

Clouded alliance - North Korea and Myanmar's covert ties

Bertil Lintner

Key Points

- [North Korea](#) and [Myanmar](#) have a history of close ties and military co-operation, which has intensified since the countries renewed relations in 2007.
- A leaked report suggests [Myanmar](#) is looking to procure conventional weapons, equipment and training from Pyongyang, but reports of nuclear co-operation remain unconfirmed.
- While Myanmar has shown an interest in developing nuclear technology, the pursuit of a nuclear weapons capability is beyond the current financial and technological capacity of the regime.

The nature of military co-operation between [North Korea](#) and [Myanmar](#) has come under international scrutiny amid fears of nuclear proliferation activities. *Bertil Lintner* investigates the historical ties and extent of collaboration between the two pariah regimes.

Speculation about the nature of military co-operation between [North Korea](#) and [Myanmar](#) has abounded since the two Asian states re-established diplomatic relations in April 2007. Concerns were heightened in June 2009 when a North Korean freighter destined for [Myanmar](#) was suspected of carrying military cargo in violation of UN Security Council sanctions. Trailed by the United States Navy, the Kang Nam I eventually returned to [North Korea](#) rather than risk inspection. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton told reporters at the 22 July Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit that the US had "growing concerns about military co-operation between [North Korea](#) and [Myanmar](#), which we take very seriously", adding "the transfer of nuclear technology" was a concern.

Clinton's comments appear partially justified. Bilateral co-operation between the two countries has certainly increased since the 1990s, focusing on conventional military transfers. North Korean experts also appears to have been covertly assisting [Myanmar](#) in constructing an extensive tunnel network as emergency shelters for military personnel and equipment near the new capital, Naypyidaw, among other locations. However, allegations that Pyongyang is providing assistance to Myanmar's ruling junta in installing nuclear research reactors and uranium prospecting at various sites in the north of the country appear far-fetched. Analysis of the reports of nuclear assistance suggests that no substantial nuclear co-operation has occurred or is likely to for the foreseeable future, with satellite imagery over reported sites corroborating the analysis.

Historic ties

[Myanmar](#) and [North Korea](#) have a long history of close ties predating recent events by several decades. While Myanmar was ruled by a democratically elected government after independence from the British in 1948, relations with [North Korea](#) were formal and distant. However, when the [Myanmar](#) military seized power in 1962, the two countries became closer.

In 1966, the state-run Korean Central News Agency was permitted to employ a [Myanmar](#) citizen as its correspondent in Yangon (then known as Rangoon and the capital of the country), and in 1977 Myanmar's ruler, General Ne Win, paid an official visit to [North Korea](#). The ruling Korean Workers' Party (KWP) became the first communist party to establish fraternal links with the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP), which was Myanmar's only legally permitted political party at the time. In 1980, the BSPP even sent a delegation to attend the Sixth Congress of the KWP. According to Andrew Selth, author of Burma's North Korean gambit: challenge to regional security, [Myanmar](#) and [North Korea](#) both referred to their "common anti-imperialist and anti-colonial struggle". Although Myanmar still maintained diplomatic relations with North Korea's enemy [South Korea](#), Selth states: "Relations with Pyongyang tended to be warmer than those with Seoul."

However, relations changed dramatically on 9 October 1983, when North Korean agents detonated a powerful bomb in Yangon, killing 21 people - 18 of whom were visiting South Korean officials, including four government ministers. Following the attack, the [Myanmar](#) security authorities initiated a huge manhunt to capture the bombers. One of them, North Korean Major Zin Mo (also known as Jin Mo), was arrested after being spotted swimming across a creek in east Yangon. Two days later, two North Korean demolition specialists, Captain Kang Min-chul and Captain Kim Chi-o, were discovered hiding on a riverbank. Capt Kim was killed, but Capt Kang was taken into custody. On 4 November 1983, the [Myanmar](#) authorities announced [North Korea](#) was behind the explosion and ordered its embassy closed and all diplomats out of the country within 48 hours. All economic and commercial ties between the two countries were also terminated.

