

# Associate Paper

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## Burma and Weapons of Mass Destruction: Claims, Controversies and Consequences

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### Key Points

- For more than 30 years, Burma has been accused of secretly purchasing, producing and using weapons of mass destruction (WMD).
- Until 2000, these claims related only to chemical and biological weapons but, since then, attention has been focussed on Burma's reported acquisition of nuclear and ballistic missile technology, mainly from North Korea.
- Despite a number of suspicious developments, little hard evidence of Burmese WMD manufacture or use has been produced. Over the past year, however, reports of a ballistic missile production programme have become more authoritative.
- President Thein Sein's promise to the US Secretary of State in December 2011 to sever all Burma's military contacts with North Korea raised hopes that WMD development in Burma would cease. As yet, neither has happened.
- No government wants to see Burma once again become an international pariah, but its continuing defence ties with North Korea and apparent pursuit of a ballistic missile capability threaten both its diplomatic rehabilitation and domestic reform programme.
- The international community seems prepared to cut Burma considerable slack on these issues, doubtless in an effort to maintain the momentum of the current reforms, but there are limits to its tolerance. A return to tougher policies against Burma cannot be ruled out.

## Summary

Over the past nine months, President Thein Sein's hybrid civilian-military government has repeatedly promised that Burma would cut its controversial defence ties with North Korea, and end any weapons of mass destruction programmes.<sup>1</sup> There is strong evidence, however, that it has done neither. Naypyidaw's relations with the international community have greatly improved over this period, but the potential remains for these two issues significantly to impede, or even stall, the related processes of diplomatic rehabilitation and domestic reform. Should this occur, it would have far-reaching consequences not only for the long-suffering people of Burma, but also for the wider region.

## Analysis

### Burma and WMD

For more than 30 years, Burma has been accused of secretly developing, purchasing and even using a wide range of WMD.<sup>2</sup>

#### *Chemical Weapons*

At different times since the early 1980s, Mon, Karen, Karenni, Kachin and Shan insurgent groups have all claimed to be the victims of chemical weapons (CW). They have described attacks by the Burmese armed forces (*Tatmadaw*) with mortars, artillery, rockets and even air-delivered bombs that left insurgents with symptoms such as dizziness, nausea, rashes and, in some cases, partial paralysis. Only last year, there were renewed claims of CW use. In June, for example, Shan insurgents reported that they had been bombarded with artillery shells containing noxious chemical compounds. In November, Kachin insurgents and refugees claimed that they had been subjected to "yellow rain" and "toxic gas".

The Burmese Government reportedly began work on a small mustard gas facility around 1982, but closed it down after strong representations from the United States. None of the subsequent reports of CW use could be independently verified and most observers remain wary about accepting them at face value. The latest claims, however, have attracted the attention of Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, Chairwoman of the US House of Representatives Foreign Relations Committee. Ros-Lehtinen is a known critic of President Obama's policy of "pragmatic engagement" with Burma but, even so, being cited by such a prominent official, and without any of the usual caveats, has given these claims greater credibility.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Selth, A., 'Burma and WMD: In the news again', *The Interpreter*, 1 August 2012.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Selth, A., *Burma's Armed Forces: Power Without Glory* (EastBridge, Norwalk, 2002), Chapter 10.

<sup>3</sup> US House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs, 'Ros-Lehtinen Expresses Concern about Atrocities in Burma, Possible Connections to North Korea and Secretary Clinton Trip', Washington DC, 29 November 2011.

### *Biological Weapons*

During the early 1990s, a number of activist groups accused Burma's military regime of using biological weapons (BW) against ethnic minority communities along the border with Thailand. The regime's possible motives for doing so were not made clear. These claims were investigated by several official and private bodies, but none of them could prove BW use by the Tatmadaw. The air-launched BW "bombs" described by local villagers were subsequently identified as harmless weather-measuring devices. Most observers now believe that the casualties which occurred on the border around that time resulted from a potent new strain of cholera which was then sweeping across South and South-East Asia.

