

MALAYSIA-THAI RELATIONS: A CASE OF BENIGN NEGLECT OR ONE-SIDED AFFAIR?

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(DRAFT: NOT TO BE CITED WITHOUT AUTHORS' PERMISSION)

Three Decades of Malaysia-Thai Relations: A One Sided Affair?

A preliminary observation from the Malaysian perspective shows the following:

- Over time Malaysia-Thai relations have suffered benign-neglect when both countries took each other for granted.
- Thailand has been regarded as the least problematic neighbour - not causing much issues/problems.
- Malaysia-Thai relations are generally manageable and not as challenging unlike that of Malaysia's relations with Indonesia and Singapore.
- Thus, both countries accept the status-quo relations and are rather contented with each other despite the many potential areas of cooperation.

A Case of 'One-Sided Affair'?

- The politics of accommodation is reflected in Malaysia's foreign policy approach toward its ASEAN neighbours particularly Thailand (and Indonesia)
- At the government to government level, Malaysia-Thai relations is mostly seen as a one-sided affair.
- Malaysia seems to be more willing to explore bilateral cooperation, but adopt the “wait” and “see” attitude towards Thailand to reciprocate.

Why the Case of ‘One Sided Affair’?

For Thailand:

- The country has different foreign policy concerns and priorities:
 - ‘western centric’
 - mainland – more preoccupied with relations with Myanmar and China. Thailand has had a “love-hate” relations with Cambodia.
 - Influenced by regional security concerns (at the forefront of the domino theory) – the Vietnamese threat; reliance on the US for defense support such as financial aid and equipment.

Three Decades of Malaysia-Thai Relations: A One Sided Affair?

Malaysian Foreign Relations and Diplomacy: The Mahathir Years (1981-2003)

- Malaysia's foreign relations and diplomacy under Tun Dr Mahathir (1981-2003) – the country had adopted an active, bold and a more balanced foreign policy initiatives.

Amongst the major initiatives introduced by the Mahathir administration - The 'Look East' which was launched in February 1982 after years of 'looking west'. Mahathir had earlier announced 'Buy British Last' in October 1981.

Three Decades of Malaysia-Thai Relations: An Overview (1981-2012)

Malaysia-Thai Relations: The Mahathir Years (1981-2003)

- ASEAN – became one of the four major cornerstones of Malaysia's foreign policy.

Thus, intra-ASEAN relations also became important.

- This also helped to boost Malaysia ties with individual ASEAN countries including Thailand.

Three Decades of Malaysia-Thai Relations: An Overview (1981-2012)

Malaysia-Thai Relations: The Mahathir Years

- However, relations with neighbouring Singapore – could be described as ‘testy’, ‘bumpy’, etc – (both countries were led by strong personalities - Dr Mahathir and Lee Kuan Yew).
- Comparatively, Malaysia-Republic of Indonesia relations were quite stable and became less contentious.

Three Decades of Malaysia-Thai Relations: An Overview (1981-2012)

Malaysia-Thai Relations: The Mahathir Years

- It is interesting to note that the 1980s and 1990s were a period of relatively peace for the southern Thai provinces.
- Subsequently, Malaysia-Thai bilateral ties under Dr Mahathir were less affected by conflict in the South.

Malaysia-Thai Relations: The Mahathir Years

- Security – close but low-profile cooperation on the situation in the Southern Provinces and tackling Communist guerrillas (as well as Patani Malays militants).
- Refugees – “confirmed” the status of refugees in early 1981 when 1,250 Patani Malays fled to northwest Kedah and Perak.

Malaysia-Thai Relations: The Mahathir Years

- Dr. Mahathir was particularly interested in promoting cordial relations and cooperation with Thailand in economics.
- Bilateral mechanisms – establishment of Joint Commission (1987), Malaysia-Thailand Joint Authority (1990), Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle IMT-GT (1993) and Joint-Development Strategy (2003).
- These initiatives did not lead to a “special relations” between the two countries and also did not enhance people-to-people ties.

Three Decades of Malaysia-Thai Relations: The Mahathir Years (1981-2003)

Malaysia-Thai Relations: The Mahathir Years (Government-to-Government)

- Rapport between Dr Mahathir and Thais leaders:
 - Prem Tinsulanond (1980-1988)
 - Chatichai Choonhavan (1988-1991)
 - Anand Panyarachun (1991-1992)
 - Chuan Leekpai (1992-1995 & 1997-2001)
 - Thaksin Shinawatra (2001-2006)

Malaysia-Thai Relations: The Mahathir Years (Government-to-Government)

Dr Mahathir and Thaksin

- Thaksin admired both Dr Mahathir and Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore as senior ASEAN statesmen.
- Malaysia under Dr Mahathir – succeeded in making Malaysia a modern country. However, Malaysia was not in the consciousness of the Thai people.
- **Recap** - Government-to-Government
Top-Down Leadership factor

Malaysia-Thai Relations: The Mahathir Years (Government-to-Government)

- Malaysia-Thai relations were very much influenced by the leaderships of both countries (Top-Down).
- Security issues dominated bilateral relations.

