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**MOVING BEYOND HERMIT KINGDOMS.  
KOREA IN BURMA'S FOREIGN POLICY**

Burma (Myanmar)<sup>1</sup> has been called the Hermit Kingdom. Korea (more recently North Korea) has been labeled similarly. This is correct to some extent, given the fact that in both countries hermits played an important role in the political culture. It is interesting, therefore, to ask whether these similar cultural patters have had any effect on their relations. Has Korea been important to Burma? What place have Koreans had in Burma's foreign policy?

**Introduction**

This article traces the most important aspects of Korea-Burma relations. It starts with the conceptual introduction by showing the ideological spectrum of the Burmese elites' political thinking. Then it describes the "hermit" cultural similarity between Burma and Korea. In its most important part this paper is intended to present the contemporary political relations between Koreas and Burma from the

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<sup>1</sup> The name of this country invokes many controversies. In June 1989, the State Law and Restoration Council (the new junta) changed the official international designation of the country from "Burma" to "Myanmar" ("Myanmar" is the autonym of the ethnic majority since ancient times and has always been used internally). The usage of the country's name has been politically controversial since then. Personally, I consider this question highly political and, given the fact that BOTH names – Burma and Myanmar – are of Burmese origin, quite ridiculous. I follow traditional naming in English and therefore use Burma throughout the article.

failed assassination of Chun Doo Hwan to the recent dynamics. It will show the economic and social sphere, where South Korea is becoming strongly present in Burma now, as well as political one. It will also deal with Burma-North Korea nuclear cooperation which invoked such a considerable anxiety in the last decade. The paper concludes with remarks on the recent state of affairs between the Korean states and Burma.

### Conceptual and Theoretical Introduction

This paper looks at Burma-Korea relations from the perspective of political science. Applying Western theoretical concepts to Burmese conditions is, although inevitable, always risky: one must find an adequate school to local conditions. In Burma the most important local factor that must be applied and taken into consideration is the influence of Buddhism. Buddhist political thinking is predominant here; it has shaped the ways in which Burmese political elites make sense of politics. As Matthew Walton shows, “being embedded in the Theravāda moral conception of the universe, Burmese Buddhists understand the political as a sphere of moral action, governed by particular rules of cause and effect”. These moral actions include “a particular conception of human nature, an understanding of the universe as governed by a law of cause and effect that works according to moral principles, a conception of human existence as fundamentally dissatisfactory”.<sup>2</sup> This pessimistic understanding of human existence links the Burmese elites thinking with classical political realism, where politics, like society in general, is governed by objective laws that have their roots in human nature which is not understood as the one of goodness.<sup>3</sup>

Probably the most frank example of the Burmese army establishment’s realistic approach came from Colonel Maung Maung in 1950s, who criticized U Nu’s policy by evoking Theodore Roosevelt’s famous phrase “speak softly, and carry a big stick”<sup>4</sup>, by saying: “U Nu thinks we can make friends with everybody (...) Friendliness is okay but we need to have a big stick”.<sup>5</sup> There are also more modern examples. The words attributed to Than Shwe expressed in Palmerston-style: “there is no such thing as an eternal enemy or friend. We are not kissing China because we love China”<sup>6</sup> indicate clearly this way of thinking. Although since the

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew J. Walton, *Politics in the Moral Universe: Burmese Buddhist Political Thought*, unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Washington 2012, p. 2–8.

<sup>3</sup> Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations. The Struggle for Power and Peace*, New York 1948, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> *Theodore Roosevelt, An Autobiography*, The Macmillan Press Company, 1913, p. 522.

<sup>5</sup> Mary Callahan, *Making Enemies. War and State Building in Burma*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 2003, p. 162.

<sup>6</sup> Benedict Rogers, *Than Shwe. Unmasking Burma’s Tyrant*, Silkworm, Chiang Mai 2010, p. 139.

2011 reform, the language of (post) junta dissidents changed into a more internationally accepted, the statesmen should be judged by actions, not words. And these actions reveal a deeply realistic approach to politics, though embodied in the local, Buddhist understanding and discourse. Paradoxically, the same can be said about Aung San Suu Kyi, who uses liberal and idealistic narrative of politics, but behaves like a skilful, realistic politician, particularly after 2011. This tendency in her actions is likely to enhance once she takes over power in March 2016.

That is why this paper uses the traditional approach of political realism. This way of political thinking fits well with Burmese elites' political actions: Burma's military men-turned-state builders have been behaving as though they perceived the international system as anarchic, based on power politics and consequently built on an "organized hypocrisy" rule, a place where logic of expected consequences prevails over logic of appropriateness.<sup>7</sup> The "organized hypocrisy" term is understood here after Stephan Krasner. According to him, in international relations there is a set of rules or norms that define actors and appropriate behaviors, but these are rarely obeyed. Actors violate rules in practice without, at the same time, challenging their legitimacy. It occurs because: states have different levels of power; rulers are responsible to deferent domestic norms which are not always compatible with international norms; situations arise in which it is unclear what rule should apply since there is no authority structure that can resolve the differences in the international system of anarchy. All political and social environments are characterized by the logic of expected consequences and the logic of appropriateness. In the logic of expected consequences, political actions and outcomes are the products of rational calculated behavior designed to maximize a given set of unexplained preferences. In the logic of appropriateness, political action is a product of rules, roles and identities. In the international system, logic of appropriateness and logic of consequences will not always be compatible. Saying one thing but doing another, endorsing the logic of appropriateness while acting in ways consistent with logic of consequences, will be a more frequently observed phenomenon. This kind of "organized hypocrisy" will be inevitable unless one of the parties abandons, or is forced to give up, its normative architecture. The reason for the prevalence of "organized hypocrisy" in international politics are power asymmetries and the absence of any universally recognized legitimate authority. The stronger state can pick and choose from among those norms that best suits their material interests or ignore norms altogether, because they can impose their choices on weaker states in the absence of any legitimate institution that could constrain their coercion and take actions against them.<sup>8</sup>

