevant for the academic field of separatist conflict and contribute to understanding conflict duration and the willingness to negotiate in long-standing insurgencies. Further, they could have potential policy implications for states and mediators dealing with similar insurgencies.

Thus, our research question is stated as follows:

What factors lead separatists to negotiate?

2. Previous Research

Civil conflict onset is commonly explained through two major perspectives, greed or grievances. Greed-based theories emphasize economic shocks, state weakness, military advantage, and low opportunity costs for rebellion, with resource access incentivizing loot-seeking behavior (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004; Fearon & Laitin, 2003; Miguel et al., 2004; Collier, 2010). In contrast, grievance-based explanations highlight identity, political narratives, and perceived injustice, particularly where groups are marginalized, excluded from power or face horizontal inequalities (Aspinall, 2007; Cederman et al., 2010; Cederman et al., 2011; Buhaug et al., 2014). Ethnic and religious identity, including “ethnic dominance,” further affect conflict risk (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004, pp. 587–589), and semi-democracies are generally more prone to conflict than full autocracies or democracies (Hegre, 2001).

While existing frameworks explain conflict onset, they are less effective in explaining duration and termination. Prolonged conflict is often driven by credible commitment problems, with parties doubting that agreements will be honored after power relations change, preventing durable agreements, particularly in territorial or resource disputes, or when rebels are financially independent (Fearon, 2004). Conflict duration is also associated with high fatalities and third-party intervention (Balch-Lindsay & Enterline, 2000). Even when conflicts end through military victory or negotiated settlement, underlying issues may persist, with incomplete agreements potentially increasing the risk of renewed conflict (Walter, 2009).

Research on separatist conflict examines intrastate actors seeking independence or autonomy from the central state, often mobilized around a shared collective identity. Although not always ethnic in nature (Heraclides, 1997), such conflicts generally involve groups with territorially linked identities. Separatist conflicts are more likely where ethnic groups are excluded from power, particularly in weak states lacking traditions of centralized rule. Importantly, in stronger states, rebels often refrain from pursuing full control of the state, pursuing regional autonomy rather than full independence. Those willing to remain within the state typically seek political inclusion, a larger share of state resources, and cultural protection with official recognition of their separate status (Buhaug, 2006; Gurr & Pitsch, 2003;

Wimmer et al., 2009). Moreover, separatist rebels often provide public goods to strengthen local legitimacy and in-group support (Stewart, 2018).

The risk for separatist conflicts increases in larger states with favorable insurgent terrain in marginalized peripheries, and may spread across unstable regions, though spillover effects are weaker in small, wealthy democracies (Walter, 2009; Buhaug & Gleditsch, 2008). Further, separatist demands also tend to prolong conflicts (Balch-Lindsay & Enterline, 2000). State concessions to divided movements are often strategic and ineffective, often leading to continued or increased violence, while concessions to unitary movements, albeit rare, are more likely to produce lasting peace (Cunningham, 2011).

Research on transitions to negotiation suggests that armed groups can shift positions from militancy to conflict transformation depending on if negotiations are perceived as viable and beneficial. Transitions are affected by both internal factors like reassessments of ineffective strategies, interim agreements and perceived opportunities for change, and external influence from third-party intermediaries facilitating negotiations. Case studies show that even partial and imperfect pre-agreement reforms can reduce incentives for continued armed conflict (McCartney, 2005). Moreover, ripeness theory is often used to identify when conflict parties are ready to approach negotiations. The ripe moment usually occurs during a Mutually Hurting Stalemate (MHS), when the perceived costs of fighting exceed the perceived benefits. However, parties will only pursue negotiations if they perceive “real opportunities” for a settlement (Zartman, 2008; Lustenberger, 2012).

While ripeness theory privileges rational cost-benefit calculations, this study reframes negotiation readiness through theories of conflict duration, emphasizing the co-constitutive role of multiple contextual variables, such as material conditions and identity-based grievances, in separatist decision-making. The study therefore addresses a gap in existing scholarship, which has rarely examined how these dynamics interact to shape divergent negotiation trajectories in ethnic separatist conflicts.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Protracted Social Conflict

The theoretical framework of this paper utilizes Edward E. Azar's theory of Protracted Social Conflict (PSC), which offers an explanation for the occurrence and pervasiveness of decades-long socio-ethnic conflicts, structured around four clusters of variables: the *communal content* of society, *human needs*, *governance and the state*, and *international linkages*. Complementary theories will be included in the variables to provide theoretical depth.

Azar's first variable is the *communal content* of a society, as PSCs are concentrated in multicommunal societies. Conflicts emerge from a "disarticulation between the state and society as a whole, with the state usually dominated by a single or a coalition of communal groups that are unresponsive to the needs of other groups in society" (Azar, 1990, p. 7). Tensions and grievances between social groups, for instance based on uneven distribution of political power, are expected to ultimately lead to violent conflict (Ramsbotham, 2005, pp. 114-115). Further, ethnically diverse societies entail that states are less likely to concede, in order to maintain a strong reputation and avoid setting precedents that could encourage demands from other ethnic groups (Walter, 2006, pp. 324-325; Walter, 2009, pp. 201-204).

Azar assumes that humans form communal groups in order to fulfill different fundamental needs, which connects to the second variable of PSC, the deprivation of *human needs*. PSCs emerge through collective grievances in societies where state authorities leave the security, acceptance and access needs of its population unaddressed. Security includes material needs such as food, housing and safety from physical harm, while acceptance regards the need for communal identities to be recognized and socially accepted. Access expresses the opportunity to participate in political and economic institutions. The three branches of needs are mutually reinforcing, and although deprivation of needs does not automatically trigger conflict, it contributes to the aforementioned tension between communal groups and the state (Azar, 1990, pp. 7-10; Ramsbotham, 2005, p. 115).

Azar's third variable, *governance and the state's role*, is crucial for the deprivation or satisfaction of human needs. The state's ability to address the needs of diverse communal identities is dependent on its regime type, as PSCs are concentrated in countries where the state is limited by a fragile or rigid authority structure (Azar, 1990, p. 11). Fragile states are characterized by weak territorial control, limited legitimacy and the loss of the monopoly on the legitimate use of force. Furthermore, they are often unable to provide adequate public services or interact effectively with other states as full members of the international community (Fragile states Index [FSI], n.d.a). Conversely, a rigid state virtually functions, but is nonetheless resistant to reforms in public policy and administration. This often involves an entrenched bureaucracy or military that is unwilling to adapt to new political, economic, and social conditions (Ali, 2018, p. 765, p. 768). Political power being monopolized by one communal group, in both fragile and rigid states, can trigger crises of legitimacy (Ramsbotham, 2005, p. 116). Similarly, ethnically exclusionary policies can intensify grievances, strengthen group solidarity, and make rebels more willing and able to sustain prolonged conflict (Wucherpfennig et al., 2012, pp. 111-112). Moreover, in societies with entrenched divisions, weak political institutions and persisting power asymmetries, conflict parties are more prone to encounter credible commitment problems. This signifies a mutual uncertainty that either party will uphold what is agreed upon (Walter, 2009, p. 258).

