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International Boundary Study

No. 57 – November 15, 1965

Malaysia – Thailand Boundary

(Country Codes: MY-TH)

**The Geographer
Office of the Geographer
Bureau of Intelligence and Research**

INTERNATIONAL BOUNDARY STUDY

No. 57

MALAYSIA – THAILAND BOUNDARY

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MALAYSIA – THAILAND BOUNDARY

I. BOUNDARY BRIEF

The Malaysia–Thailand boundary extends for 314 miles from the Strait of Malacca on the west to the Gulf of Siam on the east. The demarcated boundary follows water divides in the west and center and the Golok river in the east.

No active disputes over the precise alignment are known to exist.

II. GEOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND

A. Physical

In the west, the boundary originates in a low, undulating coastal plain, an area of dense mangrove swamps. The plain is constricted in the immediate area of the boundary but broadens both to the north and to the south of the boundary, penetrating 15 to 20 miles inland. Isolated hills appear in Malaysia and more continuous ridges and ranges of hills lie to the north in Thailand. These attain local elevations of almost 4,000 feet but the crests of the hills normally average about 1,000 feet above sea level.

The Sayun Range, an extension of the Si Thammarat mountains of Thailand, forms the frontier region for approximately 15 miles on its northward extension from the coastal plain. The limestone range is narrow, varying from slightly more than two miles to over seven miles in width, and has an average elevation of approximately 2,000 feet. Many small tributary streams have dissected the range into jagged, steep-sided hills. Elevations fall sharply eastward to the Lam Yai valley. This lowland area extends for approximately 20 miles eastward to the Central Highlands, the main spine of the Malay Peninsula. The valley is the principal routeway from southern Thailand to Perlis State and is served by both a main highway and a railroad. The valley floor is gently undulating and broken by a few low, isolated hills.

The Central Highlands, which comprise the middle half of the frontier region, consist of a massive but dissected granitic upland. The general alignment of the ridges is north–south with maximum elevations between 3,000 and 5,000 feet situated along the boundary. Slopes are steep and are, in general, covered with a thick evergreen, tropical rain forest. However, above the 4,000 foot line a deciduous type of forest, comprised primarily of oak, predominates. The larger valleys have been cleared in places for cultivation but the major part of the frontier remains in natural forest.

The eastern coastal plain mirrors the forms and relief encountered in the west. The region is a flat, sandy lowland with swamp and mangrove forests along the coast. The shallow Golok River has a low gradient and the stream meanders across the plain. Generally elevations are below 250 feet but the occasional hills dot the landscape. The

coastal plain offers excellent access between Malaysia and Thailand and a main highway and a railroad cross the frontier.

The tropical monsoon climate of the frontier is directly influenced by both the southwest (May–September) and the northeast (November–March) monsoons. The Central Highland spine and the trend of the peninsula tend to restrict the southwest monsoonal influence to the west and the northeast to the east. Precipitation maximums occur during the monsoonal season but no period is without rainfall. Total annual precipitation is everywhere in excess of 80 inches.

As a tropical region, temperatures are uniformly high throughout the year. Mean daily maximum temperatures range between 84° and 91° while the minima are between 74° and 76°. Seasonal variations are very slight.

B. Historical

The early history of Thai–Malay contacts is obscure. However, the first Thai kingdom known to history was Nan-Chao, located near what is now Yunnan, in south China. Nan-Chao resisted the southward thrust of successive Chinese dynasties from roughly the 7th through the 12th centuries. However, the Mongol conquest of China in the 13th century shattered the Yunnan-based kingdom and speeded the southward movement of the Thai, a process which had been gradually developing for several centuries. Minor Thai kingdoms appeared in what is now northern Thailand in the 11th century. In the 13th century, however, the cohesive Kingdom of Sukothai, although it was centered on the north, laid claim to most of modern-day Thailand. Channeled between the Khmer in the east and the Burmese in the west, the Thai gradually spread southward to come into direct contact with the Malays of the lower peninsula.

After a devastating defeat by the Burmese in the 18th century, a new Thai state was reconstituted on the lower reaches of the Chao Phraya river. The present capital, Bangkok, was established in 1782 by the first king of the current Thai dynasty. His major tasks were to re-create the basic institutions of the society—laws, records, codes, traditions, temples, etc.—and to regain control over the former vassal states which now exercised a great deal of local independence. Between 1824 and 1851, the Malay sultanates of Trengganu, Kedah, Kelantan, and Pattani were brought under closer relationship with Bangkok.

The first major contact with Europeans in the region occurred in 1511 when Malacca fell to the Portuguese. During the 16th century, Dutch influences developed in Java and Spanish in the Philippines. In 1819, Britain annexed the island of Singapore as a port of call between India and China. Five years later, the Dutch exchanged Malacca, which they had previously taken from Portugal, for the British posts in Sumatra. From this base on the Malay peninsula, British protection was extended successively over the sultanates of Perak, Selangor, Negri Sembilan and finally, in 1888, over Pahang. The island of Penang and an adjacent coastal strip had been obtained almost a century earlier.

