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FINAL DISSERTATION

**China's green nationalism approach to transboundary water governance in South Asia
and its implication for EU cooperation in riparian countries: case study of the Medog
Dam and Brahmaputra River basin.**

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Introduction:

In July 2025, China announced the start of the construction of the “Medog” hydropower project on the river Yarlung Zangbo with much fanfare, with the Premier Li attending a groundbreaking ceremony at one of the hydropower stations construction sites. This project can be identified as a prime example of China’s *green nationalism* approach whereby nationalism and environmental protection are increasingly intertwined to support the leadership political legitimacy.

Green nationalism can indeed be defined as the “movements and parties simultaneously dedicated to the defence of national identities and to robust climate action in domestic and international settings” (Conversi and al, 2026), thereby departing from the long-dominant discourse that placed economic development before the protection of the environment. This approach is defined along 4 criteria: an acknowledgement of the environmental impact of the nation, self-criticism, development strategies and successful implementation (Posocco and Watson, 2022). For political leaders, *green nationalism* constitutes a rational choice to maintain their legitimacy by capitalising on the public consensus for green policies (Arantes, 2023). In the authoritarian context of China, it is translated through the “Ecological Civilisation” state ideology, implemented top-down through notions of traditional ecological wisdom embedded in official environmental discourses, as well bottom-up through a diverse range of actors, thereby normalising the omnipresence of a nationalist sentiment in environmental protection. In this context, green nationalism serves not only as a tool enabling state legitimacy but also for “disciplining civil society, economic development and reinforcing national unity” (Conversi, 2026).

Within this *green nationalism* framework, water is perceived as a key resource to be both preserved and harnessed for economic and security purposes. It is a key enabler for China’s “Green Leap Forward” - its strategy to accelerate the transition to renewable energy and reduce carbon emissions in pursuit of net zero in 2060 – which manifests, among other things, through booming hydropower development. Yet, as rivers flows across borders, the tension between environmental protection and economic exploitation is compounded by transboundary water management tensions with riparian countries, stemming from China’s upstream position and the structural power asymmetry this entails.

The Medog hydropower project represents a compelling case study precisely because it sits at the intersection between hydropower development and transboundary water management in a

context of green nationalism with Chinese characteristic. This dissertation will therefore address the following research questions:

How does the China's "ecological civilisation" doctrine shape its approach to hydropower development and transboundary water governance in South Asia? What are the possible implications for EU cooperation projects with downstream riparian countries?"

This dissertation will attempt to answer this question, through a literature review drawing on research papers, books, official Chinese sources, and news articles on the topics outlined above. It is structured as follows. It begins with an examination of water governance practices and hydropower development in China (I) which will subsequently underpin a case study on the Medog hydropower project (II), looking at its potential environmental and social implications as well as the Chinese political narrative surrounding it. The dissertation will then turn to the transboundary water management dimension (III) of the Medog project, with a particular focus on Sino-Indian relations within the Brahmaputra River basin. Finally, the potential impacts of the Medog project on EU cooperation projects will be discussed in the concluding part.

1) WATER GOVERNANCE AND HYDROPOWER DEVELOPMENT IN CHINA

a) China's environmental governance framework

i) Policy objectives, institutional architecture, and current state of implementation

China operates under a centralized, single-party political system, which extends to environmental governance. Policy decisions are made at the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) top level and then trickle down to provincial and municipal tiers of government for implementation by local cadres. Historically, environmental considerations have been subordinated to economic development imperatives, with dramatic consequences for both the environment and human health.

The 2008 Olympic Games, supposed to showcase China to the world as an emerging economic superpower, were overshadowed by the thick smog often covering Beijing and by health concerns for athletes due to pollution. Since Xi Jinping's accession as General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party in 2013, environmental pollution has moved from being a regrettable side effect of economic development to a priority for the CCP. This shift is partly due to global progress and growing efforts in recent years to gradually phase out fossil fuels and curb climate change. China's "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics" has proven effective at fast-tracking

large green infrastructure projects through its state-managed capitalism, with close cooperation between political and financial elites.

Today, although China has surpassed the EU in cumulative historical CO₂ emissions and still relies heavily on fossil fuels, it has become a global leader in green technologies such as solar panels and electric vehicles. The state has also announced a net-zero target by 2060, which many experts are confident China will meet. This "green turn" represents a fundamental shift in the way the environment is perceived in China and deployed as a political tool by the Party, signalled by a new doctrine established in 2018 at the National Ecological and Environmental Protection Conference: "Xi Jinping Thought on Ecological Civilisation".

ii) "Ecological civilization" as a guiding principle in domestic governance

This concept of ecological civilisation is now a cornerstone of China's environmental governance and is articulated around eight principles (Annex I) which call for a "harmonious coexistence of man and nature", as the Chinese civilisation can only thrive if the environment is protected. environmental protection with a flourishing of the China. This top-down doctrine encompasses notions of traditional Chinese ecological wisdom but also implemented by various actors from the bottom-up.

The concept of Ecological Civilisation has become a cornerstone of China's environmental governance. It is articulated around eight principles centred on the "harmonious coexistence of man and nature", reflecting the conviction that Chinese civilisation can only thrive if the natural environment is preserved. This top-down doctrine draws on traditional Chinese ecological wisdom while also being implemented through bottom-up actors across various levels of society (Arantes, 2023). This vision can be summarized in Xi Jinping's "two mountains" theory, formulated as early as 2005, asserting that ecological health (green mountain) and economic development (gold mountain) are not opposing but mutually reinforcing.

