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# STATE POWER, SOCIAL CONFLICTS AND SECURITY POLICY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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> Do international relations precede or follow (logically) fundamental social relations? There can be no doubt that they follow. Any organic innovation in the social structure, through its technical–military expressions, modifies organically absolute and relative relations in the international field, too.
>
> *Antonio Gramsci (1971: 176)*

International Relations (IR) scholars reading the other chapters in this volume may well be struck by the stark difference between the way that they conceptualize state behaviour and the methods that scholars of domestic politics and political economy use to understand state power, regimes, violence, authority and governance. In much of the mainstream IR theory applied to Southeast Asia, the anarchic international system constitutes a sufficiently autonomous realm for the external behaviour of states to be analysed quite separately from the internal power relations that actually constitute those states. It thus becomes possible to explain, say, the security policy of Southeast Asian states in terms of their pursuit of 'national interests', or with reference to their 'identity' and interstate norms. While occasional references to domestic politics might be unavoidable, for many IR theorists, 'states' are simply the pre-given units of international politics and we do not need to probe their origins, evolution or underpinnings particularly deeply.[1] While the agenda of international security may have broadened elsewhere to encompass actors and referent objects beyond the state, in Southeast Asia scholars argue that 'the state remains the critical actor' (Caballero-Anthony 2008: 195) and 'securitisation has largely been a state-centric project' (Emmers and Caballero-Anthony 2006: 32).

   This chapter argues that state-centric approaches of international security policies are rarely sustainable in practice and offer a very limiting perspective on the behaviour of Southeast Asian states. IR theories too often neglect the specific nature of state power revealed by scholars of domestic politics and political economy. Rather than adopting a 'top-down' view of security policy as being determined by anarchy, abstract 'national interests' or interstate norms, this chapter advocates a 'bottom-up' approach, showing how specific policies are shaped by the particular constellations of power and interests that underpin states. From this perspective, there are multiple contending sources of foreign and security policy. While the geopolitical and strategic agendas identified by IR scholars certainly do exist, they represent the ideas and interests of very

specific groups, notably the technocracies of foreign ministries which are embedded within global community of foreign policy apparatchiks. To the extent that their ideas become state policy, however, this reflects their interests and not some general, immutable, 'national' interest. More to the point, there are other socio-political forces – classes, class fractions, business groups, ethnic and religious groups, other parts of the state apparatus, and so on – whose ideas and interests frequently clash with and may override those of foreign policy officials. What actually emerges in practice, therefore, reflects conflicts among these different forces as they struggle to impose their interests as *raison d'état*.

From this perspective, security policies can only be understood as 'the products of historical structures and processes, of struggles for power within states, of conflicts between the societal groupings that inhabit states and the interests that besiege them' (Lipschutz 1995: 8). As the other chapters in this volume show, Southeast Asia's late capitalist development has produced highly distinctive forms of state and regime, modes of social control, institutions, interests and alliances. If we accept that states are not simply 'ideal types', always and everywhere the same, but are necessarily shaped by the concrete conditions in which they develop, the distinctive nature of state power in Southeast Asia must logically find expression at the international level. Indeed, domestic social conflict is a vital explanatory factor for the forms taken by regional conflicts and cooperation.

The argument proceeds in three sections. The first briefly critiques the statism and methodological nationalism of existing IR theory before discussing the ways in which domestic struggles over state power condition foreign and security policies. The second section uses this approach to analyse the policies of states within the region towards Burma. The country's military dictatorship is frequently said to be generating serious security threats, yet neighbouring states seem curiously resistant to taking action against the regime. This only makes sense if we understand their policies as being shaped and influenced by various social and economic interests and agendas. The third section more briefly applies the same approach to analyse Southeast Asian states' policies on environmental degradation and border conflicts.

## Rethinking regional security policy

Security studies have traditionally been the bailiwick of IR scholars. As an academic discipline, IR was founded on the notion that relations between states possess their own distinctive dynamics that can be analysed and theorized separately from states' internal relations. This was initially an analytical distinction, but it has increasingly hardened into an ontological one. States are often simply assumed to be coherent, fixed, sovereign units expressing 'national interests' or possessing their own 'identities', dispensing with the need to consider how they are constituted and whose interests they actually represent, and how this might condition their external relations. Domestic political struggles are usually referred to in an *ad hoc* and opaque fashion. This section briefly critiques this top-down approach, focussing on the two dominant theories used in Southeast Asian IR, realism and constructivism, and explains how social conflicts over state power actually influence states' foreign and security policies.

