



CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Purpose of the Thesis

The thesis intends to study the relationships between Thailand and Myanmar with respect to the bilateral conflicts and confrontations taking place during the Thaksin Shinawatra government. More specifically, it will analyze the causes and effects of these conflicts and confrontations, as well the Thai government's efforts at conflict management.

The reason that I would like to explore the subject is that Thai-Myanmar conflicts seemed to have reached new heights during this period, with confrontations between the two countries' armed forces. Perhaps, we could say that bilateral relations are at their most confrontational level since the Thai-Burmese wars during the reign of King Rama I. In the recent times, even though there have been many conflicts along the border, they were limited. At most, these involved proxy wars, with Thailand using ethnic minority groups as the buffers against both central Burmese government and communist expansion during the Cold War. During the period of the Thaksin Shinawatra government, conflicts became "hot" military confrontations. In addition, symptoms of greatly deteriorated relations were clearly evident, such as war of words between governments, harsh criticisms of each other by the two countries' media, and border closures. Conflicts also expanded to the grassroots level of both societies, as seen from the two peoples' sentiments towards the military clashes in 2001 and 2002 through medias. A sense of nationalism was aroused on both sides and intensified the conflicts, especially when a movie called Bangrachan, telling a story of heroic deeds by Thai villagers against Burmese invaders in the 18th century, was showing in Thai theaters.

These conflicts and confrontations were all the more interesting in that they escalated at the very time that, after having criticized the preceding Chuan Leekpai government of causing rifts between the two countries, the Thaksin Shinawatra government sought greatly improved relations with its Myanmar.

The Hypothesis of the Thesis

The hypothesis of this thesis is that conflicts and confrontations between Thailand and Myanmar during the period of the Thaksin Shinawatra government resulted from 3 factors:

1. The two countries' structural differences
2. The two countries' domestic conditions, and
3. The roles of international actors

Analytical Framework

Structural differences between the two countries had appeared since period of the Ne Win regime in Myanmar (Burma)^{*} and the Sarit-Thanom-Praphat regime in Thailand in the 1960s and 1970s. Ne Win came to power with his “Burmese Way to Socialism” in domestic policy and “Neutrality” in foreign policy as a means of responding to the threat of both internal and external interferences. At this time in Thailand, even though the three Thai leaders governed the country through a military regime, the path chosen was very different. Beginning with Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, economic development was adopted as the key approach for national progress, and external economic ties encouraged as the key to this development. In foreign policy, Thailand sided with the “Free World” as an ally of the US during Cold War.

During the 1960s-1970s, structural differences in the two countries’ development did not directly cause conflicts between them. It was due to the limitation of engagement in the Cold War period. On the one hand, a neutral country Burma was largely sitting on the sidelines all on its own, while on the other, as a frontline state of the Free World, Thailand was preoccupied with communist threats coming first from China to the north and then from Vietnam in the east.

The end of the Cold War changed all this. With the disappearance of the communist threat, Thailand was less interested in maintaining its traditional policy of

* In 1989 the military government introduced the name Myanmar or Union of Myanmar as the official name of the state instead of Burma or Union of Burma. In this thesis, the name “Burma” will refer to the country before 1989, and “Myanmar” to the country after that date.

using ethnic minority groups as buffer. Myanmar's central government was able to expand its territorial control and project its power into Thai-Burmese border areas for the first time since its independence. A combination of greater Burmese military presence in sensitive border areas and persistence of fighting between the central government and ethnic minorities caused a number of problems in Thai-Myanmar relations. These ranged from boundary demarcation, flows of refugees and illegal migrants, trade in illicit goods, conflicts for natural resources, especially timber and, most importantly in recent times, drugs.

Where Thailand is concerned, the main domestic condition affecting its relations with Myanmar is the ineffectiveness of the government in implementing its policy towards the army. During 2001-2002, the Royal Thai Army (RTA) played a strong role in countering border intrusion as well as drug activities along the border. The hardline stance of the RTA, particularly the Third Region Army, is the consequence of the previous government's policy decisions.¹

The Chuan Leekpai government stressed principles and policies that were seen to be "unfriendly" to Myanmar. These included democracy, freedom and human rights. More significantly, they also included the policy towards drugs. Faced with rapidly growing domestic drug problems, particularly those related to meta-amphetamine, and having failed to persuade the government of Myanmar to help suppress drug-production and -distribution activities taking place on its territory, the Chuan Government allowed army to deal with such problems directly.² When the Thaksin Shinawatra government came to power, it could not or would not immediately reverse the policy despite the fact that it had promised to pursue better and closer relationships with Myanmar. One reason for this was that another key policy of this government was drug suppression. With the country having become a major consumer of narcotics for the first time and the average age of users decreasing, drug problems were perceived to be an urgent agenda that the

¹ Further information see chapter IV.

