China’s Public Engagement for Advancing the Railway Project in Myanmar

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Abstract
This article compares public engagement of China’s state-owned enterprises (SOEs) in the China-Myanmar High-Speed Railway with other major Chinese projects in Myanmar. In the aftermath of the suspension of the Myitsone Dam in 2011, it seemed that China’s SOEs were stepping up measures to solicit social support for project implementation. Surprisingly, after Naypyitaw announced the discontinuation of the Railway project, China Railway Engineering Corporation (CREC) put little effort into engaging with civil society organizations. Instead, it primarily relied on Naypyitaw’s assurance to resume the strategic project. Drawing thirty-three interviews conducted in Myanmar, this article posits that discrepancy in Chinese business practices resulted from the intensity of social opposition. Despite some studies suggesting that Beijing attempts to regulate Chinese companies’ non-compliances in their overseas investment, this article finds that Chinese companies have not yet socialized into international norms. In particular, they tend to ignore meaningful consultation with affected communities in project implementation. Empirically, this study unravels the contention of the derailment of the Railway. Unlike other anti-Chinese project movements, opposition to the Railway was weak. In fact, it was technocrats’ resistance that blocked the project. Theoretically, it also highlights the signaling effect of social movements in motivating Chinese companies to engage with societal actors. This article also sheds light on interaction between societal actors and Chinese SOEs outside Myanmar.

Keywords: Myanmar; China; Chinese investment; social movements; foreign policy

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