
5. Thai–Burma relations

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I. Thai perceptions of Burma

To comprehend the nature and complexity of Thai-Burmese relations is to understand the transformation of their friendship over the past 431 years. Thais have a range of perceptions about Burma, from a historical notion of a devilish nation, to a more recent nostalgic view of the “good old Burma”. Thais describe such nostalgia as “hooi-ha-adeed”.

The view of Burma as a devilish nation can be traced back to the fall of Ayudhya. In 1569, Burmese troops invaded Ayudhya and occupied it for 34 years before the Siamese King Naresuan won the decisive battle in Nong Sarai and retook the capital city from Burma. But then again in 1767, the Burmese King Bayinnaung ransacked Ayudhya. After a prolonged fight, the city fell miserably to Burma. It was this defeat and the huge damage the Burmese victors inflicted on the Thai losers that has been etched in their memory since then. Literally, every valuable in Ayudhya was either torched or taken away by the Burmese troops. While Thais remember Naresuan’s heroic victory, they have not forgotten the aggression and barbaric acts of the Burmese invaders, and the name of King Bayinnaung, has continued to be a source of hatred. To rub salt into Thai wounds, the Burmese junta in 1996 erected a statue of King Bayinnaung opposite Ta Songyang, Tak, as if to remind Thailand of the bitter history of the two countries. Ask any Thai student who Thailand’s enemy Number One is. The answer will inevitably be Burma. This historical memory further complicates Thai-Burmese relations.

It was not until the fall of Ayudhya in 1767 that Siam’s political and intellectual leaders started to realise the unbridled violence of the Burmese and the resultant perils to Thailand, and showed more concern for investigating and reconstruction the past circumstances of their hostilities with this neighbour.

Dr Sunait Chutintaranond, 1995.

Despite this view of Burma as a devilish nation, the two countries managed to co-exist without major wars before Britain colonized Burma in 1826.¹⁷⁹

While Thailand was consolidating its statehood between 1850 and 1970, the nation, its leaders in particular, viewed Burma as a symbol of failure for being unable to combat the forces of colonization. They put the blame on the Burmese leaders. Prominent historian Somdet Kromphraya Damrong used this theme to explain Burma in his writings. “Thieu Muang Phrama” or “Travelling inside Burma” was a typical work. He praised the ability of Thai rulers over the Burmese as they could protect the country from the West’s control. He viewed the Burmese leaders as corrupt and selfish, without any leadership. In most of his work related to Burma, he used this theme to highlight the differences between Thailand and Burma. Some of these views were taken from Western authors, such as James Scott. Other Thai authors, such as Luang Vichitvathakarn and Kukrit Pramoj, also entertained this negative perception in their writings about Burma. Such stereotyping of Burma has also been perpetuated through popular TV period-dramas, which recycle characters and scripts that belittle Burmese leaders. During World War II, the Thai government used nationalism as a theme and as

¹⁷⁹ The colonization pushed Thailand and Burma to redefine their common border. Thus the 1909 treaty was established, which currently serves as a legal instrument to demarcate the 2400-kilometre long border.

propaganda to legitimize the government and its policy of accommodation with the Japanese. Before World War II, Luang Vichitvathakran wrote nine fiction stories related to Thai-Burmese history. The stories became popular among Thai readers and all were made into TV dramas. The government at that time fully supported this line of thinking; it did not matter whether what the Thai people perceived of Burma was fact or fiction.

After Burma gained independence, it remained a neutral country while Thailand followed a pro-US policy during the Cold War and the US-initiated containment campaign throughout the world. At this time, there were normal contacts along the Thai-Burmese border allowing peoples from the two countries to trade and learn from each another. However, the stereotype, nurtured through literature and TV series, continues unabated.

At the other end of spectrum, Burma has also been associated with a romanticized feeling towards Burma, especially among the upper-middle class and *nouveau riche*. Recently, several books and videos have perpetuated this perception of the 'good old Burma'. During the economic crisis, articles by Thai writers lauded Burma's basic lifestyle and socialism, without referring to political oppression. Naowarat Pongphiboon, a well-known poet, wrote a book lamenting the loss of Thai-ness in "Mong Phrama" or "Looking at Burma".

Another attitude is found among business groups, who view Burma as a new market where they can get rich. This attitude was widely prevalent during the Chatichai Choonhavan government (1988–1991). The Chatichai administration went all out to accommodate the Burmese junta in exchange for concessions to exploit natural resources such as logging, fisheries and gemstones. These businessmen, based in Bangkok and provincial areas, can influence the cycle of ups and downs of Thai-Burmese relations, particularly on the state of border trade. They continue to press the government to open more permanent checkpoints to further facilitate border trade, without other considerations.

Since 1995, at least half a dozen docu-dramas have been produced relating to the Thai wars against Burma at various periods. The most famous were "Prasrisuriyothai", "Nine Wars", and "Soldiers of King Taksin" and "Nai Kanumthum". The most interesting trend was that all these series were remakes of previous productions. These productions sought to reinforce the notion that Thai-Burmese relations were about war. It was as if that was the only lesson Thais would learn from history, although the war of 1767 was just one of two major battles in their 400-year history of war.