² Kavi Chongtavorn, "Thai-Myanmar Relations," in Challenges to Democratization in Myanmar: Perspectives on Multilateral and Bilateral Response. (Stockholm: Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), 2001), p. 125.

government had to address for domestic political reasons. Shortly after assuming office, a government's high-level drug workshop was held in Chiang Rai in March 2001.³ In the meeting, the name of "Maung Yawn" and drug activities of the United Wa State Army (UWSA) inside Myanmar were directly mentioned. In Myanmar's perception, these were interferences in its domestic affairs. It was only later that the government turned to an inward-looking drug policy by initiating its war on drug campaign.

In addition, conflicts were intensified by a sense of nationalism. During the confrontations in 2001 and 2002, with their emotions aroused, the Thai people became participants in the conflict process. This sense of animosity towards Myanmar is not sudden, but a result of our socialization processes which for a long time had Myanmar as a main actor. Wars with Myanmar had been widely used to create a sense of unity for the purpose of nation building since the government of Field Marshall Phibun Songkhram. Thus, in conflict situations with Myanmar, the "stakeholders" are not only the governments but also the peoples.

Where Myanmar's domestic conditions are concerned, the role of Red Wa or the UWSA in connection with its drug business and the consequences of the Myanmar government's relocation policy are very important. This relocation policy resulted in the expansion of Wa authorized principality into the southern region of Shan State in Myanmar adjacent to the northern region of Thailand, moving the drug business closer to the Thai border. One can see from the prosperous condition of Maung Yawn, controlled by Red Wa, just how lucrative this business has become. In areas close to the Thai border, there continued to be fighting between the central government and ethnic minorities, as well as among the minorities themselves. As a result, confrontations easily erupted with Thai army units. In addition, there are also many other issues, economic, social and political, which affect Thai-Myanmar relations in the long term and will be considered below.

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The Office of Narcotics Control Board, "Policy and drug prevention strategy of the government," ONCB [Online]. 2004. Available from: <http://www.oncb.go.th>.

Furthermore, major powers such as China, India, and the United States played significant roles in Thai-Myanmar relations. China seemed to have influenced the relocation policy of Myanmar, given Beijing's concerns with the flows of drugs from the northern area of Shan State to Yunan. The role of India, with respect to economic and political cooperation, perhaps helped to prolong domestic problems in Myanmar, such as political conflicts between the government and the opposition parties. The United States also continued to extend its influence into Thailand through its counter-drug assistance and military training cooperation programs. The US might have good reasons for providing such assistance to Thailand, but the consequence has generally been greater distrust and misunderstanding in Thailand and Myanmar relations. For instance, Myanmar has always condemned Thailand's foreign policy as a "bend-with-the-wind" policy due to the close association between Thailand and the US.⁴

While during the Thaksin Shinawatra government conflicts and confrontations have reached new heights, one must also point out the signs of progress made towards better relations between Thailand and Myanmar. These include bilateral assistance from Thailand to Myanmar, bilateral agreements in a number of areas, the frequency of high-level official visits, as well as increased trade and investment ties between the two countries.

During this administration, Thailand has provided Myanmar with huge sums of money for bilateral assistance. 4000 million baht have been allocated in the framework of the ESC strategic cooperation, of which 1200 million baht would be for road links and infrastructure development in Myanmar as a soft loan. There are also bilateral agreements and memoranda, such as 20 million baht drug assistance and cooperation, repatriation of illegal migrant in 2002, Pagan declaration in 2003, attendance of Myanmar's leaders in

⁴ The Nation (1 June 2001).

