Commentary

Commentary: Philip Hirsch’s “The shifting regional geopolitics of Mekong dams”

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A multidimensional and comprehensive view of the contested politico-economic agendas around the Mekong, unwrapping the geospatial construct itself and delineating the related geopolitical practices, is long overdue. Philip Hirsch’s (2016) “The shifting regional geopolitics of Mekong dams” certainly adds to the discussions on constructing rhetoric and regions, and by default, the sovereignties and territorialisations of individual states in a time when many networked arrangements and economic flows are disrupting earlier forms of regulation and coordination. Hirsch’s overall goal is to associate the re-emergence of hydropower development in the Mekong to the ways in which the shifting geopolitics and regionalisms are played out in and around the region. His argument is that both geopolitics and the region are much more complex, and their multifaceted attributes warrant investigations that do not segment the object of study into single issues such as water or boundary disputes, dam politics, trafficking, infrastructure projects, growing regionalism, or other such themes. Overarching all Mekong matters is the region itself—not as a passive backdrop but with its discursive representations actively engaging in developments and affecting outcomes. Hirsch’s aim is to deconstruct the various representations of the Mekong as part of the multidimensionality he notes is missing in earlier studies. The “Mekong ontologies,” as sketched out by Hirsch, denote the geopolitical and discursive practices since the Cold War, representing the Mekong in the following ways: as a river; as a basin that includes tributaries and the territory that drains into the river; as a region of traversed boundaries; as an arena of contested development; and even as a socio-legal entity. He poignantly shows how some of these representations are not spatially coterminous or even materially related to water and the Mekong, a derivative of Mae Nam Khong, the Thai-Lao words for the river that has flowed since time immemorial.

Hirsch’s paper can be divided into two parts. The first part concerns geopolitics as a concept and a practice—both concurrently differentiated, diffuse, and discursive, raising the need to distance scrutiny from an overly state-centric axis when exploring the “fundamental geopolitical shifts” (Hirsch, 2016, p. 72). The second part concerns the Mekong as a (geo) political construct, evident in the multiplicity of concurrent “regions” that have come to be attached to the name. Hirsch is also attentive to the “critical” portion of geopolitics as a subfield of political geography that focuses on exploring the power relations behind representations. Here, I will address the first notional part in passing and focus on the consequential constructions attendant in the multiple Mekong “regions” and beyond and their effects beyond the discourses, and on critical geopolitics as a prying method for exposing the power of (geopolitically motivated) constructed knowledge.

1. Emerging Mekong assemblages?

The struggle over the changing role of the state and territories, both as concepts and practices, allows for the crafting of several universal conceptualizations of space and power within and beyond the discipline. On the one hand, with memories and some
past material manifestations of the Cold War, the omnipresence of Realpolitik in the Mekong theatre, and several matters between individual states remaining relevant, geopolitics and particularly its “traditional state-as-a-monolith centric view” (Moisio & Paasi, 2013, p. 1) continue to be the ready means for practicing power and dominance, particularly by the “winners” in history (Christie, 1996). On the other hand, the proliferation of various trans-national functional regimes and political communities not delimited primarily in territorial terms, as well as certain functions and responsibilities transferred from the state to other scales of decision-making, calls for a scalar appraisal to understand the changing nature of statehood and the transforming relevance of territories (Moisio & Paasi, 2013, pp. 4–5). A notion which many authors believe more accurately captures the fluidity of the political relationships and power-plays is a regional assemblage as a “... more diffuse and fragmented form of governance” (Allen & Cochrane, 2007). This notion is also worth exploring for the Mekong. Hirsch (2001:248) has shown the fragments of such relationships in the Mekong region by making a plea to ignore the fixed institutional forms when seeking to understand “... civil society input into – even control over – the new regional landscapes of sustainability politics ...” The concept of “translocal assemblage” is proposed by Colin McFarlane (2009) to conceptualize space and power in contentious politics, focusing attention more on the question of “how” rather than “why”. Thus, it is both a theoretical and practical challenge to analyze the past and present local contexts; the power and limitations of central (and local) governments; the role of the state and the abilities of other agents to mobilize resources, opinions and interests; the involvement of private sector, business elites, and civil society and its organizations, and the (often contentious) agendas of the relevant parties – and include all this in one framework. However, this is what a nuanced analysis and multidimensional approach demand, despite making the overall picture even more complex.

2. Emerging Mekong agencies?

Critical geopolitics is in a good position to both understand the unraveling geopolitical events and explain the knowledge construction of these events, tackling the sweeping power of normalizing discourses and knowledge (Tuathail, 2010). One example of how geographical representation is mobilized as a legitimate strategy is the delineation of the Greater Mekong Subregion as a postdevelopment arena. In a single sweep, such representation enables to include hundreds of millions of people and numerous states and capitals for making powerful statements to justify action. A very pertinent representation in the Mekong region is the ubiquitous discourse on the “opening-up of borders” for “allowing more connections” between people and nations, the deconstruction of which is perhaps not on Hirsch’s agenda. In this very successfully normalized discourse, the opening of borders denotes the opening of official border crossings – or gates as often used in the local vocabularies with reference to the (often imposing) physical structures signifying state presence at the border. In the lived worlds of Southeast Asia, where people and goods have a history of rather unrestricted mobility until quite recently (with exceptions), the opening of official border crossings translates into more state presence, control, and taxes, and thus more complications, if not extra costs, for the local people and traders. It also translates into many of the nonconforming mobilities becoming categorized as illegal.

