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## Burma, North Korea and US policy

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*Naypyidaw's continued violations of human rights and apparent pursuit of a military relationship with North Korea left US president Obama very little room to implement his more nuanced policy of 'pragmatic engagement' with the military regime.*

The Obama administration's policy of 'practical engagement' with Burma is running into serious trouble. The military government in Naypyidaw has shown no inclination to respond to the US's overtures and, although the policy is barely nine months old, pressure is mounting for a return to the hardline approach of the Bush era.

Ironically, the new policy may eventually be undone not by the regime's recalcitrance or the efforts of Obama's political opponents and anti-regime activists, but by Burma's continuing shadowy links with North Korea.

During a visit to Naypyidaw earlier this month, US Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell expressed the administration's 'profound disappointment' over recent developments in Burma. These included the promulgation of election laws that effectively excluded Aung San Suu Kyi from the political process and forced the dissolution of her party.<sup>1</sup> He also referred to increased ethnic tensions.

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Selth, 'Burma New Election Laws', *The Interpreter*, 19 March 2010, [www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2010/03/19/Burmas-new-election-laws.aspx](http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2010/03/19/Burmas-new-election-laws.aspx) [page discontinued] [now at archive. [lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/burma-new-election-laws](http://lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/burma-new-election-laws)].

For his trouble, Campbell was told by the Burmese foreign minister that ‘guests who criticise the host again and again are unwelcome’.

The new policy has also been facing problems at home. In March, nine Senators signed an open letter calling for increased sanctions against Burma. On 7 May, the US Senate unanimously passed a resolution calling on the administration to reconsider its approach, on the grounds that it had failed to shift the Burmese regime.<sup>2</sup> The US House of Representatives introduced a similar measure the following week, with bipartisan support.

Establishing a productive dialogue with Naypyidaw was always going to be very difficult. As senior US officials repeatedly warned when the new policy was announced last September, there are no quick or easy solutions to Burma’s many complex problems. Despite rhetorical flourishes from some activists, no one realistically expected that the regime would suddenly release all its political prisoners, introduce democratic reforms and return to the barracks.

The administration was still hopeful, however, that Naypyidaw would offer something to help justify Washington’s more subtle and nuanced approach. This has not occurred, strengthening the hand of Obama’s critics. Even so, the US may find that the greatest problem it faces in pursuing engagement with Burma is not the regime’s continuing commitment to military rule or its human rights abuses, but its contacts with North Korea.

When the North Korean ship *Kang Nam 1* was sailing towards Burma last June—possibly with weapons on board—Burma gave an undertaking to the US that it would observe UNSC Resolutions 1718 and 1874.<sup>3</sup> Inter alia, these instruments prohibit the export of arms from North Korea, including missile and nuclear components. At Burma’s request, the *Kang Nam 1* returned to North Korea.

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2 United States Senate, Senate Resolution 480, ‘A Resolution Condemning the Continued Detention of Burmese Democracy Leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and Calling on the Military Regime in Burma to Permit a Credible and Fair Election Process and the Transition to Civilian, Democratic Rule’, Passed Senate amended 7 May 2010, *Congress Gov.*, [www.congress.gov/bill/111th-congress/senate-resolution/480](http://www.congress.gov/bill/111th-congress/senate-resolution/480).

3 *Resolution 1718: Non-proliferation/Democratic People’s Republic of Korea*, United Nations Security Council Resolution 1718 (2006), 14 October 2006, [daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N06/572/07/PDF/N0657207.pdf?OpenElement](http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N06/572/07/PDF/N0657207.pdf?OpenElement) [page discontinued] [now at [unscr.com/en/resolutions/1718](http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/1718)]; and *Resolution 1874: Non-proliferation/Democratic People’s Republic of Korea*, United Nations Security Council Resolution 1874 (2009), 12 June 2009, [ods-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N09/368/49/PDF/N0936849.pdf?OpenElement](http://ods-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N09/368/49/PDF/N0936849.pdf?OpenElement) [page discontinued] [now at [unscr.com/en/resolutions/1874](http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/1874)].

Yet, it appears that another North Korean cargo vessel has arrived at the port of Thilawa, near Rangoon. Naypyidaw claims that the ship is simply taking on board a shipment of rice, but there are suspicions it may have delivered arms, possibly even components of a nuclear or ballistic missile program.<sup>4</sup> If so, this would be in direct violation of the UNSC. These suspicions have been strengthened by recent US and Burmese statements.

