

## **CHAPTER III**

### **POLICY OF THAILAND TOWARD MYANMAR: CONCEPT OF CONSTRUCTIVE ENGAGEMENT.**

In this chapter the writer will describe about the policy of Thailand toward Myanmar and ended with the description of the Constructive Engagement's concept.

In September 1988, the Burmese junta cracked down on a people's demonstration for democracy. Western countries and Japan stopped aid and imposed sanctions on Burma, while Thailand, other ASEAN countries, and China tried to foster good relations with the junta. Since the end of the 1980s, Thailand had altered its policy from a buffer policy to constructive engagement supporting the military regime of Burma. Thailand's constructive engagement policy toward Burma has placed priority on good relations with the junta rather than human rights and democracy in Burma. After Chuan's flexible engagement policy, Thaksin revived Chatchai's constructive engagement policy toward Burma, which was more business-oriented than the Chatchai's policy.

#### **A: Constructive Engagement Policy with Burma**

##### **1. Foreign Policy of Chatchai Administration**

For ten years after 1989, Thailand pursued a policy of "constructive engagement" with Burma. This policy developed from the desire of Chatchai Chuanhawan's government (from August 1988 to February 1991) to "transform Indochina from battlefield to marketplace", which aimed to build closer relations

with former enemies such as Vietnam and Burma.<sup>1</sup>

Chartchai became Thai prime minister one month before the September 1988 junta's crackdown in Burma. Thailand complied with the Burmese junta in two ways. First, Burmese students who escaped to Thailand after the State Law and Order Recovery Council of Burma (SLORC) were repatriated. Secondly, the “buffer state” policy of supporting ethnic minorities, especially the Karen, to pressurize Burma, was abandoned. In 1989, the junta awarded Thai companies logging concessions in an area controlled by ethnic minorities.<sup>2</sup>

Chartchai viewed Burma as a “land bridge” between Southeast Asia and South Asia from which Thailand could benefit. Chartchai, however, was less interested in Burma than the military, which was traditionally concerned about border security and the stability of neighbors. Thai army commander Chavalit Yongchaiyut fostered a good relationship with the junta. The military revived the idea of Suwannaphume or a “golden land” that comprised mainland Southeast Asia. It was particularly emphasized by Chavalit, who called for Thailand to become the economic center of the mainland. Chavalit visited Burma on December 14, 1988. Chavalit excluded the Thai Foreign Ministry from his diplomatic efforts with Burma, Laos, and the Hun Sen regime in Cambodia,

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<sup>1</sup> Battersby, Paul, 1998, “Border Politics and the Broader Politics of Thailand’s International Relations in the 1990s: from communism to capitalism”, *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 71, no. 4. : Buszynski, Leszek, 1998, “Thailand and Myanmar: the Perils of ‘Constructive Engagement’”, *The Pacific Review*, vol. 11, no.2.

<sup>2</sup> Venika Boonma-klee, 1997, *Phama: Nayobaai Taang Pratheet Thai Samai Phon’eeek Chaachaai Chunhawan (Burma: Thai Foreign Policy under Chatichai Choonhavan’s Government)*, Bangkok: The Thailand Research Fund and The Foundation for the Promotion of Social Sciences and Humanities Textbooks Project.

although Chartchai's advisor team, Baan Phisanulok, also played a big role in the policy toward Cambodia.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Justifications for Constructive Engagement

Even though constructive engagement has proved unsuccessful in changing the Burmese junta, two justifications still apply. One is Thailand's growing economic stake in Burma. The economic benefits of constructive engagement include the US\$ 1 billion Yadana gas deal, developing transportation links through Burma. Thailand also benefits from fishing ventures negotiated with the Burmese regime and is interested in purchasing electricity from Burma.<sup>4</sup>

The second justification is the need to ensure border security which has been accentuated repeatedly by the military. There have been various border clashes that nearly escalated to full-scale conflict between the Thai and Burmese militaries. In February 1992, the Burmese military attacked the Karen National Union (KNU) forces and occupied a part of Thai territory. The Burmese accused Thailand of supporting the KNU. In 1995, the Burmese junta attacked the KNU position at Manerplaw. The junta accused Thailand of deploying forces along the border and of shelling Burmese positions, which was regarded as encouragement for the Karen. Some 80,000 Karens also moved into Thailand to be sheltered in temporary refugee camps.

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<sup>3</sup> Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, 2002, *Thailand: Economy and Politics*, Selangor

Darul Ehsan: Oxford University Press, Second edition.

<sup>4</sup> Venika Boonma-kee, 1997, *Phama: Nayobaai Taang Pratheet Thai Samai Phon'eek Chaachaai Chunnawan (Burma: Thai Foreign Policy under Chatichai Choonhavan's Government)*, Bangkok: The Thailand Research Fund and The Foundation for the Promotion of Social Sciences and Humanities Textbooks Project.

