

30

Burma and North Korea: Reality checks

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It looked like the continuing and often heated debate over the nature of Myanmar's links with North Korea and Naypyidaw's possible nuclear weapons program could see some resolution in 2011, when the US Government appointed a special envoy for Burma and started providing Congress with official statements on key aspects of the problem.

Earlier this month, a conference was held in Washington to look at Burma's relationships with the two Koreas. Inevitably, the issue that attracted most attention was Pyongyang's purported assistance to Naypyidaw in the nuclear field and the possibility that this extends to collaboration on a secret weapons program.

Unsurprisingly, the conference did not produce any dramatic new insights on this subject. Indeed, its greatest value was to provide an opportunity for some of the main participants in the current, rather heated, public debate to lay out for scrutiny and discussion the key elements of their arguments.

One of the speakers was Robert Kelley, a former IAEA inspector and the principal author of a March 2010 report on Burma's nuclear ambitions, which was sponsored by the opposition DVB.¹ Another speaker was David Albright, also a nuclear physicist and president of the respected Institute for Science and International Security.²

Kelley reiterated his firm belief that Burma has a nascent nuclear program. He acknowledged that it does not seem to have advanced very far, nor is it being managed very competently by the local authorities. It is therefore not an immediate military threat. Drawing mainly on information provided by a Burmese army defector, however, Kelley remains convinced that the sole purpose of this secret program is to produce nuclear weapons.³

This view was strongly challenged by Albright. He allowed for the possibility that Burma was interested in acquiring nuclear technology—in itself a matter for concern—but he argued that there was still insufficient hard, verifiable evidence to claim the existence of a nuclear weapons program.⁴ To his mind, the data provided so far have been fragmentary and ambiguous and often tainted by association with Burmese opposition groups.

On one critical issue, Kelley and Albright were in agreement. They both pointed out that, despite clear signs of a growing defence relationship between the two countries, there was still no reliable evidence of direct North Korean assistance to Burma in the nuclear field. These comments were in stark contrast to the claims made by some activist groups and misleading headlines in a number of prominent news outlets.⁵

1 'Burma's Nuclear Ambitions', *Democratic Voice of Burma*, March 2010, www.dvb.no/burmas-nuclear-ambitions/burmas-nuclear-ambitions-nuclear-expert-analysis/9297 [page discontinued].

2 Institute for Science and International Security, Washington, DC, www.isis-online.org/.

3 Robert E. Kelley, 'Nuclear Proliferation in Southeast Asia: Is Burma a Problem?', Presentation at a conference on Myanmar and the Two Koreas, School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University, Washington, DC, 11 April 2011, www.sais-jhu.edu/bin/s/i/robert-kelley-myanmar-and-the-two-koreas-conference-paper-april-2011.pdf [page discontinued].

4 David Albright and Christina Walrond, *Technical Note: Revisiting Bomb Reactors in Burma and an Alleged Burmese Nuclear Weapons Program*, ISIS Report (Washington, DC: Institute for Science and International Security, 11 April 2011), pp.1–7, www.isis-online.org/uploads/isis-reports/documents/Burma_Analysis_Bomb_Reactors_11April2011.pdf.

5 Cameron Stewart, 'Burma's Nuclear Plans Exposed by Wikileaks', *The Australian*, 11 December 2010, www.theaustralian.com.au/in-depth/wikileaks/burmas-nuclear-plans-exposed-by-wikileaks/story-fn775xjq-1225969238522 [page discontinued].

The two scientists also agreed, however, that any technical assistance provided by Pyongyang would be critical to Naypyidaw's ability to pursue a nuclear program, peaceful or otherwise.

One of the reasons this debate continues to arouse strong feelings, and why some unlikely scenarios still get an airing in the news media, is that there have been almost no authoritative statements by the IAEA or reputable government sources to clarify the picture or to put all the competing claims into a sensible context.

The strongest official statement issued so far has been by the US State Department, which reported in July 2010: 'At this time, the United States lacks evidence to support a conclusion that Burma has violated its NPT [Non-Proliferation Treaty] obligations or IAEA safeguards.'⁶ Yet this report appears to have been discounted by some observers, who prefer to cite the US's oft-stated concerns about the possible implications of Burma's links with North Korea.

There are a number of developments on the horizon, however, that could see some of these uncertainties resolved, or that will at least give the public debate some perspective.

The first is the likely Senate confirmation later this year of President Obama's special envoy for Burma, Derek Mitchell.⁷ Such an appointment is required under the 2008 Burmese *JADE Act*, through which Congress sought to pressure the Bush administration into taking tougher measures against Naypyidaw. The envoy's stated role includes a range of activities designed to 'restore civilian democratic rule to Burma', but he will also be responsible for coordinating US policy and consulting other countries on the issue.

Second, it was revealed at the Washington conference that one of the special envoy's first tasks will be to address the longstanding requirement—also stemming from the *JADE Act*—for the US Government to issue a formal statement listing all those countries and entities that provide Burma

6 2010 *Adherence to and Compliance with Arms Control, Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Agreements and Commitments* (Washington, DC: US Department of State, July 2010), p.59, www.state.gov/documents/organization/145181.pdf [page discontinued] [now at 2009-2017.state.gov/t/avc/rls/rpt/170924.htm].

7 'US Appoints Burma Special Envoy Derek Mitchell', *BBC News*, 15 April 2011, www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-13090242.

with ‘military or intelligence aid’. Specifically covered by this clause is any provision of WMD and related materials, technologies, training and equipment.⁸

Third, a resolution has just been introduced into the US Senate by Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Dick Lugar.⁹ It carefully notes (but does not confirm) ‘reports that the Governments of North Korea and Burma are collaborating on matters relating to the development of Burma’s nuclear program’. The resolution calls upon the US Government to provide Congress with an unclassified report on the volume of ships and planes from North Korea that have visited Burma since 2009.

Taken together, these three developments hold out the promise of more reliable data and greater clarity about the US Government’s views regarding Burma’s relationship with North Korea, including the complex problem of Naypyidaw’s nuclear ambitions. This is to be welcomed, for the public debate sorely needs an informed and objective official view to balance the more sensationalist stories that have already appeared on this subject.

Even so, as the conference attendees were reminded earlier this month, Burma and North Korea are challenging intelligence targets and reliable information on both countries is still very difficult to obtain. Regardless of any public statements by the US, a number of critical questions are likely to remain unanswered. Also, Burma’s interest in nuclear technology and its relationship with North Korea will remain emotive and highly politicised issues.¹⁰

These factors alone will ensure that a wide range of claims and counterclaims will continue to be heard on this vexed issue for the foreseeable future.

8 ‘HR 3890 (110th): Tom Lantos Block Burmese JADE (Junta’s Anti-Democratic Efforts) Act of 2008’, Introduced 18 October 2007, Enacted 29 July 2008, US Congress, www.govtrack.us/congress/bill.xpd?bill=h110-3890.

9 ‘Lugar Seeks Investigation into Military Ties between North Korea and Burma’, *Senatus*, 8 April 2011, senatus.wordpress.com/2011/04/08/lugar-seeks-investigation-into-military-ties-between-north-korea-and-burma/.

10 Stephen Engelberg, ‘Experts, Intelligence Agencies Question a Defector’s Claims about Burma’s Nuclear Ambitions’, *ProPublica*, 12 November 2010, www.propublica.org/article/experts-intel-agencies-question-a-defectors-claims-about-burmas-nuclear.

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