

Burma and North Korea: Smoke or fire?
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Over the past few months, there has been a spate of reports in the media accusing Burma and North Korea of engaging in bilateral activities that have serious consequences for regional—and possibly even global—security. If they are accurate, these reports would be grounds for considerable concern. Before drawing any firm conclusions, however, it is important to separate what is actually known from what is assumed, or the product of speculation. Also, despite being reported together, some of these developments may not in fact be connected, in which case they deserve a more considered treatment than they have received to date.

Six headlines

Apart from occasional stories about the Burmese Government's human rights violations—most recently its harsh treatment of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi—Burma does not often feature in the mainstream news media. North Korea is mentioned much more often, but until recently was rarely linked with its fellow 'outpost of tyranny' (as the two countries were once described by Condoleezza Rice). In a remarkable confluence of events, however, since the beginning of June there have been six developments that have tied Burma and North Korea together in the news media, and in the public imagination.

The first development was the publication on 9 June of several photographs showing underground facilities being constructed in Burma. Over the following weeks, more photographs were released, purporting to reveal a 'network of secret bomb-proof tunnels'. It was claimed by the opposition Democratic Voice of Burma that between 600 and 800 such tunnels were being built, all with the help of North Korea. The purpose of these facilities was not clear, but activists and Burmese exile groups were quick to cite the photographs as evidence of nefarious dealings between Naypyidaw and Pyongyang.

The second development was the departure from North Korea on 17 June of the cargo vessel *Kang Nam 1*, apparently bound for Rangoon. It was claimed that, in violation of a UN Security Council resolution earlier that month, the ship was carrying 'Scud-type missiles', nuclear weapon components or even nuclear weapons. The *Kang Nam 1* was shadowed by a US naval vessel until 29 June, when it turned around and headed back

home. Pyongyang later stated that the ship had been forced to return by bad weather, but it was widely believed that North Korea wished to avoid an inspection of the ship when it stopped in Singapore to refuel.

The third development took place on 21 July, when US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton spoke at a press conference in Thailand, where she was attending the ASEAN Summit. Although her remarks were focused on North Korea, she told reporters that the US took seriously growing concerns about military cooperation between Pyongyang and Naypyidaw. She said that such cooperation 'would be destabilising for the region' and 'pose a direct threat to Burma's neighbours'. The Secretary of State revealed that the US's concerns included 'the transfer of nuclear technology and other dangerous weapons' from North Korea to Burma.

Two days after these remarks, Japanese police announced that they had issued a second warrant for the arrest of Ri Gyong Go, president of the Toko Boeki Trading Company, who was suspected of illegally exporting to Burma an instrument for grinding magnets. According to press reports, this device could be used to develop missile control systems and centrifuge machines for uranium enrichment. Ri had shipped the grinder to Burma in November 2008. He was initially arrested on 29 June 2009, however, on suspicion of attempting to export to Burma another machine, reportedly 'for developing missiles'.

Also in July, Burmese opposition groups claimed to have obtained an official report of the visit to North Korea in December 2008 of a delegation led by Burma's Joint Chief of Staff, General Thura Shwe Mann. The report described the inspection of several military bases and arms factories. More importantly, perhaps, it referred to a draft Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) outlining proposals for even closer defence cooperation between the two countries. The MOU covered such matters as North Korean assistance with military training programs and the construction of underground bunkers and arms shelters in Burma.

These five stories prepared the ground for publication on 1 August of reports in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age*, claiming that Naypyidaw had embarked on a secret nuclear weapons program. These reports cited the claims of two Burmese 'defectors', that in 2002 the regime had secretly begun to build a nuclear reactor and hide it underground, with North Korean help. The project reportedly included all the essential components of a uranium enrichment program and it has been suggested that if everything proceeded according to plan Burma would be capable of producing one bomb per year, every year, from as early as 2014.

Both individually and collectively, these developments have created quite a sensation. They have also prompted a number of important questions, many of which remain unanswered. With these problems in mind, it is worth putting these reports into a broader context and examining them more closely. For, considered from a more critical perspective, the picture is not as clear as it might first appear.

The historical background

Since they both achieved independence in 1948, Burma and North Korea have enjoyed a checkered relationship. Burma supported the UN forces during the Korean War, but after the 1953 armistice it established good

working relations with both Koreas. Burma established full diplomatic relations with both states in 1975. During the 1960s and 1970s, the Ne Win Government took pains to balance the competing demands of both North Korea and South Korea for diplomatic support and trade. However, the relationship with Pyongyang became slightly stronger than that with Seoul, as Ne Win and the Burma Socialist Programme Party forged direct links with Kim Il-sung and the Korean Workers Party.