Now, the Thai perception of Burma has been transformed, not only among civilians but among the military as well. While most Thais still view Burma as an enemy, they also sympathise with the situation in that country and the plight of the Burmese people. The Thai public admires the courage of Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the opposition party, the National League for Democracy, because they have found in her leadership, a quality lacking, especially among Thai women. She is ranked high among popular political figures in Thailand along with Singapore's senior minister Lee Kuan Yew.

The Thai people also view their country as more developed than Burma. The sense of insecurity *vis-à-vis* the Burmese has somewhat diminished given current Thai economic development and level of democratization. The emerging civil society and political reform since 1997 have rendered a strong sense among the Thai people that Thailand is a democratic country that respects human rights like Western societies do. In contrast, they see that Burma is still ruled by military dictators and that political oppression continues. Thus Thais can take pride in their current situation.

After years of unquestioned collaboration between the Thai and Burmese armed forces, the Thai army no longer tolerates the old pattern of relationships, which were characterized by awards or incentives from Burma's military leaders. It has been an open secret that the Thai military used to obtain concessions, especially in the lucrative logging and gemstone business, in exchange for security

cooperation. It was common in the past for security forces along the Thai-Burmese border not to pursue policy as directed by the central government.

II. Ties with Thailand: a short history

Moving quickly through the history of Thailand and Burma, bilateral relations did not vary much over the past 200 years until Burma gained independence in 1948. Britain went to war with Burma in 1824 to retaliate against Burmese raids across the Indian border. This led to the colonization of Burma two years later. As a neighbour, Thailand was very concerned that Britain had ambitions to colonize it, too. As part of the effort to appease the great power, Thailand concluded the Burney Treaty that followed the visit of Captain H. Burney in 1825. This development redefined the two countries' border: the current territorial boundary between the two nations. After independence, ethnic minorities continued to use the Thai-Burmese border as strongholds to stage wars of attrition against Burma and China. Together with the remnants of the Kuomintang armies in the north along the border, independent Burma distrusted the Thais because Burmese leaders believed the Thai government was supporting the KMT (Kuomintang). It took much dialogue between the two countries to settle the matter. Throughout the 1950s, the lack of mutual trust was the major reason for the deteriorating relationship. Burmese Prime Minister U Nu visited Thailand in March 1955. Thai Prime Minister Field Marshall Pleak Bhibunsonggram returned the visit in the December of the same year. The visits warmed relations. During U Nu's visit, the Thai delegation took him to Ayudhya so he could see the ruined temples and mutilated Buddha images. These visits resulted in a treaty of peace and friendship being signed a year later. In 1960, their Majesties the King and Queen visited Burma for the first time. Thai-Burmese relations, right after World War II, were very cordial because of the growing number of exchange visits among senior officials. However, after Gen. Ne Win's 1962 coup deposed U Nu, Thai-Burmese relations faced new challenges and their relations gradually deteriorated.

Once in power, Ne Win harboured greater suspicion about Thailand's intentions and its support for the minorities sheltering along the border areas, especially the Karen rebels, whom Burma considered arch-enemies. With the proclamation of the Burmese Way to Socialism by Ne Win, anti-communist Thai leaders were alarmed and concerned that Burma would export socialism to Thailand. As such, both sides did not trust each other and bilateral contacts, including top-level dialogue, almost stopped. The Burmese government also adopted a long period of isolation, which in effect severed ties with the outside world. As Burma was engulfed with its own development and problems, the rest of the Southeast Asian region was confronted with a much more serious issue – the victory of the communists in Indochina. The reunification of North and South Viet Nam, the Khmer Rouge victory and the takeover of Laos by the communists occupied the hearts and minds of Thai leaders. Thailand's security along its Eastern flank suddenly became a major headache. Therefore, Thai-Burmese border issues fell into a state of disrepair. These circumstances encouraged the minorities to increase their border attacks against the Burmese government while the Thai side turned a blind eye.

After almost two decades of socialism and dismal economic performance, the Burmese government loosened its grip on the economy. The new leniency immediately stimulated border trade and created a better feeling inside Thailand. With better understanding and improved dialogue, the Thai government in the 1980s began to push back the minorities who had sought sanctuary inside Thai territory. Under the premiership of Gen. Prem Tinsulanonda (1979–1988), Thai-Burmese ties improved markedly. The Prem government stated that Thailand sought to befriend all countries, especially those that share a common border. Thailand's assurance had an immediate effect in encouraging dialogue between the two countries. Then Foreign Minister A.C.M. Siddhi Savetsila visited Burma in 1986, followed by a senior-level visit by then Thai Army Chief Gen. Chavalit Yongchaiyudh the following year. Both

sides agreed to revive the long-discarded Joint Border Committee, which had been established in 1967. The joint committee would serve as a forum for the two countries to discuss and settle border-related problems, which had become more complex due to the vast goods, arms and drug smuggling networks that had developed. The long-awaited visit of Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn in March 1986 to Burma gave the long-troubled Thai-Burmese relations respite and an added semblance of normalcy.

