Belt and Road Initiative in Northern Myanmar: The Local World of China's Global Investments

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Macro-level discourses on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) firmly establish China as the sole agent in driving infrastructure development. This article contends that often obscured from view by the discourses on China's dominance are the host country authorities' exercising of agency in infrastructure development under their own jurisdiction. The paper focuses on the actions of the local host country authorities in developing an infrastructure megaproject as a part of the BRI in northern Myanmar's Kachin State. Currently under suspension, the Myitkyina Economic Development Zone (MEDZ, also known as Namjin Industrial Zone) would make an ambitious spatial intervention with wider implications and risks. The paper scrutinizes the 'strategies' by the local authorities in 2019-2020 in their attempts to move the project forward covertly. These include exploiting the project's designation as an economic developing zone to conceal its scale and the inclusion of a major urban development, lack of transparency, and alleged abuse of power.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative; Chinese Investments; Cross-Border Economic Zone; Kachin; Myanmar

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INTRODUCTION

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has effectively opened the door for the Chinese state and businesses to enter a multitude of countries across the world. The dominating macro analyses of the BRI generally present the Chinese actors as the only – or as the only active – party engaged in the overseas projects, often seeing the host countries as passive recipients of the investments. The local worlds of China's global investments, however, are much more complicated. All BRI proposals require agreement on the dimensions and details of the project including its conditions, location, land dispensation, and acceptance by the local authorities and the public, to name a few apparent arenas of local engagement. The Chinese developers must comply, even if just nominally, with the host country's regulations and bureaucracy and their environmental and risk assessment prerequisites. First and foremost, Chinese developers must engage, both collectively and individually, with the host country's political actors and decision-makers, who are embroiled in local politics and multiple stakeholder interests. Critical scholarship on China's involvement in Africa, for example, calls to view the local authorities as "crucial voices and challengers" (Carrai et al., 2020, p. 8).

This article draws attention to the role of the host country authorities as cardinal agents at the planning stage of a transnational BRI project. It holds that the host authorities' bargaining power ensues by default from the moment the Chinese lay open their plans, particularly if driven by grand geopolitical or geoeconomic ambitions. A mix of geopolitical context, local political culture, and the host authorities' negotiation capacity shape the outcome of the project planning. Importantly, the local decision-makers' disposition to advance national, local, or personal interests becomes crucial for the project's fate.

This article studies the anatomy of planning the Myitkyina Economic Development Zone (MEDZ, also known as Namjin Industrial Zone), an official BRI infrastructure project in Kachin State in northern Myanmar that was set to become one of the country's largest with an estimated cost for its first phase earmarked as USD 300 million (Baoshan Municipal Government, 2018). Its Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed in 2018, however, was suspended in 2020 without any further elaborations. This article demonstrates that it was the particular actions of the authorities in Kachin State in 2019-2020 that – resonating with Myanmar's lingering past patterns and practices of governance – were geared towards hastily launching the megaproject, also leading to its consequent suspension. It is argued that the local Kachin State authorities, while having ample geopolitical agency to push for a publicly more acceptable agreement with the Chinese developers, instead tried to move the project forward covertly. This article identifies three such 'strategies' by the local authorities – hiding behind the project's designation as an economic developing zone to conceal its scale and inclusion of a major urban development, operating without transparency, and allegedly abusing power.

This article first demonstrates that the geopolitical context across Yunnan, Kachin State, and Northeast India affords the host authorities notable extra agency and power to negotiate a more accountable solution. It continues by introducing the MEDZ as a typical Chinese economic zone model project in more detail. It then explores the lack of knowledge and transparency and alleged abuse of power experienced by a cross-section of actors in local communities in Myitkyina and at the planned project site. For information on strategies and visions related to the MEDZ infrastructure development, the article relies on the translation of the original Mandarin-Burmese bilingual blueprint for the project issued by the developer, Yunnan Tengchong Hengrong Investment and Development Company (YTHIDC). The blueprint obtained from fieldwork informants is not a public document, but a copy was kept by the author. On the whole, this article benefits from the author's long-term ethnography-based research in Kachin State at both sides of the China-Myanmar borderlands conducted over the course of hundreds of interview sessions since 2000, thus employing a timespan of 20 years to identify changes in Myitkyina's urban development. Material on the MEDZ-related developments was collected through in-depth interviews in Myitkyina in March 2019 conducted by the author with a multitude of actors representing a cross-section of local communities. They include two farmers who accused the Kachin State government of grabbing their land for the project, a lawyer defending the farmers, four Kachin businessmen engaged in the cross-border trade and with potential interest in the MEDZ if it moved forward, several Kachin political elites, local civil society and media representatives, two Kachin State MPs, and a Kachin State minister. The interviews were conducted in English, Burmese or Jingphaw, with a translation provided for the latter two languages by a bi-lingual Kachin interpreter whose expertise, local knowledge, and collaboration greatly contributed to this research. None of the interviews were recorded in order to provide the interviewees assurance of safety, confidentiality, or ease to talk freely, while detailed notes and verbatim quotes were taken with their permission. Only broadly described profiles, such as professions or affiliations, are used in reference to the interviewees to guarantee their anonymity. The interview responses have been cross-checked with different actors, and the internal workings of the Chinese investment company threshed out with a Tengchong (Yunnan, China) resident with relevant information. The limitation of the article remains that the particular government authorities operating without transparency and accused of power abuse by the farmers have not been interviewed.