The deeply embedded statism of IR theory has expressed itself in all varieties of scholarship on the security of Southeast Asia. 'Realist' analysts are generally sceptical about interstate cooperation because of the anarchic nature of the international system. They emphasize the role of great powers and shifts in the 'balance' between them as the fundamental determinants of regional security (e.g. Leifer 1989; Jones and Smith 2006). Realists have sometimes explained international conflicts with reference to domestic developments. Michael Leifer, for example, argued that Sukarno's crusading, anti-imperialist foreign policy in the 1960s was driven by

attempts to manage the rising power of the Indonesian left. However, he proceeds to present the apparent return to *realpolitik* under Suharto as the resumption of the state's autonomy from domestic vested interests, restoring the rational management of Indonesia's external relations (Leifer 1983). This explanatory strategy presents the influence of domestic struggles on foreign and security policy as occasional, extraordinary and aberrant, rather than as a constant and evolving dynamic.

Constructivist scholars have attempted to show how norms, ideas and culture can help mitigate the effects of international anarchy that realists foreground. They argue that Southeast Asian states have had an important influence on regional security order by enunciating norms of interstate conduct that have 'socialized' the member-states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and even external powers, transforming their interests and identities (Acharya 2001; Johnston 2003). However, constructivists have reinforced the statism and methodological nationalism of IR theory by conceptualizing states as *de facto* persons, capable of having an 'identity' as well as 'interests' (Wendt 2004). Like realists, constructivists have referred fleetingly to domestic dynamics to explain events that interstate norms cannot, such as the founding of ASEAN (Acharya 2001: 49), or to account for policy divergences, which are often explained rather crudely with reference to countries being 'more' or 'less' democratic (e.g. McDougall 2001). However, the consequence of treating states as persons is that no systematic attention can be paid to their domestic constitution. Constructivists' failure to enquire critically into the nature of state power has led critics to argue that they play directly into elite hands by deflecting 'analytical attention away from both existing tensions among ASEAN states and internal divisions within their states that reflected unresolved ethnic and religious dissonance and opaque networks of corruption and patronage' (Jones and Smith 2002: 100).

After lengthy neglect, IR scholars have recently begun to recognise the importance of domestic dynamics, particularly given the clear impact of the upheavals unleashed by the 1997–8 Asian financial crisis on foreign and security policies in the region. Once committed to illiberal and authoritarian 'Asian values', regional states now proclaim their fondness for 'democracy', 'human rights' and 'good governance', indicating their desire to shift from an elite-driven to a 'people-centred' ASEAN by boosting civil society 'participation'. Scholars cannot but attribute this shift to the 'democratic moment' of the Asian financial crisis and particularly the democratization of Indonesia (Acharya 1999). Analysts now speculate on the possibility of 'participatory regionalism' and the use of ASEAN as a forum for democracy promotion (Acharya 2003; Emmerson 2007). Moreover, they are grappling with how to reincorporate these domestic dynamics into their theorizing of regional security (e.g. Emmerson 2009).

So far, however, attempts to achieve this are ahistorical and theoretically unsatisfying. Scholars often treat the influence of domestic power relations on security policy as something entirely new, rather than something new only to IR analyses. Jörn Dosch, for example, claims that the 'intertwinedness of international and national structures and processes … did not seem to exist until very recently'. He explains this alleged novelty by referring to the greater 'regime accountability' caused by democratization, which has reduced 'state autonomy' in foreign policy (Dosch 2006: 71, 21–30). This wrongly assumes that authoritarian states can somehow sit in splendid isolation from their own societies, doing as they will, and that only democratic states can express societal interests. Indonesia's Suharto regime, for example, which Dosch claims was simply dominated by a tiny political elite, reflecting the Javanese culture of kingship, was actually based on the support of business elites, the professional middle classes, Islamists, anti-communist nationalists, traditional rural authorities and the army (Robison 1986). The emphasis on formal institutional change since 1997 neglects the possibility that the same socio-economic and political elites whose interests have long dictated Indonesian policy have

reorganized themselves to capture these new, apparently democratic institutions (Robison and Hadiz 2004).

Focusing narrowly on institutions ignores the wider constellations of social and economic power in which political institutions always develop and which conditions their operation in practice, leading to rather naïve views of the impact of democratization. Scholars too often assume that democratization naturally produces a 'shift from a realist to a more liberal perspective' (Dosch 2006: 46). It is simply seen as a 'logical consequence of domestic political change that the … most democratic states in Southeast Asia … should have been driving forces in the quest for a regional commitment to democracy and human rights' (Dosch 2009: 84). However, as many political economists have demonstrated, formally democratic regimes can in fact harbour highly illiberal practices, suggesting that institutions matter less than the social forces mediated through them. Rüland's (2009) recent study of the Indonesian parliament's role in foreign policy, for example, suggests that democratization has given vent to highly nationalistic, chauvinistic forces, not liberal ones. Similarly, changes in ASEAN's institutions are seized upon to suggest that 'the closed black box of high policymaking inside ASEAN has finally been pried open' by civil society organizations (Caballero-Anthony 2009: 216–17). Yet studies of the domestic influence of such organizations suggest that they remain profoundly constrained by the power of entrenched political and economic elites, casting doubt upon ebullient assessments of their regional strength (Reid 2006).

