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## Burma and WMD: In the news again

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*President Thein Sein told US secretary of state Hillary Clinton during her December 2011 visit that Myanmar had no intention of manufacturing or using WMD. He also said that Myanmar would sever its military ties with North Korea. However, reports kept emerging that cast doubt on these promises, not the least a remarkable document issued by the US State Department in July 2012 outlining Myanmar's apparent WMD ambitions.*

Despite Burma's promise last year to cut its defence ties with North Korea and to not pursue any WMD programs, these problems simply will not go away. Naypyidaw's relations with the international community have greatly improved over the past year or so, but the potential remains for these issues to bring Burma's diplomatic rapprochement and domestic reform to a grinding halt.

Given North Korea's past sales of conventional arms to Burma and likely involvement in a ballistic missile production program, if not a nuclear weapons development program, it was a relief to all concerned when President Thein Sein told the US Secretary of State in December 2011 that Burma would sever its military links with North Korea.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 'Background Briefing on Secretary Clinton's Travel to Burma', Special Briefing, US Department of State, Washington, DC, 29 November 2011, [www.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/2011/11/177896.htm](http://www.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/2011/11/177896.htm) [page discontinued].

There have since been statements by other senior Burmese officials assuring the world that Naypyidaw had abandoned its small nuclear research program and that military relations with North Korea had ceased.<sup>2</sup> It was partly with these ‘firm assurances’ in mind that the US, and most other countries, suspended or lifted a wide range of punitive measures that had been progressively imposed against Burma since the 1988 prodemocracy uprising.

Both the WMD and North Korea issues, however, remain of concern. Indeed, even more than the election of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi to Burma’s parliament in April,<sup>3</sup> they have the potential to dramatically alter the trajectory of Burma’s internal and external affairs. In the parlance of US analysts, they are ‘game-changers’.

Last year, there were renewed claims of chemical weapons use by the Burmese armed forces. In June, Shan insurgents told activist groups they had been attacked with artillery shells containing chemical weapons.<sup>4</sup> In November, Kachin insurgents and refugees claimed they had been the victims of ‘toxic gas’.<sup>5</sup>

None of these reports could be independently verified and most observers remained wary about accepting them at face value. Similar claims had been made by ethnic insurgent groups on several occasions over the past 30 years, but no hard evidence of chemical weapons use by Burma had ever been produced.

In November 2011, however, the latest claims attracted the attention of at least one member of the US Congress opposed to the Obama administration’s policy of ‘practical engagement’ with Burma—namely,

2 John O’Callaghan, ‘Myanmar Abandons Nuclear Research: Defence Minister’, *Reuters*, 2 June 2012, in [reuters.com/article/uk-asia-security-myanmar/myanmar-abandons-nuclear-research-defence-minister-idUKBRE85105520120602](http://reuters.com/article/uk-asia-security-myanmar/myanmar-abandons-nuclear-research-defence-minister-idUKBRE85105520120602).

3 Esmer Golluoglu, ‘Aung San Suu Kyi Hails “New Era” for Burma After Landslide Victory’, *The Guardian*, 3 April 2012, [www.theguardian.com/world/2012/apr/02/aung-san-suu-kyi-new-era-burma](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/apr/02/aung-san-suu-kyi-new-era-burma).

4 ‘Fears Mount Over Chemical Weapon Use’, *Democratic Voice of Burma*, 8 June 2011, [www.dvb.no/news/fears-mount-over-chemical-weapons-use/16018](http://www.dvb.no/news/fears-mount-over-chemical-weapons-use/16018) [page discontinued].

