



**Myanmar-DPRK relations:
disarmament and nuclear
nonproliferation dimension**

By Aung Ko Min

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Abstract

With world attention focused on the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's nuclear ambitions, tests, and threats, there are questions about the foreign policy of Myanmar's new NLD-led government toward Pyongyang. Disagreements between the military and the NLD administration over sensitive issues, such as constitutional amendments, building a Federal Union, the peace process, and handling foreign relations, etc., are inevitable. However, it is critical that the NLD administration cooperate and coordinate with military elites because the military's role in political leadership cannot be neglected. An official statement condemning DPRK's January nuclear test was issued for the first time by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs under the former regime. This paper examines whether this indicates a changing relationship with the DPRK. It discusses challenges facing Myanmar in implementing United Nations Security Council Resolution 1540 (2004) and concludes that allegations about Myanmar's nuclear program are groundless.

Myanmar-DPRK relations: disarmament and nuclear nonproliferation dimension

by Aung Ko Min*

After the Aung San Suu Kyi-led National League for Democracy (NLD) won the 2015 parliamentary elections, Myanmar's future is promising. Its peaceful and orderly transition has been applauded by the international community. Although allegations about and criticisms of Myanmar's nuclear ambitions have been withdrawn after Myanmar made progress in nonproliferation efforts, there is concern about the new leadership's foreign policy toward Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). This is a challenging issue for policy-makers in Myanmar, and has been under international scrutiny and suspicion for a long time. As Aung San Suu Kyi discharges her duties as state counsellor and foreign minister in the government, it is hoped that she will reform Myanmar's foreign policy toward the DPRK in accordance with UNSC resolutions and international norms. Among the priorities and challenges the new government faces, clearing up Myanmar's relations with the DPRK is vital for improving relations with Western countries and lifting the remaining sanctions. However, reforming Myanmar's DPRK policy might lead to heated discussions at the powerful National Defense and Security Council, where the military has a majority. Therefore, it is of critical importance for the NLD leadership to cooperate and coordinate with military elites to produce win-win situations. This paper analyzes and predicts the NLD government's policy direction which is to be formulated within the current constitutional arrangement. This paper also examines Myanmar's nuclear ambitions and the alleged DPRK's involvement. It highlights Myanmar's efforts to meet its international nuclear nonproliferation and disarmament commitments.

The political role of the military in Myanmar

Myanmar's military has played a significant role in national politics for decades. It has always been assumed that national security is a top priority in its decision-making process in both internal and external affairs. Since the military coup in 1962, the Myanmar Armed Forces (or Tatmadaw) has dominated politics and manipulated state affairs. During the peak of the Cold War, the Ne Win government introduced a unique political ideology, the 'Burmese Way to Socialism,' through which he directed the country to do things without foreign involvement and assistance.¹ He positioned the military as the protector of state security and the backbone of national strength. A number of defense and military equipment factories were built across the country during the 1980s and 1990s.² However, the 'Burmese Way to Socialism' failed to achieve

*The views expressed in this paper are the views of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the institutions he is associated with.

¹International Crisis Group. 2001. 'Myanmar: The Military Regime's View of the World.' As of Dec. 8, 2015: <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/asia/south-east-asia/burma-myanmar/Myanmar%20The%20Military%20Regimes%20View%20of%20the%20World.ashx>

² Selth, Andrew. 2000. *Burma's Secret Military Partners*. The Australian National University: Strategic and Defence Studies Centre Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies. Papers on Strategy and Defence No. 36, p-1-5.

socioeconomic development due to mismanagement. The Socialist government of Ne Win was replaced by another military regime in 1988, the State Law and Order Restoration Council, later renamed the State Peace and Development Council. Throughout all these changes, military involvement in national politics continued with military men in military uniform.

