

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A FRAMEWORK FOR EFFECTIVE REGIONAL POLICY

In evaluating ASEAN's constructive engagement policy on Burma, we find a conflict between the concept of engagement, which implies the need to influence a rogue state by integrating it into the international community, and non-interference, which involves a neutral stance on the irrational behaviors of a rogue state. ASEAN's constructive engagement policy includes the key words of "political reform, peace, prosperity and partnership."<sup>1</sup> ASEAN continues to adhere to a non-interference policy, allowing Burma's domestic problems, which have regional consequences, to remain unresolved.

In an interview with Termsak Chalermphanupap, a high official from ASEAN secretariat office, he said, "ASEAN's objective is not to try to change the political situation or political system of any of its member states. Rather, it is more to keep every member state in the ASEAN family, working together for common regional interest."<sup>2</sup> Inevitably, some questions will be raised in response to his statement. If what he says is so, why did ASEAN diplomatically involve itself in the Cambodia situation in the 1990s? Why did some of ASEAN's member countries, such as Thailand and the Philippines, cooperate with international peace keeping forces in East Timor? Why did ASEAN's founding members, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines, express their concern over Burma's internal affairs? In the recent AMM meeting in Manila, Foreign Secretary Alberto Romulo renewed ASEAN's plea for Burma to promote democracy in keeping with the spirit of ASEAN, "While we recognize that Myanmar needs time and political space to deal with its complex challenges, Myanmar has to accelerate its national reconciliation and democratization."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Quality of Partnership Myanmar, ASEAN and the World Community." Report of the Asian Dialogue Society Information and Resource Center, December 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Interview via Internet with Termsak Chalermphanupap from ASEAN secretariat office. By email reply, 20 August 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Cynthia Balan. "Burma ASEAN 'black sheep'." Inquirer 31 July 2007.

It was ASEAN's diplomatic involvement in the Cambodian situation that earned it the visible and positive international profile it enjoys today. ASEAN's efforts at multilateralism in the 1990s were executed again in relation to a new and altered security environment. Additionally, there was a clear attempt at replicating the apparent success of multilateral efforts in the broader Asia Pacific region.<sup>4</sup>

However, in the case of East Timor, ASEAN was reluctant to take any direct action in the matter despite calls for "regional intervention" within East Timor; the situation was eventually met with a UN peacekeeping force. The organization's significance is diminished by the fact that the only solutions have come from outside. The flaws of the ASEAN Way are aptly pointed out by the domestic crises in East Timor and Cambodia, making them ideal cases to base an approach on Burma domestic affairs on.

In the case of Burma, the country's domestic problems spill over into the region. There are more than 500,000 documented Burmese political and economic refugees in India, China, and Thailand. The number of undocumented Burmese refugees living in Thailand is estimated to be in the millions. Burma is the world's second largest producer of opium and heroin and a major supplier of amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS), the world's newest illicit drug. The HIV/AIDS pandemic in Burma is spreading into neighboring countries, facilitated by drug trafficking routes. ASEAN scholars warned: "...since she became an ASEAN member in 1997, Myanmar's domestic problems have become the region's problems and hence must be addressed as such."<sup>5</sup>

However, ASEAN members engagement in business over political objectives has diluted the effectiveness of engagement policy. According to the US 2006 Investment Climate Statement on Burma, Singapore is the top foreign investment country and the amount is (\$ 721, 572.73), Thailand is the third with (\$551, 341.22), Malaysia is the fourth with (\$ 33, 660.75), Indonesia is eighth with (\$12, 241.50) and Philippines is thirteenth with (\$2, 146.67).<sup>6</sup> Burmese economist Zaw Oo points out: "...incentive policies, due to the seclusion of quiet diplomacy and elitist business deals, have failed to

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Jonathan Green, "The Strategic Implications of the Burma Problem." Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Subcommittee on Asia Pacific Affairs, Washington DC. 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Report of the Asian Dialogue Society, 2003.