Bangkok process, and BIMST-EC regional cooperation meeting in Thailand, 53 bilateral projects in 2004, and further agreements on Yadana and Yetagun pipeline projects.⁵

We can see closer relations between the two countries from exchanges of official visits. A new direction in the foreign policy of this government was announced when the Thai Prime Minister visited Myanmar in June 2001 amid the tension on the border. In fact, Prime Minister Thaksin's visit was the first by a Thai Prime in many years. Likewise, Prime Minister Khin Kyunt's visit in 2001 was his first trip to Thailand in 11 years, and General Maung Aye's in 2002 his first in 10 years. Also we can see many official visits exchanged at other levels after the Thai Prime Minister had open a "new chapter of relations" in 2001.

However, it should be pointed out that the Thaksin Shinawatra government was able to bring about improved, "close and warm" relations, not by addressing long-standing bilateral problems as such, but by short-term domestic measures. Or to put it another way, it managed conflicts with Myanmar mainly through domestic conflict management. The process began with the military reshuffle, which moved high-ranking military officers with responsibility for Myanmar to other positions, to lessen the degree of conflict.⁶ Also, the government's drug eradication program was turned into an inward-looking approach. A "War on Drug" campaign was declared, instead of criticizing and pressuring Myanmar on this matter.

Emphasis on domestic conflict management as a means of external conflict management meant that, although conflicts and tensions in Thai-Myanmar relations were alleviated and ameliorated in the short term, all the bilateral problems which needed time and understanding to resolve over the longer term were not addressed. This is an important point, given that such problems have not been limited to the ties between the governments, but also involve people-to-people level of relations.

⁵ See Matichon (23 August 2004). See Aung Zaw, "Thaksin and tyrant," The Irrawaddy [Online]. Available from: <http://www.irrawaddy.org/aviewer.asp?a=3184&z=102>

⁶ Further information see chapter IV and VII.

This longer-term task is much more difficult. One structural problem with Myanmar is that Myanmar's leadership is limited to only a small group of people whose position has not been legitimized by the entire country. By attempting to strengthen relations through only working with the leadership, especially where economic integration is concerned, the Thai government might have overlooked the importance of at least two other factors. One is the Myanmar people's quest for their basic rights and freedom. The other is the need to adjust the socialization process in the country in order to bring about sustainable trust and understanding.

Methodology

The methodology used in this paper relies on a historical approach. Various types of sources are used to analyze the thesis based on the political, economic, and social development of both Thailand and Myanmar. Thus, the data mainly is based on documentary materials. Primary sources used in this thesis are government documents, meeting transcripts of various committees, as well as reports from various academic seminars. Secondary sources include pre-existing research materials, news clippings, media reports, and other publications, such as online documents.

Nevertheless, the thesis aims to analyze through a structural analysis. Such analysis is important as the current problems are structural problems which have been rooted long before the Thaksin Shinawatra government. Structural problems in this context include domestic and foreign policy as well as the political, economic, and social conditions of both countries. These problems are sources of concern to Thai-Myanmar relations.

The Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is composed of 7 chapters organized as follows:

Chapter I: Introduction

Chapter II: General Perspectives on Conflicts and Confrontations: This is a general chapter which outlines the problems that this government had to face.

Chapter III: Historical Background: Structural Development of Both Countries:

The development of both states since the 18th century will be analyzed in order to understand the structural differences between Thailand and Myanmar.

Chapter IV: Thailand's Domestic Conditions: This chapter will examine the domestic problems of Thailand, which have played a crucial role in the relations between Thailand and Myanmar. These included problems within the government's organization, drug issues, and Thai nationalism.

Chapter V: Myanmar's Domestic Conditions: This chapter will similarly study Myanmar's domestic conditions affecting its relations with Thailand. These include unabated domestic political problems, the impact of cease-fire agreements, and economic recession.

Chapter VI: Roles of External Actors: The main emphasis of this chapter will be to pinpoint the roles of external powers which had influence on the conflicts between Thailand and Myanmar, particularly the United States, China as well as India.

Chapter VII: Conclusion: Conflict Management and Thaksin's Policy Analysis: The conflicts and confrontations between Thailand and Myanmar were eased when the two countries reached a landmark regional cooperation agreement called "Pagan Declaration", which aims to forge economics-led cooperation in accordance with an "Economic Cooperation Strategy" or ECS. This section will explore the Thai government's approach to dealing with Myanmar, the reasons for such an approach and its overall impact on bilateral relations.