The asymmetry of power in international system explains why the logic of consequences usually prevails over the logic of appropriateness. This asymmetry,

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<sup>7</sup> Stephen D. Krasner, *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey 1999, p. 1–9.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

however, doesn't necessarily mean that the more powerful dominate the less powerful (e.g. economic dominance of South Korea over Burma does not mean political dominance). There are different types of asymmetry, as Maung Aung Myoe has shown using Brantly Womack's typology. In case of Burma-Korea relation, the "normalized asymmetry" applies. It is when the relationship is not harmonious but both sides are confident of fulfilling their basic interests and expectations of mutual benefits.<sup>9</sup>

### **Hermits in the Korean and the Burmese political cultures**

Korea and Burma have both been labeled "hermit countries": Korea – in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, whereas Burma – during the General Ne Win rule (1962–1988), and even later, in 1990s. This characterization of Korea and Burma as 'hermit lands' was made unconsciously, without understanding the role of hermits in Burmese and Korean political culture. Therefore, this name invokes, or suggests, some similarities between Korea and Burma, but these are vague at best.

The name Hermit Kingdom was first used to describe Korea by a 19<sup>th</sup> century writer William Griffis, who was then a resident in Japan and wrote the book "Corea: The Hermit Nation".<sup>10</sup> Griffis was not an expert on Korea, and chose this name because in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Korea had few contacts with the Western world and very little was known about her in the West. Hence the name was not chosen because of Buddhist heritage or because of any other cultural reason. Hermit here was understood as "a pejorative term applied to any country or society which willfully walls itself off (metaphorically or physically) from the rest of the world".<sup>11</sup> Although Korea indeed had few contacts with non-Asian world, it maintained frequent diplomatic exchanges with China and also sent embassies on occasion to Japan; besides, Korea had frequent unofficial exchanges throughout East Asia. In sum, "although Korea was wary, Korea was not a hermit".<sup>12</sup> Korean culture "was not one of exclusion, and not one of isolation, but a culture of engagement, a culture that adapted to and at times sought outside influences".<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, Western experience was peripheral to Korea and this is the primary reason why Griffis labeled Korea a hermit nation. It shows his orientalism and it was this orientalist image that became popular and shaped the understanding of

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<sup>9</sup> Maung Aung Myoe, *In the Name of Pauk-Phaw. Myanmar's China Policy Since 1948*, ISEAS Publishing, Singapore 2011, p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> William Griffis, *Corea: The Hermit Nation*, London 1882, <https://archive.org/details/coreahermitnati02grifgoog> [accessed 06.03.2015].

<sup>11</sup> "Hermit Kingdom", [in:] e-Study Guide for Fundamentals of World Regional Geography, textbook by Joseph J. Hobbs: Earth sciences, Physical geography, 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Edward Shultz, *Korea: A Hermit Nation?*, Review of Korean Studies, 10, No. 1 (March 2007), p. 107–117, [http://congress.aks.ac.kr/korean/files/2\\_1358400010.pdf](http://congress.aks.ac.kr/korean/files/2_1358400010.pdf) [accessed 05.03.2015].

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

Korea in the West. Moreover, what is even more interesting is that the Koreans themselves started to use this label for their country as “Hermit Kingdom”, “the term is still common throughout Korea and is often used by Koreans themselves to describe pre-modern Korea”.<sup>14</sup>

This is quite natural, given the fact that hermits indeed were present in Korea. In Gyeongju, the former capital of the Silla Kingdom, hermits were quite popular. They inhabited the slopes of Mount Namsan and even now one can see their hermitages there.<sup>15</sup> Hermits were also present thorough all Korea, and known for founding monasteries and shrines.<sup>16</sup> They are also present in folk legends and in political history.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, the hermit description in Korea seems to become popular only after it was used in the West. It was accepted by Koreans themselves and today is still used to describe North Korea.<sup>18</sup> The contrast with Burma, where it has more political meaning, is noticeable.

In Burma, the term was applied to both the Burmese Kingdom (conquered by the British in the 19<sup>th</sup> century) and independent Burma during General Ne Win's rule (1962–1988). Here it was a British scholar, Hugh Tinker, who used this term for the first time internationally<sup>19</sup>. He made his characterization of Burma as ‘hermit land’ consciously. Firstly, contrary to Korea, Burma for most of her history has been reluctant to contacts with foreigners and remained an inward-looking, closed kingdom.<sup>20</sup> Secondly, and more importantly, hermits played an important role in the Burmese political culture.

