

## **Assessing Local Responses to Chinese-Backed Resource Development Projects in Myanmar and Cambodia: A Critical Survey**

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### **Abstract**

This article examines local responses to Chinese-backed resource development projects in Myanmar and Cambodia. It interrogates why, despite comparable levels of state restrictiveness, localized resistance has emerged in Myanmar against the Sino-Myanmar oil and gas pipelines, whereas the Chinese-backed North-South railway mega-project in Cambodia has been met with tempered opposition. Here, the article proposes that the existence of high civil-society capacity can contribute to facilitating opposition under restrictive state conditions.

### **Keywords**

resource development, Cambodia, Myanmar, Chinese investment, civil society, activism

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## INTRODUCTION

How can localized resistance emerge under restrictive state conditions? What accounts for the striking displays of popular contestation in authoritarian countries like Myanmar, where civil society activism is often a target of persecution by the state? This article explores the emergence and non-emergence of sustained opposition against Chinese-backed resource development schemes in Myanmar and Cambodia. Adopting a comparative perspective derived from field research in China and mainland Southeast Asia, it focuses specifically on two large-scale resource projects: the oil and gas pipelines that cut across Myanmar's Rakhine (Arakan) and Shan States, and the North-South railway mega-project in Cambodia's Rovieng district. Situated in socially and ecologically-sensitive areas, both schemes are identified as 'high-impact': not only can the consequences of such large-scale, resource projects prove detrimental to the natural environment, but the social ramifications on local communities as a result of forced displacement and the loss of livelihoods can also be acute. However, while organized forms of resistance have surfaced against the Chinese-backed scheme in Myanmar, there appears to be tempered opposition, if not conspicuous silence, in the Cambodian case examined. This raises the two-fold question of why there is such a divergence and what factors have contributed to this outcome.

A key variable considered here is the role played by civil society within each of these countries—in particular, their capacity to leverage information, resources and external support, as well as manipulate the status quo in favor of their principled ideas. Access to information, for one, is revealed to be a sizable inhibiting factor in the Cambodian case, but is less of a barrier for network activists working in the Myanmar example. This is due not only to the persistent efforts of local civil society groups and transnational NGOs like Arakan Oil Watch, Badeidha Moe and the Shwe Gas Movement in data-gathering and raising public awareness, but is also in part the result of the support these organizations were able to gain from external actors (e.g. major news outlets) that helped to disseminate their cause to the wider regional public. As such, while the popular outburst against the Chinese-backed oil and gas pipelines scheme in Myanmar might appear to be spontaneous at best, the traction achieved thus far by civil society in generating public interest is in fact based upon a sustained advocacy campaign; one which has been driven by a broad-based and resourceful activist network with transnational linkages. It is in this sense that a high degree of civil-society capacity has proven central to fostering localized resistance despite Myanmar's restrictive socio-political circumstances.

This article proceeds in three parts. The first section offers an overview of the

nature of Chinese investment in mainland Southeast Asia's extractive industries. The second advances a working analytical framework with which to make sense of the relationship between civil-society network formation and the development of resistance. The third section then considers, in turn, cases of tempered opposition in Cambodia and localized resistance in Myanmar.

## CHINA AND RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT IN MAINLAND SOUTH-EAST ASIA

As China's demand for energy and mineral resources grows (*Reuters* 2013), mainland Southeast Asia has witnessed a surge in Chinese investment aimed at developing its resource sectors. At present, China is the biggest investor in Myanmar and the largest investor in Cambodia in terms of the cumulative investment volume as of 2012 (Deboonme 2014; *Radio Free Asia* 2014). The expansion of the Chinese corporate presence has, however, given rise to a host of social and environmental problems, as forests are felled in Laos to fuel the region's illegal timber trade, specifically to supply China's booming construction industry (Fogarty 2012); bauxite, crucial for aluminum production, is mined in Vietnam's Central Highlands for export to China (The Hanoiist 2010); and oil and gas pipelines are constructed in Myanmar, traversing ethnically fragile areas much to the chagrin of local villagers. Here, major Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) are often accused of enabling the questionable enforcement of social and environmental standards in host countries, as well as perpetuating unsustainable resource management practices within the region (Maurin & Yeophantong 2013; Turner & Wu n.d.; Lazarus 2008).

