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Burma and WMD: Lost in translation

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If there was greater familiarity with a range of technical terms and a more considered use of the language used by participants, the public debate over Myanmar and its reported WMD programs would most likely be clearer and more productive.

Over the past 10 years, the public debate about Burma's nuclear ambitions and possible missile purchases has generated more heat than light. This is perhaps to be expected, given the dearth of reliable information on these issues, the emotive nature of the subject matter and the fact that, since the abortive 1988 prodemocracy uprising, Burma-watching has become highly politicised.

Yet there may be another reason the debate has at times been unproductive—even misleading—and that is the nature of the language employed.

Academics and other professional analysts are under considerable pressure to write deliberately and to choose their words with great care. They are encouraged to pay almost forensic attention to questions of terminology, for whatever they say will be scrutinised by other subject experts ready and able to test their data and weigh every nuance of their argument. Reputations and important decisions can hang on questions of accuracy and balance.

This emphasis on precision, however, is not usually characteristic of journalists and activists. There are exceptions, of course, but generally speaking the interests of these groups lie more in telling a good story or promoting a political line. Also, some of those engaged in the Burma debate are not familiar with the relevant technical issues, leading them, in the words of one former IAEA inspector, to be ‘very loose with terminology’.¹

The result has been numerous articles and blogs that make casual references to quite specific issues. To a certain extent, this is inevitable and understandable. As Lindsay Tanner has recently pointed out—albeit rather trenchantly—the news media demands concise stories written in simple prose that can be easily understood by non-specialists.² Advocacy groups appeal to a mass audience that is more likely to respond to short, catchy phrases and dramatic claims.

And, to be fair, even professionals resort to familiar terms and common phrases to refer economically to complex issues or to convey subtle arguments, particularly when writing for a public audience. Often this practice is harmless. It can in fact aid popular understanding and advance the debate. At other times, however, it can cause confusion and take the discussion in unhelpful directions.

For example, surveying the literature on Burma since 2000, there are numerous references to its ‘nuclear program’. Yet it is not always clear whether the author is referring to the peaceful nuclear research program that has been subject to prolonged negotiations between Burma and Russia or a secret military program that some observers claim has already been launched by the Burmese regime, with North Korean help.

Indeed, the term ‘program’ itself means different things to different people. To specialists, a program is a systematic plan to reach a specific goal, accompanied by the full panoply of political endorsement, bureaucratic oversight, budgetary allocations, dedicated infrastructure, assigned personnel and technical support. As the Institute for Science and

1 Robert Kelley and Ali Fowle for the Democratic Voice of Burma, *Nuclear Related Activities in Burma* (Oslo and Bangkok: Democratic Voice of Burma, 25 May 2010), www.dvb.no/burmas-nuclear-ambitions/burmas-nuclear-ambitions-nuclear/expert-analysis/9297 [page discontinued] [now at www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/world/documents/060410.pdf].

2 Lindsay Tanner, *Sideshow: Dumbing Down Democracy* (Melbourne: Scribe, 2011).

International Security has recently stated, based on the fragmentary and ambiguous evidence available so far, it would be premature to apply this term to Burma's possible interest in nuclear weapons.³

To take another example, there have been a large number of reports about Burma's wish to acquire 'missiles'.⁴ Yet it is rarely stated what kinds of missiles are being referred to. Burma has long had an interest in buying or manufacturing a wide range of such weapons, including surface-to-surface missiles, surface-to-air missiles, air-to-air missiles, anti-ship missiles and anti-tank missiles. Some activist websites even include artillery rockets in this category.⁵

Even when a reference is made, specifically or by implication, to ballistic missiles, a clear distinction needs to be made between tactical, short-range, medium-range, long-range and intercontinental weapons. Each kind has different technical characteristics and requires different levels of supporting infrastructure and expertise.⁶ Their purchase prices, too, are different. More to the point, they have quite different values as military and political weapons.

Another term used very loosely in discussions about missiles in Burma is 'Scud'. This name can be applied to several ballistic missile variants, with widely differing capabilities. Used in the right context, the broad phrase 'Scud-type missiles' can be more useful, but it still needs to be understood by the author and the reader that this term covers an entire family of weapons, made by several countries, with ranges estimated to vary from 180 to 1,500 kilometres.⁷

Similar confusion surrounds the phrase 'weapons of mass destruction', or WMD. It is used as either a synonym for nuclear weapons or, as in the title of this post, shorthand for a wide range of exotic weapons from

3 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), www.isis-online.org/uploads/isis-reports/documents/Burma_Analysis_Bomb_Reactors_11April2011.pdf.

4 Andrew Selth, 'If Not Nukes, What About Missiles?', *The Interpreter*, 11 January 2010, www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2010/01/11/Burma-If-not-nukes-what-about-missiles.aspx [page discontinued] [now at archive.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/burma-if-not-nukes-what-about-missiles].

5 'N. Korea Missiles at Burma Base', *Democratic Voice of Burma*, 24 June 2010, www.dvb.no/news/n-korea-missiles-at-burma-base/10425 [page discontinued].

6 'Ballistic Missile', *Wikipedia*, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ballistic_missile.

7 'Scud', *Wikipedia*, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scud.

ballistic missiles through to chemical, biological and nuclear weapons. At times it has been applied to certain conventional weapons. There is no agreed definition of the phrase, even among experts.⁸

Raising issues of this kind will doubtless strike some as nothing more than academic pedantry or a futile attempt to impose specialist criteria on the wider public discourse. But it would not take much to raise the level of an important debate that demands accuracy and mutual understanding. And it is worth bearing in mind that discussions of this kind influence not only popular perceptions, but also consideration of official policy.

So, everyone concerned about Burma has an interest in ensuring they are speaking the same language and talking about the same things.

8 'Weapon of Mass Destruction', *Wikipedia*, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Weapon_of_mass_destruction.

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