While the preconditions of PSC arise within a country, the external context also shapes conflict dynamics. Azar's fourth variable, *international linkages*, refers to the political, economic and military relations among national, regional and global actors. These linkages can limit autonomy, particularly when cross-border interests develop into clientage relationships, where the client trades its loyalty and obedience to the patron in exchange for protection or support. Such dependencies influence the actions of the client, for instance compelling weak governing bodies to pursue policies contrary to the needs of its own constituents. Direct or indirect intervention by such external powers not only widens the scope of the conflict but also extends its duration (Azar, 1990, pp. 11-15).

3.2. Natural Resources

The combined insights of Conrad et al and Le Billon will provide a framework for analyzing natural resources. These theories are included because of their prevalence in the literature on rebel conflict, and avoiding them risks overlooking potentially decisive explanations for the dynamics and duration of the selected cases. Natural resources can be expected to prolong conflict in several ways, making it a fitting complement to PSC.

Access to resource rents can finance rebel activities, including the procurement of weapons or recruitment of new members. If the rebels are the weaker conflict party, these funds prolong conflict by strengthening their resilience. A secessionist group that depends on resource rents will usually not agree to settlements that restrict their access to said resources. Further, “illusions of invulnerability” may develop within the group, creating the belief that negotiations with the state are unnecessary. These illusions reflect a broader commitment problem between rebels and the state, where mutual distrust undermines confidence in upholding agreements, particularly if one party expects to gain strength and negotiation leverage in the future (Conrad et al., 2019, pp. 593-597). Access to natural resources can also shape third-party behavior, as lucrative assets attract international and regional actors willing to provide support in exchange for resource access. Third-party mediation may be undermined as corporate interests override genuine peace efforts, while fiscal leverage declines if rebels become financially self-sufficient. Resource wealth can also shorten conflict duration, for instance if one party has a monopoly on resource revenues. If said party is the state, this wealth may act as motivation for rebels to defect to the state or as an incentive in peace negotiations (Le Billon, 2005, pp. 47–48).

To summarize, the theoretical framework of this paper consists of five dimensions, which will be further operationalized in the following chapter.

4. Research Design and Methods

4.1. Case Selection

The case selection for this paper is motivated by what De Meur & Berg-Schlosser call a Most Similar Different Outcome (MSDO) design (1996, p. 425), which focuses on cases that have similar characteristics but have a variation in the dependent variable. The task then becomes to find differences in the independent variables, in order to draw conclusions about what led to the divergent outcomes (Anckar 2008, p. 395). Based on this design, the rebel groups BRN-C in Thailand and KIO in Myanmar serve as the objects of comparison, because they have different outcomes despite having many similar characteristics. In this paper, the variation in the dependent variable is the willingness of separatists to negotiate with the state, while the independent variables are theory-driven and based on factors that have led to prolonged civil conflict in the past. In this way, the choice of cases is both motivated by the research design and the theoretical framework.

The similarities between BRN-C and KIO are that they both inhabit peripheral regions of Southeast Asian countries and have been in a state of conflict with the central states of their respective countries since the 1960s. They each represent an ethnic and religious minority group within their countries, and have similar claims of separatism, in a national historical context of unstable civil-military relations including multiple coups. Further, both groups have colonial legacies, with the Kachin being part of the colonization of Myanmar and the Pattani Malays being colonized by the Thai regime. Another similarity is that both groups have had temporary ceasefires and approached negotiations before at several points, but not reached any lasting settlements (Complicated War, 2026; Helbardt, 2011; BTI, 2026).

Given the prolonged nature of the conflicts, the timeframe of our analysis is limited to a five year period, 2021-2025. This period was chosen because of the societal turmoil linked to the 2021 military coup in Myanmar and a reported rise in casualties in the Thailand SBPs, representing new chapters in the respective conflicts (Asia Foundation, 2021, p. 21; ICG, 2022). Further, examining the conflicts in their entirety would result in an overly broad scope, which goes against the focused quality of an SFC (George & Bennet, p. 70). This limited

period enables us to draw relevant conclusions about which variables have contributed to the current conflict outcomes rather than past negotiations. Consequently, more recent developments after our chosen time period will not be accounted for, although events preceding it may be included for the sake of historical context.

4.2. Variables

This paper constructs five independent variables, drawing from the theory of Azar, Conrad et al., Le Billon, Walter, and Wucherpfennig et al. to explain the variations between the groups. The independent variables will be labelled: *Communal content*, *Human needs*, *Governance*, *Natural resources* and *International linkages*. Four of them draw on Azar's variables of PSC, with some additions, and one will be based on natural resource theories.

The first variable, *communal content*, examines the ethnic diversity of the country and the tensions it generates. It will be measured by the ethnic and religious composition of each country, with specific attention to the communal identities of the rebels and the state respectively and how these identities create societal tension.

The second variable, *human needs*, examines if the fundamental security and acceptance needs of the rebel groups are met, and how unmet needs create grievances. Security will be measured through the occurrence of violence and levels of underdevelopment in rebel territories, while acceptance will be evaluated by looking at how communal identities are socially accepted or marginalized.

The third variable, *the state*, examines the composition of the state and its ability to meet the needs of its citizens. Due to the state-centric perspective of this variable, political access from Azar's *deprivation of human needs* variable will be included here. This will be measured through regime type and the political access of the rebel group. Ethnically exclusionary policies will also be taken into account.

The fourth variable, *natural resources*, examines how access to natural resources affects the rebels and the state in their respective goals. This will be measured by the level of access to natural resources and whether these funds are used to sustain conflict. Additionally, if

resource access has facilitated rebel financial self-sufficiency, we will analyze if this has influenced their willingness to negotiate.

The fifth variable, *international linkages*, examines how regional actors affect the conflict between the state and the rebels, economically and militarily. Included in this variable is whether external third parties show an interest in the natural resources of the state or the rebel group. This will be measured by looking at mediation efforts, military or economic assistance to either conflict party and trade of natural resources between either of the conflict actors and external actors. This variable will be limited to the single most involved regional actor.

4.3. Method

To identify differences between the cases that are relevant to the different outcomes, this study employs a qualitative research design and will conduct a Small-N Structured Focused Comparison (SFC), as developed by George and Bennett (2005). Conducting an SFC entails asking a set of standardized general questions to each of the chosen cases, ensuring the comparability of the data. These questions are to be developed to fit the research objective and the theoretical focus of the study (George & Bennett, 2005, pp. 69-70). Therefore, the questions developed in this paper are grounded in the selected theories, and aim to provide answers relevant to understanding the dynamics of separatist conflict. Further, these questions should be applicable to other instances within the same empirical universe to ensure generalizability (George & Bennett, 2005, pp. 69), allowing future research on other separatist conflicts to use the same set of questions. Additionally, utilizing an SFC helps maintain focus on the research objective, as the questions prevent the analysis from being diverted by the multiple interpretations inherent in empirical data (pp. 70-71).