That said, it warrants note that the governance problems associated with resource exploitation are deeply entrenched in this industrializing region. Indeed, this arguably has more to do with the nature of the autocratic regimes in place than with Chinese investors *per se*. Although the Ministry of Industry, Mining and Energy (MIME) is the primary agency responsible for overseeing the development of Cambodia's natural resources, ultimate decision-making authority rests with the incumbent prime minister, who can directly authorize certain projects considered under urgent or special circumstances. This clearly raises a probable cause for alarm, as it becomes feasible for Hun Sen to circumvent existing regulations, including those requiring environmental impact assessments (EIAs) to be conducted before the granting of licenses for mining exploration. Similar problems related to implementation and enforcement are likewise seen in the Myanmar and Vietnamese country-contexts. Despite having an elaborate approval mechanism in place

for foreign investment projects, the uneven enforcement of regulatory requirements in Vietnam has meant that some major resource schemes have been allowed to proceed without the necessary impact assessments. The recent publication of laws such as the 2013 Foreign Investment Rules notwithstanding, Myanmar has also yet to formally pass any EIA legislation.

Even in cases where the existence of such regulatory gaps can work to afford greater political space to processes of civil regulation, whereupon civil society is able to help monitor business practices and make up for government oversight, such informal forms of regulation cannot wholly serve as a substitute for official regulation. Rather, civil regulation is at best a complementary mechanism: despite potentially contributing to 'bottom-up' governance and greater accountability on the part of governments and the private sector, it remains invariably constrained in its ability to directly shape corporate conduct.

Moreover, when it comes to deciding between resource development to meet market demands and spur economic growth on the one hand, and stringent regulatory enforcement that could increase project costs and deter some investors (and for which government capacity might also be lacking) on the other, developing-country governments will tend to find a stronger incentive to pursue the former course of action. The Chinese, Cambodian and Myanmar governments represent prime examples of this mentality, having actively prioritized the extraction of finite resources as a means to enhance economic development and hasten regional integration.

The imperative to secure and diversify the country's resource supplies abroad is, of course, one that has long-standing roots in Chinese policy rhetoric, having been stressed by Deng Xiaoping ever since the late 1970s. More recently, it has become embodied in such concepts as the 'two markets and two resources' (*lianggeshichang, liangzhongziyuan*) idea. At the opening ceremony of the China International Mining Conference in November 2010, then Vice Premier Li Keqiang had expounded on the concept by stressing the importance of strengthening domestic resource markets and enhancing international cooperation in the resource sector (*People's Daily* 2010). Crucially, it is also this notion which serves as the rationale behind the ongoing push to develop China's 'strategic energy channels.' As discussed later, the Sino-Myanmar oil and gas pipelines, which are intended to help accelerate economic growth in southwest China, constitutes a project that has been undertaken as part of this policy directive.

## LOCALIZED RESISTANCE AND CIVIL SOCIETY NETWORKS

Mainland Southeast Asia's extractive industries are marked by high levels of political opacity and sensitivity. Coupled by the fact that mining projects are often situated in remote areas, investment in this sector tends to be hidden away from the 'public eye,' effectively rendering it difficult for civil society to monitor such projects and, should the need arise, mobilize collective action against them. Indeed, the ability of civil society actors to effect actual policy change (e.g. suspension of or withdrawal from a high-impact scheme) within this sector suggests considerable constraints.

