

CHAPTER II

GENERAL PERSPECTIVES ON CONFLICTS AND CONFRONTATIONS

In the past, conflicts and confrontations have often characterized relations between Thailand and Myanmar, and it is interesting to note that, immediately after the Thaksin Shinawatra government took office, there were tensions along the Thai-Myanmar border. Despite the new government's publicly announced intent to improve bilateral ties, confrontations took place between the RTA and the Myanmar in February 2001. These, and the ones that followed in the next year, were consequences of unresolved problems, which were not new but for long deep-rooted in the relationship. In the past military clashes along the border had largely involved fighting between Myanmar government forces and ethnic minority groups. Therefore, one could say that these confrontations, involving national armies, also meant conflicts between the two neighbors had reached new heights. For these reasons, a study of the relationships between Thailand and Myanmar should begin with the conflict and confrontation aspect.

The military crisis in 2001 began during the transitional period of authority from the Chuan Leekpai government (1997-2001) to the Thai Rak Thai party-led government under Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. The new government was about to change the foreign policy towards neighboring countries, from the previous government's "Flexible Engagement" policy to "Forward Engagement", which was intended to bring about a new chapter of relations with Myanmar.* But before progress could be made in the implementation of the new approach, first the problem of border confrontations needed to be resolved before they could start to open the new chapter of the policy. Therefore, it is important first to have some general perspectives concerning the factors behind to the conflicts and confrontations, which erupted.

* "Flexible Engagement" policy was proposed to the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM) in July 1998 by the then Thai foreign minister, Surit Pitsuwan. According to the proposal, the Thai foreign minister wanted to replace the traditional non-interference policy of ASEAN with a new engagement approach, particularly concerning Myanmar. The Thai foreign minister urged ASEAN to be more open with each other and to have frank discussions on domestic issues, which have implications for other members and the group's destiny. On the other hand, Prime Minister Thaksin and Foreign Minister Surakiat Sathirathai initiated a new foreign policy direction; called "Forward Engagement", which emphasized normalization and non-interference to other domestic affairs.

Earlier in February 2001, the Myanmar Army had launched its seasonal attack on Shan rebels. During their operations, Myanmar soldiers trespassed into Thai territory after opening clashes with the Shan State Army opposite Ban Pang Noon in Mae Fah Luang district.¹ Later, they captured a Thai base, about 500m inside the border, and were preparing to use heavy weapons to attack the minority insurgents from the camp.² Then, a series of clashes opened up again. The Thai 963rd border patrol unit launched an attack on the intruding Myanmar troops to recapture the base in Ban Pang Noon after the latter refused to move out of the base despite promises made at a joint regional border committee meeting.³ The retaliation was given green light from high military officers from Thailand. At the same time, a confrontation occurred in Ku Tan Na Young hill area, which was yet clearly demarcated. This was the first time in a decade that Thai and Myanmar forces had direct confrontations.

Tension escalated. The two sides confronted each other with accusations. The Thai side linked the Myanmar military's actions with the UWSA's drug activities in Shan States. Lt-Gen Wattanachai Chaimuanwong, the Third Army Region commander, noted, "Myanmar is using the United Wa State Army to wage a proxy war with Thailand and all of the Myanmar officers along the border are getting kickbacks from drug traffickers".⁴ Ban Pang Noon is in the middle of USWA trade route, which obstructed drug activities in the area.⁵ Against this, Myanmar ran publications accusing Thailand of being the Shan State insurgency's supporter. As Maung Aung Myoe has said, "During the fighting the Shan United Revolutionary Army (SURA), or the Shan State Army (SSA), troops fled into Thai territory, specifically the area controlled by the Third Army, for protection." Myanmar official justified the capture of the Thai base as an offensive against narco-insurgent led by Yut Sik (Yod Serk).

¹ The Bangkok Post (11 February 2001).

² Ibid.

³ Press release, The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand (11 February 2001).

⁴ The Bangkok Post (13 February 2001).

⁵ Ibid.