This suggests that a different view of the state is necessary in order to properly grasp the implications of social conflict for state power and for regional security policy. Rather than being seen as neutral apparatuses or sets of institutions, states are better understood as expressions of power. Far from being autonomous from their societies, even the most authoritarian states are actually interpenetrated with them in complex ways (Poulantzas 1976; Jessop 2008). Social forces – understood as ethnic and religious groups and especially classes and class fractions – struggle against one another to impress their interests and ideologies as *raison d'état*. They use a variety of means to do so, cultivating relations with or even capturing parts of state apparatuses, or using their social and economic power to frustrate and undermine official policy and ensure that, in practice, it is their interests which are realized. Because the capacity of different social forces to achieve these ends varies enormously, and because different state forms afford starkly divergent opportunities for them to do so, state power 'reflects and essentially underpins the prevailing hierarchies of power embodied in the social order' (Hewison *et al.* 1993: 6).

As other chapters of this volume have explored, in Southeast Asia states have been captured by groups made dominant by the legacies of colonial rule, Cold War strategies and state-led economic development: principally, a highly illiberal, frequently predatory, oligarchic elite. This has influenced foreign and security policy in several ways. Dominant societal forces are often able to capture state apparatuses directly and use them instrumentally, shaping them to suit their own purposes. This both shapes the overall contour of foreign and security policy and produces specific policy outcomes. A particularly egregious example is tycoon-turned-politician Thaksin Shinawatra, who became Thailand's foreign minister in the mid-1990s and prime minister from 2001–6. In 1994, his company, ShinCorp, was reportedly involved alongside officers of Thailand's National Security Council in a failed coup attempt against Cambodian prime minister Hun Sen, which was designed to advance the business interests of Thaksin and his allies (Jones 2010: 488). Thaksin also used his ministerial roles to acquire lucrative contracts for ShinCorp's subsidiary, Sattel, in Burma; correspondingly, he always promoted a soft line towards Burma's military regime (Pasuk and Baker 2004: 213; McCargo and Ukrist 2005: 54–5). This sort of instrumental control of state policy by oligarchic interests helps explain why, as one analyst wryly remarks, 'nothing drives government policy in Southeast Asia like the smell of money' (Ott 1998: 73).

The interpenetration of state apparatuses with different, potentially oppositional social forces also leads to social conflicts being played out within states themselves, generating incoherence in security policy. In the early 1990s, for example, the Thai government officially ceased its support for the guerrilla movements it had sponsored in Cambodia during the Cold War. However, various military, bureaucratic and business elites had established lucrative relationships with the guerrillas, relying on their cooperation to dominate the cross-border, black-market trade in arms, gems, timber and other commodities. These forces lobbied vociferously against, and essentially ignored, government policy. Army and police units simply continued to work with the guerrillas in order to line their own pockets (Rungswasdisab 2006: 103–11). The ability of powerful interests to control how state apparatuses are used in practice thus led to official policy being completely undermined and for Thailand to violate United Nations Security Council embargoes designed to assist the Cambodian peace process.

The influence that oligarchic elites exercise within state apparatuses, the economy and society more broadly also enables them to constrain state policy even when they do not control governments directly. In 1997, for example, the Asian financial crisis led to the downfall of the oligarchic Chavalit government in Thailand and its replacement by the reformist, neoliberal Democrat Party, which is based largely in the Bangkok middle class. Despite the change in government, the new foreign minister cautioned that

> The task of balancing the interests between the more progressive and entrenched establishment interests is a delicate one. Foreign policy cannot get ahead of social factors. Foreign policy must reflect the domestic structure; must reflect the existing social structure altogether. If foreign policy is internally contradictory, the benefits gained would fall short of their potential. For example, if our policy of promoting human rights and democracy hurts the interests of our traders along the border, the policy will encounter domestic political resistance and be ultimately unsustainable.
>
> *(Surin 1998)*

'Social structure' thus operates as a constraint on official policy, even at a distance. This is not simply because governments fear electoral defeat, but because dominant social forces are able to condition whether and how state apparatuses actually perform their officially assigned functions.

The distinctive nature of state power in Southeast Asia thus powerfully affects state policy and its practical implications.[2] From this 'bottom-up' perspective it is insufficient to make only ad hoc references to domestic developments or focus solely on formal declarations or institutions to explain the scope and content of regional security policy. If we wish to understand state policy we need to understand the strategy and interests of the specific social forces implicated in a given issue area and analyse the ways in which these forces constrain and enable state managers to respond. We will now apply this approach to analyse regional policy towards Burma.

