

Chapter VI

Thailand's Constructive Engagement with Rangoon and its impacts upon the New Mon State Party and Myanmar's Mon displaced persons

The 1990s have witnessed a shift in Thailand's policy towards Myanmar from a Dual Tracks approach and Realist Non-Confrontation to Constructive Engagement with Rangoon.

The Looming Danger of Emerging Trans-State Problems as a Defining Feature of The New Regional System

After the end of the Cold War, confrontation between countries with different ideologies in this region decreased dramatically, as support from the superpowers dried up. However, when confrontation was replaced by economic competition, many countries, most of whom had achieved economic success, became concerned about natural resources and national economic interests and consequently began to build up and develop weapons. A number of reasons could be the cause

of conflict between countries of this region, such as overlapping maritime economic zones, unclear borders, the problem of minorities, etc. It should be noted that a conflict in one country could spill over the border into another country. These conflicts are more complicated than in the past and could escalate in a very short time. Among these, ethnic conflict seem to be a cause of many trans-state problems such as smuggling, arms sales, refugee influxes and so on.

Currently, there are nearly 100,000 Burmese refugees in Thai territory and their presence poses a danger to Thailand's security. Professor Muntabhorn noted in his comment on Burmese refugees that since 1994, the scenario has become more critical and complex for a variety of reasons.

- First, Slorc troops have been increasingly successful in their drive against minority forces and have gained a strategic upper hand.

- Second, the Slorc has enjoyed more economic benefits due to its overtures toward foreign investors.

- Third, Thailand's own passive attitude towards the Slorc, encapsulated by its "Constructive Engagement" policy, has given the Slorc plenty of room for manoeuvring against Burmese dissidents. The

Slorc has no doubt interpreted that policy as one of tacit acquiescence in response to its activities to suppress dissent. (The Nation)

In a study of Thailand's behavior toward the Mons, as encapsulated in the policy of Constructive Engagement with Rangoon, two kinds of motive were found : "because of" motives and "in order to" motives. For example, Thailand's relatively fixed image of Myanmar as a hostile country, her long experience as a recipient country for Burmese refugees and her security paranoia inherited from the Cold War era, should be viewed as "because of" motives underlying Thailand's formulation of security and foreign policies toward Rangoon.

As regards "in order to" motives or factors that contribute to Thailand's new strategic move in the promotion of her recently formulated policy of so called Constructive Engagement with Rangoon in the post-Cold-War era , three circumstances were found to act as the motivating factors behind Thailand's steps towards ending military alliance with the Mons. These circumstances include 1 a prospect that Thailand would benefit greatly from Myanmar's richness in natural resources and its extensive markets, especially at this time since Thailand may soon be facing a shortage of certain natural materials due to overconsumption and misuse of natural resources.

: A possibility that Thailand's role , not as a supporter of ethnic minorities in Myanmar , but as a mediator in solving the conflict between the Mons and the military regime in Rangoon will be of immense benefit to Thailand's long-term national interest and security.

: There is also the consideration that the improved and upgraded military weapons that Rangoon has gained through increased military cooperation with China will help Rangoon to win the long-standing war with the New Mon State Party, thus triggering more inflows of Mon refugee into Thailand.

It should be noted that during this decade Myanmar has improved its relations with China. This can be accounted for by an increase in bilateral trade. At the end of February 1995, trade value amounted to \$ 1.2 billion, or 60 per cent of the country's total exports and imports. China in its turn, constructed a port in Myanmar. This port was also of benefit to China as it wanted an outlet to the Indian Ocean for its growing economy. When Myanmar wanted assistance in

developing its economy and armed forces, China constructed a road from Mandalay to Yunnan and also provided military assistance.

In 1994 Thailand's military sources reported that Myanmar increased the manpower of its armed forces to 300,000 men and procured a large number of fighter aircraft, tanks, artillery and rocket launchers. It has also developed naval forces to operate along the Tenasserim coast and to protect gas and petroleum drilling platforms which are being constructed by foreign investors. A chance that with Chinese support Rangoon will triumph over all ethnic minorities that are not adequately united is no longer slim. (The Defence of Thailand 1994 (Ministry of Defense)

