

Mega-urban politics: Analyzing the infrastructure turn through the national state lens

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journals.sagepub.com/home/epn**Gavin Shatkin**

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Abstract

Recent studies have focused attention on the proliferation of plans in the Global South for massive infrastructure investment to accelerate peri-urbanization and link together networks of proximate cities. This paper proposes that a focus on the national politics of the infrastructure push is an essential starting point to understand this trend, both because the national state plays a constitutive role in the processes that are shaping emerging urbanity, and because national states are themselves being transformed by this moment. In pursuing infrastructure-driven extended urbanization, national state actors seek to capitalize on moments of opportunity presented by shifts in the investment priorities of transnational financial actors, and by advances in infrastructure and logistics technologies, to gain power through the formation of political regimes based on economic growth and the distribution of rents from land development. Hence extended urbanization proceeds not as a gradual and linear process, but is instead marked by waves of disruptive and politically contentious reforms and plans intended to enable real estate, infrastructure, and logistics megaprojects. The current wave of political projects around extended urbanization is marked by distinct features, including the increasingly fragmented and decentered nature of transnational finance, and geopolitical dynamics associated with the emergence of an increasingly polycentric global order. It is consequently marked by geopolitical competition to shape emergent state agendas of extended urbanization, and by increasing variegation in the models of infrastructure-driven extended urbanization that state actors adopt. The paper illustrates these arguments with examples from Southeast Asia's mega-urban regions.

Keywords

Infrastructure, Global South, urban politics, extended urbanization, national state

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Mega-urban expansion appears to be the flavor of the moment, but the origins and implications of this push are only partially understood. Major metropolitan regions in the Global South are witnessing plans for massive infrastructure investment to accelerate peri-urbanization and link together networks of proximate cities. Studies attempting to theorize this moment have largely focused on the roles of global finance, multinational investment, and transnational rule regimes, describing an “infrastructure push” (Ougaard, 2018), a “global infrastructure turn” in urban politics (Dodson, 2017; Addie, Glass and Nelles, 2020), and a global “infrastructure scramble” that has targeted frontier economies (Kanai and Schindler, 2019). In focusing on global forces, however, these studies have largely disregarded a parallel process that has played a major role in how urbanization has unfolded—the urbanization of the state. In countries where very large conurban regions play an increasingly central role in national political economies, we have in fact seen a *conurbanization* of the *national* state. In other words, in nations where opportunities for capital accumulation are highly concentrated in large conurbations, politics has increasingly been defined by national state efforts to build political regimes around expanding such opportunities, and by the contestations that arise around the infrastructure and urban development agendas that result. This paper posits that the urbanization of the national state is an essential starting point to understand contemporary trends in mega-urban expansion, both because the national state plays a constitutive role in the processes that are shaping emerging urbanity, and because the processes that are producing the infrastructure push are also transforming national states themselves.

The central problematic addressed in this paper, therefore, is the need to move beyond a focus on global forces to develop analytical tools for understanding how national states both shape and are shaped by the infrastructure push. The paper develops an analytical framework for addressing two questions: First, how does the political economy of the national state shape the spatial outcomes and political transformations that emerge through projects of infrastructure-driven extended urbanization? And second, what are the conditions that lead national state actors to take up such projects, and toward what political ends do they do so?

I focus on the examples of Southeast Asia’s largest urban regions, some of the largest in the world, which are experiencing infrastructure pushes that ostensibly seem quite similar. In Jakarta’s extended urban region, a reformist Indonesian President has proposed 171 km of MRT and LRT lines, a new aerotropolis, new ports, and a 65-km Jakarta Outer Ring Road, all to be linked with the rest of Java by 800 km of high-speed rail line, much to be built through a controversial partnership with China (Negara and Suryadinata, 2018). Around Bangkok, a military-led Thai government proposes more than 1000 km of high-speed rail lines linking the metropolis to the rest of the country (also driven largely by Chinese investment), port improvements, and significant expansion of the MRT system (Wu and Chong, 2018). Around Metro Manila, an aspiring authoritarian Philippine President has launched a bluntly titled “Build, Build, Build” agenda that includes regional rail and metro lines, an aerotropolis, and export processing and logistics zones, to be financed and built largely by powerful domestic conglomerates (Milken Institute, 2017). While there is an apparent family resemblance between these plans, however, actual change to urban space has in each case unfolded as an ad hoc process driven by the ability of powerful domestic interest groups to conjure global finance, gain control of land, and exercise the political influence needed to overcome regulatory hurdles and political infighting. In these contexts where national state politics has been shaped by legacies of authoritarianism, oligarchy, and ongoing but uneven transitions to more democratic and plural politics, government plans are deeply contested, and have unfolded as high stakes contests that have scrambled the political economy of urbanization. In each case, various stakeholders—elected officials, bureaucrats, incumbent and aspiring oligarchs, state-owned enterprises (SOEs), and myriad local community interests—have jostled to

influence whether and how infrastructure and urban development projects will move forth, and who will benefit and pay the costs.

A central argument of this paper, then, is that the transformations currently taking shape in Southeast Asia's megalopolises are spatial manifestations of contestations over the political economy of the national state. Understanding infrastructure-driven urbanization in these contexts, therefore, requires an analytical focus on the transformation of the state itself, as it is through this transformation that the impacts of the infrastructure push are actualized. The socioeconomic, political, and ecological dynamics of regional expansion—the processes of dispossession, ecological transformation, economic development, financialization, speculative property development, and rent seeking—are tied up in political battles over questions of who governs and what role the state plays in the economy. These issues play an increasingly central role in longstanding political debates over questions of democracy, authoritarianism, oligarchy, populism, and political representation that have deep roots in postcolonial political economies. Infrastructural agendas are also manifestations of the historical quest by states of the Global South to gain agency and autonomy in relation to geopolitical structures of power. The politics of the infrastructure push, therefore, needs to be understood in relation to the distinct political legacies, idioms of spatial control, and the particular contradictions that have shaped the urbanization of the national state in a given setting.

With respect to the question of when and under what circumstances projects of massive infrastructural expansion take shape, the paper argues that such projects emerge as national state responses to moments of opportunity presented by shifts in the investment priorities of transnational financial actors, and by advances in infrastructure and logistics technologies. At moments when the globe is awash in capital, emergent infrastructure technologies are being deployed, and corporations and their backers in multilateral and bilateral organizations seek new venues for capital accumulation, national state actors seek to reorient national political economies to seize ahold of opportunities for state empowerment through the formation of political regimes based on infrastructure-driven economic growth and land-based accumulation. Infrastructure agendas take shape around financial sector reform, assertive new agendas of land acquisition, and competition among powerful domestic corporate actors (both private and state owned) for access to land and infrastructure contracts. Hence regional expansion in a given context is not a gradual and linear process, but is instead marked by waves of disruptive and politically contentious reforms and plans that seek to transform the state even as their urban spatial outcomes remain uncertain.