Myanmar's military has sought to build a united country and overcome armed struggles that have lasted for over six decades. Myanmar faces a number of traditional and nontraditional security threats. Successive Myanmar military leaders have always considered hard security issues, such as territorial integrity, domestic stability, and national unity as their top priorities, and they are fully aware of internal and external security threats that challenge the existence of the state.³ At the same time, a perception of external intervention in the country's affairs exists as China has maintained indirect support for ethnic armed groups on its border with Myanmar. In addition, after the 1988 nationwide democratic uprisings, Western governments imposed multiple sanctions, including arms embargoes on Myanmar. They called for regime change after the repression of civilian and student protestors following the government's failure to transfer power after the NLD's victory in the 1990 elections. Hence, the military regime's sense of insecurity grew, and it tried to secure its survival by transforming itself into the most powerful institution in the country.

After 1989, the Myanmar Armed Forces systematically implemented expansion and modernization plans. These efforts facilitated the conduct of counter-insurgency operations in risky areas. The SLORC's ambition of modernizing the military increased the defense budget and expanded the military facilities procurement network. However, due to arms embargoes and economic sanctions by the United States and the European Union, many foreign joint ventures for manufacturing and trading conventional weapons were cancelled.⁴ As a result, Myanmar got close to China, which has become its major arms supplier in a short time and diplomatic partner.⁵ However, as Myanmar military leaders grew alarmed by China's influence in the country's domestic affairs, they tried to diversify economic and defense partnerships with other countries that were usually out of favor with the US and its allies. In this way, Russia became another weapons exporter to Myanmar and helped expand and modernize its defense industry. At the same time, the military leadership learned that they could not solely rely on China and Russia as their main sources of weapons in the long-run. As a result they pursued more options for self-preservation and ambitious military plans. At this point, there were international allegations about and criticisms of Myanmar's relations with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK).

³ International Crisis Group. 2001. 'Myanmar: The Military Regime's View of the World.'

⁴ Htut, Aung Lin. 2010. 'The Burma-North Korea Axis.' *The New York Times*, June 19. As of Dec. 8, 2015: http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/19/opinion/19iht-edaung.html?_r=0

⁵ Kudo, Toshihiro. 2006. *Myanmar's Economic Relations with China: Can China Support the Myanmar Economy?* Institute of Developing Economies. As of Dec. 23, 2015: <http://www.ide.go.jp/English/Publish/Download/Dp/pdf/066.pdf>

Historical background of Myanmar-DPRK relations

Myanmar-DPRK relations has had its ups and downs. The relationship between the two countries dates back to the 1950s when Myanmar established good working relations with the two Koreas after the Korean War ended. At first, Myanmar did not recognize the *de jure* segregation of the two Koreas; it commenced consular relations with North Korea on May 15, 1961.⁶ Although Myanmar had been pursuing socialist policies with a centrally-planned economy, ties between the two countries became formal and distant in the 1970s. Bilateral relations warmed again as Myanmar and the DPRK established diplomatic relations on May 16 1975. In 1977, Ne Win visited Pyongyang as chairman of the Burma Socialist Program Party, and the DPRK became the first communist-ruled country to establish diplomatic relations with Socialist Burma.

Bilateral relations soon soured, however. In October 1983, South Korean President Chun Doo-hwan made trips to nonaligned nations to establish ties. On October 9, he arrived in Myanmar, one of the founding nations of the nonaligned movement, accompanied by a large South Korean delegation. The morning after his arrival in Yangon, he headed to the Martyrs' Mausoleum to lay a wreath. Minutes before his arrival, a powerful bomb exploded and killed 21 people, 18 of whom were visiting South Korean officials, four of them government ministers.⁷ As soon as the Myanmar government identified Pyongyang as being behind the explosion, it ordered the DPRK embassy to close and all diplomats to leave the country within 48 hours on Nov. 4, 1983. All economic and commercial ties between the two countries were terminated.

