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Рамки сотрудничества в бассейне Меконга и геополитическая динамика: взгляд из Камбоджи

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Аннотация. Для бассейна реки Меконг, который играет ключевую роль в жизни миллионов людей в Юго-Восточной Азии, характерны многогранные задачи: сбалансировать сотрудничество в целях устойчивого развития с конкурирующими геополитическими интересами региональных и глобальных держав. В статье рассматриваются рамки сотрудничества по реке Меконг (MCF), представляющие собой сеть партнёрств между странами бассейна Меконга и внешними субъектами. Рассмотрены сильные и слабые стороны различных структур MCF, включая Комиссию по реке Меконг (MRC), Субрегион Большого Меконга (GMS), Сотрудничество Меконг-Ганг (MGC), Меконг-Япония (MJC), инициативу Нижнего Меконга (LMI), Меконг-Ланьцан (MLC) и сотрудничество между Меконгом и Республикой Корея (Меконг-РК). Каждая система предлагает уникальные подходы к развитию инфраструктуры, управлению водными ресурсами и социально-экономическому прогрессу, но и сталкивается с ограничениями. В статье также содержатся предложения по улучшению сотрудничества между Меконгом и Россией (MRUC) в рамках MCF.

Автор анализирует сложный геополитический ландшафт региона Меконга. Страны бассейна Меконга должны учитывать влияние Китая, крупного игрока в инфраструктурных проектах и управлении водными ресурсами, а также взаимодействовать с Соединёнными Штатами, Японией и другими региональными державами. Такие структуры, как LMI и «Друзья Нижнего Меконга», по-видимому, противостоят доминированию Китая, в то время как сотрудничество Меконг-Ланьцан вызывает обеспокоенность по поводу прозрачности в управлении водными ресурсами.

В статье предлагаются некоторые рекомендации для того, чтобы река Меконг оставалась символом регионального сотрудничества и процветания. Укрепление MRC путём усиления регулирующих полномочий и содействия расширению регионального сотрудничества в области управления водными ресурсами и охраны окружающей среды имеет решающее значение. Также подчёркивается необходимость использования существующих механизмов АСЕАН для коллективных действий и отстаивания единого подхода к Меконгу.

В заключении статьи утверждается, что для преодоления геополитических сложностей в регионе Меконга требуется деликатное соблюдение баланса. Развивая сотрудничество в рамках MCF, укрепляя региональные институты и выступая за единый подход, страны бассейна реки Меконг могут обеспечить региону устойчивое и процветающее будущее.

Ключевые слова: рамки сотрудничества по Меконгу, управление ресурсами, экономическое развитие, река Меконг, АСЕАН, Китай.

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Mekong cooperation frameworks and geopolitical dynamics: a Cambodian perspective

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Abstract. The Mekong River Basin, a lifeline for millions in Southeast Asia, faces a multifaceted challenge: balancing cooperation for sustainable development with the competing geopolitical interests of regional and global powers. This paper explores the Mekong Cooperation Frameworks (MCF), a web of partnerships between the Mekong countries and external actors. This paper delves into the strengths and weaknesses of various MCF frameworks, including the Mekong River Commission (MRC), Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC), Mekong-Japan Cooperation (MJC), Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI), Mekong-Lancang Cooperation (MLC), and Mekong-Republic of Korea Cooperation (Mekong-ROK). Each framework offers unique approaches to infrastructure development, water resource management, and socio-economic progress, but also faces limitations. Beyond existing frameworks, this paper also provides suggestions for the characteristics of successful Mekong-Russia Cooperation (MRUC) within the MCF.

The author further analyses the complex geopolitical landscape of the Mekong region. The Mekong countries must navigate the influence of China, a major player in infrastructure projects and water management, while also engaging with the United States, Japan, and other regional powers. Frameworks like the LMI and Friends of the Lower Mekong appear to counter China's dominance, while the MLC raises concerns about transparency in water resource management.

This paper proposes some recommendations to ensure the Mekong River remains a symbol of regional cooperation and prosperity. Strengthening the MRC through enhanced regulatory power and fostering greater regional cooperation on water management and environmental protection is crucial. The author also emphasizes leveraging existing ASEAN mechanisms for collective action and advocating for a unified approach to the Mekong.

Conclusively, this paper argues that navigating the geopolitical complexities of the Mekong region requires a delicate balancing act. By fostering cooperation within the MCF, strengthening regional institutions, and advocating for a unified approach, the Mekong countries can ensure the Mekong River serves as a bridge for a sustainable and prosperous future.

Keywords: Mekong cooperation frameworks, resource management, economic development, Mekong river, ASEAN, China.