In the Southeast Asian cases examined here, the current spate of projects is the second postcolonial wave of planning for infrastructure megaprojects, the previous wave having been initiated in the mid-1980s. This current wave is marked by distinct features, including the increasingly fragmented and decentered nature of transnational finance that has arisen with the emergence of more geographically dispersed financial institutions (e.g. Sovereign Wealth funds, bilateral donors, and non-Western institutional investors), and geopolitical dynamics associated with the rise of China and the emergence of an increasingly polycentric global order. These shifts are important for two reasons. First, perceptions of an increasingly polycentric world have fostered efforts by some national state actors to leverage geopolitical competition to assert greater autonomy in development paths. Second, China's rise in particular highlights an alternative model of infrastructure-driven extended urbanization that features a powerful role for the state in the corporate economy and land markets. In the context of these shifts, agendas of regional expansion have become integral to broader societal debates about the possibilities and perils of staking out new agendas of urbanization founded in new geopolitical orientations, and about newly assertive roles for the state and their implications for legacies of autocracy, state capitalism, oligarchy, and elite politics.

The next section expands on the utility of a focus on the national state, arguing that such a focus allows for a more relational and historically informed understanding of the infrastructure push.

The paper will then address the question of when and under what conditions we see infrastructure pushes take place, arguing that they manifest at moments of transformation in global financial markets and infrastructure technologies that present opportunities for states to realize political power through the construction of land–finance–infrastructure–economic development nexuses. The analysis will draw on examples from the mega-urban regions around Bangkok, Metro Manila, and Jakarta throughout.

Placing the national state in theoretical debates about extended urbanization

The call to focus on the national state in understanding processes of extended urbanization is a call to take the politics of places more seriously, and to pay greater attention to the path-dependent dynamics that shape political systems in postcolonial settings. It is a call to frame the infrastructure push not as a linear dynamic of change imposed from above, but rather as fought over and reconstituted through legal battles, elections, legislative pushes, social movements, and political competition among elite factions at local, urban, and national scales. It is a call as well to acknowledge the diversity of models of political economy that are shaping regional change, particularly with the rise of China (Mayer and Zhang, 2020). This section situates my argument for a focus on the national state in contemporary theoretical debates about the infrastructure push and extended urbanization, and argues that such a focus enables the development of more incisive analytical tools for understanding the implications of this push both for the places experiencing it, and for the geopolitical conditions that are producing it.

Much of the literature on the infrastructure push has focused upwards, unpacking the global forces that have shaped this moment in urbanization. Scholars have attributed this push alternately to global dynamics of capital switching and financialization (Castree and Christophers, 2015); a scramble to integrate peripheries into transnational value chains (Kanai and Schindler, 2019; Schindler and Kanai, 2019); the role of the United Nations and other international organizations in spreading models of extended urbanization (Schindler, Kanai, and Rwehumbiuzza, 2018); and a strengthening of industrial interests in relation to financial capital in transnational politics (Ougaard 2018). In some cases, and perhaps most notably in Ougaard's analysis, studies have quite explicitly characterized national states of the Global South as inert agents of capitalist expansion, and implied that urbanization, therefore, takes shape as an inevitable and linear process dictated by "global capital". In other cases, studies have focused some attention on the role of national states as important agents in the adoption of globally circulating ideals of regional planning. For example, Schindler, Kanai, and Rwehumbiuzza's (2018) study focuses on national urban plans, and raises important questions about the extent to which national states in Global South contexts seek to push back against Washington consensus politics by adopting regional development strategies that allow them greater autonomy.

My intention in this paper is to build on insights such as those in the Schindler, Kanai, and Rwehumbiuzza study by developing a framework of analysis that centers the national state in the study of the infrastructure push. It is toward this end that I argue for viewing the infrastructure push through the lens of the *urbanization of the national state*, or the process through which the political economy of national state power in rapidly urbanizing contexts is increasingly centered in the contestations produced by the growing importance of urban-centered strategies of capital accumulation.¹ It is within the context of this process of the urbanization of the national state that we see political coalitions emerge around plans for infrastructure-driven extended urbanization as a means to expand state power by realizing new sources of finance, or by distributing the financial benefits of urbanization to state allies. The idea of the urbanization of the national state thus provides a frame for thinking through the different roles that national state actors might play in

conceiving of large-scale urban expansion, and in mediating global finance and geopolitical relationships, to realize economic growth and the generation of new sources of capital accumulation through land development and connection to global finance and supply chains. It also provides a frame for analyzing the kinds of contestations over historically formed state–society relations and institutions that such projects of extended urbanization bring about.

A focus on the globalization of the national state therefore provides a way to ground urban analyses, and to counter the tendency in studies of the infrastructure push to focus on universalizing global processes. This tendency is of course the subject of a key contemporary debate that has centered on whether theories that posit the global spread of certain capitalist dynamics (e.g. gentrification, segregation, and neoliberalism) assist or impede our understanding of urban change. This debate has most recently focused on the idea of planetary urbanization, the argument that corporate agendas increasingly incorporate far-flung corners of the planet into dynamics of commodification and capital accumulation, thus rendering conventional dichotomies of rural/urban, nature/non-nature meaningless (Brenner, 2014; Brenner and Schmid, 2015). Critics of the planetary urbanization framework argue that its universalizing ambition draws attention away from everyday struggles around racial, gender, environmental, and other forms of injustice, and therefore risks normalizing the very capitalist dynamics the concept sets out to critique (Derickson, 2018; Oswin, 2018—for an excellent review of these critiques, see Angelo and Goh, 2021). Planetary urbanization theorists disavow such an intention, arguing that their theory allows for the possibility of “variegation” in context-specific outcomes (Brenner, 2018). Indeed, they argue that the planetary urbanization framework can help explain the grounds upon which everyday struggles take shape, and is indeed intended to inform such struggles (Brenner, 2018). Protagonists of both sets of perspectives are concerned with the political stakes of their analyses. For example, does the planetary urbanization call for a conceptualization of the urban without a “constitutive outside” (in Brenner and Schmid’s [2015] phrase) help to reveal capitalist urban logics as they play out in nominally “rural” and “natural” places, or does this universalizing framework simply reinforce the marginalization of self-labeled “rural” or “peasant” people? It is concerns like the latter that has led post-colonial theorists to argue for the need to “provincialize” purportedly universal knowledge—to recognize universal logics as situated in local knowledge, with no more purchase to comparative analytical validity than any other form of knowledge (Robinson, 2011; Leitner and Sheppard, 2016).

This is a rich, nuanced, and rapidly evolving debate that cannot be adequately summarized here. In the discussion that follows, I argue that a focus on the urbanization of the national state helps to address a central problematic of this debate—the need for a relational understanding of the interaction between the politics of place and the ideals of urban spatial change that travel through global circuits of finance, investment, technology, and expertise. A focus on the urbanization of the national state specifically enables three important theoretical and methodological moves that help to unpack these interactions: the development of what Peck (2015) has referred to as “midlevel” theories that are rooted in a relational examination of the translocal processes that shape urbanization; a reframing of analyses of transnational dynamics to account for the increasing multipolarity of the global economy; and analyses of urban politics grounded in historically informed understandings of state–society relations.

