



Looking for some good nonproliferation news? Check Myanmar by David Santoro

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Nuclear nonproliferation news is usually bad news. But sometimes there's good news, and even clear wins. If you're looking for such a case in the recent past, you need to look no further than Myanmar, formerly known as 'Burma'. As I explain in my just-published ASPI Special Report, 'Myanmar: A Nonproliferation Success Story,' Myanmar officials have made significant progress on the nonproliferation front since the middle of 2011, so much so that their country is now hailed as a nonproliferation role model in the making.

Myanmar has come a long way. When in the late 1990s Myanmar officials began to express an interest in expanding their rudimentary civilian nuclear activities and sought to acquire a research reactor from Russia, the international community raised concerns because Myanmar had neither the need for nor the infrastructure and funding to operate such a reactor. In the end, Myanmar-Russia nuclear cooperation didn't go anywhere. But subsequent allegations that Naypyidaw might have developed a relationship with North Korea fuelled strong fears that it could be interested in obtaining nuclear weapons.

These fears were magnified by Myanmar's refusal to fully endorse the nonproliferation regime. While Myanmar officials had systematically rejected nuclear weapons as an instrument of statecraft, there were important gaps and limitations in their nuclear safeguards and, significantly, they hadn't endorsed the principal nuclear safety and security conventions, as well as the regimes governing missiles or biological and chemical weapons.

Yet in mid-2011, almost overnight, everything changed. Naypyidaw abandoned its nuclear research program and radically shifted its approach to nonproliferation, in both words and deeds. Myanmar officials made clear that they were eager to burnish their nonproliferation credentials and roll back their dealings with North Korea. They quickly followed through on their declarations with several concrete actions, including the signature of an Additional Protocol with the International Atomic Energy Agency to strengthen nuclear safeguards (2013), the ratification of the Biological and Chemical Weapons Conventions (2014, 2015), and the adoption of a new trade law to better control sensitive technology (2012).

That nonproliferation U-turn needs to be understood as part of the broader reform agenda which began when the military junta in power since the 1980's decided to democratize the country and open it up to the world. Because a key motivation behind these reforms was to reach out to the West, and the US in particular (to compensate for a growing and increasingly unsustainable reliance on China) and because Washington made nonproliferation endorsement a non-negotiable condition of its engagement, Naypyidaw delivered, and did so quickly.

That being said, even though Myanmar officials have made considerable progress on nonproliferation over the past few years, they still have much more to do. Plainly, Myanmar isn't finished with nonproliferation. There are numerous instruments that it's yet to endorse and, just as important, it's yet to fully implement the ones most recently adopted.

The problem is that implementing nonproliferation instruments is immensely time-consuming and labor-intensive, and Naypyidaw not only has limited capacity to do so (and do so in a timely fashion), but it also has multiple, often higher, priorities as it opens to the world and transitions to democracy. Another challenge is the place and role of the Myanmar armed forces — the Tatmadaw — in government affairs, which remain significant even after the reforms and create difficulties or complications for nonproliferation implementation.

In these circumstances, it's imperative that the US, Western countries and the broader international community keep the spotlight on Myanmar and help its officials to solve problems so that they stay the course on nonproliferation. In other words, as I argue in the paper, outside powers should keep the pressure on, keep the engagement active (and expand it to systematically include Tatmadaw officers), and keep the assistance flowing. It's an incredibly daunting and protracted task, but one that is likely to pay off and confirm that Myanmar is, indeed, a nonproliferation success story.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.