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## **Power Politics and the Institutional Architecture in the Mekong Subregion: Beyond the Geopolitical Trap?\***

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### **Abstract**

This article argues that power politics and the contending institutional contestation are key to understanding Mekong's complex dynamics. It is structured in four main parts. The first discusses China's struggle for predominance in the Mekong, known as Lancang in Chinese. The second part examines the parallel and competing subregional institutional architectures. The penultimate part explores how the US and other extra-regional development partners have responded to the changing configuration of power in Mekong. The last part concludes with the

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ways forward, by addressing how to transcend the geopolitical trap in the Mekong Basin. It calls for the riparian states to search for a sustained and robust regional architecture through a political construction of security community. Within the subregional security community, every Mekong actor should be seen as an equal partner and winner.

## **Introduction**

Against the backdrop of a war in Ukraine and Sino-US geopolitical rivalry in the third decade of twenty-first century, the Mekong Subregion is turning into a new flashpoint in the Indo-Pacific. In an era of hydro-politics, it is a transboundary site of cooperation and challenges in the mainland Southeast Asia. As Asia's sixth longest river, the Mekong is also a primary source of diverse ecological system and regional supply chains for water- and food- security. In the emerging existential crisis of climate change, environmental security, water management and developmental sustainability are of paramount importance. It is likely that these conditions could lead to a climate refugee crisis in Southeast Asia in the near future.

Mainstream neoliberal international relations theory might render economic interdependence and the overlapping transboundary governance institutions — including intra-regional water governance — as a catalyst for mutual benefits and cooperation. It might also assert that any successful and effective international cooperation is largely dependent on a hegemony which should lead, manage and provide international public goods to the key stakeholders.

However, this conventional prognosis is at odds with what really happens in the Mekong, which is recently shaped by a geopolitical trap. On the one hand, this is due to a long-standing tussle between different extra-regional players with divergent interests and agendas, and among

riparian states themselves, both upstream power like China and downstream neighbors, including the CLMTV countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Viet Nam).

On the other hand, recent great power competition between the US and China coupled with the contrasting visions of international order have increasingly exacerbated a security and geo-economic dilemma along the Mekong River. Environmental and developmental challenges are recently overshadowed by geopolitical agenda. While smaller states are increasingly pressured to choose sides, a rising power has pursued a goods substitution strategy in order to displace international public goods, provided by the established power and other institutional arrangements. In practice, a struggle for subregional dominance is not necessarily compatible with the autonomy and interests of riparian states and civil societies.

### ***China's Riparian Backyard?***

With America's limited engagement in the Post-Cold War era, the Mekong or CLMTV countries are often seen as part of China's geostrategic backyard.<sup>1</sup> This situation is more intense since sharpening great power competition looms large after the mid-2010 onwards.

Under Xi Jinping, Beijing is increasingly operating a string of upstream dams to manage water control and seek hydropower, while controlling downstream river resources. In other words, China is first and foremost driven by a quest for influence in the mainland Southeast Asia and its concomitant struggle for resources and infrastructure. The Mekong neighbors' move closer to China is due to Beijing's infrastructural diplomacy and a large number of foreign loans. Some analysts warn the recipient countries of the potential pitfalls of debt-trap diplomacy.<sup>2</sup>

First, China's hydro-politics highlights its increasing substantial influence on water and resources management. So far, China has completed numerous dams, in particular 11 mega-dams on the Lancang-Mekong River, most prominently are Xiaowan and Nuozhadu.

Second, for China, the control of rivers for irrigation purposes and flood control has long been part of its state-building and political discourse. Its purpose is to build hydropower essential to accelerate economic growth and consolidate the Chinese state power. Today, this project is related to China's clean-energy discourse and emission-reduction goals. The latest (14<sup>th</sup>) five-year plan, covering the years 2021-2025, promises to finish construction of hydropower projects.<sup>3</sup>

Third, China's Mekong strategy is a unilateral action, which has irreversibly transformed the existing river system. Many reports allegedly claim that China's dam-building projects have resulted in a reduced water flow and droughts, fisheries' disruption, and ecological destruction, thereby raising anxieties with regard to water- and food- security for its downstream neighbors.<sup>4</sup>

Following the commissioning of China's first Mekong dam at Manwan in the 1990s, local communities in the closest downstream areas, such as Chiang Khong and Chiang Rai, began feeling the devastating and destabilizing effects on water flow changes and fisheries. The 2022 Mekong River Commission report has shown that the Chinese dams endanger the freshwater fish and block natural fish migration. It estimates that the downstream river has 40 percent fewer fish than it did a decade ago.<sup>5</sup>

Fourth, given the Southeast Asian increasing anxieties, China has to a certain extent altered its course in Mekong since 2016. Beijing's attitude towards data transparency is evolving and more constructive. It tries to improve its cooperative engagement with mainland Southeast Asian states via the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) mechanism, which will be discussed later.

