



# POINTS OF VIEW

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No. 3/2024 | April 2024

## **Unveiling the Mekong's Geostrategic Chessboard: Navigating Superpower Rivalries for a Sustainable Future<sup>1</sup>**

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The Mekong Subregion, situated in Southeast Asia, comprises five countries: Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Viet Nam. Politically, this subregion holds paramount importance in the geopolitics, economy, and security of Southeast Asia. It serves as a crucial nexus connecting the southern regions of China and extending toward the eastern part of India. Its geographical positioning between two major powers and between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean,

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<sup>1</sup> Some ideas presented within this paper stem from the textbook authored for my elective course, "Mekong Subregion Studies", offered at the Faculty of Political Science and Public Administration, Chiang Mai University. These ideas have been further developed and expounded upon within the scope of this manuscript. Prepared originally in English, the intention is for it to be subsequently translated into Russian. I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to the Centre for Vietnamese and ASEAN Studies, Institute of China and Contemporary Asia, Russian Academy of Sciences, for granting me permission to publish this English version.

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endows it with both opportunities and challenges in crafting policies responsive to continuously evolving political dynamics amongst nations. I intentionally refer to this region as the “Mekong Subregion”, distinct from other works that may use the term “Mekong River Basin”, to underscore the political significance where major powers contend to define this subregion. The subsequent paragraphs will delve into a detailed explanation of this phenomenon.

When considering the broader picture of Southeast Asia, there are two distinct political identities amongst the countries in this region. The first identity is the perception of “physical space”, referring to the geographical area located between India and China, historically recognised as the Indo-China region. The second identity manifests as an intergovernmental organisation under the name of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), an international organisation which was established in 1967. Consequently, the political identity of this region is one that overlaps between physical and political spaces. Furthermore, examining the geographical area reveals that Southeast Asia can be divided into two significant subregions: mainland Southeast Asia and maritime Southeast Asia. These two subregions differ significantly in both physical and political aspects. In mainland Southeast Asia, the contiguous landmass fosters unique factors and conditions influencing political development, security, and economy, as well as military strategies, distinct from maritime Southeast Asia. The various political frameworks existing within the intergovernmental dynamics of both subregions prioritize different goals and employ different tools for development, highlighting distinct importance regarding objectives and instruments.

Southeast Asian region comprises two significant subregions. Southeast Asia itself holds a de facto status as a region that exhibits connections, interactions, and conflicts. Simultaneously, it also functions as a de jure region with intergovernmental organisations representing the region. Within this de facto region, there exist two additional subregions: the Mekong Subregion and the

maritime subregion. However, within the de facto realm of these two subregions, they do not possess the same de jure status as the regional level. This is because these subregions lack cooperative frameworks or intergovernmental organisations that singularly reflect the region's identity or wield authority to distinctly represent the subregion, as does ASEAN.

The Mekong Subregion constitutes a political arena in the realm of interstate politics. Despite being composed of five small countries, its political significance, stability, and economic influence on the international system and order are profound. We witness major powers such as the United States, China, Japan, Russia, the European Union, and Australia attempting to engage with the subregion through various frameworks, mechanisms, and interregional relations since the end of World War II. These interactions, both interregional and multilateral, reflect the objectives of major powers in perceiving the subregion as politically, economically, and strategically significant. Therefore, it can be argued that this subregion holds importance for interstate economic and political frameworks.

Moreover, the Mekong Subregion not only experiences impacts from interstate structural frameworks, but viewing the subregion solely as a passive recipient of these impacts might oversimplify its dynamics. This subregion actively influences interstate systems as well because the mechanisms of co-operation within the subregion play a significant role in shaping negotiations, conflicts, and coordination amongst Asian nations. Changes in interstate politics are thus outcomes resulting from interactions within the subregion and the dynamics amongst countries.

The multidimensional impacts of competition amongst major powers on the Mekong Subregion are evident. Even the political terminology associated with this subregion remains a contentious issue without consensus. The political significance attached to the nomenclature reflects the subregion's competitive nature and the struggle for influence in intercountry relations.