<sup>6</sup> "2006 Investment Climate Statement-Burma." U.S. Department of State 2006.

mobilize widespread political support."<sup>7</sup> Thailand based Irrawaddy Magazine editor Aung Zaw also argued "...the constructive engagement provides Burma with the alternative of forming a closer relationship with China."<sup>8</sup>

Burma's geo-strategic position in the region gives the military regime a chance to play with China, India and ASEAN. Burma's natural resources, especially oil and gas, are attracting her two giant neighbors in terms of economic interest. Furthermore, they protect the SPDC from the international criticism on its repressive human rights abuses and diminish the influence of ASEAN in inciting changes in Burma.

The attitude of the Burma's military regime to the outside world also prevents any success with engagement. The generals are not only resistant to internal political change but are also extremely suspicious of any attempts by other countries, no matter how well-intentioned, to alter the internal political situation in its disfavor. In fact, they do not trust anyone but themselves (and by extension the military) to be saviors of the national interest. There appears to be little incentive for the military to accommodate change and retaining domestic political power seems to be a far greater consideration than appeasing the international community.<sup>9</sup>

Recently, the SPDC has cracked down on peaceful protests around the country against high fuel prices by using militant forces, coolly ignoring international criticisms. However, Burmese historian Thant Myint-U argues "...it's important to understand that beneath the long-running political stalemate in Rangoon, Burma is actually changing fast; not necessarily in the right direction, but changing all the same. The problem is not that the situation will stand still: the problem is that things might get worse — much worse. Without a fresh international approach, it may soon be too late to avoid a catastrophe in Burma."<sup>10</sup>

In the region, ASEAN has demonstrated internal weaknesses in dealing with domestic political problems among member states. Whereas certain types of intervention in the domestic politics of a country may be regarded as unacceptable (in respect of sovereignty), the world has also progressed to the point where general life-threatening

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<sup>7</sup> Zaw Oo, 1999. p. 10.

<sup>8</sup> Aung Zaw, 2000. p. 50.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Jonathan Green, "The Strategic Implications of the Burma Problem." Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Subcommittee on Asia Pacific Affairs, Washington DC. 2006.

<sup>10</sup> Thant Myint-U. "Burma goes from bad to worse." Time 30 August 2007.

situations provide sufficient justification for multilateral humanitarian interventions. In 1990s, ASEAN and the United Nations worked very closely in the successful search for the settlement of the conflict in Cambodia and the building of peace in that country. ASEAN countries have cooperated with the United Nations in building the peace in East Timor.<sup>11</sup> ASEAN countries are active in supporting the United Nations Transitional Authority for East Timor, with a Filipino officer and, after him, a Thai general commanding UNTAET's military force, a Malaysian as the chief-of-staff of the UNTAET Administration Office, and a sizeable number of Filipinos and Thais among the UN peacekeepers deployed in East Timor.<sup>12</sup>

ASEAN's Secretary-General H.E. Mr. Rodolfo C. Severino points out: "whether in Cambodia or in East Timor, whether in the South China Sea or on nuclear weapons and disarmament, whether in the settlement of disputes or on general codes of international behavior, ASEAN has always placed itself within the framework of the United Nations and its Charter, invoking its practices and precedents, measuring itself against its norms."<sup>13</sup> In this extent, ASEAN should consider the Burmese people, who are now in desperate need of basic life-saving assistance under the brutal military regime. Like the situations in Cambodia and East Timor, humanitarian intervention of the UN type can be suitably applied to resolve the situation in Burma. Thus, ASEAN itself recognizes and prepares or is in the process of applying humanitarian intervention "based on basic core responsibility to protect others" towards effective regional policy.

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<sup>11</sup> H. E. Mr. Rodolfo C. Severino, Secretary-General of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, at the Fourth High-Level Meeting between the United Nations and Regional Organizations on Cooperation for Peace-Building. United Nations, New York, 6-7 February 2001.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.