### *Nuclear Weapons*

As soon as Burma announced in 2000 that it planned to build a small nuclear research reactor with Russian help, it was accused of planning secretly to develop a nuclear weapon. These claims grew apace after the project collapsed in 2003 and Russia's role appeared to be taken by North Korea. In the years that followed, increasingly bold claims were made by activists, journalists and other observers, many of whom were convinced that a reactor (or even multiple reactors) was being built underground in northern Burma. On the basis of information provided by Burmese "defectors", it was claimed in 2009 that, if all went according to plan, Burma would have its own nuclear weapon by 2014 and 'a handful' of such devices by 2020.<sup>4</sup>

Some senior military figures clearly felt that Burma's status and security would be enhanced by possession of nuclear weapons, and a nuclear research programme was indeed launched. Its scope and purpose, however, was never clear. From all reliable reports, it was poorly managed and did not get very far. In July 2011, the State Department declared that '[A]t this point in time, the United States lacks evidence to support a conclusion that Burma has violated its NPT [Non-Proliferation Treaty] obligations or IAEA [International Atomic Energy Agency] safeguards'.<sup>5</sup> Senior US officials stated that, while Burma had perhaps 'flirted' with nuclear technology, its 'nascent' research programme was not a major concern.<sup>6</sup>

The same could not be said, however, about Burma's interest in acquiring a ballistic missile capability.

### *Ballistic Missiles*

Since 2000, there have been strong indications that Burma was keen to acquire a number of Scud-type short range ballistic missiles (SRBM) from North Korea.<sup>7</sup> In 2003, for example, the US made strong representations to the Burmese on the issue, but this seemed only to make

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<sup>4</sup> McDonald, H., 'Revealed: Burma's nuclear bombshell', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 August 2009.

<sup>5</sup> US Department of State, *Adherence to and Compliance with Arms Control, Non-Proliferation and Arms Control Agreements and Commitments*, Washington DC, July 2010.

<sup>6</sup> US Department of State, 'Background Briefing on Secretary Clinton's Travel to Burma', 29 November 2011.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Selth, A., *Burma's North Korean Gambit: A Challenge to Regional Security?*, Canberra Papers on Strategy and Defence No 154 (Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, Canberra), 2004.

the military regime more determined — and more secretive. As the years passed, numerous North Korean vessels visited Burma, where they unloaded cargoes suspected of being related to missile production. Dual-use equipment was purchased from a range of countries, including Japan, Taiwan, Switzerland and Germany, and Burmese officers were sent to Russia to study missile-related technologies.

It was very difficult, however, to determine precisely what the Burmese were doing. There were reports by “defectors” of secret missile production facilities in central Burma, and references by activists to “missile bases” along the Thai border, but they were often vague and usually impossible to verify. Some claims were simply incredible, such as those relating to Burmese attempts to acquire long range ballistic missiles capable of hitting the US base at Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean. Even so, the weight of available evidence gradually shifted in favour of those who believed that Burma’s military regime was engaged in a clandestine programme to import or manufacture short- or medium-range ballistic missiles.<sup>8</sup>

### **Developments Since 2011**

Given North Korea’s known sales of conventional arms to Burma, and increasingly likely involvement in a ballistic missile production programme — if not a nuclear weapons development programme — it was a relief to all concerned when President Thein Sein told the US Secretary of State in December 2011 that Burma planned to sever its military links with North Korea. There have since been statements by other senior Burmese officials assuring the international community that Naypyidaw has abandoned its small nuclear research programme. In June 2012, Burma’s Defence Minister told a major security conference in Singapore that military relations with North Korea had ‘stopped’.<sup>9</sup>

It was partly with these firm assurances in mind that the US and most other Western countries undertook to suspend or lift a wide range of punitive measures that had been progressively imposed against Burma since the 1988 pro-democracy uprising. Over the past nine months, there has been a dramatic transformation in Burma’s foreign relations, with a procession of officials, aid experts and businessmen visiting Burma to discuss opportunities for future co-operation. Indeed, with the measured support of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, foreign countries and corporations are falling over themselves to take advantage of the openings provided by the domestic reform programme announced by Thein Sein in March 2011.

The WMD and North Korea problems, however, have not gone away. As US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell told the House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs in April 2012, the Obama Administration remained ‘troubled’ by Burma’s continuing military trade with North Korea, which had the potential ‘to impede progress in improving our bilateral ties’. Indeed, despite two rather non-committal public reports on Burma’s foreign military links, issued by the State

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<sup>8</sup> Selth, A., ‘Burma: If not nukes, what about missiles?’, *The Interpreter*, 11 January 2010.