The general set of questions that we have derived from our five variables for our SFC are presented in the table below:

Variables	Conceptualization	General questions
<i>Communal content</i>	The ethnic and religious identities that compose the country and contribute to social tension between the rebels and the state.	- What is the ethnic and religious composition of the regime? - How does the ethnic and religious identity of the state create social tension between the conflict parties?
<i>Human needs</i>	The fundamental security and acceptance needs of rebels, which create grievances if left unmet.	- How are civilians subject to violence in conflict areas? - What is the level of underdevelopment in rebel territories relative to territory controlled by the regime? - Do other societal groups show acceptance for the identity of the rebel group?
<i>The state</i>	The organization of the state, and if this influences its ability to meet the access needs of the rebels.	- Is the country's regime type fragile or rigid? - Does the rebel group have access to the political system? - Are the rebels affected by any ethnically exclusionary policies of the state?
<i>Natural resources</i>	The level of access to natural resources and how that access affects the state or the rebels in their goals.	- Do the rebels have access to natural resources or is there a state monopoly? - Does rebel access to natural resources allow them to be financially self-sufficient?
<i>International linkages</i>	The effects of regional state actors on the conflict, militarily and economically, in addition to their interest in the natural resources of the conflict actors.	- How have regional actors affected the conflict dynamics? - Have natural resources influenced the actions of regional actors?

Table 1.

4.4. Material

The material used in this paper consists of a wide range of empirical material, including secondary sources like events data, reports, news-media and empirical studies, as well as some primary sources like official statements from the conflict parties. These qualitative sources will be combined with quantitative data, such as statistics and indices, to provide an in-depth analysis. This includes data which measures violence or underdevelopment levels, as

well as population demographics. Where different datasets are used for each case, they are treated as contextual indicators rather than identical measures. Our strategy to analyze and present this broad selection of material is through a qualitative thick description (Ponterotto, 2006), meaning that we aim to gather enough contextual detail to interpret political behavior, discourse and events in a comprehensive and meaningful way. While field data may prove useful to understand the genuine motives and identity claims of the rebel groups, more unobtrusive material has been chosen both to fit the scope of this paper and mitigate bias that may result from interviews (Halperin & Heath, p. 374). SFC constitutes both the method for data collection and analysis for this paper, as both cases will be explored along the same parameters, resulting in consistency across data collection and analysis. We operationalize this through cross-referencing with historical context, and triangulation across sources to ensure analytical depth and validity.

4.5. Delineations

Other variables than those that have been chosen for analysis in this paper may be relevant for the conflict outcomes. However, based on our choice of theory, we deem our five variables to be the most relevant for this study. Any substantial findings outside the theoretical framework will be discussed as additional factors and suggested for future research. Furthermore, while analyzing more than two cases could provide higher external validity, incorporating additional cases results in less in-depth analysis of each case, which may undermine the internal validity of the study (Halperin & Heath, 2020, pp. 168, 237-238, 147-148). The following chapter provides a background to the selected cases before proceeding to the empirical analysis.

5. Roots of Resistance

5.1. BRN-C

Before the late 19th century, Patani was a largely self-governing Malay tributary of Siam before being fully colonized during the 20th century. Today, the region borders Malaysia and corresponds to Thailand's SBPs of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat. The population in the area remains circa 80% Pattani Malay, and has resisted integration into predominantly Buddhist Thailand (McCargo, 2015, p.1-2; Minority Rights Group [MRG], 2026a). Separatist groups began guerrilla warfare against the Thai state in the 1960s. BRN was founded in 1963, and by the 1980s, the movement had fragmented into several factions, of which BRN-Coordinasi (BRN-C) became the largest and most organized (Abuza, 2006). During the reign of prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra in the early 2000s, violence peaked and BRN-C emerged as the dominant rebel faction (McCargo, 2015, p.2-3). Violence has declined since, though the seemingly unending clash between rebels and state forces has continued to 2025 (Jitpiromsi et al., 2024, p. 156; UCDP, n.d.).

Strategically, BRN-C combines terrorism and territorial insurgency tactics (Helbardt, 2011, p. 27). Human rights abuses have been committed by both BRN-C and state forces (UCDP, n.d.). Several peace talks have taken place between BRN-C and the state, often collapsing due to political instability and external disruptions (Pathan, 2025a). The original BRN's constitution portrays Patani Malays as a distinct nation united by religion, language, and history and BRN-C further seeks to implement sharia in the region. Previously, they sought an independent state in the SBPs (Helbardt, 2011, p. 26), however, recent negotiations have shifted toward demands for autonomous self-government (Chalermripinyorat, 2026).

5.2. KIO

Kachin State in northern Myanmar is inhabited by several ethnic tribes, with the largest grouping referred to as the Kachin. Myanmar is one of the world's most ethnically diverse countries, and while the Kachin are not entirely homogenous, KIO's armed struggle is

associated with Kachin ethno-nationalism tied to the geographical territory (Htung, 2022, p. 51). Historically, Kachin's borderland position enabled its leaders to retain influence under both Burmese kings and British colonial rule prior to World War II (Htung, 2022, pp. 40-41; MRG, 2017). KIO and its military wing, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), was founded in the early 1960s, alongside numerous other Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) seeking improved minority rights amid an increasingly centralized post-decolonization government. Myanmar was ruled by a military junta from 1962 until 2011, when it was replaced by a democratic government. The junta retook control in a 2021 coup, making the ousted democratic government declare war on the junta and form the National Unity Government (NUG). This ignited a full-scale civil war also involving all EAOs (Maizland, 2022). KIO was initially neutral after the coup, but resumed fighting with the junta before the end of the year. After supporting the anti-junta movement, KIO gained public legitimacy as the primary military and political organization representing all peoples in the Kachin territories (Ring, 2024).

KIO's initial objective was full Kachin independence, although this was limited to autonomy in 1988. Achieving this entails ending military dictatorship and potentially supporting the aim of other EAOs to restructure Myanmar into a federal republic. Repeated ceasefire and negotiation attempts have occurred between KIO and the junta, with the most significant ceasefire lasting from 1994 to 2011. Peace attempts the following decade, led by a democratic government, were repeatedly undermined by the junta, who were constitutionally embedded in Myanmar's democratic system (Martin, 2024; Martin, 2025; MRG, 2017). Between 2021-2025, KIO repeatedly declined peace talk invitations from the junta, continuing its armed struggle instead (Irrawaddy, 2022; Martin, 2024; Myanmar Support Group, 2025). With the historical background of the cases established, the following chapter proceeds to the empirical analysis of BRN-C.