The trial of the two captured North Korean agents was swift, and on 10 December 1983 they were sentenced to death. While the badly injured Major Zin Mo was executed by hanging in Yangon's Insein prison on 6 April 1985, the death sentence against Capt Kang was never carried out. It is likely he was spared in exchange for co-operating with the investigation.

For over a decade, there appeared to be no exchanges of any kind between [Myanmar](#) and [North Korea](#). Yet, an apparent thaw in relations took place on 4 January 1996 when the [Myanmar](#) embassy in Bangkok officially invited North Korean chargé d'affaires Pang Song-hae to Myanmar's Independence Day celebrations in the Thai capital. The Japanese daily Yomiuri Shimbun published a news report on 14 January that year quoting North Korea's ambassador to [Thailand](#), Ri Do-sop, as saying that Myanmar-North Korean communications "have been going on for some time and the atmosphere was very friendly".

In fact, during his tenure in Bangkok in the early 1990s, Ri Do-sop was instructed by Pyongyang to contact U Tin Winn, Myanmar's ambassador to [Thailand](#), to negotiate the repatriation of Capt Kang Min-chul. While North Korea's motivations in pursuing the release of Capt Kang are unknown (particularly as he was seen as a traitor for co-operating with [Myanmar](#) in the 1983 Yangon bombing investigation), several meetings took place between the two ambassadors in Bangkok in 1993-94. Ultimately however, the negotiations failed to achieve a repatriation agreement and Capt Kang remains in prison.

Military co-operation

As informal relations between [North Korea](#) and [Myanmar](#) were re-established, [Myanmar](#) began to express an interest in North Korean-produced military hardware. The Myanmar military was already familiar with similar Chinese designs that it had procured, but the North Korean versions were cheaper and, unlike [China](#), [North Korea](#) was willing to accept barter deals, which suited the cash-strapped [Myanmar](#) government.

Regional intelligence sources have told Jane's that in late 1998, [Myanmar](#) took delivery of between 12 and 16 North Korean 130 mm M-46 (Type 59) field guns. This represented the first trade transaction between [North Korea](#) and [Myanmar](#) since 1983. Subsequently, the director of procurement of the Myanmar Armed Forces paid an unofficial visit to Pyongyang in June 1999, while a [Myanmar](#) government delegation made another secret visit to [North Korea](#) in November 2000 for talks with high-ranking officials of the Ministry of the People's Armed Forces.

This was followed by a visit to Yangon of a high-ranking North Korean delegation from 20 to 22 June 2001, led by vice-foreign minister Pak Gil-yeon. According to the Korea Times in 10 July 2001, the visit was "to discuss co-operation in the defence industry with Myanmar's Deputy Defence Minister Khin Maung Win". As a key figure in the Pyongyang hierarchy, Pak went on to become North Korea's ambassador to [Canada](#) in 2002, and on 13 May 2005 he met US special envoy Joseph DeTrani to discuss North Korea's return to six-party denuclearisation talks.

In early 2002, [Myanmar](#) expressed an interest in buying one or two small submarines from [North Korea](#), either the Yugo-class midget submarine or the Sang-o-class mini-submarine. As reported by Jane's on 11 June 2003, Yangon opted for one Sang-o-class submarine, but was forced to abandon the deal in late 2002. The cost of the submarine and a lack of expertise to operate it appeared to be the reason for the cancellation. Western military sources have told Jane's that [Myanmar](#) was still interested in acquiring a small submarine to patrol its southeastern coastal areas, where smugglers and insurgents are active. A future North Korea-Myanmar submarine deal is therefore a possibility.

