

Re-militarized Myanmar and Diplomatic Relations with North Korea

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1. Introduction

Myanmar underwent a decade-long period of democratization and economic reform from April 2011 to January 2021, marking an extraordinary phase in its political history. Plagued by violent conflicts following its independence in 1948, Myanmar's government has grappled with state-building, national integration, and economic development challenges. Nevertheless, this era of reform or "transition" from 2011 witnessed tangible strides in democratic advancements, economic prosperity, and diplomatic opening. However, this trajectory was abruptly disrupted when the Myanmar armed forces invoked Article 417 of the 2008 Constitution, declared a State of Emergency on February 1, 2021, and assumed control of state powers. This juncture arguably heralded Myanmar's departure from its reform course towards re-authoritarianisation led by the armed forces. To make a worse assumption, there is even a risk of state failure due to the further escalation of violent conflicts.

Three years after the coup, the current military junta, the State Administration Council (SAC), has failed to bring stability to society. The resistance forces, consisting of pro-democracy groups like the National Unity Government (NUG) and local young revolutionists, and several ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) fighting for revolutionary change of the political regime to create a new federal democratic government, are gradually expanding their ruling areas, if not to the point of dominance. Consequently, the protracted armed conflicts have engendered socioeconomic stagnation, exacerbating prevailing pessimism regarding Myanmar's future to come¹.

Myanmar's foreign relations have also reached a turning point in 2021. After the military coup, Western powers such as the United States, United Kingdom, and the European Union turned to pressure diplomacy by imposing targeted sanctions, and other liberal countries like as Japan, South Korea and Australia changed their conventional Myanmar policies. Despite the varying levels of pressure, the constructive relations with liberal countries that existed in the 2010s are

¹ For the latest economic developments, see (Edwards et.al., 2024)

unlikely to be restored in the foreseeable future. Instead, emerging authoritarian powers like China and Russia are making advances once again. As global great power rivalry intensifies, Myanmar's military junta is aligning diplomatically with factions that sometimes aggressively challenge the status quo of the international order. Given the circumstances, Myanmar's junta sees bandwagoning as its inevitable course of action.

Despite severe state suppression and of the escalating violent conflict since the coup, it remains unlikely that the Myanmar armed forces will make any compromises with the resistance forces. Reflecting on the reforms and their consequences in Myanmar following the 2011 transition, it is clear that international efforts create a democratic Myanmar have failed with tragic consequences. Will the failed transition in Myanmar lead the country back to the days of the previous junta which lasted from 1988 to early 2011? This paper examines whether Myanmar is reverting to the days of the previous junta, which lasted from 1988 to early 2011. The focus is on Myanmar's relationship with North Korea (Democratic People's Republic of Korea: DPRK). The author argues that the current Myanmar junta has serious shortcomings in domestic governance and is unlikely to establish diplomatic and military ties with North Korea, another "pariah state", at least in the short term.

2. Myanmar and North Korea

Diplomatic relations between Myanmar and North Korea have followed a fluctuating path over time. Myanmar aligned with South Korea during the Korean War in compliance with United Nations Security Council Resolution No.84, which condemned North Korea's invasion into South Korea and supported South Korea in 1950.² However, in the 1960s, the ascendancy of the socialist military regime under General Ne Win supplanted a civilian government, fostering a burgeoning rapport between Ne Win and Kim Il Sung. Notably, in 1980, Ne Win, then president, participated in the 6th Party Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) alongside a delegation from the dominant party, the Burmese Socialist Programme Party (BSPP). Despite Ne Win's implementation of socialist policies, including the establishment of a one-party system, the nationalization of private capitals and lands, and the adoption of a planned economy, his diplomatic stance remained non-aligned and neutral, which had been taken over from the previous administration with a little rearrangement. The rearrangement is to maintain amicable ties with both Western and Eastern blocs while preserving a certain degree of aloofness, Ne Win's approach can be construed as emblematic of a strategy of passive detachment.

² UN. Security Council. "Resolution 84 (1950) [adopted by the Security Council at its 476th meeting], of 7 July 1950." (<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/112027?ln=en>) (Jan 31, 2024)

In 1966 Ne Win became the first Myanmar leader to visit the United States. President Lyndon Johnson articulated in his welcome remarks, "Our goal in Southeast Asia is a very simple one. We want the countries in that area to have the opportunity to develop in peace. We want them to be able to prosper free from outside interference or aggression."³ This statement suggests that Myanmar's foreign policy effectively diverted U.S. attention away from aggressive anti-communism by carefully managing its relations with the communist bloc while avoiding antagonism toward the Western powers (Clymer 2016). This strategic approach reflects the diplomatic maneuvering of a small Southeast Asian nation confronting significant external intervention from global powers. Consequently, the enhancement of relations with North Korea did not entail the cessation of diplomatic ties with South Korea; in 1975, Myanmar established formal diplomatic relations with South Korea. Notably, South Korea was governed by a military regime at the time, and its homogeneity likely contributed to the fostering of amicable relations.