GEOPOLITICS AND THE ISSUE OF AGENCY

Myanmar is one of the fourteen countries that border on China and thus serve as outlets for its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Uniquely, Myanmar is one of the two countries that give China access to the Indian Ocean and that, together with the influence over the Bay of Bengal region, are crucial for China's energy security and pursuing its maritime Silk Road. Gaining the economic and political upper hand in Myanmar further enables China to dominate the regional space against its geopolitical rival India. Under the auspices of the BRI, Myanmar is the second single country after Pakistan with which China has embarked on a joint economic corridor, manifesting Myanmar's wider strategic importance in Beijing's plans (Yun, 2019). This gives Myanmar's local and central authorities a considerable level of agency, viewed here as their relative power to decide or modify China's proposals for investments regardless of its might and history of influence in Myanmar.

In all cases, it is Kachin State bordering on China's Yunnan province that has an undeniably strategic position. Its capital, Myitkyina, – and the location of the planned megaproject – is just about 100 km away from the Chinese border (and from the official border crossing at Kambaiti-Houqiao/Tengchong). Moreover, Myitkyina is just 361 km away from India – along the historic Stilwell Road that connected India and China during World War II. Also known as the Ledo Road, as it started in Ledo, Assam State, in Northeast India, it was built by the Chinese, Indian, and American forces as a supply route for the Chinese troops fighting the Japanese army in Yunnan. It crossed into then-British Burma at the Pangsau Pass and branched into the southern and northern routes near Myitkyina – both connecting to the Old Burma Road before Kunming. The road fell into disuse after the war, and it is China that most actively has been trying to rebuild and revive its decrepit and at times impassable tracks for international and regional connectivities. Sections of the road in Yunnan have already been turned into modern highways, while the road from the Houqiao border crossing up to Myitkyina has also been upgraded by the Chinese. Lending further negotiating power to the Kachin State decision-makers is the determination of the authorities and businessmen in Baoshan/Tengchong in Yunnan, China, to pursue the MEDZ as the key for their wider geo-economic vision that includes the Stilwell Road connection to India.

This wider vision has emerged from both discursive and strategical reconfigurations of Yunnan's geopolitical position within China – from that of a historical imperial periphery to a future-looking "bridge" to Southeast Asia and beyond. This has driven Yunnan's border prefectures to compete for the "bridgehead" position (Rippa, 2017; Zhou, 2013), further equipped with the "anticipatory geographies . . . framed in the language of global connectivity and inclusive development" (Rippa, 2022, p. 17). In this contest, Ruili has gained the advantage as the primary gateway to Myanmar; however, the authorities in Baoshan/Tengchong that share 151 km of border with Myanmar's Kachin State to the north of Ruili are providing serious competition. They point out that the northern route of the historical Stilwell Road – crossing into China at Kambaiti/Houqiao and then passing through Tengchong – is 163 km shorter than the southern route passing Ruili (Zhou, 2013). For a decade already, they have been making all efforts to redirect traffic to this route and establish further connectivities, including to Northeast India. It is this race for the upper hand in geo-economic opportunities, banking on the revival of the Stilwell Road, where the MEDZ, a huge logistic and economic development zone at the Stilwell Road's junction in Myitkyina, has a key role.

The Chinese authorities in Baoshan/Tengchong have taken practical steps towards reaching these geoeconomic goals since the early 2000s by creating important road connections, pushing for the Houqiao border crossing's status as a national-level border port (granted in 2004), and opening an airport in Tengchong in 2009. Subsequently, the Baoshan authorities created the Tengchong Border Economic Cooperation Zone (TBECZ) in 2015, merging and renaming earlier administrative districts under a new administrative body, the Tengchong Border Economic Cooperation Zone – Committee (TBECZ-C), to become a part of Baoshan's "one line, two zones" platform for *external* development (Baoshan News Network, 2019, emphasis added). The "line" refers to a transregional thoroughfare from Baoshan to Mandalay while one of the two zones is the TBECZ combined with the MEDZ.[1] The TBECZ-C operates on the same level as the Tengchong city government, with officials at different posts in the latter also posted to staff TBECZ-C (interview, Tengchong resident, 21 August 2021) – while both are administratively under the Baoshan city-prefecture. In 2019, the *Baoshan News Network* (2019) declared that the city-prefecture would "take the lead in the construction of radiation center facing South Asia and Southeast Asia in Yunnan".