The climate of better bilateral ties lasted for two years before a new crisis confronted the two sides. It was roughly at the same time that the pro-democracy crackdown began in Burma that Thailand had a new government under the premiership of Gen. Chatichai Choonhavan, who initiated a policy of turning the battlefields of Indochina into new markets. Such a policy at that time was extremely unconventional because Thailand, as part of ASEAN, was still fighting the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia. It was not until the end of 1989 that Viet Nam began to pull out its troops. After the military crackdown in Burma, the Chatichai government initially appeared to follow international sentiment that the Burmese regime must be sanctioned and isolated as a punishment for their actions and violation of human rights. However, before long, Chatichai changed his approach and followed his own policy of maintaining ties and dialogue with the junta, thus going against the worldwide sanctions. The government considered the crackdown Burma's internal affair and Thailand decided to refrain from joining the international community in pressuring the country.

The bloodshed drove thousands of students into exile to Thailand and India. Thailand's dilemma was how they were going to handle these students. The government decided against repatriating the estimated 8,000 students and activists who choked various border checkpoints. The Thai decision not to hand the students back to the Burmese government was done on humanitarian grounds and under growing international pressure. Locally, the press and academics as well as activists urged the government to pressure the Burmese government to halt all forms of violation and suppression against the students.

As debate on Burma intensified, the Chatichai government maintained its ambivalent policy towards that country. Chavalit decided to visit Rangoon for just one day as a means to show support for the government under the leadership of Gen. Saw Maung. The trip was soundly criticized by the West because it would give the Burmese regime the wrong signal – that the world recognized and sanctioned its atrocities. Chavalit reasoned that his trip was necessary to settle pending border security issues. The Foreign Ministry did not comment on his visit. After Chavalit broke the ice, several Thai delegations, including lawmakers and businessmen visited Burma over the following two years. It was between 1988 and 1990 that Burma adopted a more positive approach towards Thailand in exchange for its friendship. Numerous new logging, fishing and gemstone concessions were given to Thai businessmen with political connections. Thai military leaders were given priority for contact and dialogue with Burma, not to mention trade and commercial concessions. Several bilateral agreements to strengthen commercial and trade ties were signed. It was in 1989 that the Chatichai government banned logging inside Thailand, making the country's timber needs and consumption totally dependent on the forests of Burma and Cambodia. In exchange for Thailand's support, Burma continues to award Thailand with logging concessions and fishing rights. Thus in the end overwhelming economic interests completely dominated the decision-making on Burma.

In retrospect, the government's forward-looking policy in Indochina must have been the main reason why it decided to embrace Burma. Thailand considers itself, along with Burma, as part of the traditional Indochina, which was called Suwannaphum. Chavalit, who is currently the leader of the New Aspiration Party, was responsible for the policy and was the key person to assist the Rangoon military regime. Obviously, given the overwhelming security concerns along the porous border and economic interests, Thailand has put the human rights concerns on the back burner.

III. Border trade from 1948–1999

Given that the Thai-Burmese border runs for 2,400 kilometres, people living on both sides of the border have been trading and crossing the frontiers for centuries. Ten provinces that share the border with Burma are Mae Hong Son, Chiang Rai, Chiang Mai, Tak, Kanchanburi, Ratchaburi, Petchaburi, Prachuap Khiri Khan, Chumpon and Ranong.

The long stretch of mountains and hills dividing Thailand and Burma has served as a natural demarcation line and has been a rendezvous for peoples of both countries to exchange products and other necessities. Even villagers come across with their homegrown produce or hand-sewn items. Most of the trade is conducted without any government sanction, except at key trading posts accessible by roads and to tourists such as those in Mae Hong Song, Tak and Chiang Rai provinces.

Thai-Burma border trade has a long history, but real regulated border trade occurred right after Burma's independence in 1948. Border trade continued unabated between 1948 and 1962 while Burma was moving steadily towards socialism. The amount of trade was marginal due to the similar structure and level of economic development. Major items that were heavily traded included rice, timber and other agricultural products.

Burma turned socialist and remained so for the next 26 years. All business enterprises were nationalized. Thai-Burmese ties between 1962 and 1987 reached their lowest ebb partly as mistrust grew. An anti-communist government under the premiership of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat led Thailand, at the time. However, the black market along the border proliferated and, ironically, increased people-to-people contact for commercial purposes. The border checkpoint at Mae Sot, Tak Province, has always been a key trading post. During the socialist period, the huge demand for consumer goods encouraged smuggling across the border. Thailand was the major exporter of goods to Burma. Both China and India were docile trading partners. Thai-Burma border trade in the past 12 years has greatly increased and at the same time become more complicated. Burma had adopted limited economic reform as in other socialist countries and was in need of foreign capital. It was during this period that Thai-Burma relations grew, especially trade and concessions related to natural resources such as timber and precious stones. In return, Thailand imported marine products, buffalo, and raw materials to feed the small and medium-sized factories located along the Thai-Burma border.

