

# The Diplomacy of Thailand with Burma(Myanmar)<sup>1</sup> (1988-2006)

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## Summary

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 Chartchai's constructive engagement policy toward Burma, which was more business-oriented than the Chartchai's policy.

Key words : Thailand, Burma, Myanmar, constructive engagement, Thaksin

## Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to analyze an international factor of supporting the Burma's military regime through studying the diplomacy of Thailand with Burma from 1988 to 2006.

The end of the Cold War and economic globalization changed political and economic circumstances in Southeast Asia. In particular, the Cambodian Conflict was over and Indo-China became more peaceful, at least big military conflicts went away. In adjustment to the new circumstances, Thailand decided to make itself an economic center on mainland Southeast Asia. This needed stable relationships among governments and orders inside each country, even though a country has domestic problem such as military dictatorship.

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. Burmese isolation from the U.S., EU, and Japan has not been matched by isolation from the rest of the world. Burma is hardly very isolated at all. In the case of South Africa, all the neighbor states approved sanctions; the elite, business, and the banking communities were geared to Western Europe and the apartheid government was eventually split on the issue. None of the above conditions resembles those in Burma (Steinberg 2007: 236).

Ironically, as the U.S. had sought to exclude Burma from the world, the junta had

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begun the slow process of opening up. The economic sanctions against the Burma had made it closer to other countries: ASEAN countries, China, India, Russia, and others. In particular, since the end of the 1980s, Thailand had altered its policy from a buffer policy to constructive engagement supporting the military regime of Burma.

## **1. Constructive Engagement Policy with Burma**

### **1.1 Foreign Policy of Chartchai Administration**

For ten years after 1989, Thailand pursued a policy of “constructive engagement” with Burma. This policy developed from the desire of Chartchai Chunhawan’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 (Battersby 1998: 479; Buszynski 1998: 291).

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 (Venika 1997: 59-62; Buszynski 1998: 292).

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 (Venika 1997: 64-5). Chavalit excluded the Thai Foreign Ministry from his diplomatic efforts with Burma, Laos, and the Hun Sen regime in Cambodia, although Chartchai’s advisor team, Baan Phisanulok, also played a big role in the policy toward Cambodia (Pasuk and Baker 2002: 370).

### **1.2 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 (Venika 1997: 141-174; Buszynski 1998: 298; Pavin 2005: 129).

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 conflicts 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.

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 (Buszynski 1998: 298-301).

### 1.3 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 EEC-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 (Buszynski 1998: 293). 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.

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 Chartchai, since the latter left ASEAN from his considerations. Chartchai'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 Chartchai, and the Foreign Ministry devised a way of reconciling the Thai vision of a mainland role with ASEAN regionalism. This reconciliation necessarily entailed Thailand's promotion of the enlargement of ASEAN to include mainland Southeast Asia (Buszynski 1998: 295).

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 (Narine 2002: 113-23).

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 (Rüland 2000: 439).

Burma's accession to ASEAN served as the catalyst for debate over non-interference. Indeed, ASEAN-EU relations deteriorated after the admission of 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 has 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 a policy of dialogue and persuasion, without any threat of sanction or coercion, an acceptance of differences in political and socioeconomic system" (Rüland 2000: 440).

## **2. Chuan's Flexible Engagement**

### **2.1 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 (Pavin 2005: 76-8).

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 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 (Pavin 2005: 76, 78-9; McCargo and Ukrit 2005: 132).

### **2.2 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 (Pavin 2005: 76, 146).

On October 1, 1999, five members of a group called the “Vigorous Burmese Student Warriors” (VBSW) marched into the Burmese Embassy in Bangkok and held hostage Burmese diplomats, Thai, and other foreign citizens. The students 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 (Crispin and Lintner 2000: 16; Pavin 2005: 79-82).

### 2.3 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 from Burma to Thailand (Rüland 2000: 441).

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 (Haacke 1999: 189).

As expected, Surin’s proposal was rejected by Indonesia, Malaysia, Burma, Vietnam, and Laos, countries that, due to poor human rights records 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 (Pavin 2005: 145; Haacke 1999: 189). 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.

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 (Pasuk and Baker 2002: 439-43).