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<sup>14</sup> Gerli Kort, *Orientalism in South Korea through the Eyes of their People*, Tartu University Paper, [https://sisu.ut.ee/sites/default/files/orientalistika/files/koort\\_g.\\_korean\\_orientalism.pdf](https://sisu.ut.ee/sites/default/files/orientalistika/files/koort_g._korean_orientalism.pdf) [access 05.03.2015].

<sup>15</sup> Visit to Gyeongju, July 2015.

<sup>16</sup> *Seminar The Korean Peninsula in a global context. Opportunities and challenges in the 21st century*, Warsaw, PAN, 13.03.2015.

<sup>17</sup> The most important trace of hermits in Korean history is in the History of Three Kingdoms. Pyongyang city used to be the home of Sinsun, a Korean Taoist hermit with supernatural powers, who was called Tangun. According to this legend, he had knowledge of astrology and geography and was the founder of Korean Taoism (Sonbi), a school from which all kinds of Asian hermits derived their knowledge. This thought is supposed to start from Hwan-in (heavenly god-king) and his son Hwan-ung. The latter came to earth to educate eastern people (or Koreans). Hwan-ung's son, Tangun, went to a mountain at the end of his life and became Sinsu (Taoist hermit) after his death, Chai-Shin Yu, *Korean Thought and Culture: A New Introduction*, Trafford Publishing House, 2010, p. 33.

<sup>18</sup> Where there are probably no hermits any longer and, given the communistic ideology, it is quite impossible that North Korean elites would like to have their country described by this deeply religious (in origin) name.

<sup>19</sup> Hugh Tinker, *The Union of Burma: a study of the first years of independence*, Oxford University Press 1967, p. 388.

<sup>20</sup> Michael Aung Thwin, Maitri Aung Thwin, *The History of Myanmar Since Ancient Times. Traditions and Transformation*, Reaktion Books, London 2012, s. 25–174. This, of course, is a simplification, although inevitable here. There were periods of Burma's openness (the 11–14<sup>th</sup> century, the 16<sup>th</sup> century), but most of the time Burma was concentrated on domestic affairs and was uninterested in the external world.

The hermit (*Yathei*) in the Burmese culture plays a very specific role, it stands as a symbol of ultimate freedom that transcends mundane boundaries.<sup>21</sup> This is why the hermit plays such an important role in the Burmese culture<sup>22</sup>. Moreover, they are the legendary founders of cities and dynasties, law-makers<sup>23</sup> and advisers to Burmese monarchs.<sup>24</sup> According to one legend based on a prophesy by the Buddha, the first Burmese kingdom Thareh Kittara (Sri Kitsara) was founded with the aid of a hermit, and thus became known as “the hermit kingdom”.<sup>25</sup> Metaphorically speaking, it was the kingdom of Burma herself that took example from the hermit. Burma chose turning inward, a voluntarily isolation, an own way of development because it was consistent with the Burmese political tradition. Therefore the name “hermit kingdom” is not only an external perception, a result of geographical determinism that shaped the Burmese elites and influenced their strong sense of independence, sovereignty and self-reliance. This is a narrower meaning of the hermit’s political heritage. In a broader meaning, it springs organically from the Burmese culture, where renouncing the world is a value, not a vice, and where a hermit who negates the mundane goods and tries to liberate himself from the circle of suffering is a sage, not a lunatic. This is why Burma had sought for centuries to exclude the outside world so that she may find her own destiny.<sup>26</sup> Here the hermit heritage stands for substantive values such as ‘national independence’ and its associated concepts – ‘historical continuity’, ‘sovereignty’, and ‘national unity’.<sup>27</sup> This is the policy implemented by General Ne Win after 1962, when Burma returned to being the hermit state it had been during the royal times. To Ne Win, who ‘hermitised’ Burma and made her an enclosed hermit land, the hermit heritage was an instrument to sanction his person and his control over boundaries.<sup>28</sup> After Ne Win’s res-

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<sup>21</sup> Gustaaf Houtman, *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics: Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy*, Tokyo 1999, p. 141–142, 337, 348–349. The idea of hermit in the Burmese culture in this article is mostly derived from Houtman’s book.

<sup>22</sup> In folk stories they are sages who, steeped in mental culture, have answers to difficult problems, and have the necessary superhuman powers and knowledge to overcome seemingly insurmountable problems, *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Gustaaf Houtman, *Mental culture...*, p. 86; Michael W. Charney, *Powerful Learning: Buddhist Literati and the Throne in Burma’s Last Dynasty*, Ann Arbor, 2006, s. 85.

<sup>24</sup> Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer: A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand against a Historical Background*, Cambridge 1976, p. 3–9).

<sup>25</sup> *The Glass Palace Chronicles of Kings of Burma*, translated by Pe Maung Tin and Gordon Luce, Rangoon 1960, § 103 s. 7, <http://pl.scribd.com/doc/34812190/The-Glass-Palace-Chronicles-of-Kings-of-Burma> [accessed 01.01.2015].

