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Icon Suu Kyi Joins Fight Against China Dam in Myanmar



Khin Maung Win/Associated Press

In this file photo taken on Jan. 7, 2011, a Kachin ethnic woman walks on stones in the Irrawaddy River in Myitkyina, Kachin State in northern Myanmar. A dam project being built on the river with Chinese help has attracted widespread local opposition.



European Pressphoto Agency

Myanmar democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi (L) talks to reporters as Aung Kyi (R), Union Labor Minister, stands beside her after their meeting at

SeinLeiKanThar state guest house in Yangon, Myanmar, August 12, 2011. Aung San Suu Kyi issued a statement on August 11 calling on the governments of Myanmar and China to reassess the 6,000-megawatt dam project due to safety and environmental concerns.

A powerful moral force is now standing in opposition to a China-funded dam project in Myanmar: icon Aung San Suu Kyi.

Ms. Suu Kyi this week released a letter calling on backers of the Myitsone hydropower project to “reassess the scheme,” citing concerns that dams on Myanmar’s Irrawaddy River degrade the environment, disrupt rice production, displace minority peoples, hurt livelihoods and risk unleashing devastating consequences during earthquakes. Her letter was distributed by a U.S. organization opposed to the project.

The Myitsone project is a 6000-megawatt cascade-style hydropower station [being built as a joint venture](#) by government-run China Power Investment Corp., Expected to come online in 2018, the project is a major symbol of China’s deepening political and economic relationship with the military regime in Myanmar.

China Power Investment Corp did not respond to requests for comment on Friday.

“We believe that, keeping in mind the interests of both countries, both governments would wish to avoid consequences which might endanger lives and homes,” Ms. Suu Kyi wrote.

By voicing opposition to widespread river damming, Myanmar’s most well-known opposition figure may boost international awareness of the project, long criticized by environmental and human rights groups. The dams, which represent a major source of foreign project finance for the government, are likewise [stirring widespread discontent domestically](#).

Dams are also a growing political factor in China’s relations elsewhere in Southeast Asia, a region increasingly dependent on the world’s most populous nation for trade but worried its efforts to alter the flow of rivers could, among other detrimental effects, reduce their ability to irrigate rice fields.

Last month, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, while meeting regional officials in Indonesia, offered to spur a two-year-old Lower Mekong Initiative that is aimed boosting U.S.-backed development in the region, thereby countering Beijing’s influence in poorer parts of Southeast Asia. In some cases, China’s dam building is a big irritant, [including Vietnam](#).

Analysts say China already has strong influence with Myanmar's military leadership, a country that promises vast natural resources, a potential channel to new sea channels and geopolitical proximity to rival India.

The Myitsone hydroelectric dam and smaller projects in Myanmar also reflect Beijing's ambitions to export technology developed at home and showcased in its own electricity producing facilities, like the giant Three Gorges Dam. But just as China's ambitions to export high speed rail technology have been [tripped up by a recent accident](#), its dam-building techniques have also been [questioned on quality grounds](#).

Ms. Suu Kyi's letter, distributed by a group opposed to the dam, Berkeley, Calif.-based [International Rivers](#), was measured in its criticism of what the Nobel Peace laureate called "the Burmese-Chinese venture" and acknowledged that the region needs power and economic development.

"While recognizing that large sums of money have already been spent on the realization of the project, we would urge that in the interests of both national and international harmony, concerned parties should reassess the scheme and cooperate to find solutions that would prevent undesirable consequences and thus allay the fears of all who are anxious to protect the Irrawaddy," Ms. Suu Kyi said in the letter.

An op-ed published Wednesday in the state-run New Light of Myanmar defended the project, saying it had already provided more than 2,600 jobs, according to a [translation](#) by Burmanet. "State leaders will not give the green light to implement a project that is not beneficial to the nation and the people," it added.

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