It has been estimated that Thailand would gain immense economic benefit from exploration and exploitation of Myanmar's natural resources, especially natural gas and oil, much of which remain in or need to be conveyed through the Mon-dominated area such as along the Tenasserim coast and in the Andaman Sea if and when a ceasefire between Rangoon and the New Mon State Party is achieved through Thailand's active role as mediator, it is hoped that this active role will be regarded by Rangoon as a token of Thailand's genuine willingness and efforts toward promoting of regional peace and security. (Committee for Publicity of People's Struggle in Monland Newsletter NO1 V.12)

In January 1994 , as evidence of Thailand's strategic shift in favor of Rangoon , 7400 Mon displaced persons were relocated ,under Thai military supervision from Loh Loe camp to Halockhani which is located at a distance of only 5 kilometers from SLORC's local army stationed at Three Pagodas Pass. Thailand's hopes have been realized with the Thai Government signing a memorandum of understanding with the Burmese SLORC regime, confirming her purchase of natural gas from the Yadana gasfield in Myanmar's Gulf of Martaban , currently being developed by Total Co of France and Unocal Corp. of the US who gained the concession in 1992.

Increasing Significance of Environmental Issues as a Factor in
Determining Thailand's Behavior
towards Myanmar's Ethnic Minorities ,
Including the New Mon State Party.

As the Western world was embarking upon an era of economic recession during the 80s ,Thailand continued to enjoy successive years of rocketing economic growth , stimulated partly by heavy inflows of foreign capital and technology. A number of indicators however, then showed that Thailand's economic growth had been

achieved at the expense of natural resources and environmental integrity. In coping with this alarming environmental crisis, Thai leaders have been forced to seek new sources of raw material in other countries to fuel and prolong Thailand's economic prosperity. Subsequently Myanmar was placed high on the list of countries rich in all kinds of raw material that the Thai manufacturing sector needed.

The official view of the Mon that prevailed in the early 80s began to alter gradually when Thailand came to perceive a growing necessity of relying on cheap raw materials, notably logs and natural gas from neighbouring countries, mostly from Myanmar upon which Thailand's export-oriented industrial expansion was dependant.

The situation culminated in the year 1989, a critical time, when hundreds were killed by massive logs freed in torrential floods after heavy rainfall. The logs were reportedly illegally cut. As a result, the Thai Government declared a closing down of all disputed forest areas with a view to calming down public panic over runaway deforestation amidst the scandal of presumed corruption among local officials. Of course the closing down of timber producing areas would usually result in widespread log shortages, which, over a long period, will naturally lead to soaring prices in all types of wood products. Among other parties

that suffered the economic consequences of the official nationwide ban on logging, the Forest Industry Organization faced accumulated losses of Bt 200 million since the ban slashed 50 to 60 percent of the FIO's income from its logging operation. The solution to this crisis of log shortage was to be found in Myanmar and Laos where logs and other kinds of natural resources are abundant. Not surprisingly, the Thai Government came to review and adjust its foreign strategies in line with the domestic reality by seeking ways and means to gain logs from Myanmar so that domestic market demands for timbers and logs could be satisfied. Businessmen involved in the logging sector were said to have lobbied the cabinet in support of their business interests. In such a climate, taking an initiative towards strengthening ties with Rangoon, in the hope that more concessions on logging could be gained to feed domestic supply was reasonable.

In addition, it should be noted that when the crisis of log shortage occurred, it coincided with a change in the regional political economic terrain characterized by Thailand's move to bring all its neighbouring countries closer in an attempt to create a friendly atmosphere under the strategic plan initiated under Chatchai Premiership transforming battlefields into market places. In subsequent years

China's strategic moves to the south, the location of the world's most important sea lanes , and its reshaping of economic attention to focus on the countries sharing borders with its southern regions, with a view to forming what has since become known as the Golden Rectangle , were necessary steps towards creating a regional economic free zone and should be considered as a precondition for the formulation of Thailand's policy of Constructive Engagement with Rangoon . In this scenario, Myanmar was recognized by both Thailand and China to be the key player without whom the Golden Rectangle Plan would never be realized. These realities have induced most Thai policy-makers to rethink their long-term goals and reassess their foreign behavior and attitudes towards Myanmar and to redefine Thai national interest within the wider global context.

