

RESCALING GEOECONOMICS:

THE ROLE OF LOCAL ILLICIT AUTHORITY IN GLOBAL MEGAPROJECTS

Annette Idler and Clara Voyvodic

ABSTRACT

This article examines the influence of violent non-state actors (VNSAs) on the construction of large-scale infrastructure projects in conflict-affected territories. Recentring such territories, it challenges state-centric geoeconomic narratives, which often overlook the significant role of local illicit authorities in shaping project outcomes. The study demonstrates how geoeconomic ambitions, such as regional or global influence and energy security, depend on negotiating with local actors in contested territories. The findings reveal the blurred boundaries between domestic and international authority in these regions and suggest that megaprojects must account for multi-scalar authority dynamics. We illustrate our argument by analyzing the construction of two megadam projects: the Hidroituango dam in Colombia's Antioquia department and the Myitsone dam in Myanmar's Kachin State. Drawing on original evidence collected during extensive fieldwork comprising semi-structured interviews and observations in these two conflict-affected regions, we show that the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia and Myanmar's Kachin Independence Army, respectively, exercised authority in regions where the state's monopoly on violence was limited. These VNSAs obstructed or facilitated megaprojects based on tactics including extortion and community representation.

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INTRODUCTION

Large-scale investment projects—so-called megaprojects—reveal the evolving relationships of authority between various actors from the local to the transnational and the global level.¹ States, often the main focus of studies on authority, invest in such projects to demonstrate political and economic power regionally and globally (Bridge, Özkaynak, and Turhan 2018; Morrison 2017; Baev and Øverland 2010). These endeavors underscore the geopolitical tensions that, at least partly, drive states' developmental ambitions (Raman 2013; O'Sullivan, Øverland, and Sandalow 2017; Mecklin 2016). They strategically leverage geographical factors such as natural resources' location when positioning themselves vis-à-vis others. In line with Luttwak (1990, 17), these ambitions concern geoeconomics, i.e., “the admixture of the logic of conflict with the methods of commerce.” Localities targeted for investment, however, are not empty spaces. Sometimes, regionally or globally relevant investments in these areas do not proceed as planned despite states' considerable power.

In Asia, China has projected its power by investing in megaprojects across the globe—especially through its Belt and Road Initiative. This approach has expanded its geoeconomic influence and geopolitical reach on various continents (Liu and Bennett 2024; Apostolopoulou 2021; Flint and Zhu 2019; Mohan and Tan-Mullins 2019). Some BRI-related projects however were fraught with setbacks (Weng et al. 2021; Wang 2021), including one in its neighborhood: the Myitsone dam in Myanmar's Kachin State, bordering China. This dam is a megadam, i.e. a large-scale infrastructure and energy project to generate hydroelectric power that costs over USD 1 billion. Although China

¹ Megaprojects are large-scale investment projects (concerning primarily infrastructure, energy, industry, technology, or real estate developments) that typically cost USD 1 billion or more and impact the communities and the environment at and near the construction site (Flyvbjerg 2014).

economically dominated Myanmar, and the Myanmar government acquiesced to the dam's construction, China was unable to finish the project (Kiik 2020; Chan 2017).

In Latin America, Colombia, together with national and transnational companies, has used megaprojects to promote investment domestically, develop regional influence imbedded in geoeconomic strength, and attempt to position itself as a global economic powerhouse (Picq 2020; Alberti 2019; Whitfield 2008). One such investment has been the Hidroituango megadam. Subcontracting three construction companies from Colombia and from Brazil, Colombia's government sought to build it as the third-largest dam in Latin America (Glassman 2018; Sparke 2018). Notwithstanding an increased military presence to protect the construction, the megaproject faced continuous setbacks (Caracol 2013; Gualdrón 2012; El Tiempo 2018).

These two cases contradict the view that powerful states and transnational companies can unilaterally advance their geoeconomic objectives through megaprojects in territories strategic to their national interests. According to this logic, other states, or transnational companies with aligned interests, may impede the construction of these states' megaprojects (Mohan and Tan-Mullins 2019; Diesen 2017; Blackwill and Harris 2016; Essex 2013). Critical scholarship that highlights megaprojects' politicized nature shows how demonstrations such as the Gezi Park protests in Turkey against massive urban developments can obstruct construction (Tuğal 2023, 460). These literatures offer valuable insights but cannot fully capture China's and Colombia's difficulties in building the megadams.

Neither realists' geostrategic approach to the interstate power dynamics that undergird megaprojects around the world (Beeson and Crawford 2023; Kim 2021; Vihma 2018a), nor critical scholars' concerns in the globalized spread of geoeconomic influence (Moisio 2019; D. Chen 2021; Tuğal 2023) completely account for the authority relations imbedded in megaproject construction in territories where the state is not the sole authority. Even in remote areas, local actors, particularly violent non-state actors (VNSAs), such as rebels, paramilitaries, militias, or criminal organizations, also exert authority alongside or in competition with the state (Gutiérrez 2022; Voyvodic 2023; D. Brenner and Tazzioli 2022).² We argue that these local actors, rather than just national, transnational, or international ones, often exert considerable influence on megaprojects' trajectory and outcomes.

Against this backdrop, we investigate how local illicit authority influences states' and transnational companies' construction of global infrastructure and energy megaprojects. We conceptualize authority as the recognized authorship of "policies, practices, of rules, and of norms" in a specific domain (Hall and Biersteker 2002, 4). Authority thus is "legitimized power," which means that those regulated or governed by the actor with authority consent to the latter, rather than being coerced to obey (Hall and Biersteker 2002, 3-4). We demonstrate that VNSAs act as local authorities at construction sites by blocking or allowing states and transnational companies to construct megaprojects, depending on their strategic objectives and the interests of the communities they claim to represent.

² A VNSA is a group of at least three people who use violence to achieve their goals. They directly or indirectly challenge the state's right to use force by illegally using or threatening to use violence. They are connected through a formal organization that lasts for a period of time and that they consider themselves a part of (Schneckener 2006, 25; 2009, 8-9; Idler and Forest 2015, 15).

