

Thailand's Relations with Malaysia and Myanmar in Post-Cold War Southeast Asia*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Thai policy towards Malaysia and Myanmar in the post-Cold War period and argues that bilateral relations between Thailand and these countries have deteriorated considerably. The immediate reason for the change is the collapse of structural arrangements associated with the Cold War, in particular the Indochina Security Complex and domestic political developments in Thailand and Myanmar. Whereas a number of issues like illegal migration, fishing and insurgency have contributed to the deteriorated relations, the situation has been reasonably well managed. Factors contributing to the stability of the situation include regular bilateral dialogue and exchanges as well as common membership in a number of multilateral fora like ASEAN, ARF, AFTA and APEC.

International relations theorists have long speculated on the nature of the decompression effect associated with the end of the Cold War.¹ Bipolarity in international relations previously provided the architecture for framing foreign policy output within the framework of regional substructures. However, the dissipation of bipolarity and the attendant collapse of regional substructures have reordered regional dynamics. The introversion of policy output to meet regional demands provides opportunities for both cooperation and conflict.²

The example of Thailand's foreign policy in the last decade towards Malaysia and Myanmar illustrates how latent tensions with geographically proximate states can surface to the fore in the face of changed structural circumstances. From 1989,

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¹ For a summary of the different structural possibilities see James M. Goldgeier and Michael McFaul, 'A tale of two worlds: core and periphery in the post-Cold War era', *International Organization*, 46 (2, Spring 1992): 467–91.

² On how structures impact on policy choices, see Arthur Stein, 'Coordination and collaboration: regimes in an anarchic world', *International Organization* 36 (Spring 1982): 294–324.

following the collapse of the Indochina Security Complex (to be discussed later), Thailand's bilateral relations with Malaysia and Myanmar have been considerably strained. Whereas it is arguable that many of the bilateral issues identified may have their origins in the Cold War, it is equally clear that the tensions deriving from them have become significantly exaggerated. This article seeks to identify the issues that have led to Thailand's strained relations with its immediate neighbours and appraise the current status of these issues. Specifically, five common issues in both sets of bilateral relations will be examined – cross-border intrusions and insurgency, illegal fishing, illegal immigrants and refugees, overlapping territorial claims, and perceptual problems.

Organizationally, the article is divided into five sections. The first section examines Southeast Asian political history and the convergence of developments in the late 1980s that led to the dismantling of the Indochina Security Complex. The second and third sections identify the issues that strain Thai–Malaysian and Thai–Myanmarese bilateral relations. The fourth section places the discussion within a broader regional context and identifies the mitigating factors on Thailand's foreign policy output. The fifth and final section identifies the current state of these bilateral relations and includes a discussion on potentially problematic issue areas in the future.

Southeast Asia, Thailand and the Indochina security complex

For most of its post-independence period, Southeast Asia as a region operated as a sub-system that reflected the bipolar nature of international relations after the Second World War. Generally speaking, all of maritime Southeast Asia and Thailand adopted a pro-Western and anti-communist outlook in their domestic and foreign policies.³ The best evidence of this position was the location of American air and naval forces in the Philippines under the terms of the Military Bases Agreement concluded shortly after Philippine independence in 1947.⁴ Equally important was the American decision to defend Thailand and contain the spread of revolutionary communism in the Indochinese peninsula.⁵ Consequently, the Philippines and Thailand anchored American security policy in Southeast Asia that was primarily aimed at Vietnam and Indochina. Within the domestic political arena, convergent threat perceptions allowed for the isolation of communist insurgent movements as

³ The classic study of threat perceptions in Southeast Asia is Robert O. Tilman, *The Enemy Beyond: External Threat Perceptions in the ASEAN region* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1984). Prior to the establishment of the New Order government in Indonesia in 1967, President Sukarno articulated a neutral foreign policy that often accommodated and aligned with China and the Soviet Union.

⁴ For a discussion on US–Philippine security relations see Salvador E. Lopez, 'The Foreign Policy of the Republic of the Philippines', in Raul de Guzman and Mila A. Reforma (eds.), *Government and Politics of the Philippines* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 241–64.

⁵ For a discussion of Thai–US security relations see Randolph R. Sean, *The United States and Thailand: Alliance Dynamics, 1950–1958* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986).

the most serious threat to political stability. Since many of these movements were committed to guerrilla warfare and the revolutionary overthrow of incumbent governments, a policy of armed suppression was easily justified. These movements were also generally supported by China, allowing for the establishment of a linkage between internal and external security. Domestic political turbulence and changes in Indonesia in the mid 1960s allowed for a structural response to regional threat perceptions in the formation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967.⁶

Suffice it to say then that communist insurgency was identified in many of the maritime states and Thailand as the foremost threat to internal security. The collective and convergent identification of communist ideology as the foremost threat to the internal and external security of these states allowed for the eventual evolution of corporate external security policies and internal regime consolidation. In the 1970s and the 1980s, until the collapse of the Cold War divide in Southeast Asian international relations, the corporate external security policies of these states were coordinated through ASEAN.

In the meantime, the Indochinese political situation evolved differently from the rest of Southeast Asia. The nationalist struggle for independence became intertwined with the revolutionary ideology of communism. The Indochinese Communist Party, which received moral and material support from the Soviet Union in the first instance and China after it became communist in 1949, coordinated the struggle for independence. The French military defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 set the stage for the partitioning of Vietnam under the terms of the Geneva Accords.⁷ However, the end of the First Indochinese War quickly dovetailed into the Second, involving Laos and Cambodia as well – the equivalent of the colonial French Indochinese Union. The involvement of external powers in Indochina significantly expanded the scope and exaggerated the intensity of the conflict. Hence, broadly speaking, Southeast Asia became ideologically polarized between an anti-Western and pro-communist Indochinese peninsula, especially after the conclusion of the Second Indochinese War in favour of the communists in 1975, and a pro-Western and anti-communist maritime Southeast Asia which included Thailand.⁸ Burma, which underwent a military coup in 1962, adopted a policy of neutrality that took the form of

⁶ The original signatories of ASEAN were Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. Brunei joined ASEAN immediately after independence in January 1984 after much of the Cold War posturing by the organization had dissipated. The Indonesian Confrontation against the Federation of Malaysia (1963–6) and Singapore's separation from the Malaysian Federation provided the turbulent political background in maritime Southeast Asia prior to the formation of ASEAN. See Bernard K. Gordon, *The Dimensions of Conflict in Southeast Asia* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1963).

