

# 14

## Burma's unanswered nuclear question

(11:40 AEDT, 3 August 2009)

*On 1 August 2009, a number of sensational reports in Australian newspapers drew attention to claims that Myanmar was developing nuclear weapons. The stories were based on the testimony of so-called defectors, but they still failed to provide any hard evidence of a secret weapons program. More to the point, none of the claims were confirmed by the US Government, which was probably the external observer best placed to determine the real situation.*

Burma's suspected WMD program is in the news once again. This time, the focus is on a couple of Burmese nationals who 'defected' two years ago, claiming firsthand knowledge of Naypyidaw's secret nuclear plans. As I noted in *The Interpreter* in February, however, the picture is still far from clear.<sup>1</sup>

Saturday's *Sydney Morning Herald* led with the dramatic headline 'Revealed: Burma's Nuclear Bombshell', followed by 'Atomic Weapons in Five Years' and 'North Korea Helping Build Secret Reactor'.<sup>2</sup> *The Age* carried a version of the story headed 'Burma "Building Secret N-Plant"'. Both papers balanced these stories with a thoughtful op-ed by *The Age's*

---

1 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)].

2 Hamish McDonald, 'Revealed: Burma's Nuclear Bombshell', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1–2 August 2009, [www.smh.com.au:80/world/revealed-burmax2019s-nuclear-bombshell-20090731-e4fw.html](http://www.smh.com.au:80/world/revealed-burmax2019s-nuclear-bombshell-20090731-e4fw.html).

diplomatic editor, reminding readers that, despite the defectors' startling claims, the issue was still the subject of considerable debate among scholars and officials.<sup>3</sup>

This is not the first time local newspapers have made such claims. In 2006, for example, *The Australian* published a story under the headline 'Burma Seeks Nuclear Weapons Alliance with N. Korea'.<sup>4</sup> No evidence was provided to justify this statement, but it was followed in 2007 by a report in the same paper entitled 'Unconventional Wisdom on Burma'. The report claimed that 'US intelligence believes that Burma is seeking to develop nuclear weapons from technology provided by North Korea'.<sup>5</sup>

There are many unanswered questions about Burma's nuclear aspirations and its ties with North Korea. As might be expected, given the isolated and secretive nature of both military regimes, details of their relationship are very hard to discover. The most pressing question for many analysts, however, is why no government or international organisation has made any official statement on this issue, despite all the articles and blogs published since 2002, when Burma was first accused of wanting a nuclear weapon.

For eight years, the Bush administration took every opportunity to criticise Burma's military regime, loudly and publicly. The US also made numerous statements condemning those countries—like Iraq, Iran, Syria and North Korea—that it believed were pursuing clandestine nuclear weapons programs or proliferating sensitive 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. It beggars belief that the US Government did not know about the two Burmese 'defectors' on whose testimony the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age* have based their latest stories. Indeed, both papers have suggested that a third Burmese defector was 'picked up' by US intelligence agencies last year, presumably to be interviewed on this

3 Daniel Flitton, 'Burma and the Bomb', *The Age*, [Melbourne], 1 August 2009, [www.theage.com.au:80/world/burma-and-the-bomb-20090731-e4h6.html?page=-1](http://www.theage.com.au:80/world/burma-and-the-bomb-20090731-e4h6.html?page=-1).

4 Greg Sheridan, 'Burma Seeks Nuclear Weapons Alliance with N. Korea', *The Australian*, 5 July 2006, [www.tai4freedom.info/articles/nuke2.html](http://www.tai4freedom.info/articles/nuke2.html) [page discontinued].

5 Greg Sheridan, 'Unconventional Wisdom on Burma', *The Australian*, 3 November 2007, [www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,25197,22693077-5013460,00.html](http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,25197,22693077-5013460,00.html) [page discontinued].

issue. Yet, even when armed with the apparent revelations of all these defectors, the Bush administration remained conspicuously silent about Burma's nuclear status.

This is not to say that there were no suspicions of a possible nuclear weapons program. In 2007, for example, *The Australian* based its story on a statement by a former White House staffer to the effect that 'Western intelligence officials have suspected for several years that the regime has had an interest in following the model of North Korea and achieving military autarky by developing ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons'. Yet suspicions of an interest in following a model are a far cry from hard evidence of a secret nuclear weapons program.

As rumours of a secret WMD program grew in frequency and scope, the Bush administration came under increasing pressure from activists, exile groups and certain members of Congress to openly accuse Burma's military regime of developing nuclear weapons, with North Korea's help. Yet it steadfastly refused to do so, even when the US conducted a concerted campaign in the UN Security Council to have Burma branded a threat to regional security.

It is difficult to escape the conclusion that the Bush administration felt obliged to remain silent on this issue largely because there was insufficient reliable evidence on which to make a public case against Naypyidaw and Pyongyang.<sup>6</sup>

Since taking office, the Obama administration has conducted a thorough investigation of this matter, as part of its comprehensive review of US Burma policy. Yet, it too has been very cautious in its comments about Burma's nuclear ambitions. For example, Naypyidaw's suspected WMD program was not raised during Senate hearings to confirm the appointments of Secretary of State Clinton or UN Representative Susan Rice. Nor has it been raised by the US in other public forums (including the IAEA) where nuclear weapons proliferation has been discussed.

---

6 Denis D. Gray, 'Is Myanmar Going Nuclear with North Korea's Help', *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, 21 July 2009, [www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/07/21/AR2009072100256\\_pf.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/07/21/AR2009072100256_pf.html) [page discontinued] [now at [www.sandiegouniontribune.com/sdut-myanmar-nuclear-ambitions-072109-2009jul21-story.html](http://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/sdut-myanmar-nuclear-ambitions-072109-2009jul21-story.html)].

In her comments at the ASEAN summit last month, Hillary Clinton finally broke the US's official silence on the subject.<sup>7</sup> Yet it is instructive to examine what was actually said. She expressed concern over military links between Burma and North Korea, including 'the transfer of nuclear technology and other dangerous weapons'. She later modified her position, however, referring only to 'dealings' between Pyongyang and Naypyidaw that were 'perhaps' taking place.

Despite having the perfect opportunity to do so, the Secretary of State did not say that Burma was secretly building a nuclear reactor or trying to develop a nuclear weapon. She did not even specify that North Korea was passing Burma nuclear *weapons* technology. This continuing official reticence strongly suggests that, while the US is clearly concerned about Naypyidaw's growing relationship with Pyongyang, it still does not have clear evidence of a secret Burmese WMD program.

As noted in *The Interpreter* in February, the Burma *JADE Act* passed by the US Congress in July 2008 stipulated that, within 180 days, the Secretary of State must issue a statement describing the provision of WMD and related technologies to Burma.<sup>8</sup> Reports filtering out of Washington suggest there have 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 that will put all the rumours and newspaper stories into their proper perspective.

---

7 Julian Borger, 'Burma Suspected of Forming Nuclear Link with North Korea', *The Guardian*, [London], 21 July 2009, [www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/jul/21/burma-north-korea-nuclear-clinton](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/jul/21/burma-north-korea-nuclear-clinton).

8 Selth, 'Is There a Burma–North Korea–Iran Nuclear Conspiracy?'.

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.