In the following years, Pyongyang made several attempts to restore bilateral ties, but Yangon showed no interest. For over a decade, there were no exchanges or visits between Myanmar and the DPRK. When Myanmar was under severe international sanctions after suppression of the pro-democracy movement in 1988, Pyongyang seized the opportunity to renew ties with Myanmar. From 1989, Pyongyang instructed its diplomats to contact Myanmar diplomatic missions in China and Vietnam to discuss normalizing relations. In September 2005, the DPRK deputy foreign minister called on the Myanmar government to resume diplomatic relations during a meeting with Myanmar's foreign minister at the 60th United Nations General Assembly. Myanmar and the DPRK normalized diplomatic relations on April 26, 2007 during the visit of the DPRK deputy foreign minister to Myanmar.⁸

After ties were restored, the two countries made a series of reciprocal visits. In October 2008, Myanmar's Foreign Minister U Nyan Win visited Pyongyang, the highest-ranking government official to visit in 25 years.⁹ In November 2008, DPRK Deputy Foreign Minister Kim Young Il paid an official visit to Naypyitaw and met with then

⁶ Diplomatic archive, Policy papers, Political Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Myanmar.

⁷ Tonghyung, Kim. 2015. 'Painful memories of Rangoon.' As of Dec. 7, 2015:

<https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/common/printpreview.asp?categoryCode=135&newsIdx=143795>

⁸ Zaw, Aung. 2007. 'Burma to establish official ties to North Korea.' *The Irrawaddy*, Apr. 23. As of Nov. 25, 2015: http://www2.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=7043

⁹ *The Associated Press*. 2008. 'Burma FM makes first visit to North Korea in 25 years.' Oct. 27. As of Nov. 25, 2015: http://www2.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=14510

Secretary-1 of the SPDC, Lt-Gen Thiha Thura Tin Aung Myint Oo (later vice president). Relations underwent international scrutiny. When a secret military delegation from Myanmar to the DPRK was revealed, it was seen by international media as opening a new chapter in defense diplomacy between the two countries.

In November 2008, the then third-ranking man in the SPDC, Gen. Thura Shwe Man (former speaker of the Lower House), led a military delegation to Pyongyang to study the military assets of DPRK.¹⁰ A leaked 37-page report contained details of a Nov. 22-29 visit to the DPRK by 17 Myanmar military officials. The report states that the delegation visited an air base, a missile factory, and other defense industries near Pyongyang. It also includes research and suggestions compiled by Myanmar military experts. During the visit, Gen. Thura Shwe Man signed an MoU on modernizing the Myanmar military and increasing its capabilities through cooperation with the DPRK military.

Myanmar's nuclear dilemma

Myanmar has a long-standing interest in and support for the peaceful use of nuclear energy. In 1955, the country established an Atomic Energy Centre under the Union of Burma Applied Research Institute (UBARI).¹¹ It joined the IAEA in 1957, and participated in a number of IAEA technical cooperation projects in isotope applications for agriculture in the 1960s.¹² In 1997, the government established the Department of Atomic Energy (DAE) under the Ministry of Science and Technology¹³ and introduced an Atomic Energy Law on June 8, 1998.¹⁴

In 2000, Myanmar asked the Russian government to help it build a nuclear research center. In 2001, Russia's Atomstroy export corporation was chosen as lead company for the project and signed a contract with Myanmar to design the center. In July 2001, Russia and Myanmar initiated an agreement on cooperation to build a nuclear research center in Myanmar.¹⁵ However, Myanmar government's civil nuclear program stalled for a number of reasons. One reason was IAEA disapproval of the project. After an IAEA team visited Myanmar, they expressed doubts about Myanmar's capability and safety standards to operate a nuclear research reactor.¹⁶ Another reason was the government's budget for the project. Myanmar's government asked Russia to issue a loan for the project, but Moscow refused.

¹⁰Irrawaddy News Blog. 2010. As of Dec. 8, 2015: http://www2.irrawaddy.org/Burma_NKorea_report.pdf and http://www2.irrawaddy.org/Burma_NKorea_Photos.pdf

¹¹Nuclear Threat Initiative. 2015. As of Dec. 8, 2015: <http://www.nti.org/country-profiles/myanmar/>

¹²Nuclear Threat Initiative

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴Kapoor, [Rajesh](#). 2010. *Judging Myanmar's Nuclear Ambitions and Likely Implications*. Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses. As of Dec. 8, 2015:

http://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/JudgingMyanmarsNuclearAmbitionandLikelyImplicationsrkapoor_220710

¹⁵Shuster, Simon. 2011. 'Why Are Burmese Scientists Studying Missile Technology in Moscow?' *Times*. As of Dec. 8, 2015: <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2101404,00.html>

¹⁶Kapoor, Rajesh. 2010. *Judging Myanmar's Nuclear Ambitions and Likely Implications*.