In the narrative of hydropower development, over a decade ago, Karen Bakker (1999) discussed the discursive construction of the regional (basin-wide) scale of the Mekong, stating that dam construction signifies “the rescaling of access and control” from the local communities to the state or private sector. Bakker demonstrates how the discourse of the river as “under-utilized” or “uncontrolled” by the local (Lao) villagers was constructed to justify hydrodevelopment as necessary in order not to “waste” the river as a resource. This combined with the scale of the Mekong as a watershed – the factor that enables the hydropower developers to construct an argument on the effective use of the river – Bakker (1999:218) says is at least partially responsible for large dams such as Nam Theun 2 remaining “unsacred.”

The construction of a dam three times larger than Nam Theun 2 in the same nominal Greater Mekong Subregion, however, was suspended as an outcome of campaigns constituting an entirely different set of dynamics, logic, agencies, and discursive representations. The construction of Myitsone dam in Myanmar’s Kachin state by a Chinese state-owned enterprise, China Power Investment Corporation (CPI), to join the 15 largest dams in the world with height at 136 m, ended spectacularly in its suspension in 2011 by the then Myanmar’s president Thein Sein. This event, considered as “one of the most stunning and symbolic events in the former pariah state’s globally celebrated reform process,” is widely cited in the global media, NGO, and scholarly accounts as a successful example of grassroots environmental and civic activism (KiiK, 2016, p. 12). The climax of the campaign was reached only after the anti-dam actions of the ethnic Kachin activists swelled into a popular nationwide “Save the Irrawaddy” movement, directed from urban centers in Lower Myanmar and joined by the then opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi. However, rather than treating the issue as primarily about (1) environmental conflict, (2) economic development and profit-sharing, (3) success of civic democracy, or (4) global inter-state geopolitical rivalry, Laur KiiK (2016), by immersing in the hidden geographies of the lived spaces, elaborately demonstrates how different nationalisms were configured in ways that led to the landmark event. He highlights the two agencies involved – the Kachin nationalists who viewed the suffering of the displaced villagers at the Irrawaddy confluence as an ethno-national issue and the ethnic Bamar activists mainly from Lower Myanmar who then framed the dam as an existential threat to the entire nation, as well as to the downstream communities and the climate. While China has faced criticism for its roles as the contractor and the almost sole recipient of power in both nationalist discourses, the Kachin nationalist framing was lost in translation (see Fig. 1).

The politics of forgetting and scaling operates in every representation. While Bakker (1999) shows how narratives are constructed over the heads of the local communities, the Kachin activists in the Myitsone case have been incredibly active but nevertheless omitted in the formulations that explain the Myitsone dam suspension, thus ignoring “the histories, intentions, and calculated decisions of the many people on the ground” (KiiK, 2016, p. 21). Jonathan Rigg (2009:26) addressed the issue of the Lao villagers being systematically overlooked in many accounts in a discussion on the Lao economic geographies as outcomes of national and transnational governance, suggesting the inclusion of a village-centric perspective that provides “an alternative vision that cuts across and disturbs these debates and issues.” Identifying the allies and adversaries of all players and their rationale, the framing of references and information, the selection of schemes for knowledge transfer and target audiences and their always contextual and often contingent character, and more are

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1 Clive Christie (1996) uses the notion of “winners” for the (political, ethnic, majority) groups in Southeast Asian history that managed to capture a state when the region emerged from colonial rule, and “losers” for the peripheral or marginalised groups that had to accommodate within the emerging nation-states.
crucial for both the multidimensional approach and critical engagement. This is easy to suggest but difficult to do. Thus, the actors, communities, and places most vulnerable in the politics of forgetting and scaling both in the lived and discursive field sites, due to their deliberate or unintentional omissions or designations as lower-rank or secondary, should be accorded extra attention. Perhaps until we are also able to see the acts of noncompliance as potentially weakening state control and sovereignty without apparent organization or structured “movement” (Malseed, 2008), some vicious (academic) prying is due.

With regard to the concern expressed in Hirsch’s article and, perhaps for all of us, more equitable governance, the generating of possibilities and spaces of involvement, and the setting of progressive (more equitable?) agendas are needed. The halt of the construction of the Myitsone dam signifies a politically, environmentally, and morally just outgrowth from the representation of threat and damage. A Kachin activist from the village relocated for dam construction in 2009 that has people gradually returning to their abandoned houses and gardens acknowledged that the Bamar activists “know better [than the Kachin — K.D.] how to say and present things” … (Fieldwork interview, Myitsone, 14.02.16).

Critical geopolitics is in a good position to critically translate the writing of global and local space, attentive to the topologies of power in the shaping of not only political relations but also discourses, narratives, and representations. The material is available for anyone’s excavation and analysis although it is complex. The latter does not warrant that anybody be wiped from the narrative or lost in translation.

**Conflict of interest**

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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**References**


![Fig. 1. Local tourists at the start of the Irrawaddy at the confluence of Mali and N’mai rivers, Kachin state, Myanmar, near the site of the Myitsone Dam, whose construction was suspended in 2011. Photo by Karin Dean, 12.02.2016.](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2016.10.007)