EBERHARD KARLS
UNIVERSITÄT
TÜBINGEN

WIRTSCHAFTS- UND
SOZIALWISSENSCHAFTLICHE
FAKULTÄT

Arbeitsgruppe Politische Ökonomie (APÖ)
Working Paper No. 12

herausgegeben vom Arbeitsbereich
Politik und Wirtschaft/Politische Ökonomie

Bearing the brunt:

The social impact of the Belt and Road Initiative's infrastructure projects on the local communities in Myanmar

Chiara Mattioli

Abstract:

Since its unveiling in October 2013 by Chinese President Xi Jinping, the bulk of research on the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has dealt with the development of Chinese-sponsored and Chinese-built physical infrastructures, its economic consequences, such as the inflow of foreign direct investments (FDIs) into partner countries, often developing ones, and its geopolitical implications.

Due to its unique geographical location on the eastern coast of the Bay of Bengal connecting the Chinese landlocked province of Yunnan with the Indian Ocean, Myanmar has long been playing a pivotal role in the BRI. Although recognizing how the BRI can positively impact Myanmar's economic growth, this work moves away from the modernist understanding of infrastructures and, in line with the so-called "infrastructural turn", acknowledges the negative societal externalities that infrastructural development inadvertently brings about. Taking a bottom-up approach and building on Mark Overland and Vakulchuk (2020), this study argues that the Chinese physical infrastructures' construction phase and everyday functioning have been entailing negative social impacts and that these have been disproportionately born by the Myanmar local communities, especially land-dependent ones, whose lives and livelihoods were disrupted.

To assess these negative social impacts, the article introduces interrelated concepts of *infrastructural violence* (Rodgers and O'Neill 2013) and *infrastructural harm* (Kallianos Dunlap, and Dalakoglou 2023). The latter will be applied to two BRI-funded infrastructure projects in Myanmar, namely the Myanmar-China Oil and Gas Pipelines and the Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone (KP SEZ). The analysis shows that in both cases no sufficient compensation was provided to the affected local communities and ultimately makes a case for the development of non-exploitative infrastructures benefitting Myanmar's overall population in the future.

Autor:

Chiara Mattioli is a Master's student in Peace Research and International Relations (MAPIR) at the University of Tübingen. She previously completed her Bachelor's degree in Philosophy, International and Economic Studies at Ca' Foscari University of Venice.

Adresse:

Melanchthonstraße 36, 72074 Tübingen

E-Mail:

chiara.mattioli@student.uni-tuebingen.de

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.15496/publikation-88615

ISSN: 2749-9014

APÖ am Institut für Politikwissenschaft

Wirtschafts- und Sozialwissenschaftliche Fakultät

Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen

Melanchthonstraße 36

72074 Tübingen

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1. Introduction

The Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), first unveiled by Chinese President Xi Jinping in October 2013, seeks to strengthen infrastructure connectivity between China, the rest of Asia, Europe, and Africa through the parallel development of two Chinese roads: the overland Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st century Maritime Silk Road. The BRI's main objective is the establishment of trade networks that further integrate international markets both physically and digitally. The BRI covers five broad areas: (1) free trade and investment, (2) policy coordination, (3) infrastructure connectivity, (4) financial integration, and (5) closer ties between people and institutions (Government of the People's Republic of China 2015). To these ends, the BRI plans to construct a plethora of infrastructures, such as highways, pipelines, railroads, deep-water seaports, airports, new cities, special economic zones, and power grids, as well as to upgrade the ports and logistics of its maritime partner countries (Gyi 2019: 106). As of February 2023, 147 countries – accounting for two-thirds of the world's population and 40 percent of global GDP – have signed on to BRI projects or indicated an interest in doing so (McBride, Berman, and Chatzky 2023).

Myanmar is one of the many developing countries in South Asia which have joined the Chinese colossal infrastructure project. Because of its unique geographical location on the eastern coast of the Bay of Bengal connecting the Chinese landlocked province of Yunnan with the Indian Ocean, Myanmar has long been playing a pivotal role in the BRI. In line with the "modernization approach", a share of the literature on BRI projects in Myanmar emphasizes the "positive side" of infrastructure development, and hence celebrates the inflow of Chinese Foreign Direct Investments (FDIs) into the country, praising the Chinese key role in "boosting" and sustaining Myanmar's economic development. More critical works center instead on the serious security challenges associated with Chinese investments in the country, and address both the fact that BRI infrastructure projects run "through contentious and insurgency-prone borders and regions" (Anwar 2020: 168) and warn of falling into Chinese debt-trap diplomacy stemming from unsustainable growing indebtedness to China. However, even these more pessimistic approaches largely focus on BRI's country-level impacts. This article departs from both these approaches by taking a bottom-up perspective on the social impacts of the BRI in Myanmar. In line with

Mark, Overland, and Vakulchuk (2020), it will be argued that even though the BRI can positively impact Myanmar's economic growth, a country-centered rhetoric fails to acknowledge the negative impacts of the Chinese-funded physical infrastructures, largely born by the Myanmar local communities. Moving away from the modernist understanding of infrastructures and embracing the so-called "infrastructural turn" and its acknowledgment of the "negative side" of infrastructural development, the concepts of *infrastructural violence* (Rodgers and O'Neill 2012) and *infrastructural harm* (Kallianos, Dunlap, and Dalakoglou 2023) will be introduced. The concept of "infrastructural harm" will then be applied to two infrastructure projects developed under the BRI in Myanmar, the Myanmar-China Oil and Gas Pipelines and the Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone (KP SEZ), to analyze the social impacts associated with the Chinese physical infrastructure projects' construction phase and everyday functioning in Myanmar.