On the Myanmar side, the authorities concerned are the Union Government of Myanmar and the local Kachin State government. Myanmar's former civilian central government had on the broader level displayed a considerable amount of negotiating

1 The other zone is the Baoshan Industrial and Trade Zone combined with Mandalay Muuda Economic and Trade Cooperation Zone.

expertise and capacity by joining the BRI bandwagon *only* in 2017. With most countries in Southeast Asia welcoming the BRI since it was launched in 2013 and Pakistan establishing the joint economic corridor with China in 2015, Myanmar, merely by signing the MoU for the BRI in 2017, was a relative latecomer. In fear of a debt trap but also aware of the public sentiment, the then-Aung San Suu Kyi-led government only signed the MoU after China agreed to proposed conditions that also included the right to involve other international tenders for megaprojects. A further demonstration of the agency of the former civilian government is the small number of projects it agreed upon – only nine early harvest projects out of the 38 that China proposed had gotten the green light before the 2021 military coup (Lwin, 2019c; Naing, 2020), with the MEDZ among them (Lwin, 2020).[2]

Spectacularly displaying Myanmarese authorities' agency in deciding over the Chinese large-scale infrastructure development was the 2011 suspension of a huge dam construction by the then-President Thein Sein in a precedent widely remembered by all parties. The Myitsone Dam construction launched by a Chinese state-owned company only about 40 km from the proposed MEDZ site led to a locally started anti-dam movement that developed into a powerful, nation-wide mobilization against the dam (Kiik, 2020). It left China stunned, finger-pointing and then launching a massive influence operation targeting legislators, political activists, military, local scholars, journalists, religious leaders, and others (Currie, 2021). Restarting the construction of the Myitsone Dam has reportedly been raised by China in every senior-level meeting, including when President Xi met with Aung San Suu Kyi in Naypyidaw during his only trip outside China in 2020 – however, Myanmar's response was just "politely feint" (Currie, 2021). A year after the signing of the MEDZ MoU in 2019, thousands of people protested or petitioned against the revival of the Myitsone Dam.

In short, regardless of China's hegemonic power position and history of long-term political and economic influence in Myanmar, its civilian authorities and people have demonstrated capability to put forward demands to China. As the MEDZ is a key part of the ambitions by authorities and businesses operating in Chinese areas adjacent to Kachin State to acquire a stake in the regional geoeconomy, the host actors have a favorable position for negotiations.

The following section first lays out the proposal for developing the MEDZ issued by the company that was specifically established by the Tengchong/Baoshan authorities and businessmen for this project, and then analyses its implications for the Kachin State capital area.

PLANNING FOR THE MYITKYINA ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ZONE (MEDZ)

What is MEDZ and why?

The Myitkyina Economic Development Zone (MEDZ) is an infrastructure development proposed by the Yunnan Tengchong Hengrong Investment and Development Company (YTHIDC) established by the Tengchong Border Economic Cooperation

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2 For comparison, under the China-Pakistan-Economic Corridor (CPEC), signed in April 2015, 51 agreements and 22 early harvest projects were already completed and operational in May 2019 (Yun, 2019).

Zone – Committee (TBECZ-C) specifically for the project. By design, YTHIDC thus is a company administered by government officials and businessmen. It has two CEOs, one of them being Duan Zhikui, known by locals in the Yunnan border areas as the 'richest man in Tengchong,' who both own private companies of their own.[3] The YTHIDC team signing the MoU for MEDZ in Myitkyina in 2018 included the Mayor of Baoshan and Duan Zhikui as one of its CEOs.

The MEDZ official proposal presents it as a logistics center, distributing goods that cater to the needs of economic interactions between China, Myanmar, and India, and as a hub for railway, road, air, and water transport. The Blueprint prepared by the YTHIDC (2017) and used as a primary source for this article lays out ambitious plans for supporting this transport infrastructure, including details for developing the designated 4700-acre area adjacent to Myitkyina.

The transport infrastructure plans include a new international airport in Myitkyina to service Boeing 737s and larger airplanes, a new railway station, and a river transport route leading from Bhamo port to Yangon. Construction of roads is planned over several stages. The first stage sees establishing local connections from the MEDZ to Myitkyina, to the highway leading to China and to the Bhamo port. The second phase sees the establishment of expressways to Lower Myanmar (Bhamo, Mandalay, Naypyidaw, and Yangon). The third stage involves the construction of a highway connecting to Ledo in Northeast India.

The 4700-acre area to be developed is conceptualized as "a joint industrial and cultural area" conjoining Myitkyina (YTHIDC, 2017, p. 19). Agricultural production and processing facilities but also various infrastructure providing public, business and other services, educational and research centers, cultural and entertainment establishments, and health and sports facilities, are envisioned to together "create a whole and enhance the attractiveness and potential of the industry" (YTHIDC, 2017, p. 22). The Blueprint clearly talks about creating "*urban* space" and facilities that signify and enhance "*urban* culture" (YTHIDC, 2017, p. 60, emphasis added). The new hospitals, educational structures, and other functional service facilities are planned to serve not only the resident population of the zone but also the population in the neighborhood: that is, Myitkyina. There will be primary and middle schools, clinics, hospitals, a community house, petrol stations, businesses and banks, postal services, supermarkets and other shops, playgrounds, fire department, administrative buildings, and large high-rise residential areas. It will have up to 14-storey-high buildings in the central areas and 7-8-storey buildings in the surrounding districts, while facilities located further from the center are planned up to seven storeys high. The residential district in the maquette photographed for the blueprint has high rises separated by greenery, parks and sports facilities, and the school is a huge, four-storey complex with a stadium and modern classrooms designed to accommodate 50 students. Written into the plan are goals of creating a healthy and diverse residential and manufacturing environment, where a public

