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13

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Conflict analysis and peacebuilding dilemmas in North East India and South East Asia from a comparative perspective

Jordi Urgell García
María Villellas Ariño

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Index

SUMMARY

Most of the exhaustive literature that exists about the armed conflicts in North East India focuses its analysis on the centre-periphery relationship between the government of India and the political elites, insurgencies and state governments in North East India. There also exists a growing body of literature dealing with the transnational dimensions of the conflicts in North East India, a region that shares 98% of its borders with other countries and only 2% with India. However, there have been no systematic efforts to analyze the political situation from a comparative perspective. This paper compares some of the conflicts in North East India –mainly the cases of Assam, Manipur, Nagaland and Tripura– with those in South East Asia –Indonesia (Aceh), the Philippines (Mindanao), Thailand (south) and Burma (east)– in terms of the conflicts' causes and dynamics, the insurgencies' goals, narratives and tactics and the governments' conflict management strategies. Although further research is needed on this comparative perspective, one preliminary conclusion of this paper is that there are many similarities between those conflicts in North East India and South East Asia.

Introduction[1]

Most of the exhaustive literature that exists about the armed conflicts in North East India focuses its analysis on the centre-periphery relationship between the government of India and the political elites, insurgencies and state governments in North East India. There also exist a growing body of literature dealing with the transnational dimensions of the conflicts in North East India, a region that shares 98% of its borders with other countries and only 2% with India (Bhaumik, 2007; Kumar Das, 2007). However, there have been no systematic efforts to analyze the political situation in North East India from a comparative perspective. This paper compares some of the conflicts in North East India –above all, those in Assam, Manipur, Nagaland and Tripura– with those in Indonesia (Aceh), the Philippines (Mindanao), Thailand (south) and Burma (east) in terms of the conflicts' causes and dynamics, the insurgencies' goals, narratives and tactics and the governments' conflict management strategies. Although further research is needed on this comparative perspective, one preliminary conclusion of this paper is that there are many similarities between those conflicts in North East India and South East Asia.

The paper is organized in three parts. The first summarizes the background of some of the active armed conflicts[2] and tensions[3] in North East India and South East Asia. The second section compares these conflicts and tensions by focusing on their dynamics and causes, as well as the war and peace strategies of both governments and insurgencies. The third part of the paper addresses some of the peace-building challenges in both regions, especially focusing on the potential role of the international community and the prospects for success of autonomy and minority rights regimes as a mechanism to overcome the sterile clash between the self-determination right raised by many ethnopolitical groups and the territorial integrity principle defended by many States.

I.- Case studies: Indonesia (Aceh), Philippines (Mindanao), Thailand (south), Burma and India (Assam, Nagaland, Manipur, Tripura)

Although the struggle for self-determination in **Mindanao** hails back to before the Philippines achieved independence in 1946, the armed conflict in Mindanao started at the end of the 1960s, when Nur Misuari founded the MNLF to demand self-determination for the Moro people, a set of Islamised ethnolinguistic groups politically organised into independent sultanates since the 15th Century. The massive settlement programmes undertaken by Manila to alleviate overpopulation pressures in Visayas and Luzon dramatically changed the demographics of Mindanao to the point that today the Moros do not make up more than 20% of the population in Mindanao and the few regions in which they are the majority are

1 Most of the findings of this paper are based on the field research made by the authors in North East India and South East Asia. Dozens of persons were interviewed during the field research, basically scholars, officials and diplomats, NGO workers, human rights activists, community leaders, displaced people and other victims of the conflict, local politicians and former or active rebels. However, as some of these persons asked not to be quoted, the authors prefer not to quote any of the persons interviewed.
2 An armed conflict is understood to be any confrontation involving regular or irregular armed forces with objectives perceived as incompatible in which the continuous and organised use of violence: a) causes at least 100 deaths in a year and/or a serious impact on the area (destruction of infrastructures or nature) and human safety (e.g. people wounded or displaced, sexual violence, insecurity of food supplies, impact on mental health and on the social fabric or disruption of basic service); b) is intended to achieve objectives that can be differentiated from ordinary crime and are normally associated with: demands for self-determination and self-government or identity-related aspirations; opposition to the political, economic, social or ideological system of a State or the internal or international policy of a government, which in both cases provides motives for a struggle to achieve or erode power; or the control of resources or the territory (School for a Culture of Peace, 2009: 21)
3 Tension is considered to be any situation in which the pursuit of certain objectives or the failure to meet certain demands put forward by various agents involves high levels of political and social mobilisation and/or a use of violence with an intensity that does not reach the level of an armed conflict. This can include confrontations, repression, coups d'état, and bombings or other attacks. In certain circumstances, its escalation can lead to a situation that degenerates into armed conflict. Tension is normally linked to: a) demands for self-determination and self-government, or identity-related aspirations; b) opposition to the political, economic, social or ideological system of a State, or the domestic or foreign policy of a government. In both cases this provides motivation for a struggle to achieve or erode power; or c) control of resources or a territory. (School for a Culture of Peace, 2009: 47-52)

quite clearly the most impoverished of the country. In 1996, the MNLF signed a peace agreement providing for autonomy in the Muslim-dominated areas of Mindanao (Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao). For strategic, ideological and leadership reasons, the MILF had split from the MNLF at the end of the 70s, fighting until present date for the self-determination of the Moro people (also known as Bangsamoro). In recent years, both parts have signed a ceasefire agreement (monitored by an international team) and have held several rounds of peace talks. The core issue in these talks is that of the ancestral domains of the Moro people and the establishment of a Bangsamoro Juridical Entity, an arrangement that could pave the way for a Free Associated State or any other formula of asymmetric federalism that would recognize the Bangsamoro homeland. On the other hand, the Abu Sayyaf group has been fighting to establish an independent Islamic state in the Sulu archipelago and the western regions of Mindanao since the 1990s. Although Abu Sayyaf initially recruited disaffected members from MNLF and MILF, it subsequently moved away ideologically from both these organisations and became increasingly involved in systematic kidnappings, extortion, decapitation and bomb attacks, leading to be considered as a terrorist group by many governments.

In **southern Thailand**, a country with a Thai Buddhist majority, the population is mainly Muslim and ethnically Malay. At the beginning of the 20th Century the Kingdom of Siam and the British colonial power in the Malay Peninsula agreed on the partition of the Sultanate of Patani, with some territories coming under the sovereignty of modern Malaysia and others (the current southern provinces of Songkhla, Yala, Patani, Satun and Narathiwat) falling under Thai sovereignty. Throughout the 20th Century there were serious resistance against the nation-building policies and 'Thaification' process in the south promoted by Bangkok, especially since the 1930s. These policies, aimed at creating more political, cultural and religious homogenisation in the country, placed special emphasis on the most significant aspects of the collective identity of the Malay-Muslim population such as the education system, the language or the religion. Such policies, along with the perception that the central government economically marginalized the south, caused the emergence of several secessionist insurrectionary groups since the middle of the century. The conflict reached its peak in the 1960s and 1970s and eased in the following decades thanks to the economic growth in the 1980s and the progressive democratisation of the country in the 1990s. In that period, Bangkok implemented some policies of cultural recognition and offered a wide-reaching amnesty, which provoked the demobilization of a significant part of the armed insurgency to the point that political violence had practically disappeared at the threshold of the new millennium. However, the victory of Thaksin Shinawatra in the 2001 elections led to a drastic shift in the counterinsurgency policy and resulted in an outbreak of violence that has caused the death of almost 4,000 people since 2004. One of the basic characteristics of the current conflict is that nobody claims the armed attacks and that most of the victims are civilians.

In the Indonesian province of **Aceh**, ruled by an independent and influential sultanate for several centuries, there is a long tradition of armed resistance, firstly against the Dutch colonialism, then against the modernizing laicism imposed by Sukarno through the Darul Islam movement and, finally, from the 1970s onwards, against the centralist and predatory nationalism of Suharto. This last episode of armed violence was carried out by GAM, a national liberation movement that claims that Aceh has been systematically neglected by Jakarta through policies of cultural homogenization, demographic colonization, economic pillaging and brutal military repression. Hassan di Tiro, closely related to the last Sultan of Aceh, unilaterally proclaimed the independence of Aceh in 1976. The conflict reached maximum intensity during the 1990s, when Aceh was declared a Special Zone of Operations. The democratisation of Indonesia in 1998 –after the Asian crisis and the sudden fall of Suharto– gave way two political and peaceful attempts to solve the conflict, the so-called Humanitarian Pause and later the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement. However, the failure of the peace processes led in 2003 to the declaration of martial law and the largest military operation in the region since the invasion of East Timor in 1975. Afterwards, the tsunami of December 2004 forced both sides to initiate peace negotiations in Helsinki, which crystallized in the Memorandum of Understanding, signed on the 15th of August 2005. The peace agreement –which provided a broad autonomy for Aceh, the demilitarisation of the region, the disarmament of the GAM and the deployment of an international mission to monitor its implementation– brought about a significant reduction in violence. Since then, the implementation of the peace agreement has taken place without significant problems and under the watchful eye of the Aceh Monitoring Mission. In fact, for the first time in the history of Aceh, local parties were allowed to participate in the local elections of December 2006, won by a former leader of the GAM that became the current Governor of Aceh. However, in the years following the signature of the peace agreement various tensions have been recorded linked to the reintegration of combatants, demands for the creation of new provinces or the alleged corruption and incompetence of the public authorities.

Myanmar, ethnically one of the more diverse countries in the world, is made up of seven administrative

divisions, where the Burman majority predominates, and seven states that take their name from the main ethnic group that inhabits them: Chin, Rakhine, Kachin, Shan, Kayah, Karin and Mon. Following the end of British colonization in the 1940s, the Burman and some of the ethnic leaders decided to create the Union of Burma, built on a federal constitution that recognised the right to secession. Following the assassination of the national leader who inspired this agreement (Aung San, father of Aung San Suu Kyi), it soon became clear that the federal agreement was not going to be implemented. Instead, the government progressively centralized the political power in Rangoon and took controversial measures such as the declaration of Buddhism as the official state religion. Thus, some ethnic minorities began to ask for greater levels of autonomy and even independence and created several armed groups, such as the ALP (Rakhine); the CNF (Chin); the KIO (Kachin); the KNPP (Karen); the KNU (Karen); the SSA-S (Shan) or NMSP (Mon), only to mention some of the strongest ones. Allegedly to prevent the dismemberment of the country, the leader of the Armed Forces, General Ne Win perpetrated a coup d'état in 1962 and established a one-party regime and the so-call "Burmese Way to Socialism". The new government completely isolated the country and also intensified centralisation and 'Burmisation' policies and systematically repressed the ethnic minorities. Although the military junta has changed its name and leader, it has ruled the country since 1962, probably being the longest standing military dictatorship in the world. In 1988, the government began a process of ceasefire agreements with some of the insurgent groups, allowing them to pursue several economic activities, but rejecting any peace agreement that addresses the self-determination and democratization claims. However, many armed groups are still active –KNU and SSA-S being the strongest ones– and the Army has continued its counter-insurgency operations, provoking the displacement of thousands of civilians amid many accusations of massive human rights violations.