Malaysia-Thai Relations under Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (2003-2009)

- Abdullah became Malaysia's Prime Minister in October 2003 after more than two decades of Mahathir leadership.
- Abdullah, popularly known as Pak Lah, led Barisan Nasional to win 'big' in the 2004 General Election. BN won more than 90 percent of the parliamentary seats.

Malaysia-Thai Relations under Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (2003-2009)

- With a very strong mandate, Pak Lah was expected to introduce many new initiatives and reforms after the 'excessiveness' of the Mahathir years.
- However, the Abdullah administration soon faced new challenges and became preoccupied with domestic issues and concerns.

Malaysia-Thai Relations under Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (2003-2009)

- Abdullah's premiership coincided with the escalation of violence in the southern Thai-Muslim provinces. Thaksin who was Thai prime minister during that time had adopted a rather harsh attitude and approach towards the 'problematic' South.
- Thaksin's perceived arrogance and abrasiveness contributed to the 'erratic' Malaysia's relations with Thailand.
- Malaysia was perceived negatively for supposedly supporting the militants.

Three Decades of Malaysia-Thai Relations: The Abdullah Years

- As Chairman of OIC and also Chairman of the NAM, Abdullah felt he had the moral responsibility to raise the issue of growing violence in the Southern provinces. The Malaysian leader had inadvertently questioned the role of the Thaksin government in managing the volatile situation in the Deep South – thus aggravating the bilateral tension.

The Abdullah Years

- In effect, there was not much socioeconomic progress in Malaysia-Thai relations during the Abdullah years.
- New issues and challenges in Malaysia's domestic politics, the growing violence in the Southern provinces and also the drastic changes in the approaches/policies adopted by the Thaksin government had contributed to the somewhat 'subdued' ties between the two neighbours – cautious and wary towards each other.

Malaysia-Thai Relations under Najib Razak

- During the early part of his administration, Najib was seen to be pursuing an active bilateral foreign relations with selected countries including Thailand. Other countries include China, South Korea, India, Singapore, Indonesia, the US and the UK.
- Early on in his administration, for the first time in many years, Malaysia and Thailand had leaders (Najib and Abhisit) who seem to share common values (both leaders were from a privileged background, trained in the UK, of the same generation etc) and interests.
- Abhisit and Najib seemed committed to seek peaceful solutions in the Southern Provinces by introducing 'grand' initiatives.

Malaysia-Thai Relations under Najib Razak

- These initiatives were unfortunately short lived due to the untimely departure of Abhisit after his party (Democrat) lost the general election to Yingluck Shinawatra.
- With the appointment of Yingluck as Thai PM who is perceived as an extension of her infamous brother, Thaksin, Thai-Malaysia relations seems to once again take a backseat.
- However, there were some positive gestures from the Thai side when Yingluck came to visit KL/Putrajaya. Her charming personality made headline news in Malaysia. Nonetheless, as expected, not much evidence of visible progress in bilateral ties since the official visit!

Malaysia-Thai Relations under Najib Razak

- In effect, the 'one-sided affair' continues under the current Yingluck-Najib administrations.



Malaysia-Thai Relations under Najib Razak

- Malaysia under PM Najib is also preoccupied with domestic issues and problems.
- Subsequently, foreign relations and diplomacy including relations with Thailand seem to have taken a back seat.

People to People Relations

- At the people to people level, it is widely believed that the people in Bangkok maintained an indifferent attitude towards Malaysia. Knowledge about Malaysia is limited and very superficial.
- This is in contrast with the view of the people in the Southern Provinces who were/are generally more positive towards Malaysia (due to its geographical proximity as well as socio-cultural similarities).
- **Thus, there is a need to explore via research/ survey if this preliminary observation at the people to people level is valid.**

People to People

- What about Malaysia's perception towards Thailand?
- At the people to people level, Malaysians generally see Thailand as an exciting holiday destination.
- Cheaper to spend holidays in Thailand than other parts of Malaysia.
- News about Thailand do make an occasional headlines in Malaysia for example, elections, floods, bombings in the South – otherwise Thailand does not loom large in the Malaysian public consciousness.

