

Mission to Myanmar

Song Qingrun

Recently as rumors of Myanmar's "nuclear plan" began to swirl in the Western media, even US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton voiced concern over the country's alleged nuclear ambition. But it is questionable that an impoverished country like Myanmar could produce the atomic bomb in the short term in the first place. So what's behind the spread of the rumors?

Over the years, the international press corps has already played up Myanmar's "nuclear plan," reporting that Myanmar, also known as Burma in the West, has acquired nuclear technology and nuclear weapons from North Korea. But more recently, nuclear proliferation concerns regarding North Korea and Iran have become bigger hot-button issues.

Now once again, however, it's Myanmar's turn.

The Sydney Morning Herald, for example, broke the news on August 1 which said, with assistance from North Korea, Myanmar had embarked on a clandestine nuclear project aiming to acquire its first atomic bomb within five years. It further alleged that Myanmar has been providing Pyongyang with enriched uranium in exchange for nuclear technology.

Then, on August 3, a Russian newspaper, quoting exiled Myanmar scholars, said the number of Myanmar's nuclear experts would reach 1,000 by the year 2012. Thanks to these media reports, the Myanmar nuclear issue has become the focus of international media attention.

The US Government has since exploited these rumors, trying to disingenuously "arrange" a Myanmar nuclear project. Last month, in a notable instance, Hillary Clinton raised the specter of closer North Korea-Myanmar collaboration in developing nuclear weapons as a dangerous precedent during her visit to Thailand for the Regional Forum of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Moreover, she voiced concern that the collaboration would endanger not just neighboring countries but also regional stability.

Kurt Campbell, US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs, has also speculated that Myanmar reinforced its cooperation with North Korea for the express purpose of obtaining a nuclear Weapon.

Myanmar pursued a nuclear plan for the first time in 1956, but the plan was abandoned with the ascent of the U Ne Win military government six years later.

More recent efforts by Myanmar to build a nuclear reactor, this time with Russia's help, foundered as well. Initially, Moscow agreed to help Myanmar establish a nuclear studies center, including a nuclear reactor, in 2002. But the program was shelved the following year because of severe financial problems. It was not until 2007 that Myanmar and Russia signed an agreement to restart the program with the participation of Russia's State Atomic Energy Corporation.

Andrew Selth, an Australian academic and military expert, said the construction of the nuclear reactor had made little progress, owing to lack of funds. Indeed, Myanmar's nuclear program remains in its infancy due to financial and technical difficulties. Thus, it is highly unlikely that Myanmar will fulfil its nuclear ambitions any time soon.

In fact, due to its backward economy, Myanmar can hardly get enough funds for a nuclear project at all. Being one of world's poorest nations, Myanmar has suffered from decades of economic stagnation and political isolation. Last year, its gross domestic product was only \$27.18 billion.

With a massive external debt of \$6.7 billion and limited foreign exchange reserves of \$3.6 billion, there is no way such an undeveloped country could afford the high costs of a nuclear project.

In addition, as the nuclear reactor program with Russia has not made any progress so far, it has provided scarce technical and material support for producing nuclear weapons. Besides, with the orientation of academic research, the Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology cannot turn Myanmar's technicians into nuclear experts.

Furthermore, Myanmar signed a comprehensive safeguards agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in 1995. Thus, under the tight regulations of the IAEA, it will be no secret should Myanmar decide to enrich plutonium with a nuclear reactor to produce nuclear weapons.

In fact, US intelligence agencies have no evidence linking Myanmar to nuclear weapons, nor have IAEA officials made any comments to date on the fresh allegations.

But Selth has said that Myanmar would probably take a risk in acquiring nuclear weapons in order to enhance its international status as well as to increase its bargaining chips with the international community.

A defector from Myanmar has also said that a secret nuclear reactor is being constructed with North Korea's aid in a mountain near Naung Laing in Myanmar's north. The country, the defector added, is also exploiting two new uranium mines. However, with no serious evidence, it is difficult to tell if this is credible or not.

There are several issues at play here. First, one agenda clearly exists to sever North Korea's economic and trade contact with Southeast Asia, as well as to pressure China.

Because of Western media allegations, neither Myanmar, nor any other Southeast Asian nations, would dare allow *Kang Nam I*, the North Korean cargo ship reported to be sailing to Myanmar for trade in weapons, to land ashore.

In the future, it would be extremely difficult for North Korean ships-even those with ordinary goods aboard-to conduct normal transactions with Southeast Asian countries. Besides, Washington could use the opportunity to ratchet up the North Korean nuclear issue as a means to manipulate China and Chinese interests in the region.

Second, the West may intend to further pressure Myanmar with the renewed cause of a "nuclear threat." The United States and other Western countries have long been applying sanctions and pressure on Myanmar based on democracy and human right issues. But these have achieved little effect-and no support from ASEAN countries.

By igniting a Myanmar nuclear issue, which might have a chance of being exaggerated as nuclear proliferation in the future, Western countries could "create" a nuclear-armed Myanmar. Through this, they could dramatize its threat to the region, thus creating an atmosphere of fear and pressure from the

international community, including ASEAN. This would leave Myanmar more alone and isolated than it already is.

Furthermore, the United States could achieve its goal of weakening ASEAN and thus take the opportunity to strengthen its control over the organization. By upgrading the Myanmar nuclear issue, the United States will inevitably cause internal conflict among ASEAN countries, notably between Myanmar and Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia-countries that have a history of criticizing Myanmar. This criticism is bound to cause regional tensions.

Third, the West may create a new regional flashpoint in areas southwest of China, thus tying down Beijing's diplomatic resources while erecting barriers to Sino-ASEAN relations.

With the North Korean nuclear issue looming large in Northeast Asia, the heating up of the Myanmar nuclear issue may yet be another big burden in China's international diplomacy. The West clearly intends to create disturbances to drain China's diplomatic energy, leaving it bogged down handling peripheral matters-which, as a result, will leave Beijing with less energy to address global affairs and limit its role in the international arena.

Besides, as the relations between China and Southeast Asian countries have been upgraded, the United States has recently displayed an obvious intention to weaken Beijing's influence with its neighbors to the southeast.

The great clamor over Myanmar's nuclear issue will bring heavy new challenges to Sino-Myanmar and Sino-ASEAN relations. China will therefore face more difficulties in balancing its relations with its neighboring countries and with the West.

Will Myanmar obtain its own nuclear weapons? That's quite a question.

Nonetheless, the cloud surrounding Myanmar's nuclear ambitions will continue to expand, so long as the West keeps playing up its rumors and reveals more shocking news. US nuclear non-proliferation experts have called on the IAEA to launch an investigation on Myanmar. The US Government may also exert further pressure on the IAEA, and even bring the issue before the UN Security Council.

So when it comes to Myanmar's nuclear issue, as with the mushroom clouds of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, any slightest misunderstanding could easily end up in another US invasion. □□□

[Source : Beijing Review]