

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background

There is an interesting debate on how to deal with the military-ruled Burma\* in the regional community. The country's geo-strategically important position in the Southeast Asian peninsula between the Indian subcontinent and China allows the military rulers to be a major regional player. Due to these geo-politics, ASEAN (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations) as a regional organization, favored to maintain a close relationship with Burma. The way the association uses "constructive engagement;" applying an open door policy, investing, trading and recognizing the Burmese junta in order to foster liberalization in hopes of creating a more democratic form of government.

Burma became a member of ASEAN along with Laos in July 1997. But contrary to expectations, this year was the worst year for the association (which had intended to celebrate its anniversary in July as a 30-year success story). In August, Thailand's economy fell into a downward spiral that was soon to contaminate the entire region. By September, Singapore, Malaysia, and the southern parts of Thailand and the Philippines were hard hit by haze from forest fires resulting from land-clearing activities in Indonesia. Preceding both these events, ASEAN had to deny membership to Cambodia in late July, due to them launching further rounds of domestic violence.

ASEAN has not managed to develop an effective concerted response to the Asian financial crisis or the environmental hazard caused by Indonesia's forest fires. Perhaps more significantly, ASEAN has also been unable to fashion a response to the regional spillover effects caused by the internal policies of Burma and Cambodia. For example, at the annual meeting of ASEAN foreign ministers in July 1998, ASEAN's least democratic states such as Indonesia and Malaysia joined forces to block a Thai proposal for reformation so the organization could effectively deal with these new threats to regional security.

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\* Burma's military regime changed the English version of the country's name from 'Burma' to 'Myanmar' in 1989. The use of the name 'Myanmar' remains controversial given the regime's lack of political legitimacy. Some states (including the US and Canada) continue to refer to the country as 'Burma', as I will do in this thesis. However, some of the quotations I use refer to Myanmar.

During 1980s-1990s, ASEAN's reputation was based on the high rate of economic growth of individual members and the leading diplomatic role ASEAN undertook to oppose the Soviet-backed Vietnamese's invasion of Cambodia. It also successfully founded the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1993. The ARF is the first multilateral security dialogue forum in the Asia-Pacific. It is sometimes argued that ASEAN's success is based on 'the ASEAN way' - an approach to regional diplomacy stressing decision-making by consensus and non-interference in another state's internal affairs. In short, ASEAN represents the triumph of process over institutionalization. As a longtime scholar of Vietnam, Carlyle Thayer writes:

No better example can be found than the inclusion of communist Vietnam as ASEAN's seventh member in 1995. ASEAN members have refrained from criticizing Vietnam's political system even though they repress communism at home. Vietnam became ASEAN's seventh member, in part, because of the geo-strategic necessity of adding ballast to ASEAN's relations with China.<sup>1</sup>

That was why the association applied its successful 'ASEAN Way' when they approached Burma after the people's uprising and military coup in 1988.

### **1.2 Objective of the thesis**

First purpose of the thesis is to analyze the mechanisms of ASEAN in dealing with problems of Burma. Second is to evaluate political cooperation experience of ASEAN with Burma. Third is to highlight challenges of ASEAN to maintain its credibility in the international arena regarding Burma.

### **1.3 Methodology and Theoretical Framework**

There are few interviews with some ASEAN and Burma scholars and experts for this thesis. Moreover, the research will be largely relied on the substantial academic books, articles from the academic journals, news and interviews in newspapers, and internet sources. As for method, empirical analysis will be utilized for this research. From

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<sup>1</sup> Carlyle Thayer, "ASEAN: From Constructive Engagement to Flexible Intervention ." Harvard Asia Pacific Review Spring 1999.

the above-mentioned sources, collections of information related to this thesis, will be recorded in the time frame from 1988 to 2006.

There are two regional perspectives on ASEAN. A longtime scholar of ASEAN Shaun Narine points out: "scholars of ASEAN hold two dominant interpretations of the organization. The first position holds that ASEAN forms the basis of a regional community of Southeast Asian states.<sup>2</sup> According to this argument, ASEAN embodies fundamental norms, values, and practices that have, over time, socialized the ASEAN states into adopting a shared regional identity. The second interpretation is that ASEAN is an instrument of its member states.<sup>3</sup> The organization is designed to pursue the narrow self-interests of its member states. From this perspective, any sense of community within Southeast Asia is illusory, at best."<sup>4</sup>

In the context of conceptual framework, the association emphasizes constructive engagement and non-interference as theoretical guidelines for their policy-making. Becky Katz, a scholar in Regional and Comparative Studies focusing on the Middle East and Asia, examines that:

"The very nature of the concept constructive engagement implies the need to influence a rogue state by integrating it into the international community. In other words, one employs constructive engagement after one has acknowledged that the given state espouses views contrary to the peace and stability of the international community, labeling it a *rogue state*. To claim that non-interference, as a corollary of constructive engagement, involves a neutral stance on the behaviors of the rogue state irrationally pits the principle as contrary to constructive engagement. The motivation for utilizing constructive engagement is that one must overcome the pariah nature of the state."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Examples include Acharya, 2001; Busse, 1999; Chin, 1997; and Martin, 1987. Acharya's position on this question is not as simple as this statement may imply. He sees ASEAN as an institution in decline in the modern era.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Ruland, 2000; Henderson, 1999; and Leifer, 1989. Like Acharya, Leifer's interpretation of ASEAN is more sophisticated than this simple assessment implies.

<sup>4</sup> Shaun Narine, Explaining ASEAN: Regionalism in Southeast Asia. 1st. Boulder, Colorado, USA: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2002. p.1.

<sup>5</sup> Becky Katz, "ASEAN's Engagement with Vietnam and Burma." paper presented in seminar of Burma: Myanmar in Conflict. 2006. p.18.

