



How to stop Burma from getting nukes



When senior Chinese officials arrive in Washington on Monday for bilateral talks on strategy and the economy, they will find a new item near the top of the agenda: U.S. concerns that North Korea is supplying nuclear weapons technology to Burma. U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton warned of this possibility speaking at the Association of Southeast Asian Nations forum this week in Thailand -- a threat she said the United States takes "very seriously." So seriously, in fact, that Clinton will raise the topic when she meets with her Chinese counterpart, State Councilor Dai Bingguo, on

Monday, according to officials at the State Department and in Congress. As one official involved in preparations told me, "Burma is very much on the agenda."

The evidence of malfeasance so far is slight: a North Korean ship bound for Burma that turned back when shadowed by the U.S. Navy, photos of tunnels being excavated near the new Burmese capital, and a handful of suspicious export cases. But the motive is there, a government official who monitors the country told me. "Burma's leaders are paranoid and it makes sense that they might look for security in a nuclear weapon," he said. And if the history of proliferation teaches us anything, it is that the best way to stop a covert nuclear program is by ringing the alarm bells early and often.

Indeed, the early stages of what might be Burmese nuclear attempts look eerily familiar. The first leaks about Israel's nuclear program in the late 1950s, which involved several dubious explanations for a suspicious construction site in the desert, were ignored -- and Israel eventually developed the bomb. The same story held true for both India and Pakistan, where results might have been different had the international community reacted to suspicious procurement activities. Then, of course, there is Iran, where the desire for a nuclear weapon dates back to the mid-70s and now it may be too late to stop them. Signs that the present rulers of Iran were buying nuclear technology on the black market in the late 1980s were dismissed because U.S. intelligence thought a bomb was beyond Iran's capabilities.

Today in Burma, some of the basic elements for a nuclear program are, in fact, already in place. After several years of discussions, Russia signed a deal in 2007 to provide Burma with a light-water nuclear reactor, facilities for processing and storing nuclear waste, and training for 300 to 350 Burmese scientists set to work there. While the proposed reactor is not suitable for a weapons program, the deal is still a foot in the nuclear door for one of the world's most repressive and reclusive regimes. Rosatom, Russia atomic agency, told the Associated Press recently that there has been no progress on the deal.

But it's Burma's relationship with North Korea that is causing heartburn now. North Korea has been selling conventional weapons like artillery and small arms to Burma for years; the Burmese tend to pay in badly needed rice. But worries that the relationship moved into the nuclear arena surfaced two years ago after North Koreans were spotted unloading large crates and heavy construction equipment near the site for the planned Russian reactor. Concerns increased in June when photographs and videos appeared in the press showing that North Korean helped dig hundreds of vast tunnels in

Burma between 2003 and 2006, in an operation codenamed "Tortoise Shells." The purpose of the tunnels, which were built outside the new Burmese capital of Nay Pyi Taw, remains unknown.

It all might seem like thin gruel for accusing the two countries of embarking on a nuclear weapons program, no matter how obliquely Clinton leveled the charge. And there is very little chance that Burma is anywhere near having the bomb. But if these tiny clues add up to nuclear ambitions, there is indeed cause for alarm -- not least because the world is simply not well-organized to contain nuclear weapons. The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty provides no punishment for signatories who are caught, and U.N. resolutions do not carry sufficient force to deter would-be proliferators. Iran is Exhibit A for the failure of the NPT and U.N. sanctions. The International Atomic Energy Agency? It's hardly equipped to deal with smuggling activities and procurement networks. Smuggling by Pakistan's rogue scientist, Abdul Qadeer Khan, eluded the IAEA for nearly three decades, during which time he helped his own country, North Korea, Iran, and Libya all obtain nuclear material.

So given the gaps in the international system, cooperation among key countries, particularly nuclear-weapons states, is essential for deterring nuclear aspirants. In this case, the United States and China are the lucky ones who will have to sort out how to keep North Korea from giving Burma nukes.

Fortunately, no country has more leverage with North Korea than China, which supplies much of the food and oil that keep the regime in Pyongyang afloat. So far, China has been reluctant to exercise its influence because Beijing fears that destabilizing North Korea will send a massive wave of refugees streaming across the border. But Clinton will try to persuade China that the time for diplomatic timidity is over. Kim Jong I II, the ailing North Korean dictator, needs to understand that helping Burma's military junta obtain nuclear weapons technology is a step too far. The two countries should share intelligence between them and with the IAEA. Tough sanctions and interdiction should be on the table to punish and isolate the transgressors.

There is reason to be hopeful that early efforts can do the trick. Past attempts to stop proliferation have been successful when the United States and others have acted on the first intelligence warnings about nuclear aspirations in Taiwan, South Korea and Ukraine. "None of these countries completed the programs it began; all were quietly nipped in the bud," Henry Sokolski, executive director of the Nonproliferation Policy Education Center and a former Pentagon counter-proliferation official, wrote in 2004 in *The*

Weekly Standard. Quiet U.S. diplomacy and threats of exposure helped prevent those threats from ever materializing.

For the Obama administration, early success with Burma would have another silver lining, on top of keeping Burma nuke-free: The effort could serve as an example for what might happen to Iran should it fail to turn back from its own nuclear ambitions. And while a nuclear weapon may be merely a mirage in Burma, it is a tangible possibility for Iran. That makes the test case all the more urgent.

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