<sup>26</sup> Hugh Tinker, *The Union of Burma...*, p. 388.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> This understanding of the hermit heritage, however, is not the only one. There is an alternative one, for in Burmese tradition hermits are mythically represented either in support or in opposition to the royal authority. In this tradition, the hermit represents something that can be labeled an “internal opposition”, a moral and transcendental opposition to a bad ruler. The latter model was being used by the Burmese democratic politicians, most notably by U Nu and Aung San Suu Kyi. This model, however, cannot match the former vision introduced by Ne Win.

ignation in 1988, this policy was continued by his successors (“the new junta”), albeit with significant differences. Even now, after the grand opening of Burma to the external (Western) world in 2011/2012, we may trace some footprints of this thinking in post-junta’s elites, particularly in the economic sphere.

To sum up, although it seems that Korea and Burma have something in common here (they were both described by the name hermit kingdom), the connection is vague at best. This term can be applied more adequately to Burma, but given the fact that the simplified, narrowed understanding of this name prevailed there, it is better to consider it a historical name, tied to very specific circumstances, not a synonym happily used any time.

### **Between Two Koreas: Burma policy towards South and North Korea**

For many years Burma was one of the few countries in the world that enjoyed good relations with both Koreas. This was possible thanks to the traditional Burmese policy of balancing foreign influences. Although since 1948 Burma twice leaned towards North Korea more (1970s and 2000s), it is South Korea eventually that has become Burma’s more important partner. This is evident after the 2011 Burma’s opening.

Since its independence in 1948, Burma has tried to maintain equal and friendly relations with both Koreas. This has been a part of the Burmese traditional balancing policy<sup>29</sup>, after 1948 known as non-alignment, or neutralism.<sup>30</sup> Thanks to this policy, U Nu’s government supported the UN forces in Korea but rejected calling North Korea the aggressor. After signing the armistice, Burma established working relations with both Koreas: consular links were open in 1961, and full diplomatic relations followed in 1975.<sup>31</sup> Burma’s Korea policy, as all her foreign policy of balancing powers, has nevertheless been a little bit biased in favor of socialist countries, in this case North Korea. This was due to the nature of the post-colonial regimes in Burma, particularly the socialist-autarchic dictatorship of General Ne Win. The “Burmese Way to Socialism” seemed somehow similar to the North Korean “*juche*”, with their both strongly nationalistic belief in national self-sufficiency behind these programs.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Since the 19th century Burma has tried to balance influences of foreign powers. Then, in the 19th c. it was unsuccessful, contrary to the 20th century, when it helped to preserve the Burmese sovereignty.

<sup>30</sup> Frank N. Trager, *Burma's Foreign Policy, 1948–1956: Neutralism, Third Force, and Rice*, *Journal of Asian Studies* 1956, Vol. 16, No. 1, p. 97–99.

<sup>31</sup> Andrew Selth, *Burma's North Korean gambit: A challenge to regional security?*, Canberra Papers on Strategy and Defence, No. 154, Australian National University, Canberra: Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, 2004.

<sup>32</sup> Both, by the way, were possible to maintain thanks to foreign loans and both ended up in almost equal failure.

Good relations with Pyongyang dramatically collapsed in autumn 1983 after the “Rangoon assassination”. On 8 October 1983, the South Korean president Chun Doo Hwan arrived in Rangoon for a state visit. The purpose of his visit remains unknown, though it is probable that, given the dire economic situation of Burma, the Burmese elites would have likely wanted to ask the South Koreans for help and loans. The visit was scheduled to start on 9 October 1983, with casual paying homage to the fallen Burmese heroes in Rangoon’s Martyr’s Mausoleum (commemorating the Burmese independence heroes killed in 1947). Chun Doo Hwan couldn’t come to the Mausoleum on the scheduled time due to Burma’s foreign minister late arrival. Thanks to this, he survived. The Mausoleum was blasted by a bomb installed by North Korean agents and killed 21 people, 17 Koreans (including the South Korean deputy prime minister) and 4 Burmese.<sup>33</sup>

This assassination was a blow to Burma’s reputation. The Burmese intelligence apparatus, so competent in eliminating political rivals and repressing society, was unable to prevent an assassination attempt in the heart of Burma’s capital, in the most politically symbolic place in Rangoon. This was partly due to Ne Win’s ‘human resources’ policy. A few months earlier, Ne Win had arrested General Tin Oo, one of his closest allies, his most loyal client and a powerful chief of intelligence, because the ageing dictator was getting more and more irrational and erratic. This was a fatal decision, the purge that followed Tin Oo’s arrest decimated the Burmese intelligence apparatus and, consequently, the North Korean agents were able to penetrate and install bombs in the Mausoleum. Apparently, Ne Win was furious once he heard the news and sacked Tin Oo’s successor, Colonel Aung Koe. “Where the hell was he?” Ne Win asked. The reply was that Aung Koe was playing golf, which prompted Ne Win to ask a second question: “Can we get someone who doesn’t play golf and doesn’t drink?”<sup>34</sup> The choice fell on Khin Nyunt, a young and ambitious colonel who later became one of the most powerful figures in the Burmese establishment, “the face of new junta”. In 1983, he successfully concluded investigation and caught the North Korean agents. There were three of them – one was killed during the pursuit, another two were arrested after an exchange of fire. One of them, Kang Min-Chul, confessed and claimed responsibility for this assassination, while the other, Chin Mo, kept silent during the trial. They were both sentenced to death, changed afterwards for life sentences. Chin soon died in prison in 1985, officially by natural death. Kang was released in 1995 and became a stateless person who, thanks to his cooperation during the trial, was given a South Korean asylum. He died in Seoul in 2008.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Marcin Kowalski, *Zamach w Rangunie (Assasination in Rangoon)*, Gazeta Wyborcza, 11.06.2012.

