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Regional Outlook

Burma and North Korea:
Conventional Allies or Nuclear Partners?

Andrew Selth

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'Burma and North Korea: Conventional Allies or Nuclear Partners?' Regional Outlook Paper No. 22 2009

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Executive Summary

Since June 2009, there has been a spate of reports in the news media and on activist websites, accusing Burma and North Korea of engaging in a range of activities that potentially have serious consequences for regional – and possibly even global – security. If these reports are accurate, they would be grounds for considerable concern.

The Naypyidaw government has been accused of developing a close relationship with Pyongyang over the past ten years that has included North Korea's sale to Burma of conventional weapons, assistance in the development of Burma's defence industries and infrastructure, the provision of military training to Burma's armed forces and even collaboration on a secret nuclear weapons project. It has been claimed that the last of these includes the construction in Burma of an underground nuclear reactor and associated uranium enrichment facilities. According to recent news reports, citing Burmese defectors, if all goes according to plan the Naypyidaw regime will be able to produce one nuclear device a year, every year, from 2014.

These claims, however, have raised more questions than they have answered. One enduring puzzle is why no government or international organisation has made any official statement on these issues, despite all the publicity they have attracted since 2002, when Burma first announced that it planned to acquire a small reactor from Russia for peaceful research purposes. Should it be determined that Burma does in fact have a secret nuclear weapons program, then another important question would be whether the generals in Naypyidaw are likely to be any more receptive to international concerns about this than they have been in the past, to protests over the regime's dismissal of the 1990 general election – which was won by opposition parties – or to its continued abuse of human rights.

Any suggestions of a secret nuclear weapons program, however, must be cause for concern. Some of the information that has leaked out of Burma appears credible, and in recent years other snippets of information have emerged which, taken together, must raise suspicions. Also, no-one underestimates the lengths to which Burma's military leaders will go to stay in power, and to protect the country from perceived external threats. Yet without hard, independently verifiable information it is very difficult to know whether the regime's apparent desire for a nuclear weapon is simply wishful thinking, or has indeed prompted a serious effort to acquire weapons of mass destruction.

There has always been a lot of smoke surrounding Burma's relationship with North Korea, and the Naypyidaw government's nuclear ambitions. Since June 2009, the amount of smoke has increased, but still no-one seems to know whether or not it hides a real fire. As time passes, the need to find an answer to this important question can only increase.

Author's Note

After the armed forces crushed a nation-wide pro-democracy uprising in 1988, Burma's official name (in English) was changed from its post-1974 form, the 'Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma', back to the 'Union of Burma', which had been adopted when Burma regained its independence from the United Kingdom in 1948. In 1989 the new military government changed the country's name once again, this time to the 'Union of Myanmar'. At the same time, a number of other place names were changed to conform more closely to their original Burmese pronunciation. The new names were subsequently accepted by the United Nations and most other major international organisations. Some governments and opposition groups, however, have clung to the old forms as a protest against the military regime's continuing human rights violations and its refusal to hand over power to the civilian government elected in 1990.

In this paper the better-known names, for example 'Burma' instead of 'Myanmar', 'Rangoon' instead of 'Yangon', and 'Irrawaddy' instead of 'Ayeyarwady', have been retained for ease of recognition. Quotations and references, however, have been cited as they were originally published. Formal titles introduced after 1989 have been cited in their current form, such as 'Myanmar Army' and 'Myanmar Police Force'. Another term used in this paper is *Tatmadaw* (literally 'royal force'), the vernacular name for Burma's armed forces. In recent years this term has gained wide currency in English-language publications on Burma.

The armed forces have ruled Burma since 1962 but, from 1974 to 1988, they exercised power through an ostensibly elected 'civilian' parliament. On taking back direct political power in 1988, the Tatmadaw abolished the old government structure and created the State Law and Order Restoration Council, which ruled by decree. In 1997, apparently on the advice of a United States-based public relations firm, the regime changed its name to the State Peace and Development Council. It still rules by decree, but has announced a seven-step 'roadmap' to a 'discipline-flourishing democracy', the latest step of which was a constitutional referendum held in 2008. The military government has announced that it will hold elections for both central and provincial parliaments in 2010.

After the United Kingdom sent military forces into the royal capital of Mandalay and completed its conquest of Burma in 1885, Rangoon became the administrative capital of the country. It remains the commercial capital, but in 2005 the regime formally designated the newly built town of Naypyidaw, 320 kilometres north of Rangoon, as the seat of Burma's government. Where they appear in this paper, the terms 'Rangoon regime', or in some cases simply 'Rangoon', are used as shorthand for the central government, including the military government that was created in 1962 and re-invented in 1988. After 2005, the government is referred to as the 'Naypyidaw regime', or simply 'Naypyidaw', to reflect the administrative change that took place that year.

This Regional Outlook draws on comments posted over the past nine months on *The Interpreter*, the weblog of the Lowy Institute for International Policy. An earlier version of this paper was posted online by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, as part of its *Policy Analysis* series. Specific references to these works have been provided in the text.

1. Introduction

The basic premises about North Korea, which inform policy development, scholarly debate and journalism, have been built from information that is largely founded on inference from isolated and de-contextualised data, speculation, ideological assumptions and worst-case scenarios. None of this is unusual as a way of interpreting highly charged issues of international security. What is unusual is the extent to which such 'knowledge' circulates as an unquestioned body of factually-based evidence and analysis... It provides at best a sometimes skewed perspective and at worst a false picture, and almost every issue on which there is supposedly 'common knowledge' of North Korea contains this whole spectrum of knowledge distortion.

Hazel Smith
'Improving intelligence on North Korea'¹

On security-related issues, Burma and North Korea are well known as information black holes.² Given the closed nature of both their governments, their shared obsession with secrecy and the restrictions they impose on independent research, it is very difficult to determine precisely what they are doing and why they are doing it. The details of their bilateral relationship are unknown. Both countries are at the centre of emotive and highly politicised debates about human rights, nuclear proliferation and regional security. The picture is further clouded by rumours and speculative stories circulated in the news media and on activist websites. There is also the danger of individuals and groups – and possibly even certain governments – deliberately planting false or misleading stories in order to encourage anti-Naypyidaw or anti-Pyongyang sentiments.

Burma thus poses many of the same analytical challenges as North Korea, often with the same result as that described by Hazel Smith in her 2004 article, cited above. Over the past decade, however, one key difference between the two countries has emerged. In contrast to the publicity given to North Korea's security policies, members of the official community have been very cautious in their assessments about Burma. For example, despite persistent demands from politicians, academic observers and activists, no government or international organisation has yet issued any formal statement about Burma's nuclear weapons status. Until quite recently, there has also been a reluctance to speak openly about Burma's relationship with North Korea. Despite – or perhaps because of – this silence, the field has been left open to others to speculate without fear of official contradiction.

Since June 2009, there has been a spate of reports in the news media and on activist websites, accusing Burma and North Korea of engaging in a range of activities that potentially have serious consequences for regional – and possibly even global – security. If they are accurate, these reports would be grounds for considerable concern. However, as is so often the case in contemporary Burma studies, few developments are as straightforward as they seem. Before drawing any firm conclusions, it is important to separate what is actually known from what is assumed, or is the product of speculation. Also, despite being reported together, some issues may not in fact be directly connected, in which case they would deserve a more considered treatment than they have received to date.

Even then, it is not possible to reach many firm conclusions. As former US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld stated in characteristic fashion in 2002, some security issues are easily researched and well understood, while others pose much greater problems. Failure to recognise the 'known knowns' and 'known unknowns', or to acknowledge information gaps, can lead to misconceptions and analytical errors.

Inevitably, there will also be mysteries – the ‘unknown unknowns’.³ At this stage, the biggest problem facing those trying to examine Burma’s relationship with North Korea is that the ‘knowns’ are vastly outnumbered by the ‘unknowns’.