<sup>9</sup> O’Callaghan, J., ‘Myanmar abandons nuclear research – defence minister’, *Reuters*, 2 June 2012.

Department in March, Campbell described this issue as a ‘top national security priority’ for the US.<sup>10</sup>

### **The State Department Fact Sheet**

The extent of Washington’s concerns was revealed on 11 July 2012, when the State Department released a Fact Sheet relating to revised US sanctions against Burma.<sup>11</sup> Inter alia, it stated that a new Executive Order had been issued by President Obama which imposed a range of measures against Burmese individuals and entities that were engaged in arms trade with North Korea, including Burma’s Directorate of Defence Industries (DDI). According to the Fact Sheet, the DDI ‘carries out missile research and development at its facilities in Burma, where North Korean experts are active’.

The State Department also referred to a memorandum of understanding signed in Pyongyang by the head of DDI in 2008, in which North Korea undertook to assist Burma to build medium range, liquid-fuelled ballistic missiles.<sup>12</sup> The Fact Sheet added that ‘in the past year, North Korean ships have continued to arrive at Burma’s ports carrying goods destined for Burma’s defence industries’.

This Fact Sheet seems barely to have been noticed by Burma-watchers and other international observers, but it is an important document. It bluntly states that, contrary to President Thein Sein’s personal undertaking to Hillary Clinton in December 2011, and various official statements made since, Burma has not severed its military ties with North Korea. Indeed, in defiance of several United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions, Naypyidaw continues to receive shipments of defence-related goods from Pyongyang. Also, for the first time, the US openly identifies the full extent of Burma’s ballistic missile ambitions.

The likely strategic impact of a Burmese ballistic missile capability is still the subject of debate. Much depends on the particular kind — or kinds — of weapon system being developed in Burma, its technical parameters and the nature of its warhead.<sup>13</sup> Recent revelations that Vietnam has long had SRBMs in its inventory have raised relatively little comment. The political implications of Burma’s continued defence relations with North Korea, however, are profound. They have the potential to set Burma’s foreign relations with the US and other countries back years, and with it any real hope of the president’s domestic reform programme achieving its aims.

It is now widely accepted that Thein Sein’s reforms have been prompted mainly by internal factors, and only in part by external concerns, such as a felt need to balance China’s

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<sup>10</sup> Selth, A., ‘Kurt Campbell on US-Burma relations’, *The Interpreter*, 27 April 2012.

<sup>11</sup> US Department of State, ‘Administration Eases Financial and Investment Sanctions on Burma’, Fact Sheet, Washington DC, 11 July 2012.

<sup>12</sup> A copy of the Burmese delegation’s report on this visit was later leaked and published by the exile Burmese media. See ‘Military Documents’, *Democratic Voice of Burma*.

<sup>13</sup> A nuclear warhead has never seemed likely, but a former senior Burmese intelligence officer has claimed that, for more than a decade, the military regime has been engaged in the development of a CW warhead. See Aung Lynn Htut, ‘The Burma-North Korea Axis’, *New York Times*, 18 June 2010.

influence in Burma. Yet, ironically, their success depends heavily on foreign involvement. After 50 years of brutal and inept military rule, almost every sector of Burma's government, economy and civil society badly needs assistance. Most of the capital, technology and expertise required will have to come from abroad. Should Burma once again be relegated to the status of an international pariah, either for violating UNSC resolutions or for producing WMD, then most of these sources of assistance would probably evaporate.

### **The View From Inside**

This being the case, the question has to be asked: why would Thein Sein risk such a dire outcome, by maintaining Burma's military relations with North Korea? Based on past US statements —both public and private — he must know that such ties cannot be kept secret any longer. Given the dearth of accurate information on most developments in Burma, and Naypyidaw's customary reticence about security matters, it has always been difficult to discern the thinking behind the government's policy decisions. Yet a number of possible reasons for Burma's apparently self-defeating behaviour present themselves.

Perhaps the most charitable explanation for Thein Sein's failure to keep his promise to the US and the wider international community is bureaucratic inertia. Burma's government machinery is very inefficient and decisions take time to implement. Also, defence ties with North Korea could have built up such a momentum over the past decade, and included so many long term commitments, that they could not simply be switched off — or at least not without incurring significant penalties. For example, there may have been contracts already paid for, shipments already under way, or processes already in train, that the Burmese wanted to see completed before ending the relationship.

