

**Pariah Partners in Arms**

**Andrew Seth**

Bilateral relations between Burma and North Korea were severed in 1983, after Pyongyang sent agents to Rangoon to conduct a terrorist attack against a visiting South Korean presidential delegation. Diplomatic ties have still not been restored. Over the past few years, however, these two economically stricken but highly militarized pariah states seem to have found some common ground.

Depending on how it develops, this relationship could extend beyond mutual support to have wider strategic implications. Reports that the Rangoon regime has sought to acquire strategic weapon systems like submarines and ballistic missiles from Pyongyang have aroused concern in regional capitals and in Washington. There have even been suggestions that North Korea is secretly helping Burma to build a nuclear reactor, raising the spectre of a future atomic weapons program that could be used by Rangoon as a bargaining chip against the United States.

**Conventional Arms**

Burma's leaders have not forgotten the 1983 attack but, faced with continuing arms embargoes by their traditional suppliers, and the perceived need to acquire even more weapons for the armed forces, or Tatmadaw, Rangoon cannot be too discriminating. North Korea offers an attractive alternative source of arms and military equipment. Pyongyang feels no qualms about defying the international community and selling arms to a regime like the State Peace and Development Council, or SPDC. The items in its inventory are comparatively cheap, and North Korean arms tend to be based on tried and tested Russian and Chinese designs. As such, they are of a similar pattern to weapon systems already in the Tatmadaw's order of battle. They are often at the same level of technical sophistication, making them easier to maintain and operate. It is also possible that for strategic reasons the ruling junta wishes to diversify the source of its arms, even at the risk of upsetting its close ally, China.

Given the closed nature of the Rangoon and Pyongyang governments, and their shared obsession with secrecy about any issues connected with national security, details of such arms sales are difficult to obtain. However, it would appear that in 1990 Burma purchased 20 million rounds of 7.62mm AK-47 rifle ammunition from North Korea. This ammunition was probably destined for the United Wa State Army, which had just signed a ceasefire agreement with the Rangoon regime. Also, in mid-1998, the junta is believed to have purchased about sixteen 130mm M-46 field guns from North Korea. The frequent visits of North Korean freighters to Rangoon in recent years, and the secrecy surrounding their cargoes, have led to speculation that other deliveries of arms and military equipment have occurred. These suspicions have been strengthened by reports of North Korean technical experts visiting Burmese military bases.

In July 2003 it was reported that about 20 North Korean technicians had been seen at the Tatmadaw's main naval facility at Monkey Point in Rangoon. They were believed to be helping

the Burma Navy to equip some of its vessels with surface-to-surface missiles, or SSM. Burma currently has six Houxin guided missile patrol boats, acquired from China in the 1990s. Each vessel is armed with four C-801 anti-ship cruise missiles. It has been speculated that similar SSMs would be mounted on the three new corvettes that have been built at Rangoon's Sinmalaik shipyard, and recently commissioned. It is more likely, however, that the North Koreans were installing SSMs of some kind on the navy's four new Myanmar class coastal patrol boats. It has long been suspected that they would be fitted with missiles to give them a greater offensive capability.

The first of these arms deals appears to have been arranged through Thai, Singaporean or possibly even Chinese intermediaries. The delivery of the 130mm field guns, however, followed an unofficial visit to North Korea by the Burma Army's Director of Procurement. A Burmese government delegation made another secret trip to North Korea in late 2000. This was followed in turn by the visit to Rangoon in June 2001 of a high-ranking North Korean delegation, led by Vice Foreign Minister Pak Gil-yon. This visit, which preceded the arrival of North Korean technical experts at the Monkey Point naval facility, was reportedly to discuss cooperation in the defense industrial field. The changing nature of these contacts clearly reflects the rapidly improving ties between Rangoon and Pyongyang.

The arrangements made for the sales of both the AK-47 ammunition and the 130mm field guns appears to have included a strong element of barter trade. This is also likely to be the case with any SSM sale. Burma was, and remains, short of foreign exchange, but produces rice and other primary products for export. For its part, North Korea has a massive arms industry, and is happy to sell weapons to whichever country wants them. During the mid-1990s, Pyongyang was facing a widespread famine and even now malnutrition remains a major problem. The way was thus open for the Rangoon regime to pay for its North Korean weapons purchases with rice, timber and marine products. There have even been suggestions that Rangoon has provided Pyongyang with narcotics in return for arms. Whether or not this is true, it would appear that barter arrangements have not been sufficient to meet Rangoon's wish for more sophisticated, and expensive, weapon systems.