In spite of the fact that the Thaksin government came up with a new policy highlighting good relations with Myanmar, bilateral relations remained tense for months after the incidents, causing concerns among the Thai people, who wondered whether the confrontation would lead to war. Internal conditions in Thailand supported such a possibility. After a week of incidents, feelings ran high due to the reinforcement of both armies on the border. In addition, both the Royal Thai Navy and the Royal Thai Air Force were also ready to support the border operations.⁶ The Thai military also made gained support at home. Broadcasts concerning the incident by many news agencies accelerated the sense of Thai nationalism. When a film called *Bangrachan*, portraying heroic deeds by Thai villagers against Burmese invaders in the 18th century, were shown in theaters, many people offered flowers to soldiers and posed for pictures with tanks.⁷

After February 2001 conflicts and confrontations remained the prominent characteristic of Thai-Myanmar relations. The Thaksin government tried to bring about better ties, using diverse mechanisms to achieve the objective, and in some ways managed to do so. But confrontations flared up again in May 2002. Thai infantry units and armored vehicles, supported by artillery, launched an offensive destroying positions manned by the United Wa State Army (UWSA) along the Thai-Myanmar border.⁸ Simultaneous operations were launched by the forces of Yawd Serk's Shan State Army, which attacked not only Myanmar's military outposts but also four other positions manned by the Wa.⁹ Amid the fighting between the UWSA and the SSA, the Myanmar government also lodged a protest with the Thai ambassador in Rangoon over the shelling of its territory, claiming that the Thai military's operations were in support of the SSA fighting against the Myanmar government.¹⁰ Inevitably, the skirmishes resulted in a war

⁶ The Thai Post (13 February 2001).

⁷ Aung Saw, "Pushing the envelope," *The Irrawaddy [Online]*. 2001. Available from: <http://www.irrawaddy.org/aviewer.asp?a=2159&z=102>

⁸ The Nation (21 May 2002).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ The Nation (22 May 2003).

of words against Thailand. Referring to Thailand as “Yodhaya” (called Ayutthaya by the Thais), which was sacked by the Burmese army in 1767, the Myanmar press published denunciations of Thailand's “bend with the wind” foreign policy. Accusations that the Thai leadership was telling “bare-faced lies” about its relationships with insurgent groups were run in the government-controlled New Light of Myanmar newspaper.¹¹

Conflicts and confrontations peaked in early 2001 and mid 2002. However, by 2004, they were abated by many foreign policy mechanisms, and bilateral relations were normalized and closer. The Thai government used all kinds of means to prevent the conflicts from escalating once more by adopting both bilateral and regional cooperation along with domestic means, which will be analyzed below.

Neither border conflicts nor other problems such as refugees and drug trafficking were recent problems. They have been deep-rooted for a long time, impacting upon bilateral relations little by little over the years. Border conflicts in fact reflected the dynamics of many of these problems.

One problem was influx of “refugees”. There were two categories. One consisted of those displaced by the Myanmar government’s political prosecution and military operations. According to the Human Right Watch Organization, the most recently estimated number of such displaced persons is approximately 146,000, with 142,000 sheltering in nine border camps and 4,000 urban refugees and asylum seekers in Bangkok and other urban centers.¹² The urban refugee population consists principally of ethnic Karen, who do not feel safe at the border, as well as Myanmar political dissidents and students who fled the Myanmar government’s violent crackdowns on pro-democracy demonstrators in 1988 and subsequently.¹³ The second category of “refugees” consists of

¹¹ The Nation (1 June 2001).

¹² “Out of sight, out of mind: Thai policy toward Myanmar refugees and migrants.” Human Rights Watch Organization [Online]. 2004, Available from: <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2004/thailand0204/index.htm>

¹³ Ibid.

millions of Myanmar illegal migrants, living and working in Thailand. Approximately 550,000 of these illegal workers registered with the Thai authorities during the registration of illegal workers in July 2004.¹⁴

The dynamics of the “refugee” problem raised concerns related to health care, basic rights, education opportunities, crimes, etc. Illegal workers, of whom 80 per cent are from Myanmar, are considered high risk as possible carriers of communicable diseases such as tuberculosis, leprosy, malaria and elephantiasis.¹⁵ Of the 567 workers in Ranong surveyed by the Public Health Ministry in 2002, 89.5 per cent carried hepatitis A, 67.1 per cent hepatitis B, 5.8 per cent hepatitis C, 2.9 per cent hepatitis D and 18.6 per cent hepatitis E.¹⁶ Not only are there concerns for these illegal workers as possible carriers of fatal diseases, but there are also problems about accessibility to the health care system. Such accessibility can be considered a basic right of these people. But while their legal status is still restricted, there is danger of maltreatment and human right violation. These risks are factors in HIV/AIDS infection also. Moreover, refugees as well as illegal migrants who give birth in Thailand are not allowed to have their citizenship rights.

