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Dealing with Burma, a Potential Nuclear Power?

By Doug Bandow

The idea of Burma as a nuclear power seems almost comical, but there is evidence from defectors that the ruling junta is interested in nuclear energy, and perhaps nuclear weapons. In the short-term however, the idea of an atomic arsenal in Rangoon is far-fetched. The more immediate challenge for Washington is dealing with an extremely repressive regime ruling over an extremely poor populace. The United States should promote more democratic governance and increased international engagement, which ultimately would reduce any incentive for Burma (also known as Myanmar) to consider atomic options.

Burma has suffered under military rule for decades. The so-called State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) brutally suppresses human rights. Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi has spent decades under house arrest. The SPDC is preparing to hold elections organized to ensure continuing military control.

Promised autonomy by the British after World War II, ethnic groups like the Karen, Karenni, Chin, Shan, Kachin, and Wa have long battled the central government. In recent years the regime has reached cease-fire agreements with several groups, but is now pressing those groups to disarm and disband without offering them any political protections. The Burmese army and ethnic forces reportedly are preparing for renewed hostilities.

This tragically misgoverned and impoverished nation also has been accused of developing nuclear weapons. Last year the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported: "Rumors have swirled around refugee circles outside Burma about secret military installations, tunnels dug into the mountains to hide nuclear facilities, the establishment of a 'nuclear battalion' in the army, and work done by foreign scientists." Secretary of State Hillary Clinton voiced concern over possible nuclear cooperation between North Korea and Burma. Still, discerning the SPDC's capabilities and intentions is not easy. Author Catherine Collins acknowledges that "the evidence of malfeasance so far is slight," but worries that similar whispers of Israeli nuclear activity in the 1950s turned out to be accurate.

In fact, Burmese interest in nuclear *power* runs back decades. That does not, however, necessarily mean the regime has an interest in developing nuclear *weapons*. Burma is an unlikely nuclear weapons state. It has only about half of North Korea's per capita GDP. Lack of funds is thought to have held up planned Russian construction of a nuclear research reactor. The Burmese regime faces no serious outside threats, primarily deploying the army to suppress domestic protest and ethnic resistance—purposes for which atomic weapons would be useless.

What of paranoia and prestige? Author Bertil Lintner contends: "There is no doubt that the Burmese generals would like to have a bomb so that they could challenge the Americans and the rest of the world." Perhaps. Andrew Selth of the Griffith Asia Institute points to "a siege mentality among Burma's leaders. Even now, they fear intervention by the United States and its allies—possibly even an invasion—to restore democracy to Burma." However, he believes that at most "a few Burmese generals envy North Korea's apparent ability to use its nuclear weapons capabilities to fend off its enemies and win concessions from the international community."

The best evidence suggests a nuclear weapons program does not yet exist. A recent report from the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies concluded that Burma "has no known capabilities that would lend themselves to a nuclear weapons program, apart from limited uranium deposits and some personnel who have received nuclear training overseas. If it is built, a 10 MW research reactor and associated training from Russia could provide the basis for an eventual civilian nuclear power program, but few of the skills required for such a program are readily transferable to nuclear weapons development. Specialized reprocessing or enrichment facilities would be necessary to produce weapons-usable fissile material, and any attempt to divert plutonium from the reactor is likely to be detected by IAEA [International Atomic Energy Agency] inspectors."

Are there secret facilities? A January study from the Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS) in Washington, DC, noted

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is dedicated to promoting peaceful resolutions to the nuclear crises in North Korea and Iran. It aims to provide policy makers with analysis on the latest developments in both nations and options for formulating coherent U.S. responses. In highlighting the importance of achieving diplomatic solutions, the goal is to avoid armed conflict and its attendant consequences.

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that the “sheer number of alleged secret sites posited by [several oft-cited] defectors by itself raises doubts about their claims.” North Korea has assisted the SPDC in building tunnels near its new capital of Naypyidaw, but the little available intelligence suggests that they have nonnuclear purposes. ISIS concluded: “Despite the public reports to the contrary, the military junta does not appear to be close to establishing a significant nuclear capability. Information suggesting the construction of major nuclear facilities appears unreliable or inconclusive.”

The United States and other countries still have reasons to be watchful and wary. However, ISIS noted: “Because Burma’s known program is so small, the United States and its allies have an opportunity to both engage and pressure the military regime in a manner that would make it extremely difficult for Burma to acquire a nuclear weapons capability, let alone nuclear weapons.”

Unfortunately, the West’s ability to influence the SPDC is quite limited. Although the United States and the European Union already apply economic sanctions against Burma, most of Burma’s neighbors invest in and trade with the regime. Russia and China have blocked United Nations sanctions; Beijing also has helped arm the junta.

Regime change obviously is desirable for the people of Burma, but if the junta believes that it faces a military threat—one reason it apparently rejected American aid sent via U.S. warships after Cyclone Nargis in 2008—it is likely to be less willing to consider political reform and more willing to pursue a nuclear weapons program. Thus, Washington should seek to reduce the junta’s fears. Selth makes a reasonable argument that the “aggressive rhetoric, open support for opposition figures, funding for expatriate groups, and military interventions in other undemocratic countries have all encouraged the belief among Burma’s leaders that the United States and its allies are bent on forcible regime change.” Washington should continue to press for improved human rights, but should demonstrate by word and deed that there are no plans to take military action against Burma.

At the same time, the United States, the EU, Canada, and Australia should together

offer to relax trade and diplomatic sanctions if the regime takes steps that genuinely open the political system and reduce ethnic conflict. The Western states also should encourage India, Japan, South Korea, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) states to apply coordinated diplomatic and economic pressure on the SPDC, backed by the threat of imposing targeted sanctions against junta leaders and business partners.

Washington should use the potential, however slim, of a Burmese nuclear program to encourage greater Indian and Russian involvement, in particular, toward moderating the SPDC’s behavior. Both nations routinely resist intervention to promote human rights, but they might be more willing to press for political reform if doing so would reduce the likelihood of nuclear complications.

The United States should similarly prod China to be more helpful. Burma harms Beijing with its instability. China recently was angered by a Burmese military offensive that pushed refugees across its border. Surely Beijing does not want a second isolated, unpredictable nuclear weapons state as a neighbor. Moreover, promoting political change in Burma would enhance China’s international reputation. Washington also should pledge—a promise worth repeating regarding North Korea—that the United States would not take military advantage of any Burmese liberalization. There would be no American bases, naval deployments, or training missions—even if a more pro-Western government emerged.

The junta might not respond positively. Yet in the months after Cyclone Nargis the International Crisis Group reported that “it is possible to work with the military regime on humanitarian issues.” Frank Smithuis of Doctors Without Borders similarly said that “the military at times has actually been quite helpful to us.”

Burma is one of the world’s greatest international tragedies. Nuclear weapons would turn it into one of the world’s greatest international challenges. Unfortunately, current U.S. policy is doing nothing to help the Burmese people. It is time to try a different approach in an attempt to simultaneously aid political liberalization and end talk of a Burmese Bomb. ■