Officially, the first utterance of a more sophisticated concept of non-interference came from Thai Foreign Minister Surin Pitsuwan at the Asia-Pacific Roundtable in Kuala Lumpur in June 1998. He suggested derogation from non-interference in favor of "constructive intervention". In truth, ASEAN had obeyed non-interference through "constructive engagement". Surin contended that if a domestic conflict displayed regional reverberations, then it necessitated ASEAN's assertion. Perhaps geopolitical concerns motivated Thailand as Burma's situation has only become worse. In a paper presented at the 1998 AMM in Manila, Surin reworked constructive intervention as flexible engagement and wrote,

"The dividing line between domestic affairs on the one hand and external or transnational issues on the other is less clear. Many "domestic" affairs have obvious external or trans-national dimensions, adversely affecting neighbors, the region and the region's relations with others. In such cases, the affected countries should be able to express their opinions and concerns in open, frank and constructive manner... ."<sup>6</sup>

Surin does not speak of romanticized human rights; he does not mention the responsibility of people as citizens of the world to ameliorate the human condition for those in Burma. Instead, he proffers a utilitarian calculus, a realist perspective on politics.<sup>7</sup>

The core assumptions of constructive engagement will be introduced as the theoretical tool for the better explanation of this thesis. In this regard, this thesis will analyse ASEAN's engagement policy on Burma as a regional cooperation.

#### 1.4 Hypothesis

In the case of Burma, ASEAN's constructive engagement policy did not achieve its objectives in Burma, let alone paving the way for political liberalization. First, the emphasis of business interests over political objectives has diluted the effectiveness of engagement policy in pursuing fundamental changes in the behavior of the regime and larger reforms in Burma. Second, the developments in Burma, which facilitated greater

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<sup>6</sup> Surin Pitsuwan. "Thailand's Non-paper on the Flexible Engagement Approach." 27 July 1996.

<sup>7</sup> Ramcharan, Robin. "ASEAN and Non-Interference: A Principle Maintained." *Contemporary Southeast Asia*. Vol. 22, No.1 April 2000. p. 79-80.

cooperation between the Burmese military regime and her two neighbors, China and India, diminished the influences of ASEAN in shaping changes in Burma.

### **1.5 Research Problems and Limitations**

Rather than transferring power to the winner of the multiparty elections in May 1990, the National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Aung San Suu Kyi, Burma's regime took steps to enter ASEAN to legitimize itself in the international arena. From then on, Burma's regime still appears to be as strong as ever with no hopes of a democratic transition. This thesis will not examine rational and dispassionate analysis of the emergence of ASEAN and its declarations and documents in detail. This thesis will seek to answer the following questions:

1. Why has ASEAN invited Burma to join the association?
2. Why has ASEAN adopted the pro-engagement policies to deal with Burma?
3. What are the aspects of political cooperation that ASEAN carries out with Burma?
4. How does the Burma's military regime respond to the association?
5. Why is the ASEAN's engagement policy not effective?
6. What is the alternative way for ASEAN to deal with Burma?

The thesis will not explore the effects of an ASEAN charter, in which human rights body would be included, will not be discussed in the thesis.

### **1.6 Chapter Breakdown**

#### **Chapter 2**

This chapter will present an examination of the failure of ASEAN's engagement policy in contributing to a democratic transition in Burma. There will have a particular attention why "ASEAN Way" was beneficial to the members, particularly Burma. In 1990s, ASEAN as a regional group was unable to avoid and was forced to respond to spillovers of a country's internal crises in the region. This chapter will explore ASEAN's involvement in the internal affairs of member countries with the two case studies of East Timor and Cambodia's conflicts.

### **Chapter 3**

This chapter will examine ASEAN's dilemmas of engaging Burma's regime; why has ASEAN invited Burma to join the association and why has ASEAN adopted pro-engagement policies to deal with Burma? In order to discuss these questions, this study will use the concept of constructive engagement, which aims to encourage liberalization to create democratic transition in Burma. ASEAN's actions of implementing policies for political and economic development in Burma are also explored.

### **Chapter 4**

This chapter will have an evaluation of the positive and negative aspects of the political cooperation between ASEAN and Burma. Furthermore, this chapter will point out details of the economic activities and investments of ASEAN's developed countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand in Burma. This chapter will also discuss the presence of rich natural resources and discovery of gas reserve, which attracted China and India to cooperate more with the regime and protected them from international pressures or persuasions. It is important to know ASEAN's economic activities and investments, especially Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand, in Burma to highlight the argument that the emphasis of business interests over political objectives has diluted the effectiveness of engagement policy in pursuing the military regime for larger reforms in Burma. In fact political conditions and internal developments within Burma have prevented ASEAN to achieve its objective. Thus, this chapter will attempt to find an alternative way for ASEAN in the context of regional cooperation.

### **Chapter 5**

It is obvious that Burma's withdrawal from the ASEAN chair leadership was the outcome of pressure works applied from within ASEAN. It raised the question of whether ASEAN has moved closer to flexible engagement as a working principle. Therefore, recent changes in ASEAN's policies toward Burma will be assessed in this paper. Particular attention will be given by the formation of the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Caucus on Myanmar (AIPMC) in Kuala Lumpur in November 2004 that played a significant role in pressuring ASEAN leaders to bar Burma from assuming

chairmanship of the association in 2006 and its formation in the region dramatically changed the dynamics of the association's approach to Burma. The last part of this chapter will include a study on Burma's response to ASEAN when its engagement policy dramatically shifted to address the unchanged situation in Burma.

### **Chapter 6**

This chapter will be the conclusion of the thesis and have a recommendation for ASEAN to consider multilateral approach under the UN charter in dealing with the situation in Burma.