Since Burma's independence, Thai-Burmese border trade has been influenced by the presence of various ethnic minorities along the frontier. The Karen minority, which has been fighting for the past five decades for an autonomous region, has been associated with the border smuggling. The New Mon State Party, the Shan, and the Kachin ethnic groups also have their fair share of border trade. These minorities used to have freedom to levy tax and collect other service charges without any interference from Rangoon. However, the situation changed in the late 1990s when Burmese troops attacked the minorities and tried to exert control over their strongholds. In the beginning, it looked as if Burma allowed the minorities to trade with Thailand without much interference. It is now apparent that the Burmese government was searching for ways to disarm the minorities and wrest direct control of the border trade.

IV. Evolution of Thailand's constructive engagement policy

ASEAN foreign ministers were caught off guard when EU representatives unexpectedly raised the situation in Burma during their ministerial meeting in Luxembourg in May 1991. That question on Burma was destined to become a hurdle in ASEAN–EU relations almost a decade later. The EU wanted to know ASEAN's assessment of the situation in Burma. No ASEAN country at that time

appeared keen to be associated with the crackdown on the democratic opposition in that nation which took place a year after the State of Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) refused to honour the electoral victory by the opposition party National League for Democracy, headed by Aung San Suu Kyi. Because of close proximity to Burma, Thailand was assigned to answer the EU inquiry on Burma. Two months later, when ASEAN foreign ministers met their counterparts – including the USA, the EU, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand in Kuala Lumpur – Burma was the central issue under discussion. The political oppression inside Burma was brought up separately by representatives of the USA, the EU, Japan, Canada and Australia.

The West's harsh and coordinated criticism of the Burma situation caused great concern within ASEAN about possible outside interference. Thailand, as Burma's neighbour, became a target for the West. It was at this meeting that the term "constructive engagement" as an alternative to confrontation or sanctions was first introduced by the Thai foreign minister. Arsa, a veteran Thai diplomat, was in the uncomfortable position of having to explain the situation in Burma in response to questions posed by reporters while he was simultaneously trying to improve Thailand's image right after the February 1991 coup. The Thais argued that ASEAN countries knew the situation in Burma better: the Burmese should be left alone to settle their own problems without outside interference.

Although the Burmese situation was raised and extensively discussed between ASEAN and its dialogue partners, the controversial issues were not reflected in the joint communiqué issued at the end of the Kuala Lumpur meeting. Among the ASEAN countries, only Thailand mentioned the constructive engagement policy as its official stance. At the time, ASEAN countries did not have any common or coordinated stand on Burma and agreed to adopt their own position. Both Malaysia and Indonesia expressed concern over the ongoing suppression inside Burma and the treatment of the Burmese Muslims, known as the Rohingya, and both countries protested the military junta's treatment of the Rohingya refugees. When ASEAN foreign ministers met a year later in Manila, there was an attempt to organize a common ASEAN approach by sending Foreign Minister Raul Mangapus as an ASEAN special envoy to discuss the situation in Burma with its leaders. But Rangoon quickly rejected the initiative saying that it would only welcome him in a private capacity. The rejection toughened the group's position and ASEAN–Burma ties fell to their lowest ebb. After its initial strong support of Burma, Thailand was playing it safe by stepping back from its efforts to improve bilateral ties.¹⁸⁰

The Burmese issue continued to be high on the agenda of ASEAN foreign ministers when they met in Singapore in 1993.¹⁸¹ In Singapore ASEAN and the West agreed to disagree on Burma and to overlook differences so they could cooperate in other areas, which they considered more important. This included, in particular, security issues needed to shape the new regional order. At the time, the idea of an ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) was broached and subsequently agreed to by ASEAN and dialogue partners. After the agreement on the ARF, both ASEAN and the dialogue partners showed support for a common approach to political and security measures. With the Western dialogue partners in a new regional security framework the Burmese issue began to take a back seat, although suppression continued to intensify inside Burma. It was at this time that the split within ASEAN widened. However, in 1994, ASEAN–Burma relations began to change when Foreign Minister Prasong Soonsiri invited Burmese Foreign Minister U Ohn Gyaw as guest of Thailand to participate in the ASEAN meeting in Bangkok for the first time. It was a controversial decision by Thailand, which tried to appease the Burmese junta because of the deteriorating bilateral relations. Burma's presence caused a commotion among human rights and non-governmental organizations. They staged protests in front of the meeting venues trying to block the Burmese delegates. The Thai government, which

¹⁸⁰ The lack of Thai leadership contributed to Burma's early admission into ASEAN in July 1997.

¹⁸¹ Each time ASEAN struggled to review the situation, the members failed to reflect a common stance in a joint communiqué at the end of their meetings.

was under constant public pressure over its lenient policy towards Burma, then gave in and allowed Nobel Prize laureates led by Bishop Desmond Tutu to visit the Thai-Burmese border and areas where displaced refugees, including Karen minorities, dwelled. The visit was also to show solidarity and support for the jailed Aung San Suu Kyi, also a Nobel Peace prize laureate. ASEAN's dialogue partners, led by the USA, Australia and Canada, continued to press ASEAN to urge Burma to open up and called for the release of all political prisoners and the ban on the use of child labour and porters.