The relationship with North Korea collapsed in 1983, however, after Pyongyang sent three agents to Rangoon to assassinate South Korean President Chun Doo Hwan, who was making a state visit to Burma. Chun survived the bomb attack, but seventeen South Korean and four Burmese officials were killed. Ne Win not only considered the incident a gross violation of Burma's sovereignty, but also a personal insult. He severed diplomatic relations between Rangoon and Pyongyang and even withdrew recognition of North Korea as an independent state. Kim Il-sung later made several attempts to restore ties, but was repeatedly rebuffed.

Ironically, it was Burma's ostracism by the West after the abortive 1988 pro-democracy uprising that gave North Korea its chance to re-establish ties. Shunned by its usual aid donors and arms suppliers, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) in Rangoon turned increasingly to China and former Eastern bloc countries for assistance. Also, it developed relationships with other states that were out of favour with the US. Discreet contacts were made with North Korea in the early 1990s, and a number of official visits followed. Full diplomatic relations were restored in 2007. Even before then, however, there were a number of bilateral agreements and arms sales.

Reliable information is scarce, but it seems that in 1990 Burma purchased small arms ammunition from North Korea, probably through intermediaries. This deal was reportedly followed in 1998 by the purchase of a dozen or so field guns. Around 2002, Rangoon appears to have opened discussions with Pyongyang about the purchase of one or two small submarines. The following year there were reliable reports that Burma's military leaders had expressed interest in acquiring some Scud-type short range ballistic missiles (SRBM). These deals do not appear to have gone ahead, probably because of US representations to the Burmese Government.

The periodic visit of North Korean freighters to Rangoon since then, and the secrecy surrounding their cargoes, has led to speculation that other deliveries of conventional arms and military equipment have occurred. For example, there were reports in 2007 that North Korea had supplied Burma with some truck-mounted multiple launch rocket systems. Claims have also been made regarding the possible sale to Burma of ship-to-ship, surface-to-air and surface-to-surface missiles. The latter category was said to include Scud-type SRBMs. None of these arms deals, however, have yet been confirmed.

The bilateral relationship seemed to reach a turning point in 2003. That year, North Korean technicians were observed on Burmese military bases. Also, the *Far Eastern Economic Review* reported that North Korean aircraft had unloaded heavy equipment in central Burma, near the site of a proposed Russian nuclear reactor. It also reported the presence in Burma of the Daesong Economic Group, which had a record of conducting clandestine activities on behalf of Pyongyang. Later news stories claimed that North Korea's notorious Namchongang Trading Company had sold equipment to Burma which could be used for a nuclear program.

The clear implication of these reports was that North Korea was helping Burma with a clandestine nuclear program, either in addition to, or in place of, the Russian reactor project.

Since then, there has been a steady trickle of news stories accusing Burma and North Korea of conducting a range of illicit activities. Many of these reports have originated with Burmese exiles and other activists, and have lacked hard evidence. Even so, it has become evident that North Korea has developed strong military ties with the Burmese regime (known after 1997 as the State Peace and Development Council, or SPDC). The links between these two pariah states has caused unease in Washington and among Burma's neighbours. The actual nature of the bilateral relationship, however, remains the subject of considerable debate.

Rumours and realities

Over the past twenty years, Burma has made a major effort to increase its military capabilities and improve its defence infrastructure. This has included the construction of various underground facilities—although the figure of 600–800 'tunnels' cited by activist groups is probably too high. It would be logical for Naypyidaw to ask Pyongyang to assist in this program. Both are authoritarian regimes fearful of external intervention, particularly by the US. Pyongyang needs Burmese primary products, which Naypyidaw can use to barter for North Korean arms. Also, North Korea has considerable experience in underground construction.

Many of these underground facilities are probably for military purposes, such as command bunkers, air raid shelters and protective tunnels for vehicles and weapon systems. Ever since the Gulf War, Burma's generals have feared an attack from the air and have taken measures to protect against such a threat. However, many of the tunnels pictured are quite modest and, despite efforts at concealment, would be vulnerable to attack by a modern air force equipped with the latest weapons. Some are more likely to be related to civil engineering projects. None of the photos support claims of a secret nuclear reactor, or nuclear weapons project.