This expression of green nationalism within an authoritarian framework allows the CCP to leverage broad public support for environmental protection as a source of political capital. Environmental goals are thus infused with a sense of national purpose, characteristic of a dual-function approach in which environmental policies serve both ecological and political goals. As CCP maintains its legitimacy primarily through performance, the doctrine of Ecological civilisation represents a strategic expansion of that legitimacy beyond economic growth. After decades of remarkable economic development, several economic performance indicators have weakened, most notably in the real estate sector, making environmental achievements an

increasingly important pillar of the Party's claim to authority. Legitimacy through environmental target is then used as a tool by the CCP to sustain itself in power. The recent adoption in 2025 of an Ecological and Environmental Code in Chinese legislation exemplifies this governance approach.

iii) China's promotion of "Ecological civilisation" in global environmental governance

The Ecological Governance is not only a domestic governance doctrine: it also carries a global dimension (Dong and al., 2025). The last principle of "Xi Jinping Thought on Ecological Civilisation" clearly states that "the Thought calls on to adhering to the joint efforts of the people to build a global ecological civilisation". This principle is reflected in China's efforts to position itself as an international leader in environmental governance, through its involvement in international environmental conferences such as COP30 or through its support to the green transition in partner countries. The Belt and Road Initiative, for instance, has progressively shifted towards financing greener infrastructure projects (Green Silk Road). China has also been the largest contributor to the core budget of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and a leading stakeholder in the establishment of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework in 2022 aiming to stop and reverse biodiversity loss.

b) Transboundary water governance and hydro-hegemony

i) Hydro-hegemony and power asymmetries in river basins

Transboundary water governance refers to the systems and instruments implemented among riparian countries to cooperate and effectively manage an international river basin, defined as basins "with water flowing year-round across state boundaries or with common water flow destination" (Bernauer 2020). International river basins are home to approximately 52% of the global population which depends on freshwater catchment to survive, making their effective management crucial.

Climate change is likely to drive greater variability and, in some regions, a decrease of available freshwater resources, while water use is expected to increase. Transboundary water management is thus becoming an increasingly necessary tool to maintain regional security and achieving sustainable development as riparian localities, regions, and states are never equal in river basins. Stakeholders located upstream indeed can control the flow of the river and extract the resources they require for irrigation, sanitation or industrial use purpose, sometimes at the expense of the downstream communities. Those power asymmetries have historically been a

significant source of tensions between countries. Researchers remain divided however on the influence of water scarcity on possible open armed conflicts between two or more riparian countries with some evidence suggesting that other factors play a more determinant role in armed conflicts than water stress alone. Open conflict represents however only the most extreme manifestation of such tensions around water management. The ongoing Nile River dispute between Ethiopia and Egypt, two BRICS+¹ members, over the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam illustrates how competition over water resources can create significant geopolitical tensions. Ethiopia's approach has been characterized as seeking a hydro-hegemony² position, contributing to the contentious geopolitical relations of these two states.

ii) Cooperation, competition, and unilateralism in regional water governance

Although cooperation represents the best way for the effective management of transboundary river basins, non-cooperation is often observed (Yu and al. 2019). Upstream and downstream stakeholders' interaction can be modelled through a prisoners' dilemma game where defection is the dominant equilibrium strategy given that gains from cooperation are insufficient to incentivise individual riparian countries, unless adequate incentive is given, such as benefit sharing arrangement. Cooperation among riparian countries can take various forms, including binding treaties, information sharing and fair water use agreements, trust building, and commitment to avoid unilateral actions with potential downstream impacts. In this prisoner's game, defection, whether unilateral or mutual, is often the equilibrium. This is driven by several factors: structural power asymmetry of power granting upstream stakeholders' control of shared resources, mutual lack of trust due to the perceived risk of defection of the other party, absence of enforcement mechanism for cooperation and predominance of short-term national interests over long-term collective gains.

¹ **BRICS+:** term used to describe the expanded version of BRICS (originally Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa). Since 2024, the bloc has grown to include Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Indonesi.

² **Hydro-hegemony:** dominance of one actor at the river basin level through control strategies of the freshwater resources enabled by the exploitation of existing power asymmetries, within a weak international context. (Zeitoun and al, 2005).

iii) China's strategic position in major Asian transboundary river system

China holds a significant structural power advantage in major south and southeast Asian transboundary river systems through its political control over Tibet and subsequent upstream position. Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) has been under effective political control of China after its annexation in 1950 and the exile of the Dalai-Lama in 1959 during the Tibetan Rebellion. By incorporating the Tibetan plateau in the 34 Chinese provincial level regions, China gained control over the “Water Tower of Asia”. Many important international river basins in South and Southeast Asia indeed starts from the Himalayans glaciers in Tibet such as the Indus, Ganges and Mekong, as well as the Brahmaputra River basin. In total, about two billion of people depends on those rivers for their livelihood, thus giving China a dominant position toward downstream countries and enabling it to shape the upstream regional governance according to their own strategic interest. China's advantage extends beyond its upstream position alone: the relatively easily accessible flat terrain of the Tibetan plateau makes the construction of infrastructures also more feasible than in the steep, muddy and intensely vegetated Indian jungle on the other side of the border.

c) Hydropower in China's energy and environmental strategy

i) China as a hydropower powerhouse: a global leadership in hydropower plant construction and capacity

Hydropower has become central to all Himalayan states' efforts, including China's, to become carbon neutral and meeting their development goals. For China, dam-building has historically carried significance beyond just economic progress, representing a continuity with imperial tradition in which the control of rivers has been a symbolic representation of the emperor's power (Piets, 2015). China's investment in modern hydropower dates to the second part of the 20th century, developed under the URSS guidance and with technology transfers. In Xi Jinping's “New Era”, China has invested massively in developing its domestic production of renewable energy, among which hydropower is emerging as its largest renewable energy source. The country's installed hydropower capacity is now at 435GW, having added 14.5GW only last year, accounting for approximately 30% of global installed hydropower capacity. This expansion is supported by substantial public infrastructure investments and by technologically advanced state-subsidised construction and engineering companies. Those includes CWE, PowerChina, Dongfang or Sinohydro, the latter having become the largest dam building corporation in the world. One of the most widely renowned hydropower projects is the Yangtze

River Water Conservancy Project or Three Gorges Dam, a mega dam completed in 2006 with an installed capacity, ie. the maximum possible output, of 22.5GW, the largest in the world.