In North East India, currently there are three active armed conflicts –Nagaland, Manipur and Assam– and one situation of tension –Tripura. Other states, though more peaceful, have also been affected by unrest and violence. The famine that took place in Mizoram in the sixties led to an armed conflict that ended two decades later with an agreement between the parties and the rebels integrating in mainstream politics. Meghalaya faced some instability until it declared a full-fledged state and still today some armed groups maintain low-level insurgent campaigns, have bases there or cross the state in their way to Bangladesh (Cline, 2006). In Arunachal Pradesh violence episodes have been quite rare, although armed groups operating in other states, especially in Nagaland, have some bases and hideouts in this state. As cline points out, "Arunachal Pradesh has faced 'overflow' insurgent operations by the NSCN-IM and the NSCN-K. Both Naga groups have conducted significant attacks in the state, both against security forces and against each other." (Cline, 2006: 140).

The oldest conflict in the region is that of **Nagaland**, where the insurgent movement dates back to 1956, when the Naga National Council (NNC) started the armed confrontation against the Indian Government demanding independence and the creation of a sovereign country for the Naga people. Prior to the beginning of the armed struggle, Naga tribes claimed independence even before India obtained its own one. In 1963, Nagaland was declared a full-fledged state within the Indian territory, and twelve years after this benchmark, the Indian Government and the NNC reached the so called Shillong Agreement. Some factions of the NNC rejected the agreement, and in 1980 the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) was created, keeping the conflict active. A split along tribal lines within the group led to the creation of NSCN-IM (headed by Isak and Muivah) and NSCN-K (led by Khaplang). In 1997 the NSCN-IM reached a ceasefire agreement with the Government and initiated peace talks that have kept ongoing periodically since then, without substantial advances or final agreements being achieved. In 2000 the NSCN-K agreed also a ceasefire. Since both ceasefires were arranged, no clashes against Governmental forces have taken place, but factional fighting among both groups has not stopped, reaching at certain moment intensity levels of an armed conflict (Urgell and Villellas).

The armed conflict in **Assam** is also rooted in the feeling shared by high proportions of the Assamese population of never having been a part of India. Tensions in the state started in the 1970s due to the large influx of population coming from Bangladesh as a consequence of the armed conflict that led to the creation of this country in 1971. Between 1979 and 1985, a big non-violent social movement raised, known as the "Assam Movement", led largely by the student organization All Assam Students Union (AASU). The main demand was the deportation of all the illegal migrants, perceived by local population as a threat to their identity due to the large numbers that had arrived after 1971. The conflict turned violent in the early eighties after the creation of the armed organization United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), that has demanded since then the formation of an independent and sovereign Assam. In 2005 a peace process started with the mediation of a civil society group, People's Consultative Group (PCG), designated by the ULFA. Nevertheless, the process ended without advances. In 2009 the ULFA suffered a serious setback after the surrender of large numbers of the 28th battalion, one of the most important for

the armed group. However, low-intensity levels of violence persist in the state (Urgell and Villellas).

In parallel to this conflict, there have also been other conflict spots. Bodo armed groups have also demanded higher levels of autonomy and even independence for the Bodo people since the 1980s, achieving certain degrees of recognition. In 1993 an agreement was reached for the establishment of the Bodoland Autonomous Council. This accord was not accepted by all factions, and clashes persisted. In 2003 this agreement was expanded leading to the establishment of the Bodo Territorial Council. In 2005 a ceasefire agreement was signed with one of the main bodo insurgent movements, the NDFB, although some factions have remained active. And finally, there have been several inter-ethnic clashes in the state, especially among Kuki, Karbi and Dimasa communities in the Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills districts, with a very serious impact on civilians. Ethnic armed groups have taken part in these clashes, aggravating the violence (Urgell and Villellas).

In **Manipur**, the insurgency arose in the sixties, with the creation of the Meitei armed group United National Liberation Front (UNLF). Manipur, that had become a kingdom independent from India in 1948, merged with it in 1949 when its king signed an agreement with Delhi. Grievance feelings by Meitei population –not recognised as a Scheduled Tribe within Indian legislation– gave way to independence aspirations. The main insurgent groups, UNLF and People's Liberation Army (PLA), have shared this demand. The escalation of violence led to the designation of Manipur as a 'disturbed area' in 1980. Together with the Meitei insurgency that has been active mainly in the Imphal valley, the Naga armed groups have also operated in the state areas inhabited by Naga population, where clashes between different ethnic groups, such as Nagas and Kukis have been also frequent, further complicating the conflict landscape of the state. In 2008 and 2009 the conflict in Manipur became the most serious one in the North-East in terms of casualties and number of attacks (Urgell and Villellas).

In **Tripura** the situation has been somehow different, as the main issue has been the demographical transformation experimented by the state as a consequence of the arrival of non-tribal population, particularly from the territory of present-day Bangladesh. The main population influx took place after India's partition and again as a consequence of the war that led to the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. In the 1901, the tribal population represented 53% of the census, but in 1991, this percentage was reduced to 31%. The feeling that political parties were favouring the economic prosperity of Bangladeshi population in detriment of indigenous people fuelled the creation of insurgent groups, the most important of them Tripura National Volunteers. During 1979 and 1980 very serious inter-ethnic riots took place, with a death toll of more than 1.800 civilians. In 1989 TNV signed an agreement with the Government, but the dissatisfaction of some leaders with the terms of the agreement led to the appearance of new armed groups such as the NLFT and the ATTF, the former with Christian ideology, the latter demanding only the deportation of those arrived from Bangladesh later than 1951. Since 2006 violence has sharply declined due to various agreements and the demobilization of many combatants (Urgell and Villellas).

II.- Conflict dynamics and narratives: A comparison between South East Asia and North East India

This section[4] compares the conflicts in North East India and South East Asia by identifying some significant features of the causes, typology and dynamics of those conflicts. Some of the issues addressed below are the fragmentation and atomization of violence; the long and protracted nature of the disputes in the region; the distinction between vertical and horizontal conflicts; the evolving nature of the conflicts, from Cold War geostrategic disputes to identity and self-determination conflicts; the narratives of both the States and the insurgent groups regarding the causes and the solutions of the conflicts; the relationship between majorities and minorities and, finally, the international dimensions of the intrastate conflicts in both North East India and South East Asia.

Patterns of violence: complexity, fragmentation and factionalism

One of the main characteristics of the ongoing conflicts in South East Asia is the huge number of armed actors and the complex web of cooperation and competition links created between them on the basis of ideological, strategic or opportunist reasons. Some of the factors behind the atomised patterns of the violence in North East India and South East Asia have to do with the diverse ethnolinguistic landscape of the region, with many armed groups claiming to defend the rights of the community they belong to. Following the security dilemma theory, in a context of violence where the State is inexistent

4 Some of the ideas of this part were presented at the 5th European Association on South East Asian Studies (EuroSEAS) Conference (Naples, Italy) in the working paper "Minorities within minorities in South East Asia: Spoiling Peace or Seeking for Justice? A comparative analysis of Aceh, Mindanao, Burma and Southern Thailand".

or weak, some of these armed groups also regard themselves as security providers to their own ethnic group. On the other hand, the fact that almost all the aforementioned conflicts are protracted –almost all of them have been ongoing for more than four decades– and fought in isolated and remote areas creates the conditions for other groups with its own economic and political agendas and military strategies to get involved in these conflicts. That seems to be the case of some regional militant networks or organised crime groups that take advantage of the economic, social and political opportunities provided by decades of violence. Another important set of factors has to do with government counterinsurgency policies, quite often based on the creation and funding of paramilitary and self-defence groups and the "divide and rule" strategies aimed at promote factionalism and constant schisms within the armed opposition groups. Some of these factions ally or cooperate themselves with the government to fight against the armed organisations from which they have split.

In North East India, there are more than 30 active armed groups (Cline, 2006; Hussain, 2007), most of them having suffered factionalism. In the Indian state of Assam, the so-called Surrendered ULFA (SULFA) is collaborating with the police in counter-insurgency actions against the ULFA. In Bodoland, the main Bodo outfit, the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) was divided between those who wanted to continue the armed struggle (the Ranjan Daimary-led faction) and those who wanted to keep alive the ceasefire agreement. In the districts of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills, both in Assam, the Karbi Longri North Cachar Hills Liberation Front (KLNLF) broke away from of the United People's Democratic Solidarity (UPDS) after this outfit signed a ceasefire agreement in 2002. In the same districts, the Black Widow outfit, also known as the DHD-J, is a breakaway faction of the Dimasa armed group Dima Halim Daogah. In Nagaland, the NSCN split between the followers of Khaplang (NSCN-K) and those of Isaac and Miuvah (NSCN-IM). In the last years, most of the clashes in Nagaland have been between these two Naga armed groups and not between the Army and the Naga insurgencies. In Tripura, the NLFT emerged from the Tripura National Volunteers soon after this historic insurgency reached an agreement with the Government in 1988. Former combatants of TNV also formed the All Tripura Tribal Force, from which the All Tripura Tiger Force emerged in the early 1990s.

In Aceh, the GAM did not experience significant factionalism or desertions, but faced serious internal tensions between the leadership based in Sweden and the local commanders in Aceh. These tensions appeared to be explicit during the regional elections in December 2006, when the "Swedish" and the "Acehnese" leaderships backed different candidates. Apart from that, in the central districts of Aceh the Army backed several anti GAM militias.

In Mindanao, the government has openly accused the three main Moro insurgent groups –the MILF, the MNLF and Abu Sayyaf, specially the last one– of having links with foreign terrorist groups such as Darul Islam and Jemaah Islamiyah, thus converting Mindanao –above all the Sulu archipelago– in a terrorist haven. In fact, Manila has threatened to break off its peace talks with if the MILF did not publicly reject those organisations. Apart from these armed organisations, there are three other phenomena that have to be taken into account to assess the enormous atomisation of violence in the region: first, the widespread availability of small arms in Mindanao; second, the existence of many self-defence groups and armed militias, many of them created and funded by different politicians (such as the Civil Volunteer Organisations linked to the governor of Maguindanao), and, third, the importance of "rido", a local phenomenon that refers to the historic clashes between different families or clans that have provoked the death of hundreds of people in recent decades.