Similarly, the press coverage of the *Kang Nam 1* is another case of the public commentary running ahead of the facts. The ship was indeed going to Rangoon—this was not known at the time—but it returned to North Korea at Naypyidaw's request. Its cargo remains a mystery. Reports from anonymous sources that it was carrying Scud-type missiles have not been confirmed. The claim that it was transporting nuclear weapon components, or even nuclear weapons, is even less credible. Indeed, the most recent US news reports suggest that the ship may have only been carrying conventional small arms.

Before claims that the *Kang Nam 1* was carrying strategic weapons or arms-related equipment to Burma are dismissed out of hand, however, it is worth remembering the export of sensitive dual-use technology from Japan in 2008, and the attempt to do so again earlier this year. These are not the only occasions when the Naypyidaw regime has tried to acquire high-precision machinery for which there have been few logical explanations—apart, that is, from the manufacture of weapons or weapon components. In 2006 and 2007, for example, Burma imported some machine tools from Europe which aroused the suspicions of analysts.

Yet such purchases do not necessarily mean that the SPDC is engaged in a secret program to develop weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Burma has a large defence industrial complex, capable of building weapons and weapon platforms ranging from landmines to frigate-sized naval vessels. Faced with the threat of a more comprehensive arms embargo after 1988, the regime has sought to reduce its dependence on external suppliers. It is possible that Burma is trying to develop a capability to manufacture more sophisticated arms. The report on Shwe Mann's visit to North Korea suggested that Burma wishes to produce its own SRBMs.

Also, while some of the claims made by the Burmese 'defectors' are plausible, their testimony needs to be treated with caution. Defectors are not always reliable or disinterested sources. Some of the claims cited in the press recently are clearly incorrect—construction of the Russian reactor, for example, has not yet begun. Other statements have lacked the necessary context. For example, hundreds (not thousands) of Burmese officials may have gone to Russia for nuclear-related training, but many were young and inexperienced, and struggled to complete their courses.

Burma and North Korea have come a long way over the past ten years, from a very cool relationship to one in which the two countries now share close ties. North Korea is selling Burma conventional arms, sharing its military expertise and experience, and helping it upgrade its defence infrastructure. That much seems certain. The US believes Pyongyang may also be passing on nuclear technology to Naypyidaw. It is still not known, however, whether North Korea is helping Burma secretly to build a nuclear reactor and uranium enrichment facilities, with the eventual aim of producing a nuclear weapon.

Burma's nuclear ambitions

Of all Southeast Asian countries, Burma arguably has the strongest strategic rationale to develop nuclear weapons. Ever since 1988, Burma's military leaders have feared external intervention, possibly even an invasion to restore democratic rule. These fears have waxed and waned over the past twenty years, but they have never gone away. Indeed, they have been kept alive by the aggressive rhetoric levelled against the regime by influential members of the international community, the economic sanctions and embargoes imposed against Burma, and the support openly given to the country's opposition movement.

There has never been the serious prospect of an invasion, but it would be a mistake to underestimate the impact such threat perceptions have had on the regime's security policies. Some generals—possibly including regime leader Senior General Than Shwe—are clearly attracted to the idea of acquiring a nuclear weapon, in the belief that possession of WMD would give Burma the same status and bargaining power that they believe is now enjoyed by North Korea. The key question, however, is whether this is just wishful thinking, or if there has been a serious attempt by the regime to pursue a nuclear weapons program.

In 2000, when the SPDC announced that it was going to purchase a small research reactor from Russia, activist groups warned that the generals were not to be trusted. They accused the regime of secretly planning to develop a nuclear weapon, to threaten the international community and resist pressures to reform. Activists cited the regime's long record of duplicity, its abiding fear

of external intervention, and its customary disregard for international norms of behaviour. They dismissed assurances that the Russian reactor was for peaceful research and would be placed under International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards.

After 2003, others—including some influential figures in Washington—warned against Burma's relationship with North Korea, a known proliferator of sensitive nuclear technologies.

At the time, these suspicions were greeted with scepticism. Burma had a long record of opposition to nuclear weapons proliferation and was party to all the major disarmament treaties. Burma's financial reserves and its level of technological development were very low. It was struggling even to maintain its basic civil infrastructure. Also, the country's higher education system had virtually collapsed. After an inspection tour in 2001, the IAEA declared Burma to be completely unready for the construction of even a small research reactor.

