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The Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) 2.0: What's Next?

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The year 2026 marks a key milestone for the first and formative decade of Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC), officially launched at Sanya, China in March 2016. During the 11th LMC Foreign Ministers' Meeting on November 4, 2026, in Beijing, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi praised this first ten years – or so-called LMC 1.0 – as its "golden decade". Among more than ten institutions along the Mekong River, LMC is a multilateral subregional forum that seeks to deepen ties among six riverine countries including China in the upper Lancang River and Cambodia, Laos PDR, Myanmar, Vietnam and Thailand in the lower Mekong. Initially focused on water management and infrastructure connectivity, LMC is broadening to cover the security-development nexus that touches upon both traditional and non-traditional security challenges. Although non-traditional security is of utmost and urgent importance, LMC must tackle this complex (inter)dependence of security-development nexus in order to bolster a security shield and build a sustainable and green community.

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This article aims to take stock of and evaluate LMC 1.0 and explore the possibilities of the future LMC 2.0 in the next decade or so. What's next for LMC 2.0 should be based on a transformation from an intergovernmental cooperation towards a community building process. This article makes a case for a sustainable and green community of a shared future for humanity that non-traditional security – both human and post-human/ environmental security – must be defended. With this sustainable synergy, LMC will be a more robust, resilient and responsible community.

Complex (Inter)Dependence

In the past decade, LMC 1.0 has concluded with some fruitful achievements but colluded on some challenges and contestations. We should learn from the lessons of the past in order to navigate the changing configuration of power and cultivate the Lancang-Mekong community. Hereunder, this article highlights four focal points of complex (inter)dependence within the Lancang-Mekong River, as follows.

First of all, the Mekong cooperation should advance shared and common interests. The Lancang-Mekong River and its tributaries are the vital arteries and intricate web of subregional commerce, connectivity, chokepoints and corridors. As a key mechanism linking both upstream and downstream riverine states, LMC led by China's hydro-hegemony has set up a transboundary governance on critical junctures such as water and energy security. Conceptually, this governance is framed under the Chinese rubric of "a community of a shared future for mankind". Against this backdrop, we should and must start from the commons – particularly common challenges, the common heritage of mankind, and planetary commons – in order to facilitate solidarity among

riparian states and peoples, and foster sustainability and environmental ecosystem integrity. Instead of a mere talk shop, LMC must endorse tangible and intangible outcomes.

Consider a critical issue of water security. Recently, we have serious concerns about heavy metal pollution and contamination in the upper reaches of the Mekong, most notably the Kok and Mae Sai Rivers in Chiang Rai province, Thailand. This polluted water is susceptible to human health insecurity and has the greatest impact on various species of fish and aquatic animals. This is due to severely harmful exposure to metals like lead, mercury, cadmium, and arsenic.

To avoid any environmental, ethical and diplomatic dilemma, we should shoulder the consequences and responsibility of toxic contamination, and take immediate action within the LMC mechanism. This is not a blaming game. It is a survival game. It is a sustainability game that strikingly affects us all.

Second, LMC should advocate a more inclusive subregional riverine architecture and multilateral institutionalization. Given the proliferation (or a complex spaghetti's bowl) of subregional institutions in the Mekong, LMC countries should build closer coordination among LMC mechanisms and with other subregional cooperation forums, such as Ayeyawady – Chao Phraya – Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS), the Mekong River Commission (MRC) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) so that the efforts could be mutually reinforcing and constructively coordinating inter-institutional relations.

In this sense, LMC should avoid institutional bypassing, which is defined as a strategy of institution-building that establishes a new institution in parallel to compete and outperform an existing institutional architecture in terms of functions and purposes. Rather, LMC should be a bridge builder among different institutions along the River, which every so often pursue lopsided

approaches and work in silo/ isolation. Furthermore, LMC should share information and develop a single data base system. This is perhaps a genuine data center of the subregion.

Third, LMC should pay attention to new radical realities in terms of climate change-related and human-made challenges, such as drought and flood, environmental degradation, deforestation, mining-related deterioration, landslide and riverbank erosion, transboundary haze and PM2.5 pollution, polluted and contaminated river, human displacement and human trafficking, and so on. Undeniably, non-traditional security is of utmost and urgent importance. LMC should adopt an active multialignment, prioritizing key strategic areas of cooperation. The Beijing 11th LMC Foreign Ministers' Meeting reiterated the significance of LMC Special Funds to manage such critical challenges as green innovation, digital economy growth, artificial intelligence, and cross-border security cooperation.

