



CLAWS

Myanmar: Nuclear Programme and Its Implications

■ R S N Singh

There has been an unmistakable spurt in the development and acquisition of nuclear weapon capabilities by Myanmar. Given the level of progress in this regard, it is reckoned by various agencies that this would be realised by the year 2014. The media in the Southeast Asian region is rife with insinuations that this project is in progress in active collaboration with North Korea under the aegis of China.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is seized of the matter. Recently, at the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) meet at Phuket in July 2009, the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton voiced her concern over reports about military cooperation between Myanmar and nuclear-armed North Korea. This statement should be viewed in the backdrop of the incident in June 2009, wherein a North Korean 2000-tonne freighter, *Kang Nam-I*, allegedly carrying illegal cargo, and headed for Myanmar, was tracked by a US Navy destroyer, USS *John S McCain* and was forced to reverse course. The UN Resolution 1874 permits North Korean ships suspected of carrying illegal cargo to be searched. North Korea conveyed that any such move would be considered an “act of war”.

Since the year 2000, there have been reports about North Korean ships off-loading construction and other material at Thilawa port in Myanmar. It is intriguing that these activities were taking place when North Korea and Myanmar did not have a diplomatic relationship since 1983. The relations between the two countries were snapped following the bombing of the Martyr's Mausoleum in Yangon by North Korean agents in an attempt to assassinate the then visiting South Korean president, Chun Doo-hwan.

No sooner had diplomatic relations been restored in 2007, there has been a flurry of secret visits by Myanmar officials to North Korea: a delegation led by Lt Gen Myint Hlaing, the Chief of Air Defence, followed by another delegation headed by Lt Gen Tin Aye, Chief of the Office of Chief Defence Industries, visited North Korea. The composition of these delegations suggests that, besides cooperation for procurement and development of conventional weapons, there are aspirations on the part of Myanmar to seek assistance in nuclear weapons and missile technology. If it was only conventional weapons, China is well-placed to meet its requirements. As it is, Myanmar and China have thriving defence cooperation, and more than 70 percent of Myanmar's military arsenal is of Chinese origin. Moreover, North Korea lags far behind China in conventional weapon technologies. But as far as transfer of nuclear and missile technologies is concerned, it has been the wont of China to supply them through proxies like North Korea, so as to deflect international opprobrium. Pakistan is one such glaring example.

Sources have revealed that the Myanmar-North Korea rapprochement was painstakingly brought about by China. It is believed that when the Myanmar authorities approached China for a supply of ‘howitzer guns’, the Chinese authorities expressed their inability on the plea of shortages, but said that the same could be obtained from North Korea in exchange for rice. During that period, North Korea was facing severe food shortages due to drought. At the behest of China, the ambassadors of

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Myanmar and North Korea to Thailand met each other. The desperation on China's part to facilitate the rapprochement process between the two internationally pariah nations, extremely close and beholden to China, is a pointer towards the evolution of a new Chinese strategy in the region.

It is believed that these secret delegations from Myanmar to North Korea had gone to seek further cooperation as part of the tunneling project, already underway in a mountain complex (Setkhaya Mountains), in Naung Laing village, southeast of Pyin Oo Lwin in Mandalay Division. The off-loading of special construction material by North Korean ships on several occasions partially vindicates the belief. There are images available to suggest extremely large network of tunnels (some 800 in numbers), being excavated, apparently with the help of North Korea. The North Korean assistance is corroborated by the fact that Myanmar does not have tunneling capability. Meanwhile, uranium is also being mined at least at 10 locations. It may be pertinent to mention that the Kachin state of Myanmar is rich in uranium, which reportedly in the past, was being clandestinely excavated by Japan, with the tacit indulgence of regional leaders during the period when the state was virtually out of control of the central authority.

The design of the reactor at Naung Laing uses water to provide carbon dioxide utilised in the cooling loop, and bears resemblance with the reactor at Yongbyon and the reactor in Syria, being constructed allegedly by North Korean assistance, which was eventually bombed by the Israelis in September 2007.