On 10 July 2003, the Far Eastern Economic Review reported: "Between 15 and 20 North Korean technicians have been spotted at the Monkey Point naval base near Yangon and at a Ministry of Defence guest house in the northern suburb of the [then] capital." It is possible that North Korean technicians were helping the [Myanmar](#) navy equip selected vessels with surface-to-surface missiles. Monkey Point is the base for the [Myanmar](#) navy's six Houxin-class guided missile patrol boats, which were purchased from [China](#) in the mid-1990s. Each of them is armed with four Chinese-made C-801 Eagle Strike anti-ship cruise missiles. Another possibility is that North Korean technicians were installing surface-to-surface missiles on the [Myanmar](#) navy's Myanmar-class coastal patrol boats that were manufactured locally. Suspicions of further military collaboration continued in November 2006, when the 2,900-tonne North Korean cargo vessel MV Bong Hoafan (Bonghwasan) sought shelter from a storm and anchored in a [Myanmar](#) port. Although the [Myanmar](#) authorities declared that an on-board inspection had found no suspicious equipment, journalists and embassy staff in Yangon told Jane's they remained sceptical. The Kyodo news agency reported on 26 April 2007: "A North Korean ship under US surveillance was believed to have unloaded self-propelled artillery at a [Myanmar](#) port."

This was not the last time a North Korean vessel would be reported running into trouble in [Myanmar](#) waters. In April 2007, only days after the restoration of ties, the North Korean freighter Kang Nam I docked at Thilawa port near Yangon. [Myanmar](#) officials claimed the vessel was forced to seek shelter from a storm, although two local [Myanmar](#) reporters working for a Japanese news agency were turned back and briefly detained when they went to the port to investigate. This suggests there may have been more covert reasons for the arrival of the Kang Nam I in [Myanmar](#) - an incident which heightened concerns over the vessel's attempted second known voyage to [Myanmar](#) in June this year. Western intelligence sources told Jane's that there have been many other port calls by North Korean vessels over the past three to four years. Some of the most revealing evidence of conventional military co-operation between [North Korea](#) and [Myanmar](#) surfaced when details of a military visit to Pyongyang were leaked by [Myanmar](#) military sources to the country's exile community. This included photos and a detailed report of a visit to Pyongyang in November 2008 by General Thura Shwe Mann, joint chief of staff of the Myanmar Armed Forces, who is considered number three in the ruling military junta. The photos show Gen Shwe Mann inspecting air defence systems and missile factories, and signing an agreement between the two countries. The report mentions joint military training programmes, air defence schemes, joint efforts in building tunnels and language training. Western intelligence analysts told Jane's that they interpret the leak of information as a sign of disaffection within Myanmar's military ranks over the new ties with Pyongyang.

Tunnelling expertise

That military co-operation continues amid ostensibly poor diplomatic relations makes sense for two largely isolated regimes with rudimentary domestic defence production industries.

However, other areas of collaboration have also been noted in recent years. In June 2006, local [Myanmar](#) sources told Jane's that Asian intelligence agencies intercepted a message from Naypyidaw confirming the arrival of a group of North Korean tunnelling experts at the site.

Naypyidaw is in the foothills of Myanmar's eastern mountains, and Yangon-based diplomats have long suspected that the most sensitive military installations in the newly established administrative capital would be relocated underground. These are likely to include arms stores, underground communications centres (with fibre optic cables) and bomb shelters.

Myanmar's concern about the threat of US airstrikes or invasion, fears which it shares with [North Korea](#), is likely to have been a major motivation behind the ruling junta's decision to move the capital to a mountainous location it considers safe.

A key component of the growing strategic ties between [Myanmar](#) and [North Korea](#) appears to be North Korea's expertise in tunnelling, as Pyongyang is known to have dug extensive tunnels under the demarcation line with [South Korea](#) as part of contingency invasion plans.

The tunnels and underground shelters built by [North Korea](#) in [Myanmar](#) are located not only in and around Naypyidaw, but also near Aungban and Taunggyi in Shan State, near the Defence Services Academy (DSA) in Pyin Oo Lwin (formerly known as Maymyo) and other locations. Some are located close to new hydro-electric power stations, and the electricity these generate is for the military's above- and underground installations. It is noteworthy that there is no electricity in nearby towns and villages.

Nuclear Myanmar?