## **Strategic Weapons**

The Tatmadaw has been interested for some time in acquiring a submarine, and has sent a number of Burma Navy officers to Pakistan to undertake "submarine training." In early 2002 the junta reportedly opened discussions with Pyongyang on the purchase of one or two submarines. Designs considered included the Yugo class midget submarine and the Sang-O class mini submarine. Rangoon ultimately opted to purchase one Sang-O class boat, but was forced to abandon the deal in late 2002. It appears that the cost of the submarine, and perhaps belated recognition of the technical difficulties of keeping it operational, scuppered the project.

The junta is believed also to want short-range ballistic missiles, or SRBMs. In the late 1990s, there were rumours circulating among the diplomatic community in Rangoon that China had agreed to sell Burma some M-11 SRBMs, similar to those which had earlier been provided to Pakistan. More recently, there have been unconfirmed reports that Rangoon is interested in acquiring a number of Hwasong (Scud-type) SRBMs from North Korea. A secret meeting to

discuss such a deal was reportedly held in Rangoon in August 2003, while another was supposedly held in Phuket, Thailand, in October that year. The latest variants of this missile are capable of ranges of up to 500 km with a 770 kg conventional warhead.

The submarine sale seems to have been shelved for the time being and, even if a missile deal has already been struck, any delivery of SRBMs is likely to be some years away. They remain a worrying prospect, but of even greater concern to strategic analysts is the possibility that the junta may have drawn the same conclusions from the 2003 Iraq War as Pyongyang appears to have done, and is now seeking to acquire a nuclear weapon to use as a bargaining chip against the US and its allies.

## **Nuclear?**

In November 2003 the *Far Eastern Economic Review* suggested that Pyongyang had taken over from Moscow as the source of Burma's nuclear technology. North Korean technicians were reportedly seen unloading large crates and heavy construction equipment from trains at Myothit, "the closest station to the central Burmese town of Natmawk, near where the junta hopes to build a nuclear research reactor." In addition, North Korean civil aircraft have reportedly been seen landing at military airfields in the area. The implication of the article was that Pyongyang was providing equipment and materials to build a nuclear reactor. These developments coincided with the arrival in Rangoon of representatives of the Daesong Economic Group, a sub-division of Bureau 39, which is responsible for a range of clandestine activities on behalf of the North Korean leadership. The small research reactor Burma hoped to get from Russia was said to be unsuited for the manufacture of fissile material, but Pyongyang is able to offer Burma other options, and has a record of proliferating nuclear technologies.

In a separate report, it was stated that 80 Burmese military personnel had departed for North Korea in November 2003 to study "nuclear and atomic energy technology." If true, this story would appear to confirm Pyongyang's readiness to share its nuclear expertise with Burma. Yet the Tatmadaw has taken delivery of artillery pieces, and probably acquired other conventional weapons from North Korea, including SSMs. Some training in North Korea in their maintenance and use would be a logical part of any arms deal. It can also be assumed that any SRBM sale to Burma would be accompanied by training programs in North Korea. It does not automatically follow that all members of the Tatmadaw leaving for Pyongyang are going there to study nuclear technologies-peaceful or otherwise.

The junta has firmly denied that it has any plans to acquire missiles (presumably SRBMs) or weapons of mass destruction. Without a trace of irony, a regime spokesman has asked, "Why would Burma want to develop WMDs (weapons of mass destruction) when the country needs all her strength and resources in pursuing a peaceful, stable and smooth transition to a multiparty democracy and an open-market economy?"

The nuclear reactor, which is still one of the regime's priority projects, was said to be for "peaceful research purposes." The spokesman further stated that Burma had no ambition to acquire nuclear weapons and firmly rejected the idea that it would ever threaten any of its neighbors. Predictably, the international reaction to this statement has been mixed.

The thought of Burma seeking to acquire a nuclear weapon is the stuff of nightmares in the Asia-Pacific region, and in capitals like Washington. Given Rangoon's strong record on international disarmament initiatives, however, the potential repercussions of such a dramatic policy change, plus the massive costs and enormous practical difficulties involved, it must still be considered highly unlikely. Nevertheless, it is a scenario that is made more credible by Rangoon's continuing fears of external intervention, its growing defense relationship with Pyongyang, their shared political isolation and the readiness of both pariah regimes to do almost anything to survive.

**Courtesy: *The Irrawaddy*, March 2004, Vol. 12 No.3, Chiang Mai, Thailand**