On the security front, Thailand's economic prosperity throughout the last two decades is considered to be a significant factor in promoting the influx of Myanmar's Mons as cheap labor. In recent times the number of these Mon economic immigrants has risen to the extent that it poses serious threat to the Kingdom's security. Thailand's fear that illegal alien immigrants would dominate the labor market and that some of these might engage in espionage activities has aggravated

the situation. Thailand's public attitude toward Myanmar's Mons has been affected by such fear. Growing Rangoon-imposed pressure upon their financial sources in the Mon State have weakened the New Mon State Party's financial position. Moreover, the working of the trans-state ethnic Mon Nationalist Movement during this period, undoubtedly suffered mounting difficulties due to the adverse effects, from a Mon point of view, of Thailand's new international political move, with constructive engagement of Rangoon its central theme.

Even so, taken together with the nature of her porous long border with Myanmar, Thailand's lax immigration control system and mild or, more truly, lenient foreign policy towards Myanmar's ethnic groups contributed significantly to the sustainability of the dynamic trans-states organizational network of various ethnic groups. The head quarters of this ethnic organizational network are designed to function as a mobile-cross-border military base whose members occupy dynamic social categories, from refugees to nationalism-conscious warriors.

Turning to the issue of factors determining their economic life, it should be noted that these trans-state ethnic organizational networks could sustain themselves over a long period by mobilizing all

necessary kinds of resources available within the environment they dominate ; setting toll points on significant trade routes and providing guard services for foreign businessmen in areas where, presumably illegal economic activities operate.

This situation began to change markedly from 1995 onwards when a new Rangoon-led military move was made so as to eradicate the ethnic Mon nationalist root by mobilizing thousands of Rangoon soldiers into the area to intensify what the Western academics term as part of the Burmanization programme.

The collapse of the largest headquarters of the New Mon State Party , at Sangklaburi in early 1995 , following the sudden fierce attacks launched by Rangoon armed forces , was attributable to Rangoon 's increased efforts to force the Mon leaders to begin a ceasefire. To some , this incident implies Thailand's collusion with the Rangoon military. To others, Rangoon is responsible for the downfall of the Mon military base of Sangkaburi. However , it is believed that despite disbanding their most significant base, thousands of Mon-hardliners have secreted themselves in several spots across the vast ragged mountainous Thai-Burmese border area, working on their projects. In the

meantime, Thai high-ranking military officers are said to have tried to persuade the Mon leaders to begin peace talks with Rangoon. One obstacle that hindered both sides from making progress during several meetings was their different view on economic interests to be shared. As some critics noted that in June 1995 leaders of Myanmar's ethnic Mon guerrillas left the Thai border for a final meeting with the ruling Burmese junta to sign a bilateral ceasefire agreement.

A high-level 26-member delegation from the New Mon State Party (NMSP), led by deputy chairman Nai Thin, flew in on two Burmese helicopters from Three Pagoda pass, opposite Thailand's Kanchanaburi province, to Burma's Mon state capital of Moulmein.

Four previous rounds of peace talks with the Burmese State Law and Order Restoration Council (Slorc) have taken place in the state capital. Previous talks ended in a deadlock as Slorc rejected a Mon proposal which clearly defined the territory the ethnic group and its armed force wanted to operate in.

Both sides agreed, in the last meeting, not to establish any physical boundary between the areas controlled by each group and that civilians and villagers could travel freely without hindrance from the two

areas. Slorc promised to end forced labor of local villagers. It was not known if both sides had reached any agreement on the future of about 11,000 Mon refugees uprooted from their homes by the decades long fighting in southern Myanmar , or on the continuation of cross-border assistance to the fugitives, who subsist mainly on food and medical supplies provided by private relief agencies operating in Thailand.

Over the last three years , Swejin , the Supreme Leader of the New Mons State Party has been inveigled by his party fellows into holding truce talks with Rangoon as a way to prevent the collapse of the Mon nationhood when Rangoon has threatened to intensify its pressure upon Mon civilians residing in the Mon State. It should be noted that in 1994, Rangoon with its plan to modernize its army turned to its new military strategy by prolonging its military occupation with an aim to starving the Mon warriors in the area.

It should also be noted that what forced the Mon leadership to negotiate peace with Rangoon was the increasing destructive military potential of the Burmese armed forces. At the beginning of this decade, Rangoon took steps towards strengthening its ties with Peking with the aim of gaining military support from China. This move on Rangoon's

part has successfully resulted in successive influxes of Chinese modern armament with which the Rangoon military has continued its suppression of its own ethnic people. Successive victories by the Central Government armed forces over ethnic minorities, attributed partly to these new weapons imported from China ,at a very low price , have demoralized the Mon leadership.