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Introduction

The Mekong River, known as one of the longest rivers in Asia, is 4,350 kilometres long and originates in the Tibetan Plateau. The river flows across six countries such as China, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam, ultimately emptying into the South China Sea [Armstrong 2015: 4]. The region is the second-richest in fish biodiversity [Baran & Borin 2012: 136] and is also essential to the area's hydropower production, energy supply, transportation, and agriculture.

Geopolitically, the Mekong subregion is located at a strategic crossroads. The Mekong-Lancang River functions as a crucial land link, connecting Southeast Asia with China to the north and India to the west [Thu 2020: 2]. The strategic location aligns with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy; therefore, with the rise of China, the Mekong subregion becomes a geopolitical dynamic in the 21st century.

The confluence of economic and strategic interests has led to the establishment of numerous Mekong cooperation frameworks (MCF). These include the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) in 1992, the Mekong River Commission (MRC) in 1995, the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) initiated by India in 2000, the Mekong-Japan Cooperation launched in 2007, the Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI) established by the US in 2009, the Mekong-Republic of Korea (Mekong-ROK) partnership formed by South Korea in 2011, and the Mekong-Lancang Cooperation (MLC) initiated by China in 2016 [Jaknanihan 2022: 5].

This paper will examine the different frameworks within the Mekong Region, analyse their strengths and weaknesses, and see how these frameworks attempt to balance the pursuit of sustainable development with the geopolitical realities of the region, particularly the growing influence of China. Ultimately, the article will explore the challenges and opportunities for sustainable management of the Mekong River and its resources and suggest characteristics of successful Mekong-Russia Cooperation (MRUC) within the MCF.

Mekong River Commission (MRC)

Following France's departure from Indochina in the 1950s, the newly established sovereign governments encountered several difficulties, such as the Indochina War and the conflicts in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. These events had a profound impact on the affairs of the Mekong region between 1950 and 1975 [Makim 2002: 6].

In 1949, the French granted Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos internal autonomy as 'associated states', marking the first intergovernmental accord among riparian states for river cooperation. The three countries, under the Paris Convention in 1954, agreed to establish the 'Provisional Mekong Committee', an early international river-basin management institution, ensuring free navigation on the Mekong River [Ratner 2003: 65].

In 1957, the Mekong Committee, which included Thailand, was established as a pioneer in regional cooperation [Ratner 2003: 65]. The committee remained provisional until 1995 when the Mekong River Commission (MRC) was established. The MRC's focus on sharing water resources, research, and sustainable management marked a significant milestone, as it was the first time such

cooperation had occurred during a period of peace [Caffe 2023: 135–136]. Currently, China and Myanmar are dialogue partners for the MRC, but these roles do not necessitate fulfilling the obligations of the MRC countries. The MRC plays a crucial role by collecting and analysing data and encouraging cooperative management, especially in Cambodia, which needs technical assistance to monitor river flow and fisheries production [Darren, Nitsch 2005: 14].

In 2016, the MRC adopted a strategy known as ‘Water Diplomacy’ [Sok et al. 2023: 81]. The initiative paved the way for China to jointly address the drought by releasing more water from the Jinghong hydropower station¹ and signing a Memorandum of Understanding to share river flow and rainfall data for river flood forecasting. The agreement was renewed twice, and China began sharing year-round data in October 2020, marking a landmark in China-MRC cooperation [Sok et al. 2023: 81–82].

Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam Development Triangle (CLV-DT) and Ayeyarwady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS)

Lower Mekong Basin countries (LMB) also boast significant intra-regional cooperation frameworks, such as the Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam Development Triangle (CLV-DT) and the Ayeyarwady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS). The CLV-DT, initiated in 1999 by Vietnam, aims to promote socio-economic development, reduce hunger and poverty, and enhance economic competitiveness. The 10th Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam (CLV) Summit in Hanoi adopted a Joint Declaration and Master Plan for CLV Economic Connectivity up to 2030. Similarly, the ACMECS, established in 2003 by Thailand, is a framework for economic cooperation between Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam. The cooperation covers seven areas: trade, investment, agriculture, transport, tourism, human resources, public health, and environment [Duong et al. 2020: 41].

The success of these initiatives is evident; at the 10th CLV Summit in 2018, Cambodia secured 41 investment projects worth US\$1.6 billion². The ACMECS also attracts contributions from regional powers to support its initiatives. For instance, the Republic of Korea (ROK) and Japan contributed \$1 million and \$1.38 million respectively to the ACMECS, distributing \$278,000 to each member state between April and March 2023, primarily to support Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) in four specific areas³.

Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS)

With assistance from the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the GMS was established in 1992 to promote political and economic cooperation among six countries of the subregion: China,

¹ Shannon Tiezzi. Facing Mekong drought, China to release water from Yunnan Dam. *The Diplomat*, Mar 16, 2016. URL: <https://thediplomat.com/2016/03/facing-mekong-drought-china-to-release-water-from-yunnan-dam/> (accessed: May 9, 2024).

² Vietnam invests over 3.7 billion USD in Development Triangle provinces of Laos, Cambodia. *Vietnam Plus*, Feb 27, 2024. URL: <https://en.vietnamplus.vn/vietnam-invests-over-37-billion-usd-in-development-triangle-provinces-of-laos-cambodia-post280062.vnp> (accessed: May 11, 2024).

³ Chanintira na Thalung, Attakrit Patchimnan. Rethinking ACMECS amidst Changing Regionalism in Southeast Asia. *Heinrich Böll Stiftung Southeast Asia*, May 27, 2023. URL: <https://th.boell.org/en/2023/05/27/rethinking-acmecs-regionalism-southeast-asia> (accessed: May 8, 2024).

Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam [Ratner 2003: 67]. The GMS plan aims to enhance economic and infrastructural development by nations within the sub-region through the establishment of efficient transport systems, economic connectivity, corridors, energy grids, and other infrastructure systems [Leng 2020: 101–102]. The concept of the GMS is defined by the “Three C’s”: Connectivity, Competitiveness and Community [Vu 2014: 160]. The projects have covered potential corridors, including the North-South Economic Corridor (NSEC), stretching from southern China to coastal ports in mainland Southeast Asia; the East-West Economic Corridor (EWEC), linking from Vietnam to Myanmar; and the Southern Economic Corridor (SEC) [Raymond 2021: 153].

One of the flagship initiatives funded by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) for the GMS is the East-West Economic Corridor (EWEC). The corridor is named for the east-west direction and includes transportation links across four GMS countries: Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam. The East-West Economic Corridor (EWEC) stretches for 1,110 kilometers. To improve connectivity along the corridor, various infrastructure projects have been built, including the 2nd Lao-Thai Friendship Bridge connecting Mukdahan in Thailand to Sawanakhet in Laos, and the Hai Van Tunnel in Da Nang, Vietnam [Yi 2011: 3–6].

Since the early 1990s, Cambodia, China, Laos and Vietnam have overcome ideological struggles and shifted towards market-oriented economic development, leading to improved political relations and increased interest in economic cooperation [Raymond 2021: 153]. Meanwhile, economic growth allowed China to become a major investor in the GMS programs. China invested heavily in the GMS infrastructure, mainly in the North-South Corridor. Beijing spent US\$4 billion building highways connecting their southwestern provinces (Yunnan and Guangxi) to other GMS countries. Moreover, China eliminated tariffs on over 200 products from Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar, aiming to increase bilateral trade.

China's trade with the GMS has skyrocketed since the early 1990s. The total trade volume grew almost 30 times, from just US\$610 million in 1992 to over US\$12 billion by 2006. The growth of trade in the GMS region is expected to persist as new transportation networks are constructed, primarily dominated by resources like minerals, oil, and gas from GMS countries, and China exporting manufactured goods [Lim 2009: 41–43].

On the other hand, it is worth noting that the ADB’s leadership structure, with a tradition of Japan and United States influence, tends to promote Japanese policy in the region. In particular, during the first Mekong-Japan foreign ministers’ meeting, Japan aimed to maintain its influence by promoting all economic corridors, though excluding the North-South Economic Corridor [Raymond 2021: 156].

The GMS often prioritizes large-scale infrastructure projects that primarily benefit wealthier members like Thailand, potentially neglecting the specific needs of least-developed countries within the subregion, such as Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar. This heavy reliance on the ADB funding raises concerns about potential debt burdens for Mekong countries.

Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC)

The competition for Mekong influence between Japan and China presents India with a strategic opportunity. New Delhi's growing partnership with the United States and tense relations with China create a situation where India's engagement could be a significant factor. The rise of

China as a regional power triggered Indian motives to become the first country to initiate a cooperation platform, known as the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) in 2000 [Singh 2022: 45].

The MGC could be referred to as a part of India's Act East Policy, which defines Narendra Modi's policy toward Southeast and East Asia. For India, the MGC offers a possible counter to Chinese expansionism and power in the region, taking on a more people-to-people approach compared to China's more MCF-goal-oriented outlook.

