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Is Burma really buying submarines?

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For years, there were rumours that Myanmar's armed forces wanted to acquire at least one submarine. None of these stories could ever be confirmed. Some officials may have nursed such ambitions but, as far as any foreign observers could tell from the information publicly available, Myanmar had not purchased any boats, nor did it have the capacity to develop a subsurface warfare capability.

For the past six months, there have been intermittent reports in the news media and on specialist websites stating that Burma (Myanmar) is developing a submarine capability. If this is true, it has important implications not only for Burma and the region, but also for the wider international community.

However, equally dramatic stories about Burma have emerged in the past only to prove misleading or false.

This is not the first time Burma has been linked to a submarine sale. In 2003, it was claimed the military government had held discussions with North Korea on the purchase of one or two small submarines.

The 110-tonne Yugo and 370-tonne Sang-O classes were mentioned. Despite the limitations of both designs, Burma's interest in these boats was said to reflect a wish to police its territorial waters and deter an invasion.¹

According to *Jane's Defence Weekly (JDW)*, Burma eventually opted to purchase one Sang-O-class submarine but was forced to abandon the deal in late 2002. It was suggested that the project had been scuppered by the cost of the boat and perhaps belated recognition by the country's military leadership of the technical difficulties of keeping it fully operational.

These reports were never confirmed, but other developments gave them some credibility. For example, after the 1988 uprising, Burma's new military government launched an ambitious plan to modernise and expand the armed forces. This included a naval rearmament program. In 1999, it was reported that Burmese naval officers had undergone unspecified 'submarine training' in Pakistan.

Also relevant was the fact that in the 1990s Burma started to expand its defence ties with North Korea.² If the generals were interested in acquiring other weapons from Pyongyang, possibly including ballistic missiles, so the logic went, why not a few submarines? If Korea was prepared to sell Yugo-class boats to Vietnam (which it did in 1997), why not to Burma?

Over the next decade, Burma's navy acquired several new ships, some armed with antisubmarine weapon systems,³ but the emphasis was clearly on surface warfare. Claims by an activist group in 2010 that India had provided training for Burma on a Foxtrot-class submarine, and that Naypyidaw was considering the purchase of two Foxtrot boats from Russia, could not be verified.⁴

1 Andrew Selth, *Burma and the Threat of Invasion: Regime Fantasy or Strategic Reality?*, Griffith Asia Institute Regional Outlook Paper No.17 (Brisbane: Griffith University, 2008), www.griffith.edu.au/business-government/griffith-asia-institute/pdf/Andrew-Selth-Regional-Outlook-17v2.pdf [page discontinued].

2 Clifford McCoy, 'Rogues of the World Unite', *Asia Times Online*, [Hong Kong], 28 April 2007, www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/ID28Ae01.html [page discontinued].

3 Ankit Panda, 'Myanmar to Import India-Developed Submarine Sonar Systems', *The Diplomat*, [Washington, DC], 25 October 2013, thediplomat.com/2013/10/myanmar-to-import-india-developed-submarine-sonar-systems/.

4 'Russian Submarines for Burma Navy: Kilos or Foxtrots?', *Hla Oo's Blog*, 18 July 2013, hlaoo1980.blogspot.com.au/2013/07/russian-submarines-for-burma-navy-kilos.html.

During a visit to Russia in June 2013, however, Burmese Commander-in-Chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing reportedly opened discussions for the purchase of two 3,000-tonne Kilo-class diesel submarines. It was also claimed that he secretly visited St Petersburg's naval dockyard. A number of commentators have stated that Burma hopes to create a submarine force by 2015.⁵

Burma was said to have chosen the Russian Kilos over Pakistan's ageing Agosta-70 boats.⁶ Also, in April 2013, about 20 Burmese naval officers and ratings reportedly began basic submarine familiarisation and training in Pakistan, probably at the Submarine Training Centre, PNS Bahadur. This prompted *JDW* to suggest that 'Myanmar is finally taking concrete steps towards developing a subsurface capability'.⁷

These reports raise a number of issues that need to be considered.

First, no official announcement has been made, by either Russia or Burma, about a possible Kilo sale. This is not unusual, but it leaves the field to unconfirmed reports in the news media and on activist websites. Most of these outlets have simply recycled earlier claims without giving sources or providing any firm evidence. Indeed, it is difficult to determine where the story originated.

Second, there does not appear to have been any response to these reports from other countries, which again raises questions about their accuracy. In normal circumstances, it might be expected that Burma's possible acquisition of submarines would prompt comments from its neighbours at least, let alone interested powers such as the UK and the US.

Third, Burma's armed forces are much larger, more balanced, better equipped and more capable than they were in 1988. They have also developed a better grasp of conventional warfare doctrines. Yet they still have serious problems, and it is difficult to see Burma being able to develop a viable submarine force in the foreseeable future, let alone by 2015.