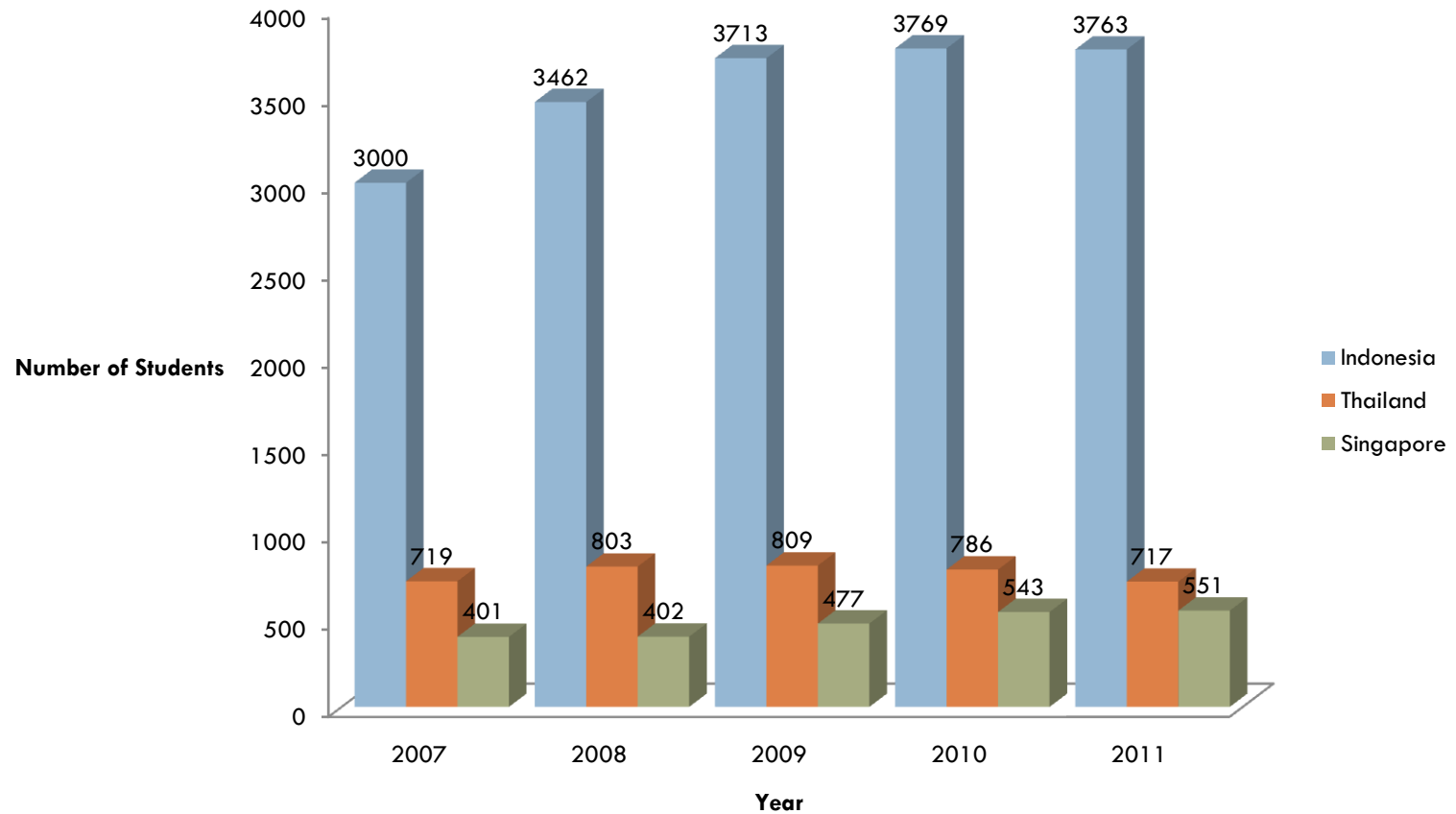
New Areas of Cooperation

- The 'sticky' issue of the South has long dictated and shape bilateral relations between Malaysia and Thailand.
- As long as the situation in the South is under control, there is no need to elevate existing relations to the next level.
- Thus both sides seem contented that relations are cordial and somewhat manageable.
- No urgency to explore new areas of cooperation despite the vast potential.
- For example, in the areas of higher education and tourism.