The national state as a site for “midlevel” theory building

Focusing on the national state provides an important site at which to apply what Peck (2017: 4) has referred to as “midlevel” theoretical formulations—revisable formulations that allow for “dialogic connections” between theory claims and case study analyses—to analyses of extended urbanization. This is so because an examination of national state projects of extended urbanization presents

a means to unpack how global interests unfold as real-world political gambits, and how they enter into, reshape, and are reshaped by the particularities of everyday politics. It is thus one way to ask questions about how concepts with pretense to universality engage with context. Here, I am influenced by Anna Tsing's (2005) discussion of "engaged universals" as a frame for thinking through the terms of engagement between universalizing forces and situated actors. While universals (i.e. of capitalism and commodification) are indeed as provincial in their origins as other forms of knowledge, Tsing argues, their special characteristic is their aspiration to travel, to mobilize new adherents and transform landscapes through their engagement with local conditions. Such "engaged universals", Tsing (2005: 8) argues:

...can never fulfill their promises of universality... They are limited by the practical necessity of mobilizing adherents. Engaged universals must convince us to pay attention to them. *All* universals are engaged when considered as practical projects accomplished in a heterogeneous world.

The task, Tsing argues, is to analyze across scales to understand how and through what agencies "engaged universals" mobilize adherents and transform in response to their messy encounters with people and places.

My argument for a focus on national state actors in infrastructure-driven extended urbanization is premised precisely on their role as a central agent in mediating the ways in which Tsing's "engaged universals" interface with the territories around rapidly growing urban regions. As will be discussed in the analysis of the Bangkok, Metro Manila, and Jakarta cases later in this section, national state actors play an inherent role in the unfolding of projects at the scale of large conurban regions, and it is through the debates and contestations over state institutional, legal, and discursive strategies that the engagement between emergent models of urbanism and the politics of place takes shape. By examining the embrace of ideals of infrastructure-driven mass commodification of land and ways of life by some national state actors, we can interrogate how and why they appropriate these ideals, what kinds of resistance they encounter from other power brokers, how the state itself is transformed in the process, and how grassroots and everyday politics change in response.

The infrastructure push and multipolarity in the global economy

Analyzing the role of the national state in mediating between situated actors and "engaged universals" also draws our attention to an important dynamic—the increasing multipolarity of the global economy, and the consequent variegation in the models of urbanization that states might aspire to. The current moment of dramatic geopolitical change is destabilizing some models of economic organization, while simultaneously giving rise to new ones. In today's Southeast Asian urban regions, Sovereign Wealth Funds, multilateral aid and lending institutions, footloose transnational financial sector and real estate actors, bilateral lenders from Japan, Korea, and elsewhere, Chinese state corporate and private investors, and other transnational actors increasingly jostle for influence over the shape of urban change. This competition arguably provides national states leverage in financial, economic, and policy negotiations over infrastructure investment with the "traditional" bilateral and multilateral power centers (such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund). It is increasingly clear that the decentralization of global investment, trade, and financial markets is destabilizing the "Washington consensus" ideals of low tariff barriers, privatization, and unimpeded flows of international trade, investment, and labor (McNally, 2020). It is also arguably encouraging the development of more statist approaches to the planning, financing, and development of infrastructure megaprojects.

Thus, while it is broadly true that infrastructure planning is partially driven by interests in connecting places to global supply chains, the questions of *whose* supply chains are being connected, and *what models* of financing, technology, and land value capture are being proposed to connect them, increasingly reflect the geopolitical strategies of state actors. Moreover, connection to transnational value chains is not always the only or predominant objective. Studies have shown that the urbanization of domestic capital in response to rising domestic consumer demand, and the growth of transnational investment in real estate products, is a growing driver of urban and infrastructure development in some places (Fauveaud, 2020; Cardenas, 2020). In sum, European, American, and Japanese capital increasingly have competition for influence over the terms by which places are plugged into the global economy, and national states are increasingly in a position to play various centers of authority against each other in their bids to access finance and technology to accelerate regional transformation. This competition plays out in part in a competitive framing of “engaged universals” in the form of models of urban political economy and state roles in the production of urban space. A focus on the struggle of postcolonial states to assert autonomy and authority in relation to global economic power structures and domestic economic actors is an essential analytical position from which to interpret these changes.

The rise of China, and its “state capitalist” model of urbanization, is of course centrally important to this changing geopolitical context. China’s role plays out in several ways. One of the less widely discussed of these is China’s impacts on the global terms of trade. Jepson (2020) argues that China’s demand for resources (e.g. copper, zinc, lead, fossil fuels, and agricultural commodities) created a commodity boom from 2002 to 2013 that increased the discretionary income of some Global South governments. This, he argues, “loosened the disciplinary power exercised by the international financial institutions (IFIs) and global capital markets and provided states with a level of policy autonomy that allowed (but did not compel) them to substantively break with neoliberal economic orthodoxy for the first time in a generation” (Jepson, 2020: 2). The result was a wave of policy experimentation, sometimes focused on redistribution, economic planning, and support for domestic industry.

China has also provided an alternative source of loans and technical assistance in infrastructure and urban development, notably through the Belt and Road Initiative and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Other sources of such funding and assistance have also emerged in the form of Sovereign Wealth Funds like Singapore’s Temasek, but China’s role has predominated (Clark et al. 2010). This expanded range of funding and technical assistance sources has provided some national states an opportunity to accelerate their infrastructure push by “playing off” various bilateral and multilateral lenders who are in geopolitical competition for political influence and access to the land, labor, and resources that will be opened up through development. In Bangkok, Jakarta, and Metro Manila, the current infrastructure push is layered on a previous wave of infrastructure-driven urbanization that arose from the offshoring of Japanese industry, and attendant Japanese aid, from the mid-1980s on (Webster, 2000). Japan and China have engaged in open competition to shape regional development through infrastructure investment in Southeast Asia in recent years (Negara and Suryadinata, 2018; Wu and Chong, 2018).

Yet another mode through which China exerts influence is in its role as a model and knowledge producer in spatial and infrastructure planning (Mayer and Zhang, 2020). The “China model”, in which state and capital are integrated, provides opportunities for the state to play an active role in land commodification and infrastructural development (Zhou, Lin, and Zhang, 2019). While it is often difficult to trace the influence of this model directly, its core elements are apparent in many recent megaproject infrastructure deals that China has been involved in. These often include the use of land-based financing, particularly using state land, and a powerful role for state-owned companies and state bank financing in infrastructure development. In the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed rail project, for example, the Indonesian government’s use of SOEs

to develop the line, and its efforts to finance it in part through the monetization of state landholdings, are departures from the orthodoxy of public–private partnerships (PPPs) backed by the World Bank (Salim and Negara, 2016).

The infrastructure push and historically formed political economies of state–society relations

Finally, a focus on the national state enables a more grounded understanding of the interaction and mutual transformation between historically rooted institutions and social relations and emergent models of infrastructure-driven extended urbanization. Previous studies have often drawn on Harvey's (1989) idea of "entrepreneurial urbanism" to understand urban politics across different contexts, arguing that neoliberal and austerity-driven urban governments everywhere have adhered to the dictates of the World Bank, Western institutional investors, and transnational corporations to build a "business friendly environment". But as urbanizing *national* states have played a growing role in shaping regional infrastructure agendas, their efforts have reflected nation-specific legacies of longstanding struggles for state autonomy and agency in relation both to transnational capital and to domestic economic actors. A rich literature on comparative political economy that has developed largely in Asia has emphasized the tension in postcolonial politics between the national state's imperative to cultivate a compliant domestic capitalist class through regulation, licensing, planning, and access to state resources, and its need simultaneously to cater to the interests of transnational capital through laissez-faire reforms (Hutchcroft, 1998; Fukuoka, 2013). The existence of a relatively compliant domestic capitalist class is essential to state efforts to achieve control over the direction of economic growth, and to ensure the state's ability to maintain power through the distribution of patronage and the exercise of control over interest groups. Yet so too is a strong connection to the global economy through foreign direct investment, finance, and other linkages.