The confrontations in 2001 and 2002 were also a consequence of continuing failure to demarcate the border. Thailand shares more than 2,400 kilometers of border with Myanmar, of which only about 50 has been demarcated.¹⁷ The clashes that occurred in 2001 and again in 2002 were mostly situated in the area of Doi Lang. About 32 square km in size, Doi Lang has been a source of problem between Thailand and Myanmar since 1996. Disputes over the area became an issue in 1996 when Khun Sa’s MTA, who used to control the territory, surrendered to the Myanmar government. According to a Myanmar source, “When Khun Sa surrendered, the Tatmadaw (Myanmar Army) retook the area and established military outposts. At the same time in 1996, the Thai military

¹⁴ The Nation (24 July 2004).

¹⁵ The Nation (14 March 2002).

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ The Bangkok Post (23 February 2001).

maintained seven military outposts, manned by about 550 troops, in the area. Some outposts were almost five miles inside Myanmar territory."¹⁸ The dispute arose from the use of different maps by the two countries.* The Myanmar side used the map attached to the Anglo-Siam treaty, signed on October 27, 1894, to back its claims to Doi Lang.¹⁹ On the other hand, Thailand referred to a 1980 map to show that the mountain belonged to the Kingdom.²⁰ The problem of undemarcated borderline is not new. It has been long rooted in Thai-Myanmar relations particularly after 1988. At the end of 1980s, the Tatmadaw tried very hard to sign cease-fire agreements with ethnic minorities' armed troops who had been fighting with the government since 1948. The civil war in Myanmar caused a deterioration of political, economic, and social situations in the country pressuring the government to adopt a free market economy. Following the end of cold war and the beginning of an open door policy by Myanmar, almost all of the buffers, controlled by ethnic minority groups, have gradually disappeared. This brought the two neighboring countries into direct contact in the border areas for the first time since Myanmar's independence and at the same time raised the question of boundary demarcation.

Unsuccessful border demarcation maintained opportunities, not only for migrant mobility, but also for the spread of drug activities along the border. Drug trafficking across the border had become a major concern for Bangkok during the previous decade. Thailand has had to face the spread of metamphetamines, or Yaba, from Golden Triangle Area, which affected the relations between Thailand and Myanmar. The Thai government could not effectively stop the flows of drugs across the border unless the boundary is

¹⁸ Maung Aung Myoe, Neither friend nor foe: Myanmar's relations with Thailand since 1988 a view from Yangon, pp. 119-122.

* The problem with the use of different maps and territorial agreement led to many disputes as the example of the three islands at the Adaman Sea. The three islands are Koh Lam (or known in Myanmar Ginga Island), Koh Kham Island and Koh Ki Nok. These three islands have been unclearly demarcated as we can see from the British maps indicating the three islands are Myanmar's and the Thai-American Joint Mapping Operation providing three islands to Thailand. (Maung Aung Myoe 2001: 96-123).

¹⁹ The Nation (8 March 2002).

²⁰ Ibid.

demarcated and there is cooperation is on the Myanmar side. The drug situation in Thailand has worsened as the average age of drug users went down. In other words, Thai teenagers have become the main drug abusers. Within a few years, Thailand changed from being a transit country for drug trafficking, such as heroin, to consumer countries elsewhere, to being a major consumer itself. According to figures on drug abusers, 43,191 people went to rehabilitation centers in 2000. Among them, there are 34,154 in the 15-24 age range, and 49.99 percent of patients had used Yaba before admitting to the center.²¹ Thai national security has been affected by this deterioration of the country's human resources.

The apparent impact of border confrontations both in 2001 and 2002 was the closing of the border.* Border checkpoints are the main gateways of trade between Thailand and Myanmar generating billions of baht annually. The closing of the border became the means used by both governments to put pressure on and retaliate against each other. Inevitably, the ordinary people along the border suffered, especially since the Myanmar side sustained the closure. After the confrontations in 2001, the Myanmar government closed the Thai-Myanmar Friendship Bridge, connecting Tachilek and Mai Sai, for four months.²² Again, in May 2002, the Myanmar authorities closed all the border checkpoints, after the Thai military retaliated with smokes shells and then live rounds, firing in response to shelling from the Myanmar side. The Thai military was again

²¹ Statistic Page, The office of the narcotics control board. Available from: <http://www.oncb.go.th/c2-statistic.htm>