2. Seven Headlines

Apart from occasional stories about the Naypyidaw Government's gross human rights violations – most recently its harsh treatment of popular opposition leader and Nobel peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi – Burma does not often feature in the mainstream news media.⁴ North Korea is mentioned much more often, but until recently was rarely linked with its fellow 'outpost of tyranny' (as former US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice described the two countries in 2005).⁵ In a remarkable confluence of events, however, since the beginning of June 2009 there have been seven developments that have tied Burma and North Korea together in the news media, and thus in the public imagination.⁶ All have the potential to create more heat than light.

The first development was the publication on 9 June of several photographs showing underground facilities being constructed in Burma.⁷ Over the following weeks, more photographs were released on the internet, purporting to reveal a vast 'network of secret bomb-proof tunnels'.⁸ It was claimed by the Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) that between 600 and 800 such tunnels were being built by the ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) with the help of North Korea. The project reportedly dated back to 1996.⁹ Some pictures showed 'North Korean technicians' conducting seminars and visiting sites in Burma. The purpose of all these facilities was not clear, but activists and journalists were quick to cite the photographs as evidence of nefarious dealings between Naypyidaw and Pyongyang, including collaboration on a secret nuclear weapons project.¹⁰

The second development was the departure from North Korea on 17 June of the cargo vessel *Kang Nam I*, apparently bound for Rangoon. It was reported that, in direct violation of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution 1874 passed earlier that month, the ship was carrying 'Scud-type missiles', nuclear weapon components, or possibly even nuclear weapons.¹¹ There were calls for the ship to be stopped and boarded.¹² The *Kang Nam 1* was shadowed by a US destroyer until 29 June, when it turned around and headed back home. Pyongyang later stated that the ship had been forced to return by bad weather, but it was claimed by some news outlets that North Korea wished to avoid an inspection by countries participating in the Proliferation Security Initiative. Such an inspection could have been undertaken, for example, if the vessel had called into Singapore to refuel.¹³

The third development took place on 21 July, when US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton spoke at a press conference in Thailand, where she was attending the annual ASEAN summit. While her remarks were focused mainly on North Korea, she told reporters that the US took seriously growing concerns about military cooperation between Pyongyang and Naypyidaw. She said that such cooperation 'would be destabilising for the region' and 'pose a direct threat to Burma's neighbours'.¹⁴ At the same time, she revealed that the US's concerns included 'the transfer of nuclear technology and other dangerous weapons' (sic) from North Korea to Burma.¹⁵

Two days later, Japanese police announced that they had issued a second warrant for the arrest of Ri Gyong Go, the North Korean president of the Tokyo-based Toko Boeki Trading Company. Ri was suspected of exporting an instrument for grinding magnets to Burma without permission from Japan's Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry. According to press reports, this device can be used to develop missile control systems and centrifuge machines for uranium enrichment.¹⁶ Ri allegedly received an order for the grinder from a North Korean-affiliated company in China. It was shipped to Burma in November 2008. Ri and two Japanese nationals were first arrested on 29 June 2009, on suspicion of attempting to export to Burma a magnetic measuring device that could be used 'to develop missiles'.¹⁷

Also in July, Burmese opposition groups claimed to have obtained an official report of the visit to North Korea in November and December 2008 by a high-level delegation led by Burma's Joint Chief of Staff, General Thura Shwe Mann.¹⁸ The report described the delegation's inspection of several military bases, underground facilities and arms factories. One was a plant which manufactured Scud-type short-range (SRBM) and medium-range (MRBM) ballistic missiles.¹⁹ The leaked report also referred to a draft Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) outlining proposals for even closer defence cooperation between the two countries. The MOU covered such matters as joint exercises and North Korean assistance to Burma in areas like military training, air defence, and the construction of underground bunkers and arms shelters.²⁰

Throughout this period, there was considerable debate on weblogs and other internet sites about a number of unidentified buildings in Burma, which had been found in commercial imagery and online services like Google Earth.²¹ These facilities were suspected of being related to a nuclear weapons program. The location of one large square building – which became known as the 'Burma box' – was said to correspond exactly with a place named by Burmese defectors as the site of a secret nuclear-related facility. After examining these buildings, some observers claimed to have found the tell-tale signatures of a nuclear reactor or a uranium processing plant. Others were unable to do so, but speculated that the absence of any such signs was evidence that the Naypyidaw regime had managed to conceal the true purposes of the buildings from prying eyes.²²

These six stories prepared the ground for publication on 1 August of two reports in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age*, claiming that Naypyidaw had embarked on a secret nuclear weapons program.²³ These reports cited the claims of two Burmese defectors that in 2002 the military government had begun to build a nuclear reactor, with North Korean help. The reactor was said to be hidden underground at Naung Laing, southeast of Pyin Oo Lwin (formerly Maymyo). This project, which was reported to be quite separate from plans to acquire a small research reactor from Russia, was said to include all the essential components of the nuclear fuel cycle. According to Desmond Ball of the Australian National University and the journalist Phil Thornton, who had interviewed the defectors over the previous two years, if everything proceeded according to plan Burma would be capable of producing 'a bomb a year, every year', as early as 2014.²⁴

Both individually and collectively, these seven developments created quite a sensation. They also prompted a number of important questions, many of which remain unanswered. With these problems in mind, it is worth putting these reports into a broader historical context, and examining each of them a little more closely. Considered from a more critical perspective, the picture is not as clear as it might first appear.

3. Historical Background

Since they both achieved independence in 1948, Burma and North Korea have enjoyed a chequered relationship.²⁵ Burma supported the UN forces during the Korean War, but after the signing of the 1953 armistice it established good working relations with the two Koreas. Consular links with both states were established in 1961 and full diplomatic relations followed in 1975. During the 1960s and 1970s, General Ne Win's government made efforts to balance the competing demands of North Korea and South Korea for recognition, diplomatic support and trade. However, during the late 1970s the relationship with Pyongyang became slightly stronger than that with Seoul, as Ne Win and the Burma Socialist Programme Party forged fraternal ties with Kim Il-sung and the Korean Workers Party.²⁶ Although determined to keep Burma out of the Cold War, in diplomatic terms Ne Win was more inclined to favour China-backed Pyongyang than US-backed Seoul.²⁷

The bilateral relationship with North Korea dramatically collapsed in 1983, after Pyongyang sent three agents to Rangoon to assassinate South Korean President Chun Doo Hwan, who was making a state visit to Burma. Due to a last minute, unannounced change to his schedule Chun survived the massive bomb attack at the Martyr's Mausoleum, but 17 South Korean and four Burmese officials, including four Korean Cabinet ministers, were killed. Forty-six others were injured.²⁸ Ne Win considered the incident not only a gross violation of Burma's sovereignty, but also a personal insult. As soon as the official enquiry was completed and North Korea's guilt was formally established, he severed diplomatic relations between Rangoon and Pyongyang. He even withdrew recognition of North Korea as an independent state.²⁹ In the years that followed, Kim Il-sung made several attempts to restore bilateral ties, but he was repeatedly rebuffed.³⁰

Ironically, it was Burma's ostracism by the West after the abortive 1988 pro-democracy uprising that gave North Korea its chance to re-establish links. Shunned by its usual aid donors and arms suppliers, the new State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) in Rangoon turned increasingly to China and former Eastern bloc countries for assistance. It also began to develop relationships with other states that were out of favour with the US and its allies. It appears that discreet contacts were made with North Korea in the early 1990s, followed by a number of unofficial visits, in both directions. Kim Il-sung's death in 1994 and Ne Win's waning influence during the mid-1990s probably eased the way for closer ties. After quietly consulting South Korea – and receiving its blessing – Burma finally restored diplomatic relations with North Korea in 2007.³¹