3 Duan Zhikui is a business tycoon from Tengchong with a history of engagement in the opportunistic and profitable borderland economy. He started as a teacher in the Kachin-Yunnan border areas, but accumulated wealth through mining, real estate, and various other borderland endeavors. He now has businesses in Myitkyina, Houqiao border trade zone but also in South Myanmar's planned Kyaukphyu SEZ (personal communication, Tengchong resident, 12 May 2019).

green belt is combined with built *downtown* areas (YTHIDC, 2017, p. 64, emphasis added).[4]

It is important to note that the planned development is huge even by Chinese standards – most special zone types in China usually range between 2,6 and 11,7 square kilometres on average (Herlevi, 2017, p. 25), while the 4,700 acres of the MEDZ convert into 19 square kilometers.

Implications and Risks

The Chinese authorities' envisioned MEDZ – its planned functions, conceptualization, and scale – is bound to have three kinds of wider implications. First, there are standard problematic issues related to any megaproject development such as land acquisition, finance, environmental impact assessment, and socio-political effects (Sandhi Governance Institute, 2019). Secondly, precarious from the local perspective, is the 'added value' of high-rise residential districts and downtown urban areas as a part of the unique Chinese approach to such 'zone' development. Labels such as economic zone or logistics center conceal the actual content of China's zone models, not well known to the ordinary public. Thirdly, the hasty acceptance and total lack of public consultations or even awareness – the complete lack of transparency – would likely have complex implications.

The standard problematic issues are even more problematic under precarious regimes, where these may not get the acceptable treatment and solutions. Myanmar in 2019 continued to struggle with the legacy of the longest military rule in the world (1962-2011), characterized by the political system of impunity and coercion, corruption and crony capitalism, combined with military's entrenched control over the legislative and executive powers in the government. The half-civilian rule between 2011 and 2021 21 had been trying to clip all this – that ultimately led to the latest military takeover on 1 February 2021. Only one report by a Yangon-based social research organization, the Sandhi Governance Institute (2019), assessed the potential risks of the project and related these to the socio-political conditions of the time. However, the report remained rather an analysis of general economic, political, and financial risks due to the limited information available. It pointed to the unknown corporate governance structure of the Kachin state-owned entity (the Myitkyina Economic Development Zone Committee, or MEDZC), established to coordinate with the Chinese developer, to the conflict of interest written into the MoU, and to the absence of information on the public-private partnership's financing structure or rates of return (Sandhi Governance Institute, 2019). It also pointed to the potential of a conflict over land procurement and wider socio-political perils such as the likely intensification of the opportunist political economy that might exploit the green light given to the project; related cross-border flows of goods and people; further marginalization of the ongoing armed political resistance by the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO); and the overall resentment towards Chinese investments arising from earlier exploitation of natural resources and the ongoing predatory agribusiness investments. The Sandhi

4 In both Mandarin and Burmese versions of the blueprint, the quoted terms on pages 60 and 64 can be translated as 'urban model/space,' 'city/urban culture' and 'downtown/central areas.'

Governance Institute, however, incorrectly assumed that the YTHIDC was a private business established by a well-known Yunnanese businessman (Duan Zhikui), and thus speculated that, by lacking a history of public records, it would have problems in securing loans.

Indeed, there is a *diversity* of Chinese developers constructing the BRI projects in general, complicating any macro-level presumptions and risk assessment, as their structures, internal workings, and access to finances may vary considerably. In theory, most broadly, these part between China's state-owned enterprises (SOEs) administered by the State-Owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission of the State Council and the individual commercial groups. The Yunnan Tengchong Hengrong Investment and Development Company (YTHIDC), established by the Tengchong Border Economic Cooperation Zone – Committee (TBECZ-C) specifically for doing MEDZ (and some other small business and development in TBECZ-C administered area), is a local government-level SOE. Duan Zhikui's own company Baoshan Hengyi Business Group 'cooperates' with YTHIDC – that is why Duan Zhikui is one of the CEOs in YTHIDC (and mistaken by the Sandhi Governance Institute as the owner of YTHIDC). Businesspeople like Duan Zhikui – with several smaller companies and deeply entrenched political connections and skills – are useful for the administrative body such as the TBECZ-C to cooperate with (interview, Tengchong resident, 29 October 2021). Most importantly, TBECZ-C has access to state-owned bank money (for example, Bank of Development that only does business with governments). In fact, as an SOE and strongly backed by the local government for carrying out its key long-term development visions, YTHIDC has access to the necessary funding.

A highly serious consequence from the MEDZ is related to applying the Chinese economic development zone (EDZ) model without precedent and relevant awareness in the host country. It is clear from the vision described in detail in the project's blueprint that the proposed development leads to a form that is much more than an economic zone in its literary meaning – it is a large, multi-purpose industrial-agricultural-urban space. This is not unexpected from China's perspective. Various EDZs, although viewed under the BRI as any other infrastructure development, in practice constitute more 'holistic' spatial approaches to economic development.