This is critical in territories where the state is not the sole authority, such as conflict-affected territories. Here, VNSAs often hold authority through their own governing structures (Hertogh 2008; Z. C. Mampilly 2011; Arjona, Kasfir, and Mampilly 2015; Harsh 2012; Jütting 2007; Idler 2018). These VNSAs, the “internal” actors, force “external” actors, such as states and national or transnational companies to engage with their illicit authority. Thus, understanding to what extent states can project their geoeconomic power through megaprojects in regions where they do not have sole authority requires accounting for the local illicit authority that radiates from non-state actors in those territories.

To substantiate our argument, we draw on in-depth interviews and focus groups about the construction of two megadams: the Hidroitungo dam in Colombia and the Myitsone dam in Myanmar. We collected this evidence during extensive fieldwork in the two conflict-affected regions where these two dams are located: in Colombia’s Antioquia department (2018 – 2019) and in Myanmar’s Kachin State (2020).³ Both megadams represent large infrastructure and energy projects with significant domestic and international investments in territories where the state lacks sole authority. Other examples include the Trans-Caspian pipeline, led by Turkmenistan and other countries in the region, that caused geopolitical tensions between Russia, Iran, and the United States (Orazgaliyev 2017; Morrison 2017). Local authority affected the Trans-Caspian pipeline’s construction. The Taliban in Afghanistan initially resisted the pipeline, including the US government’s efforts to negotiate the project’s access (Orazgaliyev 2017, 20). They eventually allowed the project to continue in 2017 in the areas under its control, challenging Russian and Iranian interests (Morrison 2017, 264). Another example is the Chinese-Pakistani

³ Fieldwork was conducted following ethical approval by the University of Oxford with the following reference numbers: R50663/RE004 (for Myanmar) and SSH_DPIR_C1A_18_037 (for Colombia).

Economic Corridor (CPEC). Local militants halted construction in the territories they controlled (Basit 2019; Javaid 2016). Similarly, in Iraq, the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), an armed militia, demanded payments from state-owned engineering and construction companies building and operating billion-dollar port projects such as the Grand Faw port (Al-Nidawi 2019).

The Hidroituango dam in Colombia and the Myitsone dam in Myanmar represent, yet also stand out from, this universe of cases. The Hidroituango dam is the third-largest dam in Latin America, costing \$3.8 billion (Acosta 2023). Supported by the Colombian state, the Colombian public utilities company, Public Enterprises of Medellín (EPM), led the project in one of the continent's most marginalized and conflict-affected territories (Lombana 2020; Sepúlveda 2013). Myitsone, costing \$3.6 billion, is a large-scale investment in Myanmar. It was led by an international actor, the state-owned Chinese Power Investment Group, with the Myanmar government's permission (Bünthe, Camroux, and Ufen 2012). Similar to the Hidroituango dam, VNSAs—here, armed ethnic organizations—operated near the Myitsone dam. Both territories are distant from their countries' power centers, which marginalized these regions,⁴ isolating them socially, economically, and politically from domestic and international interests (Lawn 2023; Kiik 2020; Sepúlveda 2013; Torres Ramírez 2018). Yet for both national and international actors, dam construction caused tensions with the local authorities that communities already recognized: the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia—People's Army (FARC-EP, hereafter FARC) in Colombia and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) in Myanmar.

⁴ See McGill et al 2023 for how marginalization involves a multi-dimensional distancing from access and opportunity.

We first situate megaprojects within the broader context of geoeconomics, the state, and authority. We then examine how the FARC's and the KIA's local illicit authority influenced the megadam constructions in Colombia and Myanmar by national and transnational state-owned companies. We conclude that analyzing authority relations in megaproject construction should not be limited to international and national interests, but also account for the local authority that can radiate outward and upward from the territories under construction.

MEJAPROJECTS AND LOCAL AUTHORITY

Geoeconomics, the State, and Authority

The concept of geoeconomics helps understand how megaprojects form part of states' economic strategies to further their geopolitical interests (Csurgai 2018; Vihma 2018a; 2018b; Scholvin and Wigell 2018). Coined by Luttwak (1990, 17), it has experienced a recent revival (Roberts, Choer Moraes, and Ferguson 2019; Gertz and Evers 2020; Babic 2023). We follow Blackwill and Harris's (2016, 20) clarification of geoeconomics as "[t]he use of economic instruments to promote and defend national interests, and to produce beneficial geopolitical results; and the effects of other nations' economic actions on a country's geopolitical goals." The term geoeconomics is broader than "economic statecraft." While geoeconomics deals with overarching national interests and the strategic interplay between economics and geopolitics, economic statecraft is more focused on tactical maneuvers to influence other nations' behaviors. A subset of geoeconomics, it refers to the process through which a country uses economic tools in a targeted way to achieve specific foreign policy objectives (L. S. Chen and Evers 2023). It also differs from "weaponized interdependence," a tactical approach within the broader strategy of geoeconomics. Accordingly, states leverage their central roles in the global economic

interconnectedness to coerce other states into aligning with their strategic objectives (Drezner et al. 2021; Farrell and Newman 2023).

Megaprojects' proliferation results from states shaping the global economic landscape strategically as part of their geopolitical ambitions. In the early-to-mid twentieth century, large-scale infrastructure projects such as ports, dams, and railways symbolized modernization (Harvey and Knox 2012; Scott 1998). For decades, they were largely excluded from international financial institutions' investment strategies in lieu of intangibles such as governance, human rights, and rule of law (Carrai 2021). However, megaprojects arise from the same global logics of competitiveness that propelled geographic, economic, and political processes around the world starting in the late 1970s (Olds 1995; Schindler, Fadaee, and Brockington 2019). These projects present opportunities for development and generate revenue for investors and the public (Siemiatycki 2017; del Cerro Santamaria 2019; Picq 2020). While megaprojects can drive economic growth for both donor and recipient countries, they may also allow the donor to influence decision-making in the recipient's territory (Anguelov 2020).

