The Burmese Junta’s Impediment to Thai-Burma Relations

B.K. Sen*

The recent border clashes between Burma and Thailand have brought the issue of Thai-Burma relations into focus. The earlier mass exodus of refugees from Burma to Thailand did not cause panic. The voluminous drug inflow into the kingdom also did not shake the Thais, although the sex trade and import of HIV and AIDS roused Thai conscience. The on-and-off border clashes were taken in their strides. But the last straw in the camel’s back was the intentional insult hurled at the Thai monarchy, the most revered institution in Thailand, by allegations made through a series of articles published in the state-run The New Light of Myanmar. The Burmese junta has shown its complete contempt for Thai policy makers. No country has ever done that before. Prime Minister Thaksin said that his government is reviewing its Burmese policy. But does it have one? The ruling political party has one conception, the opposition has another, the bureaucracy yet another, and the military of course has the prime one—hence, four different approaches. When a nation’s national security is at stake, this situation is lamentable.

Thailand and Burma share a long history. There have been misunderstandings, friction and conflict. The common frontier extends for over 1,000 miles, poorly demarcated and contested. Thai-Burma relations have for hundreds of years been characterized by at the very least rivalry and often by outright hostility. A bit of the traditional animosity still remains. Although Burma has border treaties with its other neighbors China, India, and Bangladesh, it does not yet have such a treaty with the Thais. The onslaught of the Cold War in Thailand and the civil war in Burma prevented the two countries from building up mutual trust. Subsequently, with the emergence of a military junta in Burma, the situation became a potential threat to Thailand’s security. Slowly but steadily the Burmese
army became the second largest in the Southeast Asian region. Such a huge army is absolutely unnecessary for the maintenance of internal peace, and this created a great deal of consternation in Thailand. Add to this the fact that the Burmese junta provided sanctuary for General Sant Chitpatima after the failure of his coup. As Thailand was also undergoing a drastic change in her polity, it did not say anything. Afterwards Thailand witnessed a Burmese opium wave, but again remained complacent.²

When General Chatichai became Prime Minister of Thailand, a shift in the policy towards Burma emerged. Chatichai’s policy, “From battlefields to marketplaces”, came out with a policy of constructive engagement. He led a big delegation to Burma for talks with the military junta. For the first time border trade flourished. But would Thailand want to get rid of the junta? The existence of the junta has been very profitable for the Thais who obtained lucrative timber, fishing and mining concessions in Burma. If they supported Burma’s democratic transition, they would jeopardize their concessions. Moreover, a democratic Burma could easily become a major economic competitor in the Southeast Asian region.

The 8-8-88 uprising was a landmark event in Burma’s history. Although the then Thai government did not say anything about this, Thai-Burma relations took a different road. A large number of students and ethnic minorities fled Burma to escape the wrath of the junta and came to the Thai border area, and the Thais have been hospitable. Thailand’s policy of constructive engagement, however, has become counter-productive. Despite repeated human rights violations the Burmese junta has won regional recognition by joining the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. And notwithstanding the fact that Thailand has been instrumental in letting Burma join the Association, the Thai government has received not a single acknowledgement from the Burmese junta. Expectations underpinning the Thai decision were belied. The decision has boomeranged Thailand’s problems: from a social threat Burma has now become a security threat.

Determinants of relations between two neighbouring countries are geography, economy, political history, culture, domestic milieu and commonality of approach in foreign affairs. Save and except geography, all the other tests fail. In reviving good relations one other factor should not be lost sight of, namely the gross violations of human rights in Burma, which have been causing problems for Thailand as well. The human rights problem in Burma is due to the dictatorial junta and unless there is political reform which is reflecting a change in the thinking mould of that junta, talks will not deliver anything. But Prime Minister Thaksin paid a visit to Burma anyway, and although he pledged that “not another gunshot will be heard while [he] is in power after patching up differences with Rangoon”,³ he did not address the root causes of the ongoing conflict between the two countries. Thaksin emerged from his meetings with the junta