Last but not least, China's regional and global assertiveness exacerbates Sino-US rivalry while the US from Donald Trump to Joe Biden enthusiastically revitalises its networked security alliance and strategic partnership in the Indo-Pacific, such as the Quad, AUKUS, and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework. The structural transformation puts a lot of pressures on riparian states to choose between the two superpowers.

Having said that, although China is seeking its own sphere of influence in Mekong, a strong wind of great power competition is more intense. Both factors set a new geostrategic context for the Greater Mekong subregion.

### ***One River, Many Institutions***

Institutionally, the Mekong subregion is like a complex Spaghetti bowl, including rivalling and parallel institutional fora and frameworks. So far, it comprises approximately 14 transboundary cooperation mechanisms. In the emerging bipolar international system, the US and China have competed for different ways of institutionalisation in the Mekong subregion. According to Zhang Li, the two superpowers have adopted bifurcated approaches: China's approach of "regionalisation" is exclusively limited to cooperation among Mekong riparian states whereas American approach of "internationalisation" is seeking to involve extra-regional players and development partners.<sup>6</sup>

Since the end of the Cold War, plans for sub-regional connectivity have been developed by the US and international institutions, most important of which is the Asian Development Bank (ADB). After the peace settlement in Cambodia ending the Third Indo-China War, the ADB established the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) in 1992.

The US-backed Mekong River Commission (MRC) came into being in 1995. It sets the rules and protocols for notification, consultation and data-sharing on water governance and dam buildings along the Mekong Basin. Nevertheless, in practice, China is unwilling to follow the rules, which could constrain its national interests. More dams were built without notification or consultation with other downstream states. The MRC has reportedly warned about the nefarious impacts of China's upstream dams on the lower Mekong.

Although China became an MRC dialogue partner in 1996 just one year after its formal establishment, it has not joined as a full member. As a major subregional institution, the MRC is often seen as excluding China and Myanmar.

China under Xi Jinping aspires to engage with the institutional governance rivalry in the Mekong by setting its own multilateral framework of the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) in 2016.<sup>7</sup>

First, the LMC is Beijing's attempt to seek a minilateral organisation in the Mekong whose membership is restricted to the five riparian states and does not include any other extra-regional major powers and development partners.

Therefore, Beijing has marginalised the first-generation Mekong River governance framework by coming up with the LMC. It overshadows its rivals, the US-backed Mekong River Commission (MRC) and the Great Mekong Subregion (GMS). In this sense, the LMC can be seen as a manifestation of institutional balancing strategy vis-à-vis the US. According to Kai He, institutional balancing is defined as a type of soft balancing, which include "countering pressures or threats through initiating, utilizing, and dominating multilateral institutions".<sup>8</sup>

Second, the LMC is China's multi-pronged and broader initiative regarding not only the water resources management<sup>9</sup> but also other kinds of cooperation, culminated in the three core pillars, namely political and security issues, economic and sustainable development, and socio-cultural and people-to-people exchanges. Under the 3+5 Cooperation Framework, the LMC identifies five key priority areas, including (1) connectivity, (2) production capacity, (3) cross border economic cooperation, (4) water resources, and (5) agricultural and poverty reduction. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi claims that "the LMC is not a talk shop, but a bulldozer moving forward steadily and firmly to make the cooperation become true".<sup>10</sup>

Third, the LMC is part and parcel of China's institutional statecraft with the purpose of strengthening its influence on continental Southeast Asia. Since the inception of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), Beijing has adopted various multilateral mechanisms in order to expand its power and prestige in Asia.

Fourth, the ultimate aim of LMC is to reduce a trust deficit and soft power problem, largely due to China's assertiveness and the accusations of water, fishery and environmental damages upon the downstream river.<sup>11</sup> Against this backdrop, China has increasingly provided a large number of funds for joint cooperation projects with riparian countries. Under the so-called LMC Special Fund, it launches a series of projects to study the impacts of climate change and hydropower dams upon one of Asia's great waterways in order to manage the growing risks from floods and drought.

