

Help Myanmar Reduce Dependence on China

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Four members of the Japan Institute for National Fundamentals Planning Committee, including JINF Vice President Katsuhiko Takaike, visited Myanmar from November 11 through 18, exchanging views with senior officials of the Myanmar Presidential Office, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defense and other government agencies, as well as executives of new think tanks. Expectations on democratic reforms were growing ahead of a U.S. President's first Myanmar visit. But Myanmar was on its way to recovering a diplomatic balance after its heavy dependence on China, said Myanmar presidential adviser Ko Ko Hlaing.

China's considerable presence

Nevertheless, senior Myanmar officials indicated China's great presence in their country. National Planning and Economic Development Minister Kan Zaw said U.S. and European economic sanctions forced Myanmar to depend heavily on China. In the past two decades, China accounted for nearly a half of foreign investment in Myanmar, the minister said. Deputy Defense Minister Maj. Gen. Kyaw Nyunt went so far as to say that China stood on the side of Myanmar when other countries refused to deal with Myanmar. Myanmar people have traditionally repaid their debt to anyone, he noted.

On the Myanmar government's surprise decision as announced in September 2011 to freeze the China-led Myitsone Dam construction project along the upper Irrawaddy River in northern Myanmar, government officials said they respected citizens' opposition to the construction. While explaining the freeze would continue until national sentiment is improved, they noted the freeze was imposed because the project destroyed the environment of the holy upper Irrawaddy River and because electricity generated at the dam would all be sent to China for a certain period of time with no benefit expected for Myanmar. They indicated it would be difficult to lift the freeze. But whether China would give up on the project is still uncertain.

Seeking to link Indian Ocean to Yunnan Province

The decision to freeze the Myitsone Dam project was useful for President U Thein Sein to get citizens' confidence after Myanmar's shift to civilian rule. A U.N. official said China's top priority in Myanmar would be the construction of a

700-kilometer natural gas/oil pipeline linking China's Yunnan Province to Kyaukphyu Port on the Indian Ocean coast. China, which has become an oil importer, will greatly benefit from the direct transportation of energy resources from the Indian Ocean. Construction is under way for a deep-water port where a 300,000-ton tanker could be anchored. The pipeline will be completed in two years under the present plan. There are plans to construct a railway and expressway along the pipeline.

Min Ko Naing, 49, who was a student leader in the 1988 democracy movement, said anti-China demonstrations were emerging in protest to environmental destruction around the port accompanying the pipeline construction. In Shan State neighboring China's Yunnan Province, movements would arise against land seizure for the pipeline construction, he said. The problem is that the policymaking process in Myanmar lacks transparency and could be linked to China and interests of the military and government officials.

Pro-Japan Myanmar expects Japan to provide international rules, standards and technologies. Japan should help Myanmar reduce its dependence on China amid a tug of war between China and Western countries toward the next general election in 2015. JINF plans to promote exchanges with Myanmar think tanks including the Myanmar Institute of Strategic and International Studies as well as Myanmar Egress that operates a political school to train young people.

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