

Comparative Foreign Policies of Thailand Myanmar
For the Past Five Decades

Khin Maung Nyunt
and
Yuthapong Chantrawarin

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*Dr. Khin Maung Nyunt is an Assistant Professor, School of Management and **Mr. Yuthapong Chantrawarin is an Assistant Professor, School of Liberal Arts, Mae Fah Lung University, Chiang Rai, Thailand.

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Abstract

This research investigates the direction and perspective of foreign policy of Thailand towards Myanmar both in historical and contemporary contexts and to seek the resolution, bilateral benefit and multilateral cooperation. It also suggests directions and perspectives for further cooperation between Thailand and Myanmar. The framework of present foreign policy analysis is based on four main areas: (i) borderland and ethnic issues, (ii) foreign policy and diplomatic relation, (iii) economy, trade and investment and (iv) rational and principles for policy making and dialogue.

Diplomatic form of friendship commenced in Thai-Myanmar relations in the 1950s. The Kuomintang (KMT) catastrophe influenced significantly these relations in 1950-60. Thai-Myanmar relations commenced in the 1950s by signing the “Thai-Burma Treaty”, and establishing exchange of visit and cooperation.

Thai-Myanmar relations for the period: 1960-1970 were less amicable since the two countries had different ideological sets in economic and political systems and foreign policies. Myanmar commenced socialism and followed a strict neutralist foreign policy in the preserve of national solidarity in 1962. Thailand pursued a capitalism and strongly anti-communist policy. The dominant role of the military in Thailand was presented in foreign policy process comprising the Supreme Command Headquarters, the military’s high commander, and the National Security Council.

The ideology on a new role of Thailand as a regional economic power was initiated in the 1990s and it was reflected substantially in Thai Foreign Policy in particular with Asian countries. Thailand Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanond established civilian role in Thai democratic political system, while the notion of withdrawal of military role emerged during eight years of his administration. Prime Minister Chatichai’s regional development vision of foreign policy that would promote Thailand’s role in mainland Southeast Asia has been reverberated by other Thai leaders. General Chavalit focused on open borders among Thailand, Indochina, and Yunnan Province of China, while Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun aimed Thailand as the “gateway to Indochina”. Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai expressed Thailand as a regional “financial center.”

General Chavalit's visit to Myanmar enhanced the Thai-Myanmar cooperation in refugee settlements in Tak Province that were jointly administered by the Thai and Myanmar Red Cross societies. Thai Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai described his country's security concerns due to influx of refugee and the need for corporation. Constructive engagement has become a political issue in Thailand in the 1990s, reflecting the conflict over values in foreign policy.

Major determinants of relations between Thailand and Myanmar constitute geography (border), economy, political history, culture, domestic policy and commonality of approach in foreign affairs. In creating good relations, the regional factors under ASEAN and international best practices should be adopted as a basis in setting foreign relations policy and processes of these two countries. It may include primarily the aligning economic system with international ones for avoiding illegal activities at the border; respect for democracy and human rights; enhancing economic liberalization and fair trade; and regional cooperation in socio-economic and environmental activities so that it will deliver a cohesive region.