

## QUESTIONS

### **How serious is the Myanmar Government's reported intention of getting nuclear weapons and why would they want them?**

That's a very good and difficult question. There is at least one person in the audience who is a genuine expert on this subject. I think that the Myanmar interest in nuclear development began with nuclear power – and it could be no more than that.

It is not very logical. They were certainly shocked to find they were on George Bush's 'Axis of Evil' and they are paranoid about their own security.

They have a lot of uranium deposits in the country – they generally have a lot of minerals – and they are conscious that they are one of the few countries in South East Asia that doesn't have a peaceful nuclear program. They have been thinking about that for quite some time.

I think it is quite conceivable, but not necessarily proven, that there are people in the army who believe that Myanmar should have nuclear weapons as a deterrent and for some kind of strategic purpose. I am not convinced that that is what they are trying to achieve. If anything like this happens, it would be well into the future.

If they are going to go that way, they must be seriously underestimating the reaction they are going to get from their neighbours. I don't think their neighbours, including China, will be very happy about that.

Really the evidence is not there to prove that they have a nuclear weapons program although we know they have a peaceful nuclear research program; they have been open about that and there has been at least one international inspection of that.

### **Can you comment on the extent to which the current turmoil in the Middle East may be having an impact on Myanmar? Can you give an assessment of how the strategic interplay of tensions between India and China is being played out in Myanmar?**

I am sure the military regime is very concerned about what is happening in some Middle East countries. They would be watching the situation very closely. They have a few measures they use from time to time to block communications – internet, email – they just shut things down. For instance, before the elections there was almost no internet capacity in the country at all.

The extent to which there might be some kind of groundswell of opinion? Nobody likes the army or thinks the army should be running the country, but don't forget many families have members in the army. That can split families. There are families who are no longer speaking to each other over it.

What you saw in 2007 when the monks led the protest was that kind of groundswell happening and it was very widely based and pretty spontaneous. They were not highly organised protests at all. They reflected very strong discontent with the Government on economic issues in particular at that time as well as political.

All of that could happen again very easily. Some Burma experts will tell you you can never predict what is going to happen there, or don't rule out anything, because anything can happen.

I think we need to watch and maybe hope, but we should not be unrealistic. The army has tremendous power in its favour and they have been acting and operating as a police State very effectively for much more than the last 20 years. When Ne Win was in power there were probably more political prisoners than there are now. He was just as repressive and tyrannical. There is a history of that in Myanmar.

As for China-India competition, it happens inside the country. I have written an article on it in one of the AIIA magazines. It is not competition between equals, because China's influence is far beyond what India's is.

If you want to think about it: Yunnan Province in China, wealthy and prosperous which needs supplies is on the border. So there is a natural need for a relationship there and for border trade to develop. On the Indian side you are dealing with the poorest part of Burma and the poorest part of India, so there is not much rationale to build new forms of infrastructure out there, although the Indians have done some of that.

So I do not think there is serious strategic competition. Both India and China like to play around with the idea and the Burmese generals like to think they can take advantage of them, but in the end of the day they really have to do what China says.

**The *Irrawaddy Magazine* has published a story saying that a new State Supreme Council has been formed that will dictate to Parliament. The regime has not commented on this publically, but in private has said it is rubbish. What are your feelings?**

It was in my speaking notes to mention, but I ran out of time. I have not seen any other reporting to back up that claim, but it seemed to make sense, because there is no other institution either specified in the constitution or in existence that includes Than Shwe.

The State Peace and Development Council seems to still exist and hasn't yet officially handed over to the new Government – this is one of the things that doesn't seem to have gone quite according to plan – and the curious is that at least one of the generals who took off his uniform, the new President and former Prime Minister, Thein Sein, is now being called General Thein Sein again.

So what all this means is beyond me at the moment. I would have expected there would be some kind of arrangement in which Than Shwe in some way exercised his authority. Because of that the *Irrawaddy* report was quite interesting. They may well deny that it is a formal body – and it may well not be – but in practice it probably exists with only a small number of people. It makes sense, because if you are getting a change from the State Peace and Development Council, which was anything from 15 to 20 generals, the only change would be that it is a bit smaller.

**Will Aung San Suu Kyi ever be able to play a political role in Burma, or will she remain largely a focus for the West?**

She is not just a focus for the West. She is very much a focus for the Burmese people as well, but the question of her role is very difficult. Her party effectively chose to boycott the election; therefore they were deregistered as a legal political party. They had a choice to register for the elections and certainly some of their people did want to participate.

Without a formal, legal status, her position is precarious. The regime could throw her back into house arrest at any time. The recent case of house arrest was the only time she had actually been charged with an offence and it was a court sentence that she was serving out. Although I would say the courts are a very good case for institution strengthening.

She could still play a role – not a formal political role. But there would have to be another big change if she were to come back as president, both on her part and by the Government.