On March 4, 1995, the junta closed the Mea Sot-Myawaddy border checkpoint in an obvious attempt to punish Thailand for not allowing Burmese forces to use Thai territory in its fight against the KNU. Thai Prime minister Banharn Silpa-Archa visited Rangoon in March 1996 after being pushed by Thai business interests to make the necessary concession to the Burmese to have the border opened. Thai Army Commander Chetta Thanajaro telephoned Khin Nyun requesting that the border be opened for trade. Thailand's coalition politics and fragile governments allowed business interests to put considerable influence over foreign policy as they tended to dominate the major political parties.<sup>5</sup>

### 3. Constructive Engagement and ASEAN

This policy of accommodation with Burma was given the name "constructive engagement" by the Thai Foreign Ministry by way of justification. Foreign Minister, Arsa Sarasin, declared during an European Commission-ASEAN meeting in July 1991 that Thailand and Burma were inseparable, that constructive engagement was the only way to deal with Burma, and that Thailand had no choice but to pursue this policy because of the need to maintain border security. The policy was an immediate answer to a specific dilemma faced by Thailand in its relationship with Burma. It was intended to bridge the gap between particular Thai interests in Burma on the one hand and condemnation of the junta of Burma by EU, the USA, and Japan on the other.

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<sup>5</sup> Buszynski, Leszek, 1998, "Thailand and Myanmar: the Perils of 'Constructive Engagement'", *The Pacific Review*, vol. 11, no.2. p. 298-301

Thailand's constructive engagement policy developed into the enlargement of ASEAN to all the mainland Southeast Asian states. This was one major difference between the grand schemes of Anand and Chatchai, since the latter left ASEAN from his considerations. Chatchai's exclusion of ASEAN from the Cambodian peace efforts generated much criticism of Thailand within ASEAN and considerable suspicion about Thailand's true intentions. Anand, caretaker after the 1991 coup against Chatchai, and the Foreign Ministry devised the way of reconciling the Thai vision of the mainland role with ASEAN regionalism. This reconciliation necessarily entailed Thailand's promotion of the enlargement of ASEAN to include mainland Southeast Asia.<sup>6</sup>

In 1992, Vietnam and Laos received the observer status of ASEAN, and in 1995, Vietnam was admitted as the first country of Indo-China into ASEAN. Laos and Burma followed in 1997, Cambodia in 1999; however, the policy toward Burma has been criticized by Western countries for supporting the junta.<sup>7</sup>

Constructive engagement is based on a principle of ASEAN's non-interference. This means that ASEAN countries do not interfere in the internal affairs of each other, neither by openly criticizing them nor by supporting opposition groups.

Burma's accession to ASEAN served as the catalyst for debate over non-interference. Indeed, ASEAN-EU relations deteriorated after the admission of

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<sup>6</sup> Buszynski, Leszek, 1998, "Thailand and Myanmar: the Perils of 'Constructive Engagement'", *The Pacific Review*, vol. 11, no.2. p. 295

<sup>7</sup> Narine, Shaun, 2002, *Explaining ASEAN: Regionalism in Southeast Asia*, Boulder; Lynne Rienner.

Burma to ASEAN. A meeting of the ASEAN-EU Joint Cooperation Committee was cancelled twice due to European insistence that the meeting took place without Burmese participation. Since 1991, ASEAN have pursued a policy of constructive engagement toward Burma, which is defined as a non-confrontational strategy to “Aseanize” the isolated country. It hoped or at least argued that the policy would stimulate political change “through an policy of dialogue and persuasion, without any threat of sanction or coercion, an acceptance of differences in political and socioeconomic system”.<sup>8</sup> B.

#### Chuan’s Flexible Engagement

##### 1. Rethinking of Foreign Policy toward Burma

Following the resignation of Chavalit in November 1997 after economic crisis, Chuan and his Democrats came into power and remained until February 2001. This cabinet, unlike those of previous governments, comprised professional politicians as well as leading academics with no personal economic interests in Burma who appealed for a rethink on Thai policy. Foreign Minister, Surin Pitsuwan, and Deputy Foreign Minister Sukhumbhand, former professor, displayed their personal political ambitions to be internationally recognized while asserting a tough policy toward Burma. In general, this administration tended to accept the requirements of western countries.

Chuan made an effort to take the Burmese policy out of the military’s private interests and into the hands of the Foreign Ministry. Yet, Chuan had difficulty pursuing his Burmese policy because Burmese affairs had been tangled

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<sup>8</sup> Rüländ, Jürgen, 2000, “ASEAN and Asian crisis: Theoretical Implications and Practical Consequences for Southeast Asian Regionalism”, *The Pacific Review*, vol. 13, no.3.

up with money politics practiced by power holders involving a large number of influential people in the military. Therefore, the replacement of personal diplomacy with collective collaboration was simultaneously carried out with the demilitarization of politics. The appointment of the new army chief, General Surayud Chulanond, a professional military man, also weakened the military's role in politics. Surayud was not the favored choice of conservative factions in the military or the Burmese elites who objected to his anti-SLORC attitude. During his tenure as army chief, Surayud actively pursued a program of military reform and led a crackdown on "mafia colonels" who abused their rank to engage in criminal activities.