### **3. Thaksin's Revival of Constructive Engagement**

#### **3.1 Thaksin's Link between Business and Diplomacy**

In February 2001, Thaksin Shinawatra, one of Thailand's richest businesspersons, became prime minister (to September 2006) and appointed a cabinet consisting of other leading business figures. By entering into the business of telecom concessions, Thaksin had also entered into the world of politics because the grant of the concessions and the details of their benefits were decided by political processes. In November 1994, Thaksin joined the Cabinet as foreign minister under the Phalang Tham Party quota in the Chuan government. In July 1998, he launched the Thai Rak Thai Party (TRT). TRT Party became a magnet for some major business leaders who had suffered greatly from the 1997 economic crisis and yet survived. As a result, leading businessmen saw the need to participate more actively in politics and to have a strong political leadership in order to survive economic globalization.

Thaksin's venture into the political world was the logical extension of his business success based on state concessions. His main aim was to protect his own business and Thailand's "competitiveness" in the face of globalization and transnational capital (Pasuk and Baker 2004: 74). After becoming Prime Minister, Thaksin revised Thailand's policies toward the rest of Southeast Asia. At the same time, a remarkable wave of new investment in the region's telecommunications took place, especially in China, India, and Burma. Thus, the Prime Minister's official visits had also paved a diplomatic path to introduce his company, Shin Corp, into these countries (McCargo and Ukrit 2005: 52).

Standing against globalization, the Thaksin government promoted regionalist policies emphasizing three aspects of cooperation between Asian countries: a) collaboration with China and the "Asia for Asian mindset"; b) Asian Cooperation Dialogue (ACD). The first meeting of ADC was held in June 2002 in Cha-Am, Thailand<sup>2</sup>; and c) promoting a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) for bilateral relations with key trading partners. Thaksin's government had long tried to combine the business requirements of the private sector and the need for investment in the Asian region. This Asia-centered regional policy<sup>3</sup> paid his official visits to Burma (June 19-20, 2001), China (August 27-29, 2001) and India (November 26-29, 2001 and February 1, 2002) (McCargo and Ukrit 2005: 50-3; Ganesan 2004: 36).

### 3.2 Thaksin's Policy toward Burma

Thaksin's policy toward Burma was business-oriented, and Foreign Minister Surakiart said, "We would like to promote democracy in Burma, but we would like to do it the Asian way" (Crispin and Vatikiotis 2001: 27). Thaksin's visit to Burma on June 19-20, 2001 was the first by a Thai prime minister. His predecessor, Chuan Leekpai, had consistently refused to visit the country. Although his visit took place amidst a host of conflicts between the two nations regarding minority groups, narcotics and drugs, fishing territories, and confrontation along the border, it yielded positive results. Lieutenant General Khin Nyun visited Thailand from September 3 to 5, 2001, as a gesture of recognizing and reciprocating Thaksin's efforts. This visit was highly significant in the complicated relations between Thailand and Burma, since none of Burma's leaders had set foot in Thailand for 11 years (McCargo and Ukrit 2005: 53-4). In early 2002, senior General Than Shwe visited Thailand and was received by an audience with His Majesty King Bhumibol and Queen Sirikit; the Thai Crown Princess, Sirindhorn, visited Burma. Other visits by key members of government including the Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister, Surakiart, followed (James 2004: 540).

This thawed the relations of two countries and proved beneficial to Thaksin's business. In May 2002, SATTEL, his company, signed a service and procurement contract for purchasing the complete iPSTAR system package. This example illustrates that Thaksin's avenues of diplomacy under the concept of "Asian for Asian" involved much more than the use of diplomacy to reduce tensions between neighboring countries like Thailand and Burma. It also involved the integration of large-scale investments by SATTEL. Official diplomacy helped pave the way for negotiations as well as the pre-sale and promotion of telecommunication systems (McCargo and Ukrit 2005: 53-5).

Aung San Suu Kyi and the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) became embroiled in a bloody encounter at Depayin on May 30, 2003. This incident left at least four people dead and Aung San Suu Kyi was taken into "protective custody" (Crispin and Lintner 2003: 20-1). Thailand proposed the idea of a road map that would see the SPDC commit itself to a timetable for the release of Suu Kyi and the regime's steady move to democracy. In addition, Thai Foreign Minister Surakiart Sathirathai put forward the idea of organizing a multilateral forum to discuss the situation in Burma. Burmese Prime Minister Khin Nyun announced on August 30, 2003 that Burma would pursue its own seven-step road map to achieve a "peaceful, modern, and developed state".

Thaksin had consistently supported Burma, both in ASEAN and internationally, and on December 15 hosted a ten-nation conference in Bangkok on Burma's road map. Moreover, Thaksin sponsored a four-nation economic summit at Bagan on November 12, 2003, including Laos, Cambodia as well as Burma, in what Thaksin called a "prosperity sharing" policy (James 2004: 540).