Goeconomic analysis highlights the role of the state in global investments in megaprojects (Babic 2023; Moio 2019; Liao and Katada 2021). While national and transnational companies build these projects (Schindler, Fadaee, and Brockington 2019), states remain engaged in them to pursue their goeconomic interests, whether as "external" international actors or by projecting power through "internal" projects within their borders (Reboredo 2019; Bridge, Özkaynak, and Turhan 2018). China for example has invested in infrastructure such as the Belt and Road Initiative in Africa and hydroelectric megaprojects

in Southeast Asia (Lee, Wainwright, and Glassman 2018; Zou and Jones 2020; Blanchard and Flint 2017), expanding its political influence.

States and other actors constructing megaprojects in such localities are typically considered as imposing their geoeconomic power on these spaces and populations locally and globally (Kim 2020; Diesen 2017). Hence, scholars analyzing geopolitics see such projects “as a vehicle for hegemonic power struggles” (de Goede and Westermeier 2022, 3). Infrastructural development narratives often assume that megaprojects are introduced into contexts with messy or nonexistent forms of governance. Accordingly, the frontier is pushed further into the hinterlands as actors compete for resources (Ballvé 2020; Rasmussen and Lund 2018).

Recent debates have moved beyond state-centric geoeconomic analyses to examine non-state actors’ roles in megaprojects (Jenss and Schuetze 2021; D’albergo, Lefèvre, and Ye 2018). These discussions challenge the internal/external dichotomy around geoeconomic investments, highlighting how international or transnational actors govern by introducing large-scale projects in places where state authority is limited (Carrai 2021). For instance, multinational corporations can, alongside the state, effectively govern populations when building extractive megaprojects in resource-rich areas such as South Africa and Mozambique (Bezuidenhout and Buhlungu 2015; Symons 2016). These studies however still focus on transnational companies’ authority, overlooking local authority. Analytically prioritizing state and transnational actors creates “blind spots and conceptual black boxes” in large-scale infrastructure projects (Pedersen and Buur 2016, 77). Such a focus ignores the role of local non-state actors, especially in the Global South, where state authority’s reach is uneven. As Hurrell (2016, 4) notes:

“In fragile states and penetrated systems, the division between the ‘international’ and the ‘domestic’ appears very differently compared to those living with a world whose dominant intellectual framing is that of the Weberian state and its accompanying ideas and ideologies.”

Therefore, we examine how the international and domestic intersect at megaproject construction sites. Here, local dynamics are influential, especially in regions where non-state actors hold more authority than the state. Even critical scholarship on local dynamics around megaprojects typically analyzes how megaprojects displace communities, undermine livelihoods, or worsen living conditions (Reddy, Smyth, and Steyn 2017; Cotula 2019; Vanclay 2017), rather than how local authority extends to national and international levels. Some studies examine how conflict actors may try to block or control supplies to megaprojects or target them in military campaigns (Lacher and Kumetat 2011; Sovacool and Walter 2019; Pearse-Smith 2012, 81). Yet this merely positions VNSA as spoilers to be suppressed militarily rather than authorities. Others examine how business elites override or coopt local infrastructure (Peterson 2021; Sanders 2014; Tretter 2016), but these studies largely focus on the Global North.

We show that multi-scalar authority relations—operating at local, regional, national, transnational and global levels—can delay or advance megaprojects,⁵ also affecting the geoeconomic goals of their constructors. Viewed from spaces with local non-state authority, both the state and global economic and geopolitical landscapes thus must be understood from the bottom up (Bolívar 2010; Schouten 2019; Ballvé 2020a).

⁵ For similar uses of the term “multi-scalar” see Jeness and Schuetze (2021), Sosnowski (2023), and Adamson (2024).

Recentring the Local—Tying together Geoeconomics, the State, and Authority

To connect geoeconomics, the state, and authority, we recenter territories whose geographical location and political economy are distant from states' power centers. In unstable regions in the Global South, these territories typically feature governance and authority that differ from the central state (Mattheis, Raineri, and Russo 2018; García and Fold 2022). This epistemological approach is akin to the borderland lens (Idler 2019), which examines regions adjoining an international border and internal borderlands. This lens highlights that the margins are not necessarily messy but possess authority that delineates borders apparent to those who wish to traverse or enter these spaces even if they are not marked on maps (Dean 2020). Such spaces are often referred to as frontier regions, where various “geographies of settlement, political organisation and economic surplus generation” meet, “state power is territorialized” and disorder prevails (Goodhand 2018, 9).

Recentring territories far from power centers allows us to defy, first, state-centric perspectives that only consider such localities if there is violence that challenges territorial sovereignty; and second, work on local governance that does not connect local complexities to geopolitical power dynamics. In these territories, “the state ends” (Korf and Raeymaekers 2013, 5; see also Asad 2004), but also *starts* because non-state forms of authority exist. Baud and van Schendel (1997, 211–42; see also Abraham and Schendel 2005; Goodhand 2018; Ho 2022) state that “we know much more about how states dealt with borderlands than how borderlands dealt with states.” Van Schendel (2005, 385) further argues that “many states stand or fall by how their borderlands handle them.” Localities distant from power centers thus possess their own agency that radiates outward

from the local onto the national and the international rather than merely constituting spaces to be acted upon (see, e.g., Korf and Raeymaekers 2013, 7). Recentring these localities “mak[es] the invisible visible, bring[s] the margin to the center, render[s] the trivial important” (Reinharz 1992, 248).

The geoeconomics of megaprojects must therefore contend with the local’s agency. Infrastructures do not merely serve hegemonic power; they also obstruct and shape it (de Goede and Westermeier 2022, 4). Recentring localities far from power centers reverses the traditional top-down examination of authority. It first analyzes local actors of conflict and resource governance and then explores how they connect sub-nationally, nationally, and globally (Schilling, Saulich, and Engwicht 2018, 442). It thus reveals local ownership as a contested space where various political authorities’ boundaries are questioned (de Carvalho, Schia, and Guillaume 2019, 182).