⁷ For an exceptional work on Southeast Asian political history see David Joel Steinberg (ed.), *In Search of Southeast Asia* (Revised Edition) (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1987).

⁸ The polarization of Southeast Asia is detailed in Donald Weatherbee, *Southeast Asia Divided* (Boulder: CO: Westview Press, 1985).

isolationism and insulated itself from Southeast Asian international relations until the late 1980s.

Conventional scholarly wisdom credits Southeast Asia with having two security complexes that determine a hierarchical ordering of power and threat perceptions which in turn derive from geographical proximity and historical interactions.⁹ A number of cross-cutting issues like ethnicity, religion, and irredentist behaviour exaggerates the utility of the concept. The first of these complexes, the Malay Archipelago complex, groups the five countries of maritime Southeast Asia, where Indonesia is the dominant and hegemonic power. A strong sense of proprietary entitlement to order inter-state relations characterized Indonesian foreign policy output in the post-independence period.¹⁰ As convenor of the Afro-Asian Summit in Bandung in 1955 and founder member of the Non-Aligned Movement later, there was some measure of international accommodation to Indonesian claims to Third World leadership in the 1950s and 1960s. This dominant status in the archipelago was sometimes brought to bear on countries in maritime Southeast Asia. Indonesian agitation for a North Kalimantan Federation that sought to incorporate the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak and its policy of military confrontation against Malaysia between 1963 and 1966 are examples of attempts to impose Indonesia's will on the rest of the region.¹¹ Singapore, which separated from the Malaysian Federation in August 1965, had anxieties regarding both Malaysia and Indonesia.¹² Brunei, which benefited from British protectorate status until 1984, was somewhat insulated from such anxieties while the Philippines, with a large American military presence until 1991, was also excluded from the dynamics of the Malay Archipelago complex.

The second and more important Indochina Security complex which groups the five countries of mainland Southeast Asia, was typically played out between Vietnam and Thailand. In this complex, Vietnam was the dominant power with hegemonic ambitions, while Thailand was the medium power that deflected the Vietnamese threat. The small states of Laos and Cambodia traditionally had their political fortunes determined by Vietnam and/or Thailand. Geopolitically, the latter two are small states sandwiched between two larger and ambitious ones. After the communist victory in Vietnam in 1975, Laos and Cambodia gravitated towards Vietnam, except for a brief period when the Khmer Rouge was in power in Cambodia. Burma, owing to its self-imposed isolationism, effectively remained outside the workings of the

⁹ See Barry Buzan, 'The Southeast Asian Security Complex', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 10 (1, June 1988): 1–16. A refinement of the concept can be found in Muthiah Alagappa, 'The dynamics of international security in Southeast Asia: change and continuity', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 45 (1, May 1991): 1–37.

¹⁰ Michael Leifer, *Indonesia's Foreign Policy* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983), p. xiv.

¹¹ See Donald Hindley, 'Indonesia's confrontation with Malaysia: a search for motives', *Asian Survey*, 4 (6, June 1964), 904–13.

¹² See Lau Teik Soon, 'Malaysia–Singapore relations: crisis of adjustment, 1965–68', *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, 10 (March 1969): 155–76.

Indochina Security complex. When systemic pressures associated with the Cold War were brought to bear on Southeast Asia, the Malay Archipelago complex and the dynamics associated with it gradually receded into the background.

The global collapse of communism from the mid 1980s, epitomized by the destruction of the Berlin Wall and eventual collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 significantly altered the dynamics of systemic structures. With the collapse of the bipolar systemic structure, there was a rippling effect on the sub-systemic structures that were a product of the Cold War. In Southeast Asia, the most significant decompression effect was the collapse of the Indochina Security complex that had ordered inter-state relations in the region. A number of developments converged to dismantle the complex.

The first development that undermined the Complex derived from domestic political developments in Thailand.¹³ In April 1988, the government of Prem Tinsulanonda was defeated in a no-confidence motion in parliament over an intellectual property rights bill tabled under American pressure. Elections were subsequently called and Chatichai Choochavan from the Chart Thai Party emerged as the new Prime Minister in August 1988. Immediately after assuming the premiership, Chatichai announced a new Indochina Initiative. In essence, the policy sought to downgrade Vietnam as an external security threat and instead treat it as an ally in the economic transformation of the entire Indochinese peninsula. This policy initiative of 'turning the battlefields of Indochina into market places' undermined the most important assumption underlying the Indochina Security complex – that Vietnam was a hegemonic power that presented a security threat to countries in mainland Southeast Asia.

The security complex was also dismantled by Vietnam's own domestic situation. In December 1986, the Fourth Party Congress adopted *doi moi* (renewal) and in 1987 the Politburo adopted resolution number 2 which resulted in a strategic readjustment of Vietnam's defence posture including withdrawal from Laos and Cambodia and downsizing main forces by half. Later, in September 1989, Vietnam, under growing international pressure, withdrew its occupation forces from Cambodia, effectively denying ASEAN and Thailand the reason for a confrontationist policy. After all, the second rationalization for ASEAN's aggressive policies towards Vietnam between 1979 and 1989 was that the latter had violated the territorial integrity of a smaller and sovereign state through its occupation of Cambodia. Such a precedent was regarded by ASEAN as unacceptable in Southeast Asian international relations. The first and foremost rationalization was that the Vietnamese Occupation had significantly eroded Thailand's national security, turning it into a 'front-line' state, in direct confrontation with Vietnamese troops. Since 1953 when Laos and Cambodia were

¹³ Katharya Um, 'Thailand and the dynamics of economic and security complex in Mainland Southeast Asia', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 13 (3, December 1991): 245–70 and Surin Maisrikrod, 'The "peace dividend" in Southeast Asia: The Political Economy of New Thai-Vietnamese Relations', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 16 (1, June 1994): 60.

granted independence from French colonization, Thailand regarded the neutral status of both countries as a critical buffer to Vietnamese hegemonic ambitions in mainland Southeast Asia although pre-colonial forms of statehood in the region permitted a high degree of interaction. Throughout their post-independence period, both countries, except for brief interludes, naturally gravitated towards Vietnam through insurgency and warfare.