The renewal of formal ties sparked a flurry of official exchanges.³² Even before then, however, there were a number of arms sales and bilateral agreements. Reliable information is scarce, but in 1990 Burma reportedly purchased 20 million rounds of small arms ammunition from North Korea, probably through intermediaries.³³ This deal was apparently followed in 1998 by the purchase of between 12 and 16 130mm M-46 field guns.³⁴ While based on a 1950s Russian design, these weapons were reliable and significantly increased Burma's long-range artillery capabilities. In 2002, the SPDC opened discussions with Pyongyang on the purchase of one or two small submarines. The regime reportedly opted to purchase one Sang-O class boat, but was later forced to abandon the deal. It appears that the cost, and perhaps recognition of the difficulties of keeping a submarine fully operational, scuppered the project.³⁵

There have also been persistent reports that Burma's generals are interested in acquiring a number of Hwasong (Scud-type) SRBMs from North Korea.³⁶ A secret meeting to discuss such a deal was reportedly held in Rangoon in August 2003, while another was supposedly held in Phuket, Thailand, two months later.³⁷ The latest variants of this

missile are capable of ranges of up to 500 kilometres with a 770 kilogram conventional warhead.³⁸ North Korea has already sold ballistic missiles to a range of overseas customers, reportedly including Pakistan and Vietnam.³⁹ This particular deal does not appear to have gone ahead, possibly because of the robust US representations made to Burma in New York that October.⁴⁰ However, the military government's interest in acquiring North Korean SRBMs does not seem to have diminished. None appear to have been delivered so far, but there appears to have been some progress in the regime's plans eventually to manufacture such weapons in Burma.⁴¹

The periodic visit of North Korean freighters to Rangoon in recent years, and the secrecy surrounding their cargoes, has led to speculation that other deliveries of conventional arms and military equipment have occurred. For example, there were reports in 2007 that North Korea had supplied Burma with a number of truck-mounted multiple launch rocket systems, possibly through Singaporean intermediaries.⁴² There have also been claims that Burma has acquired 'missiles' from North Korea.⁴³ This generic term is rarely explained, but from time to time there have been references to the possible sale of air-to-air missiles (AAM), anti-ship missiles (ASM), surface-to-air missiles (SAM) and surface-to-surface missiles (SSM). China is a more likely source for AAMs and ASMs, but North Korea may have provided Burma with SA-7 and SA-16 shoulder-launched SAMs, and possibly even larger air defence systems like the SA-6 and SA-2. Pyongyang could have even sold Naypyidaw some tactical SSMs. However, no claims of North Korean missile sales to Burma have yet been verified.⁴⁴

There was probably at least one bilateral agreement as early as 2000, but the relationship seemed to reach a major turning point around 2003. In July that year, it was reported that between 15 and 20 North Korean technicians were working at the Monkey Point naval base in Rangoon.⁴⁵ There were claims of other North Koreans in Naypyidaw and elsewhere. In November that year the *Far Eastern Economic Review* (FEER) reported that North Korean aircraft had been seen unloading heavy equipment in central Burma, near what was believed to be the site of the proposed Russian nuclear research centre. The FEER also reported the arrival in Burma that year of representatives from the Daesong Economic Group, which had a record of conducting clandestine activities on behalf of Pyongyang, possibly including the provision of missile and nuclear-related technologies.⁴⁶ The implication of these reports was that North Korea was helping Burma to pursue a secret nuclear weapons program, either in addition to, but more likely in place of, the delayed Russian reactor project.

Since then, there has been a continuous trickle of news stories accusing Burma and North Korea of conducting a range of illicit activities.⁴⁷ As noted above, some have pointed to Burma's acquisition of unspecified 'missiles' and other conventional arms. Other reports have hinted at darker schemes, going well beyond the 'mere tactical rapprochement' expected by some Burma-watchers.⁴⁸ For example, it has been revealed that North Korea's Namchongang Trading Company – which probably assisted Syria with its secret nuclear reactor project – had sold Burma high precision equipment which could be used for a nuclear program.⁴⁹ While many of these reports lacked hard evidence, it gradually became apparent that North Korea had developed strong defence ties with the Burmese regime. The relationship between these two pariah states began to cause growing unease, including in Washington.

In 2003, the then Chairman of the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Richard G. Lugar, called Burma a potential 'source of instability throughout South and Southeast Asia'. Noting the increasing contacts between Burma and North Korea, he stated 'the link-up of these two pariah states can only spell trouble'.⁵⁰ Concerns that Rangoon might accept Pyongyang's offer of SRBMs, or even seek nuclear technology from North Korea, were reportedly raised at a meeting of US and Burmese officials in 2003.⁵¹ In February the following year, Senator Lugar's chief aide gave a speech at the Heritage Foundation in which he warned that North Korea could be transferring missiles and nuclear technology to Burma.⁵² The subject came up again in 2006, when a State Department official told a Harvard University study group that the US was concerned

about the development of Burma's relations with North Korea, given the potential for a transfer of nuclear technology.⁵³

Prompted by these concerns, Congress asked to be kept informed about North Korea's arms exports, missile sales in particular.⁵⁴ The Senate Foreign Relations Committee also began to monitor nuclear-related developments in Burma.⁵⁵ Due largely to this increased level of interest, an inter-agency task force, comprising representatives from the Departments of State, Defence and other agencies, was reportedly established in 2004 to monitor 'weapons-related issues' in Burma.⁵⁶ There is no reason to believe that this task force did not conscientiously fulfil its role, but as the years passed and no major announcements were made, concerned members of Congress attempted to force the Bush Administration's hand. The Burma JADE (Junta's Anti-Democratic Efforts) Act of July 2008 stipulated that, within 180 days of being enacted, the Secretary of State must issue a public statement describing 'the provision [to Burma] of weapons of mass destruction and related materials, capabilities, and technology, including nuclear, chemical, and dual use capabilities'.⁵⁷

That deadline has long since passed, but still no public statement has been forthcoming. Such delays are not uncommon. However, without an authoritative view of this kind, the precise nature of the bilateral relationship between Burma and North Korea, and what joint projects the two countries might be working on, has remained the subject of rumour and speculation.

4. Rumours and Realities

There are some facts that are not disputed. For example, over the past 20 years Burma has made a major effort to increase its military capabilities. The armed forces (or Tatmadaw) have been expanded and modernised, and equipped with a wide range of new weapon systems.⁵⁸ The regime has also strengthened Burma's defence infrastructure, a project which has included the construction of a range of underground facilities – although the figure of 600 to 800 'tunnels' cited by activist groups is probably too high. It would be logical for Naypyidaw to ask Pyongyang to assist in this program. Both are authoritarian regimes fearful of external intervention, particularly by the US. Pyongyang needs Burmese primary products, such as rice, timber and rubber, which Naypyidaw can use to barter for North Korean arms and technical advice. Also, North Korea has considerable experience in underground construction which it is prepared to share – for a price.⁵⁹

Many of these underground facilities are probably for military purposes, such as command bunkers, air raid shelters and protective tunnels for vehicles and conventional weapon systems. Ever since the Gulf War, Burma's generals have feared an attack from the air. They have taken various measures to protect against such a threat, including the acquisition of fighter aircraft, SAMs, anti-aircraft artillery and air defence radars.⁶⁰ The report on General Shwe Mann's visit to North Korea in 2008 suggests that this fear still influences Burmese strategic thinking – and the regime's arms acquisitions. That said, many of the tunnels pictured on the Internet are quite modest and, despite efforts at concealment, would be vulnerable to attack by a modern air force equipped with the latest weapons. Some are likely to be related to civil engineering projects, such as a hydro-electric power station. None of the photos published supports claims of a secret nuclear reactor, or nuclear weapons project.⁶¹