Military transfers and tunnel construction therefore continued the bilateral relationship, even without the presence of formal diplomatic relations. However, following the restoration of ties and amid increasing military collaboration, international concern over the burgeoning relationship has naturally focused on one of the possible exports that [North Korea](#) could provide: nuclear equipment, technology and expertise.

Such concerns exist not only because of Pyongyang's desire to gain hard currency and its alleged role in the near-construction of a nuclear reactor in [Syria](#), but also owing to Myanmar's professed desire to gain nuclear technology. So far, the most public potential nuclear partner has been [Russia](#). In February 2001, Russia's Atomic Energy Ministry announced plans to supply a nuclear research reactor to [Myanmar](#). For unknown reasons the 2001 deal failed to materialise, most likely because [Myanmar](#) lacked the necessary funds for the project. Nevertheless, a similar agreement, likely to involve the same components to be supplied by [Russia](#), was reached on 15 May 2007, when Russia's atomic energy agency Rosatom announced it had agreed to build a 10 MW nuclear research reactor at Natmank in central [Myanmar](#).

According to Rosatom, the research reactor is to use low-enriched uranium, not plutonium as used in North Korea's Yongbyon complex. According to Rosatom's press release: "The centre will comprise a 10 MW light water reactor working on 20 per cent-enriched uranium-235, an activation analysis laboratory, a medical isotope production laboratory, silicon doping system, nuclear waste treatment and burial facilities." In addition, under the 2007 agreement, between 300 and 350 [Myanmar](#) students are to be trained in related technology at Russian institutes. This would supplement the approximately 1,000 to 2,000 [Myanmar](#) nationals (most of whom are military personnel) who have already been trained in [Russia](#) under the initial 2001 agreement. Since then, around 500 have returned to [Myanmar](#) with a bachelor's or master's degree, some of whom have studied nuclear technology.

Significantly, although Rosatom claimed that the Natmauk centre would be controlled by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the IAEA stated on 17 May 2007 that [Myanmar](#) had not reported plans to build a nuclear reactor to the agency, despite claims by Moscow that the facility would be overseen by the nuclear watchdog. As of September 2009, no plans are known to have been submitted to the IAEA. [Myanmar](#) is a signatory to the nuclear non-proliferation treaty of 1968 (NPT) and has a safeguard agreement with the IAEA that would require the country to allow inspections of its nuclear facilities. Despite reports to the contrary, Western intelligence sources told Jane's that the Russian nuclear reactor has not yet been delivered. Commercially available satellite imagery obtained by Jane's corroborates this. A 30 km² search around the co-ordinates of the reported uranium processing plant at Thabeikkyin was conducted over satellite imagery from March 2009. No such site or related facility was observed, nor any tunnelling or underground activity.

North Korea's role

Despite the paucity of nuclear co-operation with [Russia](#), speculation about North Korea's involvement in Myanmar's potential nuclear programme has increased in recent years. Yangon residents have told Jane's about the presence of North Korean technicians in [Myanmar](#) in November 2003 when representatives of the Daesong Economic Group (an enterprise under the KWP's Bureau 39 charged with earning foreign currency for Pyongyang) arrived in the city. At about the same time, Yangon-based Asian diplomats told Jane's that North Korean technicians had been spotted unloading large crates and heavy construction equipment from trains at Myothit, the closest station to Natmauk, near one of the suspected sites for the installation of Myanmar's planned nuclear research reactor (more unconfirmed recent reports have placed the planned reactor site at Myaing, north of Pakokku in Magwe division).

Such events have been bolstered by analyses by academics and analysts. For instance, a detailed report by Australian academic Desmond Ball and Thailand-based journalist Phil Thornton appeared in the Bangkok Post on 2 August, which was quoted by newspapers all over the world.

However, all of this evidence remains circumstantial and no evidence - satellite imagery or eyewitness - has emerged of North Korea's involvement in a nuclear programme in [Myanmar](#). The initial report by Ball is based solely on the testimonies of two [Myanmar](#) defectors - an accountant who used to be attached to an alleged nuclear programme and a Russian-trained junior officer, who claimed to have been in charge of an artillery unit guarding what he described as a nuclear site in [Myanmar](#). It is therefore impossible to confirm the report, particularly given the often unreliable testimony of defectors.