International allegations and the government's response

After that project failed to get off the ground, there were international allegations that Myanmar turned to the DPRK for assistance. Analysts suggested that Pyongyang could trade Myanmar's primary products, such as rice and cotton for DPRK arms, expertise, and technology.¹⁷ Accusations spread that the DPRK had taken over from Russia as the source of Myanmar's nuclear energy program. International media reported that DPRK technicians arrived in Naypyitaw and assisted the Myanmar military in constructing military facilities.¹⁸ They also referred to shipments from the DPRK to Myanmar in 2009 and again in 2011 suspected to be carrying cargoes that violated UN sanctions.

In May 2010, the Democratic Voice of Burma, then an exile-run media agency based in Oslo, announced that Myanmar was suspected of nuclear activities.¹⁹ The agency's information was based mostly on the defection of a former major in the Myanmar army, Sai Thein Win. He had documents and photographs with him but they were not enough to prove his claim. In fact, DPRK involvement in Myanmar's alleged nuclear program is based on hearsay and originated from mostly biased sources. After scrutinizing these documents, international arms experts concluded that materials and components seen in pictures could be used for civilian sectors. Expert such as David Albright, president of the Institute for Science and International Security, sent a letter to US Sen. Jim Webb in which he said, "I believe that the publication of the recent DVB reports and its many unconfirmed allegations should not cause the suspension of outreach to the Myanmar government."²⁰ International analysts confirmed that Sai Thein Win's information was second-hand and required more verification.²¹ While data and information suggests that Myanmar is likely to pursue a nuclear energy program in the long-run to meet its electricity and energy needs, the so-called secret nuclear activities do not exist.²²

Marco Marzo, then a director in the IAEA's Department of Safeguards, sent a letter to the ambassador and resident representative of Myanmar to the IAEA asking for information about nuclear activities identified in a documentary coproduced by AI

¹⁷Selth, Andrew. 2009. *Burma and North Korea: Smoke or Fire?* Australian Strategic Policy Institute. Policy Analysis. As of Dec. 8, 2015: https://www.aspi.org.au/publications/burma-and-north-korea-smoke-or-fire-by-andrew-selth/Policy_Analysis47.pdf

¹⁸Panda, Ankit. 2013. 'Can Myanmar and North Korea Say Goodbye?' *The Diplomat*. Nov. 23. As of Dec. 8, 2015: <http://thediplomat.com/2013/11/can-myanmar-and-north-korea-say-goodbye/>

¹⁹ Kelly, Robert. 2010. 'Expert says Burma 'planning nuclear bomb,' *Democratic Voice of Burma*, June 4. As of Dec. 23, 2015: <http://www.dvb.no/news/expert-says-burma-%E2%80%98planning-nuclear-bomb%E2%80%99/9527>

²⁰ Albright, David. 2010. *Letter to Senator Webb*. June, 29. As of Jan. 23, 2016: http://isis-online.org/uploads/isis-reports/documents/Letter_to_Senator_Webb.pdf

²¹ Albright, David & Christina Walrond. 2011. *Technical Note: Revisiting Bomb Reactors in Burma and an Alleged Burmese Nuclear Weapons Program*. Institute for Science and International Security. As of May. 16, 2016: http://www.isis-online.org/uploads/isis-reports/documents/Burma_Analysis_Bomb_Reactors_11April2011.pdf

²²Khlopkov, Anton & Dmitry Konukhov. 2011. *Russia, Myanmar and Nuclear Technologies*, Center for Energy and Security Studies. As of May 16, 2016: <http://ceness-russia.org/data/doc/MyanmarENG.pdf>

Jazeera and the Democratic Voice of Burma.²³ The ambassador's reply noted that the allegations made by the international media against Myanmar regarding the nuclear program are "groundless and unfounded; that no activity related to uranium conversion, enrichment, reactor construction or operation has been carried out in the past, is ongoing or is planned for the future in Myanmar,"²⁴ and it said that "Myanmar will notify the Agency if it plans to carry out any of the aforementioned nuclear activities." In fact, the Myanmar government has never publicized a national plan for building a nuclear reactor or nuclear power plant. Even if Myanmar does have ambitions to start such a program, it will be for civilian purposes only and not for building a weapon.

