Burma’s Nuclear Program: Who’s in Charge?


As the use of chemical weapons by Bashar al-Assad’s government continues to dominate foreign-policy circles globally, the news that Burma (or Myanmar) recently signed an important agreement providing International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors with greater access to investigate suspicious nuclear activity will go largely unnoticed. However, the difficulty of attributing chemical attacks in Syria provides a useful reminder of the challenges of dealing with a country with overlapping powers of authority and ambiguous chains of command. In this respect, Burma’s case is not as simple as it may appear.

In November 2012, Burmese president Thein Sein indicated that his country would adopt an Additional Protocol to its nuclear safeguards agreement with the IAEA. The Protocol, which many in the international community—along with the IAEA itself—had been urging Burma to adopt for some time, commits it to providing more information about its nuclear activities, as well as greater access to international inspectors. Although it has taken several months for the president’s decision to be formalized, it nonetheless constitutes a great leap forward for transparency.

This is welcome news, given the allegations in recent years that Burma’s nuclear activities have not been altogether legitimate. Worrying links with North Korea have further enhanced these suspicions. As a result, most have taken Naypyidaw’s greater openness as a sign that its nuclear ambitions are no longer military in nature, or that they were never truly anything else. After all, why would Thein Sein agree to reveal more information about his country’s nuclear program if he knew that it had something to hide?

Other explanations remain, however.
There is a real possibility that President Thein Sein was unaware of the extent of his country’s nuclear activities when he agreed in November to adopt the Additional Protocol. Or perhaps, more interestingly, the president was very much aware of these activities and is now relying on their exposure by the nuclear inspectors, in order to undermine or discredit those who authorized them. These scenarios have not been considered by commentators, but they explain all the observed facts—the large volume of testimony from defectors, including Sai Thein Win, which strongly suggest secret nuclear plans on the part of the military junta, as well as the new and surprising nuclear transparency.

But is it really possible that Burma’s president would not know what, if any, nuclear activities were underway in his country?

Events in Burma’s Kachin state suggest that this is more likely than one might think. In December 2011, President Thein Sein ordered an end to aggression against ethnic minority rebels in Kachin, and yet hostilities continued. In December 2012, the Burmese army deployed attack helicopters and fighter aircraft against the rebels, although one report claimed “A government official said the army had not informed them of any air attacks.” The lack of internal communication between the army and the government suggests the legacy of military rule in Burma still has influence, despite recent elections.

Earlier this year, the U.S. government ‘designated’ Lt. General Thein Htay, head of Burma’s Directorate of Defence Industries (DDI), for his dealings with North Korea. The retired military official was singled out for sanctioning because of his continued trade in military goods with Pyongyang. This was in spite of promises made by Thein Sein during President Obama’s visit to Burma in 2012 that such ties had ended. The US Treasury statement emphasised that its action was not aimed at the Burmese government, suggesting Thein Htay was working alone without the knowledge of his superiors.

In spite of the difficulty in obtaining information from Burma, these examples suggest that authority does not purely rest with the president, but instead comprises overlapping jurisdictions and competing powers. Perhaps the civil authority, despite largely being composed of military or former military officers, is not fully in control of the Burmese army. And after all, perhaps the army wouldn’t be particularly keen on owning up to a covert nuclear-weapons program, however primitive.
All of this means that Thein Sein’s agreement to exhibit more nuclear transparency cannot be taken as a genuine indication that nothing is rotten in the state of Burma. International governments should be planning—and coordinating—their actions in the event that previously undisclosed nuclear activities are detected. Looking (optimistically) ahead, this may even be a litmus test for dealing with other states, such as Iran or North Korea, which may decide to open up to greater nuclear transparency further down the road.

Whether or not Thein Sein knows about clandestine Burmese nuclear activities, their potential discovery could act to undermine his authority and create conflict within Burma’s fledgling political system. It would be a great tragedy if the nuclear openness urged upon Burma ultimately resulted in a crisis that destabilised the wider political progress it has made thus far. The international community should not be surprised if anything untoward is uncovered, but should ensure that the actions it takes—and particularly those taken by the IAEA in handling any discovery—support the process of political reform, rather than benefiting those still in positions of power who would undoubtedly prefer to see them fail.