Hutchcroft (1998) discusses a variety of models that state actors have drawn on to achieve these dual objectives, including:

1. A *developmental state* model, in which the state cultivates a set of corporations, owned either publicly, privately, or in some combination, that act largely according to state economic planning and are strongly regulated (e.g. the chaebol of South Korea).
2. A *regulatory state* mode, in which the state largely pursues a laissez-faire agenda that allows corporate actors a significant amount of autonomy.
3. An *oligarchic* mode, in which the state cultivates an oligarchy that dominates the economy, but is deeply dependent on the state for patronage (e.g. Suharto's Indonesia and Marcos's Philippines).

A full analysis of the factors that shape which modes have prevailed in different settings is beyond the scope of this paper. Broadly speaking, the state's capacity to assert control over powerful economic interests (in the early postcolonial period mostly agricultural) linked to trade with former colonial powers, and its ability to gain control of key assets like land, have been important factors shaping state leverage in managing the economy (Fukuoka 2013). What is important for our analysis of the infrastructure push is that states may draw on varied models of economic management in mega-conurbation development, and they face different political constraints in doing so. In the Southeast Asian cases that I focus on here, the East Asian "developmental state" model has long had some influence on economic development policy, though powerful economic interests have often tempered the ability of bureaucrats to forward such agendas.

As countries have integrated into a globalizing world through the adoption of market-oriented reforms, the politics of urban planning and development has in many contexts been increasingly defined by the growing concentration of wealth among oligarchic economic actors, and political battles over their influence. Scholars have argued that oligarchy—a political system in which a small minority use their dominance of material wealth to engage in collective political projects of wealth defense—has been a feature of postcolonial politics for some time (Winters, 2011; Fukuoka 2013; Aspinall, 2013; Hewison, 2019, Phongpaichit and Baker, 2015). Under Indonesia’s New Order regime, Suharto (in power from 1965 to 1998) positioned himself as an uber-oligarch, using state power to cultivate a coterie of subordinate oligarchs who controlled economic sectors through licenses, concessions, and other forms of state patronage (Winters, 2011). In the Philippines, by contrast, Marcos’s authoritarian regime (1965–1986) was less successful in its efforts to dominate largely agrarian capital that was already deeply politically entrenched at the end of American colonial rule. While Thailand has no similar history of sustained authoritarian regimes, its politics have also revolved in recent decades around a growing contest for power between emerging, largely Bangkok-based economic interests, and economic and political interests rooted in a nexus between the monarchy and the military.

In both Indonesia and the Philippines, the post-authoritarian period has seen a push to enact market-oriented reforms, and to broaden political participation through democratization. Despite these political and economic reforms, however, oligarchs have largely been able to sustain projects of wealth defense under these new regimes through a variety of strategies—the capture of political parties, control of political discourse through the ownership of media outlets, the mobilization of groups for or against policies, the mobilization of mass politics through civic and religious organizations, or the launching of political careers by oligarchs themselves (Winters, 2011; Aspinall, 2013). Moreover, the era of economic liberalization, financialization, and technological change has opened up vast new opportunities for collaboration with state actors around new projects of capital accumulation. In the case of Thailand, Hewison (2019) finds that the combined worth of the ten wealthiest individuals rose from US\$18.1 billion in 2009 to US\$108.6 billion in 2019 alone. The growing concentration of wealth is consistent with global trends—Forbes records a tripling of the number of billionaires globally between 2010 and 2020, including, for example, a sixfold increase in China and more than a twofold increase in India and Brazil (Stoller, 2020).

This entrenchment of oligarchic elites in democratized and liberalized political systems has coincided with the urbanization of their economic interests. In Thailand, the economic interests of the wealthiest families have shifted significantly since the 1980s from agriculture into urban and technology sectors like real estate, hotels, construction, transport, and telecoms and media (Hewison, 2019). In his study of Philippine conglomerates, Cardenas (2020) argues that large, diversified, and politically powerful family-owned companies have distinct advantages in their ability to acquire newly privatized land, and to operate in water, power, and other infrastructures, which Philippine law largely restricts to domestic corporations. As a result, these conglomerates have become “vertically integrated rentiers, able to capture substantial portions of capital flows through the built environment” (Cardenas, 2020: 233). Even as Philippine manufacturing exports have declined significantly as a proportion of GDP, conglomerates have thrived on urban property and infrastructure, and associated financial sector investment, in part by capturing investment of remittances from overseas contract workers (OCWs). Cardenas notes that 63% of the profits of Philippine conglomerates between 2000 and 2015 came from property development, energy, and financial services, indicating that conglomerate interests in urban investment have been a major driver of regional expansion.

Discussion: The national state and the infrastructure push in Southeast Asia's large urban regions

The factors discussed in the preceding two sections—a shifting geopolitical landscape and the historically rooted dynamics of political contestation between domestic centers of influence—set the context for analyzing the role of the national state in the infrastructure turn in Southeast Asia. As opportunity has arrived in the form of institutional investors, bilateral and multilateral organizations, SWFs and other transnational state capital, and corporations eager to strike infrastructure and real estate deals, state actors have witnessed new opportunities to create powerful new nexuses of economy and politics. The possibility of fostering new projects of massive market-making through urbanization is consequently an increasingly important factor reshaping states in the region. The projects that have resulted have reflected the efforts of state actors to navigate the treacherous geopolitical waters between a China that is purposively seeking to enter new markets, and the entrenched influence of the Western powers and Japan, backed by the powerful influence of the Bretton Woods institutions and the financial capacity of the bulk of institutional investor finance.

The new models of infrastructure financing and development and urban spatial planning embodied in these projects reflect state strategies to strike new balances of power in relation both to geopolitical actors and domestic economic interests. Opportunities for rent seeking from land-based accumulation and infrastructure development, and prospects of economic growth through connection to global supply chains, have presented stark political choices. Will state actors double down on the political economy of oligarchy, using their political will and financial capacity to distribute patronage to oligarchic interests through the awarding of infrastructure contracts and concessions, and a focus of infrastructure investment on opening new lands for speculative real estate investment? Or will they seek to shift the national political economy in the direction of a state capitalist or developmental state role, fiscally strengthening the state through land-based financing and the empowerment of SOEs in infrastructure and real estate development? Will they use the leverage that the infrastructural moment provides to empower bureaucrats and technocrats in the planning process?