While economic development zones (EDZs) have a centuries-long history as commercial zones designed to encourage entrepôt trade in citywide zones on international trade routes (World Bank & International Finance Corporation, 2009), in China, the creation of EDZs has been a gradual policy since the late 1970s and early 1980s. After initial experimentation, 'the zone' in China has diversified into many different types and modes, depending on the objective. The zones are always geographically delimited areas that have a single management or administration; these offer benefits to businesses or investors located within the zone, and attract businesses from foreign countries, often aiming to attract foreign direct investment (FDI) and increase exports (Wang, 2013). The zones can constitute cities but most often these are city districts, while, importantly, Xie, Swerts & Pumain (2018) argue that zones are tools for urban development in China.

Bach (2019), furthermore, argues that the China-adopted EDZ model has over time developed into a specific urban form(ula). This new urban form, originating in an economic zone infrastructure development, has shifted "from the 'hard' infrastructure of ports and pipes, roads and factories, and electronic 'backbones' to 'softer' infrastructures of housing, entertainment, education, and 'creative' spaces to nurture and attract the right 'talent'". Bach (2019) asserts that this is China's urban form of "late modernity, one where socio-technical infrastructures graft onto, transplant, and extend existing ideas about cities as catalysts". The MEDZ being also visioned as a mega logistics center with rail, air, and overland connections to China, India, and Bangladesh – as a dry, inland port – invites a further discussion of how much this corresponds to the port-park-city (PPC) model, also associated with a form of China's EDZ pioneered in Shenzhen. PPC is a 'full-stream-of-logistics-production-and-urban services' model with a port in the front, an industrial zone in the middle, and a city at the back – and it is "a readymade template" being exported worldwide by all Chinese SOEs active in overseas port development (Liu et. al, 2020, p. 6).

Emplacing such a Chinese EDZ/PPC model to conjoin the low-rise sleepy provincial capital and market town of Myitkyina with a small-scale industry of mostly local nature is likely to produce major schisms not only in urban scale and form but also in the socio-cultural fabric. Myitkyina has not seen any significant urban development during the last 20 years of Myanmar's rapid transformations. Since the mid-2010s, only some cosmetic public works have been conducted, such as, for example, upgrading roads, installing traffic lights, and initiating landscaping. The tallest building in Myitkyina – the lone "tower" that every local knows – is the 10-storey Myitsone Hotel built in 2016. In Kachin State's socio-cultural context of multi-layered intra-ethnic, ethnopolitical and anti-Chinese tensions, Myitkyina has served as a sort of cosmopolitan urban center, where urbanites operate together, even if residing in distinct ethnic neighborhoods. It boasts Christian churches of multiple denominations, mosques, and Hindu, Buddhist, and Chinese temples, while motley (often ethnic-based) entrenched professional and trading networks, but also grassroots and political activist networks, invisibly traverse the urban space. All Myitkyina inhabitants meet and mix at marketplaces, banks, government schools or the Myitkyina University, popular tea and coffee shops, and at the ethnic Kachin, Chinese, Shan, Burmese, Korean or Thai restaurants dotting the town overlooked by tall Kachin *manau* posts. Historically, a region dominated by the Kachin – while hardly so anymore – most of its residents gather to see the spectacle when the Kachin embrace their traditional dress and pick up the steps at the festival ground to dance the deeply symbolic *manau* dance to beat drums and songs. If the MEDZ materialized, the sheer size of the spatial intervention on one hand, and the type of embedded Chinese late modernity on the other, are bound to have deep and irreversable impacts on Myitkyina's city space, its fragile socio-cultural context and demographics. The function of the logistics center would further entangle the local spaces in transcontinental networks through new flows, routes, and configurations, while the zonal logic will potentially disembed the site from the local surroundings.

Importantly, the MEDZ was being planned in a context of general public anger and anti-Chinese sentiment – in Myanmar more generally and in Kachin State specifically – and thus of potentially explosive citizen awareness and resistance to Chinese megaprojects.[5] The analysis that follows will demonstrate that instead of negotiat-

5 Most of China's major investment projects in Myanmar have faced public resentment from the communities that face land grabbing, environmental problems, an influx of Chinese immigrants, and a low share of revenues. While the Myitsone Dam project was exceptional in that it was unilaterally suspended

ing with the Chinese developers to reach a more publicly acceptable solution – that would have involved a more inclusive planning process in Kachin State – the local authorities used covert actions that were conjoinedly expected to facilitate the hasty launch of the project. These include exploiting the designation of the project as an economic zone and the lack of awareness of what the Chinese EDZ contains, the near complete lack of transparency to simply cut the public off from any information on the project, and alleged abuse of power by exploiting the Vacant, Fallow and Virgin (VFV) Land Law amendment to secure land.

ZOOMING IN: KACHIN STATE AUTHORITIES' ACTIONS

Exploiting the Project's Designation

The designation of the MEDZ as an economic development zone (or the Namjin Industrial Zone) employs the vocabulary of China's zone model of development. It benefits from the ambiguity stemming from the very broad conceptualization of economic development zones (EDZ) in China and in the world. In China, specifically, EDZ is an umbrella term for at least 14 types of zones, each with different policies and sometimes supervised by distinct administration (Wang, 2013, pp. 16-22). Thus, the designation does not give any hints on the project's major goals, preferential policies, administration structures or expected performance.