2. Benefits and losses: the BRI from the modernist framework of infrastructures to the "infrastructural turn"

Throughout the past decade, many International Relations and International Political Economy scholars have portrayed the connectivity generated by BRI-linked physical infrastructures as a tool of China's statecraft and economic power (Chin 2015; Ikenberry and Lim 2017; Pacheco Pardo 2018; Petry 2023; Xiaotong and Keith 2017) and analyzed the BRI's impacts on the global and regional level. Many scholars focused their research on how the construction of these infrastructures reconfigures economic (inter)dependencies between China and BRI countries (Garlick 2021). The debate about the BRI has hence been mostly "China-centered" (Calabrese and Cao 2021: 1): countries, particularly developing ones, "receiving" Chinese FDIs to develop infrastructural networks. In consequence, these countries have conversely been portrayed as rather passive agents that lack room for maneuver. The less frequent studies that take the receiving-country perspective (e.g., Myint 2019; Sun 2017) focus mostly on the prospective economic gains and opportunities associated with the BRI large-scale projects from a national perspective, e.g., foreign capital inflow, the transfer of technology, and the creation of new jobs (MCPWC 2016: 62). The risks and costs associated to these Chinese-backed projects are often left unaddressed (Mark, Overland, and Vakulchuk 2020: 382) or framed as resulting from these countries' poor economic performance. Works of this kind follow the long-

established modernist framework of infrastructure, understanding it as "a technical apparatus to be managed by civil engineers and urban planners" (Rodgers and O'Neill 2012: 403). Focused only on the "positive" side of infrastructure development, this perspective glorifies infrastructures as symbols of modernity promising improvement and prosperity thanks to their capacity to create connectivity by facilitating and accelerating international interconnectedness and trade flows (Kallianos, Dunlap, and Dalakoglou 2023: 831).

However, the interdisciplinary "infrastructural turn", which has emerged across the social and policy sciences over the past 20 years, has been disputing the conception of infrastructures as "neutral […] physical artifacts" (Addie, Glass, and Nelles 2020: 10) and reframed them as fragile systems operating via "disruption, uncertainty, complexity, and disorder" (Kallianos, Dunlap, and Dalakoglou 2023: 831). This view underscores the plural and active character of infrastructures (Lemke 2015: 2) and emphasizes the multiplicity of their functions and impacts on their social, environmental, and political surroundings (Glass, Addie, and Nelles 2019: 1651). This "turn" has hence also begun to unveil the "negative" side of infrastructural development. Berlant's concept of "cruel optimism" (Berlant 2011: 1), as a relation "that exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" is hereof instructing. Indeed, "infrastructure's cruel optimism" underscores how the "desire for greater and faster connectivity, the proliferation of market opportunities, the promise of progress and economic growth, and the continuous self-affirmation of being 'modern' can also produce harmful effects" (Kallianos, Dunlap, and Dalakoglou 2023: 832). In other words, despite being "powerful devices of enchantment and imagination" (ibid: 829) enabling certain modes of circulation, mobility, and existence, infrastructures at the same time generate "immobilities and disconnections" (ibid: 831) entailing serious security and socio-ecological costs.

Following this theoretical reorientation, works analyzing the impacts of the geopolitical and geo-strategic aims pursued by China on BRI-receiving countries' national security have been proliferating. Worth mentioning are studies on Chinese "debt-trap diplomacy", stressing how low income (and mostly developing) countries expected to pay the high rates of Chinese loans are facing economic instability and, in some instances, even col-

lapse (e.g., Fernholz 2018; Gyi 2019). A case in point is Sri Lanka, which borrowed heavily from China for the construction of Hambantota port at a 6.3 percent interest rate (instead of the 2 or 3 percent offered by multilateral development banks) (Gyi 2019: 110). Unable to repay the loan, in December 2017 Sri Lanka was compelled to hand over the port and 15,000 acres of land around it as collateral to China for 99 years (ibidem: 110).

Despite significantly moving away from the old understanding of infrastructures as "good" and beneficial, these studies are addressing infrastructures' deleterious effects, risks, and costs at the country-level, and prioritizing political-security concerns over the social and environmental ones. In contrast, this article analyzes the negative impacts of infrastructures on the sub-national and local levels, focusing on how the environmental disruptions caused by the BRI-linked infrastructure projects have been having deleterious impacts on the indigenous communities' lives and livelihoods.

The choice to focus on Myanmar is justified by the low academic coverage of this South Asian conflict-ridden country, despite its pivotal role in the BRI, in general, and a lack of literature applying the recently developed concept of *infrastructural harm* to the BRI infrastructure projects in Myanmar, in particular.

3. Understanding the negative side of infrastructures: infrastructural violence and infrastructural harm

To uncover the social impact of BRI-linked infrastructure on Myanmar's local populations, two theoretical concepts designed specifically to analyze the negative side of infrastructures shall be employed: the more abstract concept of *infrastructural violence* presented by Rodgers and O'Neill (2012), and the more concrete notion of *infrastructural harm*, developed by Kallianos, Dunlap, and Dalakoglou (2023). The latter is later applied in the empirics.

Rodgers and O'Neill (2012: 402) present infrastructure as a key factor directly shaping the relationships that people have with each other and with the natural environment they inhabit. Often state-funded or state-approved, in combination with third-party creditors, as in the case of mostly Chinese-funded BRI projects in Myanmar, infrastructures are also

used by the state to organize its society and exercise forms of social control and oppression (ibid: 402). At the same time, infrastructures embody the convergence of state practices with the so-called global economy (Scott 2020).