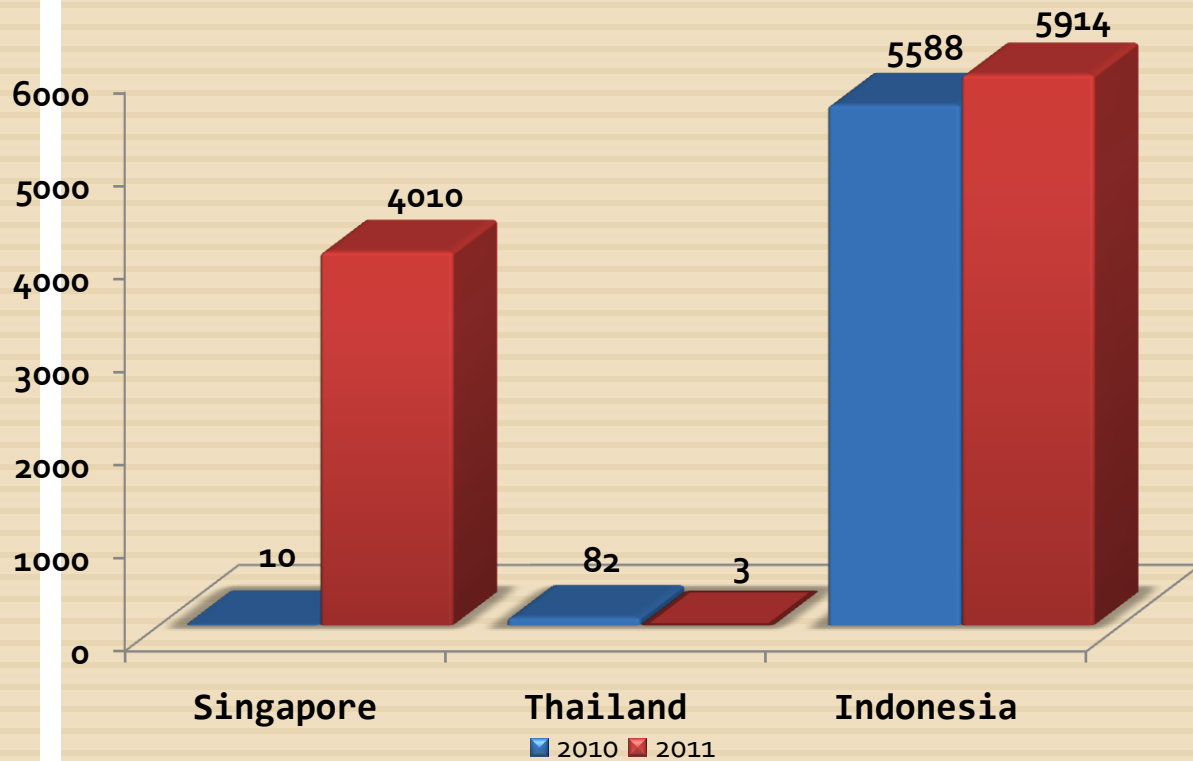
Higher Education

- Similarly, Malaysians do not see Thailand as a preferred choice of higher education, in particular for post-graduate studies.
- This is in contrast to the availability of many reputable institutions of higher learning in Thailand, namely Thammasat University, Mahidol University and Chulalongkorn University which offer post-graduate studies programme in English.

Enrolment of Foreign Students (Indonesia, Thailand and Singapore) in Malaysian Public Universities (2007 - 2011)



Source: Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia (2011)



Malaysian students in Indonesia, Singapore and Thailand (2010 - 2011)

Source: Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia, 2011

Higher Education

- For Malaysians, Singapore and Indonesia remain an important destination for higher education.
- **It is interesting to explore ways and means to encourage more students enrolment and mobility (student exchanges) from both sides.**
- Yet, it must be noted that universities in both countries have signed a number of MOUs in recent years.

Higher Education

- Currently, most of the Thai students in Malaysia are from the Southern Provinces.
- **It is thus a challenge to attract students from Bangkok and other provinces (excluding the Deep South) as this would provide a balanced outreach to youth in Thailand.**
- Most of the Thai students in Malaysia are pursuing courses in the sciences (preliminary observation).
- Thus, it is imperative that more scholarships are made available for them to major in the humanities and social sciences (not only in Islamic Studies)

Higher Education

- Similarly there should be a more rigorous effort to promote Thailand as an alternative destination for post-graduate studies (mostly taught in English)
- This will promote a more meaningful understanding of the importance of Malaysia-Thai bilateral relations.

