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Burma's nuclear status: Not the last word, but ...

(09:24 AEDT, 29 September 2009)

A comprehensive report in 2009 by the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies concisely and very usefully put into context all the rumours and speculation that had been circulating about Myanmar's reported clandestine nuclear weapons program.

It is indicative of the uncertainty surrounding Burma's nuclear status that the issue has attracted as many true believers as devoted sceptics.¹ In the absence of enough hard information to settle the argument either way, Burma-watchers and other observers are left waiting for an authoritative statement from an institution like the IAEA or the US Government.²

It may not be quite the same thing, but a comprehensive study just completed by the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) comes close. The IISS strategic dossier, entitled *Preventing Nuclear Dangers in Southeast Asia and Australasia*, was published

1 Andrew Selth, *Burma and North Korea: Smoke or Fire?*, Policy Analysis No.47 (Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 24 August 2009), www.aspi.org.au/publications/publicationlist.aspx?pubtype=9 [page discontinued] [now at www.aspi.org.au/report/burma-and-north-korea-smoke-or-fire].

2 Andrew Selth, 'Burma Unanswered Nuclear Question', *The Interpreter*, 3 August 2009, www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2009/08/03/Burmas-unanswered-nuclear-question.aspx [page discontinued] [now at archive.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/burma-unanswered-nuclear-question].

yesterday.³ It is based on extensive research over several months and draws on information provided by a wide range of officials, academics, scientists and journalists.

On Burma, its key findings include:

1. Of all the Southeast Asian countries, Burma is the only one that might be considered to have a strategic motivation to develop nuclear weapons.
2. To date, no firm evidence of a secret nuclear weapons program has been produced and no government or international organisation has confirmed any of the claims put forward by regime opponents. Yet suspicions remain.
3. As of September, the contract covering the proposed construction of a Russian 10 MW research reactor in Burma had still not been finalised. If agreement can be reached, the research centre would take about five years to build.
4. A light water reactor of this size would produce no more than 1 kilogram of weapons-usable plutonium a year, even if operated for this purpose (considerably less than the 8 kg defined by the IAEA as a significant quantity).
5. In mid 2007, 203 Burmese students were studying in Russia. It was expected that about 1,000 Burmese students would go there within the next few years, including 300 experts who would eventually work in the Russian-built nuclear research centre in Burma.
6. Apart from the Russian reactor project, which will be under IAEA safeguards, Burma is not known to have any significant nuclear facilities or to have conducted any work in any area of the nuclear fuel cycle.
7. Burma is not known to have broken any international laws or commitments. However, in addition to persistent claims about transfers of missiles and other sensitive technology from North Korea, questions have been raised about Burma's importation of some dual-use equipment.

3 *Preventing Nuclear Dangers in Southeast Asia and Australasia* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2009), www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-dossiers/preventing-nuclear-dangers-in-southeast-asia-and-australasia/ [page discontinued] [now at epdf.pub/preventing-nuclear-dangers-in-southeast-asia-and-australasia-an-iiss-strategic-d.html].

8. While North Korea has a history of proliferation activities, there is only circumstantial evidence of a North Korea–Burma nuclear connection. Indeed, less appears to be known about North Korean activity in Burma than was known about North Korean activity in Syria.
9. Recent claims of a secret nuclear weapons program in Burma—none of which has yet been verified—should be assessed with a high degree of caution. Many claims made by the Burmese defectors do not stand up to scrutiny.

The strategic dossier's chapter on Burma (which the IISS calls Myanmar, the country's official name) concludes:

Myanmar has no known capabilities that would lend themselves to a nuclear weapons program, apart from limited uranium deposits and some personnel who have received nuclear training overseas. If it is built, a 10MWt research reactor and associated training from Russia could provide the basis for an eventual civilian nuclear power program, but few of the skills required for such a program are readily transferrable to nuclear weapons development. Specialised reprocessing or enrichment facilities would be necessary to produce weapons-usable fissile material, and any attempt to divert plutonium from the reactor is likely to be detected by IAEA inspectors.

The concern is whether Myanmar might take the road Syria appears to have taken by building secret facilities. With sufficient foreign help in the complex technologies and equipment required for plutonium implosion weapons, lack of indigenous technical capabilities would not be an insurmountable hurdle. Nor, despite the huge investment required for nuclear weapons, would Myanmar's relative poverty be a deal-breaker ... the regime is no longer short of funds for such ambitious projects. The question hinges more on political decisions. In this regard, there is insufficient information to make a well-founded judgement about Myanmar's nuclear intentions and the North Korean connection.

Concerned governments have therefore erred on the side of caution, refraining from committing themselves. Until recently, this approach reflected scepticism about a secret nuclear program. Since 2008, however, concerned governments and international organisations appear to be giving this matter a higher priority and making greater efforts to test the claims of defectors. There is

a growing international determination to be alert to signals about nuclear-weapons programs that in countries such as Israel and Pakistan were overlooked until it was too late.⁴

The IISS's chapter is necessarily based on open sources and thus lacks some data that might be available to others. However, until the US Government or the IAEA reveals the results of their own investigations, the IISS strategic dossier constitutes the most comprehensive and detailed examination of Burma's nuclear status currently available.

4 *ibid.*, p.115.

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.