Rodgers and O'Neill (2012: 403) formulated the notion of infrastructural violence to underline the deleterious effect of some infrastructures. This concept's theoretical underpinnings are the notions of *infrastructural warfare* (Graham 2004) and of *infrastructural power* (Mann 1984). Graham's (2004) notion of infrastructural warfare stresses how deliberately destroying or disrupting networked and multiple infrastructures that ensure modern urban life connectivity and mobility provoke dramatic suffering. Infrastructural warfare "sees infrastructure as a passive medium through which the violent disruption of warfare is inflicted on society" (Rodgers 2012: 431). However, such a vision of infrastructure "obscures its power […] and the way it can constitute the basis for oppressive forms of domination in cities" (ibid: 431). Here Mann's concept of infrastructural power comes into play and sheds light on the long-ignored fact that infrastructures are one of the major forces organizing a society and constitute "a privileged institutional channel for social regulation" (Rodgers and O'Neill 2012: 403) as they ultimately reflect the institutional capacity of a central state to penetrate its territories and logistically implement decisions (Rodgers 2012: 431). When infrastructure projects cut across borders, they give rise to asymmetric relations between states, as through the development of infrastructures, the dominant state can penetrate the subordinate state. Powerful states, such as China, can hence utilize infrastructures as tools of economic statecraft since the connectivities these infrastructures create enable them to extend their rules both domestically and internationally (Weiss and Thurbon 2018).

Building on the articulation of the two seminal concepts of infrastructural warfare and infrastructural power, infrastructural violence takes into account the duality of infrastructure, namely its "relational and ecological" (Star 1999: 377) character. Infrastructural violence results as both "a material embodiment of violence" and often as "its instrumental medium" (Rodgers and O'Neill 2012: 404): the material organization and form of a landscape reflect and reproduce social orders, eventually contributing factor to the reoccurrence of forms of harm (ibid: 404).

To reveal the embodiments, the complications, and the extent of infrastructural violence, Kallianos, Dunlap, and Dalakoglou (2023: 830) put forward the concept of infrastructural harm. To develop it, the authors built on White's conception of harm as stemming from "direct and indirect social processes" (White 2013: 31) and illustrated it as "a socio-technical process which, by persisting in time and space, and by extending to other arrangements, generates lasting, uneven, and transformative damages to ecologies and communities" (Kallianos, Dunlap, and Dalakoglou 2023: 830). Hence harm is understood as a process inherent to the building and everyday functioning of modern infrastructure (ibid: 830). In other words, infrastructural harm manifests itself in how infrastructures "create and maintain long-lasting entanglements with socio-cultural fabrics, environments, ecologies, and political, legal, and economic practices" (ibid: 830), and have a damaging rippling effect that ultimately negatively alters the quality and conditions of people's lives (ibid: 833).

Kallianos, Dunlap, and Dalakoglou (2023) discuss three analytical approaches to examining infrastructural harm and explain how arrangements of harm are "normalized, experienced, governed, and confronted" (ibid: 835): spatiotemporality, morality, and resistance. Tackling the "spaces and times of harm" (ibid: 835) means charting its spatial and long-term path. Infrastructures' longevity often exceeds human lifetimes. Consequently, they have been described as having "many lives" (Anand, Gupta, and Appel 2018: 19), and the harm that they generate has been qualified as incremental (Nixon 2011: 2): the older the infrastructure in question the greater the harm it potentially generates. Therefore, taking a "longue durée approach" is key, as any attempt to uncover what constitutes infrastructural harm today requires laying bare and analyzing the historical processes underpinning the generation of such harm (Kallianos, Dunlap, and Dalakoglou 2023: 830).

As it will be extensively analyzed in the empirics, this entails examining the forms of life that previously inhabited Myanmar's territories and how they were affected by the construction of the infrastructures under scrutiny, paying particular attention to what replaced them, as well as these changes' negative and long-lasting, if not everlasting, impacts on the local environment and its population. Regarding the infrastructures' "spatial" element,

it entails analyzing how infrastructures inhabit space through their massive physical extension.

The second analytical approach, which addresses infrastructural harm through morality, strives to highlight how harm is associated with ethical dilemmas and with the questions of good and proper relations (Liboiron, Tironi, and Calvillo 2018: 334). As stressed by Rodgers and O'Neill (2012), current infrastructures are wedded to modernist and liberal ethical ideologies. Despite offering practical benefits, today's infrastructures must also be recognized as clear indicators of the ongoing socio-ecological crisis devastating the planet (Kallianos, Dunlap, and Dalakoglou 2023: 386).

Related to any attempt to attend to the moral entanglements that infrastructure enacts is the final approach, named by Kallianos, Dunlap, and Dalakoglou (2023: 837) as "resistance, contestation and counter-infrastructures", dealing with the wide range of "anti and counter-infrastructural tactics" (ibid: 838) that people set in place to resist infrastructural harm. In many ways, these severe and multiplying "infrastructural contestations" (Giovanopoulos et al. 2020) draw attention to both the malleable and relational qualities of infrastructures (Furlong 2011), exposing the direct and indirect harms that they generate (Kallianos and Dalakoglou 2023: 852).