Similarly, the press coverage of the *Kang Nam 1's* voyage seems to be another case of the public commentary running ahead of the facts. It turns out that the ship was indeed going to Rangoon – this was not known at the time – but it apparently returned to North Korea at Naypyidaw's request.⁶² The reason for the SPDC's decision is not known – it initially denied the vessel was headed to Burma – but the regime may have balked at being directly associated with such a blatant challenge to a specific UNSC resolution. China and the members of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) also seem to have helped persuade the regime to request the vessel's return to Pyongyang.⁶³ The ship's cargo, however, remains a mystery.⁶⁴ Reports from an anonymous South Korean intelligence source, that the ship was carrying Scud-type missiles, or missile parts, have never been confirmed. The claim that it was transporting nuclear weapon components, or even nuclear weapons, is even less credible. Indeed, recent news reports suggest that the ship may have only been carrying conventional small arms, such as automatic rifles and rocket-propelled grenade launchers.⁶⁵

Before claims that the *Kang Nam 1* was carrying strategic weapons or arms-related equipment to Burma are dismissed out of hand, however, it is worth remembering the export of sensitive dual-use technology from Japan in 2008, and the apparent attempt to do so again earlier this year. These are not the only occasions when the Naypyidaw regime has tried to acquire high-precision machinery for which there have been few logical explanations – apart, that is, from the manufacture of weapons or weapon components. In 2006 and 2007, for example, Burma imported some sophisticated machine tools from Europe which aroused the suspicions of proliferation analysts.⁶⁶ According to the *Washington Post*, this equipment was shipped to educational institutions in Burma that had connections to local nuclear experts.⁶⁷

On their own, however, such purchases do not necessarily mean that the SPDC is engaged in a secret program to develop weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Burma has a large defence industrial complex, already capable of building weapons and weapon platforms ranging from landmines and automatic rifles to armoured cars and frigate-sized naval vessels.⁶⁸ Faced with the threat of a more comprehensive arms embargo after 1988, and probably wary of even its current suppliers, the regime has sought to reduce Burma's dependence on imported weapon systems and strategic materiel.⁶⁹ There is firm evidence that, over the past 20 years, the regime has tried to develop the capability to manufacture a much wider range of arms, and at a higher technical level. This probably includes artillery rockets, small SAMs and possibly even AAMs.⁷⁰ The report on Shwe Mann's 2008 visit suggests that Burma eventually hopes to produce its own SRBMs.

In her comments at the ASEAN summit in Thailand, Hillary Clinton broke the US's long official silence on the subject of Burma's defence relationship with North Korea and the possible transfer of nuclear technology. Yet, it is instructive to examine what she actually said. She did not specify that North Korea was passing Burma nuclear *weapons* technology. Also, according to the transcript later posted on her own website she referred only to 'dealings' between Pyongyang and Naypyidaw that were 'perhaps' taking place.⁷¹ After referring, rather confusingly, to the transfer of 'nuclear technology and other dangerous weapons', she said 'I'm not saying it is happening, but we want to be prepared to try and stand against it'.⁷² Despite having the perfect opportunity to do so, the Secretary of State did not comment on the repeated claims that Burma was building a secret nuclear reactor, or trying to develop a nuclear weapon.

During an interview in Australia on 1 September 2009, the Commander of US forces in the Pacific, Admiral Timothy Keating, seemed sceptical about reports of Burmese military cooperation with the North Koreans. He was clearly reluctant to discuss current intelligence issues but, in response to a direct question about the possible transfer of nuclear weapons technology to Burma by North Korea, the Admiral stated he was 'not aware of any direct evidence to support that'.⁷³ Off the record, US officials have conceded the possibility of talks between Naypyidaw and Pyongyang about nuclear technology, but dismissed reports of a secret nuclear reactor in Burma as 'unsubstantiated rumours'.⁷⁴

Few of the claims made in the Australian news media on 1 August were in fact new.⁷⁵ Rumours about a secret nuclear reactor and a clandestine Burmese nuclear weapons program had been circulating in Thailand and on activist websites for a number of years.⁷⁶ Also, while some of the claims made by the Burmese 'defectors' are plausible, and therefore worrying, their testimony needs to be treated with caution. As the US found to its cost before the Iraq War, and others have found with regard to developments in North Korea, defectors are not always reliable or disinterested sources. Some of the claims about Burma cited in the press are clearly incorrect; construction of the Russian research reactor, for example, has not yet begun. Other statements have lacked the necessary context. For example, hundreds (not thousands) of Burmese officials may have gone to Russia for nuclear-related training, but many were young and inexperienced, have faced language difficulties and have struggled to complete their courses.⁷⁷

There are other reasons to be wary of recent claims. For example, if Burma began a WMD program in 2002, the suggestion that it would be able to produce one nuclear weapon a year, every year, from 2014, demands closer examination. The construction of a large nuclear reactor in a secret underground facility, and development of the uranium enrichment and plutonium reprocessing plants required, would be extremely demanding. Add to that the enormous technical challenges involved in the production of a deliverable nuclear weapon, and serial production of such devices within five years seems extraordinarily optimistic.⁷⁸ Even with help from North Korean experts, a later target date of 2020, cited by one of the defectors, would still be a considerable challenge. It is more likely that, as Bertil Lintner has suggested, in such circumstances

Burma 'must be decades away from acquiring anything that would even remotely resemble an atomic bomb'.⁷⁹

Considerable caution also needs to be exercised about the purported identification of various defence facilities and other buildings around Burma as somehow being involved in a secret WMD program. For example, the so-called 'Burma box', which featured prominently on blogs and activist websites during August, was subsequently revealed to be nothing more than an industrial workshop or machinery centre.⁸⁰ Indeed, suspicions that this building some 30 miles east of Mandalay was some kind of nuclear facility had been dismissed by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) some six months before. Western intelligence agencies had reportedly examined the site and discounted it as a secret WMD plant even earlier than that.⁸¹ Not all unidentified facilities in Burma can be dismissed quite as easily, but the 'Burma box' fiasco may be viewed as an example of how rumours and speculation about secret WMD programs can take on a life of their own.

Bilateral relations between Burma and North Korea have clearly come a long way over the past 25 years, from a very cool – indeed frigid – diplomatic impasse in the 1980s to one in which the two countries now share close political and military ties. North Korea is selling Burma conventional arms – although probably not yet SRBMs – sharing its military expertise and experience, and helping Burma to upgrade its defence infrastructure. That much seems certain. It is likely that North Korea is helping Burma to manufacture arms, possibly including tactical and surface-to-air missiles. The US suspects Pyongyang is passing on unspecified 'nuclear technology' to Naypyidaw. The trend is clear, and of growing concern to many countries.

It is still not known, however, whether North Korea is helping Burma secretly to build a nuclear reactor, and uranium enrichment and reprocessing facilities, with the eventual aim of producing a nuclear weapon. Indeed, Burma's nuclear ambitions have long been shrouded in mystery.

5. Burma's Nuclear Ambitions

Of all the Southeast Asian countries, Burma arguably has the strongest strategic rationale to develop nuclear weapons.⁸² For, ever since they took back direct political power in 1988, Burma's generals have feared external intervention, possibly even an invasion by the US or a UN-led coalition to overthrow the military government and restore democratic rule.⁸³ These fears have waxed and waned over the past 20 years, but they have never gone away.⁸⁴ Indeed, they have been kept alive by the hostility shown towards the regime by influential members of the international community, their aggressive rhetoric, economic sanctions and embargoes, and the active support given by several governments to the country's opposition movement. In May 2008, after Naypyidaw initially refused to accept foreign aid for the victims of Cyclone Nargis, some senior officials at the UN and elsewhere openly canvassed the possibility of 'coercive humanitarian intervention' under the Responsibility to Protect doctrine, to deliver relief to the cyclone victims.⁸⁵

There has never been a serious prospect of an invasion, but it would be a mistake to underestimate the effect of such threat perceptions on the regime's security policies. An assessment of Burma's strategic environment since 1988 has clearly encouraged efforts by the SLORC and SPDC to strengthen ties with China and Russia – both permanent members of the UNSC – and with ASEAN. The same concern is in part responsible for the Tatmadaw's acquisition of more advanced conventional weapon systems, most of them suited only for territorial defence operations. Burma's actual military capabilities are impossible to assess with any confidence, but even with its new arms and equipment it is still unlikely to be able to deter intervention by a determined and modern armed force.⁸⁶ With this in mind, some generals are reportedly attracted to the idea of acquiring a nuclear weapon, in the belief that possession of WMD would give Burma the same status, level of protection and bargaining power that North Korea now seems to enjoy.⁸⁷

The critical question, however, is whether this is just wishful thinking, or if there has been a serious attempt by the military government to pursue a nuclear weapons program.