6. BRN-C: The Muslim Insurgency in Thailand's Southern Forests

6.1. Communal content

Thailand is a diverse society encompassing 62 ethnic groups, yet ethnic Thais form the demographic majority and occupy most state positions, including teaching and administrative roles (MRG, 2026a; CERD, 2023). Pattani Malays, the communal group connected to BRN-C, were represented by seven senators in the 2023 elections, out of two hundred total seats (Wardana et al., 2026, p. 5), despite the national religious composition being estimated to be 90% Buddhist, 7% Muslim, and 2% Christian (Evans et al., 2024). Furthermore, Islam and Pattani Malays are frequently treated as sharply contrasting state supported “Thai-ness” and Theravada Buddhism, especially in the SBPs, where religious and ethnic identity are inseparable. Central Thai norms, which diverge heavily from Southern ones, are reproduced in schools, media and state discourse, deepening political divisions and conflict (Wijitwatchararak, 2024, p. 25-27; Wardana et al., 2026, p.1). Facing assimilationist “Thaification” policies, Pattani Malays have struggled to maintain their identity, exemplified in younger generations adopting the Thai language (Yusuf & Thongin, 2025, p. 282-289). During national crises, religious symbolism often merges with national ideology and loyalty to the monarchy, deepening identity-based exclusion and fueling minority resistance (Wijitwatchararak, 2024, p. 27). Nevertheless, some degree of royal support for Muslim-Buddhist harmony is evidenced by the king’s contributions to the construction of mosques and development projects in Southern Thailand (Royal Thai Embassy, 2022). Another of Thailand’s most marginalized groups are the indigenous peoples, who although organized in civil society (MRG, 2026a; Rattanakrajangsi, 2025), are not reported as having expressed separatist aims or committed major political violence like BRN-C.

6.2. Human needs

The SBPs are considered to be under rebel control, as insurgents maintain a strong presence despite state police and military activity (BTI, 2026). BRN-C has attacked and bombed

civilians, specifically targeting Buddhist monks and novices as symbols of the Thai state (HRW, 2025). However, large state-influenced paramilitaries and militias policing the SBPs have also resulted in massacres, tit-for-tat killings and arbitrary arrests of civilians. Furthermore, the state inconsistently penalizes violations, as militias enjoy forms of legal impunity (Chambers & Jitpiromsri, 2022, pp. 141-144; HRW, 2025). Some militias disproportionately oppress Muslims, with deep hostility being common among recruits whose family members were killed by Muslim insurgents (Chambers & Jitpiromsri, 2022, pp. 144, 150-151). Between 2021 and 2025, a total of 589 deaths occurred in the area, with victims being approximately 60% Muslim and 40% Buddhist (Deep South Watch, n.d.).

This violence is reinforced by persistent socioeconomic difficulties. Although poverty declined nationally during the chosen time period, from 6.3% to 4.9%, and undernourishment decreased along similar lines (Asian Development Bank, n.d.; Global Hunger Index, 2025; World Bank, n.d.), the SBPs remain among Thailand's poorest regions. BRN-C territories fall below the national average in indicators of poverty, constituting three out of the five most impoverished provinces in the country. With poverty levels between 21% and 25%, they have been described as stuck in "chronic poverty" (UNDP, n.d.abc; Nation Thailand, 2025). In conjunction with the poverty levels, the SBPs also fall below the average in measurements of hunger (UNDP, n.d.abc).

The need for social acceptance between Pattani Malays and Thai Buddhists remains unfulfilled due to violence, legal abuses, and exclusionary narratives. BRN-C's attacks on civilians foster fear among Thai Buddhists, while state security forces and paramilitaries similarly target Pattani Malays, reinforcing cycles of mistrust and retaliation (HRW, 2025; Chambers & Jitpiromsri, 2022, pp. 144, 150–151; Gumilar et al., 2025, p. 5). Religious nationalism and anti-Muslim sentiment further undermine intercommunal relations, as some Buddhists oppose peace efforts and support segregation in the SBPs (DoS, 2024). Pattani Malays are also stigmatized as "Khaeks", outsiders, reinforcing social exclusion, while other Thai Muslims are generally accepted as citizens (Gumilar et al., 2025, pp. 11–12, Yusuf, 2022, p. 247). Nonetheless, civil society organizations, NGOs, academic networks, and state-led educational initiatives seek to promote dialogue, interfaith cooperation, and cultural

awareness to strengthen peaceful coexistence and social acceptance across communities (Gumilar et al., 2025, p. 5; Wijitwatchararak, 2024, p. 31; Tepsing et al., 2025, p. 2).

6.3. The state

Regarding regime type, the Thai state has improved its fragility index score from 70.9 to 66.2 between 2021 and 2024 (FSI, n.d.b). For the general Thai population, the state monopolizes the use of force and provides security and public services such as welfare and healthcare, although its conflict with BRN-C jeopardizes its territorial control and coercive authority (BTI, 2026). Moreover, the state is integrated in the international community through bilateral and multilateral cooperation (Chivvis et al., 2023). It retains some public support through public service provision, though this legitimacy is limited among Pattani Malays, because of ineffective peacebuilding (Jitpiromsri et al., 2024, pp. 130-131, 142). The military and monarchy are entrenched in Thailand's state apparatus, shaping policy across all branches of government. The military-appointed constitutional court can also force out elected governments, resulting in progressive governments being constrained by the entrenched military. For instance, the military regularly sabotages peace initiatives by civilian governments it does not support (MRG, 2026a; Jitpiromsri et al., 2024, p. 144; BTI, 2026). Ultimately, the Thai state's fragility is countered by its continued capacity to provide public goods and security. However, the military's iron grip on the government makes the regime type rigid, as reforms challenging military interests are obstructed.

For BRN-C, no direct access to the political system exists, though Pattani Malays' interests are represented by the Prachachart party, who won seven senate seats in the 2023 election and whose objectives align with BRN-C's. However, military influence over the electoral system and requirements to compete nationally constrains political mobilization for ethnic minorities (BTI, 2026; Wardana et al., 2026, p. 5). Thai officials nevertheless present Prachachart's electoral success as evidence of equal political access for Muslims (Royal Thai Embassy, 2022). Notably, as a broader strategy of combining security and development to defeat insurgents, the state has broadened civic inclusion and promotes interfaith cooperation in the SBPs peace process, in addition to restoring a Pattani citizen advisory board allowing public input to state agencies (MRG, 2026b; Chambers, 2024; Jitpiromsi et al., 2024, p. 131-134).