It is however important to note that hydroelectricity generation does not only refer to dam or reservoir-based constructions. It also includes “run of the river” hydropower where water is diverted through a channel to spin turbines before being returned to the river downstream, or “pumped storage” hydropower in which water is pumped to a reservoir uphill when electricity is abundant and released downhill when demand is high.

China’s domestic strength at home translates also into international influence: Sinohydro and CWE have a large footprint abroad as HPP civil works contractors, and PowerChina and Dongfang are quickly expanding their global market share (from 19% in 2019-2021 to 26% in 2022-2024).

ii) Environmental and social impact of hydropower projects

Hydropower is considered as the world’s largest source of renewable energy, supplying 14.3% of global electricity generation, yet it frequently entails important environmental and social costs, especially for project with high installed capacity projected. Large dams more specifically have sparked controversies in the 1980s and 1990s for these reasons, with the World Commission on Dams concluding in 2000 that dams had produced as many problems as they had solved. Building a reservoir-based HPP modifies profoundly the landscape, flooding previously dried land with a specific ecosystem putting at risk endemic species and biodiversity. Beyond the reservoir itself, hydropower projects can also disturb the river biodiversity: by regulating downstream flow, reservoirs block fish reproduction pathways and disturbs their natural migration. Toxic algae can also develop in those newly formed artificial lakes where biodiversity has not yet had the time to develop. Finally, hydroelectric activities can trigger seismic activities, endangering local communities.

HPP can furthermore lead to forced displacement of populations. For instance, about 1.3 million of Chinese citizens had to be relocated due to the construction of the Three Gorges dam, as its reservoir swallowed hundreds of cities and towns. More broadly, such projects can weaken social equity in a region if local populations are not properly consulted and included. Finally, structural risks associated to infrastructures damages exists. The collapse of the Shimantan and Banqiao dams in 1975 for example led to catastrophic flooding which killed 171 000 people.

iii) Dam building politics in Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR)

China is increasingly focusing its hydropower efforts in TAR to achieve its domestic energy transition objectives. The Tibetan plateau offers considerable opportunities to capitalise on steep gradient and powerful river flows from the Himalayan glaciers with largely untapped resources. These public infrastructure projects are often presented by the central government as a powerful tool to address regional economic disparities and drive growth by creating direct and indirect local jobs, producing local electricity and improving the overall living conditions in remote parts of the country.

Importantly, these dams are also tools for the CCP to connect and control firmly bind Tibet, once a peripheral rebellious region seeking independence, to the Chinese State. Developing HPP in the regions enables the government to establish or reinforce associated physical infrastructure such as roads, transmission lines, and settlements, thereby deepening China's administrative and economic integration with the rest of China. Finally, in territories close to international borders, dam building also responds to what the central government perceives as a strategic military necessity to safeguard the national territory.

2) CHINA GREEN NATIONALIST APPROACH IN MEGA HYDROPOWER PROJECTS: CASE STUDY OF THE MEDOG HYDROPOWER PROJECT ON THE YARLUNG ZANGBO RIVER

a) An ambitious project in development phase, aiming to increase significantly electricity production in TAR

i) The Yarlung Zangbo (and the Brahmaputra) River Basin: characteristics and strategic considerations

The Yarlung Zangbo has its source in the Angsi Glacier in Tibet and flows for about 1600 kms, one of the highest altitudes of any major river in the world. It then turns sharply near the contested India-China border, creating the world's deepest non-oceanic gorge before crossing in the Indian State of Arunachal Pradesh. Joined by numerous tributaries, the river enters Assam and takes the name Brahmaputra before entering in Bangladesh, where it will be called the Jamuna and will drain out in the Bay of Bengal. Over the course of its 3000 km, the river goes through a wide variety of ecosystems and intense topography, ranging from the Tibetan glaciers and high altitudes plateaus to the Indian jungle and Bangladeshi wetlands. Over 200 million people depends directly on the river system and countless livelihoods specifically rely specifically on the fertile silt, generated by the erosion of the Himalayan rocks which is then

carried downstream and deposited by the river down to the Bay of Bengal, making the Brahmaputra one of the most sediment-rich river in the world.

The river is fed by the snow melt in its Tibetan upper reaches, but also for an important part by intense rainfalls during monsoon season in its Indian and Bangladesh section, where hot winds from the Indian Oceans hit the high peaks of the Himalaya and fall back as rain.

The Brahmaputra River has become the site of extensive and contested dam planning and construction, driven by a securitisation dynamic between China and India over their disputed border region. China has already massively engineered the river on the Tibetan stretch of the river, developing a network of dams on the Yarlung Zangbo and its tributaries since the early 2000s. By 2018, 18 large dams have been built on the upper Brahmaputra River system, with 74 other approved for construction.