In southern Thailand, historically the secessionist insurgent movement has been highly fragmented into many different groups, such as the BNPP, the BRN, the Pulo, the New Pulo, the GMIP or the RKK. At the end of the 1990s the umbrella-organisation Bersatu tried to coordinate the insurgent movement, but did not succeed and today has been practically dismantled. From 2004 onwards, the insurgent movement is even more atomised than the "historical" armed organisations, with many small, flexible and independent cells without identifiable leaders or explicit political objectives. Although the government has always said that the conflict in the south is strictly a domestic problem, it has recognised that the insurgents have received support and training from radical Muslim organisations in Cambodia and Indonesia. Furthermore, there are many civil self-defence groups allegedly supported by the State.

In Burma, although the Military Junta has managed to sign ceasefire agreements with more than fifteen different insurgent organisations during the 1990s, more than ten armed groups (such as the the KNU, the KNPP, the SSA-S and the ANP) remain active in the seven so-called "ethnic states" calling for the democratisation and federalisation of Burma. Although these groups mainly fight against the government, they occasionally come into conflict with each other and against government-backed paramilitary groups. Almost all the main active

groups are currently fighting against the Army and also against rebel breakaway factions that subsequently signed ceasefire agreements with the military junta. The largest and oldest group in the country, the Karen National Union (KNU) suffered a split in 1994 when militant Buddhists accused the group's leadership of being dominated almost exclusively by Christian commanders. In recent years, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) has carried out several attacks against the armed wing of the KNU and collaborated with the military junta in several ways. Similarly, the Karenni National People's Liberation Front (KNPLF) and the Karenni National Defence Army (KNDA), which respectively split in 1978 and 1995 from the main armed Karenni group, the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), have been fighting the KNPP in regions close to the border with Thailand. In the Shan state, the Shan State Army-South (SSA-S) has split into a number of factions that are fighting among themselves. In Kachin state, the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) is facing armed hostilities from a breakaway group, the New Democratic Army-Kachin (NDA-K). Some "ceasefire groups", such as the DKBA, cooperate with the Junta's counterinsurgency strategy, both because of ideological or tactical reasons or because of the government's threats to forcibly disarm them and cut off their access to natural resources and political and financial privileges.

The atomization of violence in North East India and South East Asia is relevant not only in terms of conflict analysis but also from a conflict resolution perspective. First, because it is not clear who is behind the violence, what creates confusion and mistrust at the community level and erodes the peace building capacity of the civil society. Second, because in some cases it is not clear who the government has to talk to and about what. Third, because there are several groups claiming to represent the same cause or the same people, which can provoke intra-group competition and fighting. Forth, because the intensity and lethality of violence can increase: the more the number of armed groups, the higher the number and intensity of attacks is needed to attract the attention of the government and the media. This point is especially important in those contexts where some armed groups do not feel compromised to the international humanitarian law. Then, the "divide and rule" strategies used by many governments (generally by co-opting certain leaders, offering incentives of all kinds to some factions of the armed group or sharpening the religious, geographical, ideological or tactical divisions within a particular armed organisation) may provide some short-term benefits, but in the long term can hamper the resolution of the conflict.

Long, protracted, forgotten conflicts

Most of the ongoing active armed conflicts are among the oldest in the world. While the average duration of the active armed conflicts is around 17 years, the average in the region is more than 31 years (School for a Culture of Peace, 2009: 25). Other sources reach the same conclusions, but using different data.[5] Indeed, some of the insurgencies in North East India and South East Asia, such as the Naga and Karen, are said to be the oldest active insurgencies armed groups in the world. This phenomenon could be explained by the three factors. First, the fact that almost all the conflicts are related to territory and self-determination, a kind of conflict much more difficult to solve than other resource or power-based conflicts. As Reilly (2002: 16) states, "Internal conflicts—particularly ethnic conflicts—are notoriously difficult to solve using conventional measures. Because of the deep-seated nature of ethnic identities, they are particularly unsuited to cake-cutting, split-the-difference solutions. They also tend to be immune to traditional approaches to international security, based on international law, diplomacy, and inter-governmental organizations".

Second, the reluctance of many governments to accept any interference of the international community in its internal affairs, which has prevented United Nations and other international actors to play any peace-making role in facilitating talks, mediating or monitoring peace agreements. Third, all the armed conflicts are related to the formation of the new independent states during the decolonisation decades following the end of the Second World War.[6] In fact, the armed struggles in the second half of the 20th Century in many cases are only the latest episode of long historical periods of war, as in Aceh –who fought against the Dutch colonialism, the Japanese imperialism and the centralism and secularism of Sukarno–, Southern Thailand –where rebellion erupted at the beginning of the 20th Century, after the sultanate of Patani was divided between the Buddhist Kingdom of Siam and the Muslim Malaysia– or Mindanao –where the Moro resisted the Spaniards' attacks for many centuries.

The duration of these conflicts, sometimes lasting for several generations, reflects their complexity and hampers their resolution. The continuation of violence for decades has a devastating impact on the cohesion and agency of the civil society and causes fatigue and scepticism in the international

5 According to Möller et al. (2007: 374), "the temporal dynamics of civil wars also differ between regions. Between 1946 and 2004, civil wars in Southeast Asia (we define the region as comprising Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Papua New Guinea, Malaysia, Vietnam/South Vietnam, the Philippines, and Cambodia) last 8.29 years on average. The average civil war duration for the rest of the world is only 3.94 years."

6 India and Myanmar gained independence from United Kingdom (1947 and 1948 respectively), Philippines from the US (1946), Indonesia from the Netherlands (1949). Thailand was never formally colonized.

community, thus preventing its involvement in conflict resolution initiatives. It can also provoke certain dynamics among the warring parties: perversion of the original political goals; growing alienation from the civil society mainstream; emergence of factions and internal dissent and strengthening of the more intransigent, maximalist, belligerent factions; the need to resort to illegal activities to fund the armed struggle; the risk that rebellion progressively becomes more a livelihood option (a job) than a mean to achieve political goals. In sum, the perpetuation of violence erodes the resources and incentives to achieve peace and legitimizes those who see these identity protracted conflicts as non-ending and irresolvable.

Apart from protracted conflicts, most of the disputes in North East India and South East Asia seem to be invisible or irrelevant to the media and the international community (Reilly, 2002). Even in comparative terms, it is quite clear that other conflicts attract much more attention, such as those in the Middle East (Israel-Palestine, Iraq), Europe (Kurdistan), Latin America (Colombia), some regions in Africa (Darfur, Somalia, Democratic Republic of Congo) and other areas in Asia (Afghanistan, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Kashmir). All the cases analyzed, except for Aceh after the Tsunami of December 2004, are not properly covered even by the national media.

There could be several reasons to explain this phenomenon: most of the countries of the region have a medium Human Development Index, are not failed states with capacity to destabilize the region, do not face major humanitarian crisis, do not have weapons of mass destruction (except India) and do not have, in comparative terms, abundant natural resources of great strategic importance to the industrialized countries. Moreover, the fact that most conflicts are internal and revolve around the very sensitive issue of self-determination can explain the inexistent or low political profile involvement by the international community. ASEAN, a regional organization based on non-interference in the internal affairs of its members, has not played any role in the disputes analyzed. Regarding the UN, contrary to its very important involvement in Africa, it has not had a presence in the region beyond its intervention in Cambodia in the early 1990s, the role of the UN Special Envoy to Burma trying to boost a tripartite dialogue to democratise the country, the organisation and monitoring of the independence referendum in East Timor in 1999 and the subsequent deployment of several missions to support the Government. Maybe the suspicion with which many governments saw the role of the UN in Timor-Leste is precisely what has prevented a greater involvement of the UN in the region in the last decade.

Vertical and horizontal conflicts

At the risk of oversimplifying the picture of the region, the current armed conflict in South East Asia and North East India can be classified into two main categories: vertical and horizontal conflicts (Snitwongse and Scott, 2005: 3). Vertical conflicts are those between an armed opposition group and the State. Some examples would include the Philippines government against the MILF or the MNLF in Mindanao; the Indonesian government against the GAM in Aceh and the OPM in West Papua; the Military Junta in Myanmar against the so-called ethnic armed groups, such as KNU in the Karen State, SSA-S in the Shan State or the KNPP in the Karenni State; the government of Thailand against RKK and other insurgent groups in the South, or the Indian governments against the ULFA in Assam, the NSCN-IM in Nagaland and the PLA or UNLF in Manipur. These vertical conflicts normally –not always– revolve around identity issues and self-determination claims by a national minority.

Horizontal conflicts refer to clashes between different social groups and can include communal fighting or violence between non-state armed groups, such as guerrilla movements or militias. These clashes normally occur between cultural or ethnic defined groups, but the ultimate incompatibility can be around ideology, identity, territory, resources or access to political power. Some of the recent most notable cases in the region are the clashes between Karbis and Kukis and Karbis and Dimasa in the Assamese district of Karbi Anglong, between Tripuris and Bangladeshi migrants in Tripura, between Bodo and non-Bodo population –such as Rajbongshis, Assameses, Nepalis and Bengalis– in the districts of Assam considered to be part of Bodoland or between Nagas and Kukis in Manipur. Regarding the specific case of North East India, Lacina states that "since the early 1990s the trends have been the increasing incoherence of armed movements; a growing role for inter-communal and intern-factional violence as opposed to attacks on the state's security forces; and a proliferation of movements due to ethnic groups arming in response to each other." (Lacina, 2007: 167). In Indonesia, communal clashes have taken place between Christian and Muslim communities in Maluku and Sulawesi, between Dayak indigenous communities and Madurese transmigrants in Kalimantan or between indigenous Papuans and Javanese in West Papua. Other examples would be the attacks against the Chinese community in Malaysia or Indonesia, the communal tensions in the Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak, or the conflict between the Muslims (Rohinga) and Buddhists in the Rakhine State (Myanmar), which caused the exodus of tens of thousands to neighboring Bangladesh.

Although this distinction between vertical and horizontal conflicts can be a useful analytical tool to classify and distinguish different patterns of violence, a very close relationship exists between vertical and horizontal conflicts. In some cases, as in Mindanao, North Cachar Hills, Karbi Anglong or Manipur, armed groups emerge after a long period of communal tensions or even clashes. In other examples, as in Aceh, Southern Thailand or the Karen State in Burma, the emergence of secessionist armed groups provokes the organisation –almost always with the open or covert support of the Government– of militias and self-defence civil groups, thus sharpening the polarisation of identities and increasing the prejudices and hostility among different communities.