In 2000, when the SPDC announced that it was going to purchase a 10 MW light water research reactor from Russia, activist groups immediately warned that the generals were not to be trusted.⁸⁸ They accused the regime of secretly planning to develop a nuclear weapon, to threaten the international community and resist pressures to reform. They cited the regime's long record of duplicity, its abiding fear of external intervention, and its customary disregard for international norms of behaviour. Some claimed that the regime had consulted the notorious Pakistani nuclear scientist A.Q. Khan.⁸⁹ These activists dismissed assurances that the Russian reactor was only for peaceful research, was unsuited for producing fissile material and would be placed under IAEA safeguards. Even if a nuclear weapons option was not available, it was argued, the presence of a reactor would at least give the regime the capability to develop a 'dirty bomb', which could spread radioactive material through a conventional explosion.

After the FEER's 2003 report about secret deliveries from Pyongyang, others – including some influential figures in Washington – also warned against Burma's relationship with North Korea, even then suspected of proliferating sensitive nuclear technologies.

At the time, these warnings were greeted with scepticism. Burma had a long record of opposing nuclear weapons proliferation and was party to all the major disarmament treaties. Burma's financial reserves and level of technological development were very

low. It was struggling even to maintain its basic civil infrastructure. Also, the country's higher education system had virtually collapsed, and many intellectuals were seeking their fortunes abroad. After an inspection tour of Burma in 2001, the IAEA declared the country to be completely unready for the construction of even the small research reactor being offered by Russia.⁹⁰ At the same time, several countries expressed concern over the construction of the reactor, its maintenance, the security of its nuclear materials and the lack of any regulatory framework to manage the process. Burma's history of earthquakes was also raised.

As events turned out, the Russian project struck numerous delays and in 2003 was suspended, apparently due to funding problems. In 2007, however, a new MOU was signed which opened the way for the settlement of all outstanding issues. According to the latest reports, the Russian reactor and associated research centre will now be built at Myaing, north of Pakkoku.⁹¹ However, despite repeated claims that the reactor has already been built and is now operating, construction work has not yet begun. If the project still goes ahead, it is likely to be at least five years before the reactor will be completed and Burma can claim the same nuclear status as some of its ASEAN neighbours. Indeed, the repeated delays and Burma's many political, economic and social problems continue to raise doubts about the project's viability. In 2007, for example, Singapore's Foreign Minister stated that Burma was 'unlikely' to develop a nuclear program, given its many other challenges.⁹²

Even so, since the IAEA's 2001 visit, and notwithstanding all the delays to the Russian project, some of the problems identified by the Agency's inspectors appear to have been overcome. Thanks to booming natural gas sales, mainly to Thailand but soon also to China, Burma has billions of dollars in untapped foreign exchange reserves that could be used to fund a secret WMD program.⁹³ Over the past 20 years, the armed forces have built an extensive network of new training, research and development institutions, some of which appear to have nuclear-related programs. Also, Russia is providing technical training for a large number of Burmese servicemen and officials, including hundreds who are studying subjects like nuclear physics. Burma has imported some sophisticated dual-use equipment, possibly for a nuclear program, and the relevant nuclear technologies could have been provided by North Korea.

As noted above, Burma would still need to overcome enormous technical difficulties before it could develop its own nuclear weapon. Given developments since 2001, however, the answer to the question of whether or not Burma has embarked on a clandestine WMD program may now depend more on issues to do with intention and political will, than matters of resources, expertise and practical management.

For its part, Burma's military government has consistently and firmly denied that it has any plans to acquire WMD, with or without North Korean help.⁹⁴ It has emphasised that the Russian nuclear reactor is only for 'peaceful research purposes'.⁹⁵ In 2003, an official spokesman stated that Burma was 'everyone's friend and nobody's ally or enemy'. He said that it had no ambition to arm itself with nuclear weapons (or SRBMs) and firmly rejected the idea that Burma would ever threaten any of its neighbours.⁹⁶ This has remained the official line. Burma has not made any official response to the latest spate of news reports, but during US Senator Jim Webb's visit to Naypyidaw in August 2009, a senior regime official told him that Burma did not have a covert nuclear program.⁹⁷ Predictably, the international response to all these assurances has been mixed.

6. The Official Silence

All these developments have raised concerns, but without hard evidence few of the claims made about a secret nuclear reactor in Burma or a clandestine nuclear weapons program can be verified. Indeed, some news reports have prompted more questions than they have answered. One of the most intriguing questions – at least for many strategic analysts – is why no government or international organisation has yet made any official statement specifically addressing this subject, despite all the articles and blogs published about it since 2000.⁹⁸ Most puzzling of all is the US Government's continued silence. Burma has not been a priority for Washington policy makers, but since the 1988 pro-democracy uprising it has certainly had a higher public profile. The proliferation of WMD (in which broad category the US often includes ballistic missile sales) and North Korea's provocative behaviour have long been sensitive policy issues, regardless of who occupies the White House.

The Bush Administration clearly had no love for Burma's military government. For eight years, it took every opportunity to criticise the regime, strongly and publicly. Implicit in this approach was a demand for regime change. In 1997, to justify a range of economic sanctions, President Bill Clinton issued an Executive Order declaring a 'national emergency' to deal with the 'unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States' posed by the actions and policies of Burma's military government. This declaration was repeated annually by President George W. Bush.⁹⁹ In 2003, US Secretary of State Colin Powell referred to 'the thugs who now rule Burma' and in 2005 his successor labelled Burma 'an outpost of tyranny' to which the US must help bring freedom.¹⁰⁰ In Bush's 2006 State of the Union speech, immediately after references to the US invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, Burma was ranked alongside Syria, Iran and North Korea as places where 'the demands of justice, and the peace of the world, require their freedom'.¹⁰¹

At the same time as it was putting pressure on the regime and supporting Burma's opposition movement, the Bush Administration was pursuing nuclear disarmament as one of its highest policy priorities. Between 2000 and 2008, it made numerous statements in many different forums strongly condemning countries like Iraq, Iran, Syria and North Korea, that it believed were pursuing secret nuclear weapons programs and proliferating nuclear technologies. The 2003 invasion of Iraq was justified in large part by the claim that Saddam Hussain was developing such WMD.¹⁰² The US also pursued private entrepreneurs like A.Q. Khan, who were believed to be passing on sensitive nuclear technologies to rogue regimes, including Libya.¹⁰³ At no time during this period, however, did the US government ever accuse the Naypyidaw regime of trying to build a secret reactor or develop nuclear weapons, with or without external assistance.

Throughout this period, Washington was watching developments in Burma closely. More than two years ago, US officials knew about the two Burmese defectors on whose testimony the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age* based their 1 August 2009 stories. Indeed, both newspapers have suggested that a third Burmese defector was 'picked up' by US intelligence agencies in 2008, presumably to be interviewed about Naypyidaw's reported WMD ambitions. It appears that a number of the US's allies, including at least one Thai intelligence service, also interviewed one or two of the defectors at length about their experiences inside Burma.¹⁰⁴ Yet, even when armed with the apparent revelations of all these people, the Bush Administration remained conspicuously silent about Burma's nuclear status.