The answers to these questions are being determined in real time, and they differ substantially between countries. In Thailand, telecoms billionaire Thaksin Shinawatra rose to the Prime Ministership in the early 2000s by cultivating a political regime backed by a faction of oligarchs, and by dominating electoral politics through a redistributive policy agenda targeting the poor. Thaksin rewarded political allies in ways traditional to Thailand's transactional politics—by awarding key ministerial positions, and by pushing through large infrastructure projects that created significant new opportunities for capital accumulation. The creation of Suvarnabhumi International and Aerotropolis is one example of this strategy—the project created significant opportunities for distribution of rents through land value increases, and rumors abounded of land purchases by well-connected politicians that occurred in the run-up to the project's approval. Thaksin was deposed in a coup in 2006 because his rise threatened the political dominance of another elite faction centered around the monarchy, which itself has major interests in land development and construction through the Crown Property Bureau. In the decade and a half of civil unrest, elections, and coups that have ensued, both elected and military-backed regimes have jockeyed to put forth infrastructure initiatives to appeal to powerful corporate interests in property development and economic growth. In response to the increasing skittishness of Western-backed institutional investors and development institutions at Thailand's lurch toward authoritarianism, they have also increasingly turned to China as a ready source of finance, technical capacity, and markets (Hewison, 2018).

Both Indonesia and the Philippines have recently seen the election of two very different political leaders—President Joko Widodo (assumed office in 2014) and President Rodrigo Duterte (assumed

office in 2016)—whose distance from longstanding conventions of oligarchic rule were a significant part of their electoral appeal. President Widodo was elected by positioning himself as a political outsider—a provincial businessperson who had started his political career as the mayor of the provincial city of Solo. His administration has embraced a more statist infrastructural agenda, in a developmentalist push that is in part a response to the seeming incapacity and unwillingness of the country's powerful oligarch-owned conglomerates to undertake large infrastructure projects. Many of Indonesia's largest conglomerates hold development permits dating from the Suharto period for massive amounts of land spread across the Jakarta metropolitan region. They have tended to focus their investments on shorter term and less risky investments in property development on these lands, and on vast opportunities in industrial agriculture like palm oil (Arai, 2015).

Widodo has sought to empower SOEs to take on the infrastructure push by increasing their state budget allocation, encouraging them to launch new rupiah and dollar-denominated debt instruments, and in one important instance by developing the massive Jakarta-Bandung rail project through a partnership between Chinese and Indonesian SOEs (Kim, 2019). He has also sought to capitalize on state landholdings to finance infrastructure projects, for example, by developing new towns along the Jakarta-Bandung line and by undertaking "Transit-Oriented Development" around metro stations (Jakarta Post, 2017). Overall, SOE share of Indonesian GDP increased about 27% between 2014 and 2018, and the dramatic increase in state investment in SOEs has led to concerns about the potential fiscal implications of increasing SOE debt for the Indonesian state. Indeed, the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have brought this issue to the fore, as increased SOE debt has forced the government to make difficult decisions about the balance between further state support and potential sovereign debt downgrades (Ren, 2020). It has also led to complaints from oligarch-led conglomerates about increasing competition from SOEs for market share in key sectors, including property (Warburton, 2018; Kim and Sumner, 2019). But these conglomerates have also sought to capitalize on the infrastructure boom by using their access to vast land banks to launch major projects on newly connected lands, increasingly drawing on financing from Chinese private lenders and investors, or partnering directly with Chinese investors.

President Duterte is a provincial politician who rose to national power by striking an authoritarian pose, promising to visit state violence on criminals and corrupt politicians, and promising to eradicate the political influence of oligarchs, who he has referred to as a "cancer on society" (Almendral, 2019). Yet the influence of oligarchic families has proven to be deeply entrenched. The economic dominance of the Philippines' plantation-owning elite has historically constituted an obstacle to reforms to increase state capacity in economic management (Winters 2011). The Philippine state has long turned to PPPs, and the approval of unsolicited bids from well-connected conglomerates, to achieve its infrastructure objectives, while conglomerates have pursued opportunities in infrastructure as a way to realize synergies between their massive property investments and the infrastructures that connect and service them (Mouton and Shatkin, 2020). Despite Duterte's aggressive public stand toward oligarchs, in the absence of bureaucratic capacity and a strong state-owned sector, his administration's *Build, Build, Build* agenda has largely followed the PPP template, and large conglomerates (e.g. San Miguel Incorporated, Ayala Land Incorporated, First Pacific, and others) have dominated new infrastructure contracts (Freedom of Information Philippines, 2017). Some of the largest proposals, such as new airport and aerotropolis and a new metro line and urban development linking Metro Manila to an adjoining province, are unsolicited bids proposed by San Miguel Incorporated, the country's largest conglomerate. Projects have generally been financed domestically in pesos, with much investment coming from remittances from OCWs, and from the country's burgeoning business process outsourcing economy (Cardenas, 2020). While Duterte has signed loan agreements with China, therefore,

the role of Chinese finance, technology, and supply chains has to date been more muted than in Thailand and Indonesia.

These brief vignettes show that the infrastructure push has unfolded through its interaction with ongoing political transformations. It has been tied up in each case in societal debates about oligarchy and democracy, the rise of a muscular brand of economic nationalism in political discourse, emergent trends toward a regression to authoritarianism, and competing views of the role of the state in society (Hadiz and Robison, 2017; Einzenberger and Schaffar, 2018). It has also been tied up in debates about the place of nation-states in a changing geopolitical order. In each case, contestation centers on a battle for control of the economic and political benefits of spatial change among political factions, the elite factions they represent, private conglomerates, SOEs, and bureaucrats. State plans in each country seek spatial transformation through the transformation of land ownership patterns and property rights regimes, and in doing so find themselves in a contest with farmers, land brokers, and some elements of the state across the local, provincial, and national scales. It is in the debates among these actors and the political and legal contestations that result that actually existing spatial change takes place, and the global order of capital accumulation takes shape.

I have drawn on these examples from Southeast Asia because they are the ones I know best, and because their geographic locations make them particularly interesting with respect to the growing role of China and the historic place of the region within geopolitical relations between China, Japan, and the West. However, the intersection of geopolitics, globalization, finance, national politics, the growing role of China, and emergent models of urban and regional transformation, is not unique to Southeast Asia. While the specific geopolitical entanglements and globalizing ambitions may differ, recent studies on Turkey and Nigeria, to note two examples, indicate that the politics of infrastructure-led mega-conurbanization is reshaping national politics in these settings as well (Adama, 2018; Üçoğlu, 2021). The field is ripe for studies that bring cases of the national politics of mega-urban development from different world regions into conversation.

Nation states and the land–infrastructure–finance–economic development nexus

The preceding section has argued that contemporary national state projects of infrastructure-driven regional expansion arise in response to a shifting geopolitical landscape, and reflect historically specific tensions between oligarchs, bureaucrats, elected officials, civil society, and the public that play out in the building of political regimes. But what ultimately are such projects all about? What do the national state actors who embrace them seek to accomplish through them? This section examines the global forces at play in such projects, and the ways that they interact with the political economy of urbanizing states. I argue that, where states embrace infrastructure-driven extended urbanization, they do so as a means to exercise power and autonomy by crafting new political alliances around the making of new markets and the distribution of the opportunities for capital accumulation that result among state and elite actors. They specifically seek to generate new sources of revenue for the state, new opportunities for capital accumulation by domestic corporate actors, and new opportunities for transnational capital to connect places to global supply chains, through the creation of new land–infrastructure–finance–economic development nexuses. Such projects emerge at critical moments when access to new technological innovation, new sources of finance, and new connections to transnational value chains take hold, encouraging actors to build networks across scales to realize new opportunities for place-based capital accumulation.

