

## Burma: Two WMD developments

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*Given the dearth of reliable information about developments in Myanmar, authoritative statements about controversial issues by governments and international organisations were always welcome. Not only did they define particular problems but also, as in the case of Myanmar's reputed WMD ambitions, they helped dispel any associated myths and misconceptions. Rarely, however, did such statements prevent continuing discussion and speculation about the regime's possible aims and activities.*

There have recently been two noteworthy developments in the long-running saga of Burma's reported interest in acquiring weapons of mass destruction. In different ways, both were welcome but, inevitably, concerns remain.

First, in mid September, the US State Department released the third of its annual reports on foreign military and intelligence assistance to Burma, as required by the *JADE Act* of 2008.<sup>1</sup> As the Act specifically referred to the military regime that was replaced with the Thein Sein Government in March 2011, another report was not expected, but it seems that a short note was required to tie off loose ends.

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<sup>1</sup> *Report to Congress per P.L. 110-286 on Military and Intelligence Aid to Burma for 2011* (Washington, DC: US Department of State, 16 September 2013), [www.state.gov/s/inr/rls/burmareport/214291.htm](http://www.state.gov/s/inr/rls/burmareport/214291.htm) [page discontinued] [now at [2009-2017.state.gov/s/inr/rls/burmareport/214291.htm](http://2009-2017.state.gov/s/inr/rls/burmareport/214291.htm)].

And it certainly is short, even more so than the first two reports, which briefly covered developments in 2009 and 2010.<sup>2</sup> The latest report simply states that, during 2011, Burma's main suppliers of weapons and military-related technology were China, North Korea, Russia and Belarus. Also, firms based in Singapore, Taiwan and Thailand apparently assisted Burma's defence industries in acquiring unspecified production technology.

On North Korea, the report states that, during 2011, Pyongyang 'supported Burma's efforts to build and operate military-related production facilities' and that North Korean arms traders purchased production-related equipment for work in Burma from companies based in Taiwan and China. Despite specific references to it in other official US documents, there was no mention of a possible ballistic missile program in Burma being conducted with North Korean assistance.<sup>3</sup>

Nor was there any treatment in the State Department's report of foreign intelligence cooperation. This was despite some bold claims in 2011 that China, in particular, had established a close relationship with Burma in this field, to the extent of operating intelligence collection stations in Burma.<sup>4</sup> If there were any such bilateral links that year, they were covered in the more comprehensive classified annex of the report, which was presented to Congress.

Second, on 17 September, Burma signed the additional protocol to the IAEA's Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement.<sup>5</sup> This fulfilled a promise made by Thein Sein during Barack Obama's visit to Burma in December 2012.<sup>6</sup> It is a major step forward, not only in terms of Naypyidaw's international respectability, but also because it holds out the promise of a better understanding of Burma's nuclear status—for example, through mutually agreed inspections.

2 Andrew Selth, 'Burma and WMD: Nothing to Report?', *The Interpreter*, 29 March 2012, [www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2012/03/29/Burma-and-WMD-Nothing-to-report.aspx](http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2012/03/29/Burma-and-WMD-Nothing-to-report.aspx) [page discontinued] [now at [archive.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/burma-and-wmd-nothing-report](http://archive.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/burma-and-wmd-nothing-report)].

3 Andrew Selth, 'Burma and North Korea: Again? Still?', *The Interpreter*, 10 July 2013, [www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2013/07/10/Burma-and-North-Korea-Again-Still.aspx](http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2013/07/10/Burma-and-North-Korea-Again-Still.aspx) [page discontinued] [now at [www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/burma-and-north-korea-again-still](http://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/burma-and-north-korea-again-still)].

4 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.scribd.com/document/155246947/Chinese-Military-Bases-in-Burma-Griffith-Asia-Institute](http://www.scribd.com/document/155246947/Chinese-Military-Bases-in-Burma-Griffith-Asia-Institute).