Thailand's Indochina Initiative, which was partly the result of systemic structural changes as well as a reconfiguration in domestic politics, fundamentally altered Thai foreign policy output. Thailand, which had traditionally adhered to the dynamics of the Indochina Security complex, sought greater independence and latitude in policy output. Previously, up to the conclusion of the Second Indochina War in 1975, Thailand sought a mutually beneficial strategic alliance with the U.S. Following the communist victory and American disengagement from developments in the Indochinese peninsula from 1975, Thailand benefited from an informal strategic alliance with China up to the end of the Cold War in 1988.¹⁴ Hence, Thailand's Indochina Initiative marked a significant break from previous policy output. It was in the aftermath of this break that bilateral tensions with Malaysia and Myanmar escalated significantly.

Thai-Malaysian bilateral tensions

Many of the tensions between Thailand and Malaysia have a historical rooting. By this, one does not mean that the problems are deep-seated but rather that many of them derive from insufficient interaction and knowledge of each other. As noted in the earlier sections, there is a sense in which Thailand traditionally operated within the confines of the Indochina Security complex. Even before conceptions of statehood were entrenched following British and French colonization of the mainland, the Thais traditionally interacted with the Burmese, Khmer, Lao and Vietnamese. In this regard, the cultural dynamics of Southeast Asia has resulted in a broad-based divide between the mainland and the maritime. The mainland is predominantly inhabited by the Tibeto-Burman and Sino-Thai peoples who mainly practice Theravada Buddhism. From the languages to the customs and culture of this region, there is a certain symmetry.

Malaysia, on the other hand, has traditionally functioned well within the framework of the Malay Archipelago. Its traditional pattern of interactions are essentially aimed at maritime Southeast Asia. Even during the pre-colonial period, its interactions were primarily directed at what is present-day Indonesia. Like the mainland, there is a certain ethno-cultural, linguistic, and religious symmetry among the Malayo-Indonesian peoples who inhabit the maritimes. With the exception of the northern and central parts of the Philippines and Singapore, maritime Southeast Asia

¹⁴ Thailand's post-1975 alignment with China is detailed in Sukhumbhand Paribatra, *From Enmity to Alignment: Thailand's Evolving Relations with China* (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University, 1987).

is home to the region's Islamic community. In this regard, it is arguable that differences between Thailand and Malaysia are partly rooted in a lack of interaction after the Second World War. The absence of such exposure has naturally created stereotypical images of one against the other.

Thailand's gravitation towards maritime Southeast Asia and ASEAN between 1967 and 1988 was the result of regional dynamics associated with the Cold War. It was ideological congruence that led to this unnatural gravitation and worked in the interest of both Malaysia and Thailand in achieving a good measure of familiarity and accommodation. Since 1988, when Thailand announced its Indochina Initiative under the Chatichai government, the country has moved away from the geopolitical core of ASEAN and gravitated back towards the mainland where it naturally belongs. In fact, in a series of public pronouncements, Thailand has made it clear that it aspires to perform the role of an infrastructural and service centre hub for mainland Southeast Asia, for a region spanning from Burma on the west, to Yunnan province in Southwestern China on the east.¹⁵ The most visible evidence of this policy thrust is the formation of the Golden Quadrangle encompassing Northern Thailand, Laos, Northern Myanmar, and the Yunnan province in China. Additionally, the Greater Mekong Subregion Cooperation scheme which groups Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, and China performs a similar function. In fact, prior to Vietnam's entry into ASEAN in July 1995, Thailand forwarded a proposal to form SEA 10 as an interim measure before ASEAN expanded outwards. In this regard, Thailand has not only gravitated back towards mainland Southeast Asia but also sought to concurrently integrate mainland and maritime Southeast Asia.

In order to facilitate its new post-Cold War role, Thailand has reopened road and rail links with Laos and Cambodia into Vietnam and eventually China. Two 'friendship bridges' have been constructed, one linking Laos and the other linking Myanmar.¹⁶ Additionally, Thailand is linking the Yadana oilfield in the Gulf of Martaban in Myanmar to Kanchanaburi in Thailand, negotiating to directly pipe in natural gas from Vietnam, and developing power stations in Laos. Thailand's Eastern Seaboard Project at Laemchabang, and Southern Seaboard Project that brings together Krabi, Phang-Nga, Songkla, Nakhon Si Thammarat, and Surat Thani are also meant to grid the country into the larger subregion. Finally, the Thais proudly acknowledge that they have a certain cultural advantage over their competitors in mainland Southeast Asia.¹⁷

¹⁵ See text of speech by Dr. Surin Phitsuwan entitled, 'Prospects of trade and investment in Southeast Asia', *Thailand Foreign Affairs Newsletter*, Information Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, July–September 1994, pp. 9–10; Squadron Leader Prasong Soonsiri, 'Southeast Asia: the current situation'; and Dr Surin Phitsuwan, 'Thailand's vision for Southeast Asia', *Thailand Foreign Affairs Newsletter*, October–December 1994, pp. 5–6 and 2–3.

¹⁶ See Gordon Fairclough, 'Spanning the divide', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 157 (16, 21 April 1994): 23.

¹⁷ Michael Vatikiotis, 'Trading on culture', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 158 (13, 30 March 1995): 28–30.

Thailand's lack of interaction with Malaysia and natural recent gravitation towards mainland Southeast Asia is not meant to suggest that there are no bilateral tensions between the two. In fact, one of the biggest irritants in the relationship is insurgency and separatism. The origins of this tension derive from Thailand's previous sovereignty over the four northern Malay states and the 1896 Anglo-French Treaty under whose terms Thailand ceded the four southern provinces of Yala, Satun, Narathiwat, and Patani to be ruled by the British from peninsular Malaya. By the time the four states were reintegrated back into Thailand in 1909, the region housed a Malay–Muslim minority that comprised some 7 per cent of the Thai population. The Japanese decision to 'return' the four northern Malay states to Thailand during the occupation of Malaya at the time of the Second World War was partly premised on Japanese recognition of Thailand's previous sovereignty over these areas.