Yet, across the two cases examined here a degree of variation is found to exist on one dimension: that is, the emergence of localized resistance. Even though limited public concern and opposition has been leveled in Cambodia against Chinese investments in Rovieng to date—this is despite there being some knowledge of Chinese plans and their potential impacts on communities and the surrounding environment—the case of the oil and gas pipelines in Myanmar yields a strikingly different outcome. Here, the Chinese SOE involved became a prominent target of localized resistance that subsequently grew into a full-fledged campaign. And as suggested earlier, the campaign managed to attract considerable public attention despite Myanmar's unfavorable political climate. If one were to subscribe to conventional wisdom which considers state restrictiveness, as manifest in authoritarian and semi-authoritarian countries plagued by endemic corruption and political opacity, to be an inhibiting factor vis-à-vis civil society's freedom to maneuver, how is one to explain the emergence of sustained resistance in Myanmar against this Chinese-backed scheme?

The link between state restrictiveness and an activist network's level of effectiveness in issue creation and resistance mobilization is by no means straightforward. I posit that the *capacity* of a network constitutes a key determinant of whether or not localized resistance emerges in restrictive socio-political contexts. To be sure, the term 'capacity' is an equivocal and oftentimes conceptually-loaded one, which renders any attempt to measure it precarious. There is, moreover, the added risk of committing to a tautological explanation, whereby civil society capacity is defined by the very existence of localized resistance. For this reason, it is necessary to formulate a set of indicators for assessing the relative capacity of civil society networks in the Cambodian and Myanmar cases. As a first step, I advance the following three: access to information, access to resources, and breadth of network.

It is not sufficient for local advocacy groups or international NGOs to adopt an issue; they need to also have adequate resources at their disposal as well as ac-

cess to ‘game-changing’ information. These are integral to processes of ‘issue definition’—that is, the identification of ‘responsible parties’ and the proposal of ‘credible solutions’ (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 19)—which, in turn, serve as the basis for orchestrating effective campaigns that attract public support and gain policy resonance. At the same time, for an organization to create a compelling ‘problem,’ it will need to draw on authoritative, if at times ‘shocking,’ information that can add to its credibility as a ‘gatekeeper’ within a given issue-area (Carpenter 2010, 214). The breadth of a civil society network (i.e. the degree of external support it has) is likewise predicated on the other two indicators. Once an ‘expert’ reputation has been established, the expansion of a network is more likely to occur, as other domestic and transnational NGOs are persuaded to join the cause. In certain scenarios, one may also see an advocacy campaign gaining sympathizers within government and the bureaucracy, in a way reminiscent of the strategies used by ‘rightful resisters’ (O’Brien 1996). Anti-Myitsone dam activism in Myanmar, for instance, has succeeded in fomenting intense opposition at both the local and national levels. This was made possible by the existence of a well-organized activist network, which was also notably characterized by a broad membership base. Despite facing many impediments in their efforts to bypass the state and build civic engagement, this network managed to employ a range of strategic tools, which included cooperating with those inside the Myanmar government, to turn the Chinese-backed Myitsone dam project into an issue worthy of public concern and collective resistance (Yeophantong 2013).

This is where the notion of civil regulation—defined as the regulation of the private sector by civil society actors (see Mason 2005, 150)—comes into play. It is usually in response to the weaknesses inherent in extant governing arrangements that activist networks are either formed or bolstered. Working to rectify governance gaps by bringing public scrutiny to bear on opaque decision-making processes, a major function performed by such networks is to push for outcomes such as answerability, compensation and remediation (Fox 2007, 663-671) through indirect as well as direct channels of influence. What this means is that network activists may attempt to effect policy change either through direct engagement with the target actors (i.e. government or company in question); indirect pressure through engagement with the affected public or host government; or some combination of both. Mass campaigns, popular protests and petitions are, of course, among the more confrontational approaches adopted by activists, whereas the formation of collaborative partnerships with government agencies and companies represent more consultative pathways of engagement. Regardless, the overarching objective is usually aimed at increasing the costs of actor non-compliance to established standards and, in other cases, prevailing social expectations. As

reflected in reinvigorated calls in past years for sustainable investment practices, social disapprobation of high-impact resource schemes has the potential to escalate into protracted host-society opposition. This could negatively impact not just the reputation of investors, but also result in commercial losses in the event that a project is disrupted or cancelled.