Still, exclusionary policies affect Pattani Malays, and in extension BRN-C. For instance, Thai is the sole national language, leaving Patani Malay formally excluded from administration or education, while local culture and language is preserved by private Islamic schools (Gumilar et al., 2025, pp. 11–12; MRG, 2026b). Although the state generally supports religious freedom and funds Islamic public projects, the constitution generally promotes Theravada Buddhist education. Furthermore, the state monitors religious teachings to avoid disruptions to social harmony (DoS, 2024), with Pattani Malays being further marginalized through cultural clothing restrictions and policies of assimilation (Gumilar et al., 2025, pp. 5, 17). An emergency decree active in the SBPs since 2005 has also enabled arbitrary arrests of hundreds of Pattani Malays, lacking judicial oversight and sometimes lasting over a month (International Commission of Jurists, 2024; Duay Jai Group, 2026). However, the state has reduced the decree's territorial scope and considered its repeal if security in the SBPs improves (Public Relations Department of Thailand, 2024).

6.4. Natural resources

The natural resources in the SBPs consist of rubber, alongside agricultural and seafood products. Rubber plantations cover 640,000 hectares in the SBPs, while southern Thailand accounts for 56% of the country's total rubber planting area and consistently achieves higher-than-average yields (UNDP, n.d.a, p. 3; Sowcharoensuk, 2026; Benbourenane, 2021, pp. 103). Palm oil is also planted in the SBPs, but at a much lower rate than rubber, and while the region may be rich in rubber, its value has sharply decreased in the past decades and the industry has been heavily disrupted by the conflict (Benbourenane, 2021, p.107; Payo & Askandar, 2024, p.253; Weber & Schaer, 2026). Ultimately, considering that rubber is the only substantial natural resource in the region combined with its low price, it can be concluded that the area is not rich in resources.

While members of BRN-C have connections to rubber plantations (Bangkok Post, 2024; Morris & Nguyen, 2025), there are no indicators that they exert significant control over these. Furthermore, the Thai state is the actor that pushed the SBPs to produce rubber and palm oil through economic policy and subsidies, with the aim of reducing regional poverty

(Benbourenane, 2021, pp. 93, 107). The rest of Thailand's natural resource wealth of oil, natural gas, minerals, and forestry lies in state-controlled areas (IEA, n.d.; EBSCO, n.d.), granting them a monopoly.

In turn, BRN-C does not seem to be financed by natural resources. Rather, they are funded by various forms of member contributions, including recurring payments and emergency funds, which alongside business investments have provided BRN-C with about 6.1 million USD (Thairath, 2026). The communal nature of this income points to BRN-C not being financially self-sufficient, as it is dependent on member donations. This also suggests that access to natural resources is not central to BRN-C's financial levels. Instead, resource access seems to have a rather minimal impact, although wages earned from rubber production may be what enables the SBPs population to fund BRN-C, as rubber tapping constitutes one of the most common sources of income in the region (Benbourenane, 2021, p. 91).

6.5. International linkages

Malaysia has acted as the main facilitator in intermittent negotiations between BRN-C and the Thai state (Strangio, 2024). Its inclusion is important to Bangkok, because it maintains friendly relations with its neighbour and partner in ASEAN, but also to BRN-C, which shares cultural-religious characteristics with Malaysia and houses exiled leaders there. However, facilitation becomes a balancing act for Malaysia as Thailand is concerned about partiality and Malaysia intervening in substantive issues, while BRN-C wants to avoid dependence on Malaysian national interests (Pathan, 2025b; ICG, 2022). However, BRN-C benefits from the ethnic kinship with Malaysia and the safe haven it provides, as hundreds of BRN-C fighters operate with implicit approval over the Malaysian border (Helbardt, 2025; Udin, 2025). With regard to the Thai government, Malaysia pursues border cooperation and closer commercial and security ties, as they both view economic development in the SBPs as key to long-term peace (Lam, 2024; Public Relations Department of Thailand, 2025).

Malaysia has also shown indirect interest in Southern Thailand plantations of palm oil and rubber, as the region constitutes an important regional commercial transport hub (Azmi, 2023). However, its overall economic interests center on cementing further technology and

the digital economy trade with the Thai state. Although food and energy security from Southern Thailand is also sought after by Malaysia, the insurgency darkens prospects for consistent trade and commerce over the border (Chong Yew Keat, 2023; Rayar & Han, 2023).

7. KIO: The Christian Insurgency in Myanmar's Northern Mountains

7.1. Communal content

The Myanmar military junta, mainly consisting of the Bamar ethnic group, represents around 68% of the total population. The Bamar and other groups, an estimated 88% of the population, practice Theravada Buddhism (Hayward & Naing, 2023). Myanmar contains more than 135 ethnic groups, yet the state is dominated by this largely homogenous ethnic and religious bloc, which presents “national unity” as its duty to uphold. This marginalizes the Kachin, a Christian minority who constitute approximately 1.5% of the population in the predominantly Buddhist country (HART, 2021; MRG, 2017). The junta dictates a Bamar- and Buddhist-centered political order, known as “Burmanization”, countering EAOs like KIO, who advocate liberal democratic principles and greater autonomy for ethnic groups (Asia Centre, 2023, p. 1-3; Win, 2024). Although the junta upholds ceasefires with some EAOs, it rejects EAO aims as illegitimate, with the junta leader stating that they will be active in politics “until EAOs no longer exist” (Thiha, 2023; Kavi, 2025). Meanwhile, KIO’s central committee states that making Myanmar a federal union is the only way to end the oppressive junta rule (KIO, 2021; 2023).

This antagonism was exacerbated by religious freedom being curtailed following the 2021 coup, with the junta targeting churches, civilians and clergy in predominantly Christian states, including Kachin (Greenwalt, 2021; House of Commons, 2026; Open Doors, 2026, p. 2). Kachin Christians have described these attacks as a method of intimidating KIO and the ethno-religious minority it represents (Brumley, 2024). Authorities also mobilize anti-defamation laws against non-Buddhists accused of defaming Buddhism, while Buddhist leaders defaming other religions enjoy relative impunity (Hayward & Naing, 2023). Colonial-era mission work made Christianity a significant Kachin identity marker, with KIO leadership having stated that “to be a Kachin is to be a Christian” (Mang, 2022). This creates social tensions toward the ruling Buddhist Bamar, who distance themselves from colonial

influences, viewing non-Buddhist religions as threats to unity and stability (Hayward & Naing, 2023; Jacquet, 2015; Mang, 2022).

7.2. Human needs

By late 2024, KIO reportedly controlled substantial parts of Kachin State, while the junta retained some urban centers and was estimated to control only 21% of Myanmar, mainly around Mandalay, Naypyidaw, and Yangon (Naing & Nguyen, 2024; RFA Burmese, 2024; Henschke et al., 2024). Following the 2021 coup, violence against civilians in Kachin State escalated, with both conflict parties increasing arrests, abductions, killings, and being accused of forced recruitment of child soldiers (Raw, 2025, pp. 10-11, OHCHR, 2025, p. 6). In the chosen time period, 560 Kachin civilians were reportedly killed (MPM, 2025), and although anti-junta groups have reportedly attacked suspected junta loyalists and civilian objects without warning, the OHCHR considers these violations incomparable to those committed by the junta (OHCHR, 2025, p. 6).