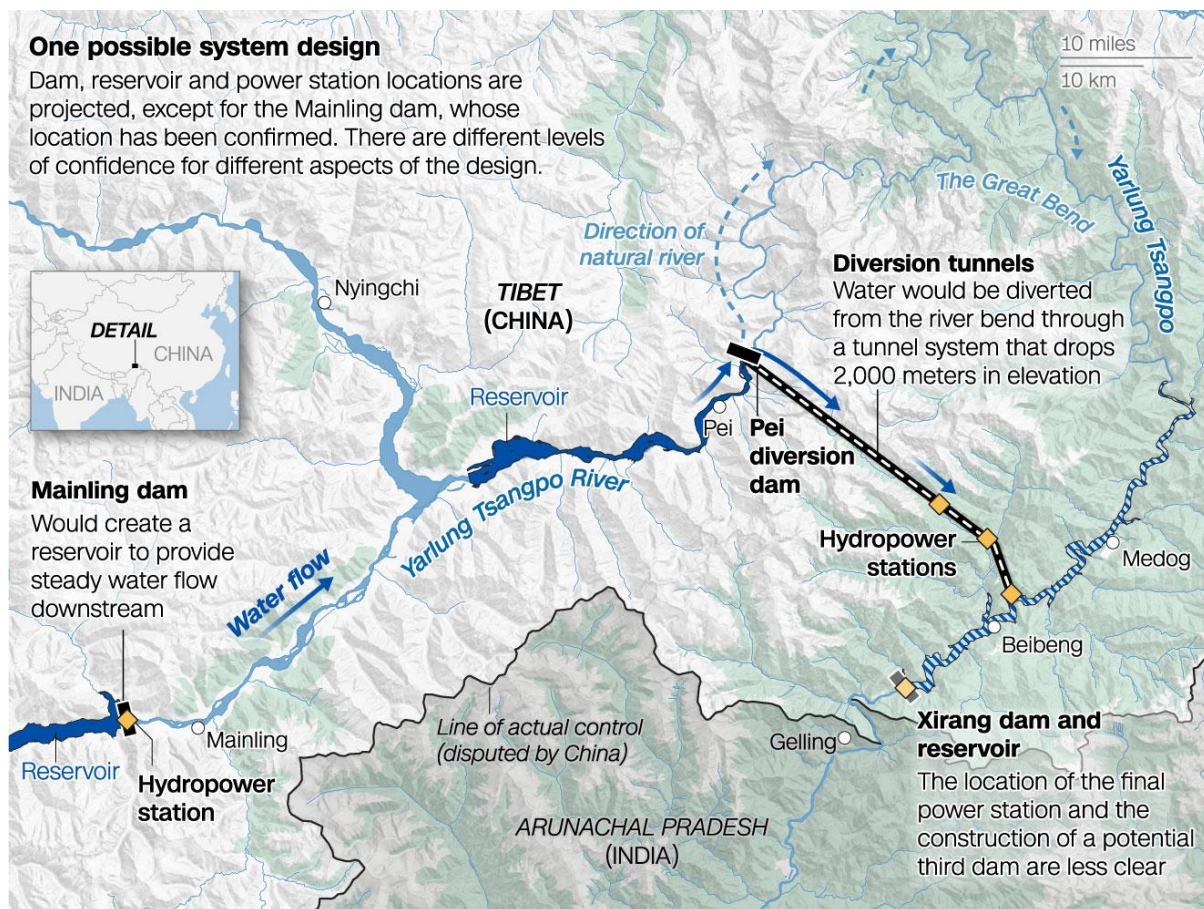
ii) Medog hydropower project profile and timeline

It is precisely at the “Great Bend” of the Yarlung Zangbo, where the river drops by more than 2000 meters over 50 kms around the Namcha Barwa mountain, that the Chinese government has decided to build the world “most powerful dam”, as part of the 14th five-year plan of China adopted in 2021. The project is located in the Medog county, the last Chinese territory before the contested border with India, and consists of five cascades³ hydropower stations, with an estimated total investment of USD 167.8 billion. Its stated objectives include providing electricity for local demand in Tibet, fostering the development of solar and wind energy sources, and enabling electricity export by 2033.

A groundbreaking ceremony was held in July 2025 for a first reservoir upstream of the Great Bend, the “Mainling Dam”, attended by Chinese Premier, signalling the launch of the construction. The overall project design seems to suggest a complex system of dams and reservoirs hydropower stations engineered to harness the powerful flow of the Yarlung Zangbo, with an expected installed capacity of 60GW, approximately triple that of the Three Gorges Dam. One of the possible designs modelled by the Stimson Centre, a US-based think tank, and CNN includes diversion tunnels through which water would be redirected and electricity generated from cascades run-of-river hydropower stations in a tunnel caved directly under the mountain (*see below*). As construction has only just started on the Mainling dam, others

³ **Cascade hydropower stations:** multiple hydropower stations built one after the other along a river, with each station functioning with the flow of the station upstream. Stations can be of different types: reservoirs/dams or run-of-river.

hydropower project's precise locations and exact designs are unknown. The below graph is based on open-source information and technical assessments, pending official disclosure by the Chinese government, which makes a comprehensive evaluation of potential downstream impacts difficult at this stage. It is also unclear how much land will be flooded by reservoirs to create this system. A further critical unknown is whether the Chinese will build a final dam and power station just before the border, enabling operators to control the overall flow of the river before it passes through countries downstream. Neither comprehensive Environmental Impact Assessment nor operational plans have been shared publicly, and no commitments have been made regarding future data sharing or basin-wide consultation mechanisms.



Medog hydropower project possible design. Source: CNN.

b) Environmental and socio-political implications

i) Potential ecological impacts at local level

As mentioned above, the Chinese government has not released any Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) for the project, nor any documentation detailing its potential impacts on the environment. Official documentation addresses those concerns only superficially, indicating that the project “prioritises ecological protection” and will promote “harmony between

humanity and nature”. Despite calls from researchers for comprehensive surveys covering biodiversity and ecosystem services in the region (Ren and al, 2024) and NGOs pointing out devastating potential impacts, a substantial lack of publicly available data remains, making it difficult to qualify and quantify precisely the Medog project’s exact environmental footprint.