<sup>34</sup> Aung Zaw, *The Dictators*, Irrawaddy. Org, <http://www.aungzaw.net/index.php/article/152-the-dictators-part-5-ne-win-promotes-than-shwe#sthash.ZDPvY6ri.dpuf> [accessed 06.03.2015].

<sup>35</sup> Marcin Kowalski, *Zamach...*



Political consequences soon followed. Once it became known that the North Koreans planned the assassination, Burma immediately cut the diplomatic relations with North Korea and ordered North Korean diplomats to leave the country within 48 hours (this was the first such move in the history of Burma's diplomatic relations).<sup>36</sup> The relations with North Korea stalled and weren't resumed until, probably, the mid-1990s (certainly until the beginning of the 2000s.).

The relations with Seoul, on the other hand, accelerated after 1988. That year saw Burma's 8888 revolution being repressed, but more importantly: the general change of state economic policy. Autarchy made place to opening and rapid introduction of the free market.<sup>37</sup> South Korea, together with other Asian countries (most notably China), had no compunctions about abusing human rights (as Western countries did), and started investing in Burma, together with offering assistance programs, loans and grants. The main goal behind Seoul engagement there was to ensure that Japan's role in Burma would not exceed Korea's.<sup>38</sup> It is hard to tell whether this goal had been achieved before 2011. What is certain is that both the Korean and the Japanese engagement in Burma, due to these countries' strong ties with the United States, was not major and ranked well below initial plans and hopes. The US factor hampered plans for more concrete actions (for two decades Washington has been advocating an isolation of Burma due to human rights abuses). In Korea, as in Japan, there was no domestic consensus about Burma's policy either. During Kim Dea Jung and Roh Moo-hyun presidencies, Korea supported the Burmese opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi. Particularly Kim Dea Jung has long held strong views favoring democracy and admired Aung San Suu Kyi, backed her case and even supported the US resolution against the Burmese regime in the UN in 1999.<sup>39</sup> In 2005, South Korea ended a long-standing program to provide development loans to Myanmar, citing human-rights abuses.<sup>40</sup> Despite such occasional gestures, however, South Korea has never jumped the bandwagon of the Western policy of isolating Burma – Seoul had much more interest there. But the South Korean ambivalence towards Burma had another reason and it was not human rights, but Burma-North Korea nuclear cooperation (see below). South Korea had been somewhat of “a mixed bag” when it came to relations with Burma: the two countries enjoyed healthy bilateral trade, and Seoul poured billions into Burma's energy sector (two lucrative gas blocks in Burma, while South Korean companies Korean Gas Corp (KOGAS) and Daewoo International hold sizeable stakes in the Shwe gas pipeline project), but the Burmese junta relations with Pyongyang worried

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<sup>36</sup> Michael W. Charney *A History of Modern Burma*, Cambridge 2009, p. 144.

<sup>37</sup> Robert H. Taylor, *State in Myanmar*, Singapore 2009, p. 375–391.

<sup>38</sup> David Steinberg, *Burma: the State in Myanmar*, Washington 2000, p. 244

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Korea's Lee Visits Myanmar, Seeing Opportunity*, The Wall Street Journal, 14.05.2012, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304371504577403100550390104> [accessed 06.03.2015].

Seoul.<sup>41</sup> Once it was known, however, that the Burmese-North Korea cooperation was in decline, South Korean investments intensified, particularly after 2011. After Burma's opening up and following South Korean President Lee Myung-bak's state visit to Burma in May 2012 (the first since 1983). In 2011 alone, the trade relationship between the two countries went up by about 50% since 2010, to about \$965 million. Since then, about 100 South Korean businesses, many in the textile industry have had operations in Burma, and in December 2011 Seoul announced that it would resume the loan program.<sup>42</sup> Since then, the economic relations accelerated even further. However, even before this turning year 2011, the Korean presence in Burma was felt. Many cars imported to Burma were old Korean models, Korean restaurants were (and still are) quite popular in Burmese cities, whereas Korean soap operas and dramas dominated the Burmese TV programs.<sup>43</sup> Now the Korean economic presence in Burma is getting stronger and stronger year by year and the prognoses for further cooperation are positive.

One cannot say the same about Burma – North Korea relations. Although their supposed nuclear cooperation in the 2000s evoked serious concerns in the West, judging from today's perspective it must be considered an episode, although a significant one. It is desirable, then, to outline this cooperation here.