Beyond direct assistance in any nuclear complex construction, various reports have also suggested [North Korea](#) has been involved in prospecting for uranium in [Myanmar](#). According to a report compiled by Thailand-based Myanmar dissidents, uranium deposits have been found near Indawgyi Lake in Myanmar's northern-most Kachin State. The report also claims that North Korean mining experts have been spotted looking for uranium near Inle Lake in Shan State.

While these reports remain unconfirmed, a [Myanmar](#) government website has identified uranium ore deposits at the following five locations: Magway (Magwe), Taungdwingyi (south of Bagan), Kyaukphygon (Mogok), Kyauksin (near Mergui, or Myeik), and Paongpyin (Mogok). A sequence of DigitalGlobe satellite images taken over a reported uranium mining complex southeast of Mandalay (at Tha Tha Na) reveals the rapid construction of a large-scale mine. Although imagery cannot readily verify the ore that is being obtained, the necessary elements for refining minerals of a radiological nature (extensive and independent power source and ample water supply for waste dispersal) are present at this active facility.

However, North Korea's involvement in uranium extraction is not yet definitively evident. None of the government-declared sites are near Indawgyi or Inle, and Russian, not North Korean, companies are known to be prospecting for uranium in northern and central [Myanmar](#).

Russia's state-run oil company, Zarubezneft, is also involved in oil and gas exploration in [Myanmar](#), possibly as a concession to [Russia](#) for agreeing to supply a nuclear reactor. Other Russian companies involved in exploration in [Myanmar](#) include Tyazhpromexport and a company from the autonomous Russian republic of Kalmykia. If North Korea has been aiding [Myanmar](#) in its uranium prospecting, it is likely to be either for cash or to further the improving relationship. [North Korea](#) itself has extensive uranium deposits, so even if Pyongyang is pursuing a uranium enrichment programme, as claimed on 4 September, it is unlikely to require any imports from [Myanmar](#).

Conclusion

Ostensibly, [Myanmar](#) has plenty of reasons to pursue a nuclear programme and [North Korea](#) to supply one. Naypyidaw fears external military intervention, and may perceive a deliverable nuclear weapon as an ultimate security guarantee. Meanwhile, Pyongyang continues to desire foreign currency, and the sale of nuclear technology or expertise could be one source (the US also claimed that [North Korea](#) was engaged in helping [Syria](#) building a nuclear reactor before the building's destruction in an Israeli air strike on 6 September 2007).

Moreover, there are domestic reasons for the [Myanmar](#) military to desire a nuclear capability, not least the junta's belief in and desire to project the image of a strong, united nation state. The change of the country's name in 1989 to [Myanmar](#) was intended to signify a new concept of a singular unitary nation state, as opposed to the diverse unity of various ethnic groups previously pursued in post-war Burma. This also helps explain the new grandiose capital and the worship of medieval warrior kings (symbolised by three statues of Anawratha, Bayinnaung and Alaungpaya in Naypyidaw) rather than independence hero Aung San, the father of Nobel Peace laureate and opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been under house arrest for the past 19 years. With such change and centralisation, the ruling junta believes it is building a stronger state. A nuclear arsenal would clearly bolster this image. Nonetheless, despite these reasons, it is currently unlikely that recent agreements between [North Korea](#) and [Myanmar](#) have included any advanced nuclear co-operation. A deliverable nuclear arsenal remains far beyond what [Myanmar](#) can currently achieve and afford.

The consensus among regional intelligence sources speaking to Jane's is that, for the time being, [Myanmar](#) cannot afford such a project. Even with the Russian-supplied reactor and nuclear facilities, [Myanmar](#) would still lack an enrichment capability to produce fissile material and delivery systems, while all the time maintaining the facilities themselves. North Korea's nuclear programme has developed over decades since the 1960s, at times with Soviet assistance, and the country is still struggling to develop deliverable nuclear devices and reliable delivery systems. So far, [Myanmar](#) is not known to have shown any interest in buying delivery systems from [North Korea](#) (other than basic missiles such as first-generation Scuds, known as Hwasong in [North Korea](#)).