Since then, however, these problems may have been overcome. Thanks to natural gas sales, Burma now has large, untapped foreign exchange reserves that could be used to fund a nuclear program. The armed forces can boast an extensive network of new training, research and development institutions. Russia is providing technical training for a large number of Burmese servicemen and officials, including in the nuclear field. Some sophisticated equipment has been imported, and it is possible that sensitive nuclear technologies have been provided to Burma by North Korea.

In these circumstances, the conundrum of whether or not Burma has embarked on a clandestine nuclear weapons program may now depend more on issues to do with intention and political will, than matters of resources, expertise and practical management.

The official silence

All these developments have raised concerns, but without hard evidence, few of the claims made about a secret nuclear reactor or a clandestine nuclear weapons program in Burma can be verified. Some news reports have raised more questions than provided answers. Perhaps the most intriguing question—at least for many strategic analysts—is why no government or international organisation has yet made any official statement specifically addressing this subject, despite all the articles and blogs published about it since 2000.

The Bush Administration had no love for Burma's military government. For eight years, it took every opportunity to criticise the regime, loudly and publicly. At the same time, the US Government stated that nuclear proliferation was one of its highest policy priorities. It made numerous statements condemning countries like Iraq, Iran, Syria and North Korea, that it believed were pursuing nuclear weapons programs, or proliferating nuclear technologies. At no time, however, did the US Government ever accuse the Naypyidaw regime of trying to build a secret reactor or develop nuclear weapons, with or without North Korean assistance.

Throughout this period, Washington was watching developments in Burma closely. More than two years ago, the US knew about the Burmese 'defectors' on whose testimony the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age*

based their recent stories. Indeed, both papers have suggested that a third Burmese defector was 'picked up' by US intelligence agencies last year, presumably to be interviewed about Naypyidaw's WMD ambitions. Yet, even when armed with the apparent revelations of all these defectors, the Bush Administration remained conspicuously silent about Burma's nuclear status.

As rumours of a secret nuclear program grew in frequency and scope, the Administration came under increasing pressure from activists, Burmese exile groups and certain members of Congress to openly accuse Naypyidaw of developing nuclear weapons, with North Korea's help. Yet it steadfastly refused to do so. This remained the case even in 2005 and 2006, when Washington conducted a campaign in the UN Security Council for Burma to be branded 'a threat to international peace and security'.

It is difficult to escape the conclusion that the Bush Administration felt obliged to remain silent on this issue largely because it did not feel there was sufficient reliable evidence on which to make a public case against Naypyidaw and Pyongyang.

Since taking office, the Obama Administration has investigated this matter as part of its comprehensive review of the US's Burma policy. Yet, it too has been very cautious in its public comments. In July, for example, incoming Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell told Congress that he would watch all external support for Burma's nuclear development, including from Russia and North Korea, but he did not comment on a secret WMD program. In Thailand, Hillary Clinton did not specify that North Korea was passing Burma nuclear *weapons* technology. Nor has the subject been raised in other public forums—such as the IAEA—where nuclear proliferation is routinely discussed.

Following Hillary Clinton's remarks in July, the State Department said that the US did not have 'a good sense of the military cooperation between Burma and North Korea'. Following publication of the stories in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age* on 1 August, the Department was specifically questioned about claims of a clandestine Burmese nuclear program. Three times in as many days its spokesman refused to comment, other than to say it was an intelligence matter. (Off the record, however, one senior official has described reports of a secret nuclear reactor in Burma as 'unsubstantiated rumours'.)

Other governments have been a little more forthcoming, but none have confirmed the existence of a secret WMD program. In 2006, for example, the UK Government said that it was 'not able to corroborate' reports about the alleged transfer of nuclear technology from North Korea to Burma. The UK also stated that no uranium was being processed in Burma, and denied that Burma had operational enrichment facilities. Nor was the UK aware of any Burmese uranium exports. More information may have become available since then, but in August 2009 senior Thai officials refuted the Australian news reports that Burma was building a secret nuclear reactor.

Policy challenges

In tackling this issue at a policy level, governments and international organisations face a number of seemingly intractable problems.

The first problem is the difficulty of determining whether or not Burma actually has a secret nuclear program. This is clearly proving a real challenge, even to those agencies with enormous resources and highly sophisticated

technologies. Nuclear reactors and all the associated processing facilities are not easy to conceal. If there was such a program, however, the Naypyidaw regime would be sufficiently aware of recent history to try and hide—or at least disguise—the usual signatures. In this regard, it could seek advice from North Korea, which has considerable experience in the field.