Concerning underdevelopment, Myanmar has been on the UN's least developed countries list since 1987, with the situation worsening since the 2021 coup (CDP, 2024). Furthermore, hunger levels have increased nationwide, while Kachin state households experienced the highest levels of moderate to severe hunger nationally, at 6.5%. For comparison, the biggest junta-controlled cities recorded hunger levels between 2.2% and 4.0% (Tauseef et al., 2025). Kachin State also had one of the highest poverty rates in the country in 2023 at 63.8%, compared to the junta-controlled regions which were between 40.6% and 45.7%. While conflict-affected areas were the most severely impacted, poverty remained a nationwide issue, (UNDP, 2024, pp. 27-34).

Despite these conditions, interethnic acceptance in Myanmar remains relatively high. A 2024 survey found broad everyday tolerance between ethnic groups, excluding the Rohingya, though support for diversity policies varied, with Bamars being less supportive of decentralization than minorities were. Out of all religious minorities, the Buddhist population is the most acceptant toward Christians, both in regards to identity and political participation.

KIO is also among Myanmar's most trusted ethnic organizations, trusted by 90% of Kachin and 61% of non-Kachin respondents (Chew & Jap, 2024, p. 4, 29, 32, 41, 67). The 2021 coup further strengthened solidarity among EAOs and minority communities (Vrieze, 2025, p. 5). Moreover, the NUG's acting president, a Kachin Christian who publicly embraces Kachin identity, has gained support among Kachin rights advocates. His elite position and the alternative government he represents being supported by a majority of the population (Nadi, 2022) could indicate a broader acceptance of Kachin identity. However, the NUG has also been criticized for prioritizing national unity over minority interests (Nadi, 2022; Matelski, 2024, pp. 146–147).

7.3. The state

Myanmar's fragility index score increased from 93.8 to 100 between 2021 and 2024 (FSI, n.d.b). The junta's lack of legitimacy stems from ousting the democratic government, failing to provide public services, and losing control over large parts of the country (ICG, 2025). Moreover, low levels of trust toward the junta have been reported nationwide, while NUG is more trusted by the population (Chew & Jap, 2024, p. 66). The junta has also faced international condemnation, with exclusion from ASEAN and Western sanctions contributing to Myanmar's growing status as a "pariah state" and loss of international legitimacy (Passeri, 2025; Global Sanctions, n.d.; Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, 2025). Simultaneous to this fragility, the junta displays some characteristics of a rigid state through its repression of political opposition and repeated extensions of the post-coup national state of emergency, which delayed elections until 2025. These elections were widely criticized as neither free nor fair and viewed as an attempt to preserve military rule under a facade of democracy and legitimacy (Peck, 2025; Kurlantzick, 2025). Another factor exhibiting rigidity is the junta's refusal to concede to EAO demands (Kavi, 2025), demonstrating an unmovable stance regarding new societal and federal configurations.

Thus, the junta obstructs political pluralism, imprisoning or barring leaders of the major opposition parties. Because of the elections at the end of 2025 being widely seen as undemocratic, KIO pledged to disrupt them (The Borderlens Desk, 2025; ANFREL, 2025; Peck, 2025; Democratic Voice of Burma, 2025). This indicates that KIO lacks access to the

national political system, although it retains de facto authority at the regional level, where it operates a parallel civilian administration in Kachin townships, including courts, education, health, and security separate from the junta (Aung, 2025).

However, KIO is affected by several ethnically exclusionary policies. Firstly, citizen verification is particularly difficult for minorities such as the Kachin, since accessing the required documentation is complicated by restrictive administrative procedures (ICHR, 2025), which creates exclusion on an institutional level. Further, although the constitution guarantees religious freedom, the junta offsets this through measures such as the “Race and Religion Protection Laws” which restrict religious conversion and interreligious marriages. The junta uses national security and terrorism threats as justification for these policies, which in practice violates the religious freedoms of minorities while favoring Bamar Buddhist identities. In addition, the junta mandates Burmese as the sole language of basic education, marginalizing minority languages (Asia Centre, 2023, p. 6-9). These policies reflect the junta’s portrayal of non-Buddhists, including the Kachin, as foreign and threats to national unity (Open Doors, 2026, p. 3).

7.4. Natural resources

Kachin State contains huge swathes of forests as well as high value mines, where most of the world's jade is produced with its industry having an estimated annual value between 8 and 40 billion USD. However, jade trade is mostly conducted on the black market, constraining data collection (Daialal, 2025; Lawn, 2025; Combs, 2021). Mines in Myanmar also contain most of the world’s vital heavy rare earths such as dysprosium and terbium (ICG, 2025; Marsden, 2024). Rare earth mining is concentrated in Kachin State, where extraction has increased massively since the coup, with satellite data revealing over 370 mining sites and 2,795 leaching pits, representing a 194% increase (OHCHR, 2025; Naing & Nguyen, 2024). In total, this data points to the conflict area being rich in resources.

Specifically, extraction has continued since 2021 despite the widening civil conflict, as both conflict parties see rare earths and smuggling as a possible major source of income (Marsden, 2024). Since the coup, KIO has repeatedly engaged the junta in the northern mountains,

fighting for control over the jade rich “Green Vein”, which may be the single most valuable resource in Myanmar (Combs, 2021). Importantly, control over a significant number of rare earth mines and border crossings to China in Kachin State shifted from junta aligned forces to KIO in 2024. While KIO does not exert total control over all towns in Kachin, they control surrounding areas through informal taxes on the jade trade. Nonetheless, China challenges KIO’s control over the heavy-rare-earth belt through trade threats and incentives, granting them indirect but decisive control over the resources (Han et al., 2025). Simultaneously, there are worries within KIO that the junta is preparing an offensive to expel them from these lucrative areas (Ring, 2024; ICG, 2025).

KIO’s control over minerals provides them with several billion dollars worth of annual revenue, crucial to fund their war effort, administration and service delivery. KIO has also begun developing its own rare earth mines and controls mines that supply the majority of heavy earth elements worldwide (ICG, 2024; OHCHR, 2025). The rebels draw substantial income from natural resources, but it cannot be said with certainty that they are able to act entirely independently, because of reliance on conditional trade with China (Thiha, 2025; Stratnews, 2025). Furthermore, resource revenues finance the rebels’ fight with the junta outside Kachin State, although KIO states that mining income is not considered as revenue for military operations. They claim that it is used for regional development, education, health and infrastructure in northern Myanmar (ICG, 2025; Marsden, 2024; Thiha, 2025). However, others refute this claim, as 37.4% of locals in the region live below the poverty line despite the rebels’ substantial resource wealth (Daialal, 2025). KIO’s exports mean that they could generate well over 200 million USD annually, surpassing the budget of several small states (Thiha, 2025).