Myanmar's nuclear nonproliferation measures

Myanmar does not possess any nuclear weapons and has consistently opposed their use for any reason. Myanmar was among the first countries to become a State Party to the 1963 Partial Test Ban Treaty. It has also signed the 1967 Outer Space Treaty and signed, but not yet ratified the 1972 Seabed Treaty. Myanmar became a non-nuclear weapon state party to the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) in 1992. In 1995, Myanmar entered into a safeguards agreement with the IAEA, as required under the NPT, and the same year signed the Treaty of the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone committing not to develop nuclear weapons. Myanmar has also signed the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) in November 1996, but has not yet ratified it.²⁵

Since former President Thein Sein took office in 2011, Myanmar has made significant developments in nuclear nonproliferation measures. After President Barack Obama's first visit in November 2012, Myanmar announced it would sign the Additional Protocol to the IAEA safeguards agreement. On Sept. 17, 2013, Myanmar signed the agreement, but has yet to ratify the instrument.²⁶ Myanmar has stated that it "will notify IAEA on its entry into force of the Additional Protocol when the preparedness reaches satisfactory levels."²⁷ The Additional Protocol would increase physical access by IAEA inspectors and improved administrative arrangements in Myanmar after ratification is accomplished. In the meantime, the decision to sign the Additional Protocol is evidence that Myanmar has full transparency in its nuclear-related activities and is dedicated to the peaceful use of nuclear energy in close cooperation with the IAEA.

²³'Myanmar's military ambitions.' June 2010. *Democratic Voice of Burma* and *Al Jazeera*. As of May 18, 2016. <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/general/2010/05/201053110470990951.html>

²⁴'As Regards Allegations against Myanmar on Nuclear Programme...' 2010. *New Light of Myanmar*. As of Dec. 23, 2015: <http://www.networkmyanmar.org/images/stories/PDF3/196newsn.pdf>

²⁵'Country Profiles: Myanmar, Republic of the Union of.' 2012. Preparatory Commission for the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty Organization. As of May 18, 2016. <https://www.ctbto.org/the-treaty/country-profiles/?country=118&cHash=37eddea4ecb8f1cd7023b6a614b26b6c>

²⁶Nonproliferation Treaty Initiative

²⁷Chansoria, Monika. 2014. *Myanmar's Quest for Nuclear Peace is incomplete without explaining Chemical Weapons Production*. Center for Land Warfare Studies. As of May 16, 2016. <http://www.claws.in/1237/myanmars-quest-for-nuclear-peace-is-incomplete-without-explaining-chemical-weapons-production-dr-monika-chansoria.html#sthash.SGkhCLRW.dpuf>

Although Myanmar is not a signatory to the 1925 Geneva Protocol, the country has signed the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) in 1993 and ratified it in July 2015.²⁸ Myanmar will fully implement the Treaty and eliminate persistent suspicions of chemical weapons stockpiles and their use against ethnic rebel groups. The country signed the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC) in 1972 and ratified it in December 2014.²⁹ It has also opened a representative office in Vienna in 2014 to improve engagement with international organizations there. Myanmar is now studying important international conventions, nonproliferation regimes, and controls such as the Convention on the Physical Protection of Nuclear Materials and will participate as a member.

On Jan. 13, 2016, Myanmar's Foreign Ministry issued a statement in which it expressed its deep concern about the hydrogen bomb test conducted by the DPRK on Jan. 6, 2016.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar expresses its deep concern on the hydrogen bomb test conducted by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea on January 6 2016. The test is in violation of the relevant United Nations Security Council Resolutions and undermines the international nonproliferation regime and increases tension in the Korean Peninsula. Myanmar attaches great importance to nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Also being a dedicated State Party of the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ) Treaty which aims to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons, Myanmar is working vigorously towards a world free of nuclear weapons. In this regard, Myanmar urges the Democratic People's Republic of Korea to comply with the United Nations Security resolutions.³⁰

This statement represents a significant juncture for relations between the two countries because the Myanmar government had never commented on Pyongyang's erratic behavior. Therefore, it can be said that the relationship between Myanmar and the DPRK has changed even before installation of the NLD government. These actions by the previous leadership reflect a commitment to follow international norms and regulations under UN Security Council Resolution 1540 (2004). This decision to issue a statement criticizing the DPRK's actions has the NDSC's approval. It is expected that more statements of this kind addressing DPRK's actions will be made under the NLD-led administration.