The state of Patani had particularly strong links with the Sultanate of Kelantan. In 1934, a Muslim separatist movement called the Patani United Liberation Organization (PULO) sprang up in Southern Thailand and sought the creation of a separate state through guerrilla warfare.¹⁸ The Thai army managed to successfully suppress PULO. The strong cooperation between the Malaysian and Thai governments to suppress communist insurgency (Communist Party of Malaya and Communist Party of Thailand – CPM and CPT), including the right of hot pursuit and joint patrols across borders also dealt a blow to PULO. Nonetheless, remnant elements of the movement occasionally remind the Thai government of their presence through acts of sabotage and the detonation of explosives. A series of such incidents in the 1990s, including an attack on a corps of army engineers raised tensions in southern Thailand.¹⁹ In January 1998, after a spate of such incidents, the Thai army threatened to deploy regular units in the south, and prime minister Chuan Leekpai spoke of information suggesting Malaysian support for the guerrillas – a charge Malaysia vehemently denied.²⁰ Matters came to a head after Malaysian authorities apparently refused to hand over the leader of PULO who was arrested on a charge of carrying explosives.²¹ The Thai government felt that its goodwill gesture of turning over Ashari Mohamad, the leader of the banned Malaysian Islamic sect Darul Arqam in 1995 was not reciprocated. Eventually, however, there was an exchange initiated by the Malaysian government which stabilized the situation.

Apart from insurgency, illegal immigrants and fishing are two other issues that have strained diplomatic ties. Malaysia, with its stunning economic performance

¹⁸ See Omar Farouk, 'The historical and transnational dimensions of Malay–Muslim separatism in Southern Thailand', in Lim Joo Jock and S. Vani (eds.), *Armed Separatism in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1984), pp. 234–60.

¹⁹ Rodney Tasker, 'Southern discomfort', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 156 (35, 2 September 1993): 20–1.

²⁰ See *The Straits Times*, 6 January 1998.

²¹ Michael Vatikiotis, 'Altered chemistry', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 160 (5, 30 January 1997): 16.

over the last 15 years or so, has attracted a large number of illegal immigrants, in view of the tight labour situation, relatively high wages, and better exchange rates. Whereas Malaysia's biggest problem is with Indonesian illegal immigrants in the peninsula and Filipinos in Sabah, there are also significant number of such illegals from Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Thailand. In view of the recent economic slowdown and currency turmoil, Malaysia had indicated that it would repatriate one million foreign workers, and Thai nationals will be affected in this exercise.²² Another source of irritation for Malaysia is the country's perception that Thailand does not provide adequate security precautions to stem the flow of illegals through their long and porous common border. As for illegal fishing, Thai trawlers are regularly detained by the Malaysian navy, especially off the coast of Trengganu.²³ Since 1988, such seizures have become more frequent. The situation came to a head in 1995 when a Malaysian naval gunboat opened fire on a Thai trawler, killing two Thai fishermen. The Thai trawling community expressed outrage and threatened to sail a flotilla of up to 2,000 trawlers into Malaysian waters. Swift bilateral negotiations subsequently defused the crisis and the Thai foreign ministry managed to persuade trawler operators from fulfilling their threat.

The final issue that has been an irritant in Thai–Malaysian relations is overlapping territorial claims, or more correctly, cross-border intrusions. Off the coast of Kelantan and Narathiwat province, both countries had long disputed rights to an offshore oil deposit. However, since 1994, both countries have settled the claim amicably through joint exploration.²⁴ As for land border disputes, the border between the two countries is not well-defined in many areas and the Golok river traditionally provided the natural boundary-marker. The land border area has previously been the staging point for smuggling and banditry, leading to tit-for-tat accusations of poor security arrangements. However, at the height of bilateral tensions between Malaysia and Thailand in 1991, the Thai-based Border Patrol Police made four incursions into the Malaysian side of the border at Padang Besar. The Malaysian government was outraged at the incident and reinforced its troop presence at the border.²⁵ Additionally, there were calls to renegotiate the 1922 Anglo-Thai Border Treaty and Malaysia unilaterally undertook the construction of a retaining wall to enforce existing demarcations. Thailand, simply responded by noting that friends do not build walls between themselves.²⁶

In view of the changed security scenario, particularly growing Sino-Myanmar

²² *The Nation*, 7 January 1998.

²³ Malaysian authorities have reported sightings of some 2,000 trawlers annually for illegal fishing since 1985. However, it is estimated that only 10 per cent of such sightings actually led to seizure of vessels and arrest of crew. See Daniel Y. Coulter, 'South China Seas fisheries: countdown to calamity', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 17 (4, March 1996): 383.

²⁴ Michael Vatikiotis, 'Sea worthy', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 157 (16, 21 April 1994): 80.

²⁵ *The Straits Times*, 1 January 1992.

²⁶ Michael Vatikiotis, 'Back-yard bickering', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 159 (10, 7 March 1996): 22.

military cooperation (to be discussed later), bilateral tensions with Myanmar and with Malaysia, Thailand undertook a series of policy initiatives.²⁷ It announced the basing of an F-16 fighter squadron in Southern Thailand, the decision to deploy its newly acquired aircraft carrier in the southern Gulf of Thailand, and the construction of a new naval base at Phang-Nga.

The recent spate of bilateral tensions between Thailand and Malaysia derive primarily from the decompression effect associated with the end of the Cold War. Whereas both countries did not interact much with each other after the Second World War, the regional dynamics associated with the Cold War and in particular the formation of ASEAN enhanced familiarity and accommodation. However, Thailand's gravitation back towards the mainland and accompanying policy initiatives have resulted in an erosion of the previous accommodation achieved on the basis of convergent threat perceptions. Given that such policy initiatives have lengthy lifespans, it is expected that bilateral tensions will surface from time to time. Fortunately, in recent years, evidence indicates that a Thai government led by the Democratic Party, and with the appointment of Surin Pitsuwan as the Thai foreign minister, could alleviate tensions. Surin, a southern Thai-Muslim, may be better placed than his predecessors to articulate the grievances of the Thais to Malaysia. On the other hand, the fact that the Malaysian state of Kelantan is controlled by the fundamentalist opposition Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS), leaves it suspect as a covert supporter of Muslim insurgency in Thailand.²⁸ After assessing all the issues that strain bilateral ties between Malaysia and Thailand, it may be argued that whereas insurgency may be controlled by the respective governments, illegal immigrants and fishing are likely to remain beyond the purview of governments and therefore more problematic to control.