Higher Education: Potential Area of Cooperation

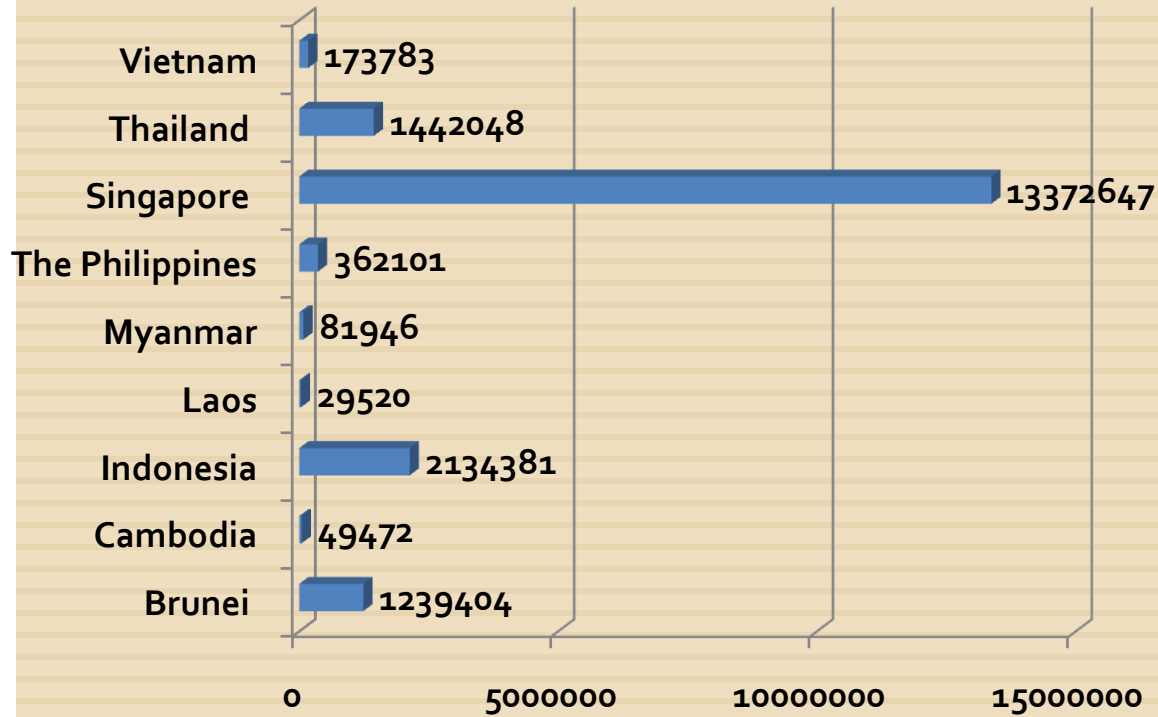
- In effect both sides have bypassed each other and did not seize the opportunity for greater cooperation in the higher education sector.
- Against the backdrop of the Euro-crisis, Thailand should look closer to its neighbours.
- Thus, this is an opportune time for both Malaysia and Thailand to learn from one another.

Tourism

- Unequal relationship – despite the fact that many Malaysians love to go to Thailand as a holiday destination, this is not reciprocated by the Thais.
- There is no doubt there has been an increase in tourist arrivals, more so from Malaysia to Thailand.
- However, this does not mean that there is greater awareness or understanding about Thailand or vice versa.