5 'Burma Signs New Nuclear Deal with IAEA', *Voice of America*, 17 September 2013, [www.voanews.com/content/burma-signs-new-nuclear-deal-with-iaea/1751469.html](http://www.voanews.com/content/burma-signs-new-nuclear-deal-with-iaea/1751469.html) [page discontinued] [now at [www.voanews.com/east-asia/burma-signs-new-nuclear-deal-iaea](http://www.voanews.com/east-asia/burma-signs-new-nuclear-deal-iaea)].

6 Andrew Selth, 'Burma: The Man Has Met The Lady', *The Interpreter*, 23 November 2012, [www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2012/11/23/Burma-The-Man-has-met-The-Lady.aspx](http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2012/11/23/Burma-The-Man-has-met-The-Lady.aspx) [page discontinued] [now at [archive.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/burma-man-has-met-lady](http://archive.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/burma-man-has-met-lady)].

Burma clearly hopes that, by signing the additional protocol, it will remove any lingering fears that the former military regime flirted with the idea of making nuclear weapons. At no time did Burma appear to be in breach of its IAEA or Non-Proliferation Treaty obligations,<sup>7</sup> but there were enough suspicious signs, including the acquisition of some dual-use technology,<sup>8</sup> for the international community to question Burma's intentions. Naypyidaw now wants help with a civilian nuclear program.

As former IAEA inspector Robert Kelley has warned, the signing of the additional protocol is only the beginning of a potentially lengthy process of ratification, administration and declaration.<sup>9</sup> Despite the fact that several suspected nuclear facilities have been identified, it is possible that the Burmese will simply declare they have no sites warranting inspection. That would effectively deny the IAEA access and raise doubts about Naypyidaw's bona fides.

The State Department's latest *JADE Act* report is not likely to remove concerns about North Korea's continuing defence links with Burma or quell suspicions of a secret missile program. However, it contains no surprises and is important for what it does not say. Acceptance of the additional protocol does not immediately clarify Burma's nuclear status, but it is very encouraging.

Burma being Burma, there is still a great deal that we do not know, but the more reliable information the US Government and the IAEA can put on the public record, the more they can help balance the policy debate and dispel the myths and misconceptions that surround Burma's possible WMD ambitions.

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7 Bureau of Arms Control, Verification and Compliance, *2011 Adherence to and Compliance with Arms Control, Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Agreements and Commitments* (Washington, DC: US Department of State, August 2011), [www.state.gov/t/avc/rls/rpt/170447.htm#4e\\_burma](http://www.state.gov/t/avc/rls/rpt/170447.htm#4e_burma) [page discontinued] [now at [fas.org/nuke/control/compliance2011.pdf](http://fas.org/nuke/control/compliance2011.pdf)].

8 David Albright, Paul Brannan, Robert Kelley and Andrea Scheel Stricker, *Burma: A Nuclear Wannabe; Suspicious Links to North Korea; High-Tech Procurements and Enigmatic Facilities* (Washington, DC: Institute for Science and International Security, 28 January 2010), [www.isis-online.org/isis-reports/detail/burma-a-nuclear-wanabee-suspicious-links-to-north-korea-high-tech-procureme](http://www.isis-online.org/isis-reports/detail/burma-a-nuclear-wanabee-suspicious-links-to-north-korea-high-tech-procureme).

9 Robert Kelley, 'Nuclear Burma: A Chance to Cut the Red Tape', *Democratic Voice of Burma*, 22 September 2013, [www.dvb.no/analysis/nuclear-burma-a-chance-to-cut-the-red-tape-myanmar-iaea-atomic-energy/32677](http://www.dvb.no/analysis/nuclear-burma-a-chance-to-cut-the-red-tape-myanmar-iaea-atomic-energy/32677) [page discontinued] [now at [english.dvb.no/analysis/nuclear-burma-a-chance-to-cut-the-red-tape-myanmar-iaea-atomic-energy/32677](http://english.dvb.no/analysis/nuclear-burma-a-chance-to-cut-the-red-tape-myanmar-iaea-atomic-energy/32677)].

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