4. Context: Myanmar in the BRI and the BRI in Myanmar

Myanmar is one of the poorest countries in Southeast Asia, with a GDP of 59.36 billion US dollars in 2022. About 40 percent of the population lives below the national poverty line (World Bank 2017). Despite its rich deposits of gas, hydropower, and minerals, poor economic policies and international sanctions have long stalled the country's economic development. Moreover, like other countries in Southeast Asia, Myanmar faces an infrastructure gap (Calabrese, Gelb, and Hou 2017). BRI projects have hence been widely welcomed by the successive Myanmar governments.

China sees Myanmar as playing a peculiar role in the BRI due to its unique geographical location: it shares a 2,129-kilometer border with China, and it is not landlocked. These two characteristics place it in a more favorable location to other countries that figure prominently in the BRI architecture, which are either much further away from China, e.g.,

Sri Lanka, or neighboring China but landlocked, e.g., Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, and Nepal. Being landlocked is a condition that, given the BRI's focus on transport and mobility, increases the transportation risks associated with the involvement of other states along the trade route (Mark, Overland, and Vakulchuk 2020: 386). Moreover, thanks to its geographical location at the intersection between South Asia and Southeast Asia, and between the Indian Ocean and China's landlocked Yunnan province, Myanmar provides China with overland access to the Indian Ocean (Gyi 2019: 109). Routes through Myanmar enable China to pursue its "two oceans" and "Western development" policies and to relieve its dependence on the Strait of Malacca, the main route for China's oil imports, thus increasing its energy security (Calabrese and Cao 2020: 7).

These conditions were drivers that led to the construction of the Myanmar-China Oil and Gas Pipelines in 2013 and to the signature of the 15-point China-Myanmar Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) agreeing to establish the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), the linchpin of China's BRI in Myanmar, on the 9th of September 2018. The CMEC is a 1,700-plus-kilometer inverted Y-shaped economic corridor, envisaged to run from Kunming, the capital of China's Yunnan Province, cross the Sino-Myanmar border at Muse, and continue to Mandalay. There, it splits into two: one section runs to Kyaukpyu in Rakhine state which faces the Bay of Bengal, whereas the other heads to Yangon, the business center of Myanmar. The Kyaukpyu-Kunming route runs parallel to the China-Myanmar Oil and Gas Pipelines (Gyi 2019: 108).

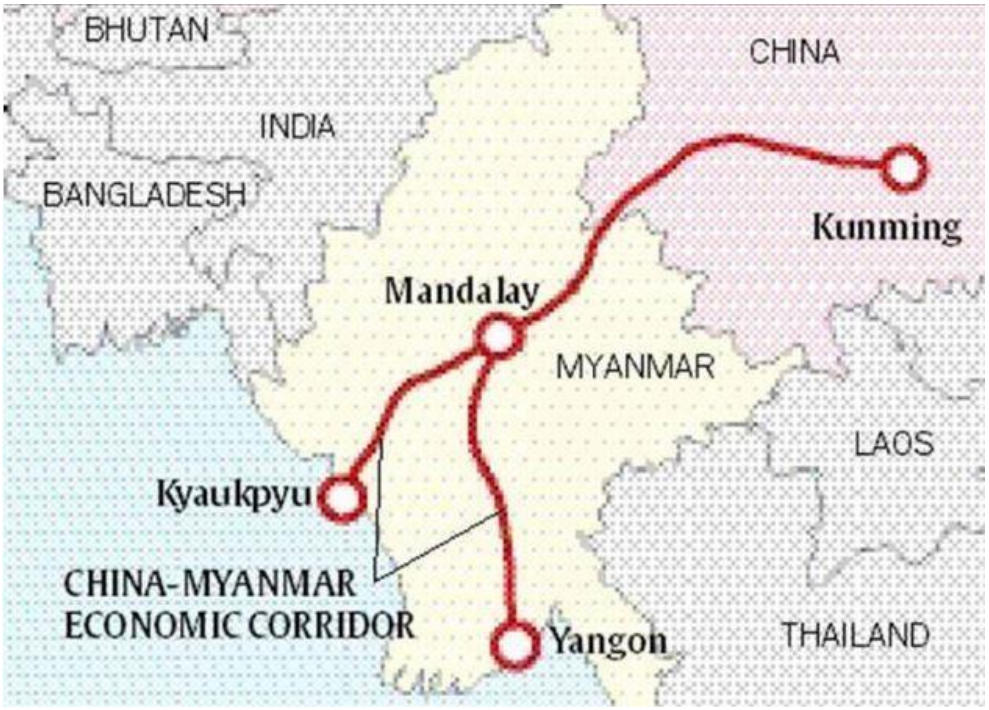

Figure 1. The inverted Y-shaped China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC). Drishti IAS 2020.

The CMEC features strategic infrastructure-related projects, including the upgrade and the creation of new Border Trade Zones and multiple industrial zones, a deep-sea port, and a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in Kyaukphyu, a new city for more than 1 million people to the west of Yangon on a floodplain, as well as the connection of these various projects with new railways and highways (Millar 2023). On January 18, 2020, the National League for Democracy's (NLD) General Secretary and then-State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi and President Xi Jinping oversaw the signing of 33 project MoUs during Xi's two-day visit to Myanmar, the first by a Chinese head of state in nearly two decades, making clear that Myanmar assets are essential for China.

The February 2021 military coup, which saw the *Tatmadaw*, Myanmar's military, deposing the democratically elected members of the NLD and taking control of the country, stalled CMEC's project implementation. Post-coup, with the economy devasted and FDI in free-fall, Myanmar's military leaders lost the capacity to play foreign actors' interests and investors against each other inviting them to participate in projects (Millar 2023), the strategy traditionally chosen by Myanmar to balance Beijing's demands. China currently

holds most of the cards and can largely control which CMEC projects it implements, when, and at which rate. As of August 2023, the SEZ in Kyaukphyu is among the projects that are slowly moving forward.