However, only eight years later, the parallel relationship between North and South Korea became untenable. In 1983, South Korean President Jeon Doo-hwan embarked on the first official visit to Myanmar as a South Korean head of state. During the visit, it was planned to pay homage on October 9 at the Martyrs' Mausoleum in Yangon. North Korean secret agents, having acquired intelligence regarding the visit, clandestinely planted a remote-controlled explosive device at the mausoleum two days prior to assassinate President Jeon Doo-hwan. Nonetheless, on the morning of October 9, the president's delayed arrival at the Martyrs' Mausoleum. The North Korean agents mistakenly identified another vehicle as the president's, prompting one of the guards to commence a musical performance, which inadvertently triggered the detonation of the bomb. While the president himself escaped harm, the explosion resulted in the deaths of seventeen South Korean government officials, including four cabinet members and the South Korean deputy prime minister, who had already assembled at the mausoleum, alongside four Burmese cabinet members and government officials. In response to this egregious incident, the Myanmar government severed diplomatic ties with North Korea.

Diplomatic relations were informally rekindled after approximately a decade, during the early 1990s, as North Korea, grappling with acute food shortages, aligned with the interests of Myanmar's military junta, which sought to modernize its armed forces. This convergence led to a bilateral barter trade arrangement, wherein Myanmar exported commodities such as rice, rubber, and timber to North Korea in exchange for weaponry and military technical assistance. Notably, North Korean military personnel reportedly aided in the construction of military tunnels in

³ "Remarks of Welcome at the White House to General Ne Win, Chairman of the Revolutionary Council of the Union of Burma" September 8, 1966 (<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-welcome-the-white-house-general-ne-win-chairman-the-revolutionary-council-the>) (February 7, 2024)

Myanmar's capital, Nay Pyi Taw, during the early 2000s. The precise nature and intricacies of these exchanges remain shrouded in ambiguity, a fact that is hardly surprising given the clandestine nature of such arrangements.

At that juncture, North Korea had terminated the moratorium on its nuclear program, which had been agreed upon in 1994, and resumed operations at its nuclear facilities in 2002. Subsequently, in 2003, North Korea announced its withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), prompting the convening of the Six-Party Talks involving Japan, the United States, South Korea, China, Russia, and North Korea. Despite diplomatic efforts to address North Korea's repeated violations of agreements, the country persisted in conducting nuclear tests, prompting the United Nations Security Council to pass resolutions imposing sanctions on North Korea. Concurrently, Myanmar experienced a gradual escalation of sanctions, primarily spearheaded by the United States. Notably, in 2003, comprehensive sanctions were imposed following the reinstatement of house arrest on Aung San Suu Kyi, encompassing import/export embargoes and financial restrictions.

Despite the impediments posed by the international order, Myanmar and North Korea found common ground, leading to the reinstatement of diplomatic relations in 2007. In the subsequent year, General Thura Shwe Man, the Joint Chiefs of Staff of Myanmar's armed forces and the anticipated successor to General Than Shwe, visited Pyongyang. During this visit, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between the two military entities, outlining cooperation in developing solid-fueled medium-range ballistic missiles and tunnel construction⁴. In 2009, North Korean cargo vessels, namely the "Tumangan" and the "Kang Nam 1," made port calls at Thilawa near Yangon. This resurgence in diplomatic ties between Myanmar and North Korea sparked apprehensions regarding Myanmar's nuclear ambitions.

This growing nuclear suspicion led U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to express concern about cooperation in nuclear development between the two countries in July 2009.⁵ Notably, during the early 2000s, a significant number of Myanmar military engineers pursued studies at Russian universities, exacerbating suspicions of nuclear ambitions. Furthermore, media reports suggested not only the existence of intentions to develop nuclear armaments but also the presence of concrete facilities and nuclear materials within Myanmar, purportedly corroborated by

⁴ Aung Zaw (2009) "Burma's Secret Mission to North Korea" *Irrawaddy*. Vol.17, No.4.