After the lapse of almost a year, however, this explanation is difficult to sustain. A more worrying possibility is that President Thein Sein is not in effective control of those elements of the government or armed forces responsible for Burma's relations with North Korea, and the country's WMD programmes. It has already been suggested that his orders to the Tatmadaw regarding military operations against Kachin insurgents have been ignored or, at least, interpreted by the military leadership in a self-serving manner. If this were the case, it would suggest that, despite Thein Sein's express wishes, a rogue element of the security apparatus is continuing to defy the United Nations and risk an international backlash against Burma.

A third, and even more troubling, possibility is that Thein Sein is fully aware of Burma's continuing military ties with North Korea, but is determined to push ahead with an indigenous ballistic missile programme out of concern for Burma's long-term security. If this is the more accurate scenario, then the president and his supporters are taking an enormous risk. However, they may have calculated that it is one worth taking, given the international community's strong desire to see Burma continue on its current course — both internally and externally. Thein Sein may be gambling that Western governments will not take any decisive action until it is too late, and Burma has operational ballistic missiles.

There are already some in the activist community who believe the latter to be the case. They have never trusted the Thein Sein government, which they see merely as a cleverly disguised

and more subtle incarnation of the old military regime of Senior General Than Shwe. Yet the answer is unlikely to be that simple. There is now a wide consensus that Thein Sein and his immediate circle genuinely want to reform Burma and improve its standing in the world. Inevitably, there are some dissenters, but the reformers appear to enjoy the support of most members of parliament, the armed forces and opposition movement — not to mention the general population.

Whatever the reason for Burma's risky behaviour, Naypyidaw's continuing military relationship with Pyongyang poses a serious policy dilemma for countries like the US, the members of the European Union and Australia.

### **The View From Outside**

For more than a decade, the US and its allies have been trying to curb Burma's apparent WMD ambitions.

For example, with regard to its shadowy nuclear research programme, officials from many countries have urged the Burmese to abide by their international obligations and become a signatory to the IAEA's Additional Protocol. As early as 2003, the State Department said that the US would respond 'vigorously and rapidly' to any evidence of North Korean ballistic missile sales to Burma. On at least two occasions, the US Navy has taken action to prevent the delivery of suspected missile components to Burma by North Korean ships. Also, the US, EU members and others have repeatedly called on Burma to abide by the UNSC resolutions prohibiting arms sales from North Korea.

Over recent months, the international community's response to the growing evidence of a Burmese ballistic missile programme has been surprisingly low-key. The fact that the US and like-minded countries have not made more of the continuing defence links between Burma and North Korea suggests that, for a period at least, they are prepared to give Thein Sein the benefit of the doubt. No-one wants to see a return to the bad old days, when Burma was subject to harsh public criticism and wide-ranging economic sanctions. It is in every country's interests for Thein Sein's reforms to succeed, and for Burma to become a more prosperous, humanely governed and responsible member of the international community.

Yet, such tolerance has limits. The UN cannot ignore blatant breaches of UNSC resolutions without a major loss of face, and credibility. Some UNSC members, like China, may be prepared to turn a blind eye to such provocative behaviour, in order to preserve its own substantial national interests in Burma, but states like the US and United Kingdom would find that very difficult. Even if broader security factors were not persuasive enough, their governments would face considerable pressure to act from anti-regime lobby groups. In these countries, Aung San Suu Kyi's views would also be very influential. For their part, the ASEAN states would be obliged to respond to any developments in Burma that had a significant impact on the region's strategic environment.

Should the very worst happen, and key members of the international community felt obliged to adopt much tougher policies against Naypyidaw, then there could be dire consequences for the people of Burma. Without strong international support, there is a good chance that

the current reform programme would stall, greatly impeding the political, economic and social development of the country. Given currently elevated popular expectations, that could contribute in turn to widespread civil unrest, prompting action by the security forces and possibly even a return to a more authoritarian government. Burma's diplomatic rehabilitation would also suffer, not only affecting its standing in the region, but also further afield.

These dangers should not be overstated. It would be in everyone's interests to find a way to resolve these issues before they ever reached such a stage. Nor, however, should the potential problems be underestimated. In the parlance of US analysts, the WMD and North Korea issues are "game changers". Whatever happens, they will continue to warrant close attention.

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