This is not to imply that there were no US suspicions about Burma's possible interest in nuclear weapons. As noted above, ever since the two rogue regimes renewed contacts, the State Department and other US agencies have taken a close interest in Burma's

developing relationship with North Korea.¹⁰⁵ Diplomats based in Rangoon knew that some generals envied North Korea's apparent ability to use WMD to resist international pressures and wring concessions out of the US.¹⁰⁶ In 2007, two former senior Bush Administration officials wrote in the US journal *Foreign Affairs* that 'Western intelligence officials have suspected for several years that the regime has had an interest in following the model of North Korea and achieving military autarky by developing ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons'.¹⁰⁷ Some journalists have taken this to mean that 'Burma is seeking to develop nuclear weapons from technology provided by North Korea'. However, suspicions of an interest in following a model is a far cry from hard evidence of a secret nuclear weapons program.¹⁰⁸

As the rumours of a secret nuclear program grew in frequency and scope, the Bush Administration came under increasing pressure from activists, Burmese exile groups and certain members of Congress openly to accuse Naypyidaw of developing nuclear weapons, with North Korea's help. Yet the Administration steadfastly refused to do so. This remained the case even in 2005 and 2006, when Washington and its closest allies conducted a campaign in the UN Security Council for Burma to be condemned as 'a threat to international peace and security'.¹⁰⁹ In 2005, the then US Permanent Representative to the UN, John Bolton, told journalists that, according to 'press reports', the SPDC was 'seeking nuclear power capabilities'. He never clarified this remark, however, nor did he repeat it.¹¹⁰ No other references were made to Burma's nuclear program during the UNSC campaign, apparently on instructions from the State Department.¹¹¹

It is also noteworthy that no US government department or intelligence agency has ever confirmed the existence of a Burmese nuclear weapons program, for example in their periodic appearances before Congressional committees. In 2004, the State Department publicly denied some of the rumours then circulating, for example that Burma was exchanging heroin for North Korean nuclear technology, but it went no further.¹¹² In 2007, the Department reminded the Naypyidaw regime of its obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), but only referred to the proposed Russian research reactor.¹¹³ It is difficult to escape the conclusion that the Bush Administration felt obliged to remain silent on this issue either because it did not believe all the rumours about a secret nuclear weapons program, or because it did not feel there was sufficient reliable evidence on which to make a public case against Naypyidaw and Pyongyang.

Since taking office in January 2009, the Obama Administration has investigated this matter closely, as part of a comprehensive review of the US's policy towards Burma.¹¹⁴ Yet this administration too has been very cautious in its public pronouncements.

As demonstrated by President Obama's April 2009 speech in Prague, the new administration has maintained the US's strong stance against nuclear weapons proliferation.¹¹⁵ However, Burma has never been mentioned in this regard. Neither Secretary of State-designate Hillary Clinton, nor UN Permanent Representative-designate Susan Rice were questioned about Burma's rumoured WMD program during their Senate confirmation hearings.¹¹⁶ Nor did they raise the issue in their prepared statements. In July, incoming Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell reportedly told Congress that he would watch all external support for Burma's nuclear development, including from Russia and North Korea, but his prepared statement made no reference to reports of a secret WMD program.¹¹⁷ Nor has the subject been raised by the US in other public forums – such as the IAEA or the NPT Review Conference – where nuclear weapons proliferation is routinely discussed. Even Burma's peaceful nuclear research program seems to have escaped close public scrutiny.¹¹⁸

On 9 July, barely two weeks before Hillary Clinton's comments at the ASEAN summit, the State Department's official spokesman declined to comment on suggestions of a nuclear relationship between Burma and North Korea.¹¹⁹ Following the Secretary of State's comments in Thailand, the spokesman admitted that the US did not have 'a good sense of the military cooperation between Burma and North Korea'.¹²⁰ Following

publication of the stories in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age* on 1 August, the State Department was repeatedly and specifically questioned about claims of a clandestine Burmese nuclear reactor and WMD program. Three times in almost as many days the official spokesman refused to comment, other than to say that this was an intelligence matter that he could not discuss in an open forum.¹²¹ While slightly more forthcoming, Admiral Keating made similar comments during his 1 September 2009 interview in Australia.

This continuing official reticence strongly suggests that, while the US may be concerned about Naypyidaw's growing relationship with Pyongyang, including in the military field, it does not have any reliable evidence of a secret Burmese nuclear program. Indeed, the Obama Administration seems to have accepted Burma's assurances that it will fully implement UN sanctions against North Korea.¹²²

A few other governments have been a little more open about this subject, but none have confirmed – or specifically denied – the existence of a secret Burmese WMD program. For example, in 2006 the United Kingdom (UK) government stated in the House of Commons that it was 'not able to corroborate' reports about the alleged transfer of nuclear technology from North Korea to Burma.¹²³ The UK government also said that it had 'no specific information' on press reports that Pyongyang was providing nuclear training to Burmese officials.¹²⁴ Again in 2006, it stated that no uranium was being processed in Burma, and that Burma had no operational uranium enrichment facilities. Nor was the UK aware of any uranium exports from Burma, as activist and exile groups had also claimed.¹²⁵

More information may have become available to London since then, but in 2006 the UK government did not seem concerned about a secret nuclear program in Burma.¹²⁶ Presumably, its assessment was based on all the specialised resources available to the UK government at the time, including data provided by its allies.

Following publication of the two stories in the Australian press on 1 August 2009, a 'highly placed army source' in Thailand was reported as saying that the Thai Army had been asked by US intelligence agencies to monitor the situation in Burma, but had been unable to find any evidence of a secret nuclear weapons program.¹²⁷ At the same time, the chief of Thailand's National Security Council was reported to have said that Thai intelligence agencies were unable to confirm the claims in the press reports. Thailand's embassy in Burma joined the chorus, stating that it had not found any evidence of 'nuclear collaboration' between Burma and North Korea.¹²⁸

7. Policy Challenges

In tackling this issue at a policy level, governments and international organisations face a number of seemingly intractable problems.

The first problem is the sheer difficulty of determining whether or not Burma actually has a secret nuclear program and, if so, how far it has progressed. Several governments and international organisations are currently looking at this matter but it is clearly proving a real challenge, even to those agencies with wide resources and access to sophisticated surveillance technologies.¹²⁹ Reactors, uranium processing plants, and all the other facilities related to a major nuclear program would not be easy to conceal. If there were such a program, however, the Naypyidaw regime would be sufficiently aware of modern intelligence methods to try and hide – or at least disguise – the usual signatures. In this regard, it could presumably seek the advice of North Korea, which has had considerable experience trying to conceal its nuclear programs from state monitors and international agencies like the IAEA.¹³⁰

Needless to say, given their poor records and continuing lack of credibility, any denials made by the Naypyidaw and Pyongyang regimes would require independent verification.

Understandably, foreign officials examining this problem are being very cautious. No-one wants a repetition of the mistakes that preceded the 2003 Iraq War, either in underestimating a country's capabilities, or by giving too much credibility to a few untested intelligence sources. Memories of the 'Curveball' fiasco and other embarrassing revelations after the invasion have doubtless made many analysts – and politicians – wary of placing too much faith in the testimony of defectors.¹³¹ Also, in the emotive and highly charged political environment that surrounds consideration of Burma's many complex problems – not to mention North Korea's illicit activities and proliferation issues more generally – no government is going to accept claims of a secret nuclear weapons program in Burma without investigating them thoroughly.