⁵ Glenn Kessler, "Clinton: U.S. Wary of Growing Burmese, North Korean Military Cooperation," *The Washington Post*, July 21, 2009.

testimonies from defected former military officers.⁶ Despite the apparent technological limitations of the Myanmar armed forces, the immediate feasibility of nuclear development appeared relatively low. However, suspicions persisted due to allegations of external support, compounded by the perceived lack of transparency and trustworthiness of the military regime, which was previously branded as the "outpost of tyranny" during the George W. Bush administration.⁷ Consequently, suspicions surrounding Myanmar's nuclear activities remained unabated.

3. Myanmar's transition and its diplomatic impact

Myanmar's foreign policy underwent a profound transformation following the assumption of power by Thein Sein's administration newly formed in 2011, marked notably by a shift towards closer alignment with the West and a corresponding reduction in reliance on China. The new administration actively sought the engagement of the United States, recognizing the potential for economic development through the relaxation of U.S. economic sanctions while simultaneously endeavoring to lessen political and economic dependence on China. The government embarked on a series of measures aimed at fostering domestic reconciliation and demonstrating a willingness to compromise with the United States, exemplified by the successive pardons of political prisoners, including former Prime Minister Khin Nyunt and prominent 1988 student movement leader Min Ko Naing, on January 13, 2012.

This strategic posture of diplomatic balancing was further exemplified by the decision made on September 30, 2011, to suspend the construction of the Myitsone Dam, a joint project with the China Power Investment Corporation (CPI) located close to the Chinese border of Kachin State along the upper Ayeyarwady River. During U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's visit to Myanmar in December 2011, President Thein Sein underscored the importance of peace, stability, economic growth, and human resource development in the democratization process, emphasizing the necessity of U.S. assistance in achieving these objectives.⁸ Furthermore, he addressed U.S. concerns regarding nuclear issues, affirming Myanmar's commitment to compliance with Security

⁶ "Burma's Nuclear Secrets", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, August 1, 2009 (<http://www.smh.com.au/world/burmax2019s-nuclear-secrets-20090731-e4fv.html>) (Feb 4, 2024); Desmond Ball, "Burma's Nuclear Programs: The Defectors' Story," *Security Challenges*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (Summer 2009). (<http://www.securitychallenges.org.au/ArticlePages/vol5no4Ball.html>) (Feb 4, 2024)

⁷ "Rice targets 6 'outposts of tyranny' *The Washington Times*, 19 January 2005 (<https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2005/jan/19/20050119-120236-9054r/>) (Feb 1, 2024).

⁸ *New Light of Myanmar*, December 2, 2011

Council Resolutions 1718 and 1784 pertaining to nuclear nonproliferation, in addition to other measures aimed at dispelling suspicions regarding the country's nuclear capabilities.

Still, in 2012, the Directorate of Defense Industries of the Ministry of Defense of Myanmar was added to the U.S. sanctions list due to its technical collaboration with North Korea, despite which military relations between Myanmar and North Korea persisted. In August 2012, North Korea attempted to illicitly export goods to Myanmar, contravening UN Security Council sanctions, prompting Japan, at the behest of the United States, to intercept the shipment. As reported by *Asahi Shinbun*, the intercepted items comprised "15 aluminum alloy bars stamped with 'DPRK,' denoting North Korea, along with approximately 50 metal tubes measuring 5 meters in length and 9 centimeters in diameter."⁹ Notably, the UN Panel of Experts concluded that the materials were not uranium. However, Katsuhisa Furukawa, a member of the UN Panel of Experts at the time, observed that many of the alloys appeared unsuitable for sale and were rendered unusable (Furukawa 2017: 1501/6067).

The Myanmar armed forces' "Defense White Paper," released for the first time in 2015, also espoused support for the abolition of nuclear weapons (The Republic of the Union of Myanmar 2015: Ch.7). Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing's frequent references to the concept of a "standard army" in his speeches alluded to the military's transition from an army-centric formation towards bolstering its air force and naval capabilities. Upon the establishment of the Aung San Suu Kyi administration in 2016, Myanmar became a signatory to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). Concurrently, between 2016 and 2017, the Security Council adopted six resolutions imposing sanctions on North Korea, thereby escalating pressure on Myanmar-North Korea relations. In 2018, the Myanmar government decided to repatriate the North Korean ambassador. While formal military relations appear to have been maintained since then, the extent of engagement seems limited, with North Korean military officers primarily involved in teaching Korean language courses at Myanmar military training school, Defence Services Academy. Consequently, there is currently no discernible inclination for the resurgence of previous nuclear-related suspicions.