India's interests in the Mekong subregion have been influenced by four factors: (1) India's Look East Policy, (2) the westward expansion of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which included Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam, provided opportunities for India to extend aid, assistance, and technology transfers, (3) the social, cultural and historical connection with the Mekong subregion, and (4) China's assertive engagement with the region [Singh 2022: 43–44]. The MGC further maintains four areas of cooperation: tourism, culture, education, and transportation & communication⁴. Notably, a major emphasis of this framework is indeed not the goals of the MCF itself. Instead, the focus is on soft power relations, such as those presented by the four main areas of cooperation.

Substantially, in July 2023, India and Mekong countries together held the 12th MCG Foreign Ministers' Meeting focusing on potential cooperation areas in tourism, culture, education, and connectivity⁵. Significantly, the trade between India and Mekong countries has experienced consistent growth, rising from US\$1.32 billion in 2000 to US\$33.8 billion in 2022–2023. New Delhi continually fosters Mekong subregion development through Quick Impact Projects, collaborating on 105 projects. India has provided a total of US\$1.76 billion in Lines of Credit to Mekong countries for various purposes such as hydropower and water resources development, infrastructure development, digital connectivity, rural electrification, irrigation, and installation of transmission lines [Hussain 2024: 1–2].

Particularly, India started this initiative with a US\$40 million grant specifically for digital connectivity projects in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam (CLMV countries). This grant supports the 'Digital Village Project', where India shares its telecommunications expertise to improve digital access and services in rural areas. Each CLMV country received a US\$10 million grant for this project. India's commitment to expanding broadband connectivity in these countries aims to bridge the digital divide in Southeast Asia [Phan, Nair 2022: 2].

Geopolitically, the MGC is important for India's soft power in the region, prioritizing cultural exchange and capacity building, and fostering long-term partnerships. However, the major shortcoming of this framework is the limited impact it has on the most significant matters of the MCF. Therefore, the MGC could be improved by maintaining the strength of the initial four areas of cooperation in addition to creating new areas of cooperation which touch more specifically on the goals of the MCF, including infrastructural development and water management.

⁴ Vientiane Declaration on Mekong-Ganga Cooperation. *Ministry of External Affairs of India*, Jul 25, 2016. URL: https://mgc.gov.in/public/uploads/Vientiane_Declaration.pdf (accessed: May 9, 2024).

⁵ Outcomes of the 12th Mekong-Ganga Cooperation Foreign Ministers' Meeting. *Cambodia MoFA*, Jul 17, 2023. URL: <https://mfaic.gov.kh/posts/2023-07-17-Press-Release-Outcomes-of-the-12th-Mekong-Ganga-Cooperation-Foreign-Ministers--Meeting--20-43-27> (accessed: May 10, 2024).

Mekong-Japan Cooperation (MJC)

In 2007, the Mekong-Japan Cooperation (MJC) was created, with its first summit in 2009 [Koga 2022: 29]. The cooperation emphasizes the four main areas such as industrial infrastructure development (connectivity hardware), industrial human resource development (connectivity software), sustainable development (Green Mekong), and coordination with relevant stakeholders⁶.

The MJC also has its share of consequential geopolitical outcomes. For Japan, the Mekong region's role as a buffer zone is significant to keep any possible conflict from reaching its own shores. For the Mekong region, diversifying sources of investment is also advantageous to reduce over-reliance on one country in the face of conflict. In the same way, India may want to counter Chinese influence in the region, Japan may also look to maintain or improve Mekong relations as a way to balance out Chinese expansionism. In this way, the MJC injects a layer of complexity into the Mekong subregion's geopolitical landscape. While Japan's focus on infrastructure development, regional connectivity, and sustainable development aligns with the Mekong countries' needs, it also carries the potential for competition with China's BRI.

In 2016, Japan introduced the Japan-Mekong Connectivity Initiative and its 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' agenda. These mechanisms culminated in the Tokyo Strategy 2018, which highlighted peace, stability and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region, including in the Mekong subregion [Koga 2022: 30–31].

The Japan-Mekong Connectivity Initiative is a major player in boosting infrastructure across the Mekong region. The initiative encompasses various projects, including the development of a new container terminal at Sihanoukville Port in Cambodia⁷. The project began construction for Cambodia on the first phase of a brand-new deep-water container port in Sihanoukville. The initial phase, costing roughly \$243 million, is expected to be finished by 2026⁸. The 350-meter-long and 14.5-meter-deep port will allow access to massive cargo ships (up to 60,000 tons or 4,000 TEUs) from the Asia-Pacific region, and the port's capacity will jump to roughly 1.25 million TEUs annually⁹.

Moreover, the project also supports the construction of urban railways in Ho Chi Minh City (Vietnam), Bangkok (Thailand) and the East-West Economic Corridor highway section in Myanmar and feasibility studies for new international airports in both Vietnam (Long Thanh) and Myanmar (Hanthawaddy)¹⁰.