From geostrategic Cold War conflicts to identity and self-determination disputes

In the last two decades a large body of literature has emerged –under the label of "new wars literature"– addressing the elements of continuity and change in the patterns of collective armed violence before and after the end of the Cold War. Many of these studies have focused on both the changes in historical and international context (globalization, erosion of the nation-state and the classical meanings of sovereignty) and also the growing complexity of violence: its motivations and goals (not only political), actors (not only regular groups), morphology (some sort of combination between organized crime, delinquency, war and massive human rights violations), typology (internal, but with an important international dimension), funding sources (predatory war economies) and targets (civilians as the main victims of the current wars). South East Asia, and to a lesser extent North East India, can be good examples of the changing nature in the typology of armed conflicts.

After the Second World War, Southeast Asia became a key Cold War scenario, mainly due to the proximity of China –was South East Asia the backyard of China?–, the presence of large communist insurgencies in Myanmar, Philippines, Malaysia and Thailand and the regionalization of the Vietnam war –both in its first phase, between 1945 and the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, and the second part in the 1960s and early 1970s, when the U.S. troops and the South Vietnamese army faced the communist guerrillas of North Vietnam (Viet Minh) and South Vietnam (Viet Cong). The geostrategic and ideological confrontation of the Cold War resulted in a direct or covert intervention of four of the five permanent members of United Nations Security Council, provoked the complete polarization of the region and led to the emergence of authoritarian governments in both blocks. Beijing and Moscow backed the consolidation of communist regimes in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia –Burma, with its own Way to Socialism was an isolated country–, while the West supported some authoritarian regimes in Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand or Singapore to fight the communist expansion in the region. A good example is the Indonesian occupation of Timor-Leste a few months after the withdrawal of Portugal, the former colonial power, to prevent the rise to power of a political party considered to be too close to some communist regimes in the region. Likewise, the acceptance by the US and other western countries of the 1969 sham referendum organised by Indonesia to justify the annexation of West Papua must be understood from the geostrategic dynamics of the Cold War.

The end of the Cold War provoked dramatic changes in the region. Powerful communist insurgencies in Thailand, Malaysia and Myanmar were progressively dismantled. Political and economic transitions began to take place in Laos and Vietnam. Vietnam ended its occupation (1979-1989) of Cambodia, paving the way for the pacification and reconstruction of the country in the 1990s. The growing democratization in the Philippines or Thailand provoked an impressive –but not definitive– decline in the insurgent activity. However, one of the most important changes in the region was the greater preponderance or visibility of identity conflicts (also called secessionists, ethnic, ethnopolitical, ethnonationalist, territorial, cultural, minority-majority, center-periphery, etc.). Another label to refer to this kind of conflict is "sons-of the-soil conflicts", defined by Möller et al. (2007: 378) as "typically rural-based civil wars that are low in intensity but have a tendency to last a long time (...). Sons-of-the-soil wars involve a peripheral ethnic group that is fighting for autonomy or secession. The group is inextricably tied to the territory it occupies; tensions mount when there is a valuable resource in the territory and the government adopts a policy of transmigration into the territory (e.g., Indonesia and West Papua)." (Möller et al., 2007: 378). Although most of the current conflicts were already active during the Cold War, some authors refer to the defrosting effect of the end of the Cold War to explain the growing significance of ethnicity from the 1990s onwards. From this perspective, the superpower ideological and geostrategic rivalry prevented some centre-periphery tensions to become visible. Once the "ice" of the Cold War melts away, many conflicts that were analysed as East-West disputes were reframed as nationalist, self-determination or ethnopolitical conflicts (Wimmer 2004: 3).

It is important to underscore that both North East India and South East Asia are a real ethnic and religious mosaic. Reilly (2002) argues that, regarding

ethnicity, South East Asia is simply the most diverse area in the world, comprising numerous indigenous groups of Austro-Asiatic and Melanesian descent, as well as many European and Eurasian communities. The main religions of the world are present in the region, with Buddhism being dominant in Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam or Singapore; Islam in Indonesia, Malaysia or Brunei, Christianity in the Philippines and Timor-Leste. There are also significant Hindu, Taoist, Sikh, Jew and animist communities. In North East India there are hundreds of ethnic groups, many of them recognized as Scheduled Tribes. According to Fernandes, Bharali and Kezo (2008), there are more than 23 Scheduled Tribes in Assam, 12 in Arunachal Pradesh, 5 in Nagaland, 29 in Manipur, 17 in Meghalaya, 14 in Mizoram and 19 in Tripura.[7] According to these authors, more than 12% of the tribal population in India lives in North East India. According to Ali and Das (2003), in North East India there are 145 tribal communities, 78 of them exceeding 5,000 members. These two authors explain the great ethnic diversity of the region: "The migration of people from ancient to present time and from various directions to North East India have significantly contributed towards the growth of ethnic diversities. Besides the tribal groups, a few other non-tribal groups have also come into existence as a consequence of prolong interactions between the cultures of the migrants and those of the indigenous people. The spread oh Hiunduism; invasions of different outside rulers at different historical periods; integration on the north eastern region with the rest of India in the nineteenth century and migrations that took placeas late as the last century have resulted spectacular social, cultural, economic and political transformations in this region." (Ali and Das, 2003: 141).

Whatever the label used to define the active conflicts in the region, in most of them the warring parties have resorted to the politicization of ethnicity and religion to mobilize their supporters. As Ted Robert Gurr points out, "ethnopolitical groups are identity groups whose ethnicity has political consequences, resulting either in differential treatment of group members or in political action on behalf of group interests." (Gurr, 2000: 5). Both governments and armed insurgencies have appealed to ethnicity and religion to define, respectively, the country and the group, so that conflicts that originally may have revolved around inequity, power or resources have turned to be considered as ethnics or religious conflicts. Thus, the images that has been consolidated in the media, the academia and the collective imagination of many societies is one of an ethnic Muslim Malay majority in the south against a Buddhist government, the Muslim Moro minority against the Filipino Christian majority, the Acehnese against a Javanised Indonesia or, the peripheral ethnic minorities in Burma (Shan, Chin, Kachin, Karen, Karenni, Mon, Arakan, etc.) against a Burman dominated government.

Likewise, one can observe high levels of religious mobilization and instrumentalisation in many of the conflicts of the regions. In Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines, the narratives of some armed insurgencies include –or are basically constructed around– religious issues. In Burma, the religious cleavage among the Karen people has been exploited by Rangoon, fuelling the resentment of the Buddhists Karen against its Christians co-ethnics. In North East India, religion has not been a major issue –at least, in comparative terms–, but some authors have accused some Christian missionaries of prompting religious dissatisfaction and using the language of Christianity to direct local grievances against Delhi. The other way around, many States have tried to enhance the country's majority religion and transform it into a fundamental element of the national identity, being some clear examples Buddhism in Thailand and Myanmar, Christianity in the Philippines and Islam in Indonesia. In these countries, religious minorities have historically suffered discrimination and even repression. In sum, both governments in North East India and South East Asia and insurgencies have succeeded in transforming ethnicity and religion as the most powerful identity marker, the one that generates more in-group solidarity, out-group resentment and social and political mobilization.

The starting point for many authors addressing the "ethnic" dimension of the conflicts in South East Asia and North East India is the debate between the primordialist, instrumentalist and constructivist theoretical schools about ethnicity and its nature (innate or contextual), significance (primary or secondary), plasticity (mutable or perennial) and relationship with violence (direct, indirect or non-existent). As Kellas underlines, "scholars are divided into those who go back to something called 'human nature', where instinctive behaviour is to be found, and those who look only for historical, cultural and economic explanations ('contexts')." (Kellas 1991: 8). According to constructivists and instrumentalists authors, "identities can be created and recreated. Identity creation is sometimes the work of myth-makers who build on the preexisting sense of groupness. More often it is a consequence of policies and acts by powerful agents –states and dominants groups- who define groups by assigning them labels and treating them differentially over generations." (Gurr, 2000: 4). On the other hand, primordialism argues that ethnicity is based on the psychological, biological and historical dimensions of identity, so it is highly significant, permanent and has a strong

7 The main tribal in groups in North East India are the Naga, Mizo, Lushai, Hmar, Kuki, Chin, Mizo, Bodo, Dimasa, Karbi, Kachari, Borok, Tripuri, Reang, Jamatia, Garo, Jaintia, Adi, Aka, Apani, Nyishi, Monpa and Paiti (Fernandes, Bharali, Kezo, 2008: 9).

capacity to mobilize individuals and groups. "Ethnic groups are naturally political, either because they have biological roots or because they are so deeply set in history and culture as to be "unchangeable" givens of social and political life." (Fearon 2004b: 6).

One of the more controversial theories among the primordialist views are the theories of "ancient hatreds". According to these authors, rivalries between ethnic groups are "accumulated" in history and are transmitted from generation to generation, reinforcing the image of the enemy (us-them), petrifying the loyalty to the group resulting in a "fear from the future lived trough the past" (Lake and Rotchild, 1998: 7). Then, a threat to a sector or a member of the group is perceived as an offense to the identity of the whole group and deserves a collective response. The violence that emanates from this notion of ethnicity gives little room for their regulation –intractable conflicts– because it is linked to some of the most important dimensions of people's identity. Although these theories have enjoyed a certain popularity in the nineties –and seem to be enjoying a renewed appeal after the 09/11 attacks–, it is true that in recent years have been refuted by countless authors who have criticized its deterministic and biological dimensions. Monica Duffy Toft (2003), for example, noted that these approaches have little explanatory power to account for the conflicts that emerged so recently or to explain why most of the ethnic groups cooperate instead of fighting each other. Similarly, Lake and Rotchild (1998: 5), state that "the most frequent criticism of the primordialist approach is its assumption of fixed identities and its failures to account for variations in the level of conflict over time and place."

Tough this debate continues to be a common place in the literature about ethnopolitical conflicts, there seems to be certain consensus that none of the aforementioned theoretical schools can fully explain such a complex phenomenon (Esman, 2004). As Gurr (2000: 5) concludes, "ethnic identities are not 'primordial' but nonetheless based on common values, beliefs and experiences. They are not 'instrumental' but usually capable of being invoked by leaders and used to sustain social movements that are likely to be more resilient and persistent that movements based solely on material or political interests."

Clash of narratives: internal colonialism vs. development and nation-building

North East India and South East Asia clearly illustrates the academic debate about "greed and grievance" as the main cause of armed conflicts (Collier and Hoeffer, 2004). Many governments in both regions reduce the causes of the conflicts to the lack of development and state institutions in the conflict-affected areas and, second, to the economic profits obtained by the insurgencies (greed). On the other hand, some ethnopolitical movements tend to look back in history and raise economic, economic, political and cultural grievances to justify their armed struggle. From these two opposite visions of the causes of the conflict, two opposite resolution strategies arise. While national minorities ask for recognition, remedial policies, autonomy or secession, the State normally uses some sort of 'carrot and stick' strategy that combines repression –to eradicate the greedy criminal networks operating in the periphery of the country– and also nation-building and state-building to redress the lack of development and national institutions.