4. Uncertain diplomacy in the post-coup period

The February 1, 2021 coup d'état heralded a seismic shift in Myanmar's political landscape. The erstwhile dichotomy between a robust military dictatorship and a non-violent democratic

⁹ *Asahi Shinbun*, November 24, 2012 (<http://www.asahi.com/special/08001/TKY201211230786.html>) (February 9, 2024)

movement, epitomized by the leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi, has been upended. Presently, the military regime, experiencing a waning capacity for governance, finds itself embroiled in conflict with a burgeoning resistance movement, wherein armed struggle has assumed a prominent role. While elements of the resistance encompass segments of the democratization movement, it concurrently comprises disparate factions united in their endeavor to disrupt the established state apparatus. A smooth transition is deemed improbable under prevailing circumstances.

Looking at the diplomatic front, multiple approaches have dealt with the Myanmar problem without effect. Immediately after the coup, the United Kingdom, the United States, the European Union, and some other countries imposed targeted sanctions on Myanmar armed forces leaders, army units, defense ministry departments, military-affiliated companies, some state-run companies, and political and commercial entities. Myanmar government assets at the U.S. Federal Reserve Bank were also frozen. While this is meant to limit the military junta's return to the international community, it has not changed the armed forces' behavior. ASEAN, which has been trying to engage rather than exert pressure, also reached a "five-point agreement" with the Myanmar armed forces at the ASEAN Leaders' Meeting immediately after the coup. Still, progress since then has been extremely slow. As a result, SAC leaders have not been allowed to attend the ASEAN Summit and the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting to date, and ASEAN's approach has been a mixture of pressure and engagement. It appears that neighboring countries such as China, Thailand, and India are cautiously accepting SAC to avoid further political confusion that could undermine border control.

What lies ahead for the relationship between Myanmar and North Korea in the post-coup situation? It is unlikely that we will witness a resurgence of the close ties that characterized their relationship during the former military regime, at least not in the immediate future. This is primarily due to the current constraints the Myanmar armed forces face, which preclude considerations of external security matters. The stability of the former military junta contrasts starkly with the current one operating under SAC. Despite its coercive tactics, the SAC has struggled to establish governance stability. While the armed forces swiftly quashed resistance during the 1988 pro-democracy movement in less than two weeks, it now faces sustained civil resistance even three years after the 2021 coup. Moreover, the military's authority over border regions such as northern Shan State, Kayah State, northern Rakhine State, and Chin State has diminished. As a fragile state, Myanmar lacks the capacity for sustained investment in capital and technology for weapons development. To address domestic threats, the country requires heavy weaponry for close combat and additional resources for close air support, such as fighter jets.

In the long term, geopolitical dynamics may gradually revert to a semblance of those observed during the former military regime. Myanmar's engagement with North Korea and its purported nuclear program commenced in the late 1990s, a period marked by mutual international isolation and authoritarian regimes demonstrating antipathy towards the West. Subsequently, Myanmar made strides towards enhancing relations with the West during the 2010s. However, following political upheavals, military control was reinstated, accompanied by a resurgence of anti-Western ideology. From an objective standpoint, inter-state security tensions in Southeast Asia are comparatively lower than those in East Asia. Southeast Asia is instead poised for future economic growth amidst political stability and prosperous population.

Nonetheless, tendencies toward paranoia may be ingrained within Myanmar's military leaders. Just as Myanmar's military leadership once perceived threats to national sovereignty in response to U.S. military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, there exists the possibility of a heightened self-centric perception of threat. In such a scenario, it is conceivable that military ties with North Korea could intensify. Nevertheless, the trade in supplies remains constrained due to the inherent risks associated with maritime shipping under the sanctions imposed by the United Nations Security Council. The Myanmar armed forces' fundamental diplomatic strategy will likely involve procuring weaponry from Russia while concurrently cultivating amicable ties with China. Furthermore, there will be concerted efforts to enhance cooperation, particularly in the realm of naval operations, with the militaries of India and Bangladesh, which share mutual interests in the security of the Indian Ocean, all the while emphasizing economic development. Initially eschewing relations with Western powers, the junta aims to strike a delicate equilibrium with emerging global powers. However, effective diplomacy hinges upon internal stability. In the interim, the military junta's primary focus will be on fortifying its domestic rule, although the efficacy of this endeavor remains uncertain.

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