In the regions surrounding Jakarta, Metro Manila, and Bangkok, the current moment represents the second postcolonial wave of finance-driven plans for massive urban expansion. The previous

wave occurred with the surge of foreign direct investment that entered the region beginning in the mid-1980s, and particularly after the signing of the Plaza Accord and the resulting increased valuation of the Japanese yen in 1985, which led to a dramatic offshoring of manufacturing production from Japan, with much of this going to Southeast Asia. The politics of the current moment reflects in part the path-dependent processes of urbanization of the state and of major corporate actors that took shape during this previous wave.

The pages that follow will unpack the factors shaping the politics of extended urbanization through an individual discussion of the components of this nexus (e.g. land, infrastructure, and finance), each of which exercises its own agency. Importantly, while changes in the realms of infrastructure and finance tend to reflect the influence of transnational corporate and financial sector actors and international rule regimes, transformations around land are shaped powerfully by national state action and local politics. The domestic politics of extended urbanization, therefore, plays out in large part in contestations over state efforts to transform regimes of land management and infrastructure and real estate financing in efforts to realize new capacities to generate economic growth and rents.

Infrastructure technologies

The past decade has seen the growing adoption of new transportation technologies, and the widespread diffusion of established ones. Worldwide high-speed rail passenger traffic grew almost 3.5 times between 2010 and 2017—much of this growth occurred in China, which has subsequently sought to export this technology (Union Inter des Chemins, 2019). The 2010s saw the development of 33 new metro systems in Asia, and worldwide metro ridership rose 21% between 2013 and 2017 (UITP, 2018). Increased cargo throughput globally, and the increasing size of ships, are leading to new port development, and the expansion and retrofitting of existing ports. Airport, aerotropolis, and toll road developments have also accelerated in the past decade. Plans for regional expansion like those in the Bangkok, Jakarta, and Metro Manila extended regions have been built around these trends.

Why have national states launched infrastructure-driven regional expansion efforts at the current historical juncture? This question is not fully answerable without reference to the role of finance in shaping infrastructure agendas, which will be discussed later. However, it is useful to think of infrastructural agendas as emerging in response to two dynamics: an exogenously imposed temporality of infrastructural opportunity and constraint; and a more endogenously defined national and local political economy of regime building. In the case study urban regions examined in this paper, new infrastructure technologies are an exogenous force leading to a changing landscape of economic opportunities, that state actor who adopt conurban plans seek to harness using the rents these opportunities generate to build coalitions and empower the state.

The exogenous temporality of infrastructure emerges through the dialectical interrelationship between the changing imperatives of capital—the need for infrastructural “spatial fixes” during crises of accumulation—and advancements in infrastructure technologies. This is the push, as Danyluk (2019) has framed it, to create “fungible space” through technological innovations that open places up to projects of capital accumulation. Danyluk illustrates how *both* technology *and* changing scales of accumulation exercise some agency in shaping the spatial change that results. For example, the increasing size of container ships has led some carriers to reroute shipping between the US East Coast to Asia so that they travel through the Suez rather than the (narrower) Panama Canal. This has had the unintended consequence of fundamentally reorienting the global shipping network in ways that have had significant implications for the reallocation of national state prospects for connecting to global supply chains. The shift to larger ships has also meant that many ports must retrofit to accommodate newer ships. State actors consequently experience

new incentives to build ports or retrofit existing ports to maintain their connection to global supply chains, or to capture new opportunities to build transshipment facilities. Similarly, the decreasing cost of air travel has made shipping by air freight increasingly feasible for certain high-value and low weight products, and has also facilitated such service industries as medical tourism. Hence, the temporality of state infrastructure initiatives is partially shaped by the extent to which technological change leads to geographically specific opportunities to avail of emergent economic opportunities.

The endogenous national and local political economy shapes infrastructural agendas through the influence of powerful economic actors on national infrastructure policy. This is not just a story of the influence of transnational corporate actors and their domestic allies—the interests that cohere, for example, around the opportunities to open up land, labor, and resources that emerge from a railroad connecting an export processing zone to a bonded logistics zone and a container port. It is also, importantly, about the powerful domestic economic actors who stand to benefit from construction contracts, from investments in financialized infrastructure, and perhaps most importantly from land-based accumulation. Toll roads, passenger rail, high-speed rail, and airports, all create opportunities (at quite different scales) for real estate development on newly accessible land—residential communities, new towns, malls, office districts, industrial zones, tourism, leisure, or retirement facilities, or others (Peterson, 2009). The adoption of the aerotropolis concept, a planning/infrastructure “technology” that encourages urban development around airports through zoning and industrial incentives, seems often to be motivated as much by real estate development opportunities as by economic development through connection to supply chains (Kasarda, 2006). Finally, infrastructure provides opportunities for project-based accumulation, opportunities to profit from the infrastructure itself, through user fees, rents, and public subsidies. The tolls from a toll road, for example, constitute an attractive revenue stream for investors, albeit one that investors will weigh carefully against certain risks (e.g. political and regulatory risk or exchange rate risk).

The types of opportunities for accumulation that any particular infrastructure technology creates have implications for the economic interests that coalesce around the adoption of that technology, and consequently shape state strategy in building growth coalitions. Opportunities for land-based accumulation may lead a variety of interests—conglomerates, large agricultural landowners, SOEs, real estate developers, agricultural cooperatives—to seek to shape the direction of infrastructure investment. During the explosive expansion of the large urban regions in Southeast Asia from the mid-1980s to late 1990s, some major domestic conglomerates (particularly in the Philippines) began to move into transportation infrastructure—toll roads, metros, and regional rail ones—as land development emerged as a major new source of accumulation (Shatkin, 2017). Major new infrastructure initiatives have in some cases been strongly oriented toward distributing land rents to key allies of political regimes, as already noted in the case of the Suvarnabhumi Airport and Aerotropolis.

Where infrastructure investments are not directly linked to land-based accumulation, this presents a distinct challenge to state efforts to entice domestic corporations to get involved. Domestic corporate actors are often averse to the risks inherent in the long time horizons and unpredictability of project-based revenue. Their involvement in infrastructure PPPs is often contingent on the promise of state protection against the political, economic, and exchange rate risk. It is in part because of this lack of take-up from domestic corporations that governments have sometimes turned to SOEs to build infrastructure, and have sought to encourage investments from institutional investors in such schemes. This is indeed the case in Indonesia, where the focus of conglomerate interests on more immediately profitable opportunities in real estate, industrial agriculture, and mining has resulted in a statist turn in infrastructure development (Davidson, 2015; Davidson, 2019).

Moments of innovation in infrastructure technologies, therefore, present state actors with distinct political choices about what interests to cultivate in decisions that involve the assumption of

considerable political, social, and ecological risk. In the case study regions examined here, these moments have marked inflection points at which state actors make strategic decisions with respect to their relations with oligarchic actors, and their assertion of state powers in the realms of land and urban development.