Furthermore, international opprobrium may act as something of a restraining force. [Myanmar](#) is party to the nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT) and in 1995 entered into a safeguards agreement with the IAEA. In December the same year the country signed the Bangkok Treaty (the Treaty on the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone), guaranteeing no use, manufacture, transfer, stockpiling or testing of nuclear weapons. Although these treaties will not in themselves prevent [Myanmar](#) developing a nuclear weapon ([North Korea](#) was party to the NPT, but withdrew in January 2003 to pursue its programme), they present international norms to the country, which would see relations with its neighbours suffer significantly if it pursued a nuclear programme. Moreover, extensive international sanctions would be likely in the event that Naypyidaw sought to develop nuclear weapons, hampering Myanmar's economy.

All of these factors suggest that Myanmar's nuclear ambitions are balanced by the potential negative repercussions and difficulties in producing nuclear weapons. Although a nuclear programme would bolster Myanmar's image, recent reports of nuclear co-operation appear overblown, with satellite imagery confirming that no construction has occurred at some suspected sites, and defector information proving inconclusive. Even if [Myanmar](#) were to pursue a nuclear programme, it is likely to be decades before it approached a capability.

Nevertheless, whether or not nuclear co-operation is forthcoming, North Korean-Myanmar relations are set to intensify. Both countries share a similar approach to external relations, particularly towards the US, and are subject to international or national sanctions. Although leaking photographs and a report of Gen Shwe Mann's visit to [North Korea](#) suggests the [Myanmar](#) military may not be wholly united behind the move to establish closer links with Pyongyang, the strategic and practical motivations for continued co-operation remain. In particular, conventional military transfers are set to continue, with [Myanmar](#) seeking to procure further equipment to aid its counter-insurgency campaigns near the country's borders.

RESTORATION OF TIES

On 26 April 2007, North Korean Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs Kim Yong-il signed an agreement with his [Myanmar](#) counterpart Kyaw Thu in Yangon to restore diplomatic relations. Noted South Korean scholar Baek Hak soon commented on the agreement in the [Singapore](#) daily, Straits Times, on 30 April 2007. He said: "Both sides can support each other in the midst of heavy international pressure - Pyongyang for its nuclear arms programme and Yangon for its human-rights abuses. Despite their lack of bargaining leverage, [Myanmar](#) might also be keen to learn more about North Korea's 'know-how' in standing up to the US." Significantly, [China](#) also lauded the restoration of diplomatic ties between [Myanmar](#) and [North Korea](#). The Straits Times quoted Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesman Liu Jianchao as saying that "[North Korea](#) and [Myanmar](#) are both friendly neighbours of [China](#). We welcome the improvement of their bilateral ties". However, the US was less enthusiastic about the development. The resumption of diplomatic relations "will be closely observed by the US", State Department official Tom Casey said on 27 April 2007.



Myanmar soldiers march during an Armed Forces Day ceremony in Naypyidaw on 27 March 2007. Myanmar's concern about US airstrikes was likely to have been a major motivation behind the decision to move the capital to a more central location. (PA)
1350631



The capital, Naypyidaw, includes a tunnel network for security, which [North Korea](#) appears to have aided. (Bertil Lintner)
1350650



[Myanmar](#) army diagram of an underground facility for an armoured battalion. It houses a battalion of three companies of three platoons each. Each platoon has its own tunnel entrance/exit. Although the document is labelled as a tank position map, the vehicles in the yellow rooms appear to be armoured personnel carriers. Each company has its own ammunition depot, while the non-linear shape of the connecting tunnels is designed to lessen the effects of missile or bomb attacks. (Bertil Lintner)
1350651



Comercially available satellite imagery suggests that construction on Myanmar's planned nuclear research reactor has not begun. (IHS Jane's)
1350695

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