A year later Burma decided to join ASEAN as an observer and acceded to the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. The junta leaders also released Suu Kyi from house arrest. It was a calculated move by Rangoon to reduce pressure from the Western dialogue partners and the European Community. As an observer, Burma automatically became a member of the region-wide security forum, the ASEAN Regional Forum, at the annual Jakarta ASEAN meeting in 1996. Through the personal manoeuvring of the chairman, Indonesian Foreign Minister Ali Alatas, Burma was able to escape criticism from other ARF members at that crucial meeting. In previous years, the situation in Burma had always been on top of the ARF agenda. Interestingly, Burma's admission into ASEAN was completed within six months, a record time for admitting a new member. It took Viet Nam more than three years to become an ASEAN member while Laos took five. Given the political uncertainty preceding the membership, Cambodia required two years. One of Burma's biggest advantages in joining ASEAN is its English-language ability, as the only former British colony to join ASEAN. In retrospect, Burma's speedy success in joining ASEAN was partly due to the fact that Indonesia and Malaysia gave Burma's membership application the most support. They viewed its membership as a symbol of defiance against growing Western pressure on the group not to admit Burma. As host of the 1997 ASEAN ministerial meeting and subsequent special ASEAN summit, to commemorate the 30th anniversary of ASEAN, Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad managed to admit Burma. Another reason that benefited Rangoon was the lack of strong leadership and consistency from Thailand. Bangkok opposed the admission at the time on the grounds that Burma was still a very repressive regime and needed to open up a bit and liberalize its society before joining ASEAN. But confronting a myriad of domestic political issues, including frequent leadership changes between 1992 and 1997, Thailand was unable to lead ASEAN and at the same time failed to articulate ASEAN-related issues. Malaysia and Indonesia were able to take the lead and shape the direction of ASEAN during this pivotal period.

Bilateral ties between a new ASEAN member and other members have never before deteriorated as fast they did with Thailand and Burma. A few months after Burma was admitted into ASEAN, Thai and Burmese naval forces went to battle on the high seas over fishing disputes in the Andaman Sea. This became common over the next few years. Deputy Foreign Minister Sukhumbhand Paribatra said that Thailand and Burma are the only ASEAN members still doing battle, which is against the ASEAN tenet of the non-use of force to settle disputes.

See also the chapter on ASEAN.

V. Thai-Burmese technical cooperation

Economic and political relations have always been the main focus of Thai-Burma ties, while other ties that cover social, technical and agricultural areas have not been reported. For the past decades, Thailand has provided a generous amount of aid, scholarships and training courses to Burmese officials.

Initially, most of the Thai assistance went into training officials and for scholarships to Burmese students, chosen by the government, to attend higher education institutions in Thailand.¹⁸² After 1995, Thailand broadened the scope of the cooperation with Burma to include agriculture, education, public health and railway rehabilitation. Before the economic crisis in July 1997, Thailand allocated Bt58 million, the highest amount of aid in a single year, as assistance to Burma. Prime Minister Chavalit Yongchaiyudh's said the aid was aimed at cementing ties because Chavalit was well known for his close rapport with the military leaders in Rangoon.

VI. Key issues

Various issues of Thai-Burmese relations have plagued the two governments. Efforts to settle these problems have been marred by a lack of understanding and implementation mechanisms.

Ethnic minorities on the border

The first major issue is the presence of ethnic minorities along the Thai-Burmese border. The Burmese minorities, especially the Karen, Mon and Khaya, living along the border, have vowed to fight for autonomy although the Burmese regime has been trying to co-opt them. Rangoon has been quite successful in negotiating a cease-fire with at least 15 minority groups. In 1980, the Thai government under Prime Minister Gen. Perm Tinsulanonda made it clear to Burma that Thailand did not have a policy of supporting Burmese minorities along the Thai-Burmese border. The subsequent governments have continued to reiterate this position at the outset of their administration. However, Burmese leaders and officials remained sceptical and alleged that Thailand secretly supported the Karen rebels against Rangoon.¹⁸³ They said that Thailand continued to provide shelter and sanctuary to fleeing leaders of various minority groups, offering logistics, and selling illegal arms to minority groups. Burma was very concerned with Thailand's continued provision of a safe shelter to Gen. Bo Mia, who is considered the Burmese junta's Enemy No. 1. However, after the junta leaders were able to split the Buddhist Karens to fight against the Christian Karens, Burmese troops took control of the Karen stronghold in Manaplaw, which forced thousands of Karen refugees into Thailand. At the moment, Thailand continues to host over 50,000 displaced Karen people along the Thai-Burmese border. In addition, there are numerous incidents of robbery and theft because armed minority factions refuse to lay down arms and use them to rob villagers in the areas.

Burmese border troops

Second, the presence of Burmese troops and artillery along the Thai-Burmese border is a major concern for Thailand. Following the cease-fire agreements with Burmese minorities, the Burmese troops have moved into the strongholds of these minorities causing tension along the Thai-Burmese border. Currently, Doi Lang is the most volatile spot along the Thai-Burmese border because fully armed soldiers are standing within a stone's throw of each other. Currently, Thailand has to spend close to Bt5 million a day to secure the border. Apart from Doi Lang, the demarcation line No. 16 at

¹⁸² After the crackdown on students in 1988, thousands fled to the Thai-Burma border. About two-thirds went abroad or settled in third countries. After 12 years, over 2,000 Burmese students are still living inside Thailand. The Thai Government has provided assistance to a small number of students in discreet ways.

