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## **Burma–North Korea: Rumour and reality**

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*Myanmar had long encouraged wild stories and unsubstantiated rumours. Few modern developments illustrated this problem more than the shadowy relationship that existed between Myanmar and North Korea, which prompted many unreliable and often colourful claims relating to secret military deals and clandestine weapons programs.*

On security-related issues, Burma and North Korea are well known as information black holes. Also, both are at the centre of emotive and highly politicised debates about human rights, nuclear weapons and regional security. It is particularly important, therefore, that reports of developments involving these two countries are carefully researched, intellectually rigorous and analytically objective. At times, however, these requirements seem to be overlooked in all the excitement generated by current events.

At present, there are three issues that tie Burma and North Korea together in the news media and the public imagination. All have the potential to create much more heat than light.

The first issue is the recent publication of a series of photographs showing tunnels and other underground facilities in Burma, apparently built by North Korea or with North Korean expertise (see *Al Jazeera's* report on

the photos below).<sup>1</sup> Activist groups have cited these photos as evidence of nefarious dealings between the military governments in Naypyidaw and Pyongyang.

The second issue is the departure from North Korea of a cargo ship reportedly carrying missiles and nuclear components to Burma, despite UN embargoes on such exports.<sup>2</sup> This vessel, the *Kang Nam 1*, is being shadowed by a US Navy destroyer. There is the likelihood that it will resist inspection when it stops to refuel, probably in Singapore.

The third issue is the claim repeatedly made by Burmese exile groups, activists and others that Pyongyang is helping Naypyidaw to secretly build a nuclear reactor with the aim of developing a nuclear weapon.<sup>3</sup> According to this theory, Burma's generals believe that possession of such a weapon will help them resist international pressure to introduce political, economic and social reforms.

The main problem with all of these stories is that there is very little hard, independently verifiable information available, either about Pyongyang's relationship with Naypyidaw or about North Korea's activities in Burma. Inevitably, perhaps, the information gap has been filled with rumours, speculation and possibly even deliberate misinformation. Once it appears in print, this material tends to assume the status of established fact, further muddying the waters.

So, what do we know, or think we know?

In 1983, Burma severed diplomatic relations with Pyongyang after North Korean agents tried to assassinate the South Korean President in Rangoon. Formal ties were restored in 2007, but even before then there were unconfirmed reports that Burma—denied access to its usual arms suppliers—had turned to North Korea for small arms, artillery

1 'Myanmar's Secret Tunnels Revealed', *Al Jazeera*, 25 June 2009, [english.aljazeera.net/news/asia-pacific/2009/06/20096255353936689.html](http://english.aljazeera.net/news/asia-pacific/2009/06/20096255353936689.html) [page discontinued].

2 Jae-soon Chang, 'North Korea Ship Suspected of Carrying Missiles to Burma', *The Huffington Post*, 21 June 2009, [www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/06/21/north-korea-ship-suspecte\\_n\\_218599.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/06/21/north-korea-ship-suspecte_n_218599.html) [page discontinued].

3 Andrew Selth, 'Is There a Burma–North Korea–Iran Nuclear Conspiracy?', *The Interpreter*, 25 February 2009, [www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2009/02/25/Is-there-a-Burma-North-Korea-Iran-nuclear-conspiracy.aspx](http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2009/02/25/Is-there-a-Burma-North-Korea-Iran-nuclear-conspiracy.aspx) [page discontinued] [now at [archive.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/there-burma-north-korea-iran-nuclear-conspiracy/](http://archive.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/there-burma-north-korea-iran-nuclear-conspiracy/)].

and other conventional weapons. In 2004, it was revealed that Burma had also considered the purchase of surface-to-surface missiles and possibly a small submarine.<sup>4</sup>

Since then, there have been further (again, unconfirmed) reports that North Korea has sold Burma arms, including anti-ship missiles and multiple-launch rocket systems. In recent years, however, these possible sales have been overshadowed by accusations that Pyongyang is helping Burma's government to expand and modernise its military infrastructure and is aiding in the construction of clandestine nuclear weapons facilities.

