Hydropower Politics and Conflict on the Salween River

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Examining the Hydropower Politics of the Salween Basin

The Contested Nature of Large Dams on the Salween
Existing and Planned Large Dam Projects on the Salween

Around 18 large dam projects have been planned or are under construction on the mainstream of the Nu Jiang-Salween River.

In Myanmar:

Five/six large dams planned on Salween mainstream

Additional nine large dams planned or under construction on five tributaries

Four large dams completed

Two at advanced stages of construction
What does it mean to use a hydropolitics approach?

Hydropolitics understands that the “politics of water” are intimately connected to constructions of territory-making and scale

*Less concerned* with a local-state or local-global dichotomy

*More interested* in the ways that the politics of water are contested across and through multiple scales

A hydropolitical approach is a call to critically understand and assess the politics of water, with attention to what it accomplishes for particular actors and across certain scales, as well as what it “forgets”
Emergence and Current Status of Large Dam Plans on the Salween River

1988-present
Burma’s military junta move towards quasi-market economy – armed forces expanded both in size and expenditure

1990s Asian Development Bank Greater Mekong Subregion program

mid-2000s ASEAN economic integration
2015 ASEAN Economic Community

most recent
China-led Belt and Road initiative and associated Lancang Mekong Cooperation Framework

Vice President Dr. Sai Mauk Kham and Thai Deputy Prime Minister Mr. Pridiyathorn Dejj charn attend signing ceremony of MoU on energy and electric power sectors. —MNA
Transboundary Electricity Trade and the Salween Dams

Salween mainstream dams, principally cross-border power trade projects

1994 Norwegian consultants, Norconsult, Commissioned by ADB to prepare a plan – heavily based on large hydropower construction, including Salween projects

As plans have advanced multi-scalar politics have become more evident, involving an increasingly broad range of actors
Myanmar’s Peace Negotiations, Conflict and Hydropower Dams

- 70 years of armed conflict in Burma
- There are no less than 10 non-state EAOs, 18 Border Guard Forces (BGFs) and 28 militias active in the Salween Basin area
- Multi-lateral ceasefire agreement signed in 2015 by 8 out of 21 Ethnic Armed Organisations operating in Burma – known as the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement
- Today, Burma’s peace process is becoming increasingly unstable – renewed armed conflict, including in the Salween River basin
Local communities and CSOs have mobilised campaigns at a variety of political scales, targeting a wide range of issues related to human rights, land and natural resource governance, and legislative reform, also documenting the links between militarisation and large extractive projects on the Salween River basin.
Burma Environmental Working Group (BEWG)

Argue that for sustainable peace to be realized

... a moratorium on new and incomplete large-scale natural resource investment projects must be enforced and The 2008 constitution must be abolished and replaced with a new devolved federal constitution ... based on the principles of democracy, self-determination, human rights, and environmental sustainability
Burma Rivers Network and Save the Salween Network
International Rivers Day, Irrawaddy, Mandalay
March 2019:

The current government’s backing for the construction of large hydropower dams in areas of ongoing civil war is leading to an intensification of armed conflict, human rights violations, especially including women and children, and directly contradicts the principles of federal democracy.

Calling ...

... on the Union Government to impose a moratorium on the existing construction of large hydro dams, to abandon all planned and proposed large dams, and demand that investors respect the rights of the people of Burma as they try to lead efforts to build lasting peace and a genuine democratic federal union.
The Salween Peace Park, Karen State

Founded on a longstanding partnership between local communities, Karen civil society and the Karen National Union (KNU), this indigenous conservation initiative has sought to...expand the concept of “Water Governance” beyond just the water in the river itself, to include the land, forest, biodiversity, upland shifting cultivation, customary land systems, and cultural and sacred sites along the Salween River Basin.

-KESAN, 2017
Salween cooperation through the lens of hydropolitics?

A hydropolitical approach is a call to critically understand and assess the politics of water, with attention to what it accomplishes for particular actors and across certain scales, as well as who it includes and excludes, and what it “forgets”

• what does “cooperation” mean?
• who is included or excluded?
• what is foregrounded versus forgotten?
• what are the implications for the future of the basin?
We have sought to draw out how scale itself is produced through these contested processes.

Proponents of large dams have framed them as a "development solution" for the Salween basin.

This frame has been contested at different scales.

While in the technical documents of planners, the issue of conflict is not really acknowledged.

Collaborations between local communities, CSOs and Ethnic Armed Organisations have reconceptualised and decentralised water governance – in the context of unresolved armed conflict.