### 3.3 Military Connection with Burma

After Thaksin's government came to power, differences emerged between the government and military reformists in the policy toward Burma. The army became more involved in politics and business with Burma under Thaksin and Defense Minister Chavalit. Both Thaksin and Chavalit protected business interests in Burma (Crispin and Tasker 2001: 16-8; Tasker 2002: 19). In September 2002, reformist general Surayud was promoted to the ceremonial post of Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces. He was replaced as Army Commander by General Somdhat Attanand, a politically oriented soldier closely related with Thai Rak Thai party. The appointment of Somdhat to the top Army post had various political implications. First, Surayud's removal was an indication that the military reformist policies associated with Chuan were now out of favor. Secondly, the change reflected attempts by Thaksin to bring the military in line with his government's policy on Burma.

Whereas Thaksin and foreign minister Surakiart Sathirathai favored a policy of constructive engagement with Burma, Surayud had long insisted on a more hard-line approach. He had been particularly determined to confront the United Wa State Army (UWSA), which was believed to be the main source of the amphetamines widely sold and abused in Thailand with support from the Burmese military regime (Tasker and Crispin 2000: 24-6; Lintner and Tasker 2001: 19). The Army's tough line on Burmese border issues, closely associated with the policies of Third Army Commander General Wattanachai Chaimuangwong, a classmate of Surayud, had infuriated Thaksin and Surakiart, who felt it undermined their attempts to develop better business and diplomatic links with the Burmese military regime (Ganesan 2004: 30-1).

Soon after taking up his appointment, Somdhat announced that under his leadership, the military would do nothing that could damage Thai-Burmese relations. He made efforts to ease tensions with Rangoon by building a personal rapport with the Burmese leadership. Accompanied by a team of military officers, he traveled to Rangoon in mid-January 2003. During a meeting with Burmese military leaders, General Maung Aye and Lieutenant General Kin Nyunt, they held talks on developing collaboration in respect of drugs suppression, joint military patrols of the border and solving border demarcation disputes (McCargo and Ukrit 2005: 137, 140). In October 2003, Chaisit, Thaksin's cousin, succeeded Somdhat as Army Commander, followed his predecessor's policy to Burma, and supported the government's war on drugs (McCargo and Ukrit 2005: 153). Thaksin was ousted by a coup d'état in September 2006.

### Conclusion

Thailand's constructive engagement policy has placed 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, as the Chuan administration pursued with the flexible engagement policy, Thailand must resolve many problems with Burma such as border conflicts, drug problems, refugees, and illegal immigrants. Therefore,



Burmese political stability and democratization are necessary for the resolution of these problems in Thailand as well as for the Burmese people.

Since 2009 the situation of Burma has been changing slowly. In 2009 the U.S. began to approach the Burmese military government as a greater strategy around China, while the Burmese government has become increasingly uncomfortable with China. “Road map to democracy” of the Burmese government resulted in a general election in November 2010, the first election in the last two decades, and the nominally civilian government in March 2011. The new government is keen to prove that it is open to foreign investor. This political and economic change is welcomed by the Thai government as well as other countries like Japan and the US. The Thai Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra visited Burma in December 2011 and the other Thai ministers of foreign affairs, industry, energy, and transport did in January 2012 for a big development project in Burma (*Bangkok Post*, January 7, 2012). Prime Minister Yingluck was allowed to meet pro-democratic leader, Mrs. Suu Kyi, as the first Thai leader. The former Prime Minister Thaksin, who visited Burma before Ms. Yingluck, his sister, to help smooth the way for her visit, said, “I never used a stick to deal with Burma like the superpowers did. I always used a carrot to deal with it” (*Bangkok Post*, December 20, 2011). Thaksin’s policy toward Burma has been business-oriented.

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*Bangkok Post*, ; December 20, 2011; January 7, 2012.

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<sup>1</sup> In this article, I use Burma, not Myanmar, as a name of the country.

<sup>2</sup> ACD includes the ASEAN 10, Japan, South Korea, China, and India. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, May 23, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, Thaksin, under the increasing pressure of the US, has opened the former US airbase in U Tapao and naval base in Sattahip to allow for the stationing of military hardware and munitions for forward development and operations and the US has granted Thailand “Non-NATO ally status” (Ganesan, 2004: 36-7).