From 1991, the Thai Government increased the financial assistance several-fold, from less than Bt2 million in 1991 to Bt50 million in 1993. The number reached the unprecedented level of Bt55 million in 1994 and 1995.

¹⁸³ That Burma still accuses Thailand of harbouring its enemies can be seen in an article "The bad neighbour" in *The New light of Myanmar*, 1 March 2001: "What Thailand has done is like the act of a person in a ward who is accommodating hoodlums, ruffians, crooks and robbers at his house. These hoodlums, ruffians, crooks and robbers burgle other houses at night."

Ban Nong Uk, Hill 491 and Lam Island, Kan Island and Khee Nok Island are considered problem areas.¹⁸⁴

Illegal fishing within Burmese waters

Third, Thai illegal fishing within the Burmese maritime boundary continues unabated. Due to depletion of Thai marine resources, Thai fishing trawlers, the fourth-largest fleet in the world, continue to fish in troubled waters inside Burmese territorial waters, knowing they could be arrested and prosecuted. Burma issues two kinds of licence, one from the government and the other from the province involved. Fishing trawlers continue to buy concessional tickets from the local governments, which can be bought and withdrawn at will by the Burmese authorities when an incident irks the Burmese junta.

Illegal logging

Fourth, Thais are doing illegal logging inside Burma, especially in areas controlled by the minorities. Burma prohibited logging inside its territory in January 1995 but allowed a few timber companies to operate. But illegal logging continued unabated, especially in areas where Burmese troops are unable to wrest control. Burma has told the Thai government that illegal cutting of timber continues in border areas along the Shan, Kaya, and Kachin states. The Thai timber companies often use fake documents to back up timber felling operations.

Illegal Burmese migrants

The fifth key issue is the presence of illegal Burmese workers and migrants. Currently over 100,000 refugees are seeking safety inside Thai territory, along with 47,000 displaced persons of various ethnic backgrounds, 110,000 illegal immigrants, about 3,000 Burmese students in exile and 50,000 illegal immigrants from other countries.

Drugs

The final major problem is the flow of illegal drugs into Thailand from Burma. When *Far Eastern Economic Review*, on 1 June 2000, reported the growing dissatisfaction among Thai leaders over Burma's illegal drug trade and the toughening of the Thai position *vis-à-vis* its Western neighbour, it caused quite a stir among Bangkok-based diplomats. More disturbing, the magazine also published an interview with Thai Deputy Foreign Minister Sukhumbhand Paribatra. It quoted him saying that Thailand was supporting clandestine sabotage operations in the territory controlled by the United Wa State Army inside Burma. Although subsequently Sukhumbhand dismissed the report as groundless, it was widely known within top security echelons that Thailand has long been contemplating heavy-handed measures that would stem the flow of methamphetamine tablets into its territory. According to Thai intelligence sources cited by the magazine, Britain's elite Special Air Services are being recruited to train members of the Karen community as agents in the war against drugs inside Wa territory. This is considered as long-term strategy and is aimed at obtaining information and weakening supply routes of both raw and finished tablets.

On 24 June 2000, the Thai army sounded a warning of a huge increase in the production and trafficking of drugs in Burma. The army blamed the Burmese junta leaders, who moved tens of thousands of people into border areas as part of a mass relocation programme. In March 2000, about 50,000 people were moved from the south of the Chinese border to towns in the eastern Shan State

¹⁸⁴ Burma's attitude towards Thai border troops is not welcoming, as shown in an article entitled "The bad neighbour" in *The New light of Myanmar*, 1 March 2001: "Thailand is showing hostilities and making threats against Myanmar. A large number of Thai forces were deployed along the border as a means to show hostilities toward Myanmar."

bordering Thailand. However, the number increased to 100,000 by the end of June. The relocation led to the increase of methamphetamine factories along the border. Each factory can produce up to 1 million tablets of the drug every day.

The Burmese side argued that the relocation is aimed at cutting heroin production in northern Burma by moving people away from areas where they traditionally used to grow poppies. But Thai officials feel that the relocation is a thinly disguised move to boost the drug industry by bringing the supply closer to markets in Thailand. They point out that the Burmese and Wa are using the money generated from the drug business to fund the setting up of new towns, especially Muang Yuon, only a stone's throw from the Thai border.

