

**U.S. Drives Wedge into China-Myanmar Relationship**

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The United States and Myanmar have apparently made rapid improvements in their relationship.

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton will visit Myanmar for three days from November 30. She is the first U.S. secretary of state to visit that country in 57 years since John Foster Dulles under the Eisenhower administration. In a run-up to Clinton's Myanmar visit, President Barack Obama named Derek Mitchell, deputy assistant secretary of defense for Asian and Pacific security affairs, as U.S. special representative and policy coordinator for Myanmar in April and sent him to Myanmar in September. Mitchell met with senior Myanmar government officials and opposition party leaders during his five-day visit. In late September, Myanmar Foreign Minister Wunna Maung Lwin held talks with senior U.S. State Department officials in New York and Washington. In October, Mitchell visited Myanmar again. We thus have seen busy developments regarding the U.S.-Myanmar relationship.

**A dam construction freeze encouraged Obama**

Thein Sein, a general who became Myanmar's president last March after serving as prime minister in its military junta, has embarked on democratization policies one after another. He eased tough regulations on the freedom of speech and press and promptly met with Myanmar democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi. The president also released political prisoners and decided to register the Suu Kyi-led National League for Democracy, which was dissolved after boycotting a general election in November 2010. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations might have recognized the new Myanmar government as going in the direction of democratization. At a recent ASEAN summit in Bali, Indonesia, ASEAN leaders chose Myanmar as the ASEAN chair for 2014.

A key factor that encouraged President Obama to send Mrs. Clinton to Myanmar might have been President Thein Sein's announcement of his decision in Parliament on September 30 to freeze a China-backed Myitsone dam construction project that had started on the upper Irrawaddy River in northern Myanmar. He said he made the decision in consideration of domestic public opinion against the project. The top leader publicly stated his respect for public opinion. Such development had been unbelievable under the past military junta.

Suu Kyi and other Myanmar intellectuals raised opposition to the dam

construction project because a leaked report of China Power Investment Corp. in charge of the construction indicated the project would affect the natural ecosystem. Furthermore, 90% of electricity generated at the dam would be transmitted to southern China. Myanmar's unilateral decision to freeze the project has angered China

**A possible democracy chain reaction**

Mrs. Clinton's visit to Myanmar may lead the United States to drive a wedge into the China-Myanmar relationship. The dam construction project has backfired on China that has failed to understand the significance of the Irrawaddy River for Myanmar history. What may happen if a democratic country emerges at China's exit to the south? May a chain reaction come in North Korea, Tibet and Uighur and among pro-democracy forces in China? We can say the United States has come back to Asia.

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