Finance

In the past two decades, finance has seen two dynamic forces of change that have shaped the strategic choices available to state actors in formulating urban development strategies. First, the volume of assets under management (AUM) of institutional investors has grown tremendously, leading to an intensified process of capital switching that has seen investment in infrastructure, real estate, and urban services increase dramatically (Arezki et al. 2016; McKinsey, 2016). Second, financial capital has become increasingly decentered, and its models of land and infrastructure financing increasingly variegated, as emerging actors like Sovereign Wealth Funds, and notably Chinese state-owned banks and China-backed multilateral organizations, have played a growing role (Clark et al. 2010; Gu et al. 2016). Taken together, these shifts have provided state actors with new opportunities to launch ambitious infrastructural agendas. Yet, they have also presented them with choices regarding what models of infrastructure financing to embrace, what geopolitical alliances to forge, and what circuits of capital accumulation to integrate places into. In the case study regions around Bangkok, Metro Manila, and Jakarta, the issue of infrastructure financing have increasingly centered on the choice either to adhere to “Washington consensus” norms in a bid to attract investment from global institutional investors, or instead to play the geopolitical card in efforts to gain access to Chinese, Japanese, or other financial assistance and technical assistance. This choice, and the related question of infrastructure financing models, has significant implications for the power brokers who coalesce around infrastructure projects, and consequently for the kinds of regimes state actors seek to build.

The infrastructure financing story has in fact unfolded as a number of distinct stories, involving different kinds of financial sector actors, each connected to different economic, political, and geopolitical interests. Much of the focus of the literature on the “infrastructure turn” has been on “traditional” concessionary funding from bilateral or multilateral organizations like the World Bank or the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), which is largely intended to enable transnational corporate investment to tap into new sources of labor and primary goods in debtor countries.

There are, however, other logics at play in infrastructure financing. One involves the role of private equity and institutional investors like commercial banks, pension funds, hedge funds, and insurance companies, which have increasingly sought to profit directly from the production of urban space. Assets managed by pension funds, insurance companies, and investment funds rose from about \$30 trillion in 1998 to about \$60 trillion by 2008, and exceeded \$85 trillion by 2013 (Della Croce and Yermo, 2013; Inderst, 2016). Institutional investors have recently been touted by international organizations and consultants like the World Bank and McKinsey as key actors in efforts to close the “infrastructure gap” in the Global South. Yet their role in infrastructure investment has proven fickle and fitful, as currents of institutional investor money have often shifted abruptly according to predominant sentiment about the global investment opportunity landscape, and the risk-reward profile of specific countries and projects.

The current wave of interest in infrastructure among institutional investors represents the latest rebound of previous rounds of investment and disinvestment, most notably in the run-up to and aftermath of the Asian financial crisis (1997–1998) and the global financial crisis of 2008. In the aftermath of the 2008 crisis, new regulations put in place as part of the Basel III accord led to a reduction in bank loans for infrastructure and a decrease in the availability of insurance for

project bonds, leading to an “increase in the cost of traditional debt-based PPP infrastructure finance” (Bayliss and Waeyenberge, 2018: 581). The resulting shift away from PPPs has been offset both by an increase in lending by institutional investors to governments, and by a reorientation of the PPP model toward a stronger role for other institutional investors, notably pension funds and insurance companies.

Institutional investors as a group, however, have continued to prove quite risk averse, focusing on certain infrastructure sectors (notably ICT), and limiting their exposure in low and middle-income countries to a handful of widely cited growth stories. Investors have demonstrated a preference for countries with growth-oriented policies, strong sovereign debt ratings, and perceived growth potential based on their natural resources, growth of manufacturing, or the emergence of a consumer class. In 2014, for example, 73% of all private infrastructure investment in “developing countries” went to Brazil, Columbia, India, Peru, and Turkey (Hart, Krause and Miller, 2015). Yet institutional investor sentiment has also fluctuated significantly over time, with recent studies indicating a shift in interest to Asian countries, with Indonesia identified as the “most active” infrastructure investment market in 2017 (Global Infrastructure Hub, 2017; 2019). Notably, research has also found that institutional investors are most likely to invest within their own region, a fact that also appears to portend increasing investment in Asian infrastructure given that institutional investors based in Asian countries were projected to account for 40% of AUM by 2020 (McKinsey, 2016).

In sum, the growing role of institutional investors in infrastructure finance has generally led to a focus on infrastructures most easily monetizable through user fees, in a handful of countries, and a handful of regions within those countries that contain a substantial consumer class. It also appears to be leading to the tightening of interregional economic and financial linkages.

Yet another “infrastructure-finance” story, and one that is of growing importance, is the emergence of state financial actors who combine financial and geostrategic objectives. Notable here are Chinese state-owned banks and other SOEs, and Sovereign Wealth Funds. Chinese state bank infrastructure lending abroad tends to be at interest rates that lie between commercial rates and the concessionary rates of other overseas development assistance (ODA) lenders, and generally requires Chinese sourced contracts (as is the norm for bilateral development assistance) (Brautigam and Gallagher, 2014). It has also tended to be accompanied by real estate investment from private and state-owned real estate developers. Hence, Chinese infrastructure investment abroad appears in part to be a strategy to redeploy excess capacity in infrastructure and real estate development that has emerged with a significant slowing of growth in China, using the considerable financial resources of state-owned banks to open new markets for Chinese infrastructure and real estate corporations. SWFs, which have more than \$7 trillion in AUM, arguably behave more like other institutional investors. However, to the extent that they too consider investments through the lens of a “double bottom line” of financial return and geopolitical and economic influence, they may use infrastructure financing as a wedge to open markets and exercise political influence (Yeung, 2010).

In sum, the financing opportunities available to national governments present distinct choices regarding financial and political terms, the geoeconomic strategies they embody, and the models of infrastructure and land financialization they represent. As discussed in the previous section, political debates in cases like the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed rail project have centered on the long-term fiscal and geopolitical implications of the choices around what kinds of international finance states should tap into.

Land

The preceding discussion has argued that, to varying degrees, transportation infrastructure technologies open up opportunities for profit from the financialization of land. The development of

such infrastructure, therefore, engenders political contestation around land acquisition and land-use change attending the development of infrastructure projects and the capture of the increased value that the infrastructure brings about. A great deal has been written in recent years about the intersections between land, infrastructure, and politics, and it is not possible to summarize these studies here. I will instead highlight two points that have implications for state strategies of land management around infrastructure projects.

First, the politics of land acquisition and monetization is inherently complex, because the stakeholders involved, and the institutional and legal parameters that they operate under, reflect the legacies of centuries of pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial history. Infrastructure introduces new possibilities for land speculation and real estate development that offer opportunities for profit and power to actors who can position themselves in a mediating role between property claimholders and investors who wish to acquire land. Such actors may include private landowners, holders of customary or use based claims, land brokers, agricultural cooperatives, land speculators, real estate developers or other corporate interests, middle men, state agencies, or SOEs (Shatkin, 2017; Balakrishnan, 2019). Yet, as Balakrishnan (2019) has argued, land acquisition does not always represent a simple dispossession of the “use value” of agrarian land users by an overbearing state driven by the “exchange value” of corporate interests. Instead, they may represent transformations of property rights regimes that are legacies of previous waves of incorporation into capitalist or statist economic systems. Balakrishnan refers to these as “recombinant” forms of property, and argues that, in the Indian context, they are structured by the relations of caste, class, and other forms of subordination and domination that characterized the preceding regimes of property rights and property ownership. In the case of rural Maharashtra that is her case study, she argues that incursions of capital have enabled “caste-based agrarian propertied classes”, who have historically enjoyed electoral influence, to realize new sources of wealth and power. In sum, actors who enjoyed power in historically formed relations of property are better able to translate this power into profit from infrastructure-driven change. Communities whose claims to property have been weakened through histories of political subordination are often threatened by displacement under regimes of land financialization, and subsequently form the basis for opposition to such regimes.