Thai-Burmese/Myanmar bilateral tensions²⁹

Historically, owing to the ethno-cultural and religious similarity between its peoples as well as the dynamics deriving from the Indochina Security complex, Thailand and Burma have interacted with each other. However, such interactions have not always been cordial or mutually beneficial. Historical memories of Thai-Burmese rivalry and in particular, Burmese assault on Thai Kingdoms in the seventeenth century are deeply ingrained in the mindset of the Thais. These

²⁷ See for example, Bertil Lintner, 'Arms for eyes', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 156 (50, 16 December 1993): 26; 'Enter the dragon', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 157 (51, 22 December 1994): 22-4; and 'Burma Road', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 160 (45, 6 November 1997): 16-17; and Rodney Tasker and Bertil Lintner, 'Danger: road works ahead', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 163 (51, 21 December 2000): 26-7.

²⁸ Since the 1999 Malaysian general election, PAS has also captured the state government in Terengganu, which borders Kelantan on the east coast of peninsular Malaysia.

²⁹ Some effort has been made to distinguish between 'Burma' and 'Myanmar'. The latter term refers to the country after the military junta in power annulled the outcome of the 1988 General Election, suppressed the successful political parties, and renamed the country in June 1989.

memories often seek to inform Thai perceptions of the Burmese, particularly when bilateral relations are strained. Conversely, for the Burmese, the current state of political and economic despair does not correctly represent their historical achievements and state of relative well-being in the immediate post-independence period when the country was commonly referred to as the 'rice-bowl of Asia'. The post 1962 and in particular the post 1988 situations are viewed as difficult times brought on by internal political divisiveness and exploitation. Such exploitation, especially in the economic realm, is sometimes attributed to Thailand and China.

Despite mutually reinforcing negative perceptions of each other, there were two factors that partially insulated Thai–Burmese relations from tensions and conflict.

The first of these factors was the manner in which domestic politics was played out in both countries. To begin with Burma, although the country achieved political independence rather early in January 1948, British colonial administration never welded the country into a unitary whole, with appropriate structures and symbols. Rather, the British, who were acutely aware of their inability to suppress the highland ethnic minorities because of thick forestation and the risk of malaria, sought to pacify the minorities through peace treaties and a policy of relative autonomy.³⁰ Consequently, British colonization of Burma was restricted to the lowlands, centred on the Irrawady plains and inhabited by ethnic Burmans. Over time, the colonial policy reinforced the traditional divide between the lowland Burman majority and the highland ethnic minorities, both of whom were typically suspicious of each other's motives and intentions. Highlanders were particularly fearful of being politically subjugated and economically exploited by the lowlanders.

At the time of independence, the British colonial government promised the highland minorities the right of secession if the post-independence government was detrimental to minority interests. This conciliatory gesture was meant to allow for the highlands to integrate with the lowlands on mutually acceptable terms, especially since British colonial administration had segmented the country ethnically for administrative purposes. Additionally, the arrangement was meant as a goodwill gesture to the highland minorities, particularly the Shan and the Chin, who had conducted guerrilla warfare with the British against Japanese occupation forces during the Second World War.

Approximately, a year after independence in 1949, large segments of the Burmese Army, comprising highland minorities, defected from the government. Citing unfavourable treatment and the state's articulation of a Burman–Buddhist super-culture and identity, these soldiers formed the core around which insurgent movements were built. The largest of these insurgent armies, that were often territorially located but regularly cooperated against the Burmese government, were the Cachin Independence Organization (CIO), the Karen National Union (KNU), and the Mong

³⁰ See for example, Robert H. Taylor, *The State in Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987).

Tai Army (MTA), which was located in Shan state. The birth of these insurgency movements complicated Burmese domestic politics and threatened state legitimacy. Owing to the internal security situation and its relative dominance in domestic politics, the Burmese military staged a series of coups and by 1962, after a successful coup led by Ne Win, the country embarked on a policy of self-imposed isolationism. This turn of events insulated Thai–Burmese relations until the late 1980s and 1990s, although the insurgency movements (to be discussed later) played a critical role in the escalation of bilateral tensions.

Domestic political developments in Thailand from the 1960s till 1992 also helped to stabilize bilateral relations. With the exception of a brief democratic interlude between 1973 and 1976, Thai domestic politics was dominated by the military.³¹ Even Chatichai Choonhavan, who was democratically elected to the prime ministership in August 1988, was a retired general from the Thai army. He replaced his predecessor, General Prem Tinsulanonda, who had served as prime minister from 1980 to 1988. The military in Thailand only became discredited after the 1992 outbreak of political violence following the appointment of General Suchinda as prime minister.³² The Thai military's dominance of domestic political developments is significant in that leading military personalities were able to forge close mutually beneficial relations with the Burmese military. This was especially true of Generals Kriangsak Chomanand who was in power between 1976 and 1979 and General Chatichai who was in power between 1988 and 1991.

The issues involved in the mutually beneficial relationships between the two military governments were the second factor that insulated the bilateral relationship. Whereas Burma was richly endowed with natural wealth, its isolationist policy from 1962 onwards meant that these resources could not be extracted and traded in the international market. Consequently, Thailand and its ruling elite were uniquely placed to appropriate such opportunities. Especially important in this bilateral trading relationship were Burmese gems, teak and marine products.

If domestic political developments in both Burma and Thailand insulated the bilateral relationship from deteriorating for some 30 years, it can be persuasively argued that these same developments led to a relationship that rapidly deteriorated in the 1990s. In the case of Burma, it was the political liberalization leading to the democratic elections of 1988 and the ensuing political violence staged by the military, which refused to accept a reduced role in the domestic political process.³³ In the case of Thailand, it was a discredited military that was forced to concede power to

³¹ On the Thai military's role in domestic politics see Surachart Bumrungsuk (ed.), *The Thai Military System: A Study of the Armed Forces in Socio-Political Context* (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University, 1987).

³² See Surin Maisrikrod, *Thailand's Two General Elections in 1992: Democracy Sustained* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1992).

³³ Tin Maung Maung Tan, 'Myanmar: Preoccupation with Regime Survival, National Unity, and Stability', in Muthiah Alagappa (ed.), *Asian Security Practice: Material and Ideational Influences* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), pp. 391–416.

democratically elected governments that were more concerned with representation and accountability rather than political and economic gains.

