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## Nuclear Rangoon

by Doug Bandow

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For years the West has treated Burma as primarily a humanitarian crisis. Now the issue is complicated by evidence that the ruling junta is interested in nuclear energy, and perhaps even in nuclear weapons. Still, the idea of an atomic arsenal in Rangoon is both distant and far-fetched. The more immediate challenge for Washington is dealing with one of the most repressive regimes ruling over one of the poorest peoples. The United States should promote more democratic governance and increased international engagement, which ultimately would reduce any incentive for Burma, also known as Myanmar, to consider atomic options.

Burma has suffered under military rule for five decades. The junta foolishly held an election in 1990, which was won overwhelmingly by Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy. The regime voided the poll and arrested numerous democracy activists. The so-called State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) has brutally suppressed human rights ever since. Suu Kyi, a Nobel Prize Laureate, has spent decades under house arrest. The SPDC now is preparing to hold elections organized to ensure permanent military control.

Promised autonomy by the British, ethnic groups like the Karen, Karenni, Chin, Shan, Kachin, and Wa long have battled the central government. Fighting in the nation's east has killed and injured tens of thousands, forced hundreds of thousand to flee over the border into Thailand, and displaced millions more within Burma.

In recent years the regime has reached cease-fire agreements with several groups, but basic political issues remain unresolved and tensions have been rising. The government is pressing groups to disarm and disband, without offering any political protections. Karen National Union General Secretary Zipporah Sein warns that there is the "greatest possibility of renewed conflict." The Burmese army and ethnic forces are preparing for renewed hostilities.

In 2008 Cyclone Nargis ravaged Burma, killing an estimated 140,000 people and leaving more than three million homeless. The country remains desperately poor, with a per capita GDP estimated to run no more than \$1,200. Yet this tragically misgoverned and impoverished nation has been accused of developing nuclear weapons.

Last year the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported: "Rumors have swirled around refugee circles outside Burma about secret military

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installations, tunnels dug into the mountains to hide nuclear facilities, the establishment of a 'nuclear battalion' in the army and work done by foreign scientists."

Defectors cite plans to construct nuclear bombs. Last year Secretary of State Hillary Clinton voiced concern over possible nuclear cooperation between North Korea and Burma.

Discerning the SPDC's capabilities and intentions is not easy. After all, the fanciful claims of Ahmed Chalabi's famed defector, "Curveball," helped justify the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Author Catherine Collins acknowledges that "the evidence of malfeasance so far is slight" but worries that similar whispers of Israeli nuclear activity in the 1950s turned out to be accurate.

In fact, Burmese interest in nuclear power runs back decades. That does not, however, mean the regime has an interest in developing nuclear weapons.

Burma is a most unlikely nuclear weapons state. It has only about half of North Korea's per capita GDP. Lack of funds is thought to have held up planned Russian construction of a nuclear research reactor—which would operate under international safeguards.

The regime must spend heavily on the army to suppress domestic protest and ethnic resistance, purposes for which atomic weapons would be useless. And the regime faces no serious outside threats.

What of paranoia and prestige? Author Bertil Lintner contends: "There is no doubt that the Burmese generals would like to have a bomb so that they could challenge the Americans and the rest of the world." Perhaps, though just being thought to have the possibility of making one might have some deterrent value. And Andrew Selth of the Griffith Asia Institute points to "a siege mentality among Burma's leaders. Even now, they fear intervention by the United States and its allies—possibly even an invasion—to restore democracy to Burma." However, he believes that at most "a few Burmese generals envy North Korea's apparent ability to use its nuclear weapons capabilities to fend off its enemies and win concessions from the international community."

In fact, the best evidence is against a nuclear weapons program. The Irrawaddy News Magazine cites understandable suspicions, but opines: "It is admittedly premature to conclude that Burma intends to undertake the complicated and perilous process of reprocessing uranium to get weapons-grade plutonium."

