

37

Clinton in Burma: The WMD dimension

(16:52 AEDT, 6 December 2011)

Hillary Clinton paid a three-day visit to Myanmar in December 2011—the first by a US Secretary of State since John Foster Dulles visited the country in 1955. No one expected any dramatic breakthrough in the diplomatic relationship, but the US made it clear beforehand that it had a number of important issues to raise with president Thein Sein—not least its concerns over Myanmar’s reported WMD ambitions.

As expected, Hillary Clinton’s historic visit to Burma last week prompted a flurry of reports and op-eds in the news media and on activist websites.

Most of the immediate coverage focused on her discussions with President Thein Sein and opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi. The perennial issues of democratic reform in Burma, the release of political prisoners, the development of civil society, the plight of ethnic communities and US economic sanctions were all given a good airing.

While some were more cautious than others, most observers acknowledged that something very important is happening in Burma, and the Secretary of State’s visit was a turning point in relations with the US.

However, even experienced Burma-watchers were unable to agree on what actually prompted the visit. It was variously described as a calculated move to leave behind the failed policies of the Bush era, an effort to encourage

Thein Sein's reform process, an attempt by the Obama administration to reengage with the Asia-Pacific and a ploy by the US to score points in its strategic competition with China.

To a greater or lesser extent, all these factors probably contributed to the decision to make the visit—the first by a US Secretary of State to Burma in more than 50 years.

Despite a rather forlorn plea for attention by US Senator Richard Lugar, Burma's reported WMD ambitions and shadowy relationship with North Korea received relatively little press coverage.¹ Yet those subjects were clearly high on the US agenda. By examining public statements made during the visit, it is possible to glean some clues about the current thinking on these vexed issues.

In a background briefing given prior to Hillary Clinton's arrival in Burma, a senior State Department official—most likely Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Kurt Campbell—said the primary US concerns with regard to Naypyidaw's relations with Pyongyang were 'missiles and other military equipment' that were subject to UNSC sanctions.²

Questioned specifically about the possible transfer of nuclear technology to Burma, the same official said that 'there are perhaps other activities, nascent activities'. It was 'an issue of concern' that had been looked at 'very, very closely', but the US did not see signs of a 'substantial effort' in this area 'at this time'. He repeated that, as regards North Korean ties with Burma, the US focus was on missiles—an issue that had been examined 'fairly carefully'.

When Hillary Clinton met President Thein Sein in Naypyidaw, she was frank in stating that improved relations with the US were dependent on 'the entire government' of Burma respecting the international consensus against the spread of nuclear weapons. She looked to Burma to fully

1 Senator Richard G. Lugar, 'Lugar: Burma–North Korea Ties Should be Exposed', Press release, 28 November 2011, lugar.senate.gov/news/record.cfm?id=334974&& [page discontinued].

2 *Background Briefing on Secretary Clinton's Travel to Burma* (Washington, DC: US Department of State, 29 November 2011), www.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/2011/11/177896.htm [page discontinued].

implement the UNSC resolutions against certain contacts with Pyongyang and supported the Burmese Government's 'stated determination to sever military ties with North Korea'.³

This reference to Burma cutting its defence links with North Korea—described by the US side elsewhere as 'very clear commitments' by Naypyidaw—goes further than past Burmese statements on this issue.⁴ Also, the reference to the 'entire government' seems to be a veiled warning to hardline elements in Burma that they should not try to pursue WMD in defiance of Thein Sein's 'strong assurances regarding his country's compliance' with the relevant UNSC resolutions and other nonproliferation commitments.

'Other nonproliferation commitments' appears to be a reference to Burma's stated intention to strongly consider signing the IAEA's additional protocol.⁵ Indeed, according to US officials, the Thein Sein Government is already engaged in a dialogue with the IAEA regarding Burma's possible accession to this key instrument. Among other things, it requires comprehensive reporting of nuclear-related activities and—critically—permits IAEA inspections of suspected nuclear facilities.

The overall impression left by all these statements is quite positive. While still of concern, Burma's nuclear research program does not seem to have made much progress and in any case is considered less important than other WMD-related issues. Accession to the additional protocol would be an important confidence-building measure, particularly if it was followed by IAEA inspections.⁶ A Burmese ballistic missile program is clearly a major worry for the US, but on that subject, too, Naypyidaw seems prepared to respond to Washington's representations.

3 Hillary Rodham Clinton, Secretary of State, 'Press Availability in Nay Pyi Taw, Burma', 1 December 2011, www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2011/12/177994.htm [page discontinued] [now at 2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/12/177994.htm].

4 Senior State Department Official, 'Background Briefing on Secretary Clinton's Meeting with Aung San Suu Kyi', Special Briefing, Rangoon, Burma, 2 December 2011, www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2011/12/178091.htm [page discontinued] [now at 2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2011/12/178125.htm].

5 Senior State Department Official, 'Background Briefing on Secretary Clinton's Meeting with Burmese President', Special Briefing, Nay Pyi Taw, Burma, 1 December 2011, www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2011/12/178025.htm [page discontinued] [now at 2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2011/12/178025.htm].

6 *IAEA Safeguards Overview: Comprehensive Safeguards Agreements and Additional Protocols* (Vienna: International Atomic Energy Agency, 1998–2019), www.iaea.org/Publications/Factsheets/English/sg_overview.html.

Most importantly, the US appears to have accepted a firm assurance by President Thein Sein that Burma will observe the relevant UNSC resolutions and cut all military ties with North Korea. This would have a direct impact on any Burmese WMD programs. It remains to be seen whether and when this actually occurs. Hillary Clinton said in Burma that 'history teaches us to be cautious' but, as she also stated with regard to the democratic reform process, there are 'some grounds for encouragement'.

Of course, it is possible to read too much into these public statements. Not everyone speaks with legalistic precision. The US spokespersons were senior officials, however, with strong track records in international diplomacy, conscious that they were speaking on the record. They were trying to convey specific messages to the public and to other governments, including the one in Naypyidaw. On that basis, their comments deserve serious consideration.

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.