The competition in the Mekong region was between China and Japan. However, the US-China rivalry has recently become more prominent. Japan prefers a less confrontational approach to avoid high competition costs [Jaknanihan 2022: 6]. In contrast, the US seems willing to accept economic and political burdens to counter China, as seen in their strong opposition to China's Mekong projects. This rising US-China rivalry is turning the Mekong into a new battleground.

⁶ New Tokyo Strategy 2015 for Mekong-Japan Cooperation (MJC2015). *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan*, May 11, 2024. URL: https://www.mofa.go.jp/s_sa/seal/page1e_000044.html (accessed: May 11, 2024).

⁷ Joint Statement of the 12th Mekong-Japan Summit. *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan*, Nov 13, 2020. URL: <chrome-extension://efaidnbmnmmnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100115097.pdf> (accessed: May 12, 2024).

⁸ Torn Chanritheara. Work Starts on \$243m Sihanoukville Terminal Phase 1. *Cambodiness*, Dec 22, 2023. URL: <https://cambodianess.com/article/work-starts-on-243m-sihanoukville-terminal-phase-1> (accessed: May 27, 2024).

⁹ Torn Chanritheara. Work Starts...

¹⁰ Joint Statement...

Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI)

At first, the United States refrained from incorporating ASEAN into American policy due to the perception that ASEAN did not constitute a crucial actor in the Mekong region. In contrast, China recognized the importance of ASEAN in regional politics and actively engaged with the organization to strengthen its influence in the Mekong region. China's strategic partnerships with ASEAN countries have allowed them to expand their economic and political presence in Southeast Asia, challenging the United States' traditional dominance.

In 1956, the US, a dominant force in post-war Vietnam, identified the Mekong River's potential as a tool for regional cooperation [Permata 2023: 45]. The vision developed the Mekong River Basin that would not only foster economic prosperity, but also serve as a national agenda. The US' renewed interest in the Mekong subregion has been sparked by China's assertive engagement with it since 1996 [Singh 2022: 45].

Concerned about China's growing power within the GMS, the US initiated the Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI) in 2009 to assist environmental and socioeconomic progress in the GMS and re-establish connections with Southeast Asia [Charoensri 2022: 33]. The LMI likely has an unwritten goal of subverting Chinese influence in the region. With US-China competition growing despite efforts for cooperation on both sides, it is not coincidental that the US has endeavoured to be a significant presence in the region.

Friends of the Lower Mekong (FLM) also provide another framework by which the MCF operates. While the LMI and FLM are closely related, they serve distinctly different purposes in their goals for the Mekong region. Separately, FLM is a donor coordination group which includes the five Mekong countries and a number of donor countries and organizations, such as Australia, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand, the European Union (EU), ADB, and the World Bank (WB).

On top of that, the US shares Japan's vision for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific, and both countries have collaborated on projects specifically aimed at supporting the GMS [Charoensri 2022: 34]. As a result, the Japan-US-Mekong Power Partnership (JUMPP) was created in 2019 [Koga 2022: 31]. Moreover, in 2020, the US further enhanced the LMI to the US-Mekong Partnership (USMP) by ensuring \$153 million of funds for various collaborative projects with Mekong countries [Jaknanihan 2022: 6–7].

Furthermore, the JUMPP Action Plan tackles clean energy development and regional power trade cooperation across Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand, and Vietnam. Each country benefits from tailored support: Cambodia receives assistance with integrating renewable energy into their grid, including planning, connection standards, solar pricing, and battery storage¹¹. Lao PDR focuses on managing the impact of wind and solar power while crafting a master energy development plan.

JUMPP also assists the Mekong countries with technical protocols for renewable projects and updating grid connection guidelines. Thailand is aided in developing an electricity trading company to facilitate cross-border power trade and open access to their grid. Additionally, JUMPP offers advice on integrating renewable energy sources, digitizing the power sector, and deploying electric vehicles and smart meters. Vietnam receives support for integrating variable renewable energy

¹¹ JUMPP Action Plan & Fact Sheet. *Mekong-U.S. Partnership*, Apr 6, 2023. URL: <https://mekonguspartnership.org/2023/04/06/jumpp-action-plan/> (accessed: May 30, 2024).

sources like wind and solar¹². This includes advice on battery storage, grid upgrades, and developing markets for buying and selling electricity.

