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Burma and WMD: Nothing to report?

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On 9 March 2012, the US State Department released two reports in response to the 2008 Tom Lantos Block Burmese JADE (Junta's Anti-Democratic Efforts) Act. To the disappointment of many, they did not provide the comprehensive and authoritative statement that was expected regarding foreign aid to Myanmar in areas such as intelligence cooperation, arms sales and the provision of nuclear technology.

For nearly four years, activists, journalists and sundry other Burma-watchers have been waiting with keen anticipation for the US State Department to issue the annual reports on Burma that were formally mandated by an Act of Congress in 2008. It was expected that these reports would provide comprehensive, authoritative public statements on a range of issues that have long been mired in controversy.

As noted on *The Interpreter* last April, the preparation and release of these reports were among the first tasks set for the US's Special Envoy to Burma, who was finally appointed in August 2011 under provisions of the same Act.¹

1 Andrew Selth, 'Burma and North Korea: Reality Checks', *The Interpreter*, 27 April 2011, www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2011/04/27/Burma-and-North-Korea-Reality-Checks.aspx [page discontinued] [now at archive.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/burma-and-north-korea-reality-checks].

The State Department has just released its Burma reports for 2009² and 2010.³ They are helpful, as far as they go, but are likely to raise more questions than they answer. Indeed, they are significant more for what they do not say than for what they do say.

Under the *JADE Act* of 2008, the State Department was required to report annually to the foreign relations committees of both the House of Representatives and the Senate on all military and intelligence aid provided to Burma's ruling SPDC.⁴ WMD and related technology, materials and training were singled out for special attention.

The two reports just released are notable for their brevity and their reticence. Each is only one page long, even though half the page is taken up with an introduction and an overview that repeats much of the content. In neither of the reports do the words 'nuclear' or 'missile' appear even once, and 'intelligence' is only referred to as part of the reports' terms of reference, which are set out in the introduction.

Unsurprisingly, the State Department identifies state-controlled arms companies from China, North Korea, Ukraine, Russia, Belarus and Serbia as Burma's main suppliers of weapons and military-related technology during 2009 and 2010. China and North Korea also helped establish unspecified military production plants in Burma.

Interestingly, the reports also state that firms based in Singapore and Taiwan have 'reportedly' assisted Burma's defence industry in acquiring production technology and 'production-related equipment'. It is not clear precisely what is being referred to here, but Singapore has long played down such links. The Taiwanese connection seems to be mainly through sales to North Korea.

On North Korea's direct links with Burma, the two reports are very circumspect. They refer to attempts to deliver 'likely military equipment' and support for Burma's efforts to build and operate military-related

2 *Report to Congress per PL 110-286 on Military and Intelligence Aid to Burma for 2009* (Washington, DC: US Department of State, 9 March 2012), www.state.gov/s/inr/rls/burmareport/185615.htm [page discontinued].

3 *Report to Congress per PL 110-286 on Military and Intelligence Aid to Burma for 2010* (Washington, DC: US Department of State, 9 March 2012), www.state.gov/s/inr/rls/burmareport/184851.htm [page discontinued].

4 *H.R. 3890 (110th): Tom Lantos Block Burmese JADE (Junta's Anti-Democratic Efforts) Act of 2008*, Passed 23 July 2008, US Congress, Washington, DC, www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/110/hr3890/text.

production facilities. In this regard, however, the 2010 report alludes only to possible cooperation in the construction of ‘underground facilities for military aircraft’. No comment is made on persistent claims that nuclear and ballistic missile plants are being built and operated in Burma with North Korean help.

Nor is any specific reference made to the nuclear-related training that Russia is supposed to have provided to more than 4,000 Burmese military and civilian officers over the past decade.⁵ All the 2010 report says in that regard is that ‘Russia also continues to train Burmese students in a wide range of fields with military applications’.

The absence of any reference to Burma’s reported WMD ambitions is curious, as only last December the US was prepared to speak openly about the subject. In a background briefing to journalists just before Hillary Clinton’s historic visit to Burma, a senior State Department official made it clear that the US was concerned about Burma’s possible acquisition of ballistic missiles or related technology from North Korea.⁶

The same official said Burma’s ‘nascent’ nuclear research program was much less of a concern but, even so, both issues were raised in the Secretary of State’s discussions with President Thein Sein.⁷ US representatives later expressed their appreciation of the President’s firm undertaking to sever all military contacts with North Korea, the clear implication being that this would stem any clandestine WMD technology transfers.

Neither of the two reports refers to any intelligence links between Burma and foreign countries. If accepted at face value, this suggests that the State Department places little credence on reports in the news media and on activist websites over the past 10 years claiming the existence of Chinese signals intelligence collection stations in Burma.⁸ Some of these stories have also stated that China shares its intelligence with Burma.

5 ‘Russia Trained 4,000 Myanmar Nuclear Officers’, *Hindustan Times*, [New Delhi], 6 August 2010, www.hindustantimes.com/News-Feed/World/Russia-trained-4-000-Myanmar-nuclear-officers/Article1-583149.aspx [page discontinued] [now at www.hindustantimes.com/world/russia-trained-4-000-myanmar-nuclear-officers/story-AJWaZQtfiBwplTICJCCQgIN.html].

6 ‘Background Briefing on Secretary Clinton’s Travel to Burma’, US Department of State, Washington, DC, 29 November 2011, 2009-2017.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/2011/11/177896.htm.

7 Andrew Selth, ‘Clinton in Burma: The WMD Dimension’, *The Interpreter*, 6 December 2011, www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2011/12/06/Clinton-and-Burmese-WMD.aspx [page discontinued] [now at archive.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/clinton-burma-wmd-dimension/].

8 Andrew Selth, *Chinese Military Bases in Burma: The Explosion of a Myth*, Griffith Asia Institute Regional Outlook Paper No.10 (Brisbane: Griffith University, 2007), www.griffith.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0018/18225/regional-outlook-andrew-selth.pdf [page discontinued].

Of course, Burma has long been acknowledged by senior US officials as an extremely hard intelligence target, and it is possible that reliable information about such sensitive matters can only be obtained using sources and methods that cannot be revealed in public statements. This leaves open the question as to what might have been included in the classified and presumably more comprehensive reports delivered to the two congressional committees.

Another factor that may have influenced the State Department's cautious approach is the fragility of the current relationship between Washington and the apparently reform-minded government in Naypyidaw. The two reports cover a period when Burma was under direct military rule but, even so, revelations of nefarious activities involving WMD and North Korea would hardly encourage a closer relationship and stimulate further reforms. After all, President Thein Sein was Burma's prime minister from 2007 to 2011.

The 2008 *JADE Act* refers specifically to Burma under the SPDC's rule. The 2010 report points out that this council was formally dissolved on 30 March 2011, when the new hybrid civilian–military government took power. On that basis, it is unlikely that the State Department will feel bound to provide any further reports of this kind on military and intelligence aid to Burma.

Despite the progress made on several fronts since 2011, the latest US reports will not satisfy diehard critics of the Burmese Government. They were relying on the tough provisions of the 2008 Act to expose what they have long been convinced were secret nuclear weapon and ballistic missile programs. The fact that this has not happened will no doubt disappoint them, but it is unlikely to quieten the rumour mill or prevent similar claims in the future.

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