

Myanmar must navigate the North Korean minefield by Aung Ko Min

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After the Aung San Suu Kyi-led National League for Democracy (NLD) won the 2015 parliamentary elections, Myanmar's future looks promising. One potential trouble spot is the new leadership's foreign policy toward the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). As Aung San Suu Kyi discharges her duties as state counsellor and foreign minister in the government, it is hoped that she will reform Myanmar's policy toward the DPRK in accordance with UNSC resolutions and international norms. However, it is of critical importance that the NLD leadership cooperates and coordinates with the military elite to produce win-win situations.

Historical background of Myanmar-DPRK relations

Myanmar-DPRK relations have had its ups and downs. Myanmar commenced consular relations with the DPRK on May 15, 1961, and later the two countries established diplomatic relations on May 16, 1975. Bilateral relations soon soured, however. In October 1983, South Korean President Chun Doo-hwan made an official visit to Myanmar accompanied by a large South Korean delegation. The morning after his arrival in Yangon, he headed to the Martyrs' Mausoleum to lay a wreath. Minutes before his arrival, a powerful bomb exploded and killed 21 people, 18 of whom were visiting South Korean officials, four of them government ministers. As soon as the Myanmar government identified Pyongyang as being behind the explosion, it ordered the DPRK embassy to close and all diplomats to leave the country within 48 hours on Nov. 4, 1983. All economic and commercial ties between the two countries were terminated.

In the following years, Pyongyang made several attempts to restore bilateral ties, but Yangon showed no interest. For over a decade, there were no exchanges or visits between Myanmar and the DPRK. Myanmar and the DPRK normalized diplomatic relations on April 26, 2007, during the visit of the DPRK deputy foreign minister to Myanmar.

After ties were restored, the two countries made a series of reciprocal visits. In October 2008, Myanmar's Foreign Minister Nyan Win visited Pyongyang, the highest-ranking government official to visit in 25 years. In November 2008, the then third-ranking man in the SPDC, Gen. Thura Shwe

Man (former speaker of the Lower House), led a military delegation to Pyongyang to study the military assets of the DPRK. A leaked 37-page report contained details of a Nov. 22-29 visit to the DPRK by 17 Myanmar military officials. It was seen by international media as opening a new chapter in defense diplomacy between the two countries.

Myanmar's nuclear dilemma

Myanmar has a long-standing interest in and support for the peaceful use of nuclear energy. It joined the IAEA in 1957, and participated in a number of IAEA technical cooperation projects in isotope applications for agriculture in the 1960s. In 1997, the government established the Department of Atomic Energy (DAE) under the Ministry of Science and Technology and introduced an Atomic Energy Law on June 8, 1998. Since the 2000s, Myanmar asked the Russian government to help build a nuclear research center. However, the Myanmar government's civil nuclear program stalled for a number of reasons – one was IAEA disapproval of the project. After an IAEA team visited Myanmar, they expressed doubts about Myanmar's capability and safety standards to operate a nuclear research reactor. Another reason was the government's lack of funding for the project. Myanmar's government asked Russia to issue a loan for the project, but Moscow refused.

After that project failed to get off the ground, there were allegations that Myanmar turned to the DPRK for assistance. International media reported that DPRK technicians arrived in Naypyitaw and assisted the Myanmar military in constructing military facilities. They also noted shipments from the DPRK to Myanmar in 2009 and again in 2011 suspected of violating UN sanctions. In May 2010, the Democratic Voice of Burma, then an exile-run media agency based in Oslo, announced that Myanmar was suspected of nuclear activities. The agency's information mostly came from a former major in the Myanmar Army, Sai Thein Win. He had documents and photographs with him, but they were not enough to prove his claims. International analysts confirmed that his information was second-hand and required more verification.

Myanmar's Foreign Ministry called the allegations regarding the nuclear program "groundless and unfounded; that no activity related to uranium conversion, enrichment, reactor construction or operation has been carried out in the past, is ongoing or is planned for the future in Myanmar." In fact, the Myanmar government has never publicized a national plan for building a nuclear reactor or nuclear power plant. Even if Myanmar does have ambitions to start such a program, it will be for civilian purposes only and not for building a weapon.

A changing relationship with the DPRK?

On Jan. 13, 2016, Myanmar's Foreign Ministry issued a statement in which it expressed deep concern about the

hydrogen bomb test conducted by the DPRK on Jan. 6, 2016. This statement represents a significant juncture for relations between the two countries because the Myanmar government had previously never commented on Pyongyang's erratic behavior. Therefore, it can be said that the relationship between Myanmar and the DPRK had changed even before installation of the NLD government. These actions by the previous leadership reflect a commitment to follow international norms and regulations under UN Security Council Resolution 1540. This decision to issue a statement criticizing the DPRK's actions had approval from the National Defense and Security Council, the highest authority in Myanmar's national security policy-making. It is expected that more statements of this kind addressing DPRK's actions will be made under the NLD-led administration.

The first test came in a press conference during Secretary of State John Kerry's visit to Naypyitaw on May 22, 2016. When asked about Myanmar's nuclear ambitions and its cooperation with the DPRK, Suu Kyi first made light of the subject by noting that her predecessors had not shared that information with her. More seriously, however, she insisted on Myanmar's determination to meet its international nuclear nonproliferation obligations.

Civil-military relations and future foreign policy

Although the regime of former President Thein Sein made significant developments in nuclear nonproliferation measures, national policy and strategy regarding clarification of ties with the DPRK did not occur. Reforming Myanmar's DPRK policy might lead to heated discussions at the powerful National Defense and Security Council, where the military has a majority. When the NLD government tries to clear up Myanmar's relations with the DPRK in the international community, it is essential to reach a consensus and build mutual trust between the military and the government. In the meantime, civilian interference in military affairs will be difficult in Myanmar as the Armed Forces are likely to continue to manage their own affairs as an autonomous institution.

As foreign minister, maintaining balanced relations between major powers such as China and United States will be a challenge for Aung San Suu Kyi. Tensions with the military persist over constitutional rights in parliamentary debates. A civil-military relationship must be built in Myanmar that is based on mutual trust, understanding, cooperation, and patience. Although Aung San Suu Kyi is a key player in the new government, the army still has constitutionally-enshrined control over three powerful ministries. Therefore, for the time being, promoting Myanmar's international image under the leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi, which will be in line with international norms and values, should not conflict with the military's interests.

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