

Surfing the Waves of Nuclear Change in Myanmar

by David Santoro

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Myanmar needs to honor its nonproliferation promises. This, in short, is the key finding of the US Department of State's 2013 Report on Adherence to and Compliance with Arms Control, Nonproliferation, and Disarmament Agreements and Commitments as it pertains to the Southeast Asian country, which it continues to refer to as "Burma." Published July 12, the report strikes a different note from last year's, which stressed that concerns about Myanmar's interest in a nuclear program, including the possibility of cooperation with North Korea, were "partially allayed."

While it is important that Myanmar delivers on its nonproliferation promises sooner rather than later, this is unlikely to happen in a vacuum. It will take time and require vigorous, dedicated, and relentless engagement that goes far beyond nonproliferation on the part of the United States and others.

Since he took office in March 2011 on the heels of sweeping reforms breaking away from the rigid authoritarianism that characterized the junta's rule, President Thein Sein has revamped Myanmar's stance on nuclear policy. Several high-ranking officials have announced that because "the international community may misunderstand Myanmar over the issue," the nuclear research program, which has been entirely civilian, has been abandoned. In November 2012, ahead of US President Barack Obama's historic visit to Myanmar, Thein Sein also announced that his country would sign an Additional Protocol (AP) and submit a modified Small Quantities Protocol (SQP), both of which would enable international inspectors to verify that Myanmar's nuclear activities are, and always have been, for peaceful purposes. And a few months earlier, Myanmar had also promised to alter its relationship with North Korea and ultimately end its military ties, as well as fully implement UN resolutions imposing sanctions against Pyongyang.

There have been concerns about Myanmar's nuclear capabilities and intentions since the early 2000s. Worries emerged in 2002, when it reached a tentative agreement with Russia on the construction of a ten-megawatt research reactor and associated facilities. Although the project never materialized, there have been suspicions – based on allegations by regime defectors – about Myanmar's intent to pursue nuclear weapon-related activities through covert means. Some of these allegations were groundless, but others have been substantiated, in particular, those in a report by the Democratic Voice of Burma, co-authored by former International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspector Robert

Kelley, and in a report by the Washington-based Institute for Science and International Security, both of which were published in 2010 and alleged direct connections between Myanmar and North Korea. Myanmar has always denied conducting nuclear weapon-related work.

Myanmar became a party to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty in 1992 and concluded a Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement (CSA) with the IAEA three years later, in 1995. Since it had little to no nuclear material, Myanmar also concluded an SQP, which holds in abeyance the implementation of most of the detailed CSA procedures, including IAEA routine inspections. As a result, the IAEA has been unable to evaluate or even confirm that Myanmar has no more than small quantities of nuclear materials. Myanmar's promise to sign and implement an AP as well as submit a modified SQP, therefore, is important because these instruments grant IAEA inspectors the expanded rights of access to nuclear-related information and sites to effectively verify and help alleviate concerns about its nuclear activities. (To be sure, concerns would only be fully alleviated if Myanmar also provided the IAEA with complete details about its past nuclear research activities and agreed to answer any questions it may have.)

It will take time, however, before Myanmar adopts and especially fully implements these instruments. Myanmar recognizes that it must come clean on nonproliferation. But after years of isolation from the outside world, there is a lack of capacity to bring these instruments into force expeditiously. Myanmarese who attend Pacific Forum CSIS dialogues, for instance, are forthcoming and engaged but, by their own admission, profess to be "students" of nonproliferation. In other words, expecting too much, too soon from Myanmar is a mistake. After all, among the 10 countries of ASEAN, only four have brought an AP into force (Indonesia, Philippines, Singapore, and Vietnam) and, with the exception of Indonesia, it took years for the other three to move from the "signature stage" to the "implementation stage."

As a consequence, capacity-building efforts should be ramped up to help facilitate the adoption and implementation processes, however frustratingly slow they may remain. The United States, of course, is well aware of this and engagement efforts are taking place. For instance, the Department of Energy's National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) held a workshop in Myanmar last January to promote awareness of the international safeguards system, including elements and requirements for the implementation of the AP and the modified SQP. These efforts should be pursued and expanded, particularly as an NNSA official confirmed after the workshop that Myanmar was only in the "earlier stages" of accession with these protocols.

Significantly, engagement *beyond* nonproliferation is also essential. While Myanmar has abided by its commitments and considerably scaled back its ties with Pyongyang (as well as implemented relevant UN sanctions resolutions), a relationship still exists. During his visit to Washington last May, President Thein Sein made no secret of its existence, stressing that his country is committed to nonproliferation, but that a relationship with North Korea remains “because in the past everything is under sanctions and we were in need to find somebody who could help us with our defense.”

Only a much broader engagement on the part of the United States and others will get Myanmar to completely cut ties with North Korea. This requires a comprehensive dialogue gauging how Myanmar sees its security environment and developing confidence that its perceived security needs can be accommodated without relying on Pyongyang for military procurement.

In early July, the Obama administration was well-advised to impose sanctions against Lt. General Thein Htay, head of Myanmar’s Directorate of Defense Industries, because of continued military purchases from North Korea, while stressing that this action does *not* target Myanmar’s government, “which has continued to take positive steps in severing military ties with North Korea.” This signals that Washington will sanction bad behavior but continue to work *with* Myanmar’s government in resolving outstanding issues. Radical change from Myanmar vis-à-vis North Korea, however, is unlikely to happen without deeper engagement aimed at thoroughly understanding Myanmar’s security outlook. For that matter, such an engagement would also help understand more broadly how Myanmar views itself as well as its roles and responsibilities in the region, particularly within ASEAN.

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