But she could still play a role as the leader of a major institution in the country and this is actually what the military leadership are allowing her to do. It is a complete surprise to me, and a lot of Burmese, that they are allowing her to do this, but the question is how long will it go on.

She is being very cautious about it, probably more cautious than a lot of people outside would realise. She doesn't want to be under house arrest again. Certainly the degree of popularity that she enjoys is still very much there. When I was there and doing the usual thing – talking to taxi drivers – they would say that they support Aung San Suu Kyi.

#### **Was Aung San Suu Kyi's political power stronger when she was in detention?**

No, she now has to do things to exercise her influence – see people, meet people – she knows that better than anybody and that is why she has been pretty busy. Don't forget, she also now has the internet for the first time.

#### **How robust is the economy of Myanmar?**

At the moment they are earning large amounts of foreign exchange from the export of offshore gas to Thailand. That source is going to increase when new fields are developed for selling offshore gas to China and India. Those contracts have already been signed. The construction of pipelines and gas drilling platforms is underway.

The problem is that the revenue from that source of export earnings doesn't seem to be transmitted into Government coffers and they are certainly not passed on for improvements to health care, education or anything like that. They might get used for purposes like military equipment. So the miss-match and bad alignments of economic policies is very pronounced and there is almost no oversight of any kind – no environmental laws, no anti-corruption laws – it is pretty bad.

That is the sort of change that the international community can work at. China and ASEAN should be doing more than they are on that issue.

**As a distant observer of Burma since the 1970s, it always appears that change comes at a snail's pace. Is there complacency about change in Burma? Will the current situation drag on forever?**

I don't think the Burmese are very different from anyone else in that they have ambitions, desires, activities they like to pursue. I think there has been a tremendous amount of change in the last 20 years. Technology has changed a lot. They are lapping up the internet, mobile phones and so on. Burmese are very good at IT. If you go to the US you will find quite a few of them working in places like Silicon Valley.

There is a sense that they can take their time – it is not urgent. But that may just be Asia versus Western culture. I would not say they are complacent. Most of them are very unhappy with the lot they have got and want it to change and want to do something about helping it to change. But they are also very realistic and know their friends and family and maybe even themselves have been thrown into jail for raising a finger at any point. So they are very conscious at the presence of police controls on their activities.

I think that when it comes to tourism they are very enthusiastic about it because it is a relatively safe activity to get into it, you can have interaction with foreigners who have ideas and other interesting things to offer the Burmese in the tourism sector. A lot of young talented Burmese are working in the tourism sector.

Another reason why there has not been a great deal of change generated from inside the country is that a lot of people are leaving and they are some of the richer, better educated people, so unless they come back at some point in the future, their talents and skills are lost.

There may be people working busily for change from outside the country, but they are not involved in internal developments as such, so there is a bit of a gap with people that you would expect to be working on issues there. So sometimes you find a lot of old people that are running around trying to do training or being mentors for new developments. Yet these old people themselves are not really well in touch.

**Myanmar has China next door to it. Culturally, are they related to the Chinese and is there an ever-growing role for China in the economy of Myanmar?**

There is no cultural or ethnic connection between the Chinese and the Myanmar people. The Myanmar language comes from the Tibeto-Burman group of languages so it came from the south-west of China thousands of years ago, but I do not see any similarities with modern Chinese in the language. It has more in common with other languages.

On the whole, Chinese people have a very different attitude to life to the Burmese who are mostly Buddhist. Burmese are also racists and the Chinese are one of the races they do not particularly like.

They had a long period of insurgency during which the Chinese Government was supporting the Burmese Communist Party fighting against the Government, so there are reasons for this resentment.

There is still resentment in the north-east of Myanmar against Chinese people being allowed to come into the country to do business, and taking up residence there. How legal that is and under what sort of permission they have got, is not entirely clear.

China does regard Burma as an opportunity although there are also costs. China finds it has to provide loans to Burma because no one else will. China does not want to have a completely

backward country on its border because that would be more of a problem, so it has got involved in developing hydro-electric power, roads, bridges and other infrastructure where the Chinese have a contribution to make.

There is a big trade in consumer goods – you will find Chinese goods all over Burma - but it is really only very recently that the Chinese realised that some of Burma's mineral resources were ideal for the Chinese economy which is hungry for resources from anywhere. The ones in Myanmar were close and convenient.

So China has recently invested in a few mines that it had not done before. The Chinese are very interested in the only true jade in the world, which comes from Burma, so that's a relationship that is significant and growing. It is not necessarily something that should be scaring us. The Indians might be scared by it, but that is their problem.

China does not necessarily operate by the best codes of behaviour – it doesn't protect the environment very well or safeguard the workforce. You see these problems in China itself, and in Chinese activities in Myanmar you see these problems as well.

So there is a lot more that could be done to ask China to conform to some kind of standards with its activities in Myanmar more than it does at the moment.