There are other indications with regard to Myanmar's quest for nuclear weapon technology. Soon after Pakistan carried out its nuclear tests in May 1998, Myanmar's Head of State, Senior General Than Shwe, signed the Atomic Energy Law on 08 June 1998. The timing of this event

clearly reveals a strategic pursuit with regard to nuclear technology, rather than any benign designs of quest for nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. Significantly, post-9/11, two Pakistani nuclear scientists, Suleiman Asad and Mohammad Ali Mukhtar, took refuge in Myanmar in November 2001, when US intelligence began to investigate the nexus between the Pakistani nuclear scientists and Al Qaeda. This could not have been possible without intimate nuclear cooperation between the two countries, certainly with the tacit approval of China. The whereabouts of these two scientists is still unknown. It was alleged earlier that they were sheltered in the Muslim-dominated area of Mandalay by the Myanmar authorities. There is not a word about them from the Pakistan authorities, and even the US has become flaccid in its hunt for them.

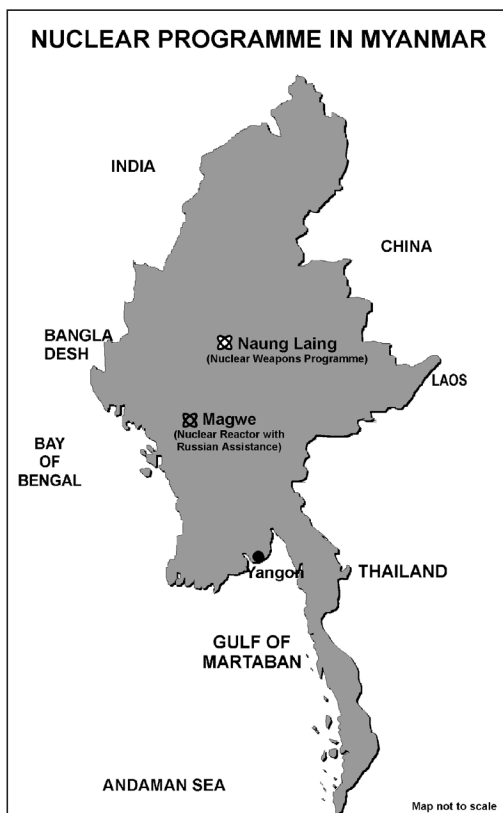
The military government established a Department of Atomic Energy (DAE) in 2001 under U Thaung, a known proponent of nuclear technology, who currently heads the Ministry of Science and Technology (MST). He made a secret visit to Pakistan in 2001, the chief agenda being nuclear cooperation. During the same period, three Pakistani naval vessels – a submarine, a tanker and a destroyer – visited Yangon port. This was an unprecedented development. Myanmar had steadfastly maintained that it would not permit foreign naval vessels to visit the country's ports. The goodwill visit by the Pakistan naval ships was immediately followed by the visit of Gen Parvez Musharraf, the then chief executive of Pakistan. The Myanmar authorities, who met Gen Musharraf, also included U Thaung.

There has been a fresh impetus in defence cooperation between Pakistan and Myanmar since the year 2000. Myanmar has been soliciting Pakistan's assistance in some very key areas like setting up of an air-defence network, upgradation of airfields, and establishment of University of Aeronautical and Space Education (Meiktila). Myanmar has also sought Pakistan's assistance in cartographic survey and mapping. Given Chinese strategic sensitivities with regard to Myanmar, such growing bonhomie between Pakistan and Myanmar cannot be possible without the Chinese prodding and support.

It was also during this period that Russia, on Myanmar's request, announced its intention to build a research reactor in Myanmar. In 2002, Myanmar's Deputy Foreign Minister, Khin Maung Win, announced that Myanmar had decided

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to build a nuclear research reactor for producing radio-isotopes for medical purposes. It may be reiterated that the health care facilities in Myanmar are of abysmal standards, and there are very few hospitals equipped and trained to handle radio-isotopes. The agreement with Russia for setting up a 10-megawatt (MW) reactor near Magwe in Myanmar was signed only in May 2007 due to financial difficulties. Nevertheless, hundreds of military personnel had been sent to Russia between 2001 and 2007 for training in nuclear science and technology. In some instances, their training duration was extended, as the Russian instructors found a significant number of personnel without the requisite basic knowledge and being slow on the uptake. Thus, Myanmar in the last decade or so has been able to create a pool of personnel trained in harnessing nuclear technology for civil application. On the flip side, and by conscious design, they were also grounded in the basic knowledge of nuclear technology, which is being honed and utilised for the nuclear weapons development programme. Sources, however, maintain that Myanmar's technological manpower resources, despite all the efforts, are still not competent enough to handle nuclear facilities or programme.