As argued by Mark, Overland, and Vakulchuk (2020: 383), BRI projects have been transforming the structure of the local economies involved in its projects. However, the BRI-linked economic benefits and losses, and hence the manifestations of infrastructural harm, are most likely reallocated disproportionately among different actors and industries. While the overall impact of the BRI on Myanmar's total economic growth (in terms of GDP) could be positive, its redistributive economic effects vary significantly among different industries and societal groups, ultimately resulting in uneven economic growth and allocation of economic benefits. Mark, Overland, and Vakulchuk (2020) analyze how Myanmar's different socio-economic players, i.e., large companies, small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), traders, and local communities, were affected or were going to be affected by BRI's projects. Their study found that BRI projects are most likely to benefit major economic actors who are ethnically Chinese or have Chinese partners, have networks with political and business elites in China, and are favored by the Myanmar government. Several ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) have also indicated their interest in building BRI partnerships, but only those with sufficient autonomy will likely be able to realize these ambitions. As for small- and medium-sized actors, traders tend to be positive towards the BRI with the expectation that it will improve the terms of trade between Myanmar and China. Yet, local communities, especially land-dependent ones, have been and are going to be the ones largely bearing the brunt of the BRI projects' negative externalities, i.e., their social and environmental costs. In line with these findings, it has become increasingly apparent in recent years that the public in Myanmar has an explicit bias against Chinese investments, as confirmed in a survey of nearly 3000 respondents from across the country (Yao and Zhang 2018), and by the proliferation of protests and revolts opposing Chinese FDIs aimed at financing the CMEC planned infrastructure projects.

Building on Mark, Overland, and Vakulchuk (2020) findings, this study seeks to uncover the manifestations of infrastructural harm resulting from the construction of the China-

Myanmar Oil and Gas Pipelines, an already completed project, and the Kyaukphyu SEZ under the CMEC, still under implementation. Despite acknowledging that other BRI infrastructure projects in Myanmar have been inflicting harm on the same societal groups, e.g., the Myitsone Dam and the Letpataung copper mine, the choice has fallen on these infrastructure projects as they are two of the most massive ones in Myanmar, affecting a large share of the country's population. Moreover, given that the Kyaukphyu township's area is affected by both projects, presenting them jointly allows taking the above-presented "long-durée" analytical approach, showing how forms of infrastructural harm repeatedly changing the local environment and the local populations' livelihoods have eventually given rise to anti-BRI resistance.

5. The Myanmar-China Oil and Gas Pipelines

The Myanmar-China Oil and Gas Pipeline Project (hereafter "the Project"), the first-ever significant strategic economic cooperation between Myanmar and China, was initiated by the former military government in 2010 that signed a bilateral agreement with China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC). The Project involves a 793-km long gas pipeline and a 711-km long oil pipeline within the territory of Myanmar, which transport crude oil and gas from the western part of Rakhine State, passing through the Magway and Mandalay Regions, heading toward the northern part of Shan State, crossing 21 townships on their way. According to the agreement between China and Myanmar, Myanmar will get 20% of gas pipeline's total capacity of 12 billion cubic meters, and 2 out of the 22 million tons of crude oil carried annually by the oil pipeline (Liu 2014).

Figure 2. China-Myanmar Oil and Gas Pipelines. Sandhi Governance Institute 2021.

The two pipelines were completed in June 2013 and August 2014, and became fully operational by October 2013 and 2017 respectively. Even though their construction was before the formal announcement of the BRI in 2013 and the CMEC in 2017, China state media has touted these two pipelines as "pioneer projects" of the BRI and referred to them as part of the CMEC (ibid: 4).

The Myanmar-China Pipeline Watch Committee (MCPWC 2016) analyzed the transparency and accountability of the Project throughout its implementation process and assessed its impact on the livelihoods of the Myanmar local communities directly affected by the pipelines' construction, i.e., those living along the pipelines' routes. Starting from the findings of the MCPWC's report, the different manifestations of infrastructural harm inflicted by the Project's construction on the local populations can be uncovered and analyzed.

The MCPWC found that although the pipelines' routes avoided crossing villages, hence preventing the resettlement of the indigenous people to other places, they did cross farmlands outside of the villages, which constituted the rural farmers' major livelihood (ibid:

25). Indeed, most of the land confiscated for the construction of the pipelines was farmland (ibid: 25). Hence MCPWC started analyzing the farmland's confiscation and compensation processes. The study's field data collection found that the affected farmers had minimal knowledge about the Project: many of them learned about it when they asked the Project's staff, who entered their farmlands without their permission to measure the Right of Way (ROW), i.e., the strip of land that would have contained the pipelines, and marked the pipelines' routes across their farmlands with small red flag poles (ibid: 21). The research team also studied whether the Project systematically consulted and collected the opinions and consent of the affected farmers regarding the determination of the pipeline route, the impact of the pipeline's construction on the local population livelihoods, and the degree of soil disturbance it entailed (ibid: 22) Even though according to the "Myanmar-China Oil and Gas Pipeline Project Booklet", the Project had conducted an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), including a Social Impact Assessment (SIA), by the Equator Principles and the World Bank Guidelines, the CNPC's subsidiary Southeast Asia Pipeline Co. Ltd. operating the Project, hereinafter CNPC-SEAP, never exposed the report for public study, and more than 90% of the affected farmers interviewed by the MCPWC affirmed that they never experienced either an interview or a consultation with the Project regarding the ROW selection and the social impact assessment (ibid: 23).