The first test came in a press conference during Secretary of State John Kerry's visit to Naypyitaw on May 22, 2016. When asked about Myanmar's nuclear ambitions and its cooperation with the DPRK, Suu Kyi first made light of the subject by noting that

²⁸ Nonproliferation Treaty Initiative

²⁹ Nonproliferation Treaty Initiative

³⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Republic of the Union of Myanmar. *Press Release*. 2016. As of Feb. 22, 2016: http://www.mofa.gov.mm/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Press-Release-of-MOFA_eng.pdf

her predecessors had not shared that information with her.³¹ More seriously, however, she insisted on Myanmar's determination to meet its international nuclear nonproliferation obligations. For his part, Kerry said that the US is "satisfied" with Myanmar's efforts to address the DPRK issue and both countries are "on the same page."³² In its 2011 report on global compliance with arms control, nonproliferation, and disarmament accords, the State Department said although they had concerns, they had not found any evidence that Myanmar "had engaged in activities prohibited by its NPT obligations or IAEA safeguards."³³

Current civil-military relationship and future

While Myanmar's future is promising, the new civilian leadership faces multiple challenges and priorities. Promoting national reconciliation, advancing the peace process, boosting economic expansion, managing FDI, lifting living standards, and most importantly, improving relations with the military are among the NLD's priorities. As foreign minister, maintaining balanced relations between major powers such as China and United States will be a challenge for Aung San Suu Kyi. China expects to maintain a friendly relationship with Myanmar under the new government. Shortly after the new government came to office, China's foreign minister paid an official visit to Myanmar to discuss China's interests, which are being frustrated locally in this resource-rich country. In the meantime, US relations with Myanmar warmed with further relaxing of economic sanctions on May 18, 2016,³⁴ yet some measures on trade and investment remain in place to push Myanmar's democratic transition forward and to thwart military relations with the DPRK.

Tensions with the military persist over constitutional rights in parliamentary debates. A civil-military relationship must be built in Myanmar that is based on mutual trust, understanding, cooperation, and patience. Although Aung San Suu Kyi is a key player in the new government, the army still has constitutionally-enshrined control over three powerful ministries. Therefore, for the time being, promoting Myanmar's international image under the leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi, which will be in line with international norms and values, should not conflict with the military's interests. In Myanmar's New Year speeches delivered by President Htin Kyaw and Aung San Suu Kyi, both stressed the urgency of national reconciliation and the importance of civil-military cooperation in Myanmar's way to democracy.³⁵

³¹US Department of State, 2016, *Joint Press Availability With Burmese Foreign Minister Daw Aung San Suu Kyi*, May 22, As of May. 23, 2016: <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2016/05/257583.htm>

³²US Department of State, 2016, *Joint Press Availability With Burmese Foreign Minister Daw Aung San Suu Kyi*

³³ US Department of State, 2011, *2011 Adherence to and Compliance with Arms Control, Nonproliferation, and Disarmament Agreements and Commitments*, August, As of May. 23, 2016: http://www.state.gov/t/avc/rls/rpt/170447.htm#4e_burma

³⁴US Department of the Treasury, *Burma Sanctions*, As of May 19, 2016: <https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Programs/pages/burma.aspx>

³⁵ Eleven Media Group. *New Year's wishes from Myanmar's leaders*. As of May 12, 2016: <http://www.elevenmyanmar.com/editorial/new-year%E2%80%99s-wishes-myanmars-leaders>