VII. New Thai policy towards Burma

Faced with the huge drug trade problem, Thailand is contemplating various options for both the short and medium term. Following long debates and examination of evidence that showed that the Burmese regime and the Wa minority are working together in the drug trade, Thailand was seriously considering what army chief Gen. Surayut Chulanont suggested – using surgical strikes on Wa-operated drug factories along the Thai-Burma border. Any military action across the Thai-Burma border to destroy drug-producing factories or mobile units would definitely have far-reaching ramifications on Thai-Burmese relations and the unity of ASEAN. If force is used, which is highly likely if the flow of illegal drugs continues unabated, it will have to be swift action by helicopter gunships. Apparently, given the gravity of the drug problem, the Thai leaders are ready to face any consequence derived from military actions against the drug warlords. Thailand is confident of garnering support from the international community because the conflict near the Thai border is akin to what happened in Kosovo two years ago. Here in the region, a pariah state exists which supports drug warlords on its territory near the Thailand border.

From a Thai point of view, cooperation from Burma and the Wa is necessary and pivotal to any reduction in the border drugs trade. Thailand has repeatedly urged Burma to assist Bangkok's anti-narcotic's efforts against the Wa, but all such overtures have failed. Of late, Thailand has viewed Burma's recalcitrance as a direct threat to Thailand's security because drugs could be used to destabilize the country. In mid-May 2000, Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai dispatched a special envoy, former foreign minister Sqd. Ldr. Prasong Soonsiri, to meet the junta leaders, including Gen. Khin Kyunt in Rangoon. Prasong brought with him a Thai proposal for a joint border patrol along the Thai-Burmese border, but Burma rejected it outright.

According to government statistics, at least 60% of methamphetamines end up in the hands of people aged 15 to 18. The tablets, locally known as ya-baa (mad pills), have been declared Public Enemy No. 1 by the previous and current governments. As part of the implementation of a new Burma policy, substantial changes and reshuffles took place in May and June 2000 along the Thai-Burmese border involving the Third Army Region, provincial and customs officials.

Bangkok also raised the issue of drug production with China and the Deputy Foreign Minister planned to visit Beijing and Yunnan in August 2000 to highlight the importance of Chinese cooperation in suppressing the cross-border drug trade.

The more assertive, if not more aggressive, policy towards Burma came after the departure of two key Foreign Ministry officials, Saroj Chavanaviraj, permanent secretary for foreign affairs and Virasak Footrakul, director general of the East Asian Affairs Department in April 2000. Former ambassador to Washington, Nitr Pibulsonggram assumed the position of new permanent secretary together with the

new director general of the East Asian Department, Surapong Chaiyanama. The change was crucial as far as Burmese policy is concerned because for the past decade the Foreign Ministry played almost no role in formulating policy on Burma. Under Nitr and Surapong, the Ministry has assumed the lead role on Burma. Surapong is well known within the ministry and Bangkok-based diplomatic community for his liberal views and tough position on Burma. He has long advocated a dual-track policy toward Burma that would increase Thailand's bargaining position. The ASEAN policy of supporting Burma could be disastrous, he argues, as it does not reflect the nature and interest of Thai foreign policy, which has respect for human rights and democratic principles as one of its main pillars. In the post-Cold War era, ASEAN has had to suppress their differences for the sake of unity and in its struggle against outside powers.

The most visible policy shift came in on 10 May 2000. The Foreign Ministry issued a hard-hitting press release in response to the *New Light of Myanmar's* accusation that Thailand provided shelter to Karen rebel groups in order to protect its black-market interests. The two-page release took the Burmese regime to task and soundly criticized Rangoon for the spillover of problems from Burma. It said that because of continuous fighting inside Burma, women, children and old people had to cross over to Thailand for safety. Thailand has to care for them and it has become a burden for the country, the document said. In subsequent months, the Rangoon regime used its mouthpiece, the *New Light of Myanmar*, to continue to attack Thailand and its leaders.

On 6 June 2000, Foreign Minister Surin Pitsuwan issued a strong protest to the Burmese junta following a serious accusation in the state-run press on 19 May 2000. *The New Light of Myanmar* threatened to expose Thai officials engaged in drug-trafficking "including those of Royal blood". Early on 6 June 2000 Surin met secretly with the junta leader Gen. Khin Nyunt at Don Muang Airport, where the Burmese leader was in transit, before flying to Tokyo to attend the funeral of the late Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi. During this meeting, Surin delivered the protest to Khin Nyunt, telling him that an allegation that involved a Royal was not an act of friendship. Showing that Thailand did not take it lightly, three weeks later on 27 June the Burmese ambassador to Bangkok was summoned to the Foreign Ministry to remind him of the allegation that would have far-reaching implications on Thai-Burmese relations. Bangkok stressed that, in addition, Thailand was expected to accede to the Treaty of the International Crime Court some time that year. Thailand would be able to join the international community in expediting justice on dictators and drug barons.

Thailand's new policy was tested in Geneva at the annual meeting of the International Labour Organisation on 14 June 2000, when Thailand abstained from supporting Burma – the only ASEAN member to do so. It was the first time that an ASEAN country decided to break away from the group's common approach. Before this crucial vote, the Thai government indicated to the Rangoon regime that its support was no longer automatic. If Burma failed to comply with ILO recommendations, Thailand would maintain its position until Burma came up with measures that would stop the practice of forced labour. The Thai abstention also demonstrated the uncomfortable situation ASEAN encounters when forced to vote on issues where there is no consensus.

