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Abstract	Myanmar this month resurrected plans to acquire a nuclear research reactor from Russia. Atomstroyexport, a manufacturer owned by Russia's federal atomic agency Rosatom, said it will, if the deal is sealed, install a 10-megawatt light-water reactor, provide 20 percent enriched uranium-235 fuel and train at least 300 technicians.

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ASEAN and Myanmar's Nuclear Reactor

Fullbrook



Myanmar's significant decision to acquire a nuclear research reactor from Russia went without comment by the Southeast Asian commission overseeing nuclear matters. That raises doubts about the institution at a time when ASEAN should be preparing strong, capable and bold institutions to implement plans now being drafted for an economic community and closer association.

Commissioners of the Southeast Asian Nuclear-Weapon Free Zone, who are supposed to keep a watchful eye on nuclear developments in Southeast Asia to ensure the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' (ASEAN) ten members are not developing or deploying nuclear weapons, should at least have reminded Myanmar of its obligations under the Zone.

To build confidence, foster transparency and help the commission do its job Article 11 of the Zone's treaty requires signatories to report "any significant event". There is no record readily available of Myanmar informing the commission prior to the announcement which came from Russian partner Atomstroyexport.

Atomstroyexport, a manufacturer owned by Russia's federal atomic energy agency Rosatom, said it will, if the deal is sealed, install a 10-megawatt light-water reactor, provide 20 percent enriched uranium-235 fuel and train at least 300 technicians. Similar reactors exist in Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam. These ASEAN members are to some degree mulling plans for using nuclear power stations to reduce their dependence on imported oil and gas for generating electricity.

Myanmar is perhaps not entirely at fault because the treaty does not define what constitutes a "significant event". Nevertheless acquiring a research reactor is significant because it is a starting point for developing nuclear industry such as power generation and medical isotopes. Furthermore, informing the Commission would be in the spirit of the Zone, which entered into force in March 1997, and ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation.

There was a reaction however from another nuclear regulator, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which reportedly said it was surprised by the move because Myanmar is supposed to give advance notice in accordance with the safeguard agreement signed a few decades ago.

Concerns were also expressed in other quarters, among them Washington. "In short, we would be concerned about the possibility for accidents, for environmental damage or for proliferation simply by the possibility of fuel being diverted, stolen or otherwise removed simply because there are no accounting mechanisms or other kinds of security procedures," said Tom Casey, a spokesman for the State Department in Washington.

A clandestine nuclear weapons programme looks far fetched right now. Training thousands of nuclear scientists and technicians will be challenging given the state of education in Myanmar. Close ties with states that have run successful nuclear weapons programmes and developed intermediate range ballistic missiles like Pakistan and North Korea will serve to keep Myanmar under scrutiny.

In the short-term at least, safety will probably be borne by the shoulders of Atomstroyexport's experienced engineers, who aside from overseeing safe operation of the reactor will have to account for hazards like earthquakes in siting, design and construction.

America's concerns about the safety and Myanmar's shortage of nuclear experts does not seem to bother Myanmar's ASEAN peers judging by the absence of public remarks from capitals around the region. It might be deemed an internal matter falling under ASEAN's coveted principle of non-interference, but that is hard to sustain given that the Zone provides for "intrusion" such as inspections.

This is a matter for concern. It suggests ASEAN is not thinking, albeit very remote at this point, about the prospect of a stand-off with the international community if evidence of a weapons programme should one day come to light.

But worse, it indicates that members are not putting ASEAN treaties, institutions and even each other at the top of their priorities despite their enthusiasm for summits. Why then should the rest of the world take ASEAN seriously?

Without effective institutions the ASEAN economic community founded on the charter now being drawn up for presentation to leaders in Singapore this October is likely to fall short in improving prosperity and eliminating poverty for the peoples of Southeast Asia.

The commission is an example of an ineffective institution that ASEAN should no longer tolerate. It failed to comment on an important development seemingly within its remit. According to the treaty the commission should conduct a review ten years after the treaty comes into force, yet there is no publicly available evidence that this review has taken place. Or indeed signs that the commission has met since sitting down seven years

ago in Bangkok. The only sign of its existence are occasional reports of executive committee meetings.

Finding out anything about the commission is challenging. Its public presence is effectively zero. It does not have even a rudimentary website. It is impossible to assess whether its budget is adequate because there are no readily available records of its budget and what that is used for. Public presence is a weakness of ASEAN institutions, even the ASEAN Secretariat has only a brass tacks website.

A strong public presence is important for raising ASEAN's profile and exciting citizens' interest. A first step is simply to ensure that all ASEAN's institutions, including the Secretariat, have effective websites. Ministries in Brunei and Singapore provide some excellent benchmarks.

Much more will be needed though because the current Secretariat is simply inadequate for the important work ahead. The charter must include clauses providing for substantial long-term budgets to develop effective institutions staffed by a well-salaried, well-trained, well-resourced ASEAN civil service drawing on best practices locally and in the European Union to be effective and avoid the corruption that is a severe problem for many bureaucracies in the region.

Myanmar's pursuit of a nuclear energy has served as a timely reminder of the shortcomings of ASEAN's institutions. The impact of Myanmar's nuclear industry on will for the foreseeable future be dwarfed by the effectiveness of ASEAN's institutions.

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