Let's start from the basic facts. Burma became a non-nuclear weapon state party to the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) in 1992, and signed the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone Treaty in 1995, committing not to develop nuclear weapons. The country signed the Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement and the Small Quantities Protocol with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in 1995. After President Barack Obama's visit in November 2012, Burma announced it would sign the Additional Protocol. Less than one year later, on 17 September 2013, Burma signed the agreement. Burma has signed, but not ratified the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). Burma's government has also undertaken some uranium explorations, although the extent and specifics of these activities are unknown. According to the Myanmar Ministry of Energy there are five areas for potential uranium mining: Magwe, Taungdwingyi, Kyaukphygon (Mogok), Kyauksin, and Paongpyin (Mogok). However, most of Burma's uranium is a byproduct of gold mining. As Myanmar doesn't need uranium, much is exported to China.<sup>44</sup>

Burma has consistently looked to Russia for assistance increasing its technical capabilities in the nuclear field. In 2001, Russia signed a contract to design a 10

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<sup>41</sup> *S Korean FM approaching Burma with caution*, 18.08.2010, <http://www.dvb.no/news/s-korean-fm-approaching-burma-with-caution/11318> [accessed 06.03.2015].

<sup>42</sup> *Korea's Lee Visits Myanmar...*

<sup>43</sup> *My Visits to Burma: 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015.*

<sup>44</sup> *Myanmar: Country Profile*, NTI, Nuclear Threat Initiative, December 2014, <http://www.nti.org/country-profiles/myanmar> [accessed 06.03.2015]. Much of the information about Burma's nuclear capacities in this article is derived from this site.

MW research reactor in Burma for radioisotope production.<sup>45</sup> Although the deal for a research reactor ultimately fell through, a few hundred specialists from Burma have been trained in nuclear research in Russia.<sup>46</sup>

In 2010, the Western world has been alerted by the allegedly existing Burmese covert nuclear program and missile facilities and illicit cooperation with North Korea.<sup>47</sup> Former IAEA inspector Robert E. Kelley and Ali Fowle went as far as to say that Burma's "technology is only for nuclear weapons and not civilian use or nuclear power".<sup>48</sup> The Burmese Government, of course, rejected the conclusions of the DVB report.<sup>49</sup> In September 2010, Burma affirmed in a statement to the IAEA General Conference that the applications of nuclear science and technology in Burma were only for peaceful developmental purposes and that Burma would never engage in activities related to the production and proliferation of nuclear weapons.<sup>50</sup> This view was supported by other, foreign voices. David Albright and Christina Walrond stated in their report that the equipment could have been used for producing "rare earth metals or metals such as titanium or vanadium".<sup>51</sup> In the US Department of State 2011 report 2011 Adherence to and Compliance with Arms Control, Nonproliferation, and Disarmament Agreements and Commitments, it was stated that although "The United States remains concerned about Burma's interest in pursuing a nuclear program, including the possibility of cooperation with North Korea", "As of the end of 2010, available information did not indicate whether there had been progress in establishing the nuclear research center called for in the Burma-Russia agreement, or that Burma's efforts to establish the center had involved activities prohibited by the NPT or by IAEA safeguards".<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Дмитрий Конухов, Антон Хлопков, *Россия, Мьянма и ядерные технологии*, 24.06.2011, Центр энергетике и безопасности, <http://ceness-russia.org/data/doc/MyanmarRUS.pdf> [accessed 06.03.2015].

<sup>46</sup> Simon Shuster, *Why Are Burmese Scientists Studying Missile Technology in Moscow?* *Time*, 7.12.2011.

<sup>47</sup> Jerome Taylor, *Burmese junta 'is developing a nuclear threat'*, *The Independent*, 04.06.2010, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/burmese-junta-is-developing-a-nuclear-threat-1991009.html> [accessed 06.03.2015].

<sup>48</sup> *Nuclear Related Activities in Burma*, Expert Analysis, Democratic Voice of Burma, 02.06.2010, <https://www.dvb.no/uncategorized/expert-analysis/9297> [accessed 06.03.2015].

<sup>49</sup> *Nuclear Pipe Dream?*, *The Irrawaddy* July 2010, Vol. 18, No. 7, [http://www2.irrawaddy.org/print\\_article.php?art\\_id=18928](http://www2.irrawaddy.org/print_article.php?art_id=18928) [accessed 06.03.2015].

<sup>50</sup> *Statement by the Leader of Myanmar Delegation H.E. U Tin Win to the 54<sup>th</sup> Annual Regular Session of the IAEA General Conference*, Vienna 20–24.09.2010, IAEA <https://www.iaea.org/About/Policy/GC/GC54/Statements/myanmar.pdf> [accessed 06.03.2015].

<sup>51</sup> David Albright, Christina Walrond, *Technical Note: Revisiting Bomb Reactors in Burma and an Alleged Burmese Nuclear Weapons Program*, ISIS Report, 11.04.2011, [http://isis-online.org/uploads/isis-reports/documents/Burma\\_Analysis\\_Bomb\\_Reactors\\_11April2011.pdf](http://isis-online.org/uploads/isis-reports/documents/Burma_Analysis_Bomb_Reactors_11April2011.pdf) [accessed 06.03.2015].

