CHAPTER 17

Building Dams on International Rivers: Assuming a More Responsible Role

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Abstract

From global climate change to small-scale pollution, environmental problems often spread across political boundaries. Thus people are now paying more attention to cross-border issues in environmental protection. Among such concerns is the development of hydropower on international rivers. This article surveys China’s overseas dam industry in Southeast and Northeast Asia while discussing its existing and potential impacts. Reviewing the latest policies on the transnational hydropower industry, the author argues that China should properly assess the dams’ ecological and social risks in order to make scientific decisions and minimize negative impacts. In addition, China should encourage multilateral participation in managing and developing water resources.

Keywords

hydropower – river basin planning – cross-border impacts – responsible investment

In March 2012, at a press conference at the Fifth Session of the Eleventh National People’s Congress, Qin Guangrong (秦光荣), party secretary of Yunnan Province, reassured journalists that “no hydropower project has resumed on the Nu River (怒江).”¹ He then explained that work on the Nu would not restart until the proposed projects went through proper national procedures and solved relocation and environmental issues. Yet, by the end of the year, the Tibet Daily reported that hydropower companies were secretly working towards taming the Nu River and had garnered support from the local

The paper quoted Norbu Dunzhub (罗布顿珠), secretary of the Changdu (昌都) Prefectural Party Committee in Tibet, who promised the China Datang Corporation (大唐集团) that generating hydropower on the Nu was at the top of the local government’s agenda. Although he mentioned issues such as environmental protection, people’s welfare, and social stability, the main message was to “prioritize hydropower development.” He was silent, however, on how to manage the Nu as a cross-border river.

1 Building Dams on Cross-Border Rivers

The Nu, or Salween as it is known in Burma, runs 3,673 kilometers, 2,020 of which flows in China, 200 along the Thailand-Burma border, and 1,450 in Burma.

The Nu was added to the list of China’s hydropower bases in 2003 with a planned capacity of 21,320 MW, ranking sixth nationally. According to the China Electricity Council, the Nu was planned as a 2-reservoir, 13-dam cascade project in Yunnan Province, but would start with a 1-reservoir, 4-dam cascade project (pending state approval). Nevertheless, concerns about the dams’ environmental and social risks have accompanied the proposals from the very beginning, especially since the assessments of how such bold efforts might impact the river valley and the communities that relied on it for livelihood were nowhere to be found in the planning reports.

Moreover, China’s hydropower development on the Nu River is not limited within its national borders. Table 17.1 lists China’s hydropower plants on the Salween River in Burma. With a capacity of 7,000 MW, Tasang is the largest in Southeast Asia, outshining the formerly well-known Myitsone dam. Located at the crossroads of China, Burma, Thailand, and Laos, Tasang plays a key role in the Greater Mekong Sub-region Power Grid. With a combined capacity of 20,000 MW and located near countries in desperate need of energy, the dams on the Salween are lucrative to hydropower developers in Southeast Asia.

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