If, for the sake of argument, clear and demonstrable evidence of a secret nuclear program is discovered, then another problem arises. The Naypyidaw regime has shown that it is determined to decide its own security policies, according to its perceptions of Burma's national interests.¹³² Surveying the events of the past 20 years, it would not be difficult for the SPDC to construct a coherent, internally consistent picture of an existential threat that was supported by empirical evidence. Such an analytical construction would still be deeply flawed, but in international relations perceptions are often more important than the objective facts.¹³³ If the regime has embarked on a WMD program out of a genuine – albeit misguided – fear of external intervention or intimidation by the major Western powers, then there is unlikely to be any progress towards halting the program until those fears are assuaged.

During the 1980s, the US was able to persuade the Ne Win regime to suspend a secret chemical weapons (CW) program, but the circumstances now are quite different.¹³⁴ The CW program seems to have been prompted by fears of growing insurgent strength within Burma, not by any perception of an external threat – particularly one that was aimed at regime change. Also, Ne Win's CW program was undertaken with the help of a West German firm, which apparently provided the necessary equipment and technical advice.¹³⁵ The withdrawal of this assistance, after Washington made strong representations to Bonn, was probably more decisive than any change of heart on Ne Win's part. If the SPDC has begun a nuclear weapons program, it is unlikely to be as easy to persuade as Ne Win was at that time. More to the point, perhaps, North Korea is not likely to be as amenable to diplomatic pressure as was one of the US's closest European allies.¹³⁶

Compounding these difficulties is the problem that in the current political climate the US, among others, would find it very hard to offer Naypyidaw the kind of guarantees that it would need to ease its current security concerns, at least to the point where the SPDC might suspend a WMD program.

It would be easy for the US to deny that it had any plans to invade Burma. Indeed, it has already done this on more than one occasion.¹³⁷ It would be much more difficult for Washington to restore full bilateral ties, remove all economic sanctions and cease its support for Burma's opposition movement.¹³⁸ This would necessarily entail at least passive acceptance of the regime's seven-step 'roadmap' to a 'discipline-flourishing democracy', which will see the armed forces entrenched in power, albeit ruling indirectly through a parliamentary system. Nor would the US and its allies be comfortable offering the generals the kind of personal guarantees they would probably demand, to escape possible retribution for their past actions.¹³⁹ Even consideration of such a diplomatic about-face would provoke strong domestic opposition and cause an international outcry. Yet these measures would probably be the price Burma's generals would ask the international community to pay, to put an end to a nuclear weapons program.

It would not be lost on the generals in Naypyidaw that, should they succeed in winning such concessions, the efficacy of a WMD program would have been confirmed. This would raise the possibility of it being revived if the regime once again felt threatened, or needed greater bargaining power in its relations with the international community.

President Obama has more room to manoeuvre than the Bush Administration which, by its unremitting hostility towards the military regime, effectively locked itself out of any meaningful negotiations. As demonstrated in the wake of Cyclone Nargis, under President Bush there was a complete breakdown in trust between Washington and Naypyidaw that severely restricted the US's options.¹⁴⁰ Even so, the SPDC's actions since January 2009 have already reduced the diplomatic space available to Barack Obama. Senior US officials have sent a number of signals to Naypyidaw, referring to a comprehensive review of US policy towards Burma, and there have even been reports of secret bilateral discussions.¹⁴¹ A new approach is still on the cards, but developments in Burma over the past few months have made significant movement by the US more difficult. Faced with the regime's harsh treatment of Aung San Suu Kyi, President Obama had little alternative but to renew sanctions against the regime in July 2009, ritualistically declaring a continuing 'national emergency' against the Burmese 'threat' to the US.¹⁴²

The discovery or even open declaration of a Burmese WMD program would not necessarily simplify matters. As the Six Party Talks with Pyongyang have shown, the policy options open to the US and its allies in such circumstances are limited. Should the international community try to force Naypyidaw to abandon such a program, it would face another set of problems. Over the past 20 years, the US, the European Community and various other Western countries have tried to make Burma's military hierarchy surrender government and adopt more humane policies through diplomatic pressure, economic sanctions, arms embargoes, travel bans and other punitive measures. Yet, as Hillary Clinton acknowledged in February 2009, this hard-line approach has clearly failed to influence the regime, which has not shifted from any of its core policy positions.¹⁴³ Indeed, such pressure may have even hardened the generals' resolve to resist external interference (as they see it) in Burma's internal affairs.

Countries enjoying much closer ties to Burma, such as China and India, would doubtless share international concerns about a Burmese WMD program.¹⁴⁴ Their influence with the military government is not as great as is often claimed, however, and it is likely that in dealing with Naypyidaw on this issue they would strike many of the same problems as the regime's critics.¹⁴⁵

Burma's senior generals seem convinced that only they know what is best for the country. They do not believe that the opposition movement, let alone any foreign

government or international organisation, can appreciate Burma's need for stability, unity and independence the way they do. The regime also feels strongly that only the armed forces can provide the strong central government required to meet all these imperatives and protect Burma from both internal and external threats. It argues that Burma's history validates such an approach. This perspective, encouraged by nationalistic indoctrination programs and public propaganda campaigns – and doubtless a fair degree of self-interest – seems to have strengthened the regime's determination to do whatever it feels is necessary for Burma's security regardless of the cost, either in domestic or international terms.¹⁴⁶

Complicating matters further, Burma's military leaders have conflated the armed forces, the government and the state. They view all three as indivisible, so that a threat to one is seen as a threat to all. This means that any criticism of the Tatmadaw, any challenge to the military government or any perceived threat to the country, arouses strong feelings at all three levels. Some generals may have reservations about the current state of affairs, possibly including pursuit of a secret nuclear weapons program. Yet it is probably safe to say that most see themselves as professionals and patriots, with the country's best interests at heart. If all this is true – and the internal dynamics of the armed forces are still largely unknown – then any policies aimed at halting a WMD program in Burma will need to take these attitudes into account. Failure to do so will not only cause the policies to fail, but could even prove counterproductive.¹⁴⁷

In any case, Naypyidaw does not appear to fear international criticism or the threat of increased sanctions. Burma occupies a critical geostrategic position and is rich in natural resources. The regime knows it is unlikely to be abandoned by Burma's influential and energy hungry neighbours, despite any concerns they may have about the regime's nuclear ambitions. After publication of the news reports in the Australian and Thai press at the beginning of August 2009, the ASEAN Secretary General, Thailand's Surin Pitsuwan, was reported as saying that any exposure of a secret WMD program would probably see Burma obliged to leave the Association.¹⁴⁸ Even if that were to occur, however, the generals in Naypyidaw seem prepared to see Burma return to its pre-1988 isolation and poverty, if that is the price they have to pay to remain masters of the country's – and their own – destiny.

One option that does not seem to have been explored yet, is for the other ASEAN members to invoke the verification and compliance articles of the 1997 Bangkok Treaty. Burma is a signatory to the treaty, which established a South East Asian Nuclear Weapons Free Zone (SEANWFZ). The SEANWFZ Commissioners, who are responsible for compliance with the treaty's provisions, have not publicly expressed any concerns over Burma's possible nuclear activities.¹⁴⁹ However, in light of the continuing WMD controversy and Naypyidaw's nuclear technology transfers from North Korea – a known proliferator – the Commissioners could invoke the treaty's article that permits 'each State Party the right to ask another State Party for clarification or a fact-finding mission to resolve an ambiguous situation or one which may give rise to doubts about compliance'.¹⁵⁰ No one would deny that the current situation is ambiguous.

As the international community has been reminded on several occasions since 1988, Burma's generals – including SPDC Chairman Than Shwe – can be quite unpredictable. They have adopted policies that appear to lack any clear strategic rationale, and have even been self-defeating. Recent history suggests that there are few practical ways to influence a government that is deeply committed to its self-appointed role in national affairs, does not care for the welfare of its own people, does not observe international norms and is protected by powerful friends and allies. If that government has embarked on a secret nuclear weapons program, then the international community faces a real policy challenge.