<sup>52</sup> *2011 Adherence to and Compliance with Arms Control, Nonproliferation, and Disarmament Agreements and Commitments*, US Department of State Report August 2011, [http://www.state.gov/t/avc/rls/rpt/170447.htm#4e\\_burma](http://www.state.gov/t/avc/rls/rpt/170447.htm#4e_burma) [accessed 06.03.2015].

What is obvious, though, is the military cooperation between Burma and North Korea. Since the resumption of relations between these countries (the exact or even approximate date is unknown, but is it likely that it happened in the late 1990s or early 2000s.) North Korea has since exported artillery, truck-mounted multiple launch rocket systems and other military equipment to Myanmar in exchange for rice and other foodstuff. North Korean tunneling experts were also spotted in Naypyidaw.<sup>53</sup> Besides, there was North Korea's assistance to Myanmar's missile program. In late November and early December 2008, General *thura* Shwe Mann led a high-level delegation to Pyongyang, where they met General Kim Kyok-sik, chief of the North Korean military. The Myanmar delegation was taken on a tour of various defense facilities, production lines, radar stations and one of North Korea's missile factories.<sup>54</sup> On November 26 2008 generals Shwe Mann and Kim signed a memorandum of understanding allowed for provision of aid and to have joint efforts in building tunnels to keep air planes and ships and other military buildings and underground buildings. Besides, the military of the two countries agreed on having joint efforts in modernizing weapons and military equipment and exchanging experiences.<sup>55</sup> What's more, Burmese missile program began at about the same time and North Korean specialists helped in the construction of bunkers and tunnels in Burma. North Korean technicians are also reportedly taking part in the production of missiles and missile components. Moreover, Burma was acquiring modern, sophisticated weapons from North Korea, such as anti-aircraft missiles in DI-10, batteries of ground-to-ground 122mm multiple launch rocket systems vehicles and spare parts for radars. Burma had to buy it from North Korea due to external factors. As one of Bertil Lintner's sources said: 'The Chinese would never sell sophisticated machinery or equipment and Russian smugglers are too cunning. In these circumstances, North Korea was Myanmar's most reliable supplier'.<sup>56</sup> The strategic reason for developing strong military was to provide a show of force to deter political opponents from challenging the "above politics" role of the army<sup>57</sup>, or in other words, the army's dominance in the Burmese politics.

Such was the picture before 2011. The relationship had been seen as a burgeoning threat to regional stability. Since then, however, Burma has undergone a policy shift. Having made some reforms, including opening of the economy and liberalizing the political system, the Burmese generals changed dress and liber-

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<sup>53</sup> Bertil Lintner, *Myanmar; North Korea stay brothers in arms*, Asia Times Online, 5.09.2013, [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast\\_Asia/SEA-01-050913.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/SEA-01-050913.html) [accessed 06.03.2015].

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Aung Zaw, *Burma and North Korea, Brothers in Arms*, 10.06.2009, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB124716393095019071> [accessed 06.03.2015].

<sup>56</sup> Bertil Lintner, *Myanmar, North Korea...*

<sup>57</sup> The "above politics" role of the army is secured in the 2008 Burma's Constitution. *Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar*, Burma Library.Org, [http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs5/Myanmar\\_Constitution-2008-en.pdf](http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs5/Myanmar_Constitution-2008-en.pdf) [accessed 06.03.2015]. The term "above politics" has been proposed by Robert H. Taylor, *The State in Myanmar...*, p. 487–506.

ated themselves from the “pariah” odium. It worked because in 2011 the US introduced their “pivot to Asia”, the goals of which are the following: “to keep China at bay and North Korea out”; thanks to this, Burma has emerged as the frontline of the Obama administration’s “pivot” towards Asia, or, in plain language, the US’s China containment policy”.<sup>58</sup>

Thanks to the Burmese post-generals brilliant move, they were able to come back to their traditional foreign policy – balancing of powers. Since 2011, Burma has been balancing Chinese and American influences and so far does it successfully. In this changed circumstances, any talks of a North Korea-Burma axis are no longer valid. North Korea is no longer needed by Burma now.<sup>59</sup> To return to building confidence with the United States and South Korea, Burma has pledged that it would entirely cut off relations with North Korea, including weapons shipments and any sort of military commerce. In other words, Burma sacrificed cooperation with North Korea for the greater good. This can be illustrated in the Burmese vice-president statement from 2011, delivered to the US delegation, where he said that his country had halted its nuclear research program because the “international community may misunderstand Myanmar over the issue.”<sup>60</sup> Burmese President Thein Sein was even more frank when he said, during a meeting with Barack Obama in the White House, the following words: “we don’t really have the capacity to build nuclear weapons. We don’t have money. We don’t have technology. And nobody will come and help us made [sic] this thing...but of course we have to establish some relations with North Korea because in the past everything was under sanctions and we were in need to find somebody who could help us with our defense. So we did engage diplomatically”.<sup>61</sup> On 17 September 2013, Burma’s Foreign Minister Wunna Maung Lwin and IAEA Director General Yukiya Amano signed the Additional Protocol to Burma’s Safeguards Agreement (from 1995).<sup>62</sup> The Burmese nuclear affair with North Korea was over.