Fourth, LMC should avoid the mistakes and pitfalls of geopolitical competition, where decoupling/ derisking, supply-chain bifurcation, and friendshoring risk escalating into tension and rigid bloc-building activities. In this zero-sum world of geopolitics, power play also occurs along the Lancang-Mekong River, such as great power rivalry, hydro-geoeconomic statecraft and the weaponization of energy, dam and electricity, and water interdependence.

Consequently, LMC should address and transcend quadruple gaps: information gap, institutional cooperation gap, interpersonal trust gap or deficit, and economic development gap, respectively. The so-called golden decade needs to be shaped and shoved by the golden rules of the game — the rules based on a law of nature and a law of nations. On the one hand, the law of nature tells us to have obligations to oneself and others as well as to the nature as a whole. On the other hand, the law of nations is currently based on the UN Charter and ASEAN Way of peaceful

coexistence, which can be summarized in key principles such as reciprocity, restraints, responsibility and mutual respect.

To reiterate, the next golden age should be equipped with the golden rules of the game. LMC and ASEAN in general should adopt prudent diplomacy that these regional players acts decently (in accordance with the norms of international society) and responsibly (with the pursuit of national and common interests).

Community Building and Coordinated Institutionalization

A shift from LMC 1.0 to LMC 2.0 could be a transition from an interstate cooperation to a community building. This is a complementarity and close entanglement between top-down cooperation and bottom-up integration. Combined together, LMC 2.0 should be based on the whole-of-the-basin approach. Connectivity from above connotes a cooperation among nations whereas connectivity from below means a relational, adaptive and socially embedded process of institutionalization, involving ordinary peoples and local communities, private sectors and NGOs.

LMC 2.0 is the next decade of the Mekong integration, which has to be a deep and comprehensive coordinated institutionalization. It should be cultivated by eight substantive points of cooperation, as follows:

(1) Pillars and priority areas – The LMC jointly works on three pillars of cooperation (political and security issues, economic and sustainable development, and social, cultural, and people-to-people exchanges), plus six key priority areas (connectivity, production capacity, water resources, agriculture, poverty reduction and cross-border economic cooperation).

(2) Principles – The LMC should uphold the guiding principles of consensus, equality, mutual consultation, voluntarism, shared benefits, respect for the UN Charter and international law, and multilateral cooperation.

(3) Promises of LMC institutional mechanisms – Established in 2016, LMC Special Fund aims to finance small and medium-sized practical development projects across member nations. Since its inception, LMC Special Fund has supported over 1,000 development projects across Cambodia, China, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam. Also, Joint Working Groups on six aforementioned key priority areas are maintained, monitored and modified in accordance with changing and urgent situations.

(4) Provision of international public goods – Leadership needs to avoid being a "great irresponsible" and seek to be a humane and responsible provider of public goods such as hydro-power and clean water, infrastructure financing and building, development assistance, rural poverty alleviation and so on.

(5) Proper balance in the security-development nexus – New synergy and initiatives for sustainable sub-regional development should be promoted.

(6) Public-private-people partnership (PPPP) – LMC should diversify and bolster comprehensive partnership between state actors, private sectors and ordinary peoples. It should also enhance people-to-people cooperation and build a people-oriented community.

(7) Practical and meaningful outcomes – Pragmatism is ensured to be delivered continually and consistently, largely based on building tangible benefits and outcomes for the whole community.

(8) Potential for South-South cooperation – LMC could serve as a benchmark for Global South as its growing economic and security clouts could translate into the enhanced participation and stronger voice in the Global South.

In other words, LMC 1.0 has succeeded in developing some of these areas of cooperation but there are a lot more for LMC 2.0 to get things done sustainably in the next decade. Rather than being an ad-hoc, responsive or reactionary platform, LMC 2.0 should be a deep and comprehensive subregional community that seeks region-wide recognition, extends influential representation on the regional stage and takes collective responsibility. Also, LMC community should closely work in tandem with other regional organizations.

Concrete Proposals for LMC 2.0

This article calls for a sustainable and green Lancang-Mekong community. LMC 2.0 should address the utmost and urgent transboundary challenges for the subregion and advocate and act upon immediate collective actions. As part and parcel of concrete and practical proposals, LMC 2.0 should establish key task forces on at least five critical security challenges.