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Therefore, Myanmar has adopted a two-pronged strategy for the development of its nuclear weapons programme. The setting up of the 10 MW reactor by Russia is a parallel venture to act as a cover for nuclear weapons development activities with the active collaboration of North Korea. Although Myanmar is a signatory to the Nuclear Proliferation Treaty (NPT), it is yet to agree to the Additional Protocol, which allows the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to conduct more intrusive monitoring of nuclear facilities and operations. In May 2007, the US State Department spokesman, Tom Casey, said that the US had a “general sense” that Myanmar had “neither the regulatory or legal frame nor safeguard provisions” for a country to be able to handle such a programme. He expressed the apprehension that there were “no accounting mechanisms or other kinds of security procedures” to prevent nuclear fuel from being stolen. He added: “We would be concerned about the possibility for accidents, for environmental damage, or for proliferation simply by the possibility of fuel being diverted, stolen or otherwise removed.”

Following the resumption of diplomatic relations between Myanmar and North Korea, Myanmar's military junta permitted North Korean transport planes going to Pakistan and Iran to refuel at the Yangon airport. The clandestine cooperation between North Korea and Iran in the field of nuclear weapons and missile technology is well known. Defectors from Myanmar allege that the junta has sent uranium deposits from its mines to Iran, as also Russia, for evaluation.

The nuclear weapons programme that Myanmar embarked on a decade ago characterises the coalescing of its strategic imperatives with an indulgent China. The involvement of North Korea, Pakistan, and to an extent Iran, for furtherance of China's regional and global agenda, is in keeping with their status as proxy powers of the latter.

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Myanmar's determined bid to acquire nuclear capability is not India-centric. It does not perceive any threat from India, which is apparent from the deployment pattern of its military. Further, it has no fixed defences along the 1463 km long Indo-Myanmar border, which is largely undisputed. In fact, Myanmar clearly desisted from denouncing the Indian nuclear tests in May 1998. Myanmar is pursuing the nuclear course for the very survivability of its military regime. In that, it is probably guided by the North Korean example. The military regime in Myanmar has also been circumspect about turning into a vassal state of China. However, the regime's survival compulsions have outweighed other considerations, which China has been ruthlessly exploiting.

Internationally, the isolation of Myanmar has rendered it into a desperate political and economic situation. Therefore, the nuclear capability, in the plausible reckoning of the military junta, will invest it with the much needed diplomatic space in the international arena, in the absence of which Myanmar has no one to turn to except for China. Indeed, it was the international isolation of Myanmar in the 1990s that compelled it to become beholden of China. Nevertheless, China's patronage and even its admission into the ASEAN as a full member has not mitigated its political and economic problems. The western world continues to view the present Myanmarese regime as totalitarian, repressive and regressive.

The military dispensation in Myanmar, very much like the regime in North Korea, is paranoid about being dislodged by an intervention, military or otherwise, of the US and its allies. The nuclear weapons capability, the Myanmar regime contends, will strategically insulate it against any such design.

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For China, a nuclear-armed Myanmar will further bolster its strategic encirclement of India, the major challenge to its regional supremacy. In the global context, proxy nuclear-states serve as robust strategic pawns in the prevailing uni-polar international order.

Myanmar's nuclear power status will have serious ramifications for the ASEAN. Besides driving a wedge in the grouping, it will act as a counterpoise to the ASEAN countries considered close to the US. It may be mentioned that all members of the ASEAN signed the Southeast Asian Nuclear Weapons Free Zone Treaty (SEANWFZ), which came into force in 1997.

The most disturbing part of Myanmar's nuclear programme is the China-North Korea-Myanmar-Pakistan-Iran axis. Some analysts reckon that it is the part of Myanmar's nuclear programme that is not entirely of its own volition, but is a strategic manoeuvre by China and its proxies. They maintain that the large number of tunnels being dug in Myanmar is to conceal nuclear material of these countries from the international scanner. Myanmar, being an isolated and closed country, is ideal for the purpose. In other words, Myanmar may be turning into a nuclear hub for all nuclear pariah states under the leadership of China.



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Views expressed in this Issue Brief are those of the author and do not represent the views of the Centre for Land Warfare Studies.



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