

Facilitating Sino-Myanmar hydroelectric development cooperation

The Myitsone dam and hydroelectric scheme, on the Irrawaddy mainstem in Kachin State—where there notably remains a viable anti-national uprising—is the largest infrastructure development under consideration for Burma/Myanmar. The proponent is a state-owned PRC company, and nearly all the power produced would be wheeled to Yunnan. Facing fierce opposition stemming from distrust over inequitable allocation of key natural resources and concerns over environmental and social impacts not yet empirically-evaluated, in 2011 the Government of Myanmar unilaterally “suspended” the agreement with the Chinese, although surveying and minor earthworks reportedly continue. Given the excellence—from an engineering perspective—of the Myitsone dam site and the steepening demand for energy in southwest China; and that benefits would eventually flow to the Burmese too, the suspension is widely seen as temporary. Indeed, an anti-dam protest march from Yangon to Myitsone is underway now.

Contrasting implementation approaches —accommodationist and confrontational— may be applied to such contentious projects. The former considers conflicting visions and objectives as reasonable, valid and subject to negotiation; and would devise mutually agreeable solutions sharing the acknowledged disadvantages, with *non-mitigable* issues presented candidly for transparent administrative resolution. But in more authoritarian polities, a project’s critics may be cast as the enemy and a military-style strategy applied to achieve speedy and effectively unconditional execution of the adopted “optimal” scheme: nothing is acceded to opponents which strengthens their position or facilitates their intelligence-gathering.

Where impact assessment documentation is mandatory, their contents can be self-serving and/or their distribution restricted. As Southeast Asia evolves towards more open societies, heavy-handed development planning risks backfiring expensively: in terms of money, time, institutional credibility and civil unrest.

