

8

Is there a Burma– North Korea–Iran nuclear conspiracy?

(07:26 AEDT, 25 February 2009)

After the leak of a report describing the visit to North Korea by an official Myanmar delegation in 2008, there was widespread unease about the military ties apparently being forged between the two pariah states. These concerns were encouraged by the testimony of Myanmar ‘defectors’ and the visit to Myanmar of several North Korean cargo vessels. Despite the lack of hard evidence, it was claimed that North Korea was secretly helping Myanmar to manufacture missiles and possibly even develop a nuclear weapon.

If the Obama administration was looking for another foreign policy challenge, all it would have to do is to take seriously the rumours circulating in Thailand that Burma is pursuing a secret nuclear weapons program, with help from North Korea and Iran. These stories have all the ingredients of a real security nightmare. The question is, though, are any of them true?

In 2000, when Burma’s military government announced that it was going to purchase a 10 MW light water reactor from Russia, activist groups immediately 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. The activists cited the regime’s long record of duplicity, its abiding fear of external intervention (particularly from the US) and its customary

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

Also, well before Naypyidaw and Pyongyang restored diplomatic relations in 2007, some observers (including a few high-profile figures in Washington) expressed concern about Burma's growing ties with North Korea—a known proliferator of nuclear weapons technology.¹

At the time, these suspicions were greeted with scepticism. Burma had a long record of opposition to nuclear weapons proliferation. Also, Burma's financial reserves and its level of technological development were so low that many doubted its ability to build and manage a nuclear reactor, even with Russian assistance. However, Burma's military leadership was highly unpredictable and prone to bizarre behaviour. Also, some generals clearly envied North Korea's ability to use its nuclear weapons status to resist international pressure and wring concessions out of the US. Still, no reliable evidence could be produced of a clandestine Burmese weapon of mass destruction (WMD) program.²

As years passed, the Burma rumour mill ground on, prompting further accusations of the generals' perfidy. There were reports in the news media and on the internet that thousands of Burmese were attending technical training courses in Russia and that Burma was secretly receiving shipments of equipment from North Korea. There were sightings of foreigners at defence establishments all around Burma. At the same time, there were increasingly strident claims by some activist groups to the effect that Burma had constructed a reactor, developed uranium enrichment plants and was exporting yellowcake to North Korea and Iran. A few even said that Burma already possessed nuclear weapons.

Yet the official view of Burma's status remained unchanged. Throughout this period, the US issued numerous warnings about clandestine North Korean, Iranian and Syrian WMD programs but, as far as Burma was concerned, the Bush administration remained conspicuously silent. In 2005 and 2006, for example, during its efforts to have Burma cited

1 Norman Robespierre, 'Nuclear Bond for North Korea and Myanmar', *Asia Times Online*, [Hong Kong], 4 October 2008, www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/JJ04Ae01.html [page discontinued].

2 Andrew Selth, *Burma and Nuclear Proliferation: Policies and Perceptions*, Griffith Asia Institute Regional Outlook Paper No.12 (Brisbane: Griffith University, 2007), www.griffith.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0015/18240/regional-outlook-volume-12.pdf [page discontinued].

by the UN Security Council as ‘a threat to international peace and security’, the US pointedly made no reference to a Burmese nuclear weapons program. In 2007, the State Department reminded Burma of its obligations under the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, but only referred to the proposed Russian reactor.³

For its part, the UK Government stated in 2006 that it was ‘not able to corroborate’ reports about the alleged transfer of nuclear technology from North Korea to Burma. The UK also put on record its view that no uranium was being processed in Burma and that Burma did not have any operational enrichment facilities. Nor was the UK aware of any Burmese uranium exports. In 2007, Singapore’s foreign minister stated that Burma was ‘unlikely’ to develop a nuclear program, given its many other problems. A new memorandum of understanding signed by Burma and Russia that year revealed that construction of the research reactor had not even begun. The most likely cause was a lack of funds.

Over the past year or so, however, a number of governments have given this issue a higher priority. The increased level of interest seems to have been prompted by the appearance in Thailand of several Burmese officials (both civilian and military) who claimed to have direct knowledge, or even firsthand experience, of a secret nuclear weapons program. According to these ‘defectors’, in 2002, Burma’s military government began building a reactor near Maymyo, with the aim of developing a nuclear device by 2020. The reactor and some related nuclear fuel processing plants were said to be hidden underground. The expertise for this project reportedly came from North Korea, with help from Iran and possibly Pakistan.

These claims are still to be verified. Some may in fact relate not to a secret WMD program, but to the regime’s efforts over the past 20 years to upgrade its military infrastructure. Particularly since the Iraq wars, Burma has felt vulnerable to attack from the air. It has reportedly constructed underground command-and-control bunkers, hardened its communications nodes and built protective shelters for a range of new conventional weapon systems. The North Koreans have considerable expertise in constructing such facilities.⁴

3 ‘US Criticises Burma Nuclear Plan’, *BBC News*, 17 May 2007, news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/6664421.stm.

4 Bertil Lintner, ‘Myanmar and North Korea Share a Tunnel Vision’, *Asia Times Online*, [Hong Kong], 19 July 2006, www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/HG19Ae01.html [page discontinued].

Even so, both Western and regional governments now seem keen to find out whether the defectors' claims are accurate. Any suggestions of a secret WMD program, let alone one conducted by a pariah state like Burma, must be of concern. Some of the information provided by the defectors appears credible and there are numerous defence facilities in Burma that have not been identified. Also, no one underestimates the lengths to which the generals will go to stay in power, and to protect Burma from perceived external threats.

Understandably, however, foreign officials looking at this issue are being very cautious. No one wants a repetition of the mistakes that preceded the last Iraq war, either in underestimating a country's capabilities or by giving too much credibility to a few untested intelligence sources. Particularly in the highly charged political environment that surrounds consideration of Burma's many complex problems, no government is going to accept claims of a secret nuclear weapons program without investigating them thoroughly first.

There has always been a lot of smoke surrounding Burma's nuclear ambitions. Over the past year or so, the amount of smoke has increased, but still no one seems to know whether or not it hides a real fire. With this in mind, strategic analysts in many countries are looking to the Obama administration for an authoritative statement on Burma's nuclear status. This may come sooner rather than later. The *Tom Lantos Block Burmese JADE (Junta's Anti-Democratic Efforts) (JADE Act)* enacted by the US Congress last July 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'.⁵ That deadline has already passed.

5 *HR 3890 [110th]: Tom Lantos Block Burmese JADE (Junta's Anti-Democratic Efforts) Act of 2008* (Public Law 110-286), United States Congress, enacted 29 July 2008, www.govtrack.us/congress/billtext.xpd?bill=h110-3890.

This text is taken from *Interpreting Myanmar: A Decade of Analysis*,
by Andrew Selth, published 2020 by ANU Press, The Australian
National University, Canberra, Australia.