Furthermore, the U.S.-ASEAN Smart Cities Partnership (USASCP), launched in 2018 by the Department of State, aims to make Southeast Asian cities and Mekong countries particularly more sustainable and livable¹³. With over \$10 million invested in more than 20 projects, USASCP tackles climate, energy, transportation, water, and research challenges. The projects focus on Water Smart Engagement (Phuket – Milwaukee, Vientiane – Hillsboro, and Ho Chi Minh City – San Francisco), Research & Innovation (pilot projects in Ho Chi Minh City), Smart Sustainable Transport (Phnom Penh – Boston and Phuket – Las Vegas), and Smart City Business Innovation Fund (Laos and Vietnam)¹⁴.

The US' initiatives emphasise good governance (democracy, rule of law), economic openness (market economies), and freedom of navigation. The concept is backed by the US and its allies, who use aid programs to nudge recipient countries towards adopting democratic values [Charoensri 2022: 28]. Indeed, all of the countries involved in this friendship are close allies of the US, and they play a role in the balancing act of Mekong countries in the great power competition between the US and China.

The return of the US influence in the Mekong subregion might be viewed with suspicion by some Mekong countries. The US focus on countering China's influence possibly embroils the region in a larger geopolitical competition, potentially hindering regional cooperation. The US' political and economic priorities might shift, leading to inconsistencies in its engagement with the Mekong region.

Mekong-Lancang Cooperation (MLC)

A recent Chinese development, with the potential to improve conflict resolution in the Mekong Basin, is the Mekong-Lancang Cooperation (MLC). This initiative, proposed by China in 2014 as a response to a Thai sustainable development plan, officially began functioning in 2016 with the first leaders' meeting [Feng et al. 2022: 326]. Moreover, during a meeting of the MLC foreign ministers in mid-July 2022, China introduced a new five-year action plan (2023-2027) and called it the latest 'golden age' for the MLC cooperation [Sunchindah 2022: 90].

Unlike the LMI, the MLC prioritizes tangible economic benefits through infrastructure projects and trade, which is more appealing than ideological values to developing countries in the Mekong region [Jaknanihan 2022: 6]. China's position as an upstream riparian country on the Mekong River system makes its participation crucial in addressing shared challenges like water resource management and infrastructure development. Due to China's direct and consequential involvement in the river's management, the MLC stands out as the most important Mekong cooperation framework. The MLC's platform fosters dialogue and collaboration between China and Mekong nations, potentially leading to more effective solutions for the region's water-related issues.

¹² JUMPP Action Plan...

¹³ U.S.-ASEAN Smart Cities Partnership Programming in the Mekong Sub-Region. *UASSCP*, Dec 2023. URL: <https://www.usascp.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/USASCP-in-the-Mekong-Sub-Region-12.23.pdf> (accessed: May 30, 2024).

¹⁴ U.S.-ASEAN Smart Cities...

In 2013, China launched the BRI, a massive economic foreign policy initiative, that proposed creating two new economic corridors in Southeast Asia as a part of this trillion-dollar program: the China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor and the Sino-Myanmar Economic Corridor¹⁵.

The BRI provides a broader framework within which the MLC operates. China's Mekong-Lancang Cooperation Special Fund (MLCSF), established in 2016 under the MLC umbrella, exemplifies this alignment. In 2022 alone, the MLCSF allocated US\$ 4.01 million to support eight Thai-led projects and US\$ 4.33 million to Cambodia's 13 projects, demonstrating China's commitment to fostering regional development through the MLC¹⁶.

China provides significant financial backing to the Lancang-Mekong cooperation on development projects. The financial support includes various loans and credits totaling 10 billion yuan (1.58 billion US dollars) specifically designated to support infrastructure development and production capacity cooperation projects in the countries along the Mekong River¹⁷.

According to a statement by Wang, China is fulfilling its pledge of financial support and construction on major development projects like the China-Laos and China-Thailand railways¹⁸. For instance, the China-Laos Railway, a key infrastructure project jointly developed by China and Laos, serves as a model for high-quality construction in Southeast Asia¹⁹. The project's total cost is US\$6 billion. In December 2021, Laos inaugurated the first completed section, the 414-kilometer electrified Boten-Vientiane Railway, which connects the Laotian capital, Vientiane, to the Laos-China border town of Boten²⁰.

However, a major complaint of the MLC from Mekong countries is the lack of information transparency regarding the dams. Water release schedules are often not shared with countries downstream, which makes it very difficult to plan agriculture effectively as this may lead to drought and flooding.

With this in mind, one of the ways that the MLC could be improved upon is to promote transparency and open communication regarding the water release schedule, perhaps with the Mekong countries cooperating with other partners to ensure transparency and information sharing. The security of millions in the region depends on this river, and as such, the Mekong-China relationship is one of utmost importance.