Even less does the designation reveal that, alongside the industrial-agricultural processing, a large aspect of the development involves creating an urban space of downtown and residential areas, parks, schools, hospitals, and other services to compound that of Myitkyina. To anybody unfamiliar with China's zone model of development, a designation of an infrastructure project as an *economic development zone* (or as industrial zone) creates the expectation of industrial-agricultural processing with factories, storehouse, and the directly related servicing infrastructure. This is exactly how the media has interpreted and thus reported on the MEDZ – that it is planned as an agricultural processing zone with some light industry of nearly 500 factories and 5,000 buildings – and nothing else (for examples of such media reports, see Kachin News Group, 2019; Lwin, 2019b; Sandhi Governance Institute, 2019; Tar & Aung, 2020). The Myanmar public, well-educated on the risks of dams, mines, or monocrop development, having mobilized on multiple occasions, however, has not had much experience with China's EDZ/PPC models, as most were still under construction until the turmoil in 2021.

Thus, the designation of an economic development zone has clearly misled the public, including the investigative journalists and think tank researchers, by

in 2011 by Myanmar, other megaprojects such as the Sino-Myanmar pipelines, Letpadaung copper mine, the Kyaukphyu port and the Special Economic Zone are in operation or moving ahead. At the time when the Kachin State authorities were making efforts to conceal the plans for MEDZ, in April 2019, thousands of people protested or petitioned against the revival of the Myitsone Dam, sparked by Aung San Suu Kyi's invitation to take a "wider perspective" on the dam (Lwin, 2019a). Augmenting the anti-Chinese feelings in Northern Myanmar at the time was also the rapid expansion of Chinese-financed banana plantations, widely known for forcibly displacing Kachin farmers from their land to become poorly-paid wage laborers, and dumping toxic pesticides banned in China, thus threatening health and environment (Hayward et al., 2020; Naing, 2021; Sarma et al., 2023; Soe & Dunant, 2019).

downplaying the project's planned scale to a great extent and denoting only to its functions of economic production, processing and logistics, while omitting what might be its most visible and socially consequential – and controversial – outcome, the planned urban facet and the importation of Chinese urban modernity. There was thus no public awareness that an infrastructure called an "economic development zone" and presented as a BRI infrastructure project, will have a modern Chinese city in the package by default, and the authorities did not articulate anything to explicate the plans behind the designation. Importantly, this leads to the next aspect of the scheme by the local authorities.

Practicing a Lack of Transparency

Ten months after the signing of the MoU, at the time of this fieldwork, very few people knew about the project. The farmers whose land the planned project would include, "got a sense of something going on" when seeing strangers from China inspecting their land, while their application for the VFV land use registration had unexpectedly been suspended (interview, two farmers, 12 March 2019). The concerned farmers had raised the issue at the government's regular public consultation on 26 August 2018.

> Upon this, U Wai Lin [Planning and Finance Minister – K.D.] said the following: This project will not start this time. If it starts, we will let you know. This means that the government promised to inform if the project is going to be implemented. In reality, the Chinese and state officials are together measuring the area, there are instruments left in the area. But the government has not yet informed us. (interview, two farmers, 12 March 2019)

The land was being measured by the Chinese technicians protected by the Myanmar police. The representatives of Kachin business and political elites also knew that something was planned, but their knowledge of details was meager. A Kachin owner of a local construction company with a potential business interest had similarly attended the public hearing and separately narrated that the Minister had said that "nothing was confirmed" (interview, 13 March 2019). The businessman gave a longer comment as follows:

> The government is not really open about how it conducts the project. It is secretive about the project and about what the final deal will be. Lots of people are not happy about this. They feel the government is not transparent. People are questioning how this affects them. The government only acknowledges it indirectly, as if it were a side plan … However, the blueprint exists. (interview, 13 March 2019)

The Kachin elites, including an MP, also appeared to not fully grasp the size of the planned MEDZ and dismissed the plan as just on paper: "Kachin State government can and must control – because Namjin is not big – not a mega-project. It is a medium project run by state government." (interview, Kachin State MP, 16 March 2019)

"The government has said that this is 'just' a MoU, that it is nothing . . . The government says that it will let MPs and the public know when the time comes", another Kachin State MP accounted, saying that the ongoing fighting had to be stopped and the internally displaced people (IDP) situation addressed before taking on such projects (interview, 12 March 2019).

A representative from the local media, *Myitkyina News Journal*, a year after the MoU's signing, felt that there was nothing to report: "We can talk to villagers who very much want to publicize what is happening, but the government officials are not giving any information. Thus [we are] waiting." (interview, 13 March 2019)

In the context of general resentment in Kachin State towards the Chinese businesses and the lively activist reporting on jade and amber mining, or the media coverage of the predatory Chinese banana plantation business, no complaints had been publicly articulated about the planned huge infrastructure intervention still a year after the signing of the MoU. The public and the grassroots communties just did not know. It appears that the silence was broken by the Chinese ambassador to Myanmar who visited the site in the end of 2018 and made a public statement, picked up by *The Irrawaddy* journalist who subsequently visited the site and published an investigative article on 9 April 2019 (Lwin, 2019b).

