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Myanmar Government Must Close Down Military Ties with North Korea

By Andrea Stricker and Serena Kelleher-Vergantini

On July 2, the Obama administration [announced](#) sanctions against a Myanmar general who heads the country's missile research and development facility because of continued military related purchases from North Korea. These procurements are in violation of international sanctions and Myanmar's commitments to the United States to discontinue their bilateral military cooperation. The Treasury Department announced that Lieutenant General Thein Htay, the head of the Directorate of Defense Industries, which runs the missile program and was previously sanctioned by the United States in July 2012, "has disregarded international requirements to stop purchasing military goods from North Korea." However, the United States indicated that the sanctions should not be seen as targeting the Myanmar government as a whole. The announcement said the government has "continued to take positive steps in severing military ties with North Korea."

This announcement is interesting because it signals that the United States wants, in good faith, to maintain the progress of improved bilateral relations and is thus willing to single out a general rather than hold the government publicly accountable for ongoing military cooperation with North Korea. However, if the Myanmar government is serious about proving to the international community and the United States that it wants to abide by international laws and norms, it must take responsibility for this policy. It must immediately close down any remaining military cooperation with North Korea including the purchase of military goods. Myanmar's president recently [indicated](#) that his country has limited options for outfitting its military needs and North Korea is the only country willing to supply it with defensive military capabilities, but this policy is at odds with Myanmar's recent commitments and planned trajectory.

While the United States and its allies are unlikely to outfit Myanmar's military needs at this nascent stage of improved relations, without consulting Myanmar's neighbors, or assessing the implications of missile or other conventional military programs, Myanmar would still be well advised to speed up its efforts to reform its international relations and fulfill its stated commitments. Dealing with the United States with one hand extended to North Korea is unlikely to move the relationship forward. Myanmar could instead build confidence at this time by acting on its pledge to sign the IAEA Additional Protocol to reduce concerns about past nuclear intentions and announce it will join the Missile Control Technology Regime. As it proves its intentions and future direction, the military cooperation it desires with other nations is likely to follow. But first, Myanmar must prove itself.