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with promises that a Thai special envoy would be permitted to visit areas suspected of being centers of drug production. Thai politicians have openly accused the Burmese military of being involved in the drug trade. Others even asked for international intervention to end the political deadlock in Rangoon, which is seen by many as the root cause of tensions between the two countries. If Thailand were dealing with a Burmese government that was accountable, it could hope for a genuine improvement of relations. But as long as it has to negotiate with a ruthless military regime that has no credibility anywhere, the problems will remain. Thailand has had problems every time it tried to deal with the Burmese junta. Openness is not the principle of the junta’s foreign relations, maybe as a result of Burma’s relationship with China. Besides, Burma has been without a democratic constitution, without Rule of Law, and without an independent press for four decades. The junta is free to do as they like without any accountability. In the absence of Rule of Law, state actions become unpredictable and unstable. Relations with other countries therefore cannot be conducted in an orderly manner. The Rule of Law, being without borders, puts international relations on a rational basis. Unless the relationship between countries is founded on Rule of Law, it will be a relationship which is deceptive and unsustainable. The 1970 Declaration on Principles of International Law Concerning Friendly Relations and Cooperation among States in Accordance with the Charter of the United Nations referred to the importance of the Rule of Law among nations.4

Today Thailand and Burma face crisis after crisis. With no Rule of Law in Burma, a new relationship based on trust, openness and honesty is not very likely. Thailand should therefore not hurry to open the door for the Burmese junta. Thailand at the moment has to stand tall. Some Thai politicians say that a harder bargain with the junta is needed, and that the Prime Minister went too far in trying to patch up relations with Burma.5 The possibility of war with Burma seemed almost appealing to many in Thailand as the Thai Third Army, responsible for the protection of the northern section of the border, was already taking a tough stance against Burmese troops who pursued Shan rebels onto Thai territory.6 But the deterioration of Thai-Burma relations has not yet reached the point of no return, and the UN Special Envoy will visit Rangoon to follow up the talks between the junta and opposition leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. The International Labour Organization will decide on the forced labour practices in Burma as its team has been allowed to go to Rangoon, but the Asia-Europe Forum has rejected Burma’s participation.

All in all, the junta is under siege and it certainly cannot afford to open a second front at the Thai border. The junta already has many problems with armed insurgency in Burma. Another front in the east would mean that the insurgents are going to be backed by the Thai Army. So the junta is playing a game to shift public focus away from domestic problems by creating an image of Thailand as an aggressor. In this context, to view it objectively, all that the leaders in Thai-
land have to do is to have one voice and evolve a short-time policy to contain
the situation. But the debate has not yet reached the floor of the Thai parlia-
ment. Before there can be a uniform policy towards Burma, it should be de-
bated by the parliament first. The Prime Minister cannot decide on such a policy
on his own. The Thai media are against the Prime Minister’s attitude in this re-
gard. Thaksin will face criticism for his handling of the current crisis, because
the unresolved issues will inevitably rear their heads again.7 Engaging the junta
could be a positive contribution to the process of change which has seized
Burma these days. This could also be for the mutual benefit of both countries.
The fledgling democracy of Thailand and the emerging democracy of Burma,
accountable to their respective people and with Rule of Law in place, have to
sort out all outstanding problems. Only then will the two countries be able to
coexist in prosperity and peace, enabling democracies to eventually converge.

Endnotes

* The author is an Executive Committee Member of the Burma Lawyers’ Council.

1. For example, the Burmese junta often deliberately uses the name of Ayut-
thaya when it refers to Thailand. “In 1767, the Burmese completely de-
stroyed the city and kingdom of Ayutthaya. This led to the Thai inferiority
complex, because the Thais never managed to sack Burma”, according to an
information sheet issued by the Myanmar Information Commission. Or, an-
other example, “Burmese Textbook Says Thais Are Lazy” (The Nation, 6
June 2001). On the other hand, Bangkok has long fed nationalistic sentiment
by portraying the Burmese as barbarous invaders. The blockbuster film Bang
Rajan, for example, depicts the Burmese invasion of Ayutthaya as a battle
between good (Thais) and evil (Burmese).

2. Josef Silverstein, “Some Thoughts on Burma-Thai Relations”. Legal Issues on

3. Vorapun Srivoranart, “Burma ‘Peace Talks’: Prime Minister Pledges End To

4. “Declaration on Principles of International Law Concerning Friendly Rela-
tions and Cooperation Among States in Accordance with the Charter of the
United Nations”. Resolution No. 2625, adopted at the 1883rd plenary meet-
ing of the General Assembly of the United Nations, 24 October 1970. Offi-
cial Records of the General Assembly, Twenty-fifth Session, Supplement
No. 18 (A/8018).


6. Kulachada Chaipipat, “If Thaksin Fails In Rangoon, It Could Mean War”.

7. “Thai-Burma Relations: Back on Track?” The Irrawaddy, Vol. 9, No. 5, June