At the meeting, the ILO decided to impose punitive sanctions on Burma, which would take effect in November 2000, if the situation of forced labour did not change. The sanctions were initiated following a report by an ILO technical cooperation mission that visited Burma during 22–27 May to ensure that Rangoon was in full compliance with ILO recommendations to stop all forms of systematic forced labour inside the country. After some heated debate, the ILO voted overwhelmingly in favour of a resolution proposing a number of sanctions against Burma. Despite some tough words from the Thai government the previous year, Thailand had voted along with other ASEAN members to support

Burma's record at the ILO meeting.¹⁸⁵ The June 2000 deliberation indicated that Thailand's policy towards Burma has changed.

Thailand's decision to abstain was due mainly to a soft-approach ASEAN statement. Two weeks before the vote, Malaysia, a member of the governing body, produced an ASEAN draft that would commend Burma's effort to ban forced labour. However, Thailand wanted the draft to reflect international concerns including Burma's own commitment to implement recommendations by the ILO.

Under the Surin and Sukhumbhand's leadership, the Thai Foreign Ministry has been taking a leading role in policy-formulation towards Burma. This is a new development because in the past the Thai army was the main policy-maker, determining the direction and substance of the country's ties with her neighbours, especially Burma. The National Security Council (NSC), which plays a coordinating role between key government security agencies, is no longer playing an assertive role. The NSC's role rests with the Prime Minister, who is the agency's chairman. Before Chuan took charge of the government, the NSC played a high-profile role in directing Burmese policy and displaced people along the Thai-Burmese border.¹⁸⁶

After the appointment of army chief Gen. Surayut Julanond in 1998 the army has been cooperating closely with the Foreign Ministry to work out and coordinate a common policy towards Burma. Surayut's predecessor, Gen. Chetta Thanajaro was considered close to the Rangoon junta leaders. He preferred personal talks with the junta leaders to dissolve bilateral issues, especially concessions on logging and fishing rights, including the opening of new border checkpoints. Under his leadership, Thai-Burmese relations were held hostage by the Burmese regime. Chetta also commented constantly on Thai-Burmese ties and took different views from that of his country as if he was operating alone. But Surayut changed all that. He asked the security officials along the Thai-Burmese border not to conduct any business across the border. With Surayut abstaining from comment on Thai-Burmese affairs and consulting the Ministry, policy-makers are now working as one for the first time.¹⁸⁷

However, when the government under Prime Minister Thaksin Sinawatra came to power in early 2001, he turned the Burmese policy upside down. Along with strong support from his coalition partner, Defense Minister Gen Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, Thailand dropped all conditions for political liberalization and improvement of human rights inside Burma. Top Thai leaders including Thaksin visited Burma and appeased the Burmese counterparts. Hard pressed by a campaign promise to get rid of narcotics along the Thai-Burmese border, Thaksin restored full trade relations with Burma in exchange for anti-narcotic cooperation and border security. With the new economic-oriented approach, the role of foreign ministry has again been side-lined as Chavalit and his team, who ended Burma's isolation in 1988, has taken charge of the policy and its decision making process. Although the tension along the Thai-Burma border has been reduced during the first half of 2001, the long-term prospects of joint anti-narcotic suppression and proposed demarcating border remain doubtful. With an absolute majority in the house, the Thaksin government is likely to continue the current policy which stimulates cross border trade regardless of political conditions inside the country.

¹⁸⁵ Before the voting, Foreign Minister Surin Pitsuwan told reporters that he personally supported the abstention, but the Thai representative in Geneva voted differently.

¹⁸⁶ During the reign of Gen Chavalit Yongchaiyudh leadership, the NSC became one of the most important bureaucracies to implement the policy. However, over the past three years, the NSC has returned to its traditional role of coordinating and facilitating discussion among various policy-makers.

¹⁸⁷ Burma has been testing the Thai resolve by employing divisive tactics through incentives. This has not succeeded.

VIII. Conclusions

Thai-Burmese relations have reached a critical juncture. Never before have Thai policy-makers expressed such frustration over bilateral ties, especially over the issue of narcotics suppression.

Before the extensive political reform in Thailand in 1997, Thai-Burmese ties were mainly driven by personal friendship. For instance, the leaders of the armed forces from the two countries met often and resolved conflicts on an ad hoc basis and through gentlemen's agreements. That helped explain why certain problems could be settled quickly and other problems dragged on. It must be noted that some of the issues settled through political expediency have returned to haunt the leaders of the two countries. In the past, strong military ties omitted and obliterated other key policy-makers including the Foreign Ministry, the National Security Council, the Interior Ministry and other related organizations. But with reform, the Foreign Ministry took the lead in the formation and execution of Burma policy.

The international community would like to see Thailand take a firm stand against the Burmese junta. As in the Cambodian conflict between 1978 and 1992, Thailand was able to provide leadership during the 14-year conflict and was a prime mover behind ASEAN solidarity and policy initiatives. Unfortunately, during the crucial days of Burma–ASEAN relations between 1995 and 1997, when key ASEAN decisions were made, Thailand was troubled by political uncertainty at home. However, the political reform that has taken place since 1997 should serve as political bedrock.

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