Tourism

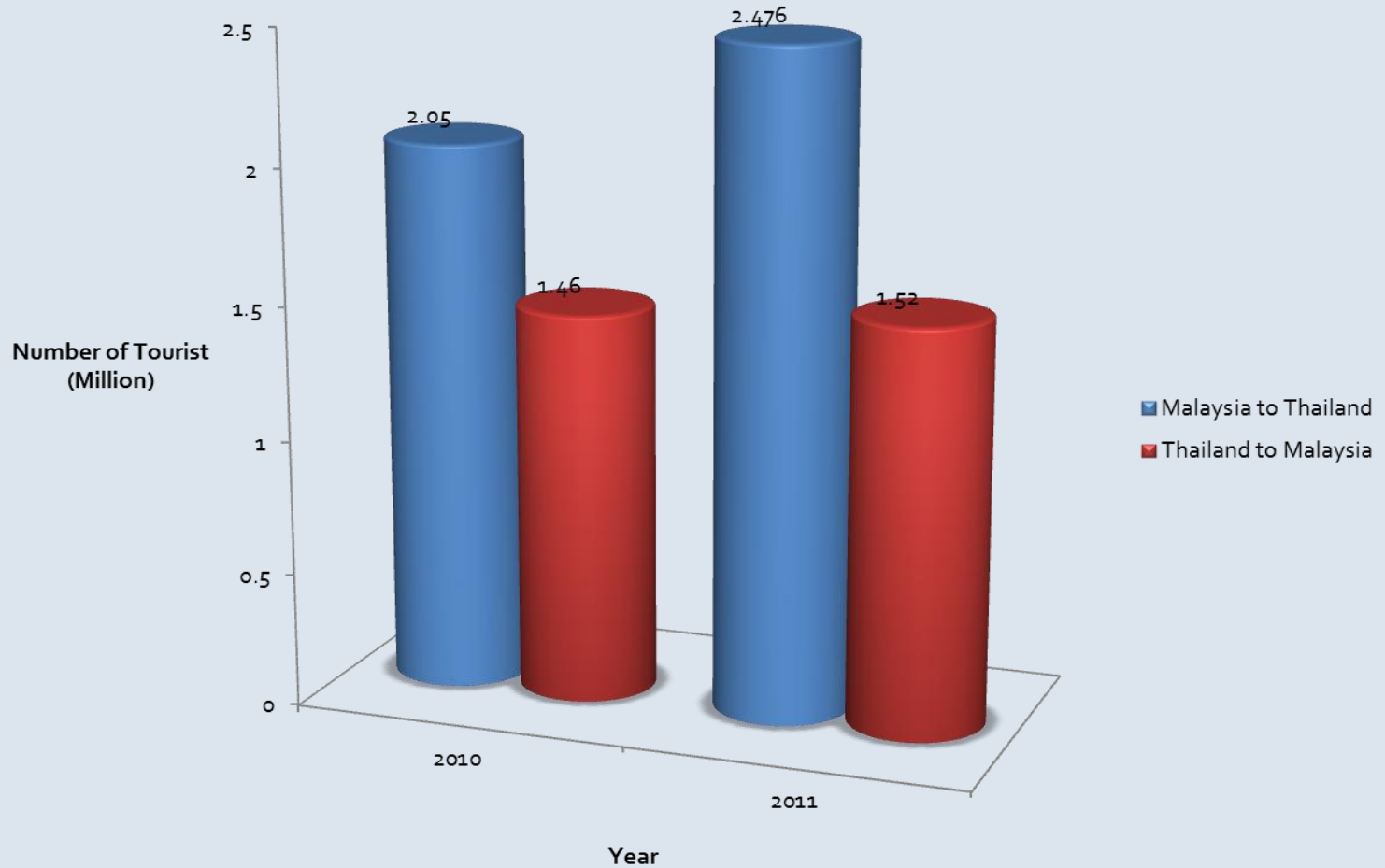
- For people living in the border areas, the 'problematic' South is the 'real' and present image of Thailand with recurring bombings and killings.
- Paradoxically, Thailand is an attractive place to have fun, shopping and entertainment.
- Malaysians are accustomed to viewing Thailand through the lenses of the Deep South and Thais seem to perceive Malaysia represented by the states that were once under Siamese suzerainty.
- To many Thais, Malaysia is Mahathir and the twin towers and even Genting Highlands!



Tourist arrivals to Malaysia from within ASEAN (January - December 2011)

Source: Ministry of Tourism, Malaysia, 2011.

Tourist Arrival Thailand-Malaysia



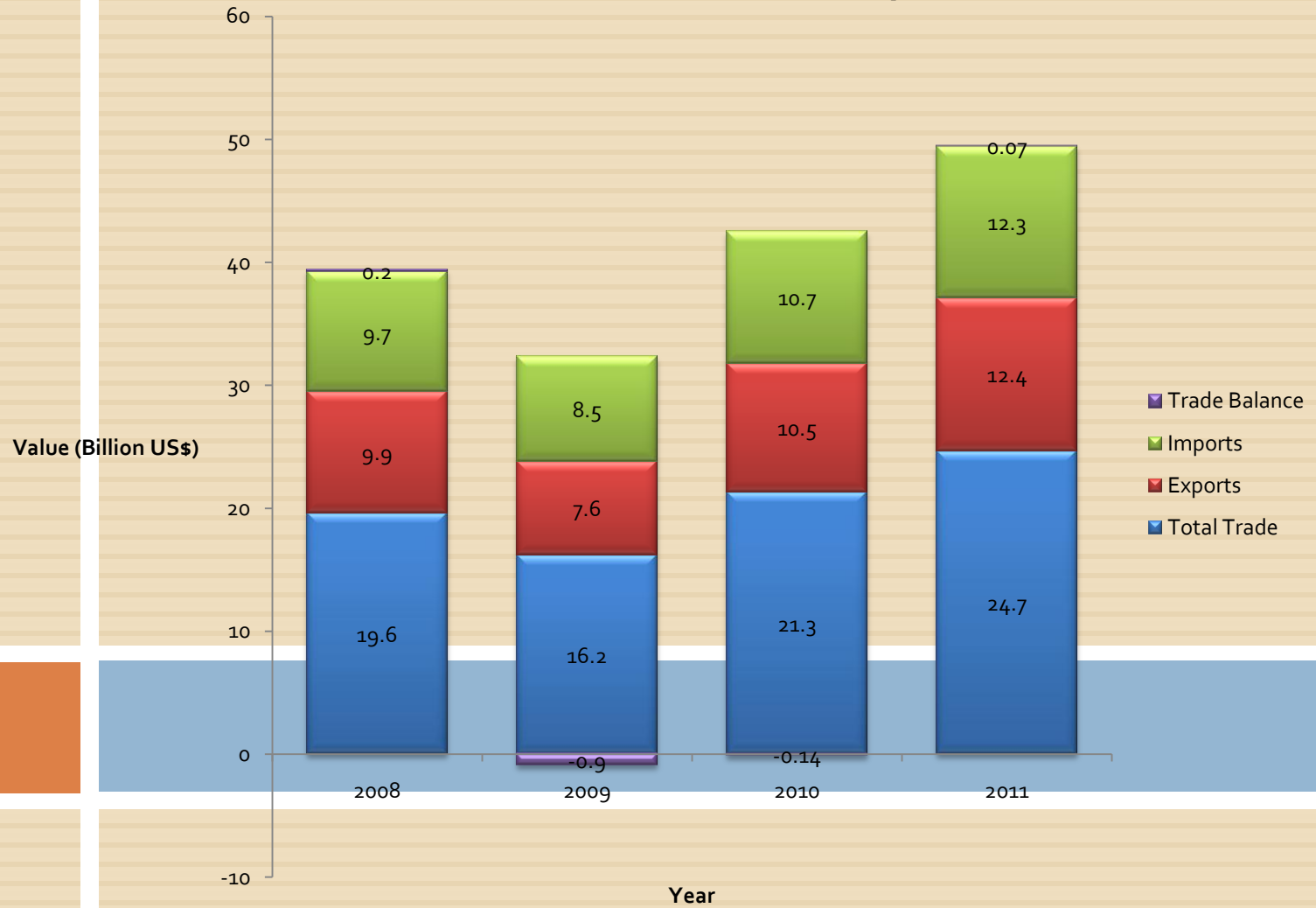
Source: Ministry of Tourism and Sports, Thailand, 2011.

