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Burma: If not nukes, what about missiles?

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Although overshadowed by claims of a secret nuclear weapons program, there had long been persistent rumours that Myanmar planned to acquire or build short-range ballistic missiles—also with North Korean help.

Fears that Burma's military government is secretly building a nuclear weapon, with North Korean help, seem to have subsided—at least for the time being.

There is wide agreement that the issue needs to be monitored closely, but at this stage most informed observers feel there is insufficient reliable information on which to base any firm judgements.¹ After consulting the IAEA—which apparently said there was nothing new in the 2009 media stories—the Australian Government has joined the US and UK in referring only to 'unconfirmed' reports of a Burmese nuclear weapons program.²

1 Andrew Selth, 'Burma's Nuclear Status: Not the Last Word, But ...', *The Interpreter*, 29 September 2009, www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2009/09/29/Burmas-nuclear-status-Not-the-last-word-but.aspx [page discontinued] [now at archive.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/burma-nuclear-status-not-last-word].

2 'Burma's Nuclear Program', The Greens, Canberra, 10 September 2009, greensmps.org.au/content/question/burma's-nuclear-program [page discontinued].

Curiously, given all the publicity surrounding Burma's possible nuclear ambitions, much less attention has been paid to the regime's interest in acquiring some Scud-type short-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs) from North Korea. Yet the evidence for Naypyidaw's interest in SRBMs is at least as strong as that for nuclear weapons, if not stronger.

Any SRBM sales to Burma would have implications for regional security. Despite an operational range of only about 700 kilometres, such missiles could give Burma a power projection capability for the first time. More to the point, perhaps, they would constitute a potent psychological weapon and have a significant political impact, not only on Burma's regional neighbours, but also in the US and Europe, where Burma remains a sensitive issue.

Activists have long claimed that Burma's generals want to get their hands on some SRBMs. Few reports on this subject have been based on hard evidence, however, and news stories have often failed to distinguish clearly between SRBMs and other kinds of missiles. For example, the regime's reported efforts to buy or manufacture anti-ship, tactical surface-to-surface, surface-to-air and air-to-air missiles have frequently been confused with its interest in acquiring ballistic weapon systems.

The picture has been further clouded by unsubstantiated claims that Burma already possesses SRBMs, and possibly even medium-range ballistic missiles. An anonymous *Wikipedia* entry states that Naypyidaw took delivery of 11 North Korean Hwasong-6 (Scud C-type) SRBMs in 2009.³ The regime has been accused of paying for such missiles with heroin. One activist website has referred to four 'bases' along the Burma–Thailand border where SRBMs have supposedly been deployed. Such reports have been dismissed by serious Burma-watchers.

Similarly, when the North Korean cargo ship *Kang Nam 1* was heading to Rangoon last June, it was widely speculated that the vessel was carrying 'missile parts', as well as nuclear components. If this was so, it would probably have been boarded under UNSC Resolution 1874, which prohibits North Korean arms exports. After the ship turned back, the commander of US Pacific forces admitted that no one knew what cargo it was carrying.

3 'Hwasong-6', *Wikipedia*, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hwasong-6.

There is no evidence that Burma has acquired any ballistic missiles. Yet the regime does seem interested in doing so and, at one stage, it may have even begun negotiations with the North Koreans. In 2004, the US State Department revealed that it had made robust representations to the military government to forestall the possible purchase of surface-to-surface missiles from Pyongyang. This was later acknowledged to be a reference to SRBMs. The US undertook to respond ‘vigorously and rapidly’ to any such sales.⁴

North Korean military expert Joseph Bermudez believes the issue of ballistic missile sales has arisen in all major meetings between the North Koreans and Burmese since bilateral relations warmed in the early 2000s.⁵ However, he thinks Naypyidaw is not yet ready for such weapons. It needs to train personnel, form units and build specialised support facilities (including some underground). Bermudez has also suggested that premature acquisition of SRBMs might complicate the purchase of other foreign arms and equipment sought by the regime.

Another possibility is that Naypyidaw plans to build its own SRBMs, with Pyongyang’s help. Senior Burmese officials visiting North Korea have inspected ballistic missile production plants. Some of the sophisticated machine tools and dual-use equipment imported from Europe and Japan in recent years may not be for a secret nuclear weapons program, as often claimed, but for an indigenous SRBM factory. While not very economical, such a scheme would be in keeping with the regime’s wish for defence self-sufficiency.

If this is the regime’s aim, such a development is likely to be some years away. Still, the question needs to be asked: what could Burma do with such weapons? Given their relatively short range, questionable accuracy and small conventional warhead, SRBMs are of limited military utility. Inevitably, this has prompted speculation that Naypyidaw plans to arm them with chemical or nuclear warheads, either made in Burma or acquired from North Korea.

4 ‘US Will Persevere on Democracy in Burma, State’s Daley Says’, *America.gov*, 25 March 2004, www.america.gov/st/washfile-english/2004/March/20040325181911ASesuarK0.3054773.html [page discontinued].

5 Joseph S. Bermudez Jr, *The Armed Forces of North Korea* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2001), www.amazon.com/Armed-Forces-North-Korea/dp/1860644864.

Even so, SRBMs would be ineffective against a seaborne threat and they are unlikely to be aimed at China or India, both of which currently support Burma's military regime.

One theory is that Naypyidaw wants a weapon that can pose a threat to Bangkok, to help deter Thailand from allowing the US to launch an invasion of Burma from Thai territory. The US has never contemplated such an invasion and is unlikely ever to do so, but the prospect of military intervention has worried Burma's generals since they crushed the 1988 prodemocracy uprising.⁶ Even the Thai king has expressed his concerns about Thailand being used by the US in this way.

Other reasons for Naypyidaw's interest in SRBMs probably include the regime's desire for status and prestige, its perceptions of what 'modern' armed forces should have in their weapons inventories and its wish for Burma to be taken seriously as an international actor.

As with so many aspects of Burma's security, there is very little hard evidence on which to base assessments. And analysis of this problem is complicated, as always, by rumours, unsubstantiated claims, speculative news reports and political propaganda. Even so, the chances of Burma one day acquiring or manufacturing SRBMs seem to be greater than those of Naypyidaw producing a nuclear weapon.

That makes another reason to monitor security developments in Burma closely.

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 [page discontinued].

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