As the process of land acquisition and compensation are interrelated, only a transparent land acquisition process would have ensured a smooth compensation process (ibid: 25). As outlined above, this did not occur: the majority of farmers reported that, before the land acquisition process began, the working groups did not explain to them the procedure of land acquisition and the compensation policies. A fourth of them said that the village or township authorities called ad-hoc meetings and "just explained the facts" (ibid: 26). The Project was presented as a state-sponsored one: therefore, the farmers had to allow the pipelines to pass through their farmland, and compensation would be provided for the construction period, estimated to take three to five years. Moreover, when the farmers signed the land and crops compensation agreements, most of them did not see or know the exact amount of money the agreement referred to, as they were unaware of the settled price of land and crops.

Furthermore, when digging the trench of the pipelines, the CNPC-SEAP did not separate the topsoil and subsoil, disturbing the soil properties and consequently significantly reducing the crop yield (ibid: 67). The farmers who wanted to grow crops again after the pipeline was finished had to invest their own money and labor to restore their farmlands, for example by renting agricultural machines to repair the land (ibid: 68). However, this was possible only for those farmers who had received large amounts of compensation.

As for non-farmland losses, no compensation was provided. Kyaukphyu Township, Rakhine State, the point of departure of both the oil and gas pipelines, has a predominantly rural population (around 70%) mainly dependent on subsistence agriculture and fisheries for their livelihoods (ICJ 2017: vii). In Maday Island, where the construction of a deep-water seaport affected local fishing businesses, however, the Project only provided compensation for agricultural lands, neglecting the impact of the Project on fishing families' livelihoods (MCPWC 2016: 14-15). In the same way, no compensation was provided to the majority of farmers owning the paddy fields and maintaining the saltwater protection dyke on Myo Chaung Island (locally known as "Kari"), which were destroyed during the pipelines' construction.

Regarding the Project's impacts on Myanmar's forests, thousands of Pyintako trees, which provided valuable hardwood useful in house and ship buildings, were cut down to clear the pipeline route in Myo Chaung Island, Kyauk Phyu Township. Freshwater resources were damaged too: other than destroying the "Kari", the pipelines passed through the riverbed of the Ayarwaddy River in Yenanchaung, collapsing the dike in the river's west bank where the pipeline crossed (ibid: 72).

The pipelines' construction waste was massive and had many harmful effects on the environment and the local communities. Problems were mostly found in Kyauk Phyu Township, Rakhine State, where the Project built crude oil storage tanks, a deep-water seaport, an Onshore Gas Terminal, and other basic infrastructure. For instance, to build the crude oil storage tanks, a hill in the eastern seaside of Manday Island was demolished to create a flat ground area, and the excess stones were disposed of into the sea, in an area where local fishermen often worked, hence greatly affecting their livelihoods (ibid: 81-82). At

the same time, coral reefs under the sea were blown up to clear the waterway for huge crude oil tankers to approach the deep seaport, affecting the breeding ground of Katkuyan, a valuable fish species nearly extinct. However, the Project's biggest waste was produced by the construction camps: when the pipelines' construction was completed, the workers just did not clear the ground nor restore it to its original condition (ibid: 84).

Not only were farmlands, forests, and fishing businesses massively and irreversibly damaged, but the Project also failed to create the job opportunities originally promised to the local populations. Myanmar citizens were mostly employed in undertaking manual labor such as digging and carrying soil, sand, stones, and cement, working as night watchmen, cleaners, and cooks in construction sites. Most of them were hired as daily workers only for the construction period and were laid off as soon as the pipeline construction was completed (ibid: 64). The job opportunities that have lasted beyond the construction phase of the Project have been largely confined to work as pipeline watch guards and as guards for valve stations. Professional jobs such as driving and maintaining machines and pipeline engineering have been taken by Chinese nationals. For instance, MCPWC researchers found out that the gas compressor station in Yenanchaung was operated by Chinese staff from CNPC-SEAP and the Myanmar member of staff sent as liaison officer by the headquarters of MOGE in Yangon was changed every month: in this way, the MOGE staff did not have enough time to learn anything about the operation of the gas compressor, eventually revealing that the "transfer of technology was, in reality, a myth" (ibid: 64).

Overall, the case features several instances of infrastructural harm where, if we assess them from a spatiotemporal, long-term perspective, harms have been inflicted on the local environments and the populations inhabiting them, while failing to provide local benefits, such as new job opportunities.

6. The Kyaukphyu SEZ

The KP SEZ is one of three special economic zones in development in Myanmar. A SEZ is a delineated geographical area with a special legal regime for business activity, including extendable 50-year land leases, as well as tax and customs benefits. Many Southeast

Asian countries have adopted SEZs, which typically involve major investments in infrastructure and demand large amounts of land. Proponents say that SEZs facilitate rapid economic development by creating investment incentives for both foreign and domestic investment, while others say their economic success has been mixed. Human rights abuses and environmental impacts have often accompanied SEZs, both in Myanmar and elsewhere in Southeast Asia (ICJ 2017: 2).