## 2. Chuan's Sympathy for Burmese Democracy and Buffer Policy

Chuan sympathized with the movement for democracy in Burma. He, therefore, sent delegates to participate in the Chilston Conference, a closed-door meeting hosted by Britain in 1998, which aimed to coordinate efforts by the concerned countries to facilitate meaningful dialogue between the Burmese military and the NLD. He also revived the Thai buffer policy vis-à-vis the ethnic minorities along the border in the name of promoting democracy. Hence, during the three years of the Chuan administration, there was deterioration in the Thai-Burmese relations.<sup>9</sup>

On October 1, 1999, five members of a group call the "Vigorous Burmese Student Warriors" (VBSW) marched into the Burmese Embassy in Bangkok and held hostage Burmese diplomat, Thai, and other foreign citizens. The students

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<sup>9</sup> Pavin Chachavalpongpan, 2005, *A Plastic Nation: The curse of Thainess in Thai-Burmese Relations*, Lanham, Maryland; University Press of America.

were released and allowed to rejoin an ethnic insurgent group by the Thai government in return for freedom of the hostages. While the opposition condemned the release, the Chuan government defended its stance by reference to democracy. On January 24, 2000, 20 armed rebels, God's Army of ethnic Karen militia, stormed a hospital in Rachaburi in order to pressure the Thai government to support the ethnic insurgent groups in Burma. The hostage crisis brought the Chuan Leekpai government's soft, human-rights-sensitive approach to Burmese dissident activity in Thailand under heavy criticism from both the opposition and the general public. The hospital episode ended tragically, following pre-dawn rescue operation by Thai security forces who killed all the God's Army rebels.<sup>10</sup>

### 3. Surin's Proposal of Flexible Engagement

At the 31st ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM) in July 1998 in Manila, Thai Foreign Minister Surin Pitsuwan proposed, supported by the Philippines, to substitute non-interference with a new approach labeled "flexible engagement." While preserving commitment to non-interference as the principle for dealing among ASEAN members and with other countries, flexible engagement would allow for frank and open discussion of other members' domestic affairs, when they have repercussions on neighbors or affect ASEAN as a whole. In particular, Thailand was afraid of spillovers of domestic turmoil from Neighboring countries such as Burma. Human rights violations, ethnic insurgencies, civil war, and economic mismanagement sent nearly 1 million refugees and illegal immigrants

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<sup>10</sup> Crispin and Lintner, 2000, "Gaining Ground", *Far Eastern Economic Review*, February 3.

from Burma to Thailand.<sup>11</sup>

Surin's proposal constituted a multi-pronged challenge to ASEAN's diplomatic and security principles. First, flexible engagement appeared to challenge the principle of non-interference. Secondly, it challenged the norm of quiet diplomacy because the concept was to explicitly allow for public discussion and criticism of one ASEAN country by another. Thirdly, by suggesting that ASEAN should become involved in intra-state issues if these entailed adverse consequences for other members, flexible engagement also challenged the long-standing norm that ASEAN should not take up collectively what for the most part would previously have been regarded as bilateral disputes.<sup>12</sup>

As expected before Surin's proposal was rejected by Indonesia, Malaysia, Burma, Vietnam, and Laos. Countries that, due to poor human rights record and authoritarian political systems, feared the creation of precedents that would bring them under international scrutiny.

In addition, it could consequently endanger mutual stability and jeopardize regime security. To increase the pressure on the Chuan administration, the Burmese junta froze all the business concessions previously granted to Thai politicians and private businesspersons. They also temporarily discontinued the import of some Thai products, replacing them with products from Singapore.

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<sup>11</sup> Rüländ, Jürgen, 2000, "ASEAN and Asian crisis: Theoretical Implications and Practical Consequences for Southeast Asian Regionalism", *The Pacific Review*, vol. 13, no.3.

<sup>12</sup> Haacke, Jürgen, 1999, "The Concept of Flexible Engagement and the Practice of Enhanced Interaction: Intramural Challenges to the 'ASEAN way'", *the Pacific Review*, vol. 12, no.4.

Furthermore, after the 1997 economic crisis, under pressure from the IMF and advanced countries including the US, the atmosphere in Thailand became more nationalistic and anti-western. Chuan was criticized that he was also a slave of western countries on the Burmese problem.<sup>13</sup>

Thailand's policy of constructive engagement has placed a priority on good relations with the junta rather than human rights and democracy in Burma, which is based on the principles of non-interference and sovereignty. However, when the Chuan government pursued a policy of flexible engagement, Thailand should resolve many problems such as conflicts with the Burmese border, drug problems, refugees and illegal immigrants. Therefore, political stability and democratic in Burma are needed to resolve this problem in Thailand as well as to the people of Burma.

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<sup>13</sup> Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, 2002, *Thailand: Economy and Politics*, Selangor Darul Ehsan: Oxford University Press, Second edition.