In territories where VNSAs challenge the state’s monopoly on violence, such as during armed conflict, these groups exert *illicit* authority, i.e. authority that is not legally sanctioned. While local illicit authority is complex (Abello-Colak and Guarneros-Meza 2014), it oftentimes gives rise to shadow citizenship, a social contract-like mutually reinforcing relationship between these VNSAs and the community in whose territory they operate (Idler 2019; see also, e.g., Arjona 2016; Arjona, Kasfir, and Mampilly 2015; Z. Mampilly 2011; Hall and Biersteker 2002). The community’s sense of belonging and governance experience typically lies with that actor, rather than with the state or an international party (Voyvodic 2021; Florea 2018). In such contexts, multiple systems of rules overlap because not only states or companies but also the local illicit authority determines a megaproject’s trajectory. The literature on megadams and geoeconomics

often ignores this interplay of actors and instead focuses on transboundary water flows and geopolitics (Warner and Zawahri 2012; Sovacool and Walter 2019; Olson and Gareau 2018). In contexts of conflict and crime, “authority is ambiguous, plural, and malleable” (Florea 2018, 149; see also Barnes 2017; Lessing 2021). National and international actors entering a territory can exacerbate this situation. This reveals the tensions that arise from these rules overlapping or contradicting each other and demonstrates an “unbundling of territoriality” (Ruggie 1993).

RESEARCH DESIGN

Our study follows a case study design with two cases of megadam construction: the Hidrotuango dam in Antioquia, Colombia; and the Myitsone Dam in Kachin State, Myanmar. They represent a universe of cases of large infrastructure and energy projects in territories where the state does not hold a monopoly on violence—VNSAs hold local authority. Both construction sites are in historically contested territories far from the state’s power centers.

Our focus on megadams as a specific type of megaproject reflects how states shift away from fossil fuels and invest in renewable energy to boost energy security (Olson and Gareau 2018; Johansson 2013). Because megadams play a globally significant role, unlike other megaprojects with a more national or regional focus, we might expect local dynamics to be little relevant to their construction. Therefore, megadams are “difficult cases” of megaprojects for demonstrating local authority’s influence.

We selected cases in Colombia and Myanmar because, while both are large-scale infrastructure projects driven by state-owned companies, one is built by a domestic actor

(Public Enterprises of Medellin in Colombia) and the other by an international one (the Chinese Power Investment Group in Myanmar). This comparison in difference inspired by a “most different” case study design (Seawright and Gerring 2008, 298) allows us to show how VNSAs’ local illicit authority hinders and facilitates megaproject construction against both national and international state interests. Such local authority thus reshapes geoeconomic interests’ internal and external boundaries regardless of the megaproject’s domestic or international status.

Two of the world’s most protracted conflicts between states and VNSAs are in Colombia and in Myanmar. In both cases, the VNSAs have political and economic motivations and have profited from multiple income sources in licit and illicit economies. While VNSAs in Colombia participate in the lucrative cocaine business and connected illicit economies, in Myanmar, VNSAs are involved in the heroin business and related illicit flows. The cases also differ in their cultural contexts (South America versus Southeast Asia), their political systems (democratic versus authoritarian), and the conflict’s root causes (class-based issues around land reform versus ethnic identity and secession).

We collected data via semi-structured interviews and observation. During fieldwork in 2018 and 2019, one author conducted 32 interviews and field observations in Colombian Antioquia, including at the dam site, and 11 interviews in Bogotá. During 2019 and 2020, the other author conducted twenty interviews in Myanmar’s Kachin State, including at the dam site, and forty interviews in Yangon. Interviewees—identified through snowball sampling—included residents, displaced people, human rights defenders, anti-dam activists, teachers, and non-governmental and international organizations staff. Snowball sampling is useful in regions with difficult-to-access populations and where trust and social

networks with the researcher improve participant comfort (Naderifar, Goli, and Ghaljaie 2017). We also reviewed local news articles, other documents, and secondary sources. We coded and analyzed the data on the VNSAs' tactics and their manifestations in the dam constructions with NVivo software and identified the causal mechanism through process tracing: the local illicit authority's influence (via blocking or allowing the megadam construction) on the pursuit of geoeconomic interests of states and transnational companies.

THE FINDINGS

The Hidroituango Dam in Colombia: The FARC's Authority

After independence from its Spanish colonialist in 1810, Colombia became one of Latin America's oldest democracies, though one marred by violence (Ballvé 2020; Villamizar Herrera 2017). Following a period of violence from 1948 to 1958, Colombia has been enduring an armed conflict since 1964, driven largely by ideological armed factions opposing the state, such as the left-wing FARC and the National Liberation Army (ELN), which were formed that year. Right-wing paramilitary groups have further escalated violence (Villamizar Herrera 2017; Gutiérrez-Sanín 2019). The FARC and the paramilitaries established strongholds in Antioquia, in Colombia's northwest region (Lombana 2020; Sepúlveda 2013). EPM, with the city of Medellín and department of Antioquia as majority stakeholders, constructed the Hidroituango dam on the Cauca River in Antioquia's mountainous Ituango municipality. Meant to become Colombia's largest hydroelectric station, the project was tendered to Consortium CCC that included one construction firm from Brazil (Camargo Correa) and two from Colombia (Concreto and Coinsa). Construction started in 2011 (Lombana 2020; EPM 2012).

Juan Manuel Santos, Colombia's president when the dam's construction began until 2018, aimed to consolidate the state and amplify Colombia's regional geopolitical power through the dam. He argued that the "sale of electricity from the [Hidroituango] dam to other countries would mean that Colombia would each time generate more prosperity that could be distributed throughout the region but that [would] also especially benefit those that produce[d] it" (SAESP 2011). His government supported developing large-scale infrastructure, for instance by deploying the military to protect the dam's construction site from "terrorist" and "criminal" actors (Sepúlveda 2013). It made developing the Cauca River's hydroelectric capacity a national priority (DNP 2009). Still, the construction was cumbersome. The Ituango municipality was the FARC's 18th Front's stronghold, supported by the 36th Front in the neighboring Bajo Cauca region downstream of the Cauca River (Lombana 2020; FIP 2014).⁶ The FARC fought the Colombian military since the dam was planned. State and paramilitary forces entered the territory in 1998, but by 2001 the FARC had rebuffed these advances. Between 2011 and 2013, the state forces increased their presence to protect the dam's construction while the FARC opposed the dam in public statements and attacked the materials and workers, and against the state forces protecting them (FIP 2014).