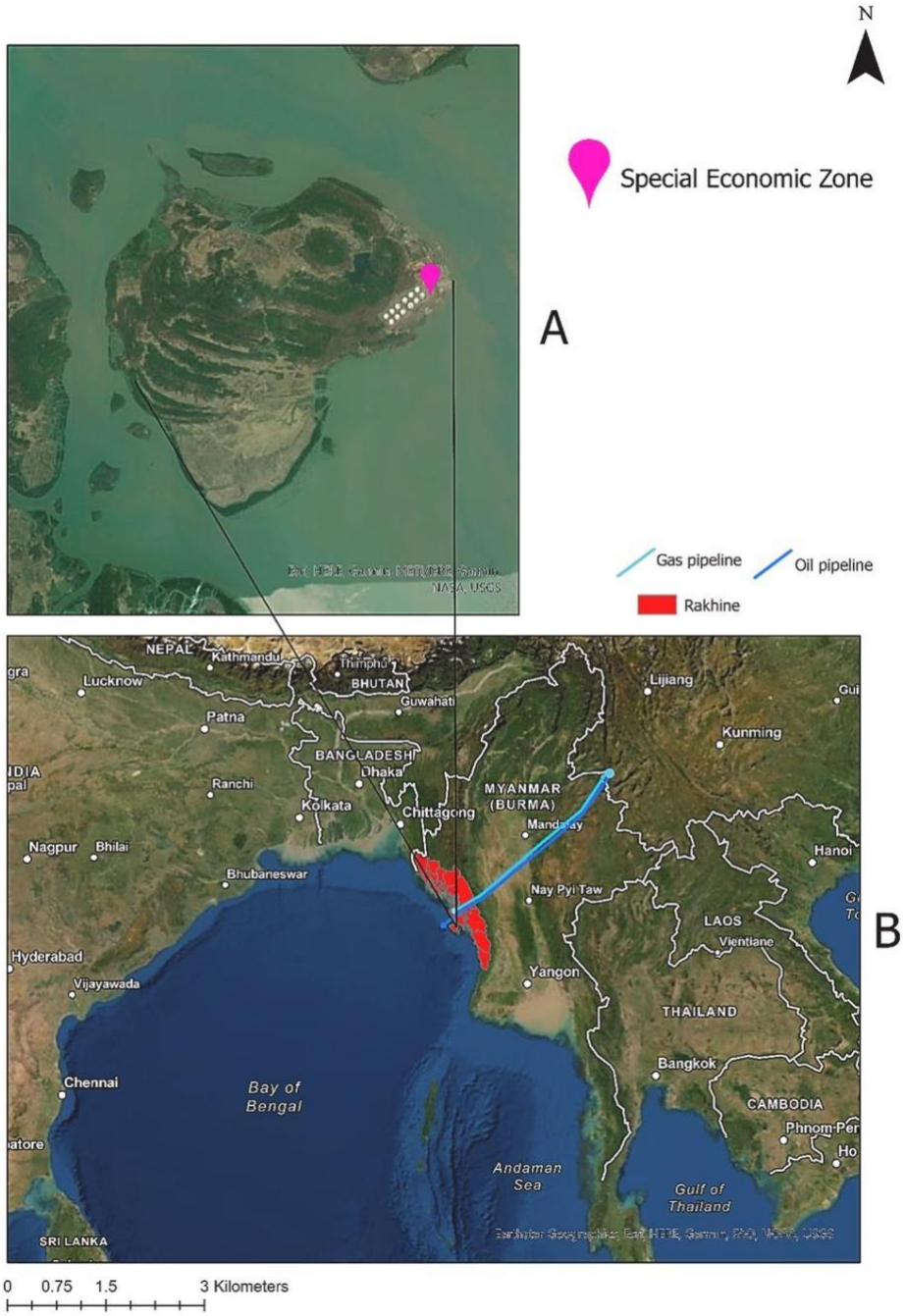

Figure 3. Kyaukphyu SEZ. Map A: location of Maday Island and the SEZ. Map B: location of Rakhine state and the oil and gas pipelines trespassing through Myanmar. Aung et al. 2022: 3.

The KP SEZ is a 4,300 acres (about 1,750 hectares) resource-rich area located along the coast of the Bay of Bengal on Kyaukphyu, Ramree Island, Rakhine State that falls under the CMEC and is planned to contain a deep-water port facility, an industrial zone with facilities for textile and garment manufacturing, and a high-end housing project. After several rounds of negotiations, in 2018 China and Myanmar agreed that the Chinese Company CITIC would hold a 70% stake in the project, whereas the rest would be held by Myanmar's Kyaukphyu SEZ Public Holding Company Ltd. (MKSH), a consortium of 17 companies (ICJ 2017: 4).

While China's strategic interests in the KP SEZ are clear, the benefits for Myanmar, and in particular for the Rakhine state's local communities, are less evident (Calabrese and Cao 2021: 7). Indeed, the deep-sea port will allow China to access the Indian Ocean through Myanmar, bypassing the congested Malacca Strait near Singapore, which makes this the shortest and most economical path between China and India. Furthermore, this access is expected to boost development in China's landlocked Yunnan Province, bordering Myanmar.

While the project is touted as a major steppingstone for China-Myanmar cooperation as well as the local economy, Kyaukphyu communities, who have already experienced the loss of livelihoods and the poor provision of jobs associated with the construction of the Myanmar-China oil and gas pipelines, are deeply skeptical about the benefits that the new Chinese investments would bring them, and exhibit a lack of trust in local authorities. Moreover, plans for the SEZ and economic planning for Kyaukphyu, in general, have until now ignored the context of the Rakhine State torn apart by significant human rights violations and characterized by an unstable security environment associated with the presence of armed forces and relations between its Buddhist and Muslim communities (ICJ 2017, iii).