Judging from the Burmese elite’s perspective, it was a good move. Burma is changing and developing rapidly and the military government, despite losing elec-

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<sup>58</sup> Bertil Lintner, *Myanmar, North Korea...*

<sup>59</sup> This, of course, doesn’t mean that North Korea won’t be needed in the future. The Burmese elites are competent and know lord Palmerston’s maxim: “We have no permanent allies, we have no permanent enemies, we only have permanent interests” (see Than Shwe’s words “there is no such thing as an eternal enemy or friend. We are not kissing China because we love China”, quoted in: Benedict Rogers, *Than Shwe. Unmasking Burma’s Tyrant*, Silkworm, Chiang Mai 2010, p. 139).

<sup>60</sup> David Albright, Andrea Stricker, *Myanmar Says Halted Nuclear Research Program: Verification Critical*, ISIS report, 03.06.2011, <http://isis-online.org/isis-reports/detail/myanmar-says-halted-nuclear-research-program-verification-critical/33> [accessed 06.03.2015].

<sup>61</sup> *Myanmar Leader Affirms No-Nuke Stance*, NTI, 21.05.2013, <http://www.nti.org/gsn/article/myanmar-leader-affirms-no-nuke-stance> [accessed 06.03.2015].

<sup>62</sup> *Myanmar Signed Additional Protocol with IAEA*, International Atomic Energy Agency, 17.09.2013, <https://www.iaea.org/newscenter/news/myanmar-signed-additional-protocol-iaea> [accessed 06.03.2015].

tions, keeps the privileged economic and political position in society. The United States no longer accuse Burma of having nuclear capacity. In the 2012 Adherence to and Compliance with Arms Control, Nonproliferation, and Disarmament Agreements and Commitments report it is written that “the U.S confidence continues to grow”, available information does not suggest the current Burmese Government has any ambitions to develop a nuclear weapons capability”.<sup>63</sup> Barack Obama in his famous remark at West Point in 2014 indicated Burma as a good example, a success of his Asian policy: “Thanks to the American leadership (...) we have seen (...) a movement by Burmese leadership away from partnership with North Korea in favor of engagement with America and our allies (...) if Burma succeeds, we will have gained a new partner without having fired a shot”.<sup>64</sup> These words may also be interpreted as a US gesture towards North Korea; so far, however, Pyongyang has been reluctant to follow the Burmese example.

## Conclusion

To recapitulate the data from this article, one must say that although important, Korean issues have not been central to Burmese policy. They form important, though secondary, dimension. The “hermit” trait shows that the similarity here is vague at best, whereas the political relations between Burma and both Korean states are not impressive. There were two events that attracted the world’s attention to the Burmese-Korean relations – the assassination in Rangoon and Burma’s nuclear affair with North Korea, but in the end both turned up to be incidents only. From the Korean perspective, Burma is even more marginal. She has never been very important to South Korea and after her political turn in 2011, Burma is no longer a partner for North Korea. However, after the 2011 reforms, Burma may become a good place for massive South Korean investments.

It is the economic dominance of South Korea – particularly when compared with Burma’s potential – that makes the Burma-Korea relations asymmetric. It is, nevertheless, a “normalized asymmetry”, one that makes their relations smooth. Although it is not harmonious, both sides are confident of fulfilling their basic interests and expectations of mutual benefits. This is why the Burma-South Korea relations are likely to develop in the future

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<sup>63</sup> *2012 Adherence to and Compliance with Arms Control, Nonproliferation, and Disarmament Agreements and Commitments*, US Department of State Report August 2012, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/230108.pdf> [accessed 06.03.2015].

<sup>64</sup> *Remarks by the President at the United States Military Academy Commencement Ceremony*, The White House, 28.05.2014, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/05/28/remarks-president-united-states-military-academy-commencement-ceremony> [accessed 06.03.2015].

**Abstract**

This paper deals with the problem of the Burma-Korea relations. It starts from the intriguing fact that both Burma and Korea, despite not having much in common, have been called the Hermit Kingdoms. This paper asks whether this “hermit” similarity has had any effect on their relations and what the place of Korea in Burma’s foreign policy has been. After describing the hermit heritage in the Burmese and the Korean political cultures, this paper concludes that Korean issues have not been central to the Burmese policy. They form an important, though a secondary, dimension. As for the place of Korea(s) in Burma’s foreign policy, the answer is equally unimpressive. The political relations between Burma and both Korean states have not been strategic. Two events attracted the world’s attention to the Burmese-Korean relations – the assassination in Rangoon and Burma’s nuclear affair with North Korea – but both turned out to be mere incidents. North Korea – Burma relations stalled, or hibernated, after Burma started its reforms and opening up to the West in 2011. For the same reasons of reforms, however, Burma has become even more interesting for South Korea. Myanmar may become a place for massive South Korean investments soon. It is the economic dominance of South Korea that makes the Burma-Korea relations asymmetric. It’s a “normalized asymmetry”, however, one where both sides are confident of fulfilling their basic interests and expectations of mutual benefits. This “normalized asymmetry” makes the Burma-South Korea relations bound to develop in the future.

**Key words:** Burma, Myanmar, Korea, Burma-Korea relations, Hermit Kingdoms