That said, there remains the distinct possibility that, aside from civil society capacity, other factors can also contribute to the emergence of resistance or, conversely, the lack thereof. A summary of the potential causal mechanisms is as follows:

1. *Civil society capacity as an enabling factor*: Civil society networks that have a broad support base, sufficient resources at their disposal, and are privy to sensitive information are likely to succeed in fomenting resistance at the grassroots and national levels. Such attributes grant them increased capacity to raise public awareness on sensitive or little-known issues, as well as ensure that their cause remains prominent within the public sphere for a sustained period of time.
2. *State restrictiveness as an inhibiting factor*: Through the exercise of strict control over the flow of politically-sensitive information and the promulgation of national laws that restrict the officially-sanctioned parameters of civil society action, the state (i.e. the Cambodian and Myanmar governments) can increase the costs of dissidence and resistance, thereby deterring as well as limiting the capacity of civil society to engage in and sustain activism.
3. *International and/or regional involvement as an enabling factor*: Involvement in the form of support and/or scrutiny from the international community and regional organizations (e.g. the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, or ASEAN) can contribute to emboldening or even catalyzing localized resistance within a given country.

These causal pathways need not be treated as mutually-exclusive. Indeed, isolating these dynamics may prove to be a challenging undertaking, as they can coexist and complement one another. The ensuing analysis, nevertheless, suggests that the level of civil society capacity remains the key factor here. As evinced by the Cambodian case, the existence of a civil society alone does not ensure that organized resistance will occur in a particular issue-area.

## CASES OF TEMPERED OPPOSITION AND RESISTANCE

The following two cases involve Chinese-backed, resource development schemes that are both large in scale and located in countries exhibiting restrictive state characteristics, where the incumbent regimes generally do not look favorably upon civic activism (Sopheap 2015; *Guardian* 2015) and where political transparency is low. While the exact nature of the projects are different (i.e. one concerns the completed construction of oil and gas pipelines; the other involves the ongoing construction of a steel plant, railway and seaport to export extracted resources), it is the case that the social and environmental impacts of both schemes were already anticipated in the early stages of project development (that is, when information on the schemes was not readily available to the public) to be harmful and extensive. Here, concerns have largely centered on human displacement, livelihood loss and environmental degradation. In this regard, the varying project-type and level of project development are not expected to affect civil society responses to these schemes.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Cambodian North-South Railway Mega-Project**

As early as 2010, plans were proposed by the Cambodia Iron and Steel Mining Industry Group (CISMIG) to undertake the construction of a US\$11.2-billion mega-project comprised of a US\$650-million steel mill in Preah Vihear province, a purpose-built seaport in Koh Kong province, and a 404-km railway in the Cambodian district of Rovieng. In 2013, CISMIG signed an agreement with two other Chinese SOEs—China Railway Major Bridge Engineering Corporation (MBEC), a subsidiary of the state-owned China Railways Group, and China Ocean Engineering Construction General Bureau (COEC), a subsidiary of the China National Machinery Industry Corporation (Sinomach)—to construct the railway and port components of the bigger project (Prak 2013). Although CISMIG is registered as a private company based in Cambodia with a majority Chinese stake (70%), according to its chairman Zhang Chuan Li, it is supported by four major Chinese steel companies (Phorn & Lewis 2013). Poised to become the country's largest Chinese-financed scheme when completed, the North-South Railway mega-project will provide the Chinese with access to valuable iron ore, while purportedly stimulating the economic growth of Preah Vihear province through the export of locally-mined steel to neighboring countries.