The fragile issue of internal political consolidation and suppression of ethnic insurgencies in Burma by the post-1988 military junta was one of the most important reasons for the escalation of tensions between Burma and Thailand.³⁴ The border region between both countries had traditionally posed some security problems. Previously, such problems included the presence of the Burmese Communist Party and remnant elements of the Kuomintang army in Shan State in Burma. From 1990 onwards, the Myanmar government sought internal political consolidation by negotiating with and, if necessary, suppressing insurgency movements. The CIO was the first to broker a peace treaty with the government. The ten thousand strong Cachin army was widely regarded as the most capable of resisting the military junta. However, contrary to the junta's expectations, the other movements did not follow suit. Instead, they offered severe and protracted resistance. The most notable of such movements was the Karen National Union, whose major bases in Kawmoora and Manerplaw were on strategically located high ground bordering the Moei river. The latter base was a symbol of anti-government resistance since elements of the 1988 group that opposed the government in elections regarded it as the location of the government-in-exile.

Following a failed attempt to capture the bases in 1992 after a large-scale offensive, the Myanmar government managed to capitalize on a discord within the ranks of the predominantly Christian Karen leadership, and supported a breakaway faction called the Democratic Karen Buddhist Organization (DKBO). Given its familiarity with the terrain, the DKBO subsequently assisted Myanmar government troops in securing both bases in January 1995.³⁵ However, the difficult terrain meant that Myanmar troops often had to do flanking assaults and cross into Thailand's Mae Hong Son province. These incursions led to regular artillery duels between Myanmar and Thailand, while the latter reinforced the border with extra troops and heavy weapons.³⁶ Similar assaults by the Myanmar government against the MTA led to border crossings along the Salween river into Tak province. Such crossings were also repulsed by the Thai military.³⁷ The MTA leader Khun Sa's negotiated settlement with the Myanmar government subsequently led to much lower levels of conflict.

The Thai government's hostile response to Myanmar military incursions can easily be understood as an attempt to keep the former's borders secure.³⁸ However, the reasons for the hostile response go well beyond that. Democratically elected

³⁴ For a general discussion on ethnicity and insurgency see Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the politics of ethnicity* (London: Zed Books, 1991).

³⁵ See Bertil Lintner, 'Loss and exile', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 158 (7, 16 February 1994): 23, and 'The fall of Manerplaw', *Asiaweek*, 21 (7, 17 February 1995): 31–2.

³⁶ Michael Vatikiotis and Rodney Tasker, 'Rude neighbour', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 158 (11, 16 March 1995): 32.

³⁷ Bertil Lintner, 'Fighting weather', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 157 (26, 30 June 1994): 24.

³⁸ See Paul Battersby, 'Border politics and the broader politics of Thailand's international

governments in Thailand after 1992 have been less willing to put up with the excesses of the Myanmar military. In fact, the Democratic Party which has been very successful in Thai domestic politics in the 1990s has been extremely scathing in its criticisms of the Myanmar military junta. Secondly, the Thais host some 100,000 Karen refugees in camps along the border with Myanmar at Mae Hong Son. Myanmar troops, together with elements of the DKBO have staged a series of raids across the border since 1995 to destroy these camps and displace the Karens.³⁹ When such incidents occur, Thailand bears the brunt of international criticism for failing to provide the refugees with sufficient security. Finally, Thai security planners have always regarded the major rivers at their borders as natural boundary markers. The Mekong, Moei, and Salween rivers fall in this category of natural boundary markers and have traditionally been vigorously defended. Similarly, the violation of Lao and Cambodian sovereignty are also regarded as security threats. It is for this reason that Thailand, together with China, provided border encampments for Khmer Rouge fighters between 1979 and 1989 to engage Vietnamese occupation troops in Cambodia.

The most serious incident in 1999 that affected Thai–Myanmar bilateral ties arose from a dissident student group's takeover of the Myanmar embassy in Bangkok. The heavily armed group comprising five students held 38 hostages in the embassy to attract attention to their cause – the restoration of democracy in Myanmar. Swift Thai intervention defused the crisis within a day. The end outcome was a release of the hostages in exchange for Thai Deputy Foreign Minister Sukhumphand Paribatra, who then flew with the hostages to the Thai–Myanmar border for their eventual release. The Myanmar government was infuriated with the manner in which Thai authorities dealt with the crisis, which appeared to condone the dissidents' behaviour. Thai Interior Minister Sanan Kachornprasart's comment that the dissidents were 'student activists who fight for democracy' rather than terrorists further infuriated Myanmar's junta.⁴⁰ In a clear gesture of disapproval, the Myanmar government sealed all border crossings, including the Friendship Bridge, and crossings in Mae Sai and Ranong. Additionally, large reinforcements were sent to Tachilek, across the border from Mae Sai and three patrol boats were deployed off Ranong. Some 24 Thai nationals accused of gambling were also arrested in Myanmar. They were later fined and freed. In a second related incident, armed Karen insurgents seized a hospital in Ratchaburi province in January 2000. Thai Special Forces subsequently stormed the hospital and killed all ten insurgents – an action that reflected the growing unhappiness of Thailand in being used to resolve the political stalemate in Myanmar.

relations in the 1990s: from communism to capitalism', *Pacific Affairs*, 71 (4, Winter 1998/9): 473–88.

³⁹ Bertil Lintner, 'It's Rangoon, not rebels', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 158 (20, 18 May 1995): 21; Michael Vatikiotis, 'Border burdens', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 160 (910, 6 March 1997): 34; and Bertil Lintner, 'Burning ultimatum', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 160 (7, 13 February 1997): 25.

⁴⁰ Bangkok Post, 2 October 1999.

The Thai government responded to Myanmar's hostile gestures by repatriating illegal Myanmar workers. This effort was not without some cost for Thailand, since labour-intensive manufacturing industries had, over the years, relied extensively on these illegals for cheap sources of labour. Many Myanmar nationals who were repatriated feared for their lives and safety. There were reports of intimidation and rapes.⁴¹ The tit-for-tat behaviour between the two governments only ended after Thai Foreign Minister Surin Phitsuwan paid a courtesy call on General Khin Nyunt, Myanmar's chief of military intelligence in late November.

