COMPLETION REPORT

Japan, China and the Quests for Socio-Technical Hegemony in Southeast Asia: The Case of Vietnam

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Chinese efforts for seeking a global position has attracted more research in recent years. While comprehensive initiative promoting China's global connections has been implemented, the conceptual frameworks so far applied to China's regional posture as well as predictions on changing regional hierarchy have not tackled the questions raised by China's infrastructural foreign policy. In this research, we studied particularly the case of China's involvement in the Sub-Mekong area's hydropower development, thereby narrowing down the scope of analysis, away from the global towards the regional level. By explaining the role of large technical systems in exemplifying the (potential) emergence of an alternative regional hegemon, we also argued that it additionally offers insights into order making on a global scale.

The focus on controversial knowledge and sociotechnical imaginaries shows that the nexus between infrastructure and political order remains contingent. Detailed in China's process of constructing new regional order using hydropower as a tool in the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS), we had explored controversial knowledge, infrastructural dependency, and competing imaginaries to offer an answer to the questions how order is reconstructed in the region, and which position "China" currently occupies. We found that, in response to China's infrastructural policies, some GMS countries showed their supports according to the fact that these power plants and their adjacents helped develop the domestic economies; the others, however, had taken the Impact Assessments (IAs) and postponed constructing process regardless of generous offers from the northern neighbor. IAs, as a result, has stirred up debates among the parties involved. While the process of knowledge construction is ongoing, no consensus about how to measures and weight positive and negative impacts of hydropower development has been reached (Käkönen and Hirsch 2009). Regarding infrastructural dependencies as a factor, the construction of infrastructures helped to form a "hidden hierarchy" in GMS, between upstream and downstream countries, in which the upstreams held absolute advantages. These asymmetric dependencies are additionally increased by China's capacities to produce engineering expertise related to hydropower development in the region. To counterbalance the knowledge gap, regional states have undertaken efforts to improve their epistemic capacities. US-led initiatives such as the Low Mekong Initiative (LMI) can be seen as an attempt to rebalance the regional knowledge dependence. Conflicting sociotechnical imaginaries play an important role in forming "a common GMS" since they convey a shared understanding, expectation and knowledge between different actors within and across societies. China's main competitors in fostering a regional order are the US and Japan. As governments have welcomed Japanese and US actors to help them solve environmental issues and potentially create a "power balance" with China (Nabers 2008), competing sociotechnical imaginaries evolved.

Despite political tensions, China's promotion of hydropower has contributed greatly to ensure the region's energy

supply. The country is forming the center of a sort of technological a "hub-and-spoke" system in the GMS's electricity field, and thus, seemingly remaking regional order. Yet, despite that most countries are heavily reliant on China, diverging socio-technical imaginaries about the future of the region indicate that it is far too early to talk about a China-centered regional order. Finally, hydropower in the GMS offers food for thought about whether and how China's recent infrastructure initiatives may lead to changes China's overall position and, relatedly, global order. However, without shared imaginaries as well as the reliance on authoritative knowledge, Billions paid for infrastructural projects might just produce unfulfilled dreams.

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