After the decolonisation process ended, one of the biggest challenges the post-colonial new States in South East Asia and India had to deal with was the vast ethnic and cultural diversity of the new countries. Following the European model of nation-state, the new governments tried depoliticize ethnicity and create other modern identities –like class, citizenship or ideology–. To make the ethnic boundaries matching the political borders, post-colonial governments used different policies of homogenization: political centralization, demographic colonization, economic exploitation, territorial annexation, military repression, acculturation, imposition of education, or religious marginalization. Importantly enough, these "nation building" strategies were implemented in both capitalist and socialist countries because ethnic identities were regarded as an obstacle to the individualistic societies in the West and to the collectivist projects in the East.

Today, as it was mentioned before, the counterinsurgency strategy of many governments has two quite different dimensions: carrots and sticks. The first dimension of the counterinsurgency policy, the carrots, includes holding peace talks, conceding certain types of autonomy regimes (nota final) and boosting development in the region or, as Sanjib Baruah (2005) states regarding the case of North East India, "nationalizing space through development". According to Baruah, "the logic of developmentalism is embedded in the institutions of the Indian state that have been put in place in pursuit of the goal of nationalizing space. Through demographic and other changes in the region the process has made India's everyday control over his frontier space more effective, but at significant social, environmental and political costs". (Baruah, 2003: 917).

The second dimension of the counterinsurgency policy, the sticks, refers to the militaristic approach to defeat the insurgents –sticks. Here there are to found the massive deployment of soldiers in the

conflict-affected areas –Burma, with one of the biggest Armies in the world, or the Philippines, where the Armed Forces has most of its effectives in Mindanao–, the creation of militias and self-defense groups or the granting of special powers to the Army –the Armed Forces Special Power Act (AFSPA) in Noth East India, the emergency decree in Southern Thailand, the declaration of Aceh as a Special Zone under Suharto or the martial law imposed by Megawati Sukarnoputri. The granting of special powers to the Army is one of the most controversial issues in the region because it encourages impunity, allows the widespread violations of human rights, consequently alienating the civil society from the government and creating the conditions for the insurgents to be strengthened.

Many governments have tried to tie their militaristic approach to irruption of antiterrorism in the world politics. In recent years South East Asia –and North East India to a lesser extent– has emerged as one of the hot spots of the so-called global war on terrorism. This is due not only to some deadly bomb blasts –Bali, Jakarta, Manila, Guwahati–, but also to the growing allegations that some regional militant organizations have deliberately created confusion and chaos in some conflicts – Sulawesi, Maluku, Mindanao, maybe Southern Thailand– to pursue their own political, economic, religious or social agenda. Whatever the truth, the global war against terrorism has affected the way the conflicts in North East India and South East Asia are analysed and managed. First, the support of most of the governments of the region to the US-led global fight against terrorism has allienated significant parts of the population from their governments.[8] Second, many governments have politically taken advantage of the antiterrorist discourse that emerged after September 2001, labelling all the opposition armed groups as terrorists, regardless of their ideology or war tactics. This fact has not only led to the simplification and criminalization of many armed groups, but has expanded the terrorist lists of many governments and prevented them to initiate or continue political talks.[9]

In response to such counterinsurgency strategies, homogenization policies and state-sponsored nationalism, which sometimes led to policies of extermination and mass displacement of population, several national minorities reacted, trying to redress their perceived discrimination and grievances through pacific political means or by resorting to the armed struggle. Authors like Ted Robert Gurr (2000) underscore that most minorities begin by raising their demands trough pacific and democratic means. Following years of systematic neglect, discrimination and repression, some of these minorities create armed groups to resist the aforementioned nation-building processes or to defend their collective rights. Most insurgents groups in South East Asia have framed their grievance narratives through the internal colonialism theory, which suggests that the relationship between the Government and a certain territory within the State can be as exploitative as was the relationship between the metropolis and colonies. There are four main points raised by nationalist and ethnic groups to sustain the internal colonialism argument.

First, the illegal transfer of sovereignty. According to ULFA and other Assamese nationalist groups, the 1826 Yandaboo Agreement –which ceded Manipur and Assam to the British –was somehow illegal, as the Burmese had never properly ruled over these two territories. In Mindanao, Moro nationalist leaders considered that Mindanao had never been part of the colonial territory of Spain and the US, so they exerted enormous pressure over the US Government not to include Mindanao before the Philippines becoming and independent country in 1945. In Aceh, the Declaration of Independence of Aceh unilaterally declared by Hassan di Tiro in 1976 protested against the "illegal transfer of sovereignty over our fatherland by the old, Dutch, colonialists to the new, Javanese colonialists". In southern Thailand, the secessionist movement has protested throughout the 20th Century against the Anglo-Siamese Treaty of 1909, which divided the so called Malay states into two parts and left Pattani, Narathiwat, Yala, Satun and Songkhla under Thai sovereignty. These southern provinces, almost all of them with a significant Malay-Muslim population, were ruled by the Sultanate of Patani for many centuries. In Burma, as the Panglong Conference preceded the independence of the Union of Burma in 1948, there were no such claims of illegal transfer of sovereignty, but many ethnic minorities consider that the assassination of Aung San, the centralist policies undertaken by the Burmese government during the 50's and the coup d'etat of Ne Win in 1962 did not allow both the Panglong Agreement and the Burmese Constitution to be fully implemented.

The second issue in the ethnonationalist narratives of certain minorities is related to cultural, religious and linguistic discrimination –both de facto and de jure–, and economic neglect of certain regions by the central government, including the exploitation of natural resources, whether it is oil and tea in

8 By way of example, the government of Indonesia faced massive protests for their cooperation with the George W. Bush U.S. administration. In the Philippines, the deployment of U.S. troops in Mindanao and in the Sulu archipelago to help the Philippines Armed Forces in the fight against Sayyaf has also provoked the protests of human rights organisations.

9 In Burma, the ethnic insurgencies are labelled as terrorists. In Southern Thailand, many government officials are quite reluctant to talk to secessionist armed groups considered to be Islamic militants. In the Philippines, the peace talks between the government and the MILF almost collapsed because Manila accused the MILF of having links with Abu Sayyaf and other terrorist organisations such as Jemaah Islamiyah. In North East India, the government has declared its growing opposition to enter into negotiations with groups that have resorted to bombings –ULFA– or that allegedly attack civilians.

Assam, oil and gas in Aceh or mineral resources in Mindanao. Quite often the regions where national minorities are concentrated are the areas with the poorest record of human development. Although the correlation between poverty, relative deprivation and insurgency is not clearly demonstrated, it is true that the Autonomous Region of the Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), the southern provinces of Thailand or some of the north-eastern states in India are among the poorest in their countries. Local authorities and insurgent leaders in these regions accuse their respective governments of systematically under resourcing them, thus fuelling the resentment against the central government and prompting secessionist tensions. In the conflict-affected areas where the secessionist movement or even former combatants become the new governing elites –the MNLF in the ARMM, the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) in Assam, the Mizo National Front in Mizoram, the Bodo Liberation Tigers Force (BLTF) in Bodoland or the Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (GAM) in Aceh– the aforementioned economic and fiscal discrimination could be seen as a strategy to erode the insurgency, making them appear as non-responsible and incompetent rulers.

The third dimension of the internal colonialism narratives refers to the policies of demographic colonization employed by the postcolonial governments as a main tool of nation-building. These massive transfer and settlement of population, sometimes called transmigration programs, officially had the basic aim of alleviating the demographic pressure of certain densely populated regions, as well as encouraging development in the more remote and sparely populated areas –that seems to be why these policies were backed by several international organizations such as the World Bank. Nevertheless, it is quite clear that beyond its developmental dimension these demographic policies had a hidden goal: the creation of an overarching national identity through the cultural and political homogenization of the country. These State-sponsored population transference programs drastically changed the demographics of some of the host societies and had an enormous social, political, cultural and economic impact. Some governments supported the settlers occupying key positions in the local economy and their language and customs being prioritized in prejudice of the local cultural systems. In contexts of scarce resources –jobs, land, education opportunities– or historical animosities between communities, is quite easy for ethnic entrepreneurs to mobilize their own constituencies along ethnic or religious lines. In such contexts, migrants and settlers can become the targets of riots of other attacks, thus becoming both victims and victimizers simultaneously.

The minorities within minorities problem

Many national minorities in North East India –the Assamese in Assam, the Mizos in Mizoram, the Nagas in Nagaland, the Meitei in Manipur– and South East Asia –the Moro in Mindanao, the Malay-Muslim in Southern Thailand, the Acehnese in Aceh, and the Shan or any other of the biggest ethnic minorities in Burma– have raised self-determination claims regarding what they consider to be their homeland. Some of these minorities are seeking "internal self-determination –self governance, minority right, cultural recognition, federalisation or regionalization of the state– while others seek "external self-determination –secession– and declare they wouldn't compromise for a short of independence formula. The legitimacy of the political and territorial aspirations of the aforementioned national minorities can be seriously jeopardized by the action of some 'minorities within minorities' that claim being repressed and discriminated by these groups.

The secessionist conflicts in which a minority runs the risk of finding itself "trapped" in another's territory can be potentially lethal inasmuch as both groups can perceive the other as a serious threat to their identity and even existence. The "majoritarian minority" may perceive that the minority can disrupt the cultural homogeneity of the new political entity and could be used as an excuse for intervention by the State from which autonomy or independence is requested. On the other hand, the "minority within the minority" may consider that an alteration of the status quo –concession of autonomy or independence– will lead to the violation of its rights by a different ethno-political community. The outbreak of violence in such contexts has its foundations in "security dilemmas" (Posen, 1993) and "theories of the fear" (Lake and Rotchild, 1998). As Brown points out: "In systems where there is no sovereign –that is, where anarchy prevails- individual groups have to provide for their own defence. They have to worry about whether neighboring groups pose security threats and whether threats will grow or diminish over time. The problem groups faces is that, in taking steps to defend themselves –mobilizing armies and deploying military forces- they often threaten the security of others. This, in turn, can lead neighboring groups to take actions that will diminish the security of the first group." (Brown, 1993: 6)

Even if each conflict is unique, on many occasions the minorities "repressed" by other minorities belong to two types of groups. First, indigenous peoples, for whom is very important the preservation of their cultural systems and ancestral domains. Second, groups of migrants and settlers, who normally

identify themselves with the dominant ethno-political community in the country. Being civil servants, individual economic migrants or participants in the governmental transmigration programmes, these groups usually maintain a close attachment to the national symbols and try to keep their original culture and language. Nevertheless, cultural differences are almost never the sole reason to explain the emergence of violence in these contexts. Normally, tension among communities increases when local population perceives that migrant groups provoke a dramatic demographic change or when they are offered better job positions, thus increasing the competition for resources. In contexts of enormous political polarisation, migrants and settlers can be seen as the symbols and even executors of the central government's repressive and discriminatory policies. These migrants may be perceived as responsible for the disruptive effect on the social, cultural, demographic and economic status quo of the region. In such situations of explicit hostility and even violence against them, settlers normally defend the territorial integrity of the State –both because of ideological reasons or fear of becoming vulnerable minorities– and can support the Armed Forces and even participate in self-defence groups or counter-insurgency activities.