The strategic alignment of Mekong nations with the MLC engenders inherent geopolitical concerns. An over-reliance on Chinese investment exposes these states to the potential for undue influence in the realm of political or diplomatic decision-making.

¹⁵ Xue Gong. The Mekong Region Is a Test of China's Global Development and Security Model. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, Dec 1, 2023. URL: <https://carnegieindia.org/research/2023/12/the-mekong-region-is-a-test-of-chinas-global-development-and-security-model?lang=en> (accessed: Jun 1, 2024).

¹⁶ Chanintira na Thalang, Attakrit Patchimnan. Rethinking ACMECS amidst Changing Regionalism in Southeast Asia. *Heinrich Böll Stiftung*, May 27, 2023. URL: <https://th.boell.org/en/2023/05/27/rethinking-acmeecs-regionalism-southeast-asia> (accessed: Jun 1, 2024).

¹⁷ Lancang-Mekong Cooperation entering new growth phase: Chinese envoy. *Xinhua*, Mar 23, 2018. URL: http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-03/23/c_137061039.htm (accessed: Jun 1, 2024).

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ China-Laos Railway brings booming tourism, building up momentum of consumption: Foreign Ministry. *Global Times*, Apr 15, 2024. URL: <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202404/1310605.shtml> (accessed: Jun 2, 2024).

²⁰ Lancang-Mekong Cooperation...

Mekong-Republic of Korea Cooperation (Mekong-ROK)

In 2010, the Republic of Korea (ROK) hosted the first Mekong-ROK Foreign Minister meeting, announcing the Han River Declaration to establish a comprehensive partnership between the two regions. The ROK takes the Mekong subregion seriously due to its strategic importance, including (1) the vast economy spread across the Southern region, (2) a young and dynamic population, (3) a foreign direct investment (FDI) focused consumer market, and continuously growing middle-class population, making the region a significant economic hub [Ahn 2019: 81–99].

Since 2013, ROK funded more than US\$25.76 million to Mekong countries for this development²¹. This appears to be a stand-out partnership, with a 5-year plan of action which outlines the specific goals of the Mekong-ROK cooperation. Improvements to this cooperation may not be necessary, and this example offers a good guide for what other countries may hope to achieve with the region.

The ROK and Cambodia collaborate on a water management project in Svay Rieng province under the Mekong-ROK Cooperation. The \$100 million ‘Prek Neal Basin Water Supply and Flood Reduction Measures Project, Phase 1’ has a completed feasibility study reviewed in November 2020²². The project aims to address both flooding and droughts while providing water for households, industries, and irrigation. Construction is expected to begin in 2025, benefiting over 5,360 households across three districts and one town, and covering an area of roughly 26,950 hectares²³.

Both geostrategic reasons and South Korea's larger Indo-Pacific vision are the driving forces for the Mekong-ROK partnership. This might be seen as a two-pronged strategy: maintaining economic links and stability in the area while simultaneously counterbalancing the influence of China. This middle power state attempts to grab the Mekong countries' attention by investing in infrastructure and development, which ensures its presence in the region.

Where is Russia in the Mekong Region?

Given Russia's historical ties with the CLMV countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam), its close relations with Thailand, its strategic partnership with Myanmar, and its unique “unlimited” relationship with China, Russia is well-positioned to play a significant role in the Mekong subregion. This confluence of factors opens doors for Russia to contribute meaningfully to the region's development. The Mekong region has a lot of room for economic growth, and Russia can be a big help. Simply put, Russia has the means and the audience to be a considerable factor in the Mekong region.

Firstly, the Mekong region offers vast economic potential. Russia's experience with building dams and getting mining resources could be useful for developing infrastructure projects in the

²¹ 8th Call for Mekong-Korea Cooperation Fund (MKCF) Projects. *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the ROK*, Mar 25, 2024. URL: https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5676/view.do?seq=322486 (accessed: Jun 5, 2024).

²² Bor Pich Zelin. Study of \$100M Svay Rieng irrigation project complete. *The Phnom Penh Post*, Nov 24, 2023. URL: <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/study-of-100m-svay-rieng-irrigation-project-complete> (accessed: Jun 6, 2024).

²³ Ibid.

Mekong. This would not only mean good business deals for Russian companies but also give Mekong countries the modern power and resource management they need.

Secondly, the current geopolitical landscape necessitates the diversification of partnerships. Mekong countries can foster a more balanced and multipolar environment by including Russia in the regional dynamic alongside their strong connections with China and Western countries. This diversification has the potential to increase their bargaining power in negotiations and provide access to a wider range of knowledge and technology.