The FARC's most visible opposition to the dam involved clashes with authorities, but it also interfered in four other ways: (1) disrupting surveyors before construction by denying them access to territory where the state could not guarantee their safety;⁷ (2) blocking workers from the site during construction;⁸ (3) extorting construction companies starting

⁶ The FARC had a hierarchical organizational structure, with the "Secretariat" as central governing body at the top. Below the "Secretariat" were regional blocs and decentralized fronts. Each operated across different regions of Colombia, responsible for executing military, political, and financial activities.

⁷ Interview with former EPM manager, Medellín, January 2019; Interview with Hidroituango dam engineer, Medellín, January 2019; interview with an engineer familiar with the Hidroituango dam, Medellín, November 2018.

⁸ Interview with former EPM manager, Medellín, January 2019.

in late 2012; and (4) threatening to attack in 2013, leading to the evacuation of nearly 90% of the workers.⁹ Though these actions seemed aimed at halting the project, by late 2012, the FARC appeared to allow construction to continue in exchange for payments.

Colombian military presence in the early 2010s did not defeat or expel the FARC from Ituango. Both the Colombian military and FARC militias patrolled the urban areas of Ituango. These militias were typically community members in plainclothes who provided intelligence (e.g. on who entered the area) to the FARC combatants ensconced in the mountains around the dam.¹⁰ State soldiers patrolled only Ituango's center square and surrounding streets. They retreated into the barracks after dark for fear of attack, as the FARC threatened to kill anyone outside after 8pm (FIP 2014, 22–24).

Other 36th Front members took over taxing the cocaine trade, kidnappings, and extorting businesses in the municipalities of Ituango, San Andres de Cuerquia, and Toledo by early 2013. These locations were crucial for transporting and moving contractors and materials for the Hidroituango dam (FIP 2014, 23). Here, the FARC began to extort the dam's construction by late 2012 (Gualdrón 2012; Defensoría del Pueblo 2014),¹¹ thus allowing the construction to proceed as long as they would profit from it.

By 2013, the FARC coopted the contractors. According to an international organization staff member in Ituango, “one [could] infer that there was an agreement” because the “FARC’s power of negotiation was very strong.”¹² Right-wing groups that acted as

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Interview with teachers, Ituango, November 2018; interview with activist (a), Ituango, November 2018.

¹¹ Interview with activist (b), Puerto Valdivia, April 2019; Interview with local teachers, Ituango, November 2018; Interview with activist (a), Ituango, November 2018.

¹² Interview with international staffer in Medellin, November 2018.

successors of the paramilitaries who demobilized in 2006 also increased their presence in the municipality, which many community members believed was to support EPM (Voyvodic 2024, 8).¹³ One local activist recounted that, in late 2013 or early 2014, some members of these groups entered the Ituango village to oppose the FARC who then expelled them, and that there were “many attacks on the road after that...EPM understood that it could not use force in that area and that they would need to negotiate directly” to enter.¹⁴ Despite more soldiers and possible paramilitary support, the FARC could still control access to the construction site.

Extortion was central to this access. A community member who lived and fished on the Cauca River described the FARC’s authority over EPM via extortion. She explained that, despite clashes between the military and the FARC when EPM began constructing the Hidroitungo dam, the dam’s construction eventually needed armed group “approval” because “for the project to be carried out, it must be in hand with the armed groups. If [EPM] doesn’t pay a *vacuna* [nb: extortion money], [the FARC] burn the machinery. If they pay, the machinery stays safe.”¹⁵ The Colombian military presence did not deter such practices. According to an Ituango miner, “all businesses had to pay, it did not matter if there was a [military] battalion, they still had to pay.”¹⁶ The FARC used its authority to extort both domestic and international entities.

By September 2013, the FARC also reached an agreement with a paramilitary successor group, the Clan del Golfo, that reduced the violent disputes between the two groups. The

¹³ Interview with activist (a), Ituango, November 2018; Interview with displaced miner from Ituango, Medellin, December 2018. Interview with teachers, Ituango, November 2018.

¹⁴ Interview with activist (a), Ituango, November 2018.

¹⁵ Interview with Ituango residents, November 2018; interview with local activist (b), Puerto Valdivia, April 2019.

¹⁶ Interview with miner from Hidroitungo area, December 2018.

FARC and Clan del Golfo agreed to divide the territory so that each could extort businesses in specified areas (Defensoría del Pueblo 2014).¹⁷ As Jenss (2023, 4) observes, despite state discourses in Colombia that situate VNSAs as “external to society and isolated from legal capital accumulation,” the FARC became imbedded in legal extractive and developmental ventures. The arrangement between the FARC and the Clan del Golfo crumbled by early 2017 when the FARC demobilized. This demobilization enabled dissident factions and paramilitary successor groups to contest territorial control and extort businesses and EPM (Defensoría del Pueblo 2018). By July 2018, the dissident factions of FARC’s 36th and 18th Fronts that remained in the territory threatened the contractors again, supposedly because they refused to pay. EPM then reportedly removed its workers from the construction site for a few weeks. They later returned without any apparent issue.¹⁸

Although the FARC initially opposed the dam, their decision to allow it for extortion money frustrated many community members. For example, teachers in Ituango criticized the Hidroituango dam “as a strategy to dominate the population.” They condemned the FARC, saying that “while they spoke out against the dam, as long as the *vacuna* was paid, the project continued.”¹⁹ The regional director of an intergovernmental human rights organization explained that the communities in Ituango and areas affected by the dam “accused the FARC of selling their territory to the multinationals.”²⁰ Armed groups thus need to weigh losing local support against gaining a new source of revenue (Gutiérrez-Sanín 2019).

¹⁷ The Clan del Golfo retaliated against EPM in late 2013 for a failure to pay. Interview with local activist (b), Puerto Valdivia, April 2019.

¹⁸ Interview with local activist, Ituango, November 2018; interview with local leader (33), Santa Rosas, December 2018; interview with resident, Ituango, November 2018.