Understandably, foreign officials looking at this issue are being very cautious. No one wants a repetition of the mistakes which preceded the 2003 Iraq War, either in underestimating a country's capabilities, or by giving too much credibility to a few untested intelligence sources. Particularly in the emotive and highly charged political environment that surrounds consideration of Burma's many complex problems—not to mention proliferation issues more generally—no government is going to accept claims of a secret nuclear weapons program without investigating them thoroughly first.

If, for the sake of argument, clear evidence of a secret nuclear program was found, then another problem arises. The Naypyidaw regime has repeatedly shown that it is determined to decide its own security policies, according to its own perceptions of Burma's national interests. If it has embarked on a WMD program out of a genuine—albeit misguided—fear of external intervention or intimidation by the major Western powers, then there is unlikely to be any progress towards halting the program until those fears are somehow assuaged. Yet, in the current political climate the US, among others, would find it difficult to offer the Naypyidaw regime the kind of security guarantees this would require.

Should the international community try to force Naypyidaw to abandon a clandestine WMD program, then it would face another set of problems. Over the past twenty years, the US and various other Western countries have tried to make the regime surrender power and adopt more humane policies through diplomatic pressure, economic sanctions and other punitive measures. Yet, this hard line approach has been demonstrably unsuccessful. Indeed, it may have even hardened the regime's resolve to resist external interference (as the generals see it) in Burma's internal affairs.

Countries closer to Burma, such as China, would doubtless share international concerns about a Burmese WMD program, but their influence with the regime is limited.

The generals seem convinced that only they know what is best for Burma. They do not believe that the opposition movement, let alone any foreign government or international organisation, can appreciate Burma's need for stability, unity and independence the way they do. The regime also feels strongly that only the armed forces can meet these imperatives and protect Burma from internal and external threats. This perspective, encouraged by highly nationalistic indoctrination programs, strengthens the regime's determination to do whatever it feels is necessary for Burma's security, regardless of the cost.

Naypyidaw does not appear to fear international criticism or the threat of increased sanctions. Burma occupies a critical geostrategic position and is rich in natural resources. The regime knows it is unlikely to be abandoned by Burma's powerful and energy hungry neighbours, despite any concerns they may have about the regime's nuclear ambitions. The exposure of a WMD program would probably see Burma expelled from ASEAN. Even if that were to occur, however, the generals seem prepared to see Burma return to its pre-1988 isolation and poverty, if that was the price they had to pay to remain masters of the country's—and their own—destiny.

As the international community has repeatedly been reminded since Burma's armed forces took back direct political power in 1988, there are few practical ways to influence a government that is deeply committed to its self-appointed role in national affairs, does not care for the welfare of its own people, does not observe international norms, and is protected by powerful friends and allies. If that government has embarked on a secret nuclear weapons program, then the international community faces a real policy challenge.

Conclusion

On security-related issues, Burma and North Korea are well known as information black holes. Given the isolated and secretive nature of both regimes, it is very difficult to determine the precise nature of their relationship. Also, both countries are at the centre of emotive and highly politicised debates about human rights, nuclear proliferation and regional security. The picture is clouded by rumours and speculative stories circulated in the news media and on activist websites. There is the danger too of individuals and groups deliberately encouraging anti-Naypyidaw or anti-Pyongyang sentiments, for partisan political reasons.

Any suggestions of a secret WMD program, however, let alone one conducted by a rogue state like Burma, must be cause for serious concern. Some of the information that has leaked out of Burma appears credible, and in recent years other snippets of information have emerged which, taken together, must raise suspicions. Also, no-one underestimates the lengths to which Burma's military leaders will go to stay in power, and to protect the country from perceived external threats. With this in mind, many observers are looking to the IAEA or the Obama Administration to settle Burma's nuclear status once and for all.

The Burmese JADE (Junta's Anti-Democratic Efforts) Act enacted by Congress in July 2008 stipulates that, within 180 days, the Secretary of State must issue a statement describing 'the provision of weapons of mass destruction and related materials, capabilities, and technology, including nuclear, chemical, and dual-use capabilities'. Reports filtering out of Washington in recent months suggest that there have already been a number of confidential briefings to senior officials on this subject. However, the world is still waiting for an authoritative public statement from the US which will put all the rumours, blogs and newspaper stories into their proper perspective.

There has always been a lot of smoke surrounding Burma's nuclear ambitions. Since June, the amount of smoke has increased, but still no-one seems to know whether or not it hides a real fire. As time passes, the need to find an answer to this important question can only increase.

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