It is true that, over the past 20 years, Burma has made a major effort to strengthen its military capabilities and this has included the construction of underground facilities—up to 800 of them, according to exile groups. It would be logical for Naypyidaw to ask Pyongyang to assist in this program. Both are secretive and isolated military regimes fearful of external intervention, particularly by the US. The North Koreans need Burmese primary products. They also manufacture arms and have considerable experience in subterranean engineering projects.

However, from the recently released photos—both published and unpublished—it is not clear what all these underground facilities are for. Many of those shown are quite modest and, despite efforts at concealment, appear vulnerable to attack by a modern air force equipped with the latest weapons. Some may be connected to communications upgrades or other civil engineering projects. None of the photos supports activist claims of a secret nuclear plant.

Similarly, the *Kang Nam 1* seems to be another case of public commentary running ahead of the known facts. It is not clear what the ship is carrying or where it is going. This particular vessel has visited Burma before, possibly to deliver conventional arms or heavy machinery, but that does not automatically mean it is going there again. Reports that it is carrying missiles, let alone nuclear weapon components, simply cannot be justified on the basis of the information currently available.<sup>5</sup>

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4 Paul Kerr, 'US Accuses Burma of Seeking Weapons Technology', *Arms Control Association*, May 2004, [www.armscontrol.org/act/2004\\_05/Burma](http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2004_05/Burma).

5 'Navy Positions Destroyer for Possible Intercept of North Korean Ship Suspected of Proliferating Missiles, Nukes', *Fox News*, 19 June 2009, [www.foxnews.com/politics/2009/06/19/military-set-intercept-north-korean-ship-suspected-proliferatin-missiles-nukes/](http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2009/06/19/military-set-intercept-north-korean-ship-suspected-proliferatin-missiles-nukes/) [page discontinued].

As regards the third issue, it can be argued that, of all Southeast Asian countries, Burma has the strongest strategic rationale to develop nuclear weapons.<sup>6</sup> Also, in the past few years, some of the previous obstacles to such a program appear to have been overcome. Yet Burma's nuclear ambitions have never been clear. Work on a Russian research reactor—first announced in 2002—has still not begun. And North Korea's possible involvement in a second, clandestine nuclear reactor has never been verified.

Indeed, it is noteworthy that no government or international organisation (including the IAEA) has ever commented publicly on these claims. This includes the Bush administration, which had no love for the Naypyidaw regime and was quick to denounce suspected nuclear programs elsewhere. The relevant agencies seem to be keeping an open mind but, speaking off the record last month, a senior US official dismissed reports of a secret Burmese nuclear weapons project as an 'unsubstantiated rumour'.<sup>7</sup>

Burma and North Korea both have such poor international reputations that they are easy targets for criticism. Also, given their highly provocative and often bizarre behaviour, they lend themselves easily to conspiracy theories and sensationalist stories in the news media and on blogs. This is not to say that, whenever the names of these two pariah states are linked, there are no grounds for concern, but the links have to be real. And care needs to be taken to distinguish between what is actually known and what is assumed or claimed by special interest groups. For only then will we know what to be concerned about.

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6 Andrew Selth, *Burma and the Threat of Invasion: Regime Fantasy or Strategic Reality?*, Griffith Asia Institute Regional Outlook Paper No.17 (Brisbane: Griffith University, 2008), [www.griffith.edu.au/business/griffith-asia-institute/pdf/Andrew-Selth-Regional-Outlook-17v2.pdf](http://www.griffith.edu.au/business/griffith-asia-institute/pdf/Andrew-Selth-Regional-Outlook-17v2.pdf) [page discontinued].

7 'Nelson Report: About That Pesky Burma/NK Nuke Rumor', *The Agonist*, 5 June 2009, [agonist.org/tina/20090605/nelson\\_report\\_about\\_that\\_pesky\\_burma\\_nk\\_nuke\\_rumor](http://agonist.org/tina/20090605/nelson_report_about_that_pesky_burma_nk_nuke_rumor) [page discontinued].

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