¹⁹ Interview with a teacher, Ituango, November 2018.

²⁰ Interview with IO director, Medellín, November 2018.

Residents often framed their locality as one of insiders and outsiders, noting that the company brought in workers from “outside.”²¹ A civil society leader from Ituango explained that many community members preferred not to travel “while they had to ask strangers [EPM and the state armed forces] for permission to enter.”²² As Starr (2013, 436) observes, relative space’s meaning (the difference between *here* and *there*) depends on the perspectives of those who traverse it. An international organization staffer recounted how the community framed their position to him: “It’s a matter of center and periphery. In this case Medellin is the periphery and we [the Ituanguinos] are the center. Because Medellin is far, and we are not.”²³ Even a former EPM manager who worked on Hidroitungo saw Ituango as distinct from the centers in Medellin and Bogotá. He considered the project as “inserted in the territorial dynamic...with conflicts of a geopolitical nature and where the state has no presence.”²⁴ An engineer noted EPM emphasized domestic ownership, with some contractors being Colombians, but felt this did not reflect the reality of entering Ituango: “What would a Chinese contractor do? They would have the same agenda [as a Colombian].”²⁵ As the manager noted, regardless of the contractor or the company, they had to accept entering a conflict zone,²⁶ i.e. a space of contested authority.

These examples demonstrate the FARC’s authority and how locals viewed the dam constructors as outsiders. Despite EPM, Concreto, and Coinsa being Colombian companies, Ituango residents referred to them negatively as multinationals. Simultaneously, they considered the FARC to control the territory, with the ability to “sell”

²¹ Interview with teachers in Ituango, November 2018.

²² Interview with civil society leader in Ituango, November 2018.

²³ Interview with international staffer in Medellin, November 2018.

²⁴ Interview with former EPM manager, Medellin, January 2019.

²⁵ Interview with Hidroitungo engineer, Medellin, January 2019.

²⁶ Interview with former EPM manager, Medellin, January 2019.

it to others. Although many residents disapproved of the FARC's actions, they attributed authority to them, while opposing multinationals altogether.

The Myitsone Dam in Myanmar: The KIA's Authority

Following independence from British colonial rule, a military junta ruled Myanmar for nearly fifty years from 1962 to 2011. Myanmar began liberalizing in 2011, but its fragile democracy collapsed in 2021 when the military, the Tatmadaw, ousted civilian leaders, including President Win Myint and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, in a coup (Al Jazeera 2023). Meanwhile, ethnic armed organizations such as the KIA, the Shan State Army, and the Karen National Army have continued to violently oppose the government since independence, especially in the country's borderlands (D. Brenner 2019; Burke 2017). In Kachin State, a ceasefire between the KIA and the government lasted from 1994 to 2011, when armed conflict resumed (Bünthe, Camroux, and Ufen 2012).

The Myitsone dam was slated to start construction in 2009 at the Irawaddy River's source in Myanmar's Kachin State. It was intended to become the world's fifteenth-largest hydroelectric power station (International Rivers 2011). However, on September 30, 2011, Burmese President Thein suspended the dam construction.

Analysts have offered various explanations for this decision. Some point to widespread public outrage over a deal that would have seen 90 per cent of the dam's energy exported to China, leaving only 10 per cent for Myanmar (Ives 2017). Others argue that Myanmar's new civilian government sought to curb China's growing influence in the region and signal a desire to improve relations with the West (Kiik 2020; 2018; Eszterhai and Thida 2021). Indeed, envisaged primarily to generate electricity for China, the dam is often cited as a

case of China's geoeconomic strategy, using investments in large-scale infrastructure projects to extend its geopolitical influence (Lee, Wainwright, and Glassman 2018; Chan 2017). Although it remains debatable to what extent such investments globally are intended to reshape the international order (Flint and Xiaotong 2019, 296), its economic ambitions in Myanmar are clear. Here, China's goals align with its "Going Out" strategy, launched in 2000 and ongoing at the time of writing, which seeks to boost national development through international investment (Kiik 2018).

These geopolitical tensions were not new; Myanmar has long been a focal point for global power struggles. As one observer put it, Myanmar has been "a sort of a hotbed of all kinds of tensions—Russia and US; China, US, Japan; the historically driven geopolitical contested relationship between Japan and China—all of it play out in Myanmar."²⁷

Geopolitical tensions may have contributed to halting the dam's construction, but local authority from Kachin State also influenced how national, transnational, and international actors, including Myanmar and China, could pursue their geoeconomic interests. The Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) largely governed the region through its armed wing, the KIA, which exerted illicit authority. In Colombia, the FARC and the state, and later the FARC and the Clan del Golfo, established rules of non-aggression to benefit from the dam. In Myanmar, the local rules around the 1994 ceasefire allowed the Myanmar government and China to expand into KIA-controlled areas (Kiik 2020). The ceasefire boosted international investment, particularly from China, to develop the territories with permission from ethnic armed organizations, including the KIA (D. Brenner 2019; Kiik 2020). When the ceasefire collapsed and conflict resumed in June 2011, President Thein

²⁷ Interview with civil society representative, Yangon, January 2019.

halted the dam construction (McCarthy and Farrelly 2020; Bünthe, Camroux, and Ufen 2012).

In the late 2000s, the Tatmadaw invested in development projects that many KIO members thought would undermine their legitimacy and control over local initiatives in Kachin State (McCarthy and Farrelly 2020). Meanwhile, China stated that it would invest in the region to strengthen ties with Myanmar and extend influence into KIA-controlled territories (Sarma, Rippa, and Dean 2023). For several years during the ceasefire, KIO officials agreed to the Tatmadaw's and Chinese companies' development efforts. They allowed the development of state infrastructure and foreign investment (D. Brenner 2019), including the Myitsone dam, in exchange for rents.

