

A China-North Korea-Myanmar “Axis” in the making?

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The suspected North Korea-Myanmar nuclear links are a potential destabilizing factor in India’s immediate neighbourhood. Even as the international community is battling to find ways and means to get Pyongyang back to the negotiating table, the Six-Party Talks from which it walked out in April 2009, a leaked UN report has claimed that North Korea is defying UN sanctions and is engaged in exporting nuclear and missile technology to such countries as Iran, Syria and Myanmar.¹ If Myanmar’s nuclear weapons quest is indeed true, the immediate concern for India is finding another nuclear state along its eastern border, which will drastically alter the security situation in the region.

The UN report, which was prepared by a panel of experts that monitors sanctions against North Korea after it conducted the nuclear weapons test in 2006 and again in 2009, accused Pyongyang of using shell companies and overseas criminal networks to export the technology. The 47-page report that was leaked in New York in late May 2010 listed North Korea’s sanctions violations, including four cases of arms exports. The panel accused Pyongyang of using “a number of masking techniques.” Pyongyang was found to be “falsely labelling the contents of shipping and giving inaccurate information about their origin and destination.” As an impoverished economy desperate to earn some foreign exchange, Pyongyang is suspected of exporting “nuclear and missile technology with the aid of front companies, middlemen and other ruses.”

Earlier, during a visit to the Thai resort island of Phuket in July 2009 for the regional security meeting, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had expressed concerns about the growing military cooperation between North Korea and Myanmar and the possibility of nuclear links between the two.

As in the case with North Korea, some military officers in Myanmar have defected to other countries and revealed startling details about the military junta's nuclear weapons development programmes. However, the junta is not yet appropriately positioned to launch such a programme due to lack of technology and resources, and therefore the programme remains primitive at the moment. Yet, the junta's intention seems to be clear and the ultimate goal seems to be to acquire nuclear weapons and make Myanmar a nuclear weapon state.

The report was commissioned by the dissident group Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) and was co-authored by Robert Kelly, a former senior nuclear inspector with the International Atomic Energy Agency. After reviewing the photographs and equipment in Myanmar, Kelly came to the conclusion that the equipment was "for chemical processes needed to make uranium compounds in various stages of processing, such as uranium hexafluoride for enrichment and bomb reduction vessels for uranium metal." However, Khin Maung Win, the deputy director of the Oslo-based DVB is of the opinion that the military junta is "still far from developing a nuclear weapon because they are using very primitive technology." This led to the cancellation of a planned visit by US Senator Jim Webb to Myanmar, who felt that the visit would be "unwise and potentially counter-productive."² Webb, the chairman of the US Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific, and a leading proponent of greater engagement with Myanmar, seemed to have been persuaded by the report's findings and felt that the time was inopportune to undertake the visit.

The main source of information for the report was Major Sai Thein Win, who defected from Myanmar, and whose evidence corroborated rumours already in circulation. Win, seen as an "army deserter" by Myanmar since February 2010, had a degree in power engineering from State Technical University in Moscow, and is believed to have smuggled out files and photographs of critical sites in Myanmar³ Kelly described Win "as Myanmar's version of Mordechai Vanunu, the Israeli nuclear technician who revealed details of the Jewish state's nuclear programme in 1986."⁴ The photographs provided by Win could as well have been faked since modern technology makes it possible. But since the pictures were consistent with other available information, the suspicion appears credible. However, the view that Myanmar's nuclear programme is "poorly planned, unrealistic" and that it is seeking "the highest and most difficult technologies, such as laser isotope separation, using machine-shop drawings of unprofessional quality and photo evidence of crude items" seems closer to the truth.

The reaction from the military junta was of denial. The ruling junta denounced the allegations as “baseless accusations that are politically motivated” and clarified that it had no intention of building an atomic bomb. It brushed aside the report expressing Western concern that Myanmar has nuclear cooperation with North Korea. The statement issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs accused the West of aiming “to undermine the political process as Myanmar is striving for democracy by holding general elections this year.”

Though Yangon severed ties with North Korea in 1983 following a failed assassination attempt by North Korean agents on former South Korean President Chun Doo-Hwan during the latter’s visit to Myanmar, their bilateral ties have warmed up in recent years. The junta has admitted to inking a deal with Russia to build a nuclear reactor for its civilian sector, though the reactor was never built because of insufficient resources. Myanmar’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs rejected the charge that the junta ignored UN Security Council sanctions resolutions by permitting a North Korean vessel to dock at a port in Myanmar in April 2010, clarifying that the ship was unloading and loading cargo unrelated to the targeted weapons activities. The ministry’s statement reminded the West that Myanmar is a member of the NPT and the Southeast Asia Nuclear-Weapons Free Zone Treaty and “has been actively participating in the United Nations Conference on Disarmament in Geneva as a founding member.”⁵

Myanmar which has been under military rule since 1962 has been accused of violating a UN Security Council ban on North Korean arms exports imposed in June 2009. When the US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell visited Myanmar in May 2010, he expressed concern about Myanmar’s links with North Korea with respect to an arms shipment.

As noted earlier, India has a legitimate reason to worry about the military junta’s nuclear plan. An axis of sorts seems to be emerging between China, North Korea and Myanmar, which is detrimental to India’s interests. The situation gets further complicated as Myanmar’s links with China gets further strengthened. Notwithstanding the economic bonhomie between India and China, there exists huge trust deficit between the two as China expands its strategic reach and builds up close ties with countries such as Pakistan and Myanmar.

As much as 87 per cent of the total investment in Myanmar has come from China.⁶ China’s investment in Myanmar is focused mainly on strategic projects such as in energy and natural resources. Chinese corporations are involved in 90 hydropower, mining and oil and gas projects across Myanmar. The Chinese aim seems to be procuring gas and oil for its landlocked southern Yunnan province.

“The pipeline is designed to open the Indian Ocean for fuel shipments and act as a means to circumvent the congested Straits of Malacca, through which over 70 per cent of China’s current oil and gas imports travel.⁷ A study undertaken by Lex Rieffel suggests that as far as Myanmar is concerned, its earnings from the growing energy sector will double in the next five years.

China’s real intentions can probably be measured from the fact that while the US imposed sanctions on the import of precious stones from Myanmar, China’s presence in that country’s gem mining and export industry soared. Like in the case of North Korea, Myanmar has emerged as one of China’s closest allies in recent years. Though China claims to be pursuing a policy of non-interference in the domestic affairs of both North Korea and Myanmar and does not tie politics to business, tacit Chinese endorsement of the policies pursued by Pyongyang and military junta in Myanmar has emboldened them to persist with policies that are detrimental for peace and stability in the region. The possible emergence of a China-North Korea-Myanmar ‘axis’ will be an unwelcome prospect for India.

Source: http://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/ACHinaNorthKoreaMyanmarAxisinthemaking_rpanda_170610