Another major source of irritation in Thai–Myanmar bilateral relations is illegal fishing. Thailand, which has a large trawling fleet, has some 2,000 trawlers in the Gulf of Thailand alone. Many of these trawlers regularly operate in the territorial waters of adjacent countries, leading to detention of both crew and vessels, especially by Myanmar and Malaysia. Apart from the usual poaching, Thai trawler captains also purchased annual licences to fish in Myanmar territorial waters for a fee. Myanmar, which had been subjected to international condemnation and diplomatic isolation following the 1988 suppression of the democracy movement, was in dire need of foreign exchange in the 1990s. Consequently, the sale of fishing licences was meant to augment depleted foreign exchange reserves. The Thai trawling fleet, on the other hand, was notorious for using these permits for more than one vessel by duplicating the permits and registration numbers.⁴² The alleged killing of some Myanmar skippers on Thai trawlers worsened the situation.⁴³ Myanmar, which has an extremely large and rich marine claim, regards itself as the aggrieved and exploited party. The sale of trawler licenses to Thailand has been suspended, although illegal fishing continues to be a major irritant in bilateral relations.

There are very few overlapping territorial claims per se between the two countries, although the nature of some of these claims is rather different from conventional disagreements. In the Thai–Myanmar case, most territorial disagreements are centred on the changing course of the Moei and Salween rivers. Heavy rains and sedimentation sometimes changes the course of these rivers and, since both countries regard the rivers as boundary markers, any change in the demarcation yields a zero sum situation – one country's gain is the other country's loss. The most recent stand-off in such claims occurred in May and June 1997, and centred on the

⁴¹ Thai Rath, 9 November 1999.

⁴² The most recent official pronouncement by Myanmar on this issue was made by Foreign Minister Win Aung who announced that Myanmar will review all fishing agreements signed with Thailand because of 'duplicated licence numbers for a dozen ships'. See Shawn W. Crispin and Bertil Lintner, 'Worst of friends', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 162 (49, 9 December 1999): 19–20.

⁴³ Serious conflicts over illegal fishing included an incident in 1992 when Myanmar patrol craft attacked and sank ten Thai fishing trawlers, which led to the presumed death of 200 crewmen, and, in another incident in 1994, Myanmar officials patrolling in a seized Thai trawler in the Andaman Sea were reported to have killed 15 Thai trawler crew members. *Bangkok Post*, 19 November 1995.

Moei river's changed course in Myanmar's favour. After a two-month long tense confrontation between both armies, the Myanmar government sealed the border at Mae Sot in Tak province.⁴⁴

The final issue that has raised bilateral tensions is the growing military cooperation between China and Burma.⁴⁵ Both countries were subjected to widespread international condemnation following the suppression of their democracy movements in the late 1980s. This common international treatment and the two countries' willingness to work for mutual gain allowed China a unique window of opportunity to establish a naval presence in the Bay of Bengal. Prior to this period, China's access was restricted to the South China Sea and the Gulf of Thailand. Strangely enough, it was also the changed geostrategic environment that allowed China this window. After all, China and Thailand had a mutually beneficial security relationship between 1975 when the Second Indochina War was concluded in favour of North Vietnam and 1988 when the Chatichai government announced its Indochina Initiative.⁴⁶ Following the normalization of Thai-Vietnamese relations in 1988, Sino-Burmese cooperation became markedly improved, almost as if the one compensated for the other for both China and Thailand.

Sino-Burmese military cooperation was particularly troublesome to the Thais, given their long list of issues with Burma that had the potential to deteriorate into armed conflict. When evidence emerged of Myanmar's construction of a naval station in the Gulf of Tennasserim and a radar station in Cocos Islands with China's help, Thailand undertook a series of measures, including the deployment of more weapon systems to the south and began the construction of the major naval base in Phang Nga. Equally ruffled by the new Sino-Myanmar security relationship is India, which maintains a major naval presence in the Andaman Islands, within eavesdropping and tracking distance of the Cocos station.⁴⁷

There are a number of other problems deriving from the cross-border drug trade between Myanmar and Thailand. They include the rising rates of drug addiction and the easy availability of cheap amphetamine tablets in Thailand that owe their origins in Myanmar. Especially troublesome to the Thai authorities is the Myanmar military junta's collusion with the United Wa State Army and the junta's reliance on it for military engagements with the Shan State Army. In February 2001, fighting along the Thai-Myanmar border spilled over into Thailand, leading to a serious engagement between the Myanmar military and the Thai Third Army. The Third Army, which has been tasked with protecting the border and preventing the flow of narcotics

⁴⁴ 'Myanmar seals post in escalation of border dispute with Thailand', *The Straits Times*, 14 June 1997.

⁴⁵ See Bertil Lintner, 'Arms for eyes', *Far East Economic Review*, 156 (50, 16 December 1993): 26 and 'Enter the dragon', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 157 (51, 22 December 1994): 22-4.

⁴⁶ See Paribatra, *From Enmity to Alignment*.

⁴⁷ Bertil Lintner, 'But stay on guard', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 161 (29, 16 July 1998): 25 and 'Burma Road', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 160(45, 6 November 1997): 16-17.

into Thailand, has just entered into an arrangement with US Special Forces to form Task Force 399 to deal with the problem.⁴⁸ The spread of HIV AIDS, which is partly related to narcotic consumption, is also a growing problem.

Of the issues discussed in Thai–Myanmar bilateral relations, most have not been seriously resolved. Nonetheless, the reduction of conflict between the insurgent movements and the Myanmar government has significantly reduced cross-border tensions. The Thai decision to locate Karen refugee camps further into Thailand and away from the border with Myanmar also reduces the chances of Myanmar troops sporadically attacking these camps. Illegal fishing is also a lesser problem now, and overlapping claims typically tend to be seasonal, particularly after the wet weather monsoon period. Sino-Myanmar military cooperation continues, albeit at a much less obtrusive level. However, the relative calm in the bilateral relations at the time of writing does not mean all is well. In fact, Thailand has recently become increasingly critical of Myanmar and the suggestions for constructive interference in the affairs of fellow ASEAN members is often a veiled reference to Myanmar. The recently reported decision by the Thai military to turn over the formulation of foreign policy towards Myanmar and Cambodia to the elected government is likely to lead to greater Thai agitation for political change in Myanmar, given the previous track record of governments led by the Democratic Party.⁴⁹

Mitigating factors on Thai foreign policy output

Notwithstanding Thailand's strained relationship with Malaysia and Myanmar in the last decade, it is arguable that the tensions have been relatively well managed and the situation arrested from deteriorating into conflict. An admixture of domestic and external reasons account for this outcome. Domestically, the most important reason is the growing entrenchment of democracy in Thailand in the aftermath of the violence associated with the 1992 military coup attempt.⁵⁰

The 1992 coup was a turning point in Thai domestic politics for a variety of reasons. Firstly, there was widespread unhappiness among the Thai people, particularly from the educated urban middle class. Secondly, as with a number of previous coups, there was factionalism within the military. Class 5 graduates from the

⁴⁸ See Rodney Tasker and Bertil Lintner, 'Nasty job for task force 399', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 164 (15, 19 April 2001): 24–5. It was also reported that General Chaovalit, the current Defence Minister under the Thai Rak Thai-led coalition government, attempted to replace the Commander of the Third Army, Lt. Gen. Wattanachai Chaimuanwong, but that his attempts were frustrated by Gen. Prem Tinsulanonda, Privy Councilor to the King.