* In 1992, the entire border checkpoint had been closed for the first time by the Myanmar government at Mae So-Myawaddy checkpoint. The Myanmar government had closed the checkpoint because of dissatisfaction in the Thai army who did not allow the Myanmar troops to cross the Thai border while fighting against the Karen minority at Myawaddy district. After that, the Mae Sot-Myawaddy checkpoint was closed in 1995 due to the fight between the Buddhist Karen supported by the Junta and the Christian Karen near the checkpoint in Manaplaw and the military government and Mong Tai Army or MTA led by Khan Sa caused people to evacuate to Thai soil resulting in the accusation by Myanmar government saying that Thailand has supported the minority to fight against the government. Later, on 11 August 1995, the Ranong- Kawthaung checkpoint was closed because of the murdered Myanmar sailor case. However, borders were not closed as a sign of worsening relations until the end of 1999. After the Vigorous Myanmar Student Warriors had set siege to the Myanmar embassy in October 1999, the Myanmar government closed the entire border in order to oppose Thai policy towards ethnic minorities.

²² "Business Brief," Thai Farmer Bank Research Center (4 September 2001).

accused by Myanmar of having given help to the SSA to launch its series of attacks on a Myanmar military outpost. According to *Irrawaddy*, when the Shan State Army-South reportedly killed 30 Myanmar troops and seized metamphetamine tablets from bases opposite Thailand's Mae Sai district, the junta accused the Thai military of planning and assisting the offensive before both countries exchanged artillery fire, and bilateral relations went into a tailspin.²³ However, strained relations were eased by official visits of both sides.

The closing of borders has long been related the Myanmar government's effort to control natural resource concessions, which also became a problem in Thai-Myanmar relations. Fishery concession is one instance. Due to the depletion of Thai marine resources, Thai fishing trawlers inevitably tried to fish in neighboring waters, especially Myanmar's. But troubles often broke out. According to Kavi Chongkittavorn, "Myanmar issues two kinds of licenses, one from the government and the other from the province involved. Fishing trawlers continue to buy concessional tickets from the local governments, which can be bought and withdrawn at will by the Myanmar authorities when an incident irks the Myanmar junta."²⁴ Because of that, Myanmar terminated the Thai-Myanmar fishing accord from 1999 onwards, after Thai fishing companies had ignored the terms of their license.²⁵ Incidents that led to the closure of the Myanmar seas included the brutal killing of Myanmar deckhands by their Thai captain and the seizure of the Myanmar Embassy in Bangkok in 1999.²⁶ Moreover, the rich natural resources of Myanmar such as timber logging have also attracted the interest of the Thai side. SLORC started giving logging concessions for Thailand from 1988. The right to control the border areas, where there was plenty of national resources, particularly timber, became an

²³ "Year in review," The Irrawaddy [Online]. 2002. Available from: <http://www.irrawaddy.org/aviewer.asp?a=2804&z=104>

²⁴ Kavi Chongitavorn, "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.

²⁵ The Nation (9 February 2002).

²⁶ Ibid.

issue in Thai-Myanmar relations from the late 1980s. After Myanmar opened the country with its economic-oriented, free market policy, the Myanmar government tried to control the border areas through suppression of or peaceful agreement with ethnic minorities. It meant that Myanmar could offer lucrative concessions, once the preserve of ethnic groups along the border, to the Thai private sector. This in turn gave Myanmar greater bargaining power to play with Thailand whenever problems occurred. The military regime could also close its borders, harming border trade, and sending a strong message to Bangkok via trade lobbies and clients of Thai politicians involved in this trade. Furthermore, there is also cross border illegal logging which caused problems between the two countries. Illegal logging inside Myanmar became a sensitive issue from Myanmar's perspective. It was alleged that illegal logging, which had not been certified by the Myanmar authority, came from KNU controlled areas. Thailand has been accused of being the KNU's financial supporter by continuing to buy timber from the KNU. Rich natural resources such as gems, natural gas and jade are waiting for investments, raising concerns with issues of conflicts of interest and exploitative manners of Thai businessmen.

In conclusion, all the issues mentioned are deep-rooted problems in the relationships between Thailand and Myanmar. Some problems, such as refugees and natural exploitation in Myanmar, did not directly cause the escalation of conflicts to the highest level, as described before. But they can be considered the fundamental factors, which provided conditions for conflicts and such an escalation of conflicts. If we are trying to understand conflicts and confrontations during the Thaksin's government, these problems should not be overlooked.