In Mindanao two groups have raised fears regarding independence or an ethnic autonomy and have openly denounced on various occasions having suffered discrimination in predominantly Muslim areas. Firstly the so-called Lumads, the original or indigenous peoples, that resist being included in the ancestral domains of the Moro people. The fact that the Lumads, largely animistic, have maintained a traditional way of life and are very inferior in number to Muslims and Christians, has meant that they have never had access to the structures of power nor have they had pre-eminent positions in the revolutionary struggle. This situation has relegated them to the status of observers and victims of the conflict rather than active and decisive participants. Secondly, the Christian population, a majority in the Philippines and Mindanao but a minority in the areas that the MILF and the MNLF consider to be their ancestral domains. In the 1960s and 1970s many Christian militias were created and participated in the communal bloody clashes that fuelled the war in Mindanao. Today, many voices consider that some Christians could resort to violence again if the outcome of the negotiations between Manila and the MILF –the creation of a Bangsamoro Juridical Entity– is perceived as a direct threat to the status quo. In fact, Christian local authorities afraid of being included in a Bangsamoro homeland were the ones who leaded the fierce opposition to the Memorandum of Agreement on the Ancestral Domains of the Bangsamoro in August of 2008.

In Aceh, despite the success of the peace agreement seems to guarantee the stabilization of the province, there are at least two minorities that have expressed their opposition to the autonomy that the peace accord grants to the region. Firstly, the so-called "transmigrants", which mainly came to Aceh from the densely populated island of Java under the "transmigrasi" programmes of the Indonesian Government. Many of these transmigrants occupied key positions in the public enterprises that manage the abundant natural resources of Aceh. Secondly, some non-Acehnese ethnic groups such as the Gayos, who consider themselves to be the original settlers of Aceh and who claim being progressively displaced from the coastal areas to the mountainous and central regions of the province by the Acehnese majority. Both the migrants and the Gayos have actively participated in the Indonesia-backed anti-GAM militias and have also supported the creation of two new provinces (ALA and ABAS) to be separated from the current province of Nangore Aceh Darussalam (ICG, 2006). Nevertheless, it seems clear that the creation of two new provinces is an aspiration of certain political leaders, rather than a demand of the population.

In southern Thailand, although it is absolutely unthinkable that the region will obtain independence or at least a Malay-dominated autonomous region, non-Muslim communities still fear repression and discrimination and numerous Buddhists are leaving the region because of security reasons. The perception among the non-Muslim population, widely spread by the national mass media, is that in an independent or even autonomous south the Buddhist would be systematically repressed by the Malay Muslim majority. This image has been reinforced by the fact that some groups –especially Buddhist monks, teachers and civil servants– have become selected targets of the insurgency. However, it must be kept in mind that the figures of the violence affecting Muslims and Buddhists are quite similar, thus suggesting that the selection of the victims could be based not only in ethnic or religious motives, but also in political ones, e.g. informants of the Army, civil servants or symbols of the State, such as teachers and Buddhist monks.

In Myanmar, the ethnic politics is much more complex that the common vision of seven national minorities fighting against an iron-fisted military dictatorship. In each of the seven ethnic states numerous minorities denounce discrimination and repression by the "majoritarian minorities" and demand self-governance within the state. In the state of Rakhine, the Muslim minority Rohinga claims to be the victim of systematic religious discrimination, and at the beginning of the 1990s it had already undergone massive exodus to Bangladesh. In the Shan state, one of the areas with greatest ethnic diversity, the Palaung, Pao or Lahu minorities –and their armed groups, the

PSLF, the PPLO and the LDF– request autonomy within the state because of the alleged abuses by the Shan "majority" and its armed group, Shan State Army-South. Moreover, many of the several Burmese communities spread all over the country may also fear being included in ethnically-defined independent states, and this situation could lead them to back the Army or even to create self-defence militias.

In North East India, the ethnic landscape is so intermingled that several minorities demand their own political structures to govern their ethnic homelands. These demands oscillate between self-governance and sovereignty, the former being far most common. Indeed, there are several existing autonomous regions within some of the states in North East India, created under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India: in Assam, the Bodoland Territorial Council, the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council and the North Cachar Hills Autonomous District Council. In Mizoram, the Garo Hills Autonomous District Council, the Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council and the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council. In Mizoram, the Chakma Autonomous District Council, the Lai Autonomous District Council and the Mara Autonomous District Council. Finally, in Tripura, the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council. The creation of these territorial autonomies has not been free of violence, e.g. the intercommunal clashes between Bodos and Santhals and other non-Bodos groups like Muslim immigrants from Bangladesh, nor has prevented communal tensions to arise, eg. the ethnic violence between Kukis, Karbis and Dimasa in the districts of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills. In other cases, some groups keep on fighting for the creation of their own territorial councils, e.g., the Bru Liberation Front of Mizoram, a group formed in the mid 1990's after the clashes between Mizos and Reang (Bru) in Mizoram and that currently is holding talks with the government of Mizoram. Whether the non-Meiteis in Manipur, the non-Bodos in Bodoland, the Reang or Bru in Mizoram, the Kukis and other non-Naga communities in Nagaland, the Bodos and other non-Assamesse groups in Assam, the Boroks in Tripura, the Bangladeshis in the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council, North East India is a good example to understand the game of concentric ethnonationalismsand competing homelands in which the establishment of new territorial autonomous entities –aimed to be the solution to protracted identity conflicts– creates new minorities, fears and demands.

International dimensions

Considering that most of the conflicts in South East Asia and North East India have a clear international dimension, do they need to be considered as internal on international conflicts? The classic distinction between 'intra-state' and 'inter-state' conflicts faces two critiques. First, that the complex nature of contemporary conflicts, that have both internal and international dimensions, resists any dichotomous labeling. Second, that it makes no sense to use the aforementioned distinction if, following the dramatic decline of the international wars and the parallel increase of the domestic conflicts reported from the end of the Cold War, almost all armed conflicts are considered to be internal (Dwan and Holmqvist, 2004). To overcome these difficulties, the concept of "internationalized internal conflict" has been widely accepted as an analytical category (Gleditsch et al., 2002). However, there still remains significant controversy over its meaning. The total number of "internationalized internal conflicts" considerably varies if there are to be considered only third-party military interventions or also other kind of external engagement. According to Lotta Harbom and Peter Wallensteen (2005), around one-fifth of the armed conflicts after the end the Cold War were internationalized in the sense that outside state troops were involved. However, as both authors point out, the percentage of post-Cold War internationalized internal conflicts increases to three-quarters if other types of international engagement are taken into account.

Both approaches face methodological difficulties. Considering only state military intervention implies ignoring other kind of external influences that can decisively affect the dynamics of the internal conflict. On the other hand, however, "in an increasingly globalized world, it is questionable whether internal conflict can be devoid of international dimensions. All conflicts, in this context, are 'international', even if they are not intestate wars" (Dwan and Holmqvist, 2004: 85). Then, considering other types of international engagement beyond the deployment of military troops runs the risk of not being useful as analytical tool ("all conflicts are international") and faces the difficulty of finding reliable data on "secondary non-warring support" (Harbom and Wallensteen, 2005).

When dealing with the international dimension of internal conflicts in South East Asia and North East India, it is important to draw attention on several issues. First, the so called "Global War on Terrorism", which plays an important role in at least one third of the current armed conflicts.[10] Second, the alleged

10 In the Philippines, for example, the US Army assists Manila in conducting counterinsurgency operations in Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago against Abu Sayyaf and Jemaah Islamiyah. In Afghanistan and Iraq, US troops are a key warring party, both unilaterally or leading international coalitions. Apart from the cases of Iraq and Afghanistan, US Army has directly conducted and openly recognised military operations (basically air and missile strikes) against suspected al-Qaeda militants in Somalia, Pakistan and Yemen. In a more covert way, US has also backed the Turkish invasion of Iraqi Kurdistan (providing intelligence support) and the Ethiopian military intervention in Somalia. US have also been accused of conducting joint military operations with both the Colombian army and the Armed Forces of Philippines (especially in Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago against Abu Sayyaf and Jemaah Islamiyah). In many of these cases, US has provided military aid and counterterrorism training in the framework of the so called "War on Terror".

presence of foreign militants, either individuals or groups. [11] Third, the links between rebel movements operating in bordering regions.[12] Fourth, the economic, political or logistical support that some governments give to certain insurgencies, usually to erode a neighboring country.[13] Another factor that explains the increasingly internationalized character of current conflicts, though not very important in North East India and South East Asia, is the increasing number of peacekeeping operations after the end of the Cold War[14] and, especially after the traumatic experiences in Somalia, Rwanda or the Balkans, the trend to invoke the Chapter VII and to establish more robust operations.[15] Obviously, the invocation by the Security Council of the Chapter VII does not mean that a United Nations peacekeeping operation automatically becomes a warring party. But since coercive means are authorized, it is much easier to get involved in clashes.