⁴⁹ See the intelligence report contained in the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 162 (1, 31 December 1998 and 7 January 1999): 8. The new Thai Foreign Minister, Surakiat Sathirathai, has in the meantime announced what appears to be a less confrontational policy towards Myanmar by pledging the pursuit of an 'Asian way' to deal with border states. This policy was described as 'mutual cooperation to resolve existing problems by not showing an attitude of interference'. *The Nation*, 28 February 2001.

⁵⁰ See Maisrikrod, *Thailand's Two General Elections in 1992*.

Chulachomklao Military Academy were unable to continue holding important positions with the failure of the coup and succeeding classes are significantly less united and have avowed to refrain from involvement in politics. General Cheta Thanajaro, the previous Armed Forces Commander and his successor, General Surayud Cholanont, have publicly endorsed this position. Previous Commanders had been significantly more ambivalent on the issue. The withdrawal of the military from domestic politics had an interactive effect with the third reason – the greater resort to political parties to gain political power. The clearest evidence of this development is the military-sponsored Sammakhi Tham Party and General Chaovalit's registration of the New Aspiration Party.

The withdrawal of the Thai military from domestic politics and the entrenchment of political parties mean that the military has significantly lesser input into foreign policy decision making. Increasingly, the Prime Minister and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, that are democratically accountable, coordinate policy output. Accordingly, the likelihood of political adventurism has become significantly reduced, although it must be noted that elected governments are less prepared to deal with the military junta in Myanmar for mutually beneficial gains.

The Asian economic crisis of 1997 also had an impact on policy making. A collapsed stock and property market, significant devaluation of the baht, rises in unemployment and inflation, and strict fiscal regulation by the International Monetary Fund resulted in a period of political introversion, away from foreign policy issues. This introversion led to greater informal economic cooperation between Thailand and Myanmar. Additionally, the Thai military either postponed or reneged on the acquisition of state-of-the-art weapon systems, including sophisticated fighter aircraft and air-to-air missiles. Decreased military expenditures inadvertently became a Confidence Building Measure of sorts.

Externally, there were additional mitigating factors. Thailand had long-standing bilateral relations with Malaysia and Myanmar and difficult bilateral issues had traditionally been solved bilaterally through diplomatic means. Such resolutions had the advantage of preventing a dispute from widespread publicity and posturing by political elites for strategic gains. Regular dialogue and sports, cultural and military exchanges helped to diffuse many of the tensions at the elite level. Other mitigating factors included common membership in ASEAN and a number of related multi-lateral fora like the ASEAN Post-Ministerial Conference (PMC), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum. Thailand was especially instrumental in pushing for ASEAN to constructively engage Myanmar, which culminated in the latter's inclusion into the grouping in 1997. Finally, external powers refrained from involvement in the disputes, unlike the situation during the Cold War.

Thailand's positive and aggressive engagement of mainland Southeast Asia since 1988 was the final major externally motivated reason. Since the time of Chatichai's Indochina Initiative, Thailand has clearly aspired to become the hub of infra-

structural and trade development for the region between Myanmar to the west and Yunnan in southwestern China to the east. Thailand's upgrade of its roads, railway lines, and bridges into Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar are clearly meant to serve this function. Ethno-religious and cultural similarities provide added support to this venture. In policy terms, this ambition is often referred to variously as the Golden Hexagon, Golden Octagon, or Mekong Delta Project. This aggressive policy initiative is partly responsible for arresting tensions with Myanmar and diverting attention away from Malaysia.

Conclusion

Thailand's bilateral relations with Malaysia and Myanmar have taken a significant turn for the worse in the last decade. The change in policy output is clearly correlated to the demise of the Cold War and the collapse of the Indochina Security Complex – the most clearly articulated manifestation of the Cold War in Southeast Asian international relations. The Thai identification of Vietnam as the source of external threat within the framework of the Indochina Security Complex has now collapsed. However, Thailand's bilateral relations with Malaysia and Myanmar have taken a turn for the worse. Both domestic political and economic developments and regional multilateral fora have cushioned Thailand's bilateral relations with Malaysia and Myanmar from deteriorating even further. The evidence thus far is that these deterrents will continue to have a positive effect on the bilateral tensions discussed. Nonetheless, it must be acknowledged that such tensions have a real potential to overhang the relationships. Accordingly, the sooner outstanding issues are resolved, the lesser the probability of an overhang.

As for the issues straining Thailand's bilateral relations with Malaysia and Myanmar identified in this article, some of the issues have been resolved while others have not. Cross-border intrusions and insurgency are clearly on the wane while illegal fishing, illegal immigrants, and refugees continue to be a problem. Whereas many overlapping claims are being negotiated, it would be only fair to assume that greater pressures on land and marine resources in the future are likely to lead to new overlapping claims. Perceptual problems are mostly embedded in the nature of previous historical interactions and therefore difficult to erase entirely. Nonetheless, regular interactions in ASEAN and other multilateral fora are likely to yield significant familiarity and accommodation of differences.

Southeast Asia's international relations have in the past been significantly determined by Thai foreign policy initiatives. During the Cold War, Thailand provided the focal point for American containment of communism in Indochina. In the aftermath of the American withdrawal and communist victory in Vietnam in 1975, Thailand facilitated the *rapprochement* between China and ASEAN through a strategic realignment in favour of China. Since 1988, Thailand's Indochina Initiative was the forerunner of ASEAN's *rapprochement* with Vietnam. Consequently, a case can easily be made that Thailand, together with Indonesia and Vietnam, have

traditionally determined the contours and configurations of Southeast Asian international relations. In view of these historical developments, it may be argued that changes in Thailand's foreign policy are likely to affect all of Southeast Asia and should therefore be closely monitored.