Following his visit to Burma, Kurt Campbell said: '[W]e have urged Burma's senior leadership to abide by its own commitment to fully comply with UN Security Council Resolution 1874. Recent developments call into question that commitment.'<sup>5</sup> In reply, the Burmese said that Naypyidaw would observe UNSC Resolutions 1718 and 1874, but the military government had 'the duty to maintain and protect national sovereignty'.

Over the past 10 years, Naypyidaw has developed close defence links with Pyongyang, including the importation of conventional arms. There have also been claims that North Korea is helping Burma to acquire ballistic missiles and possibly even develop a nuclear weapon. Washington has never commented directly on the latter claims, but it has admitted that the US is discussing a range of 'broad proliferation issues' with Naypyidaw.

When he was in Burma earlier this month, Campbell called for a transparent process that would permit the international community to verify Naypyidaw's compliance with the relevant UNSC resolutions. In its absence, he said, the US maintained the right 'to take independent action within the relevant frameworks established by the international community'.

This seems to be a reference to UN instruments permitting the interdiction of North Korean arms shipments, by land, sea and air. However, Naypyidaw is likely to interpret these remarks more broadly. It doubtless remembers that, in 2004, before UNSC Resolutions 1718 and 1874 were passed, Washington said it would respond 'vigorously and rapidly' to any evidence of North Korean ballistic missile sales to Burma.<sup>6</sup>

4 Wai Moe, 'Arms Imported Over New Year?', *The Irrawaddy*, 10 May 2010, irrawaddy.org/article.php?art\_id=18439 [page discontinued] [now at [www2.irrawaddy.com/article.php?art\\_id=18439](http://www2.irrawaddy.com/article.php?art_id=18439)].

5 'Assistant Secretary Campbell's Remarks on Visit to Burma', *America.gov*, 10 May 2010, [www.america.gov/st/texttrans-english/2010/May/20100510143632eaifas0.8452417.html](http://www.america.gov/st/texttrans-english/2010/May/20100510143632eaifas0.8452417.html) [page discontinued].

6 Paul Tighe, 'North Korea, Myanmar See Missile Trade, State Department Says', *Bloomberg.com*, 26 March 2004, [www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&sid=a9t\\_L4U1Avmw&refer=asia%3C%2Fa%3E-redirectoldpage](http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&sid=a9t_L4U1Avmw&refer=asia%3C%2Fa%3E-redirectoldpage) [page discontinued].

Also, the military regime would be aware of the February 2010 Quadrennial Defence Review, which stated that the US would develop its capacities to ‘contain WMD threats emanating from fragile states’ and increase its ability to intervene in states where ‘responsible state control’ of WMD materials was not guaranteed.<sup>7</sup>

Whether or not Burma is trying to acquire strategic weapons, such statements are bound to heighten Naypyidaw’s threat perceptions. The regime has never shaken off its fear of external intervention, including an invasion by the US and its allies. Comments by other world leaders—including Kevin Rudd, who once threatened to ‘bash Burma’s doors down’—have strengthened these concerns.<sup>8</sup>

If the US continues to press the regime about its relationship with Pyongyang, as seems highly likely, tensions between Washington and Naypyidaw are bound to grow, making a constructive dialogue on other issues even more difficult. Should it be discovered that Burma is indeed violating one or more UNSC resolutions, President Obama would have no option but to revert to a much tougher line.

This outcome may satisfy critics of the administration’s current policy, but it will not bring the resolution of Burma’s domestic problems any closer.

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7 *Quadrennial Defense Review: Report* (Washington, DC: US Department of Defense, February 2010), [www.defense.gov/qdr/images/QDR\\_as\\_of\\_12Feb10\\_1000.pdf](http://www.defense.gov/qdr/images/QDR_as_of_12Feb10_1000.pdf) [page discontinued] [now at [archive.defense.gov/qdr/QDR%20as%20of%2029JAN10%201600.pdf](http://archive.defense.gov/qdr/QDR%20as%20of%2029JAN10%201600.pdf)].

8 Jonathan Pearlman, ‘Rudd Says Donors Must Bash in Doors’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 May 2010, [www.smh.com.au/news/world/rudd-says-donors-must-bash-in-doors/2008/05/09/1210131275004.html](http://www.smh.com.au/news/world/rudd-says-donors-must-bash-in-doors/2008/05/09/1210131275004.html).

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