

The US Accelerates its Scramble for Southeast Asia

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On Wednesday, the US took two symbolic steps aimed at further warming up its relationship with Myanmar.. Then the first US ambassador to that country in 22 years, 47-year-old Derek Mitchell, who formerly was President Barack Obama's special envoy to Myanmar, arrived in the country in an ambassadorial capacity. On the same day, President Obama announced that US companies will now be allowed to "responsibly do business in Burma".

The lifting of the sanctions, which except entities belonging to the army or ministry of defense, gives US firms a go-ahead to invest in projects with the state-owned Myanma Oil and Gas Enterprise, reports the Associated Press. The move is regarded as controversial since Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi last month explicitly urged foreign firms not to do business with the enterprise.

But surely, when dominance in the north-western part of the Indian Ocean is at stake, the US is always ready to forget about human rights and easily disregard human rights activists' calls.

The fact that the stakes are really high is in no doubt. Myanmar is a pivotal country in the region, and not only because of its natural and mineral wealth, but also because it occupies a strategic place. For years, it was almost solely dominated by China, which saw it as a bypass enabling it to avoid shipment of goods via the narrow Malacca Strait teeming with pirates and US warships.

The US "strategic pivot" and shift of foreign policy focus to the Asia-Pacific rim announced by the US administration in November of last year is clearly demonstrated both by the new developments in US-Myanmar (although still stubbornly called Burma in the West) relations and by the current voyage of US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton who on Thursday arrived in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, where the ASEAN foreign ministers' meeting is under way.

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In Mongolia, Ms. Clinton praised the country as a “democratic model for Asia”. Vietnam is a long-time competitor of China in the region, and all the latest US diplomatic efforts have been directed at forging a kind of anti-Chinese alliance with the former foe in the war of the 1960s and 1970s up to returning the navy and air force base at Cam Ranh to US control. Laos, which is only beginning to open up for US diplomacy, occupies a strategic place under China’s soft belly. Therefore, it makes a valuable addition to the US policy of surrounding China.

The acceleration of US diplomatic efforts in the region fell on fertile ground. Relations between China and its neighbors, most notably in the South China Sea, have seriously deteriorated in recent months. China has territorial disputes with almost all other littoral countries, and this has more than once led to balancing on the brink of an open military confrontation – both with immediate neighbors and some other Asian powers, including India. Earlier this week, the ASEAN ministers adopted a code of conduct for resolving conflicts in the disputed waters. Now, “little remains to be done” but persuading China to abide by the code.

The US in its turn is increasing its military presence in the area by positioning its warships in Singapore, increasing the number of marines stationed in Australia, working out plans to rebuild their naval and air force bases in the Philippines along with the above mentioned Cam Ranh base in Vietnam.

Chinese media were quick to react to Ms. Hillary’s activity. On Thursday, as reported by Reuters, the leading Chinese newspaper People’s Daily published a piece signed by the pen name “Zhong Sheng”, meaning “Voice of China”. The paper slammed Hillary Clinton for comments she made lauding democracy and implicitly criticizing restrictions in China.

“Who is the United States to haughtily appraise Asia’s democratic position?” Reuters quotes the newspaper as saying.

It goes on further to state that the US has ulterior motives for pushing democracy in Asia.

“In reality, lauding democracy and holding the flag for human rights is an important part of the US ‘return to Asia’ strategy,” says the commentary.

In fact, while US strategic goals in the area are obvious, for the countries of the region the situation presents a choice between two evils – that is, either further confrontation with China, or relying on the assistance of a more powerful ally who is unlikely to stop in its push for dominance in the region or simply driving China away. US help is never provided free of any charge, and the fee may be even higher than the cost of a standoff with China.

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