First, LMC task force on water security. Building stronger cooperation on water management, downstream water quality, safety and clean water supplies, transboundary water pollution should be the first priority. We need a strong and solid support from science and technology. Let’s allow science to lead the politics of water management. We could rebuild the water security governance through the knowledge and know-how of epistemic community. In order to rebuild trust, countries in the subregion must acknowledge this severe problem, stop blaming or buck-passing, and take collective action and responsibility to solve the water problem. This is the bedrock of science diplomacy.

Second, LMC task force on cyber security. This task force should address and attack cyber crime, online scams, cross-border financial and telecom fraud, and related issue of human trafficking. During the 11th LMC Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Beijing, Thailand has proposed establishing a LMC task force bring together central banks, law enforcement agencies, regulators and private sector. Building on the Bangkok Blueprint for Fraud Resilient Financial Services, launched during the IMF-World Bank Group Annual Meeting in Bangkok, the task force would strengthen coordinated efforts to prevent, trace and disrupt criminal networks and their financial flows. With greater precision and urgency, this task force includes the need for stronger cross-border cooperation through intelligence-sharing, joint training and capacity building to tackle these networks and protect our citizens. In addition, Thailand welcomes China’s initiative regarding International Alliance Combating Telecom and Cyber Fraud.

Third, LMC task force on economic security, in particular innovation, digital security and economic resilience. Thailand suggests advancing the LMC Innovation Corridor, with cooperation in smart agriculture, digital trade, AI in education and healthcare, and sustainable tourism. This would help businesses and local communities keep pace with the rapid technological transformation and disruption. For example, agricultural cooperation should evolve from basic technological sharing to digital and intelligent cross-border supply chain coordination.

Fourth, LMC task force on climate security. This issue has to be reframed as human development security. In fact, climate change problem is the result of the previous model of economic modernization and development that limits and constrains human achievement of sustainable and shared future. LMC 2.0 should be a green community, bolstering green energy corridor, green innovation, and basin-wide renewable integration. The green LMC should uphold the principle of Bio-Circular-Green (BCG) and climate-resilient economic models to protect and

preserve grassroots livelihoods and local communities along the Lancang-Mekong River. Taking a cue from the expert and scientific community, LMC could establish a climate security working group.

Fifth, LMC task force on disaster security governance. LMC should jointly enhance disaster prevention, mitigation and relief capabilities. At the 11th LMC Foreign Ministers' Meeting, Foreign Minister Wang Yi has proposed the establishment of LMC cross-border disaster early-warning cooperation mechanism. For example, mechanism of monitoring and early warning on flash flood and drought has to be developed.

All in all, these five proposals on LMC task forces could be vital building blocks and stepping stones for tackling the subregional common challenges, translating into confidence building, and transforming the trust-based community building. These concrete policy recommendations are indispensable to the long-term and long-lasting achievement of non-traditional or comprehensive security in the Lancang-Mekong. In addition, these LMC mechanisms should make a close and constructive linkage with ASEAN Centrality, or ASEAN-centered regional architecture. The ultimate aim of LMC 2.0 is to forge and foster a sustainable and green community of a shared future.

The Future of LMC 2.0: Towards the Whole-of-the-Basin Approach

In conclusion, LMC should learn from the lessons of the past and thrive for the sustainable future together. The next golden decade has to be navigated by the golden rules of the game in the Mekong Subregion. That is, LMC 2.0 should be a rules-based and responsible community. It should also adopt the whole-of-the-basin approach, which combines the top-down and bottom-up approaches, and synergizes between cooperation from above and integration from below. We

should work together in a more nuanced and prudent manner. Prudent diplomacy should be based on key sets of rules, as follows:

- Diplomacy of Cruciality emphasizes speed, urgency and priority to address and advocate riverine common challenges;
- Diplomacy of Consistency and Coherence elevates institutional effectiveness, policy synchronization, and strategic continuity within the LMC;
- Diplomacy of Cooperation enhances an intra-subregional and inter-governmental coordination within the subregion and alongside other institutional frameworks;
- Diplomacy of Communication extends and expands cross-border dialogues and conversations among communities of states and citizens as well as their respective partners in order to build and strengthen interpersonal trust and empathy;
- Diplomacy of Community establishes a sustainable community of a shared future that respects the environment and biosphere and is responsible for diverse local and borderland communities in their respective everyday lives.

In an era of geopolitical competition and radical uncertainty, prudent diplomacy should enhance a deep and comprehensive LMC community. A green and sustainable community building would be a promising future of the whole Lancang-Mekong subregion writ large.