5 Zin Linn, ‘Kachin Fighters Claim Burma Army Using Chemical Weapons’, *Asian Correspondent*, 1 November 2011, [asiancorrespondent.com/68545/burma-must-make-a-judgment-to-end-civil-war-immediately/](http://asiancorrespondent.com/68545/burma-must-make-a-judgment-to-end-civil-war-immediately/) [page discontinued].

the Chairwoman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Ileana Ros-Lehtinen. Being cited by such a prominent figure, and without the usual caveats, these claims were given greater credence.<sup>6</sup>

Ros-Lehtinen stated that North Korea remained active in Burma, deepening her concern that the Burmese Government was still intent on acquiring ‘contraband weapons ... including for the possible development of a nuclear program’. No evidence was provided to support these claims, but on 11 July this year, the State Department released a fact sheet that acknowledges that the US remains worried about Burma’s links with North Korea.<sup>7</sup>

In the context of revised US sanctions against Burma, a new executive order has been issued by President Obama that imposes a range of measures against Burmese individuals and entities that are engaged in arms trade with North Korea, including the Directorate of Defence Industries (DDI). According to the fact sheet, the DDI ‘carries out missile research and development at its facilities in Burma, where North Korean experts are active’.

The State Department also referred to a memorandum of understanding signed by the head of the DDI in 2008, in which North Korea undertook to assist Burma to build medium-range, liquid-fuelled ballistic missiles. The fact sheet added that, ‘in the past year, North Korean ships have continued to arrive at Burma’s ports carrying goods destined for Burma’s defence industries’.

This fact sheet seems to have been barely noticed by international observers, but it is an important document.<sup>8</sup> It confirms reports that, despite Thein Sein’s personal undertaking to Hillary Clinton, Burma has still not severed its military ties with North Korea. Indeed, in defiance of UNSC resolutions, it continues to receive shipments of defence-related goods. Also, for the first time, the US describes the extent of Burma’s ballistic missile ambitions.

6 ‘Ros-Lehtinen Expresses Concern about Atrocities in Burma, Possible Connections to North Korea and Secretary Clinton Trip’, House Committee on Foreign Affairs, US House of Representatives, Washington, DC, 29 November 2011, [foreignaffairs.house.gov/news/story/?2103](http://foreignaffairs.house.gov/news/story/?2103) [page discontinued].

7 ‘Administration Eases Financial and Investment Sanctions on Burma’, *Fact Sheet* (Washington, DC: US Department of State, 11 July 2012), [2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/07/194868.htm](http://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/07/194868.htm).

8 ‘Obama Curbs Myanmar Penalties’, *Global Security Newswire*, 12 July 2012, [www.nti.org/gsn/article/obama-curbs-myanmar-energy-penalties/](http://www.nti.org/gsn/article/obama-curbs-myanmar-energy-penalties/).

The strategic impact of a Burmese ballistic missile capability is still the subject of debate. Recent revelations that Vietnam has long had such weapons have raised little comment.<sup>9</sup> The political implications of Burma's continued defence links with North Korea, however, are profound. They have the potential to set Burma's foreign relations back years and with it any real hope of the President's domestic reform program achieving its aims.

Thein Sein's reforms have been prompted mainly by internal factors, and only in part by external concerns. Yet, ironically, they depend heavily on foreign assistance to succeed. Almost every sector of Burma's economy and civil society badly needs help and most of the capital, technology and expertise can only come from abroad. Should Burma once again be relegated to the status of an international pariah, either for violating UNSC resolutions or for secretly producing WMD, most key sources of assistance would evaporate.

There are a number of possible explanations for Burma's apparently self-defeating behaviour. The fact that the US has not made more of the continuing defence links with North Korea suggests that, for a period at least, Washington is prepared to give Thein Sein the benefit of the doubt. No one wants to see Burma once again slip back into shadow. Yet, such tolerance has definite limits, and there are many in the activist community, and in Congress, who would be happy to tell the Obama administration that it was always unwise to trust the generals and ex-generals in Naypyidaw.

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9 Carlyle A. Thayer, 'Vietnam Bares Scud Missile Force: Missile Brigade 490', *Background Briefing*, 9 July 2012, [www.scribd.com/doc/99567766/Thayer-Vietnam-Bares-Scud-Missile-Force](http://www.scribd.com/doc/99567766/Thayer-Vietnam-Bares-Scud-Missile-Force).

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