A recent report from the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) concluded that Burma:

**has no known capabilities that would lend themselves to a nuclear weapons program, apart from limited uranium deposits and some personnel who have received nuclear training overseas. If it is built, a 10 MWt research reactor and associated training from Russia could provide the basis for an eventual civilian nuclear power program, but few of the skills required for such a program are readily transferable to nuclear weapons development. Specialized reprocessing or enrichment facilities would be necessary to produce weapons-usable fissile material, and any attempt to divert plutonium from the reactor is likely to be detected by IAEA inspectors.**

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Are there secret facilities? Noted a January study from the Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS) in Washington, D.C.: the “sheer number of alleged secret sites posited by these defectors by itself raises doubts about their claims.” North Korea has assisted the SPDC in building tunnels near its new capital of Naypyidaw, but the little available intelligence suggests that they have non-nuclear purposes. Concluded the ISIS: “Despite the public reports to the contrary, the military junta does not appear to be close to establishing a significant nuclear capability. Information suggesting the construction of major nuclear facilities appears unreliable or inconclusive.”

In past years the Singapore government said the possibility was “unlikely” and the British government found no evidence of uranium reprocessing or enrichment. Washington consistently has excluded Burma when discussing nonproliferation issues.

America and other states still have reasons to be watchful and wary. There is no crisis, however. Noted the ISIS: “Because Burma’s known program is so small, the United States and its allies have an opportunity to both engage and pressure the military regime in a manner that would make it extremely difficult for Burma to acquire a nuclear weapons capability, let alone nuclear weapons.”

Unfortunately, the West’s ability to influence the SPDC in any regard is quite limited. The regime places its survival above all other objectives, while the U.S. and EU already apply economic sanctions against Burma. Most of Burma’s neighbors invest in and trade with the regime. Russia and China have blocked UN sanctions; the latter also has helped arm the junta. Regime change obviously is desirable for the people of Burma as well as Western governments, but if the junta believes that it faces a military threat—one reason it apparently rejected American cyclone aid sent via U.S. warships—it is likely to be less willing to consider political reform and more willing to pursue a nuclear weapons program. Thus, Washington should seek to reduce the junta’s fears.

Andrew Selth makes a reasonable argument that the “aggressive rhetoric, open support for opposition figures, funding for expatriate groups and military interventions in other undemocratic countries have all encouraged the belief among Burma’s leaders that the America and its allies are bent on forcible regime change.” The United States should continue to press for improved human rights, but should demonstrate by word and deed that there are no plans to take military action against Burma. In fact, Selth believes that “the SPDC’s fears of an invasion seem to have diminished in recent years.”

At the same time, America, the EU, Canada, and Australia should together offer to relax trade and diplomatic sanctions if the regime takes steps which genuinely open the political system and reduce ethnic conflict. At the same time, the Western states should encourage India, Japan, South Korea, and the ASEAN states to apply coordinated diplomatic and economic pressure on the SPDC, backed by the threat of imposing targeted sanctions against junta leaders and business partners. The pain should be personalized against decision-makers rather than applied against the entire population. Washington should use the potential, however slim, of a Burmese nuclear program to encourage greater Indian and Russian involvement, in particular.

Both nations routinely resist intervention to promote human rights, but they might be more willing to press for political reform if doing so would reduce the likelihood of nuclear complications.

The United States should similarly engage China. American officials

should make the argument that Beijing, too, is harmed by instability in Burma, especially if the latter becomes a nuclear state. China recently was angered by a Burmese military offensive which pushed refugees across its border. Surely Beijing does not want another isolated, unpredictable nuclear weapons state as a neighbor.

Moreover, promoting political change in Burma would enhance China's international reputation. Washington also should pledge—a promise worth repeating for North Korea—that that United States would not take military advantage of any Burmese liberalization. There would be no American bases, naval deployments, or training missions irrespective of the government.

Burma might not respond positively. Yet in the months after Cyclone Nargis the International Crisis Group reported that “it is possible to work with the military regime on humanitarian issues.” Frank Smithuis of Doctors Without Borders similarly said that “the military at times has actually been quite helpful to us.”

Burma is one of the world's greatest international tragedies. Nuclear weapons would turn it into one of the greatest international challenges. Unfortunately, current U.S. policy is doing nothing to help the Burmese people. It is time to try a different approach in an attempt to simultaneously aid political liberalization and end talk of a Burmese Bomb.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. A former special assistant to President Reagan, he also is the Robert A. Taft Fellow at the American Conservative Defense Alliance and the author of several books, including *Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire* (Xulon).

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