Second, when it comes to land issues around infrastructure-driven extended urbanization, national states inherently have to play a central role. Leaving the land question to lower levels of government would subject projects to all manner of obstacles—political fallout from the predation by local officials against communities, opposition from local governments founded in vote bank politics, or controversies over corruption of local and state/provincial officials. The national politics of megaproject infrastructure and real estate development therefore largely revolves around national state efforts to consolidate control over property rights, and land acquisition and management. Examples of recent legislation intended to achieve this include Indonesia’s Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013, India’s Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation, and Resettlement Act, 2013, and the Philippines’ Act Facilitating the Acquisition of Right of Way Site or Location for National Government Infrastructure Projects. In some cases, national state actors such as state agencies or SOEs may themselves own large amounts of land, or exercise enough authority over its use or transfer to enjoy a substantial property rights claim. They may therefore have some ability either to realize substantial new sources of revenue from land, or to use land as a mechanism to distribute patronage.

In sum, an infrastructure push presents opportunities to cater to the interests of foreign investors, consolidate oligarchic structures, forge political coalitions, or assert a stronger role for the state in managing the economy. In the case study regions, this has played out quite differently according to the specifics of property rights regulations and land ownership patterns in different contexts. In the case of the extended Jakarta region, much debate has focused on the government issuance of land development permits to large developers to acquire state-owned land and land held under use or

autochthonous claims. In Metro Manila, the presence of large private landholdings on former plantation lands at the urban fringe has spawned efforts to build partnerships with large landowners around integrated infrastructure and land development initiatives. The resulting contestations around land differ contextually, but in each case they create a new political dynamic, positioning the state as a mediator of patronage and political privilege, often at the direct expense of vulnerable segments of the population. There is, simply stated, a complex political calculus involved in national state decisions around the pursuit of an infrastructure push, and such moments represent important political turning points.

Conclusion

In many respects, the contemporary infrastructure push is not new. The history of capitalist expansion has been marked by numerous waves of urbanization through accelerated infrastructure investment. Such global infrastructure pushes kicked off vigorously with the “great boom” of the 1850s that centered on railways, and broadened with the period of colonial expansion (Hobsbawm, 1996). In the postcolonial period, Global South countries have experienced a wave of World Bank-backed financialized PPP infrastructure initiatives in the 1980s and 1990s, followed by the current infrastructure push. Each of these periods was marked by technological innovations made possible by incremental scientific advances whose utility was defined by capital’s need for a “spatial fix”. In each case the massive capital outlays needed for infrastructure rollouts led to new experiments in the creation of financial instruments to capitalize on technological and financial opportunities. Each has also been marked by legal, policy, and institutional battles over efforts to weaken land claims of existing occupants and enable new regimes of land-based accumulation.

What is new about the current infrastructural moment is not only that it reflects the next phase in the ever-increasing scale of capitalist expansion. It is also that the emergence of new regimes of infrastructure-driven extended urbanization in places like Thailand, the Philippines, and Indonesia have increasingly played out in the form of struggles over the role of the national state. These struggles share some common features, notably the powerful but contested role of oligarchic elites who have had material interests in urban spatial dynamics since the previous boom in infrastructure and urban expansion that began in the mid-1980s, and who seek to capitalize on the opportunities for accumulation inherent in this moment. In each case, however, new political forces have emerged based on a backlash against oligarchic influence. The divergent national administrations in place in each country have each been shaped by the contradictions of this moment—each seeks to strike a posture of autonomy from oligarchic corporate interests, even as they often rely on oligarchic factions for material and political support for their ambitious urban agendas. These dynamics have unfolded in divergent ways: in the Philippines, through Duterte’s populist strong arm stance, which he has used in part to expand infrastructure investment; in Thailand, through shifts in infrastructure investment as the political system has lurched between elections, coups, and periods of military rule; and in Indonesia, through the use of SOEs as a tool to take control of infrastructure development. In each case, these state efforts to assert autonomy have reflected changing geopolitical dynamics. Strong state postures have been tied up with a nationalistic stance of pushing back against the powerful influence of the US-led global economic order (as is most evident in President Duterte’s aggressive anti-US rhetoric). China’s rise, even as it has raised concerns about a potential new hegemon, has played a role in inspiring this shift by providing both an alternative economic orientation and a model for infrastructure and urban development.

These Southeast Asian cases are arguably somewhat distinct in their geopolitical position. Their proximity to China has meant that they are experiencing growing pressures and incentives

to build links to that country, even as their politics are shaped by path dependencies from the American Cold War project to pull them centrally into the US orbit. Geopolitical contexts and postcolonial histories differ in the countries of other world regions. Yet, as noted previously in reference to recent studies of mega-urban development in Turkey and Nigeria, the current moment of infrastructure-driven urban expansion appears to be transforming national politics in geographically varied contexts.

I have further argued that these transformations of national states are in turn shaping geopolitics and the transnational dynamics of capital accumulation. In negotiating finance and infrastructure with transnational actors, national state actors play a role in recalibrating global supply chains and the geopolitics of financial and economic interlinkage. Where they focus infrastructure investment on unlocking opportunities for the production of real estate as a national and global commodity, national state actors and oligarchic interests contribute to the urbanization of capital by creating new urban-centric circuits of capital accumulation. Where they choose between alternate models of economic, social, ecological, and financial governance and planning, national states shape the fate of international rule regimes and their ideological projects.

Ultimately, the objective of all theories of the infrastructure push is to understand the kinds of politics this moment is producing. I have argued that transformations of the national state are central to understanding the emergent politics of extended urbanization. Studies of the infrastructure push need to move beyond a view of place-specific outcomes as simply evidence of “variegation” on a general theme. The infrastructure push is co-constituted through the interaction of transnational, national, and subnational politics, and the research we produce needs to inform action not only from the top-down, but through an understanding of these interactions across scales.

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Note

1. My use of this term is somewhat different from You-tien Hsing’s (2010) discussion of the urbanization of the state. Hsing uses this phrase to describe the increasing focus of the local state in China on the monetization of state-owned urban land as a mechanism of realizing economic growth and revenue generation, in a context in which the state dominates urban land ownership. The idea of the urbanization of the national state, in contrast, focuses on the national level, and can be applied to think through the various ways that this process might unfold in different institutional and socioeconomic contexts, and where property rights regimes and patterns of land ownership may differ significantly from the China case. In the Southeast Asian cases examined in this paper, unlike in China, the predominance of private landownership and private sector economic might means that state strategies of urbanization tend to center on partnership between state actors and corporate oligarchs and large landowners.

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