During the previous administration, there was a close partnership between President Thein Sein and Sr. Gen. Min Aung Hlaing, commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces, who recently extended his term for another five years. He usually appeared on the president's tours to regions and divisions, which meant that President Thein Sein's Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) enjoyed full support of the military. It encouraged cooperation between the party and the military over issues such as democratic reforms, peace process, domestic affairs, and international relations. So far, both sides repeatedly stress the need to work together. The relationship between the NLD government and the armed forces has been improving. On May 10, 2016, Myanmar's NLD-dominated parliament approved the Defense Ministry's proposal to sign an agreement with the Russian Federation on military cooperation.³⁶

The new civilian government should realize the role of the military cannot be neglected given Myanmar's traditional political history and its constitutional arrangements. The military will remain a crucial player in Myanmar's politics, at least for the foreseeable future. It will act like an autonomous political institution, and it seems as though the military will not relinquish the one-quarter of seats it holds in the national Parliament and in the state/regional parliaments anytime soon. Moreover, according to the current constitution, the 11-member National Defense and Security Council (NDSC) is the highest authority in Myanmar's national security policy-making. As union minister for foreign affairs, Aung San Suu Kyi has a seat at the NDSC. She can make important decisions, but, she cannot implement them without agreement from the military, which has six representatives at the table. The military is not ready for civilian oversight of its affairs and is likely to continue to set its own agenda until certain conditions are met. Therefore, when the NLD government tries to clear up Myanmar's relations with the DPRK to the international community, it is essential to reach a consensus and to build mutual trust between the military and the government.

Conclusion

As a member of the NPT and the IAEA, Myanmar will continue to build confidence and transparency with the international community to honor its nuclear nonproliferation commitments. Myanmar has much more to do, such as ratifying the IAEA Additional Protocol, implementing the Biological Weapons Convention and the Chemical Weapons Convention, concluding the Small Quantities Protocol, and formulating the Strategic Trade Control Law. However, Myanmar lacks expertise and legal framework in the context of formulation and implementation of global nuclear nonproliferation regulations and instruments. Thus, technical support, capacity building, training, and political encouragement are needed for Myanmar's government to execute its international nonproliferation obligations and procedures. The NLD-government will reinforce Myanmar's efforts on behalf of nuclear nonproliferation and disarmament and for peaceful uses of nuclear materials and facilities by enhancing greater compliance with

³⁶China Daily, *Myanmar parliament approves military cooperation with Russia*, As of May 19, 2016: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2016-05/11/content_25208766.htm

the UN and the IAEA. Myanmar is continuously improving cooperation with the United States and other countries on nuclear safety, security, and safeguards. The government will intensify its respect for UNSC resolutions, particularly with regard to relations with the DPRK.

International allegations about Myanmar's ambitious nuclear program are groundless. The country has been criticized because of the nature of previous military regimes. The government supports peaceful use of nuclear energy for civilian purposes, such as for medical, research and energy, and it opposes any type of proliferation. Myanmar has no aim to develop an atomic weapon, and technical and financial constraints mean it cannot afford to even dream of a costly nuclear program. Power sharing in practice is critically important for both the new administration and the military when they engage in constitutional reform and other important issues. Although the regime of former President Thein Sein made significant developments in nuclear nonproliferation measures, national policy and strategy regarding clarification of ties with the DPRK did not occur. Civilian interference in military affairs will be difficult in Myanmar as the Armed Forces are likely to continue to manage its own affairs as an autonomous institution. In the meantime, the world should be optimistic about Myanmar's efforts and developments to realize its goal of nuclear nonproliferation and peaceful use of nuclear energy.

About the author

Aung Ko Min is an assistant director from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and a resident Nonproliferation and Nuclear Security Fellow at Pacific Forum CSIS. He joined the Myanmar Institute of Strategic and International Studies in March 2015. After earning his Bachelor of Education (Yangon), Min worked as a translator before joining the current service in 2010. He studied International Relations at the Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand and received a Graduate Diploma in Arts in 2013. In 2014, he was selected to study for his Masters in International Relations at the same university and graduated in 2015. He is interested in international affairs and Myanmar's political developments. Currently, he is working on a series of research papers for the Myanmar ISIS and journal articles for Myanmar periodicals.