This enormous infrastructure project was never listed in the Myanmar Project Bank launched in 2018 by the NLD government as a publicly accessible online portal to facilitate screening of government projects in various forms of partnerships with the private sector to assess their key risk criteria.[6] The Sandhi Governance Institute (2019, p. 18) points out that there is a clause in the MEDZ's MoU stating that all terms and conditions of the project would be kept confidential during negotiations, and that such a clause violates the NLD government's transparency drive. During 2015-2021, while the NLD-led parliament had passed several anti-corruption and transparency directives, such reforms often remained against the vested interests of many local state authorities. As is clear from the quotes by the various locals and citizen representatives of Myitkyina, in Kachin State, patrimonialism on the government level continued unhindered and rendered the public sphere a subordinate place whose basic demands were seen more as a chore for the power elites who showcased their benevolence and attentiveness to public concerns more so discursively and much less in practice.

"Kachin State government is scared of protest", the lawyer defending the farmers in their struggle for their land stated as his reason for such lack of transparency (interview, 10 March 2019). We will now turn to the farmers who accused the Kachin State authorities of seizing their land and abusing power.

Alleged Abuse of Power

Essential for the MEDZ is the availability of the land but also its location. The site selected for the MEDZ was reportedly the Chinese company's second choice, as the Kachin State government had rejected the initial site nearer to the Stilwell Road over conerns of land ownership transferral and possibly high compensation fees (interview,

6 The Project Bank before the coup in 2021 listed 129 infrastructure projects, while only seven had higher budgets than the MEDZ.

lawyer, 10 March 2019). The final selection includes the land in joint ownership of 97 farmers on the government-designated Vacant, Fallow and Virgin (VFV) land, attesting to the government's deliberation that this is an easier option for land allotment.

As part of the reforms in Myanmar in 2011-2021, a development framework was adopted that promised to take a people-centered approach, address poverty and improve human development; however, this also included several "quick wins" that proved more consequential than some of the benign intentions (McCarthy, 2016; see also Mark, 2016). Among these, the Vacant, Fallow and Virgin Land Management Law (VFV Law) legally allows the government to reallocate lands designated as vacant, fallow or virgin to domestic and foreign investors. Activist groups have described these laws variously as providing "a legal mechanism for the Myanmar Government to confiscate land in rural areas across the country, constituting a massive statutory land grab" (Htoo & Scott, 2019, p. 33); as a legal method of furthering farmer disenfranchisement (Woods, 2014); or "effectively strengthen[ing] the powers of the political and economic elite" (Displacement Solutions, 2019, p. 16). In 2018, amendments to the VFV Law were adopted that required rapid registration of previously unregistered VFV land – the failure to do so resulting in criminalization of those occupying and utilizing VFV lands without registration. The amendment forces those who live on and use the land to make a choice between registering for a 30-year VFV land use permit or giving up all further rights to the land and being considered trespassers (OECD, 2020, p. 242). All analysts agree that attracting foreign investors, including for investment in land and agriculture, has been the driving force behind the described key land regulations. While the amendments also streamlined the earlier bureaucracy, making it easier for businesses to obtain land use rights, these "open the window for companies and powerful individuals to apply for VFV land, taking over from poorly informed and marginalised communities who fail to register in time" (Chau & Daudier, 2019).

Most of the land designated for the MEDZ belong to five local businesspeople with proper documents (i.e., registration with the Union Government); however, a portion of the VFV land has been cultivated by a group of 97 small farmers of various ethnicities growing grapefruit and mango, teak or various other trees for timber, or different seasonal Kachin herbs. This land, 650 acres, had been registered with the Kachin State government under the name of a Kachin man, N'Hkum Hkam, who was the leader of the Traditional Herbal Medicine Group until he passed away in 2019.

March 2019 was the deadline for applying for the land use registration by those cultivating the VFV land. The farmers' group had applied for the land use registration (Form Seven) in time and were anticipating it soon. After a delay, seven of their representatives were invited to the Kachin State government office, unexpectedly accused of being "intruders" on the land that they had been farming, and threatened by "a two-year prison sentence or five million lakh fine if we continue using our land. That was a shock! Opposite is true" (interview, two farmers, 12 March 2019). The reason reportedly stated by the official was that they did not have the Form Seven. The farmers allege that at some point during the MEDZ planning stage the government stopped processing their Form Seven application until the deadline passed, and by this move rendered the farmers "out of the legal boundary" and their land "illegal" (interview, two farmers, 12 March 2019). Wider analysis of the law enforcement points out that there are many reasons why some farmers fail to register for VFV use. These include the law's definition of "vacant land" that clashes with current ethnic practices, lack of awareness of the requirements, ambiguity of what is considered VFV land in official records, or displacement and inability to return in time to complete the necessary paperwork (OECD, 2020, p. 279). However, in this case, the farmers' knowledge and proper adherence to the requirements and procedures did not guarantee them the land use registration.

