

The Myth and Dogma of Non-Interference

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In the political culture of the 31-year old Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the principle of non-interference in internal affairs is well ensconced. Like the photo of an ancestor on the altar, ASEAN leaders pay tribute to it. Like mesmerized devotees, they mumbled the word and the organization was healed. Scholars too have credited the rule for the staying power of the organization born in critical times. Not that non-interference preempted troubles from brewing, but it at least supposedly prevented the organization from cracking up.

Thanks to non-interference, however, everyone turned a blind eye as gross violations of human rights peppered the record of many Southeast Asian regimes. In both the Philippines and Malaysia, protesters exercising their legitimate rights were blocked from, if not arrested for, organizing public fora for no-no issues like the killing of protesters in East Timor. The argument apparently was that Indonesia was not worth offending for the sake of one of its alleged provinces, East Timor. No matter that the United Nations has not recognized Indonesia's opportunistic annexation of the territory. No matter the massacres and rapes committed by the Suharto military against Timorese protesters.

For allegedly violating the cardinal rule of non-intervention when it deployed its troops to overthrow Pol Pot and propped up the Heng Samrin and Hun Sen government, Vietnam was cut off from the brotherhood for two decades. Moreover, devastated Cambodia was deprived of humanitarian assistance. The murderous Khmer Rouge (in an unholy alliance with Sihanouk and other smaller forces) was supported and upheld in the international community, the same community that now wants to earn the honor of putting the unrepentant remnants of the Khmer Rouge on trial.

Despite the dogma embraced by the keepers of the faith, the fact is non-interference is a myth. During the Cold War period, member-countries allowed the use of national resources to prevent dreaded scenarios — mostly in the form of an anticipated communist victory. Didn't Thailand and Malaysia allow their militaries to engage in hot pursuit of insurgents in their common border? How, too, can ASEAN countries

like the Philippines and Thailand explain the use of their territories for staging air and naval attacks against Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s?

Consistency apparently is not the hallmark of ASEAN leaders. In his long political career, Singapore senior minister Lee Kuan Yew never had qualms giving his neighbors a piece of his mind. Remember his injunction to President Ramos for more discipline and less democracy? Indonesia also played an active mediation role in the peace talks between the Ramos administration and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), a part that necessitated putting pressure on both parties to make up or bust.

The malleability of the dogma in the hands of the ASEAN's political elites has never been more evident than when Cambodia was shut out from the ASEAN to protest Hun Sen's ouster of the Ranariddh faction in the coalition government in July 1997. On the other hand, Burma's military junta — the loser in the 1990 election who, chalking up a measly 20 percent of votes, arrested the winning candidates of the National League of Democracy, and continued its iron-grip rule — was welcomed into the fold.

The case of Burma apparently was justified by the modified formula of constructive engagement. Constructive engagement meant that rather than isolate, one must continue to engage the other and develop ties — as in President Ramos's state visit to Burma — in the hope that by constant interaction, some of your own beliefs will rub off on the other party. Constructive engagement did not contradict non-interference, it certainly justified waltzing with dictators.

Thailand, who absorbs the spillover of the Burmese crisis in the form of human traffic, now sees the merit of a more proactive ASEAN. (Shame on the Philippines for being too timid to pose the challenge years ago when it started priding itself as the most democratic country in Southeast Asia.) Because it shares borders with four other Southeast Asian countries, Thailand has traditionally been most anxious about trouble in the mainland neighborhood. Its appeal to the ASEAN to help out on this account has often been confined to low-key requests, to which it got the same feeble personal assurances. Non-interference has really not been any different from a sweep-under-the-rug policy.

The proposal of Thai Foreign Minister Surin to shift from constructive to flexible engagement (diplomatese for being able to criticize when needed) is a move that has taken too long to come, and our foreign secretary's concurrence at least compensates for our servility in the foreign affairs scene. Not surprisingly, Indonesia put up the greatest resistance to the suggestion. It is a tribute to the smugness of other Southeast Asian countries that Indonesia prevailed on the matter despite the fact that its government may not even be around by next year.

So we are ending up with a compromised formula euphemistically called enhanced interaction when what the region needs are wider parameters for future action, necessary to be able to respond well to the expected heightening of intra- and inter-state troubles surrounding the regional financial crisis. The fate of migrant workers in each others' territories, increased activities of drugs and other criminal syndicates, wanton transnational piracy, influx of refugees, environmental disasters, and even more political instability — these issues may stem from domestic contexts but they easily spill over across the borders.

Flexible, critical engagement need not always be confrontation nor exclusive of personal, low-key, unofficial diplomacy. It does not mean interfering in all of each other's affairs nor wanton giving of unsolicited advice. No mature relationship is founded on nagging, tantrums and loose talk. The ASEAN can be effective interlocutors of each other if they work responsibly toward the maturation of this form of cooperation. The professional mediation role played by Indonesia in the GRP-MNLF talks is widely acknowledged for its positive contribution to the success of the talks. (If the Indonesian government was able to use its role in the talks to make President Ramos clamp down on the East Timor campaigns in the Philippines, it was only because our own government acted like a wimp.) Standing firm on certain conditionalities during last year's Cambodian crisis helped in setting in place a resolution process that led to the fairly well conducted election this year.

Engagement can and must be confrontational when necessary. Why can't the same ASEAN show more will in the case of Myanmar? If it sticks to this hallowed (or hollow) defense of non-intervention, ASEAN will go down in history as one of the few remaining props that kept the military junta in Burma upright, while the Burmese people died one by one in their own country's prison cells. ❁