## Regional policy towards Burma

Burma's military-dominated regime, which stands accused of repeated human rights abuses and of generating serious transnational security threats, has become a major international political issue over the last two decades. Liberal critics in the West and Southeast Asia often criticize ASEAN for tolerating rather than dealing forcefully with the threats the Burmese regime creates to regional security. The Association's non-interference principle is often cited to explain this reaction. In reality, ASEAN states have frequently violated non-interference when dealing with Burma. They have, for example, increasingly criticized the repression of opposition forces and have repeatedly

sought a role to play in Burma's process of 'national reconciliation' (Jones 2008). 'Non-interference' is thus a weak explanation for their failure to respond to Burma as a security threat. Analysing how policy is embedded in broader processes and power relations at the national level provides a better guide to state behaviour. First, it shows that oligarchic business interests, in particular, shape the basic contours of Southeast Asian states' policies towards Burma. Some things which appear as 'transnational security threats' to the region's liberal non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and political parties are actually seen as lucrative opportunities by more powerful oligarchic forces. Parts of state apparatuses are even directly involved in exploiting these opportunities. Second, we can examine how social conflict transforms security policy and the state. When liberalizing forces took control of the Thai government in 1997, they adopted a much more hostile policy towards Burma, identifying transnational flows as security threats, and began reconfiguring the state to act against them. However, this was reversed when oligarchic forces recaptured the state. Third, we can explore how regional states deal with the dilemmas created when gaps emerge between the policies generated by oligarchic domination and the demands of important extra-regional states. Several regional states have created more space for liberal critics to attack Burma, yet the risk of this being used for domestic purposes means that the space is tightly policed.

## *'Threats' as oligarchic opportunities*

Dominant oligarchic interests have been very influential in setting the basic contours of regional policies on Burma. While liberal political parties and civil society groups see transnational flows from Burma, such as refugees, as a challenge to regional security, the region's business oligarchs see them as a commodity to be exploited and thus refuse to 'securitize' them.

Liberal critics in the West and in Southeast Asia have identified various transnational flows produced by military domination in Burma as threats to international security, including high incidences of communicable diseases like HIV/AIDS, forced and illegal migration, and exports of illegal narcotics. An estimated 700,000 Burmese refugees reside in neighbouring countries, as many as two million illegal Burmese migrants live in Thailand, and up to 500,000 are in Malaysia (DLA Piper Rudnick Gray Cary 2005: 56; IOM 2008). Burma exported an estimated $123m-worth of opium in 2008, and around 700m methamphetamine tablets as recently as 2004 (UNODC 2008: 43; Devaney *et al.* 2005: 48). Drug addiction and closely correlated HIV-infection rates in neighbouring countries have steadily grown. ASEAN itself has discursively 'securitized' a number of related issues, in 2000 declaring the goal of a 'drug-free ASEAN' by 2015, issuing a declaration on the protection of migrants in 2005, and expanding regional cooperation to include the combating of HIV/AIDS and transnational crime. However, some Southeast Asian NGOs and liberal politicians argue that this response is merely rhetorical and ineffective. For them, these problems constitute security threats requiring robust, interventionist measures by the United Nations, ASEAN and/or other powers like China and India (see, for example, www.altsean.org, www.aseanmp.org).

The disjuncture between critical interpretations of these threats, ASEAN's official security discourse and what regional states actually do in practice can be explained via the nature of state power in Southeast Asia. Rather than dealing with Burma forcefully as a security threat, ASEAN governments have instead pursued a policy of 'constructive engagement'. Launched in the early 1990s, this policy aimed to transcend the frosty relations of the Cold War era to facilitate trade and investment, encourage pro-market reforms and minimize China's influence in Burma. Although the policy was initially devised by Thai foreign ministry officials with the explicit goal of promoting reforms in Burma, in practice the contours of constructive engagement were principally set by the requirements of ASEAN's business classes. The Burmese and Indochinese

markets were seen as lucrative destinations for accumulated investment capital and a crucial source of raw materials to replace supplies exhausted by ASEAN's long economic boom. The displacement of Thailand's military regime in 1988 by an elected government comprising leading business oligarchs paved the way for these interests to be prioritized in foreign and security policy and for Bangkok to try to turn neighbouring 'battlefields into marketplaces' (Jones 2008: 273–5).

Rapprochement with Burma was pioneered by well-connected senior military officers and state-linked business elites looking to expand their corporate interests into Burma. Many of them were or became involved in politics, like General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, who became Thailand's prime minister in 1996. Thai politico-business elites were followed by Malaysian investors, including the state oil company, Petronas, which sank $587m into twenty-five projects in Burma by 2001, and many Suharto cronies, who invested similar sums. These intimate connections between state and business elites ensured a cautious, non-confrontational approach towards the military regime. The political and economic reforms promoted by neighbouring states as part of 'constructive engagement' were limited to those compatible with this agenda and were commensurate with regional elites' own illiberal styles of domestic governance (Jones 2008: 273–4, 278).

