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ACMECS: after two decades, is the soul-searching over?

The framework should be given a new chance as it begins its third decade.

Walaya Jariyadham¹

When ACMECS was founded roughly two decades ago, in 2003, from Thailand's initiative, it was envisioned as a self-help catalyst to bridge economic gaps between the members, the CLMVT countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam and Thailand). Poverty reduction through the increase of trade and investment in 'zones of economic growth' was the objective of this cooperation framework, which was intended to complement whatever bilateral frameworks or mechanisms existing among these countries at the time.

Over the following years, the sub-region has gone through dynamic changes economically and socially, and has faced challenges politically in various degrees. Individually, ACMECS members have seen their GDP per capital rise as much as 70-85% from 2003 to 2021. While the

¹ Walaya Jariyadham, PhD, is a Fellow at the International Studies Center (ISC). This commentary is based on a brainstorming session on ACMECS organized by the Mekong Cooperation Unit, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand, on 29 September 2022 at Sukosol Hotel, Bangkok.

benefits of the ACMECS framework on the level of economic development of its member countries are debatable, many other Mekong-centric framework have also sprung up—thanks to the strategic foresight of major powers inside and outside the region. From the Japan-led Mekong-Japan Cooperation in 2008, the U.S.-led Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI) in 2009, the China-led Mekong-Lancang Cooperation in 2016, to the Mekong-Republic of Korea Cooperation Fund in 2019, development projects in the region have grown rapidly in numbers, types, and intensity. In 2020, the Mekong-U.S. Partnership was launched to upgrade the LMI, the American engagement in the region—making the sub-region a truly crowded field in development terms.

Now, almost 20 years after the ACMECS seed was first sown, Thailand finds itself increasingly assured to renew the interest in revitalizing the framework. Sustaining the efforts are Thailand's bureaucratic apparatus and the private sector, with projects ranging from industrial development, border management, to harmonization of trade and investment rules. Advocates for pushing a stronger ACMECS agenda say it is the only 'home-grown' framework necessary to safeguard and strengthen the sub-region's own development agenda in the era of geo-political powerplays. Indeed, all ACMECS countries now recognize the framework as still relevant, and efforts may be underway to usher in a new decade of ACMECS with a new blueprint. Thailand, the framework's founding member and main driver, is fully committed to strengthen ACMECS as a neutral and truly Mekong-centric platform towards a geo-political equilibrium in the sub-region. The fact that Thailand also hosts the Khon Kaen-based Mekong Institute (MI) means that the inter-governmental body could potentially and conveniently provide expertise and knowledge support for the grouping's operations. With the ACMECS Summit slated for later this year, its development fund looks promising with endorsement and contributions from both the member countries and

development partners both inside and outside the region. The remaining to-do list may look more technical and administrative than political as ACMECS prepares to begin its next phase.

Detractors of the framework cast doubts over ACMECS' ability to truly drive the regional agenda, especially given the China factor—the elephant in the room through its undeniable development clout among many ACMECS members—as well as the intra-subregional rivalry. The lack of common perception of threats or the weak perception of common interests is also cited as another reason behind the framework's interrupted development. But these points should not discourage ACMECS from stepping up cooperation and pushing ahead with development projects when the funding arrangements are in place.

If the member countries mutually and officially decide that ACMECS remain relevant and necessary for political, bureaucratic, or economic reasons, then they need to get right their political commitment and shared vision—something that can be challenging given the political instability and external influences—and get going the implementation mechanisms. And to re-energize ACMECS for its new decade, it may be necessary to foster a stronger sense of ownership and common aspiration among the members. After all, ACMECS as a development framework needs to have sufficient merits, and political traction, to earn its place in respective member countries' national agenda and support apparatus. It will need a solid secretariat to handle the intra-ACMECS collaboration and international cooperation with development partners—big powers with their own national agenda to push.

As things stand, each ACMECS country will need to sort out how to interact with and carry forward different Mekong-related frameworks depending on which country has a leading role in that umbrella. Working together on common projects with a clear lead from a developed partner is

one thing, but intra-ACMECS collaboration among the five member countries may encounter a different chemistry altogether. Competitive pride and mistrust will need to be set aside if ACMECS's value is to be translated into concrete results. But despite the challenges, Thailand's efforts in bringing back together the member countries and in relaunching the platform deserves attention and credits, and the grouping should be given a chance to prove its intrinsic worth and timely relevance.

Overall and collectively, the sub-region can potentially make use of ACMECS as an effective tool for strategic balancing acts. This can start from the promotion of shared identity, and by ramping up collaboration on areas such as education, climate change, health, food, energy-palpable subjects close to the livelihoods of its peoples in order to forge a truly sub-regional agenda. Confidence-building efforts will be needed, an arduous but necessary task if ACMECS truly aspires to become a meaningful grouping—the mainland 'yolk' of ASEAN that needs strengthening for the benefit of regional integration. Apart from hard infrastructural connectivity already taken up by ASEAN and big powers-led development initiatives, ACMECS can also concentrate on 'soft connectivity' issues mentioned above.

For this, ACMECS countries should be encouraged to forge a sense of common interests. It may be useful to view ACMECS as part of the building blocks for ASEAN regional building and architecture. Most importantly, perhaps, ACMECS countries should also carry over the original objective of narrowing the development gaps towards a stronger regional economic integration, a crucial immunity boost in the present geo-political reality.