This arrangement exacerbated tensions within the KIA (Kiik 2020). Growing factions of the KIA became increasingly dissatisfied with the ceasefire and the dam construction. Local residents opposed the dam since its inception, when authorities conducted scoping studies in the villages chosen as construction sites (Lawn 2023). The dam was supposed to flood over 700 square kilometers, displacing more than 15,000 people (Kiik 2020; Kirchherr, Charles, and Walton 2017). Citing concerns about environmental degradation and forced resettlements, resistance that began in Kachin State soon spread to other Myanmar regions. Local civil society groups demanded that the Myanmar government suspend construction, becoming stakeholders in talks with the Chinese company (Kiik 2020; D. Brenner 2015). Chinese analysts therefore suggested the company engage with Myanmar's civil society, not only its government, to ensure the dam's progress (Kiik 2020; Chan 2017; Zou and Jones 2020). Accustomed to the KIA's authority, locals usually first

turned to the KIA with their governance concerns.²⁸ In January 2004, villagers affected by the construction plans requested the KIA to stop the project (Kirchherr, Charles, and Walton 2017). Therefore, the KIA framed its opposition to the dam as the people's will. When pressed about the dam and Chinese influence, KIO vice chairman Gwan Maw repeatedly stated: "The KIO will rely on public opinion. We can't object if they accept it. We can't force the people if they don't accept it" (Janmar 2019).

Within the KIA, the rise of EEDY, a new KIA faction unwilling to submit to the Tatmadaw, resulted in a clash over the China-supported Myitsone dam project (D. Brenner 2019, 93). In 2010, ten bombs exploded at the dam's planned construction site, killing at least one Chinese worker (Kirchherr, Charles, and Walton 2017). In March 2011, KIO chairman Lanyaw Zawng Hra wrote to China's President requesting that the Chinese Power Investment Group cease constructing the dam. In the letter, he laid out his organization's initial approval of the project: the KIO was committed to "observe and assess the projects underway in our Kachin homeland." He clarified that the Tatmadaw coordinated with the KIO Liaison Office "concerning the travel of the dam construction workers and the transportation of the construction materials in the past," illustrating the KIO's involvement in facilitating the project. Yet he then stated that the dam was planned on "an important historical site of the Kachin ethnic people and the site has been a valuable environment for all of us Kachins" and requested that the project be moved to another site. He warned of renewed civil war if the Tatmadaw attempted to seize KIA territory to secure the dam's construction. He stated they would not be responsible for being forced to respond militarily

²⁸ Brenner and Tazzioli (2022) recount how the KIO expanded its governance role to push for enforcement campaigns against drug use.

“because of this hydro power plant project and the dam construction” (Kachin Independence Organization 2011).

KIA leaders then publicly opposed the dam, issuing statements calling for the construction to end (Kachin News Group 2011; D. Brenner 2015; Bünthe, Camroux, and Ufen 2012). When Tatmadaw troops moved to secure the site, the ceasefire ended (D. Brenner 2019, 93). The KIO-governed territory once again became hostile to Myanmar state actors, and the dam became a military target. As Kiik (2020, 235) notes, “access bridges were blown up, landmines were widely planted, and the transport of construction materials was blocked.” Notwithstanding China’s rising power internationally, the Chinese Power Investment Group had to adhere to the KIA’s authority. Following the KIO’s rejection of the dam and the ceasefire’s breakdown, the transnational company had to leave. As an anti-dam activist stated: “All Chinese, they went back because of the conflict. They were afraid. This is a scary area, right? They all went back, that’s why they haven’t started making this new dam, because of the security.”²⁹ The Chinese Power Investment Group had to halt the dam construction and evacuate their workers. Consequently, investment reports in 2017 cautioned that new megaproject constructions in the Kachin area needed the approval of ethnic armed organizations such as the KIA (Burke 2017, 60).

Vihmo (2018a, 9; also see Luttwak 1990, 126) observes that geoeconomic interests are still responsive to states’ domestic contexts. Facing an unyielding KIA and an ineffective Tatmadaw, the Chinese Power Investment Group sought to secure its foothold by appealing to the populations the KIA claimed to represent to influence the KIA. As in Ituango, communities in Kachin State opposed the Myitsone dam. However, when the KIA resumed

²⁹ Interview with anti-dam activist near Myitsone dam area, January 2020.

fighting the Tatmadaw and halted construction, civilians also suffered heavy. As one activist stated:

Before the war broke out, we had to move to relocate to this area. When the clashes started, more people were displaced to this village. People were displaced because of the dam project and the conflict. [...] Everybody had to flee from their original place. Some people tried to go back because their livelihoods were there. They were arrested, they didn't respect the curfew. You cannot go like this with the local authority in place. [...] Later, there was a battle zone in that area, this is why we could not go back to the village. [...] We were more panicked, more trapped, because first the dam project displaced us and then war broke out so now, we have more hardship, [...] the whole village is worried about the future.³⁰

To rebuild its position and gain Kachin community support, the Chinese Power Investment Group offered cash to displaced people.³¹ According to locals:

We have now been here for ten years, and no one came and asked: "Is everything okay?" The government or the institution [KIA], no one...only the Chinese. They originally came here as Chinese Power investment but now they have changed their name; they came here and said: "Hey, is everything okay?" [...] That's why for the community, they think, who they are going to tell, who is responsible, still they feel like their lives are in Chinese hands.³²

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Interview with anti-dam activist near Myitsone dam area, January 2020.

³² Interview with anti-dam activist near Myitsone dam area, January 2020.

The Chinese Power Investment Group initially negotiated with the Myanmar government but relied on the KIA ceasefire to build the Myitsone dam. The ceasefire's collapse and halting the dam's construction illustrate KIA authority and yet the Chinese saw the obstruction as part of geopolitical tensions. Kiik (2023, 94) argues that Chinese nationalists and Western observers often framed "setbacks through the hidden machinations of US, Japanese, and other powerful governments." These views overlook the "decade-long history of local-village, Kachin, and Burmese anti-dam resistance" (Kiik 2023, 94). The decision to halt construction was not solely due to Western interests or the Myanmar's new democratic government; the ceasefire with the KIA had allowed the dam to proceed. When the KIA withdrew permission, it successfully obstructed construction.