Drawing on evidence from comparable large hydropower reservoir projects in the region, some impacts can nonetheless be considered more probable than others. Reservoir dams of the scale projected would necessarily leads to flooding of significant land areas, threatening plants and endangered species, such as Bengal tigers, clouded leopards or red pandas, living in this remote region characterised by a high biodiversity. The wildlife remaining will have to inhabit a fragmented territory, with smaller areas to roam and destabilised food chains. The Medog project also risks further degrading an ecosystem already under pressure from primary forest loss to farming. Upstream reservoirs and dams upstream would also alter river flows, with cascading effects on riverine ecosystems, and could block silt from flowing into Indian and Bangladeshi arable lands. Chinese upstream control of river flow during the monsoon season aimed at reducing the frequency and extent of natural flooding events could further modify the silt deposits. The attenuation of these natural flood pulses, which usually replenish agricultural soils through silt deposition well beyond the immediate riverbanks, would likely increase erosion processes in Bangladesh and undermine livelihoods dependent on flood-recession agriculture.

The Tibetan region is also highly seismic and large earthquakes are recurrent, raising concerns of major landslides and floods with potential significant damages to dams and subsequent flooding risks for downstream communities. Finally, climate change is already affecting the region at an alarming rate: extreme precipitations and snowmelt are expected to intensify, leading to increased extreme weather events with high river flows and floods being ever more likely, compounding both the structural risks to dam infrastructure and the flood exposure of downstream populations.

ii) Socio-cultural impact in the Tibetan Autonomous Region

The Medog hydropower station will necessarily have significant socio-cultural implications in the regions, yet as with its environmental dimensions, those remain subject to limited and tightly controlled public scrutiny by the Chinese state. Official sources have limited themselves to broad statements indicating that the project would improve livelihood and happiness for the ethnic groups in the region, but with little evidence of local consultations.

Based on previous hydropower projects in the region, some impacts can be considered however as highly probable. Among them is the forced displacement of local communities. The Chinese state has not communicated any figure yet on anticipated scale of displacement but recognised its necessity due to the expected floodings subsequent to reservoir building. Some local communities have publicised their relocation to uphill areas, framing it as a reflection of engineering prowess of the Chinese government. Among the 14,000 inhabitants of this remote region facing relocating are indigenous Monpa and Lhoba people, whose belief sites face destruction and loss of income. The planned tunnel diverting the Yarlung Zangbo will go also directly through the Namcha Barwa mountain which a sacred site for the Tibetan: a feat of remarkable engineering prowess at the expense of local cultural heritage. More broadly, this development translates into a loss of local communities' connection to their land and can be considered as an example of Chinese process of territorialisation for TAR. Beyond the direct footprint of the hydropower infrastructures planned, the region will also be impacted by the construction of roads and grid infrastructure required to support the project, compounded by the arrival of migrant workers to this remote region sparsely populated, which could exert pressure on the local economy and culture.

Under the Chinese state's strict surveillance and security measures in TAR, local protests or acts of contestation are forbidden, making it difficult to gauge local reactions to the Medog HPP project. Evidence from similar large scale HPPs in TAR, suggests that local communities' reactions were complex and diverse, ranging from genuine supports among those with direct economic ties to hydroelectric companies to complete opposition, with a broad spectrum of views depending on perceived losses, interests, and cultural attachment. Limited protests, seen in other part of China for other HPP projects, have not been possible on the upper reach of the Brahmaputra as the state implemented a strict security and surveillance regime after the 2008 Tibetan uprising and protests against China's persecution and its assimilation policy. A comprehensive picture of the Tibetan sentiments towards the project is impossible but social media sources in the region points to a certain acknowledgment of the improved incomes and housing alongside unfavourable views of those colossal state funded projects, referred as "Han Chinese projects" by the local population.

c) China's political narrative

i) Framing of the project in official communications and state media

In official state communications, the project is portrayed as an historic low-carbon opportunity to develop economically the region and further its hydropower capacity, contributing to the country to net zero target by 2060 and stimulating domestic economic growth: “It is also of great importance to advancing the country's strategy for carbon peaking and carbon neutrality and to coping with global climate change.” (Xinhua, 2024). The project's contribution to renewable energy in the country mix is underlined, as are the engineering challenges that domestic companies face to build this new hydropower system. Ecological protection is presented both as guiding principle and as a direct outcome of this green infrastructure investment. The Chinese state also directly addresses concerns of downstream riparian countries, indicating that tunnel hydropower stations will be run-of-river facilities and that “the project will have no negative impact on downstream areas” (China Daily, 2025). Those political commitments and declarations, following top level CCP stakeholders' visits to the construction's sites are however not supported by publicly available documents. The project overarching goals are all encompassing, aiming overall to enhance “the sense of gain, happiness and security for people of all ethnic groups in Xizang.” (Xinhua, 2024).

ii) Understanding hydropower and infrastructure-led development in TAR through green nationalism

By its importance and location, the Medog HPP system represents more than just a hydropower infrastructure project for China: it is a national security and development green energy project, testimony of the CCP legitimacy in power. This approach is rooted in the Ecological Civilisation doctrine detailed above in this dissertation, with the Chinese government leveraging broad public support for green energy projects to advance its performance legitimacy and national development agenda, through a narrative of economic modernisation, sovereignty and technological advancement. The Medog HPP is thus framed as a green energy project but serves a dual purpose: (1) contributing to China's renewable energy mix in pursuit of its carbon peaking and net-zero targets and (2) asserting its legitimacy by achieving environmental goals through engineering and technological achievements. This further also feeds the economic development of this remote region that was only connected to the national grid in 2013, as well as its administrative and political territorialisation by the Chinese state. Hydropower developments, including in Tibet, are another manifestation of the Chinese

political, economic, social and environmental transformation of the region and are deeply embedded within wider national regional development strategies. Among them is the “West to East Power Transmission” strategy, whereby electricity surplus in western regions, including TAR, are channelled to meet the demand of energy intensive eastern regions.