Very little information on the scheme is publicly available, however. Even the Cambodian Minister for Public Works and Transport Tram Iv Tek has admitted to

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1 I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for raising this point.



not knowing ‘what the [Chinese] companies [involved] will do’ (quoted in Phorn & Lewis 2013). While it appears that the scheme has mainly proceeded on the basis of Prime Minister Hun Sen’s approval, Environment Minister Mok Mareth has also revealed that an EIA for the scheme has yet to be submitted for the Ministry’s formal consideration, despite work on the project then set to begin six months later and with feasibility studies having already been conducted for the steel plant and railway in 2009 and 2010, respectively.

The project, specifically its railway component, is expected to cut through an expanse of land that will entail the forced relocation of communities, including indigenous Kuy ethnic communities that have traditionally lived in the area. It is also likely to pass through protected forests such as the Botum Sakor National Park (World Forest Movement 2014). Of the concerns that have been raised over the scheme the majority have focused on the failure of Cambodian officials and the companies involved to disclose project information and the expected impacts on communities (Marshall & Prak 2013).

Despite Cambodia being known for having an active and fairly outspoken civil society (see Todd 2015), concerns voiced against this mega-project have yet to translate into outright opposition, having drawn limited public attention. According to interviews with Cambodian environment and development NGOs, they attribute this to the general lack of transparency that typifies the extractives sector and, in particular, to the difficulty involved in ascertaining the project’s repercussions (Author interviews, Cambodia, March 2014). As one representative from a major international NGO observed, ‘No one really knows what’s happening’ (Author interview, Cambodia, March 14, 2014). The limitations faced by local civil society in mobilizing information on this matter is further reflected in a recent (and possibly the only) briefing report published on this issue by Equitable Cambodia and Focus on the Global South, which had to rely for the most part on information collated from secondary sources—namely, media reports and company websites (Equitable Cambodia and Focus on the Global South, 2013).

Without a proper EIA, the scheme’s full range of effects remains largely unknown and uncertain. Unlike resource development projects in the hydropower sector, for example, where reservoir inundation causes visible changes to the surrounding environment, mining involves more low-key development that renders monitoring difficult. For this reason, generating broader public awareness—that is to say, concern beyond the communities who stand to be adversely affected by the mega-project—has proven to be challenging, as the gravity of the situation remains unclear to the general public and even to most of the NGOs themselves. At the same time, these problems are further compounded by the fact that CISMIG maintains close ties with the ruling Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) and local officials.

Clearly, the political barriers to gaining information encountered by civil society actors seeking to contest the scheme are high. Despite reports of local communities meeting with the prominent Cambodian NGO Development and Partnership in Action (DPA) to voice their misgivings of the scheme, there has since been little sign of sustained civil society advocacy on the issue, let alone outright resistance. However, although originally slated to be completed by 2017, according to latest reports, progress on the railway component of the mega-project has been delayed due to a lack of funds (de Carteret 2014).

### **The Sino-Myanmar Oil and Gas Pipelines**

A different set of dynamics is found in the case of localized resistance against the Sino-Myanmar oil and gas pipelines—and, in particular, the Shwe gas pipeline scheme. A joint venture between the Chinese National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and Myanmar's national petroleum company, Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise, the Shwe gas pipeline underwent three years of construction and has recently begun operations. The pipeline is set to deliver approximately 12-billion m<sup>3</sup> of gas annually for domestic consumption and for export to China's southwest provinces, including Yunnan and Guangxi. The project feeds into the Chinese government's broader resource strategy, as previously mentioned, that seeks to secure the country's access to energy resources overseas.

Despite government attempts to publicize the scheme as a boon to Myanmar's economic development, this has not helped to allay the intense opposition that has emerged domestically against the project over the years. From the very beginning, details about the project were not properly disclosed to affected communities. No prior public consultation was conducted by the Myanmar government or the companies involved. In fact, when it first became known that the natural gas extracted would be destined for the Chinese market, this sparked a '24-Hour Electricity' campaign across Rakhine State in 2011, with villagers and youth groups subsequently mobilizing protests across the country (SGM 2011).