The farmers had turned to a lawyer, who at the time of fieldwork was preparing for a settlement outside court, trying to get the government to give the farmers a proper compensation or redraw the boundaries of the MEDZ so that the smallholders' land would be excluded. The lawyer opted for a solution outside the court, because "there is no hope in other ways as the government does not follow its own procedure" (interview, lawyer, 10 March 2019). The case highlighted in the article demonstrates that the local authorities skillfully operated the system of governance in Myanmar that in 2019 was still characterized by close, mutually advantageous relationships between the military, some politicians and business elites, and a fitting legal system to protect their interests. Regardless of the NLD government's drive for transparency and good practices, the legal norms and institutions could be bypassed by Myanmar's like-minded political and business elites with an advantage in the structural architecture of power relations.

Overall, Myanmar was making steady improvements since 2011 across most governance indicators (Bak, 2019). However, as these 'improvements' need to be measured against an earlier context, much of the bureaucratic corruption, pressure by the armed forces and the police to conform to their demands, cronyism, clientelism, and 'nascent oligarchy' with personal relationships and patron-client networks as the chief forms of market governance remained rampant. Halfway into Aung San Suu Kyi's government tenure, the deeply rooted architecture of power relations persisted, with legal norms and institutions (including courts and anti-corruption commissions) continuing to be co-opted by the executive, and the rule of law being either functionally absent, used to justify autocratic tendencies, or both (Batesmith & Stevens, 2018, 2). Mark and Zhang (2017) point to the Myanmar government's low regulation capacity, stemming from the existing, ambiguous laws and overlapping authorities, and particularly the authorities' inability or unwillingness to avoid informal channels – often exploited by the Chinese investors to secure better deals. Finally, Mark and Zhang (2017) note that the most complex challenge to improve this situation was pushing aside those among the elites who benefitted from the status quo and thus resisted or openly blocked any attempts to wider reforms. In 2020, however, the MEDZ proposal was suspended, with a similar politics of secrecy by the same authorities enveloping this decision – highlighting in a different way the agency of the host country authorities.

CONCLUSION

Macro-level discursive assertions on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) generally present China as the unequivocal and uniform agent in the Initiative's global infrastructure development, and the host countries, particularly in the developing world, as passive recipients or even victims. The article challenges such blanket understanding by demonstrating that the projects' eventuality is decided in the host countries to a great extent. It contends that a Chinese partner approaching the host authorities about an infrastructure project by default lends agency to the hosts, while China's particular geopolitical or economic considerations give the local authorities extra negotiating power.

This article has shown that a thick analysis and detailed scrutiny of the BRI project at the crucial planning stage helps to understand the cardinal role and dispositions of the authorities in the host country who decide over the Chinese investment proposals. This serves to better understand the expansion of China's infrastructure development globally.

The Myitkyina Economic Development Zone (MEDZ) is a large-scale spatial intervention, with huge geo-political and local implications even if all plans laid out in its blueprint would not materialize. The blueprint prepared by a local Chinese state-owned company proposes the development of a logistics center for Chinese goods, a new airport, railways, roads, riverports, a new hospital, schools, and other aspects of an 'improved' urban environment in a sleepy provincial capital 100 km from China and 350 km from India. While the determination of China's border prefecture authorities to gain a competitive hold in the regional geo-economy lend the Myanmar government and public plentiful agency, the local authorities in 2019 and 2020 tried to move the project forward hastily and covertly. Indeed, halfway into the tenure of Aung San Suu Kyi's government, the state's developmentalist approach as well as its various authorities' ability and will to collaborate in the wider drive for transparency, acceptable legal norms, and rules-based conduct varied significantly between Myanmar's states and institutions. In Kachin State, deeply rooted patterns of elite impunity and paternalist treatment of the public continued to frame the practices of governance. Instances of this as experienced by disposed farmers, local businesspeople and the media, along with the regulatory framework of the developmentalist state, are detailed in this article. The Kachin State authorities, aware of the capability of the public to challenge Chinese investments, effectively turned to particular actions in order to launch the project. Specifically, the authorities hid behind the project's obscure designation as an economic development zone, completely concealing its large scale and plans for urban development as a part of such a zone model. They avoided any transparency and, furthermore, allegedly abused power to secure the land. The objective was to avoid public resistance, as at the time of the MEDZ planning, Myanmar's population constituted an effective political, participatory, and well-networked citizenry highly concerned and vocal about the social, economic, and political futures of their country. These actions were 'successful' in that there were no protests against the MEDZ – ten months after the signing of the project MoU, there was no knowledge of the scale and details of the project beyond the immediate stakeholders and tenants of the designated land.

As the project was suspended without explanation, we can surmise that other (central) government authorities might have intervened at some stage of its early planning, whether advocating proper institutional framework and practices, or suspending the project for another reason. In any case, the 2021 coup reversed all conditions for negotiated planning, and the prospect for a relaunch of the MEDZ is real if the incumbent government and the Chinese proponents estimate that the ongoing citizen armed resistance and civil disobedience are minor risks for the project implementation.

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