Recognizing the social basis of constructive engagement enables us to understand why the negative externalities of military rule in Burma are apparently accepted with such equanimity by neighbouring states. The vast numbers of Burmese refugees and migrants in Malaysia and Thailand, for example, are widely seen by business leaders not as a security risk but as a source of cheap, exploitable labour. Malaysia's economy depends heavily on foreign labour, with over two million legal and up to a million illegal workers (perhaps half of them Burmese) supplementing the 11.3m-strong domestic workforce. NGO leaders allege that Burmese migrant workers were used to construct the federal capital at Putrajaya, and a recent investigation even alleged the direct involvement of senior state officials in the trafficking of Burmese migrants across the Thai border (Jones 2008: 285; US Congress 2009).

Thai manufacturing, agriculture and fishing is also dependent on the exploitation of predominantly Burmese migrants. The International Labour Organization estimates that migrant labour produces up to 6.2 per cent of Thailand's GDP, or $11bn per year (Martin 2007). As in Malaysia, elements of the Thai state, whatever official government policy may be, are interpenetrated by or identical to the forces enriching themselves through such exploitation. According to Kraisak Choonhavan (2008), the Democrat Party's deputy leader, the National Security Council believes that up to five million Burmese migrants live in Thailand and worries they may soon 'explode with discontentment and anger'. Yet northern businessmen are currently able to quash strikes by 'hir[ing] policemen to do the job of suppression' (Kraisak 2008). The non-governmental Labour Rights Protection Network also alleges the involvement of Thai soldiers in people-trafficking (Ellgee 2009). Senior military officers and their allies on both sides of the border have long been accused of involvement in the black-market trade in drugs, arms and other goods, and Thai army units have reportedly even been bribed by both the Burmese government and rebel groups to intervene in battles across the border (Lintner 1999; Maung 2001: 58, 50–2).

The social, economic and political dominance of illiberal business interests, and their interpenetration with state apparatuses, thus produces an approach towards Burma which tolerates, exploits or even welcomes, rather than securitizing, the transnational flows produced by military rule.

## Social conflict reshapes security policy and states

Illiberal business interests have not always been able to simply impose their interests upon the state. Occasionally, especially in moments of crisis, liberalizing middle-class forces may impose their preferences as government policy. However, due to the interpenetration of state apparatuses

with powerful interests opposed to their agenda, liberalizers often face significant resistance both inside and outside the state. Consequently, they are often compelled to reorganize state apparatuses to pursue their goals. However, the political economy of the region is so weighted against liberalizing political parties that they are often unable to hold power for long, except in alliance with oligarchic groups.

The opponents of constructive engagement tend to be drawn from the liberal section of the middle class, which derives little benefit from the policy and has long been hostile to the Burmese regime. However, because of their subordinate position, liberals have struggled to impose their reading of the situation onto their respective states. The most forceful attempt to do so occurred under the Democrat government in Thailand from 1997 to 2001. Following repeated seizures of Thai personnel and installations by Burmese dissidents in late 1999 and early 2000, the government sealed the border and cracked down on Burmese migrant workers, severely damaging northern business interests (Haacke 2006: 8). The government also reorganized the state apparatus, promoting anti-Burmese reformers to key positions in the army. The new chief of the Thai Army, General Surayud, identified Burmese drugs as the principal threat to Thailand's security in January 2000, and by May, the deputy foreign minister had reportedly backed military raids on drug factories inside Burma, blasting the regime for sheltering narco-traffickers. Surayud endorsed the idea the following month, and armed clashes between the two countries' armies began along the border (Tasker and Crispin 2000; Kavi 2001: 125). The Democrats also tried to dilute ASEAN's non-interference principle, pressing for ASEAN to send a troika of foreign ministers to berate Burma. Outraged oligarchs condemned this ruinous deterioration in bilateral relations, trying to topple Chuan's administration in a parliamentary no-confidence motion (Associated Press 1999).

Despite Surin's warning about the necessity of government policy reflecting the 'social structure' (Surin 1998), the Democrats over-reached the government's wider social limitations. They were soundly defeated by Thaksin Shinawatra's Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party at the 2001 elections, which restored both the oligarchic domination of Thai politics and business as usual with Burma. Thaksin promoted leading Thai oligarchs to cabinet positions, following the Thai Chamber of Commerce's advice to make General Chavalit defence minister and use him to improve bilateral relations (Snitwongse 2001: 201). Thaksin cracked down on Burmese dissidents inside Thailand, renounced Thailand's policy of sponsoring Burmese rebel groups to create a 'buffer zone' along the border, and drastically reorganized the state apparatus, sidelining anti-Burmese reformers in the army and installing his own cronies (Pasuk and Baker 2004: 184–7; McCargo and Ukrist 2005: 131–51). Burma reopened the border to trade and reactivated fishing concessions, while Thai government funds were used to facilitate new investments in Burma, with Chavalit's allies and Thaksin himself rushing to exploit fresh opportunities (Moncrief and Khiel 2002; McCargo and Ukrist 2005: 54–5). The Thaksin government also ended the Democrats' attack on Burma's sovereignty, emphasizing 'non-interference' to justify their new policy. Meanwhile, Thaksin harnessed public concern about narcotics, not to attack Burma but to wage a domestic 'war on drugs' in which over 2,700 people were extra-judicially killed, many of them allegedly local 'godfathers' who had resisted incorporation into TRT networks (McCargo and Ukrist 2005: 227). Thaksin only took a critical line towards Burma when a lucrative free trade deal with the US was threatened in the wake of an anti-opposition crackdown by the junta in 2003 (Jones 2008: 279).