Given how the project cuts across an ethnically-fragile area, this has given rise to an additional slate of concerns pertaining to the project's socio-political and environmental repercussions. The potential for leakages during the drilling process meant that the surrounding coastal areas stood to suffer from chemical contamination. Despite CNPC's claims of handling land acquisition issues on the basis of 'voluntary decision' and fair compensation, accusations soon surfaced over forced labor practices and land confiscation during the project's construction phase, leading to the displacement of communities on the Maday and Ramree Islands. Research undertaken by such organizations as Arakan Oil Watch, a member organization of Oilwatch Southeast Asia, has further added credence to these

claims, with concerns also raised over revenue transparency. Crucially, the sale of Shwe gas to China is estimated to bring in over US\$29 billion to the Myanmar government in the next 30 years (Author interview, Chiang Mai, March 2, 2013).

One major instance of popular opposition within Myanmar against the scheme took place in April 2013 on Maday Island. The protest was attended by around 400 people—the majority of whom were subsistence fishermen (*Radio Free Asia* 2013)—who marched to CNPC's office to demand the project's immediate suspension and adequate compensation for confiscated lands. It was also during this period that the Myanmar-China Pipeline Watch Committee, an alliance of twelve civil society groups, was formed in Mandalay. Notably the committee assumed an important role not only in successfully organizing a mass signature campaign, but also in undertaking a social impact assessment survey of the pipelines' effects on local communities in three townships in Rakhine (Mann 2013).

Of particular interest here is how activism against the oil and gas pipelines showcases transnational linkages. Through the combined advocacy work of transnational NGOs such as the Chiang Mai-based Arakan Oil Watch, Burma Environmental Working Group (BEWG), International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), and Earth Rights International, as well as Burmese civil society groups like Paung Ku, Myanmar Green Network and Thazin Development Foundation, the issue came to garner attention on both a national and regional scale, such that pressure was progressively placed on the Myanmar government and CNPC to account for the negative consequences of their joint venture. Previously in 2012, 130 NGOs from over 20 countries had orchestrated a 'Global Day of Action' against the oil and gas pipelines, staging public protests in front of Chinese embassies and submitting letters to President Thein Sein that requested the project's postponement (FIDH 2012). More recently, in 2014, local environmental and human rights group Badeidha Moe organized a photo exhibition in Yangon, which featured photos taken by villagers affected by the environmental degradation and uneven development caused by the pipelines project.

What the emergence of localized resistance against the Chinese-led oil and gas pipelines underscores, in effect, is the importance of broad-based, civil society networks to popular mobilization under restrictive state conditions. Anti-pipeline activists operating within Myanmar managed to sidestep the state largely by virtue of the assistance they received from an incipient network of likeminded individuals. According to one civil society representative, given the difficulty in accessing politically-sensitive information in Myanmar, their organization had to rely to a considerable degree on information gathered by individuals working with CNPC, as well as on data from international partner organizations, including the Revenue Watch Institute and Earth Rights International (Author interview, Thailand, March

2, 2013). The information was then disseminated to the organization's wider network. A number of these civil society groups also maintain close ties with local and 'exiled' journalists (Ibid.). Certainly, constant coverage of the issue by the national and international press—in particular, independent news outlets like *The Irrawaddy* and *Democratic Voice of Burma*—has played no small part in catapulting local Burmese concerns onto both the national and regional public sphere. Given the Myanmar government's long-standing aversion to displays of civic activism, this is by no means an insignificant achievement on the part of civil society.