3) TRANSBOUNDARY WATER COOPERATION ON BRAHMAPUTRA RIVER BASIN: TENSION AROUND CHINA’S UPSTREAM POSITION AND THE MEDOG HPP AS A “WATER BOMB”

a) Chinese transboundary water governance practices

i) Data-sharing, bilateral agreements and flexible institutional arrangements

Water governance is centralised in China, with a top-down approach cascading down at regional, departmental and local level through the “River Chief System”. This system assigns specific governments officials, at all administrative level, as personally responsible and accountable for managing and protecting water bodies.

For international water basins, China has avoided overtly cooperative engagement in transboundary water governance, preferring instead to act unilaterally on its river activities, while stopping short of complete non-cooperation. While not a party to any international water convention, the Chinese state has concluded bilateral water agreements with countries in Northeast and West Asia. With India and Bangladesh specifically, China relies on Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) which are non-binding agreements, limited in scope and focused on data-sharing. Resources allocation agreements or conflict resolution mechanism are out of the picture. Transboundary water governance is thus perceived as a matter of sovereign discretion by China, and more broadly by the other countries in the region.

Momentum has been however growing domestically to engage in a more active hydro-diplomacy (He, 2015), to anticipate and prevent disputes and conflicts whose potential negative effects on international relations have been increasingly recognised. The Lancang-Mekong cooperation (LMC) is an example of this ‘new’, more active yet still limited approach to transboundary water politics from China.

ii) Example of limited collaboration with riparian countries on the Mekong River basin

Water governance practices on Mekong River shows indeed how this “active” engagement remains limited in practice.

Historically, the main transboundary water governance organisation in this region has been the Mekong River Commission (MRC), created in 1995 by downstream countries (Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam). It provides a rules-based framework for basin governance and includes processes for prior consultation, data sharing, and environmental assessments. China's role as an observer allows it to avoid binding commitments that could constrain its upstream activities, such as hydropower development. The EU and several EU member states have been development donors and have engaged in capacity building activities with the MRC. This engagement has been perceived by China as western influence in the region.

China has thus initiated the launch of its own, more flexible and project-based cooperation platform in 2016, the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC). Under Chinese leadership, the structure focuses on economic cooperation, infrastructure development, and “benefit-sharing,”⁴ while avoiding enforceable and binding rules on water allocation and upstream activities with downstream impacts. This specific institutional design allows China to increase regional engagement and provide financial and technical support as a preventive measure to avoid conflicts and tension, while maintaining control over critical hydrological decisions.

Through LMC, China therefore engages more actively in water regional diplomacy but preserves its upstream autonomy and avoid institutional constraints. Cooperation with downstream countries remains selective and limited, with increased dialogue and investment coexisting alongside power asymmetry and limited transparency.

b) Regional dynamics and implications for downstream countries

i) Potential risks: the Medog HPP “water bomb”?

Similarly to other hydropower projects in Tibet, downstream riparian countries have expressed concerns that China would unilaterally retain water during dry seasons for its own allocation and release excess amount of water during monsoon, increasing the risks of flash floods in downstream territories. The Medog project heightens those concerns due to its scale, the projected location of the plants and the securitisation context at the India-China border. This has led to the characterisation of the project as “water bomb” in the region (Hindustan Times, 2025), that could unravel ecological, social, economic and political instability in the region. Riparian countries have also expressed their fears that China is planning to divert the river

⁴ **Benefit-sharing framework:** approach in transboundary water management aiming to achieve better cooperative arrangements based on greater incentives for joint investment and management of shared resources for riparian parties in a transboundary setting. (Soliev, 2018)

entirely to for its own domestic use, putting the livelihood of million of people at risk in downstream Indian state and Bangladesh.

While legitimate, those concerns over Chinese created droughts or massive downstream flooding must be balanced against the fact that the Brahmaputra River flow is also heavily supplied by numerous tributaries and heavy monsoon rainfalls after the Indian border. According to the Assam State Chief minister, the Yarlung Zangbo contributes only to 30-35% of the total river flow. Although unilateral Chinese control of the water flow will have significant impact on downstream territories, complete economic and ecological collapse allegations might be overinflated.

ii) A difficult collaboration between China and India rooted in territorial dispute and water securitization context

On transboundary water cooperation, China and India's relations are not bound by any treaties as neither country is party to international water conventions or refuse to engage in binding bilateral agreements. MoUs do exists between the two on specific data-sharing practices related to potential alternation of the river flow. On the Yarlung Zangbo/Brahmaputra specifically, a MoU was signed in the early 2000s whereby China agreed to share hydrological data during the flood season and to provide assistance for emergency management, with both parties agreeing on a vaguely defined expert-level cooperation mechanism. This already limited cooperation has however been strained in recent years due competitive dam-building on both side of an historically contested border, in a context of growing militarisation and water securitisation. The aforementioned mentioned data-sharing agreement was suspended for a year, China refusing to share data with India after 2017 Dokhlam military standoff.⁵

The territorial dispute reflects nearly eighty years of competition between India and China for sovereignty in the region, with roots in the imperial legacies of both the British and the Qing dynasty, who explored and mapped the region for control without ever permanently settling due to the complicated terrain. At the Shimla conference of 1913-1914, the British first drew their proposed border, the Mc Mahon line along mountains and rivers lines, impervious to cultural ties and intricate water systems flows. The 1962 Sino-Indian war in the region however left the Chinese pulling back over the McMahan line to the Line of Actual Control (LAC), while still continuing to claim Arunachal Pradesh and part of Assam as their own.