The most important international dimension of the conflicts in the region is probably the high number of rebel groups operating in neighbouring countries, from where they allegedly attack the government they are fighting against. This is not an exclusive feature of the patterns of conflict in the region, as in more than half of the current conflicts all over the world rebel groups have been accused of having bases or significant activity on neighboring countries. Basically, there are two broad models of guerrillas operating abroad. First, if rebels have the explicit or covert support from the neighboring country, then a military or diplomatic inter-state conflict seems unavoidable, as it has been seen in the cases of Thai rebels operating in northern Malaysia, Assamese outfits like ULFA establishing training camps in Bangladesh or Moro insurgencies hiding in Sabah and Sarawak (Malaysia).[16] The second option for rebels hiding abroad is not having the support or authorization from the 'host country', which normally makes the government of this country to crash 'foreign rebels'. Some examples of these clashes, which to some extent could be labelled as international, are the Burmese and Bhutanese Armies trying to expel Assamese and Manipuri rebels from its territory; the clashes in Bangladesh between Burmese rebels and the Bangladeshi Army, or the fighting between the Thai Army and Burmese-backed Wa and Karen guerrillas after these guerrillas raided Burmese refugee camps in Thailand.[17] In both cases, many governments cross international borders to crash national insurgencies hiding in neighboring countries: Burma against rebels in India and Thailand; India against Assamese and Manipuri rebels in Burma and Bhutan.[18]

From the particular perspective of the characteristics and dynamics of contemporary armed conflicts, specially regarding the situation in North East India and South East Asia, the growing fusion and confusion between the national and international security realms can be explained from two in-out and out-in converging trends. First, the in-out trend has to do with the regionalization/internationalization of intrastate conflicts through negative domino effect and spill over processes –refugees, weapons and mercenaries flows, establishment of military bases abroad by rebels movements, as well as contagion of political instability and violence outbreaks. The second out-in trend deals with the causes, dynamics and consequences of the international involvement in internal conflicts. The growing international activism since the end of the Cold War has played an important role, especially through peace keeping and peace enforcement operations. But this apparent value-oriented multilateralism has been also counterbalanced by *realpolitik* considerations. In fact, the high number of examples in which a government decides to militarily intervene in a foreign country, even crossing an international border to crash a rebel or alleged terrorist movement, sharply contrasts with the sacred character of territorial integrity, national sovereignty and inviolability of internationally recognized borders, thus making to wonder to what extent international law prevails over national interest, domestic agendas and the home security.

11 In Mindanao, the Moro insurgencies (especially Abu Sayyaf) are accused of having close links with Jemaah Islamiyah and even the Talibans, while the government of Thailand has already accepted that some foreign militant groups may be present in Southern Thailand. Despite the difficulty of finding reliable information, this trend can surely be seen in the other cases such as Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon, Somalia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Russia (Chechnya) or Yemen.

12 Some examples would be the contacts between Burmese and North-eastern insurgencies, like those between the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), the cooperation between Abu Sayyaf and Jeaamh Islamiyah or the Rajah Solaiman Movement or the alleged training of Southern Thailand militants by the rebel movement Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (GAM).

13 The support of Bangladesh or the Pakistan's secret service (ISI) to some North East Indian outfits has been widely reported. Likewise, the Islamic ruling party in northern Malaysia and, to a less extent, the Malaysian government, had been accused in the past of giving cooperating with rebels movements in Southern Thailand. The MNLF and the MNLF allegedly had some kind of support from some Muslim countries, like Libya. Some rebel movements in Burma are said to have benefited from the covert support of some Western countries andThailand, where many insurgent leaders live.

14 Regarding the increasing activism of the international community following the end of the Cold War, it should be noted that the number of United Nations peacekeeping operations between 1948 and 1989 was 18. Between 1989 and 2008, the number of deployed missions has increased to 45, 20 of them are still active (Department of Peacekeeping Operations, 2008).

15 Between 1948 and 1989, the Security Council acted under the Chapter VII in 8 occasions. Between 1989 and 2002, the number of actions under Chapter VII resolutions increased to 237 (Johansson, 2003). The ratio of Chapter VII invocations per year during the post-Cold War period (16) its exactly 100 times the ratio during the Cold War (0,16).

16 Some examples would include the Chadian rebels operating in Darfur –which lead the Chadian Army to clash with the Sudanese Army–, the Ugandan LRA hiding in Sudan, the Ivorian Forces Nouvelles being sheltered in Burkina Faso, the Kashmiri rebels being trained in Pakistan, or the Somali warlords establishing bases in Ethiopia or Kenya

17 Other cases are the clashes between Sudan-backed Janjaweed militias and Chadian Army; the alleged destruction of dozens of FARC camps in Ecuador by Ecuadorian soldiers; the searching in DR Congo of Ugandan Lord Resistance Army by the Congolese Army or the Central African Republic Army clashes against Chadian rebels.

18 This is the case in around one third of the current conflicts: Turkey against PKK in the Iraqi Kurdistan; Colombia against FARC in Ecuador; Uganda against LRA in Sudan; Rwanda against Interahamwe and other rebel movements in DR Congo; Chad against Janjaweed in Sudan; Sudan against SLM and JEM in Chad; Afghanistan against the Taliban movement in Pakistan or Ethiopia against the Union of Islamic Courts of Somalia.

III.- What about the solutions? Dilemmas and challenges

To build peace in North East India and South East Asia is a multidimensional task that can be addressed from several perspectives. The following section deals with two issues that are closely related to some of the more specific characteristics of North East India and South East Asia. First, the lack of international engagement. Second, the strong link between ethnicity and territory, the high significance of territorial homelands and the complex geographic distribution of groups. Regarding the first point, the experiences in the regions analyzed in this paper show that there is a quite clear correlation between international engagement and "successful" peace initiatives. Regarding the second issue, although autonomy has been in the past –and seems to be in the near future– the preferred option to manage self-determination conflicts, the poor results of autonomy regimes in South East Asia and North East India open the door for considering non-territorial solutions, which in turn have their own difficulties.

The international involvement in peace processes

It is widely argued that the involvement of the international community in a peace process can have positive effects because it overcomes the State's resistances to dialogue with "terrorists", balances the power asymmetries between both parties, puts pressure on the resolution of the conflict –by offering carrots and threatening with sticks–, creates the material and confidence conditions for the parties to talk to each other, obliges the State to "open" isolated areas, and raises new perspectives on the conflict that can overcome zero-sum games and can help in the agenda setting. Considering the high number of conflicts in which violence erupts again a few years after an agreement has been reached, the success of the post conflict phase and the effective implementation of a peace agreement may to some extent depend on the involvement of the international community in the design of consultation and arbitration mechanisms between the parties. Where no international monitoring exists on the post conflict phase, it is much easier for any of the warring parties –normally the government, who is the ultimate responsible for the implementation of the agreement– not to comply with its own commitments.

In South East Asia and North East India, it is relatively clear that the internationalized peace processes have been more successful than those managed exclusively under the "national sovereignty" paradigm. In Aceh, the tsunami of December 2005 provoked the arrival of hundreds of NGO to a region that at that time was completely closed to the media and under martial law (ICG, 2003). A few months later, in August 2008, the Finnish NGO Crisis Management Initiative –leaded by the former Finnish president and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Marti Ahtisaari– brokered a peace agreement –the Memorandum of Understanding– that traded autonomy for independence. Regarding the implementation of the agreement, the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) provided for the deployment of the Aceh Monitoring Mission, formed by European and South East Asian countries, to monitor the effective implementation of the accord. The MoU clearly stipulated a dispute settlement provision in which the Aceh Monitoring Mission and the Crisis Management Initiative were supposed to play a major role. Except some controversial issues regarding the passage of the Law on Governing Aceh and some minor violent incidents, the implementation of the Memorandum of Understanding has had until now no significant problems.

In Mindanao, the Organization of the Islamic Conference helped so much in gaining international support for the resolution of the long standing armed conflict with the MNLF during the 70's and then was a decisive actor in the negotiation process that led to the signature of the Final Peace Agreement in 1996. However, the so called "grievance machinery" included in the agreement to address the unsolved issues didn't work as expected and, more than ten years after its signature, many provisions of the accord have not been implemented. Even if both the MNLF and the OIC have urged the Government on many occasions to fully comply with the agreement, Manila has never felt enough domestic or international pressure to compromise with some of the most sensitive issues of the agreement. Only when some factions of MNLF resorted to violence in Sulu and when the OIC intensified its diplomatic pressure has Manila agreed to convene a tripartite meeting to review the implementation of the agreement. Regarding the MILF, the Malaysian Government is mediating peace talks and leading –until mid 2008– the International Monitoring Team, who has played a major role in monitoring the 2003 ceasefire agreement and in building military confidence between the Philippines Government and the MILF. Moreover, many Governments and international organizations have promised to channel funds to the reconstruction and development of Mindanao once the government and the MILF reach a peace agreement.

On the contrary, there are fewer future peace perspectives in those conflicts where there is no international involvement. Probably the best example is Burma, a country completely "closed" for the last decades and where even the Special Envoy of the Secretary General has had enormous problems to

develop its good offices for the democratization and pacification of the country. In the same direction, in Burma there has not been any kind of international involvement in the monitoring of the numerous ceasefires agreements signed during the 1990s, which only envisaged the end of hostilities without addressing the underlying causes of the conflict. As the main responsible for all these agreements, Khin Nyunt, was politically "purged" a few years ago, the Government has felt free not to comply with all its compromises with several ethnic groups, thus provoking their protests. However, as the ceasefire agreements provided some economic benefits for the leaders of the insurgencies, the systematic non accomplishment of the accords by Rangoon has rarely provoked the return to weapons by the armed groups. In North East India, the international community has not actively participated in none of the several peace talks that Delhi has held with many outfits. This could explain why almost none of these peace talks have ended in a comprehensive peace agreement, why many negotiations have been deadlocked for so many years and why many civil society groups accuse the government of India of systematically undermining its compromises.

Thailand would represent a middle example between those cases of non-international involvement (Burma and North East India) and those clearly internationalized (Aceh and Mindanao). On one hand, the Government has been publicly stating that the conflict in the Southern provinces is an internal problem and has rejected the cooperation offered by other countries such as the US. On the other hand, however, considering that the violence has worsened in the last years in spite of the several dialogue offers by Bangkok, the Thai Government has asked for some kind of international involvement in the negotiations with the secessionist insurgencies. The former Prime Minister Mahatir met some insurgencies in the Malaysian island of Langkawil in 2006. In 2008, a former Defense Minister declared to have reached a ceasefire agreement with an umbrella organization of 11 armed groups. Some foreign governments, like Malaysia, Switzerland and other European countries, would have participated in these conversations. Likewise, the Government of Indonesia announced that the Indonesian Vice-president Jusuf Kalla had mediated peace talks between the Thai Government and a delegation representing several armed opposition groups. However, none of these talks resulted in a clear reduction in the levels of violence, thus raising doubts about the real importance of the armed groups that allegedly participated in those peace talks.

Despite the peace agreements reached in Mindanao and Aceh, the involvement of the international community in South Asia is very low. This is especially true if we take into account that South East Asia and North East India are the regions of the world in which a higher number of armed conflicts and tensions (School for a Culture of Peace, 2009). As Moller underlines, "third-party interventions are neither as numerous nor as effective in this region as they should be, and this is precisely why they are needed the most. This study demonstrates that – in the absence of a multitrack diplomacy based on local, regional, and international resources, and a varied set of tools ranging from peacekeeping to post-conflict reconstruction– civil wars in Southeast Asia will continue to pose a serious threat to regional and international security." (Moller, 2007: 390). Then, one of the most important challenges for the international community is to overcome the traditional emphasis on national sovereignty, non-interference and territorial integrity of both the ASEAN and the countries in the region and how to contribute to the peace processes and initiatives in the region in a constructive and respectful way.