These dramatic reversals in policy, and the reconfigurations of the state which accompanied them, clearly cannot be explained without reference to Thailand's domestic social conflict. Moreover, it is this conflict which determines the state's relationship to ASEAN's non-interference principle, rather than the norm which determines state behaviour.

### *The dilemmas of strategic liberalization*

Challenges to business-friendly policies towards Burma do not merely emanate from the domestic field, however. Particularly since a resurgence of hard-liners in the Burmese regime since 2003, Western states have also applied a great deal of pressure on ASEAN. This has imperilled the external economic and political relationships from which dominant forces benefit. Several Southeast Asian states have therefore allowed more space for domestic critics of Burma, to enhance their standing in Western capitals. However, the risk of this space being exploited to demand *domestic* reforms means that it is often tightly policed. This illustrates that the degree of liberalization in foreign and security policies remains subject to broader structural constraints.

The widening of domestic space is clearest in the Philippines and Indonesia. Since the demise of the Suharto regime and its significant business interests in Burma, dominant groups in these two states have had little interest in defending the Burmese regime. Indeed, Indonesian elites have found playing up their liberal-democratic image a useful way of regaining Western aid in the wake of the Asian financial crisis, and of restating Jakarta's supposed right to lead ASEAN (Emmerson 2007; Rüland 2009). Indonesian legislators are thus happy to criticize military rule in Burma, and have been at the forefront of the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Myanmar Caucus (AIPMC) which campaigns for intervention in Burma. However, because many legislators are drawn from the old elite and benefit from widespread corruption, they have refused to support a similar caucus on 'good governance'. This shows that liberalizing forces are not automatically unleashed by democratization, but remain subject to broader structural constraints on state power (Jones 2009: 398–400).

More authoritarian regimes like those in Cambodia, Singapore and Malaysia have also granted space to critics of Burma from within their own parliaments to help burnish their 'democratic' credentials and distance themselves from the junta. However, the risk that liberalizing opposition parties might use this space to pursue a domestic agenda means that this space remains constrained and policed. Singapore, for instance, has strongly encouraged the AIPMC, but arrested opposition politicians and protest groups for staging their own independent demonstrations against Burma. Similarly, the Malaysian government has ensured that the AIPMC legislators' attacks on Burma do not go so far as to damage state-linked economic interests. They were allowed, for example, to criticize the regime in parliament, but not to pass a resolution calling for sanctions. As an opposition parliamentarian explains, since 'some of the MPs, or the government-linked corporations, like Petronas' retain investments in Burma 'we can't call for sanctions because this will hurt the investors from Malaysia' (Kok 2008). Consequently, even when political space is strategically relaxed, dominant forces can take steps to constrain its use, and entrenched political economy relationships still operate as a background constraint.

The 'social conflict' approach to analysing regional security policies has revealed why Southeast Asian states seem surprisingly indulgent of Burma. What appears as a 'threat' to some social groups may be a lucrative opportunity for others. What matters is less the nature and magnitude of the material flows across borders, but rather their relationship to the interests, ideologies and strategies of key social forces, and the power relations between these forces.

## Implications for other issues: across and upon borders

The approach developed above can potentially help us understand a wide range of 'security' issues. Indeed, it can help shed light on why a region with many so-called 'non-traditional' security threats elicits so little practical cooperation to tackle these threats: the social forces that benefit from or even produce these threats may be too deeply entrenched, or the conflicts among

them too severe, to permit such cooperation. This section indicates how the framework could be applied to analyse environmental governance and border conflicts.

## Haze

Environmental degradation is widespread in Southeast Asia, and occasionally it is securitized. In particular, the annual 'haze' (smog) arising from Indonesian forest fires has become a major political issue. In the worst year, 1997, the haze had a greater impact than the *Exxon Valdez* disaster, affecting the health of seventy million people and costing an estimated $4.5bn (Glover and Jessup 1999). As with the Burma issue, this seems an objective 'threat' requiring decisive action, and certainly environmentalist NGOs make such claims. ASEAN states, which had been discussing environmental issues since 1990, also appeared to securitize the issue in their regional agreement on haze in 2003. However, this agreement remains unratified by the Indonesian parliament, and therefore offers no basis for Malaysia and Singapore, the worst-affected countries, to take action. The 2006 haze was almost as severe as that in 1997, suggesting that this problem is far from resolved.