Conscious of its relatively weak military position , Swe Gyin himself came to terms with this reality by avoiding unnecessary losses and damages created by its own inferior military weapons. With growing difficulties in gaining external support , he has presently had to modify , if not change , his party strategy so as to survive these vicissitudes.

A source reported that on February 4, 1996 New Year's day in their calendar, during earlier negotiation with Rangoon ,the Mons could only host one party at their headquarters on the Thai-Burmese border at Three Pagodas Pass across from Kanchanaburi. The New Mon State Party under president Swe Gyin hosted the biggest celebration at Khani village in Ye town in Moulmein province in Southern Myanmar , five-hours drive through mountainous terrain and one day's walk from

Three Pagoda Pass. It was attended by representatives from the State Law and Order Restoration Council, ethnic Karens and other minorities.

In his New Year message, Mr. Swe Gyin said that the Mons must never forget their ultimate aim of freedom and democracy, while working to keep up with other countries in strengthening national stability and economic development. In a written message to all ; he promised that everything would improve, including personal safety and livelihoods, now they no longer had to fight the SLORC. Unlike other ethnic groups which negotiated with the SLORC, the Mons did not have to lay down their weapons. Despite this concession on arms, Mr.Hong Sa , one of the leaders of NMSP , said that of the 17 point-agreement made with Rangoon, only a few clauses had been respected.

(Bangkok Post (13 Febuary 1996))

The SLORC insists on maintaining control over petroleum exploration and exploitation and gold mining in Mon-controlled areas. As regards other businesses, such as fisheries, land transport, logging, import and export, the Mons can either form joint ventures with the SLORC or pay taxes.

Most of the fishing grounds in the Andaman Sea in southern Burma, as well as land routes between Thailand and Burma, are controlled by the Mons. The New Mon State Party has also formed a joint venture with a company based in Moulmein, Ramanya International Ltd, to carry goods between the two neighbouring countries. The SLORC however, maintains that the Mon's logging exports must pass through its hands.

In retrospect, during the Cold-War period, Rangoon did attempt to terminate all Mon-dominated sources of income but failed to do so due to a limited military capability to prolong its occupation of much of the Mon-dominated area. Survival of the dynamic trans-state Mon organizational network that operated at the time was made possible through their talent and ability to establish an alliance with the Thai Army. Thanks to this alliance, the New Mon State Party was able to sustain itself by doing business with Thai businessmen mainly by selling logs cut in the Mon-controlled area. In the early part of the last decade, the political environment of Thailand's neighbouring countries became increasingly stable due to increased efforts by their leaders towards optimizing the political climate. Rangoon, for example, has promoted its national political stability by holding truce talks with ethnic minority

leaders , all the while suppressing them out of their wits when the opportunity arises.

In the late 80s , the Burmese Government rushed to open its doors wider to outside world; courting foreign capital and technology mostly from China , Singapore , Indonesia and also from Western multinational corporations , to reinforce its economic power base. Thailand's foreign and security outlook toward Myanmar at the time needed to be heavily adjusted in response to such changes in the regional political and economic climate.

What should be noted is that in the post-Cold War context, in particular, when acute ideological competition for legitimacy between the two blocs ; socialism and democratic capitalism ; came to an end, the existence of the trans-state ethnic Mon Nationalist Movement was thus no longer beneficial but instead burdensome to Thailand especially at those times when Rangoon officials threatened to close its border checkpoints with Thailand for supporting or providing asylum to all those Rangoon considers subversive.

It should be remarked that throughout this decade while Rangoon has been criticizing Thailand for aiding Mon refugee-warriors , Thailand has been suspected by the West of turning a blind eye towards the tragic incident in which Mon refugee camps at Sangkhaburi were attacked by Burmese armed forces in 1995. This tragedy not only led to a dismal weakening of the New Mon State Party's largest military base but also exerted psychological shock among Thailand's Mons. After the collapse of the Mon military base at Sangkhaburi , Rangoon began its armed offensive against other ethnic groups to the north. Consequently several other ethnic groups such as the Shans, and the Karens were widely purged by the Rangoon armed forces.