Autonomy and minority rights as a solution to self-determination conflicts?

Almost all the armed groups in South East Asia have postponed or tacitly renounced to total independence, which has eased peace negotiations in many contexts and even crystallized in peace accords, like in Aceh or Mindanao. The GAM in Aceh and the MNLF in Mindanao have already accepted autonomy, the KNU and other armed groups in Burma have put on the top of their political agenda a real federalization of the country instead of secession; the MILF in the Philippines has publicly stated on many occasions that it would compromise for a short of independence formula that would exceed the current borders and degree of self-governance of the Autonomous Region of the Muslim Mindanao, presumably the Bangsamoro Juridical Entity. In Thailand, it's difficult to know about the political agenda of the secessionist armed groups, but the historical insurgencies also renounced to the creation of an international recognized State in Southern Thailand and agreed on a broader cultural and religious autonomy for the Southern Muslim Malay provinces (ICG, 2005).

Many of these armed groups have not completely abandoned their original demands, but have taken advantage of a certain political momentum or have preferred to agree on a compromise formula than to continue to engage in eternum in a non-sense non-ending armed conflict. It is quite clear that none of the groups that are seeking for self-determination in South East Asia and North East India will achieve independence in the mid term, both because of non international support

and, sometimes, even domestic support. Then, many secessionist armed groups seem to have understood that autonomy, understood as different institutional arrangements that allow for a certain internal redistribution of sovereignty through deconcentration, decentralization, devolution or sharing of power within the framework of the pre-existing States, are the widely accepted compromise formula elsewhere.

Many self-determination disputes have been solved in recent years through autonomy agreements. These kind of agreements, being federalism, territorial autonomy or special protection and promotion of minority rights some of its most common forms, partially satisfy the minimum demands of the parties involved: those of the international community (state system stability), the Governments (territorial integrity, inviolability of its international borders) and the armed ethnopolitical groups (self-government, idiosyncratic recognition). Moreover, the flexibility of these arrangements allows its implementation in a wide variety of contexts. On the other hand, under the prominence of the subsidiary principle promoted by many international organizations, autonomy should lead to a better management of public resources, above all in those contexts in which the minorities are territorially concentrated. Finally, autonomy seems to be also a good option for the third parties when aiming to impartially mediate/facilitate in political conflicts, because autonomy is normally seen by the parties in conflict more as a compromise formula than as a preferred outcome (Lapidoth, 1996).

Nevertheless, autonomy arrangements also face many difficulties. First, the uncertainty that they provoke in both parties. From the State point of view, autonomy is feared as the first phase to independence that can also initiate a domino-effect in other peripheral areas of the country. From the armed group point of view, the full implementation of an autonomy regime depends on the political will and economic resources of the central Government, at least in its initial phase. Second, the possibility that resources initially devoted to the development of an autonomy regime are used for other purposes, such as the continuation of violence. Third, the easiness with which hard-liners from both parts can mobilize its constituencies against a compromise formula that does not reach –or even betrays- its aspirations (independence of a region or the unitary character of the state). Finally, the fact that autonomy and secession will almost certainly create new minorities (Ghai, 2000 and Esman, 2004). The legitimacy of the political aspirations of certain national minorities is seriously jeopardized by the discriminatory treatment that these national minorities often inflict to their own "minorities". So, the establishment of territorial autonomy regimes would need to include certain democratic and security guarantees for the new minorities.

There is a great variety of current or proposed autonomy arrangements in South East Asia and North East India: standard territorial autonomy in Aceh; recognition of cultural rights and areas of functional or personal autonomy in southern Thailand; "ethnic autonomy" in Mindanao –the Autonomous Region in the Muslim Mindanao, is formed by some of the Muslim majority areas, not necessarily contiguous– and North East India –all the autonomous district councils in the North-eastern states were established considering the areas where certain ethnic groups were a majority; asymmetric federalism with specific recognition of a Bangsamoro Juridical Entity in Mindanao –this formula has been proposed during the peace talks and depends on the reform of the Constitution; or federalism –and even the right of secession to be included in the Constitution– demanded by most of the active insurgencies in Myanmar.

However, the results and achievements of the different autonomy regimes in the region are clearly deficient. In Myanmar, in the regions that were granted autonomy after the ceasefire agreements signed during the 1990s, several armed groups have established their own networks of institutions (schools, hospitals, cultural organizations, etc.), but they have also used these territories for illicit economic activities. In Aceh it is still not clear whether the 'benefits' of the peace accord will be much better than those brought about by the "special autonomy" granted by Jakarta to Aceh and West Papua. In Mindanao, the Autonomous Region of the Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) has been eroded in the last decade by a deficit of governance –corruption, inefficiency, etc.– and also by a lack of economic resources, which were supposed to be transferred by Manila. This situation has resulted in an increase in the poverty rates –the highest in the entire country– and in a general disappointment towards the autonomy regime in Mindanao. Therefore, the MILF already has made it clear that it will not accept a failed autonomy like the ARMM. In North East India, Sanjay Barahua (2003: 44) argues that the "notion of exclusive homelands for ethnically defined groups" in demographically mixed areas has fuelled many of the conflicts of the region and has created a "regime of citizens and denizens" (Baruah, 2003: 48). In the same direction, Lacina considers that the special autonomy granted to tribal peoples under the Sicht Schedule has not solved the self-governance demands of many groups: "Tribal status and autnomy provisions have been contested ever since, resulting in an increase in the number of groups classified as tribals and repeated revision of autonomy arrangements." (Lacina, 2007: 167).

The dispersion and geographic location of the minorities sometimes makes the territorial dimension of the resolution of self-determination conflicts enormously complex. The fact that the political

demands of these minorities are tied to a territory often leads to zero sum games. As Reilly states, "the highly intermixed and fragmented ethnic demography of much of South-East Asia –in contrast to the more homogeneous states of North Asia– creates its own problems, making international disputes out of domestic ones and greatly complicating territorial prescriptions for conflict management" (Reilly, 2002: 8). In this sense, some experts propose "defining political communities in civic rather than ethnic terms that could incorporate the ethnic outsider" (Baruah, 2003: 47) while others advocate for "deterritorializing" the self-determination concept in favor of non-territorial formulas for autonomy –also known as functional or personal– and minority regimes. The functional autonomies, especially where minorities are not territorially concentrated, allude to a network of religious, cultural, political and social institutions that satisfy the demands of these minorities. These "functional territories", though without established borders, can be useful tools to preserve the identity of certain groups in territories dominated by other political communities. However, there are two observations regarding these *de facto* –not *de jure*– autonomies (Safran, 2002). First, that the non-territorial autonomy needs to be voluntary, since its compulsory imposition by the government would be better defined as segregation, as in the "bantustans" in South Africa. The second observation is that functional autonomy is much more vulnerable than the territorial one, because usually is not regulated by laws, so largely depends on the political will of the government.

In sum, many authors underscore the importance of delinking territory and ethnicity and advocate for non territorial solutions, such as minority rights. These views are supported by the fact that there has been a substantial worldwide improvement in the status of minorities from the 1990s onwards (Gurr, 2000). Legal discrimination because of ethnic reasons is becoming more infrequent and there is also an increasingly *de facto* acceptance that some minorities deserve the collective recognition of certain rights. Nevertheless, it is worth making two points regarding the recognition and protection of minority rights by the states. First, the strategies of accommodation of the minorities in the national mainstream have often lead to the the 'folklorisation' or the 'stigmatization' of these minorities. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the minority rights recognized by the States are predominantly cultural, rarely economic, and almost never political (this includes the right to self-determination). Almost all the Governments of South East Asia have used the recognition of cultural and religious rights as a mechanism to satisfy the more easily attainable demands of the minorities and, therefore, avoid or delay some form of devolution of power. Therefore, the recognition and promotion of minorities' cultural rights are a much more effective and less costly strategy than military repression or total discrimination when aiming to contain the political aspirations of national minorities.

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School for a Culture of Peace

The *Escola de Cultura de Pau* (School of Peace Culture) was established in 1999 with the aim of organizing academic activities, research and intervention related to peace culture, analysis, prevention and transformation of conflicts, education for peace, disarmament and the promotion of human rights.

The school is mainly financed by the Catalan government, via the Catalan Agency for Cooperation and Development. It also receives support from the Spanish Agency for International Cooperation and Development (AECID), the Catalan International Peace Institute (ICIP), the Norwegian Foreign Ministry, local authorities, foundations and other bodies. Its director is Vicenç Fisas, who is also UNESCO Professor of Peace and Human Rights at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona.

In accordance with this mission and these objectives, the school focuses its work on the following areas:

- **Intervention in conflicts**, to facilitate dialogue between the protagonists.
- Academic activities such as a **postgraduate diploma** on **peace culture** (which entails 230 hours of study with an average of 60 students per course in 10 courses) and the elective topics "peace culture and conflict management", and "educating for peace in conflicts".
- **Awareness** initiatives related to peace culture in Catalan and Spanish society through various educational activities.
- **Analysis and** daily monitoring of international events, regarding **armed conflicts, situations of tension, humanitarian crisis and gender** (Conflicts and Peace-building Program).
- Monitoring and analysis of different countries undergoing peace processes or formal negotiations, or countries which are in an exploratory phase of negotiations (Peace Process Program).
- Analysis of different themes linked to **disarmament**, with special attention given to the processes of Disarmament Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) of ex-combatants (Disarmament Program).
- Monitoring and analysis of peace-building in postwar contexts (Postwar Rehabilitation Program).
- Monitoring of the international situation regarding human rights and, in particular, the mechanisms of transitional justice, the social responsibility of business and the impact of multinationals in conflict contexts (Human Rights Program).
- The promotion and development of the understanding, the values and the capacity for **peace education** (Peace Education Program).
- Analysis of the **contribution made by music and the arts** to peace-building (Art and Peace Program).

Escola de Cultura de Pau (School for a Culture of Peace)
Edifici MRA (Mòdul Recerca A),
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
08193 Bellaterra (Spain)
Tel.: (+34) 93 586 88 42; Fax: (+34) 93 581 32 94
Email: pr.conflictes.escolapau@uab.cat
Web: http://escolapau.uab.cat

ècp escola de cultura de pau

Edifici MRA (Mòdul Recerca A)
Campus de la UAB
08193 Bellaterra
(Cerdanyola del Vallès)
Barcelona, Spain

Tel.: +34 93 586 88 48
Fax: +34 93 581 32 94
escolapau@uab.cat
http://escolapau.uab.cat