The barrier to effective cooperation against this 'threat' is not, as IR scholars would again have it, ASEAN's non-interference principle. Rather, as Tay explains, it is 'certain agro-industrial firms, ambitious politicians, and venal officials who mutually benefit from cheaply burning off land to plant cash crops' in Indonesia, and the 'corruption and collusion between some of the large plantation firms that use fire and the officials who are supposed to control and suppress such illegal acts' (Tay 2009: 233). The Indonesian military – and perhaps the police – relies on illegal activities, including logging, to raise at least half of its operational costs, and powerful agri-business magnates are able to dominate state institutions and corrupt judicial outcomes at the local and even national levels (ICG 2001; Matthew and Van Gelder, 2002). It is thus unsurprising that the ASEAN haze agreement remains unratified and no decisive action has been taken against polluters.

Why are the Singaporean and Malaysian governments reluctant to take unilateral action against haze producers inside Indonesia? Partly, they are doubtless afraid of evoking a pre-dictable, hostile response from the Indonesian state. However, they may also wish to avoid other repercussions that are not so clearly apparent. Indonesian ministers have called for Malaysia and Singapore, as the main export destinations for illegal timber, to help stem unlawful logging in Indonesia. Tay (2009) dismisses this as merely diversionary. However, this overlooks the fact that key agri-businesses involved in slash-and-burn operations, like Asia-Pacific Resources International Holdings Ltd (APRIL), are actually headquartered in Singapore and operate processing facilities in Malaysian Borneo (Matthew and Van Gelder 2002: 14–15). APRIL is just one of the many Indonesian businesses, led by one of the ethnic Chinese mag-nates who dominate the regional economy, which benefited hugely from state patronage under Suharto before relocating to Singapore to escape financial reckoning during the 1997 Asian financial crisis (Studwell 2007: esp. 163–7). It reminds us that a full explanation of trans-boundary 'security' issues is rarely complete without taking into account the complex and evolving transnational organization of economic, social and political power.

## Border Conflicts

The 'social conflict' approach may also help in analysing more 'traditional' security issues, such as border disputes. Take, for example, the Thai–Cambodian border conflict, which has been raging since July 2008 and has involved vitriolic diplomatic exchanges, repeated incursions of Thai

forces into Cambodia, and even armed clashes. Ostensibly, the dispute concerns a few square miles of scrubland adjacent to the Preah Vihear temple, which was granted to Cambodia by an International Court of Justice ruling in 1962. In fact, the conflict has virtually nothing to do with territory or border 'security' at all; its roots lie firmly in Thailand's domestic social conflicts.

The dispute emerged as part of an effort to topple the Thai government in 2008. The government was led by the People's Power Party (PPP), which won a plurality of votes in the first democratic elections following the military coup that overthrew the Thaksin government in 2006. The TRT had been forcibly disbanded but had simply reconstituted itself as the PPP and quickly seized power thanks to continued support from the rural poor. Consequently, the same forces that had opposed Thaksin in 2006 now lined up against the PPP. This alliance spanned the middle classes, big businessmen disgruntled at Thaksin's monopolization of lucrative opportunities, and the palace network, including politico-business and military and bureaucratic elites who resented Thaksin's growing encroachment on their turf (Connors and Hewison 2008).

These forces, led in parliament by the Democrats, began agitating against the government in a way which directly precipitated conflict with Cambodia. Using courts stuffed with anti-Thaksin judges during the military interregnum, they launched a series of highly politicized lawsuits against the PPP. In a so-called 'judicial coup', the courts first ruled that the PPP must disband due to electoral irregularities. The PPP simply reconstituted itself as Puea Thai and carried on. The courts then targeted individual ministers for prosecution, forcing the resignation of Prime Minister Samak Sundraravej over the hosting of a television cookery show. The border dispute began when Foreign Minister Noppadon Pattama supported Cambodia's bid for UNESCO recognition of Preah Vihear as a world heritage site. Democrat legislators (falsely) claimed that the government had thereby unconstitutionally alienated Thai territory, initiating another lawsuit. The constitutional court ruled in favour of the Democrat suit. Noppadon was forced to resign, and the government had to send politically unreliable troops to the border. Clashes were then inevitable.