For example, in 2021, Thailand's Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation (MHESI) and the Chinese Embassy in Bangkok have signed memorandum of understanding (MoU) on cooperation on Mekong projects. Under the LMC Special Fund 2021, China provided about US\$2.39 million to support seven Thai university projects related to the Mekong River.<sup>12</sup> This is China's latest attempt to reduce a trust deficit and soft power problem. The funding could

serve as a potential game-changer in the subregion. By doing so, it is likely to increase Southeast Asia's economic dependence on China.

### ***Diversifying Mekong: The US and Extra-regional Development Partners***

China's Mekong undercurrents are at odds with America's strategic priorities. The US has gradually realised that the Greater Mekong Subregion is no longer a backwater. By the end of the Donald Trump administration, the Mekong-US Partnership (MUSP) was created in September 2020. It aims at revitalizing and upgrading the work of the Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI), an earlier forum inaugurated under the Obama administration in 2009.

Amid the great power rivalry, the MUSP seeks to strengthen America's leadership role in the Mekong and to counterbalance the spread of China's influence down the river and into mainland Southeast Asia. This rebranded minilateralism focuses on inclusivity, multilateralism and the building of partnerships on issues related to "economic connectivity, human capital development, transboundary water and natural resources management and non-traditional security", such as health security and pandemic responses, transnational crime, cyber-security challenges, and trafficking in people, drugs and wildlife.<sup>13</sup>

US President Joe Biden's Mekong policy is shifted toward increasing the subregion's capacity for adapting to the impact of climate change and concerns about the impact of hydropower dams in the upper stream. Despite its relatively small amount, the US continues to provide funding support for institutions with regard to improving data transparency, such as the Mekong Water Data Initiative, the Mekong Dam Monitor (MDM) and the US Agency for International Development's SERVIR-Mekong program.<sup>14</sup>



During the East Asia Summit foreign ministers' meeting in August 2021, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken called for “a free and open Mekong.”<sup>15</sup> He co-hosted the second ministerial meeting of the Mekong-US Partnership, which emphasises data transparency and inclusivity. Within the MUSP framework, “The Friends of the Mekong” has been established whose membership extends to the lower Mekong countries, Australia, the European Union, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, the US, together with financial institutions like the ADB, the MRC, and the World Bank.

That said, the two superpowers have launched competing institutional initiatives to win hearts and minds in this critical subregion.<sup>16</sup>

In contrast to the US, Japan and other extra-regional players, such as South Korea and India, are not as vocal about their criticism of China in the Mekong. They continue to expand development frameworks with the Mekong subregion, as follows.

- Japan has forged a close collaboration with the Mekong through the Mekong-Japan Cooperation framework and Asian Development Bank. In 2019, Japan and the US have initiated the Japan–US–Mekong Power Partnership (JUMPP). Its purpose is to promote regional electricity trade by financing power-generation projects and transmission infrastructure, in particular connectivity between Viet Nam and Laos. Under this initiative, Japan and the US aspire to work with Thailand to reinvigorate the Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS) strategy.<sup>17</sup>
- South Korea has established the Korea–Mekong Cooperation Fund in 2013 as part of South Korea's broader New Southern Policy, which emphasises its support for diplomatic relations and economic development with ASEAN.<sup>18</sup>

- India has reinvigorated the Mekong–Ganga Cooperation, which was originally formed in 2000. It focuses on enhancing economic and people-to-people ties between India and downstream Mekong countries.<sup>19</sup>
- As a latecomer in the Mekong subregion, Australia has launched the Mekong–Australia Partnership (MAP) in November 2020 with the aim of promoting COVID-19 pandemic response and recovery, trade and investment, cyber issues, infrastructure development, environmental resilience, gender and regional governance.<sup>20</sup>

In light of these initiatives, it becomes clear that the Mekong subregion is entering a new age of hydro-politics, with great powers' hydro-diplomacy. China has considerable leeway on the Lancang-Mekong subregion through its proactive institutional framework of LMC. Without any substantial fundings and deepened engagement from extra-regional development partners, the Mekong-US Partnership and other institutional platforms would be merely sideshows in the current contest for regional influence.

### ***Beyond the Geopolitical Trap?***

Therefore, the Mekong dilemma is entrapped by power politics, a struggle for subregional hegemony as well as geostrategic and institutional competition. The ongoing challenges of hydro- and environmental security and sustainable development cannot be alleviated within this geopolitical trap, which risks the securitisation and depoliticisation of subregional issues. In addition, these challenges cannot be easily solved by any single country, let alone any single great power.