8. Conclusion

Over the past four months, Burma's suspected nuclear weapons program and its relationship with North Korea have prompted an avalanche of news reporting, speculation, popular punditry and serious policy advice. It is indicative of the uncertainty surrounding these issues that they have attracted as many true believers as they have devoted sceptics.

In considering Burma's nuclear status, a number of key questions must be asked. The first is whether the Naypyidaw government can be believed when it states that it is only interested in conducting peaceful nuclear research, and that this will be conducted under IAEA safeguards. The second question is whether the claims of activists, defectors and others are true, and the SPDC has launched – and is still pursuing – a secret WMD program. If this suspicion turns out to be well-founded, then the question follows whether Burma, with or without North Korean assistance, can surmount the enormous technical and other difficulties involved and actually make a nuclear weapon. Finally, if the answer to the last question is positive, then it also needs to be asked when such a project might be completed, leaving Burma with a tested, deliverable nuclear weapon. That raises in turn a number of questions about Burma's interest in SRBMs and other delivery systems.¹⁵¹

Even the first question is difficult to answer with any confidence. There is simply not enough reliable information publicly available on which to base a firm judgement. Faced with this dilemma, governments have erred on the side of caution, holding journalists and activists to a higher standard of proof, while carefully refraining from committing themselves either way. Until recently, this approach probably reflected their deep-seated scepticism about a secret WMD program, as much as a lack of hard data. Over the past year or so, however, there seems to have been a subtle shift in attitude. Several governments and multilateral organisations now seem to be giving this matter a higher priority, and are making greater efforts to test the claims of defectors and others. As Catherine Collins has pointed out, the international community has been caught napping before, and is anxious not to miss any 'tiny clues' that may indicate a new nuclear proliferation threat.¹⁵²

With this in mind, governments, strategic analysts and assorted Burma-watchers around the world are now increasingly looking to the Obama Administration for an authoritative statement on Burma's nuclear status. The deadline for a public statement under the terms of the 2008 Burma JADE Act is long past. Reports filtering out of Washington in recent months suggest that there have already been a number of confidential briefings to senior officials on this subject. They are likely to have informed Hillary Clinton's remarks in July 2009. The world is still waiting for a comprehensive public statement that will put all the rumours, blogs and newspaper stories of the past four months – indeed, the past 10 years – into proper perspective. Given the State Department's refusals even to discuss the matter, however, it is unlikely that such a statement will be forthcoming soon.

Burma and North Korea both have such poor international reputations that they are easy targets for criticism. Given their provocative and often bizarre behaviour, they lend themselves easily to conspiracy theories and sensationalist stories in the news media and on internet sites. This is not to say that, whenever the names of these two countries are linked together, there are no grounds for concern. Any suggestions of a secret WMD program, let alone one conducted by a state like Burma, require careful consideration. Some of the information that has leaked out of the country appears to be credible, and in recent years other snippets of information have emerged which, taken together, must raise suspicions. No-one should underestimate the lengths to which Burma's military

leaders will go to stay in power, and to protect the country from perceived external threats.

There has always been a lot of smoke surrounding Burma's nuclear ambitions. Since June 2009, the amount of smoke has increased, but still no-one seems to know whether or not it hides a real fire. As time passes, the need to find an answer to this important question can only increase.

Notes

- 1 Hazel Smith, 'Improving intelligence on North Korea', *Jane's Intelligence Review*, April 2004, p. 48.
- 2 The structure of this Regional Outlook paper follows that of Andrew Selth, 'Burma and North Korea: Smoke or fire?', *Policy Analysis*, no. 47 (Australian Strategic Policy Institute, Canberra, 24 August 2009), <http://www.aspi.org.au/publications/publication_details.aspx?ContentID=222&pubtype=9>.
- 3 For the full text of Rumsfeld's comment, see 'Rum remark wins Rumsfeld an award', *BBC News*, 2 December 2003, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/3254852.stm>>.
- 4 See, for example, Denis D. Gray, 'Aung San Suu Kyi found guilty', *Huffington Post*, 11 August 2009, <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/08/11/aung-san-suu-kyi-found-gu_n_256211.html>.
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- 126 The two defectors on whose testimony the latest claims are based left Burma in late 2006. Interview, Canberra, February 2009.
- 127 Wassana Nanuam and Arucha Charoenpo, 'Army denies Burma ambitions', *Bangkok Post*, 5 August 2009, <<http://www.bangkokpost.com/news/local/21465/army-denies-burma-ambitions>>.
- 128 'Thailand investigating suspected North Korea – Myanmar nuclear link', *New Kerala.com*, 4 August 2009, <<http://www.newkerala.com/nkfullnews-1-85669.html>>.
- 129 According to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the US sent un-manned surveillance aircraft into Burma in 2008 to try and verify the existence of certain nuclear-related facilities, by taking air samples and low-level overhead photographs. Naypyidaw is said to have protested against this invasion of Burma's territorial sovereignty. See McDonald, 'Revealed: Burma's Nuclear Bombshell'.
- 130 See, for example, Hibbs, 'IAEA probes Myanmar data, discourages new research reactors'.
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- 135 Andrew Selth, *Burma's secret military partners*, Canberra Papers on Strategy and Defence No. 136 (Australian National University, Canberra: Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, 2000), pp. 14–19.
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- 140 Andrew Selth, 'US-Burma: Where to from here?', *The Interpreter*, weblog of the Lowy Institute for International Policy, 28 April 2009, <<http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2009/04/28/US-Burma-Where-to-from-here.aspx>>. See also Selth, 'Even paranoids have enemies'.
- 141 Hillary Clinton has made a number of statements which can be read as diplomatic signals to the Naypyidaw government. Senator Jim Webb's visit to Burma in August might also be seen in this context. See, for example, Glenn Kessler, 'Shift possible on Burma Policy', *Washington Post*, 19 February 2009, <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/story/2009/02/17/ST2009021700968.html>>; Glenn Kessler, 'US offers Burma possible benefits', *Washington Post*, 23 July 2009, <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/07/22/AR2009072200489.html>>; and Karen deYoung and Colum Lynch, 'Webb visit may offer opening with Burma', *Washington Post*, 16 August 2009, <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/08/15/AR2009081500612.html>>. See also Greg Sheridan, 'US finds Burma difficult to tackle', *The Australian*, 15 August 2009, <<http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,25197,25930475-5013460,00.html>>.
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- 143 See, for example, George Packer, 'Clinton on Burma', *New Yorker*, 20 February 2009, <<http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/georgepacker/2009/02/clinton-on-burm.html>>.

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- 145 The *Beijing Review* has dismissed reports of a Burmese WMD program, and claimed that the issue is being used by the US to stir up trouble in Southeast Asia. See Song Qingrun, 'Mission unlikely', *Beijing Review*, 22 August 2009, <http://www.bjreview.com.cn/world/txt/2009-08/22/content_213082.htm>.
- 146 Morten Pedersen, *Promoting Human Rights in Burma: A Critique of Western Sanctions Policy* (Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham, 2008), pp. 79–124; and Selth, 'Burma in a changing world: through a glass darkly'.
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- 148 'Myanmar may have to leave ASEAN if it has a nuclear plant', *MCOT.Net*, 8 August 2009, <<http://enews.mcot.net/view.php?id=11215>>.
- 149 David Fullbrook, 'ASEAN and Myanmar's nuclear reactor', *Opinion Asia*, 27 May 2007, <<http://opinionasia.com/ASEANandMyanmarsNuclearReactor>>.
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- 152 Catherine Collins, 'Sound the alarm: how to stop Burma from getting nukes', *Foreign Policy*, 24 July 2009, <http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/07/24/sound_the_alarm>.