We have observed a phenomenon where major powers enter to create tensions between countries in the Mekong Subregion as a mechanism to reflect and push forward issues and challenges that the subregion collectively faces. Various co-operation frameworks have different objectives, some focusing on economic co-operation, others on environmental or human resource co-operation. The differences in each co-operation framework reflect the strategies employed by major powers to engage with the subregion, demonstrating which issues allow these powers to take a leading role. However, these co-operation mechanisms are not solely for the benefit of the subregion; conversely, different tensions arise from and impact interstate politics.

The question in the context of interstate relations is how we understand the origins, operations, and evaluation of different tensions. This question is not limited to the framework of co-operation within the Mekong Subregion alone; rather, it serves as a fundamental question in initiating studies on international co-operation, tensions, or intergovernmental organisations in general. Institutional-focused questions attempt to understand the effectiveness or mechanisms to supplement, develop, or address limitations, challenges, or problems being encountered. However, under these institutional questions, normative questions related to international co-operation aiming at development between countries may emerge. If we shift from institutional to normative perspectives, questions regarding different co-operation mechanisms or initiatives that can help reinforce sustainable development, equal development, or fairness in international development will be highlighted.

The existing regional initiatives that were supported by superpowers include:

1. 1992: Greater Mekong Subregion Economic Co-operation (GMS)
2. 2000: Mekong-Ganga Co-operation: (MGC)
3. 2009: Japan-Mekong Co-operation: (JMC)

4. 2009: Lower Mekong Initiative: (LMI) which was later renamed itself to 'Mekong-US Partnership' (MUSP) in 2020
5. 2010: Mekong-ROK Co-operation: (MROKC)
6. 2014: Lancang-Mekong Co-operation: (LMC)
7. 2020: Mekong-Australia Partnership (MAP)

However, the Mekong River Commission (MRC) and the Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Co-operation Strategy (ACMECS), founded in 2003, do not fall within this category as they did not originate with the backing of major powers. Particularly noteworthy is ACMECS, which represents a distinctive regional endeavour designed to serve as a subregional framework free from the influence of major powers.

In order to understand the mechanism that promotes security in the region, the author begins by analysing the security situation in the region, which has significant implications for important state politics. The analysis is divided into two levels for ease of comprehension: the interstate level and the regional level. A significant and continuous change is the transition from a bipolar power structure to a multipolar international system. This change has numerous policy implications because major players in international politics, such as the United States, China, Japan, Russia, South Korea, and the European Union, attempt to assert their roles in international politics. This has led to rapid and intense changes in the efforts of great powers to influence the international politics through the establishment of new regulations, mechanisms, international institutions, or various forms of co-operation. We have witnessed the role of great powers in attempting to create mechanisms to promote fairness through the establishment of new regulations, mechanisms, or institutions to create conditions for choosing sides.

Considering the regulations currently shaping international relations globally, these regulations play a crucial role in defining the conditions that lead to different actors in international politics shaping their relations. Interstate regulations are influenced by several factors, one of which is the power structure that perpetuates power struggles amongst states. The predominant characteristic of the current global political landscape is multipolarity, where numerous power centres compete for influence. In such a scenario, identifying which actors play significant roles for a particular state becomes challenging, as there is no single dominant actor or clear division of power between two opposing sides, as seen during the Second World War. However, multipolarity also has its benefits, as competition amongst states fosters interactions that may lead to positive relations. Specifically, in the current global political environment, the competition amongst great powers in a given region often leads to assistance or intervention, which may be perceived as biased but serves as a political tool for guidance, influence, or the establishment of spheres of influence.

Interstate regulations are also shaped by grand strategy because when there are multiple power centres, each power centre attempts to devise a grand strategy that encompasses both the goals and means of their foreign policies, reflecting national interests. These grand strategies alter interstate regulations as they represent policies and actions of states aimed at changing the international structure. The tools used to achieve the objectives of grand strategy are diverse and multidimensional, as they involve coordination amongst governments, various interest groups, and international organisations.

Two significant grand strategies that we observe in global politics and their implications for interstate regulations in the Asian region are the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of China. The FOIP strategy, proposed by the late Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, has garnered support from other great powers such as the United

States, India, Australia, and various countries worldwide, along with international organisations, which have adopted policies that align with this strategy. On the other hand, China's BRI aims to build connectivity systems between countries worldwide from China, fostering interlinked production systems between nations. This has prompted countries to pay attention to China's role in propagating the "silk road" concept, which may be seen as one of the shared memories connecting cultures worldwide. The "selling" of interstate imaginations as a shared memory in global heritage is an interplay between economics, history, storytelling, and international politics.