A question thus arises: how can the Mekong states transcend the geopolitical trap? One plausible answer is a political construction of security community. Originally pioneered by Karl

Deutsch, the notion of security community is socially constructed “whenever states become integrated to the point that they have a sense of community, which, in turn, creates the assurance that they will settle their differences short of war”.<sup>21</sup> Throughout the processes of interaction, states begin to identify with common identity and shared interests and to build interpersonal trust and mutual empathy. The security community could gradually transcend a security dilemma – which a state sees others as formidable threats – and eschew a zero-sum game scenario.

With various actors and different institutions like in the Mekong, building the security community is a much more sustained and robust way for enhancing a long-lasting peace and mutual cooperation in the long run. It should be based more on a people-oriented regionalisation from below, together with extra- and intra- regional support and solidarity.

Under the rubric of security community, the Mekong states should be treated as real stakeholders, rather than merely junior partners or pawns in the emerging great game. That is to say, Mekong should strive and search for a subregional institutional architecture, which promotes and defends shared interests, institutional statecraft and collective responsibility.

This is perhaps the original rationale behind the Thai-initiated Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS), established in 2003, to which all member states contribute resources and expertise to support various joint development projects.

Basically, Asian waters in general should be secure, stable and sustainable. In particular, the Mekong subregion is not purely strategic to the great power competition but vital to peace and prosperity in mainland Southeast Asia. Together with extra-regional development partners, the Mekong states can freely and openly address water security, data transparency and environmental challenges. Hydro-geopolitics and hydro-diplomacy should be replaced with hydro-

interdependence and joint development. In other words, these nations can develop “balanced connectivity” – “a connectivity that multiplies points of interdependence, rather than simply focuses on links to the PRC”.<sup>22</sup>

It is recommended that the Mekong states should:

- Broaden areas of cooperation with great powers and development partners on specific non-traditional security issues, such as COVID-19 and climate crisis, environmental issues, green infrastructure, water security, disaster management and humanitarian assistance, cybersecurity, counterterrorism, narcotics, organised crime and human trafficking. Given their transboundary and transnational nature, these non-traditional security issues require a new form of subregional security community.
- Balance and cope with areas of contestation and conflicts with great powers by using constructive and peaceful settlements of disputes through multilateral fora and existing regional mechanisms such as ASEAN, which is thus far not quite active on the Mekong issues.
- Bolster and build back a leading from the middle strategy.<sup>23</sup> It is a strategic vision that a middle power or a group of small states adopt their leadership in the meso-level of global politics. Leading from the middle strategy consists of (a) hedging with the great powers, (b) binding them within the rule- or norm-based international order in the region, and (c) initiating region-wide politico-diplomatic innovations and advocacy. Its fundamental purposes are twofold, as follows. First, it aims at seeking to reduce strategic uncertainty and to avoid choosing sides amid geopolitical competition. Second, it also aims to construct an amicable environment that could promote a favorable power balance and open a

common space for a multipolar Indo-Pacific region and pluriverse international order in general.

### ***Concluding Remarks***

In conclusion, the twenty-first century Mekong subregion is to a certain extent in disarray. Notwithstanding its growing strength and influence, China's accountability gap and trust deficit remain intact. In recent years, some stakeholders raise concerns with regard to China's assertiveness along the Mekong Basin. Although the official discourses of the downstream states have been cautious or neutral toward China, the riparian states are relatively reluctant to take sides in the emerging bipolar international system, which is often cited as a new Cold War.

A struggle for subregional hegemony in this case has exacerbated the conflicts over strategic resources and infrastructural sphere of influence. Rather than responsibly providing international public goods, great power tends to use such goods to substitute one's dominance with another. Through the prism of infrastructure projects and loans, China is adopting a goods substitution strategy, thereby seeking to turn Mekong into its own geostrategic zone of influence.

In addition, an excessive contestation over diverging institutional frameworks – especially between China-led LMC and US-led MRC and now MUSP – has limited the construction of subregional architecture of stable peace and cooperation. Institutional rivalries and ambiguities contest data accuracy and slow down the progress towards transparency as well as information sharing and monitoring of the river's resources.

The way forward for the Mekong cooperation requires a more inclusive and open transboundary regional governance for mutual benefits and shared collective identity. In order to

avoid the winner-take-all scenario, such an approach would require the active and equal participation of external development partners including the US, Japan, South Korea and Australia, the upstream power such as China as well as multiple stakeholders from downstream states.

Without building this robust and comprehensive security community, it risks jeopardizing the sustainable development along the basin and turning Mekong into another geopolitical battleground in the Indo-Pacific. That is the reason why it is strategically urgent for key stakeholders to seek synergies and complementarity in the Mekong Subregion.

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