The border conflict was thus triggered by the entirely opportunistic use of a long-dormant interstate dispute for purely domestic purposes. It has persisted because despite the Democrats having lured away a Puea Thai faction in December 2008, enabling them to finally dislodge their enemies and form a coalition government, the social conflict underpinning the country's political upheaval is far from resolved. The farmers, workers and oligarchs loyal to Thaksin are refusing to simply submit to the middle classes and elites clustered around the palace. On the contrary, this intense social struggle has produced open violence on the streets on several occasions, notably the massacre of 90 red-shirted protestors in April 2010. In opposition, Puea Thai has mimicked the Democrats' opportunistic use of Preah Vihear to advance their position in this conflict, attacking the Democrats in March 2009 for 'losing' 250 metres of territory by ignoring the construction of a new Cambodian road to the temple. Thus, troops remain stationed along the border, producing continued tensions and territorial violations. Reflecting what is really at stake at Preah Vihear, Cambodia's prime minister retaliated by appointing Thaksin as his economic adviser in November 2009. The border dispute is thus unlikely to end any sooner than the profound social conflicts in which it is firmly rooted in Thailand.

## Conclusions

This chapter has argued that the roots of security policy in Southeast Asia are best sought not in the realm where abstract norms and national interests supposedly hold sway, but rather in the domestic social conflicts that shape state power and policy. The particular nature of the region's

social and economic development has created powerful forces which are able to either directly capture or indirectly impose their wishes on the state, or organize themselves in ways that frustrate policy implementation or bend it to their interests. A proper understanding of international security issues is impossible without exploring their relationship to the strategies and interests of important societal groups. Many regional security issues are intractable precisely because they are rooted in obdurate social conflicts, or because they relate to particularly entrenched interests. To ignore this relationship inevitably produces naïve, technocratic policy prescriptions that have no realistic chance of being adopted, in the short term at least, given the social constraints faced by governments.

This in turn helps to explain why it is often so difficult to get states to sign up to instruments of global governance or to meet their obligations under such instruments. Take, for example, environmental governance, which is an increasingly important issue on the global security agenda and the focus of growing numbers of multilateral treaties and institutions. Issues like climate change, air pollution, forest depletion and species extinction are increasingly acknowledged in Southeast Asia's regional security discourse. However, the actual formulation and implementation of policies is filtered through dominant domestic interests. Regional states have long been in league with rapacious corporate interests, embracing porous borders and pursuing deregulation in neighbouring territories to help shift environmental exploitation into spaces where political mobilization around green issues is less effective (Pangsapa and Smith 2008). States are also reluctant to join and implement global accords around these issues because natural resources are often exploited by networks directly connected to politico-security elites who benefit from off-budget revenues and other collusive relationships (Talbott and Brown 1998; Smith *et al.* 2003). To the extent that environmental governance does occur it is likely to take an 'authoritarian' form which will reinforce dominant interests (Beeson 2010).

However, as we have seen, security policy is not simply an unfettered expression of the interests of dominant forces. Rather, states and their policies are contingent outcomes of struggles for power and control. As Thailand's relations with Burma and Cambodia show, social conflict can generate dramatic shifts in policy as competing groups reorganize the state to promote their ideologies and interests. The future of security policy in Southeast Asia will thus depend on the ongoing social, economic and political transformation of the region. In many key states, despite the persistence of oligarchic power, middle-class oppositional movements are becoming more influential, particularly in Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia. Furthermore, they are beginning to organize themselves internationally, through bodies like inter-parliamentary caucuses on Myanmar and good governance (for legislators), and the ASEAN People's Forum (for NGOs). Growing popular disillusionment with government corruption, collusion and nepotism has doubtless compelled the creation of new national and regional institutions, and public commitments to liberal values.

However, new institutions and discourse do not automatically guarantee progressive outcomes. While institutions created to perpetuate oligarchic rule in a more 'legitimate' form can occasionally be exploited by reformists in unexpected ways (Rodan 2008), the risk of co-optation is ever-present. Rather than building up independent social bases to enhance their power, middle-class reformists have historically preferred to demand 'good governance' and technocratic rule merely to advance their own narrow interests, adopting explicitly *anti*-democratic insurrectionist strategies and expressing disdain for the 'backwards', corruptible masses (Thomson 2007). This strategy has led many reformists into deeply compromising alliances with entrenched, conservative forces (Reid 2006; Kitirianglarp and Hewison 2009). Even if this strategy was reversed, the region's entrenched political economy relationships so profoundly 'undermine cohesive, independent, collective political action' that real political transformation 'requires a transformation in the

political economy' (Rodan and Jayasuriya 2009: 43). Reformers are therefore necessarily playing a very long game.

## Notes

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1 There are of course important exceptions, notably Etel Solingen's often neglected liberal analyses of Southeast Asian regional cooperation (e.g. Solingen 2005). However, even Solingen's work remains limited by its reliance on ideal-typical coalitions which ill-fit the Southeast Asian context.

2 It is worth pointing out that while the specific detail here applies to Southeast Asian states, the general theoretical argument and analytical method is universally applicable, including to the 'great' powers. For example, US policy towards Latin America during much of the Cold War is arguably incomprehensible without taking into account the interests of American corporations like the United Fruit Company.

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