

China's dam frenzy

Friday 30 December 2011, by [CHELLANEY Brahma](#) (Date first published: 16 December 2011).

'China remains the world's biggest dam builder at home and abroad'

China's frenzied dam building recently hit a wall in Myanmar, whose bold decision to halt a controversial Chinese dam project on its territory has acted as a catalyst to a series of developments, including the first visit of a US secretary of state to that country in more than half a century. Despite the setback in Myanmar, China remains the world's biggest dam builder at home and abroad. No country in history has built more dams than China. In fact, China today boasts more dams at home than the rest of the world combined.

Before the Communists came to power in 1949, there were only 22 dams of any significant size in China. But now China has more than half of the almost 50,000 dams in the world that are classified as "large" because they have a height of at least 15 m or a storage capacity of more than 3 million cubic metres. This feat means that China has completed on an average at least one large dam per day since 1949. If dams of all sizes are counted, the number in China surpasses 85,000.

Another striking fact is that China is also the global leader in exporting dams. Its state-run companies today are building more dams overseas than the other international dam builders put together. As many as 37 Chinese financial and corporate entities are involved in more than 100 major dam projects in the developing world. Profit motives and a diplomatic effort to showcase its engineering prowess drive China to build dams overseas. China's declaratory policy of "non-interference in domestic affairs" actually serves as a virtual licence to pursue dam projects that flood ethnic-minority lands and forcibly uproot people in other countries, just as it is doing at home by shifting its dam-building focus from the dam-saturated internal rivers to the international rivers originating in the Tibetan plateau, Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, and Manchuria.

China contends that its role as the global leader in exporting dams has created a "win-win" situation for the host countries and its companies. Yet evidence from a number of project sites shows that those dams are imposing serious costs. These projects, in fact, often serve to inflame anti-Chinese sentiment, as underscored by grassroots protests at several sites in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Indeed, by taking much of the workforce from home to build dams and other projects abroad—a practice that runs counter to its own 2006 regulations that call for "localisation"—China reinforces a perception that it is engaged in exploitative practices. Chinese convicts have also been used as labourers on projects in countries too poor and weak to protest.

As the world's most "dammed" country, China is already the world's largest producer of hydropower, with an installed generating capacity of more than 170 gigawatts. Yet its ambitious plans to significantly boost hydro-generating capacity by damming international rivers have embroiled it in water disputes with almost all neighbours, even North Korea. More broadly, China's dam-building passion has spawned two developments. First, Chinese companies now dominate the global hydropower-equipment export market. And second, the growing clout of the state-run hydropower industry within China has led Beijing to aggressively seek dam projects overseas by offering attractive, low-interest loans to other governments. At home, it recently unveiled a

mammoth \$635-billion fresh investment in water infrastructure over the next decade, more than a third of which is to be channelled for building dams, reservoirs, and other supply structures.

China's over-damming of rivers and its inter-river and inter-basin water transfers have already wreaked havoc on the natural ecosystems, causing fragmentation and depletion of rivers and thereby promoting exploitation of groundwater beyond the nature's replenishment capacity. The social costs have been even more staggering, a fact reflected in Prime Minister Wen Jiabao's stunning admission in 2007 that China relocated a total of 22.9 million Chinese since 1949 to make way for water projects-a number bigger than the entire population of Australia, Romania or Chile. Since that admission, another 3,50,000 residents, mostly poor villagers, have been officially uprooted. So, by official count alone, 1,035 citizens on an average have been forcibly evicted daily in the past 62 years for water projects.

With Beijing now increasingly damming transnational rivers such as the Mekong, Salween, Brahmaputra, Irtysh, Illy and Amur, the new projects threaten to "export" the serious degradation haunting China's internal rivers to those rivers. The time has come to exert concerted external pressure on Beijing to rein in its dam frenzy and embrace international environmental standards.

P.S.

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