7.5. International linkages

China is generally described as Myanmar’s most strategically significant neighbor and most involved international facilitator since the 2021 coup (ICG, 2025; Lawn, 2025, Rejwan & Romaniuk, 2025). Since the oil and gas pipelines that pass through Myanmar are of strategic and economic importance to China, they aligned with the junta in 2025 to protect these interests (Thant, 2025). China’s mediation aims are focused on stable trade and investment

rather than favoring a certain political structure in Myanmar. However, China holds significant leverage over KIO, who is dependent on Chinese food, fuel and pharmaceuticals as well as natural resource trade. The feasibility of mediation is thus directly connected to military advances and changes in territorial control by groups like KIO, with the perception among EAOs being that China will engage with whoever holds the territory (Thiha, 2025; Mar, 2025; Han et al., 2025). While initially not demanding the EAOs to curb their military advancements, an unprecedented success of the EAOs in 2024 caused Beijing to instead align with the junta because of changing commercial and security interests, ultimately legitimizing the junta (Rejwan & Romaniuk, 2025; ICG, 2025).

China is also providing material support to the junta, including fighter jets, drones and military equipment, as well as expressing desires to provide further logistical support and personnel (Rejwan & Romaniuk, 2025; Abuza et al., 2025; ICG 2025). Regarding economic assistance, China offered the junta approximately 138 million USD in 2024 for the funding of upcoming elections, infrastructure and surveillance systems (Myanmar Now, 2024). Moreover, China has been reported to use economic aid as leverage in its mediation diplomacy, for instance providing Covid vaccine doses to both conflict parties (Aoyama, 2022).

Myanmar's lucrative mineral, oil, and gas reserves is also of interest to China (Center for Preventive Action, 2026). Chinese high-tech industries are dependent on rare earth imports from Myanmar's border region, but also entails leverage for China because it can threaten to discontinue imports if its conditions are not met (Thant, 2025). Previous to 2023, mining activities in Kachin were mainly controlled by junta-aligned forces, supported by Chinese capital and investment. When these sites were captured by KIO, China initially suspended trade but ultimately resumed it in 2024 after negotiations with the rebels. The deal reflected both China's economic interests and KIO's dependence on Chinese goods and services, including the fact that the border is porous which enables smuggling. These joint interests have reportedly led Beijing to soften its approach toward KIO, urging talks with the junta without forcing direct negotiations (Sydow & Li, 2026; Mar, 2025; Lawn, 2025; Martin, 2025; Combs, 2021).

8. Explaining Divergent Outcomes

Firstly, the *communal content* variable manifests differently in both cases. Based on the empirical data on ethnic groups, both Thailand and Myanmar represent multicommunal societies, where respective states are dominated by a single communal group, which according to Azar constitutes one of the conditions for prolonged conflict. However, he emphasizes that the deciding factor for whether multicommunal compositions prolong conflict or not is the dominating communal group leaving the needs of the minority unmet. In turn, the ways in which the minorities connected to the separatist groups are marginalized differ across the cases. Overall, the concepts of “Burmanization” and “Thaisation” showcase a similarity in policy aimed at producing a homogenous national culture. In Thailand, tolerance toward Pattani Malay culture and religion exists, albeit countered by strong state promotion of the majority Thai culture.

Contrastingly in Myanmar, the actions of the military junta exhibit a deeply intolerant stance toward Christian Kachins. This contrast is exemplified by the Thai king’s patronage of mosque construction, on the one hand, and the junta’s attacks on churches, on the other. The junta’s open hostility represents a social tension which coincides with Azar’s argument that a disarticulation between the state and society is a driver of prolonged conflict. This difference could explain the differing outcomes despite both countries being multicommunal with states dominated by a single communal group. Furthermore, while Thailand is ethnically diverse, groups other than the Pattani Malays are not organized toward violent activities. As such, Walter’s theory of states being less likely to concede in ethnically diverse society may not apply in Thailand. On the other hand, the junta in Myanmar showcases a strong refusal to concede to any EAOs, which may be another contributing factor to KIO not entering negotiations with the junta.

Secondly, Azar argues that deprivation of *human needs* manifests as collective grievances among minority communal groups, prolonging conflict. However, the findings demonstrate that needs deprivations among the separatist actors are too similar for this variable to explain the varying outcomes. Regarding security needs, civilians in both cases face violence and

human rights violations by both rebel and state actors. These civilians are not only part of the separatist communal groups, but also the majority. Both Pattani Malay and Thai Buddhist security is jeopardised in the SBPs, and similarly both Kachin and junta-loyalists' security needs are violated in the Myanmar conflict. This creates similar mutual grievances between the conflict parties across cases. In terms of acceptance needs, both groups face varying forms of societal support and alienation. Pattani Malays and Kachins are generally regarded as outsiders in their respective societies, yet this is balanced by interfaith initiatives by Thai civil society and broader cross-ethnic acceptance among EAOs in Myanmar. The main difference found in the empirical data is that poverty in BRN-C territories are much higher than the national average. While KIO territories have a higher prevalence of poverty in relation to junta-controlled territories, underdevelopment is not an issue limited to that region. BRN-C's level of relative underdevelopment could explain its willingness to negotiate if said negotiations can heighten living standards.

Thirdly, concerning *the state*, both the Thai state and the Myanmar junta exhibit characteristics of being both fragile and rigid, but to varying extents. Azar reasons that a monopoly of power by one communal group, in fragile and rigid states, can trigger crises of legitimacy. This coincides with the empirical findings, as the junta's lack of legitimacy, both within Myanmar and internationally, stems from ethnic Barmars monopolizing executive political power. Although the Thai state is rigid, it appears to have stronger political institutions and greater capacity than the junta to invest in civil society dialogue and grant limited political access as well as funding to the SBPs. Moreover, both states enforce ethnically exclusionary policies, which according to Wucherpfennig et al. can intensify the rebel's grievances, group solidarity and willingness to continue fighting. Both BRN-C and KIO are subject to legally enshrined minority protection, yet these guarantees are seldom consistently reflected in practice. However, while Pattani Malays, and in extension BRN-C, are subject to cultural restrictions, the Thai state grants them indirect access to the political system and devotes resources to creating an inclusive peace process. This could counteract the grievances fueled by the emergency act and other exclusionary policies. In contrast, the junta enforces strict laws that constrain the religious and cultural freedoms of KIO and Christian Kachins, without granting them political access, exacerbating grievances and prolonging the conflict.

The relative strength of the Thai state could explain why BRN-C can be more confident than KIO that the state has the authority and capacity to redress its needs, and therefore deems negotiations worthwhile. Furthermore, based on Walter's argument on credible commitment problems, the divided, weak and asymmetrical political landscape in Myanmar, combined with the legitimacy crisis could entail mistrust between the conflict parties. Thus, KIO will not negotiate since there is no reason to believe that the junta will commit to agreements made in negotiations, and vice versa. A theoretical puzzle emerges when considering that the Thai state has entered negotiations with BRN-C, indicating an openness to talks, despite having a rigid regime type. This indicates that other factors than state rigidity may influence prospects for negotiations. Meanwhile, the Myanmar junta's regime type being both fragile and rigid entails weak political capacity and simultaneous intransigence, which could explain the absence of negotiations.

