



POINTS OF VIEW

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No. 8/2025 | September 2025

Managing a Crowded Field: Views from the Mekong International Forum 2025¹

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Scholars and practitioners gathered in Hanoi to discuss the status and future of the Mekong Sub-region at the 5th Mekong International Forum 2025 on 26 September co-organised by the Diplomatic Academy of Viet Nam (DAV) and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) Viet Nam Office. This Forum reflects Viet Nam's proactive role in the region through academic diplomacy in the same way as the ASEAN Future Forum and the South China Sea International Conference by which the DAV has organised.

The Forum was kicked off by a session that underlines the importance of the Sub-region as the world's largest inland fishery and global biodiversity hotspot with approximately 1,200 different fish species. Therefore, stability and sustainability of the sub-region is key to human

¹ This article is developed from the author's observation and presentation at the Mekong International Forum 2025 organised by the Diplomatic Academy of Viet Nam (DAV) and supported by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) Country Office Viet Nam on 26 September 2025.

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security in mainland Southeast Asia. Various speakers shared a common understanding that the Mekong Sub-region is “a crowded field”, the term coined by Benjamin Zawacki in the report published by The Asia Foundation. This notion refers to a number of partnerships and cooperation schemes agreed between Mekong countries and their development partners.

In the first session, the moderator made an interesting observation that while the world has been heading toward a multipolar order, the Mekong Sub-region is opposite. There is a tendency that a single great power could expand its influence over the region. To cope with this issue, several speakers said “the more, the merrier” approach could be a solution. However, there is a need for riparian countries to manage “the more” in this “crowded field” with clear directions as well as objectives to maximise benefits, exercise agency and avoid redundancy when working with different development partners.

A former high-level official at the Mekong River Commission (MRC) shared his views on institutional development in the Mekong Sub-region. He emphasised the need to create a “new consensus” among riparian countries by setting priorities and strengthening institutional mechanisms. He suggested that the Mekong countries should put forth inclusive and transparent information-sharing on the current set of dams and water management. The MRC has developed various technical guidelines to support effective governance on the issue after the construction of Xayaburi Dam took place in 2012. It is also important to have China, an upstream country of the Mekong River, in this picture. This official mentioned that a deal-making is required to convince related stakeholders to join this collective effort. The deal could come in the form of benefits in electricity trading, localising supply chain, tourism, logistics and transportation.

Another recommendation addressed by many scholars includes the complementarities with ASEAN. Susannah Patton, Director of the Southeast Asia Program at the Lowy Institute, pointed

out in her article on September 25 that there is an ongoing fault line between mainland and maritime Southeast Asia given the countries' different views and ways to accommodate Chinese influence. To narrow the gap, I suggested that the Forum in 2026 should bring in scholars and practitioners from maritime Southeast Asia to engage in conversations on the Mekong. My idea is that the Mekong Sub-region is a building block of the ASEAN Community, in the same way as the other two sub-regional frameworks, namely Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT) and Brunei Darussalam-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA). Although the Mekong Sub-region is more crowded than the others, there are wide range of topics to be discussed, including the evaluation of the three frameworks as building blocks of ASEAN Community, synergies and complementarities with development partners' agenda and member countries' preferences.

The presence of development partners in the region matters for the future of Mekong. Although action plans in each framework prioritise similar areas of cooperation such as agriculture, climate adaptation, water management, etc., each development partner may have its own special expertise and interest to share with the region, such as Japan on health security, Australia on human trafficking and South Korea on creative economy. I strongly encourage the European Union to focus on the implementation of schemes under the European Green Deal in the Mekong as this serves the purpose of climate adaptation. There is a need for capacity building for medium- and small-enterprises to respond to the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), the EU Deforestation Regulation (EUDR) and other measures to come.

The UK provides a good example on how a development partner sets up a niche project. A speaker from the UK referred to "One Mekong" mobile application that offers real-time river data, water forecasting and community reporting tools for users. As a news report says, this collaboration

between the UK and MRC is “another demonstration of UK’s commitment to this critical region”. This is UK’s development approach to seek sustainable, locally-led solutions delivered through multilateral institutions.

Minilateralism could be considered a strategic choice to cope with transboundary issues in the region. There is a news report that China, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Thailand conducted the 149th joint patrols to combat illegal activities such as drug trafficking, online scams and other transnational crimes along the Mekong River on 22 January 2025. The four countries also agreed to conduct the 150th joint patrols in 2025 to strengthen coordination between the four countries’ border defence forces to support the creation of borders based on peace, friendship and development cooperation.

Another example is a joint action plan to tackle transboundary haze pollution between Thailand, Lao PDR and Myanmar entitled “CLEAR Sky Strategy 2024-2030”. CLEAR stands for continued commitment, leveraging mechanisms, experience sharing, air quality networks and response. Initiated by Thailand, the Strategy focuses on cooperation in areas like fire control, hotspot reduction, forecasting, sustainable agriculture and law enforcement.

In addition to capacity building, Mekong countries should also focus on confidence building. Political will matters in advancing cooperation and collaborative efforts in the region. There is a small consensus at the Forum that characteristics of Mekong cooperation should be future-oriented, forward-looking, transparent, inclusive, constructive and consultative. As the only homegrown cooperation framework, Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS) has not only the potential, but is also crucial to serve as a connector to align the objectives of various frameworks in the sub-regional architecture with local interests and needs.

For Thailand, which has long excelled in development cooperation through extensive capacity-building programmes across the region, it is high time to reframe development cooperation beyond traditional technical cooperation. In a rapidly changing world, Thailand and its partners should consider more innovative and forward-looking forms of cooperation including trilateral cooperation, where Thailand can act as a strategic connector between countries and development partners particularly in pressing areas such as water resources management, climate change, and innovation, to ensure that sub-regional cooperation remains both relevant and impactful. This would allow Thailand to leverage its comparative strengths to play a more catalytic role in shaping the Mekong's future cooperation landscape.

The success of Mekong cooperation will depend on collective leadership and goodwill among riparian countries in collaborating closely together and with relevant stakeholders inside and outside the region. I hope these views from the Mekong International Forum 2025 will contribute to a clear direction and constructive coordination for our region.

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