Tourism

- Malaysia ranks first in term of tourist arrival into Thailand for the years 2010 and 2011
- There was a twenty percent rise from 2010 (2.05 million) to 2011 (2.47 million)
- Thailand ranks third in terms of tourist arrival into Malaysia for 2010 and 2011.
- There was only a four percent rise from 2010 (1.46 million) to 2011 (1.52 million).

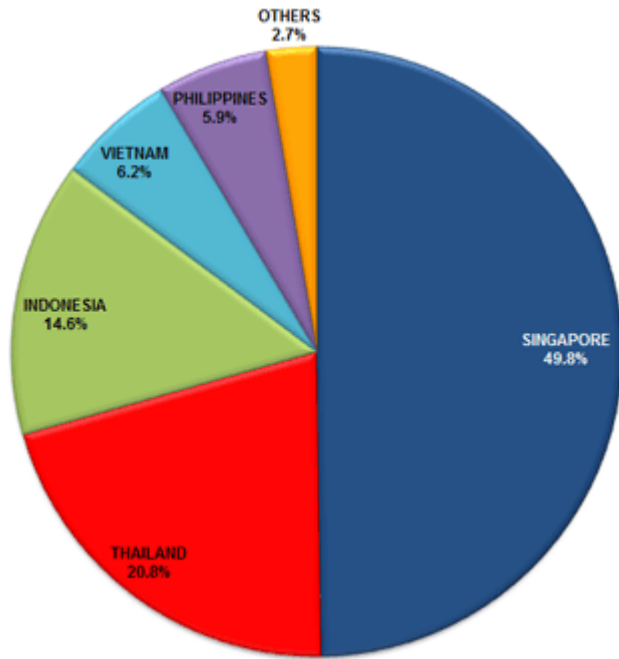
Figure 1

Overall Trade Thailand-Malaysia



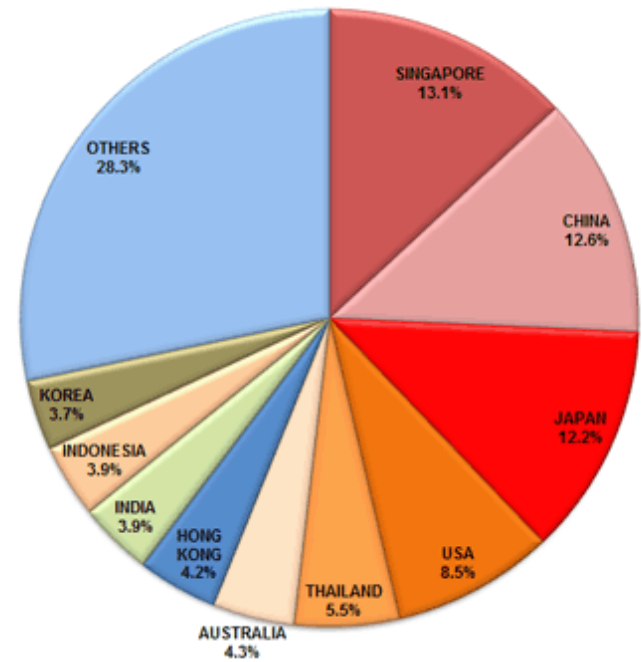
Source: Bank of Thailand

Figure 2
Exports to ASEAN Countries, January - June 2012 (RM 92.6 billion)



Source: Ministry of International Trade and Industry, Malaysia.