The dam's construction and halt shifted authority away from Myanmar's capital Naypyitaw and from Beijing to also include the KIA stronghold. One interviewee described Chinese foreign policy on megaprojects as China having "a three-handed foreign policy approach for Myanmar, keeping a relationship with military, armed groups, and civil government. This [is a] balancing act [...]. The incentives cut across the three methods; [...] there are different bargaining approaches and weightings, which leads back to their control and economic benefits of different resources, assets, and trade routes."³³ This "three-handed" approach reveals how KIA authority reshaped the Chinese company's construction approach. Initially viewed poorly by locals, the company became more willing to appeal to them once KIA blocked construction. The company could not rely on support from China, a powerful state, or on improving relations with Myanmar; its strategy had to adapt to KIA authority.

³³ Interview with civil society representative, Yangon, Myanmar, January 2019.

The suspension of the dam construction might not be permanent. Some analysts speculated that Myanmar's military regime might yield to China's lobbying efforts to resume construction (Blaine, Collins, and Leiva 2022). A civil society representative from Myanmar noted:

It's been a very happy time for the Chinese who were doing a charm offence around many of their economic development projects, dams, but now feel that they've got a partner [the Burmese military] and leverage to push things through. Chinese economically always come with political agreements; everything has a political condition. They've managed to keep their relationships up in the north, provide their support in terms of Rakhine and sovereignty issues, and push for some ambitious road building. The dam issue is still unresolved, but all those economic engagement strategies come with political incentives and so that constant dance between the two countries is effective. It affects the conflict's nature too.³⁴

Indeed, in 2024, China was negotiating with Myanmar's military regime to resume dam construction at a reduced height (Burma News International 2024; Strangio 2024). However, at the time of writing, the KIA's control remained strong, having seized regime outposts just 20 kilometers south of where the Myitsone rivers meet (Strangio 2024). Their authority remained crucial for China's geoeconomic interests.

³⁴ Interview with civil society representative, Yangon, January 2019.

CONCLUSION

We have elucidated instances where states and transnational companies, despite their power, could not unilaterally advance geoeconomic interests through megaprojects in territories where the state lacks a monopoly on violence. In such regions, local VNSAs can have the authority to block or allow megaprojects' construction by restricting access, threatening attacks, or extorting and coopting companies.

Therefore, the boundaries between domestic and international, internal and external, are fluid; the analysis of geoeconomic dynamics must be rescaled. The dichotomy of internal versus external actors around geoeconomic interests does not hold as local actors influence both "internal" national interests and "external" geopolitical interests. VNSAs have the authority to shape external actors' interests beyond being mere spoilers.

In Colombia and Myanmar, the distinction between domestic and international blurred in areas where the state appeared as distant as a foreign country. The Hidroituango and Myitsone dam construction sites embodied multiple rule systems, including those imposed by local illicit authorities. If outsiders—such as state-backed public companies—complied with local authority demands (e.g., paying extortion money), construction could proceed; otherwise, they faced obstruction. Despite different motivations and cultural contexts, the FARC and KIA held authority over these sites, forcing international and domestic actors to negotiate access. The FARC eventually came to see the Hidroituango dam as a potential income to coopt. The KIA initially permitted infrastructure work but later rejected the Myitsone dam, using violence to block the Chinese Power Investment Group's operations.

Our study has sought to advance theory at the intersection of geoeconomics, authority, and the state by emphasizing the need to consider local authorities in global narratives of geoeconomic interests. Globalizing forces have transcended state-centrism, creating new territorial configurations at sub- and supra-national levels, working through and alongside states. Geoeconomic and geopolitical shifts since the 1970s have reshaped national territories, prompting scholars to examine state power's geographies (N. Brenner 2009, 124). We add that domestic and foreign governments, transnational companies, local communities, and armed actors can all interact at megaproject construction sites. The FARC and KIA predated effective state institutions' presence in Ituango and Kachin State, shaping local orders that imposed their own rules on these projects. This challenges us to rethink the relationship between geoeconomics and local authority in remote territories (Post 2022, 1390). The Hidroituango and Myitsone dam projects, while reflecting Colombia's, China's, and Myanmar's geoeconomic interests, also reveal these states' limits.

This study opens avenues for further research. The Hidroituango and Myitsone dams, along with projects like the Trans-Caspian pipeline, the China-Pakistan Corridor, and Iraqi port developments help reimagine authority's geographies in large infrastructure projects. Further research should examine local authorities' potential to disrupt supply chains needed for large-scale investments globally. In 2023 and 2024, Yemen-based Houthi militants asserted their authority in the Red Sea by attacking commercial ships in response to Israeli strikes on Gaza (BBC 2024). These actions prompted military responses from the United States and the United Kingdom due to the economic disruption (Keating 2024). Regardless of a state or corporation's international reach, the geographic locality of a project allows local illicit authority to influence geopolitics.

Another research avenue concerns pacification narratives tied to megaproject constructions in regions where the state's monopoly on violence is contested. Accordingly, dominant actors reduce violence against them (Baron et al. 2019, 205); violence thus reveals weaknesses in pacification attempts (Huff and Orengo 2020, 4). However, these analyses reveal only a partial picture. Hidroituango and Myitsone were not built by asserting state power, but through arrangements with the FARC and KIA. The KIA agreed to a ceasefire; the FARC appeared to leave Hidroituango untouched in exchange for payment. Violence in Myanmar did not resume due to the state's weakening but revealed the constraints on its authority and a change in the KIO leadership's position. When EPM withdrew workers due to threats, FARC dissidents did not disrupt a frontier region territorialized by the Colombian state. Rather, the workers' removal revealed the negotiated arrangements that underpinned the state's access to a territory delineated by invisible borders.

Future research may reveal how far "external" actors' geoeconomic investments can bypass local authorities in conflict zones, and whether this authority extends beyond VNSAs. While geopolitical shifts have renewed interest in powerful states pursuing geoeconomic goals through megaprojects, authority remains tied to place. VNSAs may attempt to raise an international profile through diplomatic efforts (Huang 2016) but their control over specific localities can also extend their influence over companies' and states' national and global interests. As shown with the Hidroituango dam and EPM, and the Myitsone dam and the Chinese Power Investment Group, navigating geoeconomics requires policymakers to adopt more creative strategies to navigate local illicit authority.

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