5 'The Submarine Race in Asia', [Editorial], *The New York Times*, 7 January 2014, www.nytimes.com/2014/01/08/opinion/the-submarine-race-in-asia.html?_r=0.

6 'Myanmar Navy Modernization Plan', *Pakistan Defence*, 18 July 2013, defence.pk/threads/myanmar-navy-modernization-plan.265249/.

7 Anthony Davis, 'Myanmar Navy Starts Submarine Training in Pakistan', *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 20 June 2013, www.janes.com/article/23451/myanmar-navy-starts-submarine-training-in-pakistan [page discontinued].

Two major obstacles will be a lack of resources and a lack of expertise.

Defence gets about 14 per cent of official expenditure, but this allocation is likely to be reduced.⁸ Even if it were not, a submarine force would put an enormous strain on Burma's military budget. Also, subsurface warfare is highly specialised, requiring advanced technology, customised support facilities and trained personnel. There have been no signs that this infrastructure has been developed.

Other countries can help in some of these areas, but even modern navies in developed states have found such challenges difficult to overcome.

This issue also raises questions about the government's priorities and the relationship between the President and his Commander-in-Chief, Min Aung Hlaing, who has emphasised Burma's need for 'strong, powerful, modernized and patriotic' armed forces.⁹ President Thein Sein agrees, but the defence sector still has to compete for scarce resources against the demands of the government's wideranging reform program and the pressing needs of other portfolios.

The purchase of a submarine or two would also have implications for Burma's external relations.

Several Southeast Asian navies have acquired or are acquiring conventional submarines.¹⁰ After a recent maritime dispute with Burma, Bangladesh intends to buy two Chinese boats.¹¹ Talk of an 'underwater arms race'¹² may be premature, but these developments have doubtless attracted Naypyidaw's attention. Burma's strategic environment is changing.

8 Aung Thura Htun, 'Government Plans to Reduce Military Spending', *Mizzima News*, [Yangon], 15 January 2014, www.mizzima.com/mizzima-news/politics/item/10821-government-plans-to-reduce-military-spending [page discontinued].

9 Zin Linn, 'Burma Army's Boss Calls for Stronger Armed Forces', *Asiancorrespondent.com*, [Bristol, UK], 28 March 2013, asiancorrespondent.com/103472/burma-armys-boss-calls-for-stronger-and-modernized-armed-forces/ [page discontinued].

10 Carl Thayer, 'Southeast Asian States Deploy Conventional Submarines', *The Diplomat*, [Washington, DC], 3 January 2014, thediplomat.com/2014/01/southeast-asian-states-deploy-conventional-submarines/.

11 'PM Says Bangladesh to Buy 1st Submarines', *Defense News*, 24 January 2014, www.defensenews.com/article/20130124/DEFREG03/301240016/ [page discontinued].

12 'Underwater Arms Race Looms between ASEAN and China', *The Nation Thailand*, 11 January 2014, www.nationthailand.com/opinion/30224043.

The US and the UK are tentatively developing military ties with Burma. Australia has just posted a defence attaché to Rangoon, and the Royal Australian Navy has made its first port visit since 1959.¹³ Despite Burma's recent naval diplomacy,¹⁴ these and other countries are unlikely to welcome reports that Naypyidaw is acquiring an expensive and possibly destabilising power projection capability.

Strategic analysts often find Burma difficult to read. For example, it was once an accepted fact that China had a large military base in Burma. This later proved to be incorrect. Similarly, it was widely reported that Burma was on track to have a nuclear weapon by 2014. That was never a realistic prospect. Rumours that Naypyidaw was seeking to acquire ballistic missiles aroused scepticism at first, but now appear to be confirmed.

With all these factors in mind, reports of a secret submarine sale need to be treated carefully. Burma has always had the ability to surprise observers, but until there is conclusive evidence of an active subsurface warfare program, or corroboration of a submarine purchase from a reputable official source, a degree of caution seems warranted.

13 Senator the Hon. David Johnston, 'Acting Minister for Defence and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Joint Media Release, Australian Government Strengthening Ties with the Myanmar Government', Department of Defence, Canberra, 20 January 2014, www.minister.defence.gov.au/2014/01/20/acting-minister-for-defence-and-minister-for-foreign-affairs-joint-media-release-australian-government-strengthening-ties-with-the-myanmar-government/ [page discontinued] [now at www.minister.defence.gov.au/minister/david-johnston/media-releases/acting-minister-defence-and-minister-foreign-affairs-joint].

14 John Drennan, 'Myanmar's Navy Gets a Second Wind', *IJSS Voices* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 30 September 2013), www.iiss.org/en/iiss%20voices/blogsections/iiss-voices-2013-1e35/september-2013-38d4/myanmars-navy-gets-a-second-wind-880c [page discontinued].

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