Twitter Thread by Kelley Currie

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A quick thread on #Myitsone dam & #MyanmarChinaRelations in light of the SAC announcement that they would be restarting some stalled Chinese projects in Burma. This announcement has led to speculation about Myitsone, which has been suspended since 2011. Let's go! ➡■ China has

> Can\u2019t overstate how politically dangerous this is. As readers told me: a deeply unpopular regime pushing for deeply unpopular infrastructure projects. Not sure this is what Beijing wants either. https://t.co/TnlrgjPyxZ
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> — Thompson Chau (@tchau01) February 15, 2021

consistently misunderstood & underestimated popular opposition to Myitsone. First and foremost, to the Burmese people, this is about the "mother river" of Burma - the Irrawaddy- and it's nearly sacred importance to them as a lifeline of their country. This is what drove the

organic anti-dam movement that started locally in Kachin but +/- 2007 was effectively picked up & nationalized by Burmese environmental CSOs. Instead of understanding this, the Chinese lashed out and blamed the United States when Thein Sein suspended the project. I assure you

the USG was as surprised as China when the project was suspended. But China never believed it was truly the desire of the Burmese people that stopped the project. Today, the dam doesn't make sense economically for Beijing & will definitely alienate Burmese, yet they stubbornly

continue to push it. Why? Let's unpack a bit further. In addition to Myitsone, there were other campaigns & protests targeting Chinese projects such as Letpadaung copper mine & Kyaukphyu pipeline, port & SEZ. While these campaigns had varying levels off effect, none was as

successful as the anti-Myitsone effort. The copper mine protests resulted in allegations security forces used white phosphorus (2012) & live ammunition (2014) on protesters. DASSK, as a newly-elected MP, was appointed to head the Govt's investigation into the mine & protests.

The Chinese owners, Wanbao, launched a big PR & CSR push to show how they were benefiting the local community (here's a cringey propaganda video: https://t.co/bwr6BBnrci). The project continues but still faces some local opposition even though ASSK told people to stop protests.

Nonetheless the mine is operating. While Letpadaung did become a national campaign, it has been primarily a local issue since ASSK pronounced it resolved in 2016. With Kyaukphyu, a huge SEZ & port project in Rakhine state, there was again a national campaign but it reverted to a

primarily local grievance after ASSK's govt renegotiated the project, downsizing it dramatically. When I asked Burmese thinkers, scholars & analysts about these Chinese mega projects under NLD governance as part of some 2016-2017 research, the replies were interesting- esp from

those who had been on Chinese lobbying/study tours. In crude summary, the general view was that Kyaukphyu SEZ was strategic for China but not for the NLD or Tatmadaw, both of which had, um, 'issues' with the local Rakhine leadership and communities'. While China would be willing

to do just about anything to preserve its vital Indian Ocean access, the NLD could negotiate on it. Letpadaung was viewed as commercial for both, and therefore was also negotiable. Myitsone was different: for the Burmese side, at least at a popular level, it was & is existential

so there seemed to be little scope for any popularly elected govt to take the hit of restarting it. For the Chinese side, circa 2016, it was largely economic, but in a more strategic sense than a project like Letpadaung. Over time, it has become vastly more about politics for

China. I recently have been told by well informed Burmese that Beijing wants this project restarted because it was signed by Emperor Xi personally. This rings true to me for several reasons. 1) China has never seen the on-the-ground consequences of these mega-projects as being

their problem, and has very steadily worked all sides of Burma's elite politics (see eg linked GT interview with their Amb to Burma). 2) Pressure on BRI overall has increased globally, but they continue to press forward as BRI is increasingly seen internally as inexorably linked

to Xi Jinping. 3) Xi's consolidation of power since 2013 makes anything personally associated with him and related to his prestige a top priority for the party-state. So it will be interesting to watch all sides as this saga continues to unfold. #WhatsHappeninglnMyanmar