Thirdly, the potential for synergistic scientific collaboration is substantial. Russia possesses a well-established scientific heritage, including in agricultural science and climatology. Knowledge and expertise exchange in these fields could demonstrably improve the Mekong region's agricultural sector, leading to enhanced food security and bolstering its capacity to adapt to the existential threat posed by climate change.

Therefore, the possibility of establishing Mekong-Russia Cooperation (MRUC) should be seen as a potential for the region. The initiative will offer an opportunity to diversify partnerships and access new areas of expertise. By fostering knowledge exchange and collaboration on sustainable development projects, the MRUC has the potential to bolster food security, improve resource management, and equip the Mekong countries to tackle the challenges of climate change. Significantly, open communication and a focus on areas of mutual interest will be crucial for building trust and ensuring the MRUC flourishes as a valuable addition to the Mekong cooperative framework.

Mekong Countries Diplomacy

The Mekong region has crucially benefited from cooperation frameworks established with both regional and major powers, but navigating the divergent interests of these stakeholders presents a significant challenge. Mekong countries must skilfully and diplomatically engage with these stakeholders to ensure that their interests are protected and advanced in the face of competing agendas.

Mekong countries should seek to strengthen the MRC by enhancing its regulatory powers and promoting greater cooperation among member states to address issues such as water resource management, hydropower development, and environmental protection. A strong regional consensus is crucial when negotiating with major powers or advocating for regional interests on the international stage. Moreover, the initiative should align perfectly with the 'ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific', which emphasizes peaceful collaboration over competition in the region [Koga 2022: 34].

To avoid major powers turning Mekong development into a competition for influence, Mekong countries need to actively participate in ASEAN-led mechanisms to promote regional stability, economic integration, and collective security. They should leverage ASEAN's diplomatic channels to address transboundary challenges, such as water resource management, environmental degradation, and cross-border crime.

Conclusion

Despite the undeniable progress and goodwill fostered by various Mekong cooperation frameworks, the Mekong countries still face a significant challenge – navigating the complex geopolitical landscape. However, this balancing act can be precarious. Mekong countries desire a more cooperative relationship with China, particularly when it comes to information sharing and

responsible water management practices. Ultimately, they seek a future where the Mekong River serves as a bridge for regional cooperation and shared prosperity rather than as a point of contention.

The Mekong Cooperation Framework presents a complex web of partnerships between the Mekong countries and various external actors. While frameworks like the MGC excel in fostering soft power relations, they have limited impact on the core goals of the MCF, such as infrastructure development and water resource management. Conversely, frameworks like the Mekong-ROK cooperation provide a strong model for effective cooperation with clear goals and dedicated funding.

A recurring geopolitical theme is the balancing act by Mekong countries between the influence of China and other regional powers like the United States and Japan. Frameworks like the LMI and FLM appear to be strategies to counter China's influence. China's MLC framework, while comprehensive, raises concerns about water transparency and control. The MRC could be strengthened by China's full membership, promoting information sharing and ensuring the sustainable management of the river as a vital resource.

Lastly, there is also a critical step for ASEAN member states to recognize the Mekong region and the South China Sea as interconnected aspects of regional security and interests. This unified approach is essential to prevent the erosion of ASEAN's strategic influence and ensure that external powers do not dominate decision-making processes that impact the entire region's future.

Abbreviation

ACMECS	–	Ayeyarwady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy
ADB	–	Asian Development Bank
ASEAN	–	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BRI	–	Belt and Road Initiative
CLV	–	Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam
CLV-DT	–	Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam Development Triangle
CLVM	–	Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam-Myanmar
EU	–	European Union
EWEC	–	East-West Economic Corridor
FDI	–	Foreign Direct Investment
FLM	–	Friends of the Lower Mekong
GMS	–	Greater Mekong Subregion
JUMPP	–	Japan-US-Mekong Power Partnership
LMB	–	Lower Mekong Basin countries
LMI	–	Lower Mekong Initiative
MCF	–	Mekong Cooperation Frameworks
Mekong-ROK	–	Mekong-Republic of Korea Cooperation
MGC	–	Mekong-Ganga Cooperation
MJC	–	Mekong-Japan Cooperation
MLC	–	Mekong-Lancang Cooperation
MLCSF	–	Mekong-Lancang Cooperation Special Fund
MRC	–	Mekong River Commission
MRUC	–	Mekong-Russia Cooperation
NSEC	–	North-South Economic Corridor

ROK	–	Republic of Korea
SEC	–	Southern Economic Corridor
SMEs	–	Small and Medium-sized Enterprises
US	–	Unites States
USMP	–	US-Mekong Partnership
WB	–	World Bank

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