The KP SEZ faces opposition from activists and residents who criticize the tender process for its alleged lack of transparency and argue that the development would hurt local people. The total area of the SEZ covers 35 villages with a population of approximately 20,000 inhabitants (Aung et al. 2022: 4). While information about resettlement plans is not publicly available, land acquisition documentation acquired by the ICJ (2017) indicates that 20,000 people potentially face involuntary resettlement to make way for the SEZ and related projects. Even though there has been no post-coup development of the KP SEZ, agencies controlled by the junta are at work to seize 250 acres of land in the zone identified for its construction (Naing 2022). This land belongs to more than 70 local farmers (ibid), many of which are opposed to the compulsory acquisition of their land.

The SEZ-associated deep-sea port project envisages both local fertile farmland on shore, fisheries, and lush mangrove forests being absorbed into the project area (Htun and Swe 2023). As of March 2023, locals report low catches as fishing has been banned in large swaths of waters around the project area, and fishing stocks are said to be declining "by some 90 percent" (ibid), their populations imperiled due to industrial waste dumped by companies involved in the project. Local fishermen organized a campaign against the deep-sea port project on the 27th of October 2022. The campaign was conducted in the Thanzit River near Maday Island, where the deep-sea port is slated to be built. In the mangrove forests along the river, they hung vinyl sheets, demanding that local fishermen be respected and that development of the deep-sea port project be halted immediately as it was initiated without the consensus of residents and had not addressed the grievances of local fishermen and residents.

Due to these impacts on fishing activities, the lack of affordable prices for fish and rising commodity prices have led a substantial number of people to quit the fishing industry and leave the area. Indeed, another issue associated with the KP SEZ is its limited job-creating potential and the question of who gets to benefit from these new employment opportunities. At the signing of a framework agreement with the KP SEZ Management Committee in 2018, Chang Zhenming, CITIC Group Chairman, said that "the CITIC consortium will successfully build the Kyaukphyu deep-sea port project for the benefit of the people of Myanmar and the development of Myanmar's economy" (ibid). He also reassured the

local communities that the implementation of the Kyaukphyu SEZ project would create management positions to be assigned to residents and that after 10 years of operation, depending on the situation, about 90 percent of management positions would be covered by locals. However, as highlighted by U Kyaw Kyaw Soe, a member of the Land Survey and Agricultural Land Utilization Committee assigned to the Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone Management Committee, the deep-sea port project mostly relies on modern technology, which makes it hard for residents to be gainfully employed. The prospects for local and regional residents would seem to be a bit brighter for the projects within the SEZ connected to the deep-sea port, e.g., the construction of railways and highways that connect with the port. However, since these promises echo those made by the companies involved in the construction of the Myanmar-China Oil and Gas Pipelines in the early 2010s, residents remain skeptical and oppose the SEZ project implementation, which is expected to start in the second half of 2023.

This second case study supports both the spatiotemporal and resistance approach to infrastructural harm, illustrated by local communities' counter-infrastructure protests in reaction to the infrastructural harm accompanying the construction of the KP SEZ. Even though local people have so far failed to hinder the planned construction of the SEZ, their resistance has succeeded in raising awareness of the irreversible environmental and social costs associated with the BRI CMEC projects. However, these resistance strategies have been facing strong opposition from Myanmar's government, which allows for the construction of infrastructures entailing socio-ecological degradation "in the name of economic growth and technological progress" (Kallianos, Dunlap, and Dalakoglou 2023: 838).

7. Conclusion

This article has focused on the social and environmental impacts of BRI-linked infrastructure projects in Myanmar. It acknowledged the potential benefits Chinese-backed investments can have for this developing country's economic growth, yet, in line with the social scientific infrastructural turn, has focused more strongly on the detrimental implications of infrastructure development. It has taken a bottom-up/local-level approach, centering on the infrastructure project's impact on the affected communities. To uncover this

side of BRI projects in Myanmar, the concept of infrastructural harm was applied to the development of Myanmar-China Oil and Gas Pipelines and the KS SEZ infrastructure projects. The manifestations of harm were addressed from both a spatiotemporal and a resistance perspective to show how deleterious the construction of these infrastructures has been and continues to be. Local communities have permanently lost their main sources of livelihood, mostly subsistence farming and fishing, but have neither been (sufficiently) compensated nor did the projects create new job opportunities in the amount the construction companies had originally promised.

The military junta ruling the country is currently under pressure to recover from the economic onslaught following the 2021 coup and the COVID-19 crisis and hence pushes for the development and implementation of CMEC projects, such as the KP SEZ. However, the local communities, trapped in their rural village existences, know little about the changing economic dimensions of the country, striving to attract FDIs to foster its economic growth and technological development. Moreover, due to the lack of transparency involved in the above-analyzed large-scale economic projects, locals have largely borne the brunt of these transnational infrastructures without understanding or reaping the benefits related to them. If the Myanmar government is genuinely committed to developing the country, it should stop neglecting the harms generated by the BRI extractive and infrastructure investments and start mitigating and reversing their negative social and ecological impacts. Instead of violently repressing the public anti-BRI protests and resistance, the military junta should find ways to engage local communities in the CMEC projects, as well reinvest some of the economic revenues they generate in local development programs (MCPWC 2016: 90). In the future, in the pursuit of the country's national development, Myanmar's government should only allow for China-backed investments and infrastructure projects entailing benefits for the country's overall population. A good way forward could entail embracing the principle of reciprocity with ecosystems (LaDuke and Cowen 2020) and pushing for the development of non-exploitative infrastructures (Siamanta 2021).

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