It is in this way that civil society capacity—that is, the ability of network activists to leverage the necessary resources to galvanize support and disseminate information—has contributed to issue definition and the longevity of the anti-pipelines campaign. The Shwe Gas Movement (SGM), for one, has played an active role since the early 2000s. By 2005, the coalition was already aware of plans to extract and export Myanmar's oil and gas deposits through 'overland pipelines' to Yunnan Province (SGM 2006, 13). Established by the All Arakan Students' and Youths' Congress (AASYC) as a coalition of activists and civil society organizations 'based in exile' (Natural Resource Governance Institute, n.d.), SGM has offices in Thailand, India and Bangladesh (SGM 2006). Further, its international partners include such organizations as Arakan Oil Watch, the Korean Federation for Environmental Movement and the Indian platform Other Media. As part of its broader aim to monitor and curtail natural gas extraction throughout Myanmar, SGM has served as an advocacy hub responsible for publicizing and sharing information about the Sino-Myanmar pipelines, as well as for coordinating domestic and cross-border resistance. In this light, the movement has effectively built upon the strategies and the momentum of a preexisting, region-wide activist network—one that gradually came into being over the course of 'high-profile' campaigns in the 1990s and 2000s like the Yadana gas pipeline campaign and the ongoing movement against the Salween dam cascade (Simpson 2014, 173).

Even now, censure of the pipelines has persisted in spite of the state repression faced by activists (Aung Hla Tun 2013). Notably, in early 2014, a major dispute took place between ethnic Chin and Chinese workers at one of the project's work sites. This later prompted a delegation consisting of representatives from the Rakhine National Party (RNP) and National Democratic Force (NDF) to request, during their visit to China, that Beijing exercise stronger oversight of the behavior of Chinese national companies abroad (*Radio Free Asia* 2014).

## CONCLUSION

This article examined local responses to two Chinese-backed resource development projects in Myanmar and Cambodia. In so doing, it asked why localized resistance surfaced against the Sino-Myanmar oil and gas pipelines, whereas the Cambodian case only saw tempered opposition against the North-South railway mega-project. Here, the existence of high civil-society capacity was identified as an important factor that could help to facilitate popular resistance under restrictive state conditions. In the Myanmar case, network activists—assisted by transnational ‘allies’—were shown to play a critical role in raising public awareness and attracting the external support necessary for spearheading a sustained, grassroots campaign. In the Cambodian example, there appeared to be no such capable advocacy network in place.

It deserves note here that censure of the Sino-Myanmar pipelines had first originated from grassroots civil society groups. Only once the issue had become a prominent issue of contention at the local level did it attract regional and international attention, with the subsequent issue adoption by transnational NGOs and foreign media helping to expand the campaign’s membership and support base. In this way, international and regional involvement served as an enabling factor insofar as it helped to bolster *preexisting*, localized activism. Regional organizations like ASEAN played no discernible role in the issue.

As a major regional power that needs to maintain good relations with its neighbors, deflecting the external scrutiny brought to bear on the adverse consequences of its overseas resource operations has become more difficult for China and its SOEs over time. With China’s expanding corporate presence in mainland Southeast Asia becoming an integral facet of the region’s industrializing landscape, the onus of responsibility is upon China to shoulder its part in encouraging the sustainable governance of natural resources within the countries it invests.

There have been promising developments from the Chinese side in this respect, as policy-makers and corporate executives in Beijing begin to demonstrate an increased awareness of the commercial and reputational costs of host-society opposition. This is manifest in the evolving body of Chinese domestic regulations and voluntary guidelines on sustainable investment and the corporate social responsibility (CSR) of SOEs abroad (e.g. the 2008 ‘Guidelines on fulfilling CSR by State-owned Enterprises Directly under the Central Government’ and the 2013 ‘Guidelines for Environmental Protection in Foreign Investment and Cooperation’), as well as in the publication of CSR frameworks and annual reports by major Chinese enterprises.

That said, the extent to which these regulations and guidelines are imple-

mented and enforced remains highly uneven. It is thus in this regard that civil society networks in Myanmar and, to a lesser degree, Cambodia have the potential to serve as informal civil regulators, working to fill governance gaps and pressure the Chinese government, along with its SOEs, into observing their responsibilities within strategic resource sectors.

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