⁵ **Doklam standoff:** military standoff between India and China in 2017 in trijunction border area between both countries and Bhutan over the Chinese construction of a road.

Hydropower development has intensified these tensions. China's construction of dams on the Yarlung Zangbo River from the 2000s onwards triggered Indian concerns over downstream impacts, amplified recently by the securitisation of water resources. In response, India has pursued its own dam-building strategy in Arunachal Pradesh, creating a "mirroring" dynamic reinforcing distrust. These projects also raise concerns downstream in Assam and Bangladesh, highlighting the broader basin-wide implications. Hydropower projects are perceived as defensive infrastructures on both side of the border, acting as strategically valuable forward operating base tied to territorial control and often requiring security forces.

A major obstacle to cooperation lies in how both countries conceptualize the river. Rather than treating it as a complex basin shaped by monsoons, tributaries, and ecosystems, policies often reduce it to a controllable national resource. This narrow perspective, compounded with security concerns, limits integrated management and sidelines local stakeholders.

Both countries tend to manage the river unilaterally, as if it was not transboundary. While proposals for enhanced cooperation exist, national security concerns continue to dominate, shaped by China upstream position. The Brahmaputra basin ultimately illustrates how territorial conflict and water securitization constrain transboundary governance. Despite growing recognition of shared risks, competition, infrastructure development, and geopolitical tensions continue to hinder meaningful collaboration.

iii) Limits of China's global ecological civilisation discourse in addressing downstream concerns

Complicated transboundary governance on the Brahmaputra puts a strain on China's doctrine of Global Ecological Civilisation (GEC) whereby China portrays itself as a promoter of global green transformation, in line with the goals and spirit of the UN Sustainable Development Goals and notably SDG 6 "Clean Water and Sanitation" and its related targets 6.5 "Implement integrated water resources management" and 6.6 "Protect and restore water related ecosystems". GEC concept such as "harmonious coexistence between human and nature", actively promoted by China on the international stage must be challenged in view of potentially significant environmental consequences on the Brahmaputra River basin.

Active engagement to build cross-border and regional ecological governance mechanism with other countries - such as the China-Japan-South Korea trilateral initiative on air pollution or the Mangrove restoration collaboration with Cambodia - has also been absent in the region. China's ambition to make GEC's approach a viable pathway for global ecological governance

through systematic and centralised policy planning, pragmatic international cooperation and substantial resource investment is thus more nuanced when it affects strategic domestic resources and national security concerns. This active promotion of sustainability while pursuing practices putting the environment at risk can be identified both in China and India, as both still use coal heavily as a transition energy, while declaring that their sustainability engagements remain unwavering.

4) POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS FOR EUROPEAN COOPERATION IN SOUTH ASIA

a) EU international cooperation framework in the region

i) EU international partnerships and Global Gateway

The European Union (EU) engages with other countries in the world through various modalities, and on different topics. It can negotiate trade deals on behalf of its Member States (MS) for example and maintain diplomatic relations through the EU's External Action Service (EEAS). Development cooperation and international partnerships represent another modality of this engagement with the overarching role of eradicating poverty, as set out in Article 208 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU). Traditionally, the EU and its Member States foreign aids is channelled to partner countries through budget support (ie. transfer of fund from the donor to the partner government's treasury under agreed conditions and criteria) or programmes/actions in the partner country implemented third parties. Most of those funds contributes to the OECD Official Development Aid (ODA) target for donors of 0.7% of their gross national income (GNI) to countries in the DAC list⁶ of recipients. This donor-beneficiaries dynamic is rooted in the post-war, post-colonial context where the independence of states in the Global South created both demand for predictable development finance and political pressure on former colonial powers and other rich countries to provide resources framed as "development cooperation".

This traditional approach from the Global North, not exempt of accusation of neo-colonialism creating new economic dependencies, is nonetheless changing, shifting from a grant to an investment-based approach, with a more prominent consideration of EU interests in future projects than what was previously the case. Several interplaying factors explains this shift:

⁶ **OECD DAC list of recipients:** Development Assistance Committee (DAC) list of recipients includes all countries, territories and international organisations that are eligible to receive Official Development Assistance (ODA) as defined by the OECD. It consists of low- and middle-income countries based on gross national income per capita.

competing economic priorities, increased polarisation of the world, growing EU economic security concerns and the perceived economic competition posed by China, notably through its New Silk Road initiative⁷.

Launched by the European Union in 2021, the Global Gateway strategy is an example of this new approach. It aims to support and scale up infrastructure projects such as energy grids, digital and transport connectivity as well as promoting standards of transparency, environmental and social sustainability and participation from local stakeholders. local economic participation. This represents a shift from purely development aid projects toward investment strategies designed to leverage additional public and private finance to fund mutually beneficial partnerships. This strategy wants to be the European counteroffer to the Belt and Road initiative infrastructure investments, in a context what is perceived as increased economic competition of China that has transitioned from being a recipient to a provider of development assistance. The EU is stuck in a conflicting position towards China, advocating publicly for enhanced cooperation to achieve the UN SDGs while competing in partner countries to build competitive offers.

Through development aid and investments in South Asia, the EU aims at alleviating poverty (Article 208 TFEU), but also at reducing also its own dependencies to China, by securing value chains necessary to its economy, hence its objectives of mitigating its influence South Asia.

