

Sixth Myanmar-US Nonproliferation Dialogue
Naypyidaw, Myanmar, Dec. 11-12, 2018
Key Findings

The Pacific Forum, in coordination with the Myanmar Institute of Strategic and International Studies (M-ISIS) and with support from the US Department of Energy's National Nuclear Security Administration (DOE/NNSA), held the Sixth Myanmar-US Nonproliferation Dialogue on Dec. 11-12, 2018 in Naypyidaw, Myanmar. More than 65 Myanmar and US experts, officials, military officers, and observers attended, all in their private capacity. The off-the-record discussions focused on current and future directions of Myanmar's relationship with the US and the West; implementation of nuclear non-proliferation instruments and nuclear and radiological safety and security protocols, implementation of the Biological and Chemical Weapons Conventions, strategic trade controls and UN sanctions; the Hague Code of Conduct against Ballistic Missile Proliferation (HCOG), and opportunities and challenges for enhancing Myanmar's role in ASEAN nonproliferation networks. Key findings include:

The Myanmar delegation was unprecedentedly large and diverse. It included officials from the ministries of Foreign Affairs, Education, Planning and Finance, Commerce, Industry, the Union of Myanmar Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry, as well as academics and M-ISIS members. Significantly, the delegation also included the biggest ever (8-10) contingent of uniformed military officers and defense officials.

Discussions were open, frank, and candid but not confrontational. Despite increasingly difficult relations between Washington and Naypyidaw as a result of the humanitarian crisis in Myanmar's Rakhine State, there was no need for an "ice-breaking" period – a testament to this dialogue's success in creating and nurturing solid working relationships between US and Myanmar nationals over the years.

Myanmar participants explained that Myanmar-US relations are "at a near all-time low," a sentiment widely shared among government officials, the Tatmadaw, and the Myanmar people at large. They argued that there are two narratives on the Rakhine issue, which they regard as a national-security problem, and urged Americans not to fixate on that issue and jeopardize the bilateral relationship, stressing that businesses and especially employees suffer from US sanctions.

Generally speaking, Myanmar participants insisted that they want "good relations with the United States," which they no longer consider a threat. Myanmar's goal

is to thrive as “a neutral, independent, free, and democratic country.” Some were quick to add that Myanmar will “never become any country’s protégé.” It wanted friendly relations with all, including Washington and Beijing.

A senior Myanmar participant contended that Naypyidaw has neither the intention, resources, nor technical capacity to develop nuclear weapons. Interestingly, he explained that Myanmar may have harbored nuclear-weapon ambitions in the past because it was isolated and, therefore, was after a “security equalizer,” but this was no longer the case. In the same breath, he made clear that Myanmar no longer has a military relationship with North Korea, stressing that Naypyidaw is now getting small and light weapons from Russia.

There was agreement that nonproliferation cooperation can and should be insulated from the difficulties facing the Myanmar-US relationship. Even though, as one participant pointed out, Myanmar has been a “nonproliferation success story” in recent years, much work remains to be done, so now is not the time to abandon cooperation.

While it is yet to bring its Additional Protocol into force (and to adopt the modified version of the Small Quantities Protocol), Myanmar has worked relentlessly to improve the safety and security of radioactive sources used for medical and agricultural purposes. In collaboration with the US DOE and other organizations, Myanmar’s Department of Atomic Energy has run countless awareness-raising programs and training courses to bring the relevant stakeholders and constituencies up to speed with standard safety and security requirements.

Myanmar’s Department of Research and Innovation is the focal point for implementation of the Chemical Weapons Convention, which Myanmar ratified in 2015. Implementation has proceeded well since: Naypyidaw has established a national authority, made its initial declaration to the Organization of the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, and set up several working groups, including to develop legislation. Yet Myanmar officials need technical support to draft and promulgate the national chemical law, as well as to train experts on how to implement that law.

Myanmar is also implementing the Biological Weapons Convention, which it ratified in 2014. In addition to establishing a national authority to allow for rapid response in the event of a bio-incident, Naypyidaw has collected the necessary information to submit the required Confidence-Building Measures to the Convention’s Implementation Support Unit; it has made two submissions, in 2016 and 2018. Here too, Myanmar officials need assistance to implement the

Convention, notably to draft biosafety legislation, which they have been working on since 2014.

Myanmar is in the process of improving its trade legislation and regulatory framework. A New Trade Law is being drafted to expand on the 2012 Export and Import Law. Myanmar officials, however, do not intend to include strategic trade controls in the new law, explaining that they have limited capacity to do so “at the moment.” It isn’t clear whether there is also political resistance. Significantly, however, several Myanmar participants, including two Pacific Forum Myanmar fellows, said that it was in Naypyidaw’s interests to adopt strategic trade controls expeditiously.

Myanmar participants were not prepared at this time to embrace US calls on Naypyidaw to endorse the HCOC. While several showed interest in learning about the Code’s requirements, they explained that their country “had already done a lot,” that they had limited capacity to do more, and that they’d rather first implement the treaties and conventions they have adopted. On the margins of the meeting, one Myanmar participant said that “US officials are always asking Myanmar to endorse more agreements, but the United States is currently *withdrawing* from all sorts of agreements; that’s not fair and doesn’t make sense.”

There is interest in the Myanmar scientific and technological community to engage more with the region’s nonproliferation networks, notably in ASEAN. Such engagement, however, will only expand after Naypyidaw passes appropriate legislation. Assistance providers should focus on helping Naypyidaw build capacity to draft legislation.

At the end of the meeting, a senior military officer took the floor and explained that Myanmar is eager to re-engage in military-to-military cooperation with the United States, stressing that the Rakhine issue should “not get in the way” and adding that “the ball is in Washington’s camp.” US suggestions that some engagement could take place in the ADMM+ were deemed “a good idea.”

For more information, please contact David Santoro [David@pacforum.org]. These are preliminary findings aimed at providing a general summary of the discussion. The views expressed are those of the organizers and do not necessarily reflect endorsement of DOE/NNSA or the US government. This is not a consensus document. A more detailed summary of the dialogue will soon be available upon request from the Pacific Forum.