Thus, the Thai kingdom and the British Malay states came into direct territorial contact; the first boundary treaty was signed in 1869 concerning the frontier of Kedah. In the first decade of the 20th century, Siam relinquished its suzerain claim to the four Malay sultanates of Kedah, Trengganu, Perlis, and Kelantan to British protection within the Malay states. The present-day boundary stems from this treaty of 1909 between Britain and Siam. During World War II, Thailand temporarily regained control over the four states but they reverted to British administration with the end of the hostilities. In 1957, they became states of the independent Federation of Malaya (Malaysia in 1963).

C. Political

In the decades since the end of World War II, the frontier region between Malaysia and Thailand has been plagued by communist inspired insurgency. In 1959 and again in 1965 agreements were signed by the states to assist in the control of the frontier area. However, these treaties did not affect the location of the boundary.

III. ANALYSIS OF THE BOUNDARY ALIGNMENT

The treaty of 1909 delimited the boundary as follows:

"Commencing from the most seaward point of the northern bank of the estuary of the Perlis River and thence north to the range of hills which is the watershed between the Perlis River on one side and the Pujok River on the other; then following the watershed formed by the said range of hills until it reaches the main watershed or dividing line between those rivers which flow into the Gulf of Siam on the one side and into the Indian Ocean on the other; following this main watershed so as to pass the sources of the Sungei Patani (S. Pattani), Sungei Telubin (Khleng Sai Buri), and Sungei Perak, to the point which is the source of the Sungei Pergau; then leaving the main watershed and going along the watershed separating the waters of the Sungei Pergau from the Sungei Telubin, to the hill called Bukit Jeli (Buket Yeli) or the source of the main stream of the Sungei Golok to the sea at a place called Kuala Tabar.

"This line will leave the valleys of the Sungei Patani, Sungei Telubin, and Sungei Tanjung Mas (Tanjong Mat) and the valley on the left or west bank of the Golok to Siam and the whole valley of the Perak River and the valley on the right or east bank of the Golok to Great Britain."

The delimitation continued by allotting the west coast islands as follows:

"The island known as Pule Langkawi, together with all the islets south of the mid-channel between Terutau and Langkawi, and all the islands south of Langkawi shall become British. Terutau and the islets to the north of mid-channel shall remain to Siam.

"With regard to the islands close to the west coast, those lying to the north of the parallel of latitude where the most seaward point of the north bank of the estuary of the Perlis River touches the sea shall remain to Siam, and those lying to the south of the parallel shall become British."

The division of islands on the east coast of the peninsula was as follows:

"All islands adjacent to the eastern States of Kelantan and Tringganu (sic), south of the parallel of latitude drawn from the point where the Sungei Golok reaches the coast at a place called Kuala Tabar, shall be transferred to Great Britain, and all islands to the north of that parallel shall remain to Siam."

The treaty then stated:

"It shall be the duty of the Boundary Commission ... to determine and eventually to mark out the frontier above described."

IV. INTERNATIONAL TREATIES

The following treaties have been negotiated on the Malaysia–Thailand boundary alignment. Only the 1909 agreement specifically concerns the modern boundary alignment.

A. Bangkok Treaty signed on May 6, 1869 (no ratification required) (Great Britain, Foreign Office, British and Foreign State Papers, vol. 59, p. 1147 ff., London.)

The treaty delimited the coastal portion of Penang ceded to Great Britain as the Province Wellesley.

B. Bangkok Treaty signed on March 10, 1909, with ratifications exchanged in London on July 9, 1909. (Great Britain, Foreign Office, Treaty Series 1909, No. 19, Command 4703, London.)

The Treaty formally ceded the four southern Malay states under Siamese suzerainty to the protection of Great Britain. The treaty included four annexes (two protocols), the first of which delimited the entire boundary. (See quote above in Section III.)

C. London Treaty signed on July 14, 1925, with ratifications exchanged in London on March 30, 1926. (Aitchison, C.U., A Collection of Treaties, Engagements, and Sanads ..., 5th ed., Calcutta, Government of India, Vol. 14, p. 194 ff.)

Article 5 stated that "any treaty in force at the time of the signature of the present treaty, which fix or delimit the boundary between Siam and British possessions or protectorates shall remain in force." The alignment of the boundary was not discussed.

V. SUMMARY

The Malaysia–Thailand boundary is 314 miles long. For 251 miles, the boundary is formed by water divides in the west and central sectors. The Golok river forms the border for an additional 59 miles, with the remaining 4 miles in the coastal waters.

The boundary representation on Malaysian, Thai, and British published maps is identical, and they may all serve as compilation sources for the alignment. The two-sheet map, Malaya, 1:500,000, published by the Survey Department of Malaya and the British quarter-inch series, reprinted as Army Map Service series L 501, are both judged good sources.

This International Boundary Study is one of a series of specific boundary papers prepared by the Geographer, Office of Research in Economics and Science, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Department of State, in accordance with provisions of Bureau of the Budget Circular No. A-16.

Government agencies may obtain additional information and copies of the study by calling the Geographer, Room 8744, Department of State, Washington, D.C. (Telephone: Code 182, Extension 4508).