We have observed case studies demonstrating the involvement of great powers in supporting various development issues in the Mekong region, notably Japan, China, and the United States. These nations predominantly pursue political, security, and economic objectives. They utilise economic, political, and cultural instruments to provide assistance or establish relations with the Mekong region through mechanisms, spaces, or co-operative branches. In the case of Thailand, Thailand must navigate relations that do not undermine its own national interests. This entails attempting to maintain a semblance of neutrality, even though in practice, it may align with one side temporarily or in specific issues. Maintaining neutrality is paramount because, as a small state with no significant power on the global stage, choosing to survive and maximising benefits during periods or amidst competition from other nations seems to be the only viable option for Thailand to benefit from such competition.

The issue of international relations with great powers affecting the Mekong subregion revolves around the engagement of great powers with various countries in various projects, mainly concerning the security of the Southeast Asian region as a whole.

1. **The South China Sea issue:** China's efforts to develop projects such as the BRI in Cambodia, including the construction of deep-water ports, airport development, or military deployments, have caused dissatisfaction from the United States and a desire to counterbalance its power. These economic and security-related endeavours are linked to the longstanding South China Sea issue, which remains significant as a factor affecting the economic policy decisions of the United States, China, and Japan.
2. **The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI):** We have seen China's attempts to develop BRI projects connecting China with various countries and regions worldwide, especially with projects linking to the Mekong subregion. This leads to financial, debt, and environmental issues that draw the Mekong subregion into the global economic system, reshaping the geopolitical landscape of the Mekong subregion in terms of transportation and production networks. Other great powers such as the United States or Japan may seek avenues to counteract these initiatives to establish their influence.
3. **The Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) Strategy,** proposed by Japan, the United States, India, Australia, and New Zealand, presents a challenge for ASEAN countries, which must decide whether to align closely or follow the policies of other great powers. ASEAN itself attempts to emphasise ASEAN Centrality with the ASEAN's Indo-Pacific Outlook, focusing on ASEAN as the focal point and not simply aligning with the strategies of the United States or Japan. ASEAN seeks to have its own stance in managing relations. In this context, the Mekong subregion, as a member of ASEAN, finds itself in a situation where it is part of ASEAN's Indo-Pacific Strategy. Direct strategies related to the Mekong subregion may still be in the making and require further observation in the future.



4. **The European Union:** The EU retains significant potential for collaboration with the Mekong Subregion. The EU stands poised to aid local communities in initiating and enhancing human resource capacity development programs, fostering environmental protection efforts, and promoting environmentally-conscious production practices. Leveraging its normative influence, the EU can effectively bolster regional development through both economic and social development frameworks.
5. **Russia:** In the context of the Mekong Subregion's regional economic and political dynamics, it is evident that the rivalry amongst global powers such as the United States, China, and Japan has influenced the region. However, Russia's presence and involvement in the subregion remain limited. Despite this, Russia has yet to propose any regional initiatives or mechanisms that could facilitate a more proactive engagement, particularly in areas such as science, aerospace, fertilizer production, and oil and natural gas technology, which could significantly enhance its role in the subregion. It is suggested that Moscow should actively collaborate with regional universities, think tanks, and educational institutions to foster academic partnerships, concurrently employing cultural diplomacy initiatives to cultivate favourable sentiments among the local populace.

The competition for influence within the Mekong Subregion has significantly influenced its economic and political landscape. Numerous regional initiatives were launched by superpowers. The rivalry between the United States and China has precipitated geopolitical shifts and strategic realignments amongst member states of the Mekong Subregion. Concurrently, the rivalry between China and Japan has catalysed economic and infrastructural advancements. Conversely, South Korea and Russia have exhibited relatively lower levels of engagement with the subregion.

A collective focus for the Mekong Subregion should be the empowerment of ACMECS to serve as a representative body and a conduit for negotiations with external states. This strategy would augment the region's capacity to capitalise on opportunities for creating, developing, and reinforcing sustainable development objectives.

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