Whether framed as international partnership or development cooperation, this model is not without tensions: poorly designed intervention or mismanagement can create economic dependencies in partner countries. While global poverty eradication is still enshrined in the treaties as the overarching goal, ODA increasingly appears to be treated as an enabler of foreign investment for EU companies.

ii) EU external action in India and Bangladesh

The EU is involved in different cooperation projects in the two downstream countries of the Brahmaputra in South Asia: India and Bangladesh. For the period 2025-2027, the EU has allocated EUR 164 million in grants alone to the EU-Bangladesh partnership. It has also signed in January 2026 a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with India, announcing an EU-India

⁷ **New Silk Road or Belt and Road initiative (BRI):** global infrastructure and economic development strategy of China to improve connectivity, trade and communication in targeted regions and securing value chains.

Climate Platform designed to use EUR 500 million of EU funding to support India's green transition.

In both countries, water governance and renewables energies are central to projects receiving EU funding. In India, for example, the EU and its MS support increase water cooperation between Indian States through the India-EU Water Partnership (IEWP) established in 2017, by providing expertise on river basin management, as local challenges have similarities with those being addressed in the EU through the Water Framework Directive (WFD, 2000). The EU benefits as the initiative offers opportunities for EU technological water management solutions and showcase the EU involvement in dedicated events. Sustainable water supply is also addressed through local projects with for example EU funding support to the Municipality of Chandigarh in India to improve water storage and distribution or a loan to contribute to ensuring drinking water supply for a large part of the population in Dhaka, Bangladesh, as part of a project totalling EUR 476 million. It is worth noting that although wind and solar energies feature prominently in the EU portfolio for both countries, no specific investments are dedicated for hydropower.

b) Medog HPP as a potential catalyst for shifting EU cooperation strategic priorities in the regions in light of China's regional influence

i) Possible impacts of the Medog HPP on EU cooperation projects in the region

As noted in paragraphs 2) b), it is difficult to determine the exact consequences that the Medog hydropower plants will have on the environment downstream, water supply and political equilibrium in the region. One thing is clear however: the project will inevitably affect downstream riparian countries, and the EU must adapt its actions and programmes to deliver truly mutually beneficial partnerships. So far, initiatives involving the EU in the region to foster a collaborative approach to transboundary water management have not helped diffuse the tension. The infrastructure rush in China and India moreover no signs of slowing down.

Variable water flows leading to heightened droughts or floods could endanger the current ongoing projects funded by the EU in India and Bangladesh in agricultural, irrigation and transport sectors for examples. Growing diplomatic tensions between India and China due transboundary water management of the Yarlung Zangbo would also pose a risk for EU funded cooperation actions in the region: China's refusal to share water flows data could hinder successful water storage strategies for the Dhaka environment sanitation project mentioned

above for example. With significant consequences for the local population, such risks would also result in substantial cost and investment loss for the EU.

ii) Policy options for EU strategic adjustments regarding water related cooperation projects in South Asia

Based on the current portfolio of EU-funded projects the potential effects that the Medog HPP will possibly have in the region, the following orientations could be suggested for the next actions, considering both the goal of reducing poverty and advancing EU economic interests, through mutually beneficial partnerships:

- **Water supply and storage:** EU development cooperation in Bangladesh and India should continue to address water sanitation and scarcity issue by supporting water supply and storage management projects. This approach would contribute to mitigating the effects of potentially increased drought and/or flooding resulting from uncertain Chinese management of upstream water flows at the Arunachal Pradesh border.
- **Hydropower development:** The EU could also consider including in its pipeline of cooperation projects some sustainable hydropower projects in India and Bangladesh. Provided these projects remain on a relatively small scale and with comprehensive environmental assessments, hydropower plants are renewable energy sources that contributes to both countries environmental and energy security, and more broadly to global reduction of CO2 emissions. This engagement could offer business opportunities for the EU private sector with tenders' terms of reference geared towards those companies' strength and technical expertise. Concretely, hydropower development could be included as one of the focus areas of the EU-India Climate Platform initiative, due by mid-2026.
- **Transboundary water cooperation:** The support to sustainable water management across Indian states could be expanded to Bangladeshi states, depending on the government political will as transboundary water cooperation unfortunately does not feature high in the current Bangladeshi political agenda. In India, the EU work within India's national mandate rather than positioning itself as an external actor on a nationally sensitive topic. Financing better transboundary cooperation between Bangladesh's state would allow increased reliability of water flows. For the EU, this engagement would contribute to the Global Gateway strategy by supporting the creation of a secure and investment-enabling environment.

Conclusion:

This dissertation examined how China's green nationalism approach, through the "ecological civilisation" doctrine, shapes its hydropower development and transboundary water governance in South Asia. The Medog hydropower project was used as a case study exemplifying this approach and for which the implications for EU cooperation in India and Bangladesh were assessed.

The analysis reveals a tension in China's environmental governance. At home, the ecological civilisation doctrine has enabled a shift towards environmental transformation, supported by the overall consensus from the population towards those projects. Yet in transboundary contexts, this green justification is used to extend state power in border areas and legitimise infrastructure projects whose consequences both for domestic regions and downstream riparian countries remain largely undisclosed and unclear. The resistance is overall difficult toward policies that are presented as spearheading the environmental transition. China's management of the Yarlung Zangbo upper reaches as a sovereign national resource, rather than a shared transboundary basin, reveal some tension with the global ecological governance role it promotes internationally.

The Medog hydropower project and more broadly China's water management in South Tibet has direct consequences for the European Union's funded projects in South Asia, especially in water, agriculture, and transport sectors. As the Global Gateway strategy reflects a growing shift in using ODA to advance geopolitical and economic objectives, it is important to safeguard the coherence of EU development cooperation with its treaty obligations on poverty reduction as per TFEU. Furthermore, the competition engaged with China's BRI on infrastructure scale deserves to be questioned. Whether this is the right strategy remains an important open question for the external dimension of the EU environmental governance.

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