Fourthly, relating to *natural resources*, the separatist groups differ in resource wealth, with KIO possessing greater natural resources than BRN-C. Through Conrad's theory on weaker parties gaining resource-backed resilience, KIO's sustained struggle despite lacking a decisive military victory reflects how resource revenues can maintain rebel activities and prolong conflict, but also create illusions of vulnerability. The resource wealth of KIO could generate a feeling of invulnerability toward the junta, although this is complicated by China's leverage. Conrad also argues that commitment problems between conflict parties stemming from illusions of vulnerability are exacerbated when one party anticipates a future shift in power balance and negotiation leverage to its benefit. Based on this, KIO's concern over the junta's planned recapture of lucrative mining sites indicates a relational dynamic of continuous reprisals and a lack of mutual trust, further impeding negotiation prospects and prolonging conflict. In contrast, BRN-C lacks comparable resource access, which may help explain shortened conflict duration. Instead, Thai state monopoly over resource revenues may provide it with economic leverage and create negotiation incentives for BRN-C, as argued by Le Billon.

KIO also appears more dependent on resource rents than BRN-C, potentially making negotiations increasingly difficult, as Conrad argues that separatist groups resist settlements

that threaten crucial resource access. Separatist conflicts in resource-rich regions also reduce state incentives to concede, since this entails losing control over valuable assets. This is exemplified by the different resource monopolies, as the Myanmar junta has lost resource control in Kachin State to KIO, while the Thai state arguably controls more resources in the SBPs than BRN-C does. Consequently, KIO may perceive maintaining the profitable status quo as preferable to a disadvantageous settlement. By contrast, Le Billon argues that state monopolies over resources can shorten conflict, suggesting that Thai resource control may incentivize BRN-C negotiations, while the junta's lack of control prolongs conflict.

Lastly, *international linkages* in both cases manifest through external dependencies, which, according to Azar, shape needs fulfilment and conflict duration. KIO relies on trade with China, while Malaysia provides BRN-C with cultural recognition and a safe haven for its leadership. Although both external actors maintain relations with all conflict parties, their engagement is guided by strategic interests. While commercial considerations are present in both cases, Malaysia's involvement also reflects ethnic affinities, benefiting BRN-C through recognition of its identity claims. In contrast, China's engagement with KIO remains conditional and economically driven. Malaysia's lack of economic and military support to the Thai state further suggests stronger domestic capacity compared to the Myanmar junta.

Le Billon's theory highlights how natural resources shape third-party behavior, often undermining mediation through economic interests. China's prominent role in Kachin's resource economy, combined with its shifting alignment depending on territorial control, creates dual dependency between KIO and the junta. By sustaining both parties, this dynamic prolongs conflict and reduces incentives to negotiate. Malaysia's more limited economic involvement constrains such effects in Southern Thailand. Consistent with Azar's argument, China's deep involvement appears to expand and prolong the conflict in Myanmar. The junta's dependence on China may incentivize continued aggression to secure resource-rich territory, while both the junta and KIO exhibit reduced autonomy, as strategic decisions become contingent on Chinese approval. This client-like relationship may also explain actions that undermine civilian security. Although Le Billon suggests that rebel self-sufficiency can reduce external leverage, KIO's economic autonomy remains dependent on access to Chinese markets, sustaining China's influence. In contrast, BRN-C's weaker economic base limits

Malaysia's fiscal leverage, which instead operates through political and organizational support.

9. Concluding Discussion

This study has sought to explain why some separatist groups negotiate while others continue their armed struggle through a comparative analysis of the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) and Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN-C) by applying Azar's Protracted Social Conflict framework alongside natural resource theories and complementary theoretical insights. The findings demonstrate that the interaction between *the state*, *natural resources* and *international linkages* explain the variation in outcomes. BRN-C negotiates because it faces a capable state that has leverage, lacks natural resources that provide funds to maintain armed struggle and receives identity-affirming external support. KIO refuses to negotiate because it is rich in resources, providing it with the funds to continue armed struggle, because the junta is fragile and rigid, making it an unreliable negotiating partner, and because China sustains the armed capability of both sides. Thus, the interaction between *the state*, *natural resources*, and *international linkages* helps explain why some separatist groups negotiate while others continue armed struggle, thereby answering the research question.

At the same time, *communal identity* and *human needs* operate as foundational drivers of conflict, as without identity and needs-based grievances, there would be no conflict. Thus, while these factors do not explain the variation in outcome and conflict duration, they are central to the very existence of conflict. Important to note for future research is that if there is no variance between the factors that led to the diverging outcome in this paper, a variance in *communal content* and *human needs* may also explain divergent outcomes. The findings of this study further suggest that stronger institutional capacity may facilitate negotiations even within restrictive political systems. Accordingly, future research could more systematically differentiate between state rigidity and state capacity when explaining separatist conflict duration and negotiation prospects. Further, this paper found that interaction between three variables proved important to explaining the variation in outcomes. Thus, interplay between variables should not be ignored and is crucial to provide a full understanding of what factors may influence separatist conflict duration. This paper relates to the broader field of separatist conflict, as its findings exhibit greed-based tendencies across conflict actors. KIO's and the junta's revenue-seeking behavior seem to coincide with theoretical research.

Future research can test this framework across additional separatist conflicts to assess its broader applicability and refine how state capacity, resource wealth, and international linkages interact. It could also further distinguish between different types of external support and examine how these dynamics evolve over time to shape negotiation outcomes and conflict duration.

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Appendix

Table 1.

Variables	Conceptualization	General questions
<i>Communal content</i>	The ethnic and religious identities that compose the country and contribute to social tension between the rebels and the state.	- What is the ethnic and religious composition of the regime? - How does the ethnic and religious identity of the state create social tension between the conflict parties?
<i>Human needs</i>	The fundamental security and acceptance needs of rebels, which create grievances if left unmet.	- How are civilians subject to violence in conflict areas? - What is the level of underdevelopment in rebel territories relative to territory controlled by the regime? - Do other societal groups show acceptance for the identity of the rebel group?
<i>The state</i>	The organization of the state, and if this influences its ability to meet the access needs of the rebels.	- Is the country's regime type fragile or rigid? - Does the rebel group have access to the political system? - Are the rebels affected by any ethnically exclusionary policies of the state?
<i>Natural resources</i>	The level of access to natural resources and how that access affects the state or the rebels in their goals.	- Do the rebels have access to natural resources or is there a state monopoly? - Does rebel access to natural resources allow them to be financially self-sufficient?
<i>International linkages</i>	The effects of regional state actors on the conflict, militarily and economically, in addition to their interest in the natural resources of the conflict actors.	- How have regional actors affected the conflict dynamics? - Have natural resources influenced the actions of regional actors?