In its attempt to retaliate against Thailand , Myanmar has suspended its concession on logging that was signed with Thailand's private sector and has accused Thailand of harbouring its minorities, with particular reference to drug kingpin Khun Sa and his MTA troops. Several disputes along common border area prompted Burmese authorities to suspend construction of the Thai-Myanmar bridge , after they accused Thailand of changing the banks of the river. But such accusations have lost ground considerably since the opium warlord

surrendered to the Burmese Government in a widely publicised and well-staged incident in January 1996. (The Nation (16 January 1996)

Thailand's alleged insincerity in solving the problems of Mon Nationalist Movement activities on Thai soil has long been used by Rangoon as an excuse for putting an end to Thai businessmen-run logging operations in the area. In response to Myanmar's hypocrisy as well as to the new political economic environment, the Thai Government came to reorient its traditional position, from one of keeping close relations with Myanmar's ethnic minority groups, to one promoting Constructive Engagement with Rangoon itself whilst at the same time motivating the ethnic minority groups to enter into dialogue with Rangoon on ceasefire whereby political stability can be created in Myanmar. Conscious of disputes with Myanmar over myriad issues from fishing rights to unclear borders, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand has channelled its effort into the direction of promoting all types of constructive engagement with Rangoon in the hope that border security and various kinds of business interests in Myanmar's various economic sectors could be ensured. As a result, Prime Minister Banharn Silpa-Acha visited Myanmar in March of 1996 with the aim of returning

relations between the two countries to a point which both consider normal.

In addition to those factors , Thailand's long standing desire for the contracted purchase of Myanmar's natural gas for more than 30 years to feed its gigantic electricity-generating plant scheduled to be constructed in Ratchaburi Province should be considered as the most significant accelerating factor behind Thailand's attempts at motivating the leaders of Myanmar's ethnic minorities into holding ceasefire talks and eventually establishing peace agreements with Rangoon.(Committee for Publicity of People's Struggle in Monland Newsletter NO1 V.12)

To sum up , Thailand's response towards the inflow of Mon individuals seeking asylum in Thailand up to the beginning of this decade, can be regarded as generous , but from the year 1993 onwards its long-held accommodating stance towards the Mons has been in decline , the hoped for benefits of constructive engagement with Rangoon outweighing those of maintaining alliance with ethnic minorities. With its ultimate goal being to maintain border security , Thailand's present behavior towards the Mons have been affected by a growing prospect that greater economic benefits can be derived in areas suchas , exploitation of natural gas , mineral , log , border trade and other joint venture with

other countries on Burmese , with the approval of and support of the Rangoon Government rather than those benefits which might accrue from maintaining an alliance with the New Mon State Party.(Siam Post (Page 15) (March 13, 1994)

Thailand does not and will never attempt to achieve one goal at the sacrifice of all others, but instead engage in some ways designed to attain various combinations of desired results. Its dream of becoming the regional financial center and its fear of losing opportunities in natural resource-rich neighboring countries have merged to propel its successive cabinets to create a friendly atmosphere through its renowned diplomatic skill especially when Rangoon began to open up its economy to the capitalist world as early as 1988.

For Thailand, the last decade of this century can be characterized as a period of economic struggle for maintaining status quo within the new and fiercely competitive environment of Southeast Asia. As the statistics suggest Singapore, China and Malaysia are gaining the upperhand over Thailand in their foreign agenda towards Myanmar. Thailand , as one might expect, will have to try harder to regain a favourable image amongst people of the new generation in neighbouring countries, whose historical memories are largely fed with images of

Thailand as Imperialist and the culturally superior Bangkokian. These images need to be altered at a faster pace , not through a passage of time but, more wisely, through strengthening ties with this new generation the popular or grass roots level rather than through high sounding diplomatic overtures. (Siam Post (Page 15) (March 13, 1994)

As Thailand and its allies within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), as the most efficient trans - national mechanism existing in the region are moving towards the 21 st century, and a harmonization of the basic goals of foreign policies and practices towards Myanmar among ASEAN member States, need to be first achieved to show a sign of their genuine sincerity towards the Burmese people and a willingness to promote permanent peace by avoiding all forms of exploitation of Myanmar's richness in natural resources since that might help reinforce Rangoon's suppression of its own people. As some critics argue, Constructive Engagement is meant to bring about change but now many see Constructive Engagement as an endorsement of the status quo

The release of Aung San Sue Kyi , the most beloved pro-democratic political opposition leader among liberal Burmans in the year 1995 , not only symbolized a historical watershed in late 90s Burmese politics but also gave a cue to Thai policy-makers to design a more practical long-term foreign policy goal and to develop a strategy for dealing with Myanmar's political unpredictability in the years to come.



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