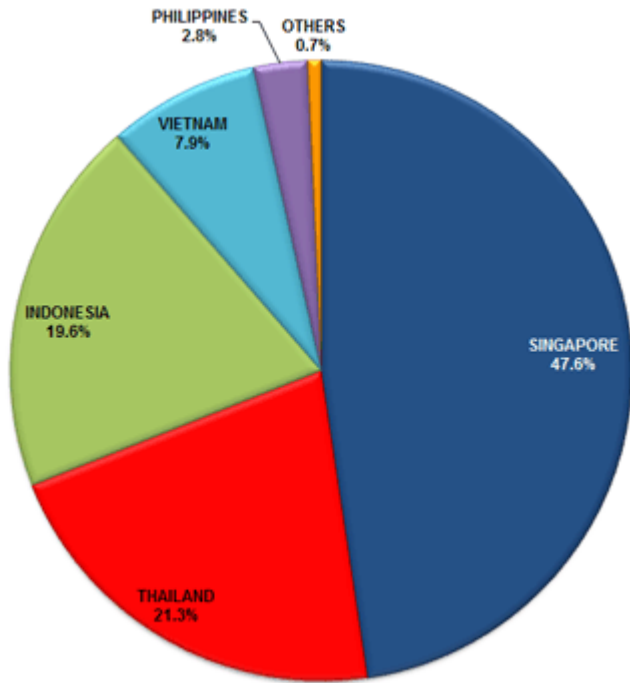
Figure 3
Export Destinations, January - June 2012 (RM 351.2 billion)



Source: Ministry of International Trade and Industry, Malaysia.

Figure 4

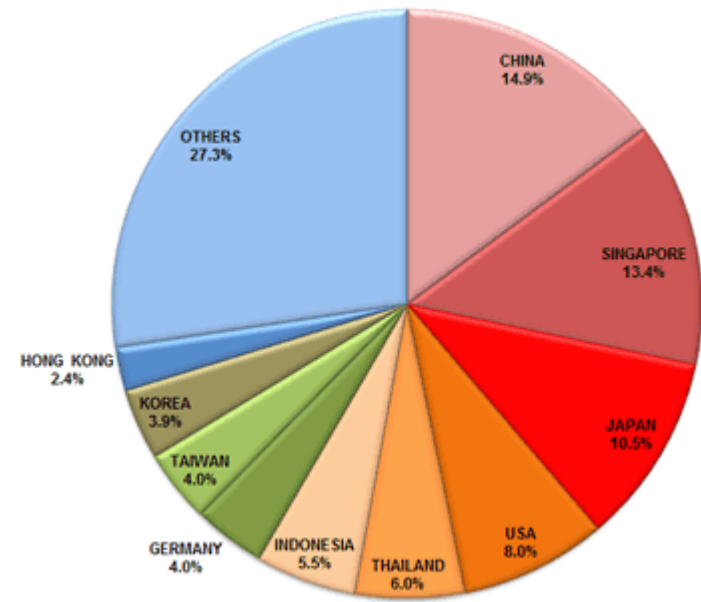
Imports from ASEAN Countries, January - June 2012 (RM 84.6 billion)



Source: Ministry of International Trade and Industry, Malaysia

Figure 5

Import Sources, January - June 2012 (RM 300.1 billion)



Source: Ministry of International Trade and Industry, Malaysia

Bilateral Trade: Malaysia-Thailand

- Overall trade shows a rise between the years 2008 to 2011
- Exports for 2011 (USD12.4 billion) surpasses imports (USD 12.3 billion).
- Thailand ranks top five (number two after Singapore) in the list of Malaysia's exports to ASEAN countries.
- Top five (after Singapore, China, Japan and the U.S.) in the list of Malaysia's exports destinations from Jan-June 2012 with 5.5 percent market share of RM351.2 billion in trade.

Concluding Remarks

- There is a need and much scope to enhance bilateral relations at the people to people level.
- Despite both countries receiving tourists, there is a superficial understanding of each other. Thus, misperceptions and prejudices remain embedded and deep-seated. This phenomenon can hamper further development in bilateral relations.
- Perhaps due to the lack of reciprocity from Thailand – mainly due to the frequent changes of leadership and other related problems - has contributed to the lack of continuity which in turn led to a ‘one-sided affair’ in the relations between the two countries.