



JOURNAL OF GREATER MEKONG STUDIES

*NON-TRADITIONAL SECURITY THREATS
AND THE ROLE OF ASEAN IN THE GREATER
MEKONG SUBREGION*

VOLUME 04 | DECEMBER 2020



JOURNAL OF GREATER MEKONG STUDIES

CHAIRMAN & PUBLISHER

HRH Samdech Norodom Sirivudh, Founder and Chairman of CICP

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Ambassador Pou Sothirak, Executive Director of CICP

EDITORS

Dr. Bradley Murg, Distinguished Fellow and Senior Advisor of CICP; and Dean, Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, Paragon International University

Ms. Gwen Robinson, Visiting Senior Fellow of CICP and Senior Fellow at the Institute of Security and International Studies (ISIS) at Chulalongkorn University, Thailand

Ms. Pich Charadine, Deputy Director of CICP

Mr. Brevin Anderson, Visiting Fellow of CICP

Mr. Him Rotha, Research Assistant of CICP

EDITORIAL BOARD ADVISOR

Prof. Milton Osborne, Former Non-Resident Fellow of the Lowy Institute for International Policy, Sydney; Author of "The Mekong: Turbulent Past, Uncertain Future" (2000, Updated Edition 2006)

EDITORIAL BOARD

Mr. Kavi Chongkittavorn, Bangkok Post Columnist; Visiting Senior Fellow of CICP; Senior Fellow of ISIS Thailand, Chulalongkorn University

Dr. David Koh, Visiting Senior Fellow of CICP

Dr. Vijay Sakhujia, Former Director of National Maritime Foundation in New Delhi, India; Visiting Senior Fellow of CICP

© 2020 Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace, Cambodia.
All rights reserved.

Responsibility for facts and opinions rests exclusively with the authors, and their interpretations do not necessarily reflect the views or the policy of the publishers or their respective affiliations.

Cover Photo: The Mekong River winding through the flooded forest in Cambodia

Source: https://www.wvf.or.th/news_and_information/?uNewsID=195121&uLangID=1

Back Photo: Mekong transboundary cooperation: Making a problem bigger

Source: <https://www.iucn.org/news/viet-nam/201906/mekong-transboundary-cooperation-making-a-problem-bigger>

JOURNAL OF GREATER MEKONG STUDIES

*NON-TRADITIONAL SECURITY
THREATS AND THE ROLE OF ASEAN IN
THE GREATER MEKONG SUBREGION*

VOLUME 04 | DECEMBER 2020
PHNOM PENH, CAMBODIA

EDITOR'S NOTE

As the states comprising the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) look ahead to 2021, we confront a landscape significantly changed from that of just one year ago. Among the most significant developments has been the launching of the new Mekong-US Partnership, the successor institution to Washington's Lower Mekong Initiative. On behalf of CICP, I am very pleased that our lead article in this edition comes from U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of East Asian Affairs David R. Stilwell, who discusses the role that the Partnership will play in the subregion and the wide range of challenges that both the subregion and ASEAN as a whole now confront. In addition, Assistant Secretary Stilwell's article sets out the comprehensive nature of the new Partnership; it is precisely that theme of a comprehensive understanding of the region that frames this edition of the journal.

While much ink has been spilt over the last few years discussing security issues in the subregion, non-traditional security threats have received comparatively less attention, yet these are essential to truly develop a comprehensive grasp of the subregion today. Cambodia's own experience in 2020 of drought, rising inequality, and food security questions underscores the timeliness of these topics and the important weight they should be given in the development of future agendas for subregional cooperation, human security, and sustainable development.

Among the contributors to this edition, Solinn Lim, Cambodia country director for Oxfam, takes a deep dive into the question of inequality and the measures needed to ensure subregional growth models are sustainable and equitable. Noel Morada examines the question of vulnerable populations, heightened risks of atrocities, and the role that ASEAN can play to mitigate these threats. Yang Jiayi and Li Fujian explore the dynamics of health security and the collaboration and cooperation required improve outcomes in this area for the GMS state. In a year in which Cambodia has experienced both extreme drought and extreme flooding, Mak Sithirith probes the question of the future of water security. To Minh Thu takes up the question of food security and the extreme and diverse pressures that access to nutrition has confronted over the last year. David Hutt takes a critical look at the question of subregional electricity production in the context of China-Laos relations. While David Mathieson investigates questions of human trafficking, narcotics, and migration in Myanmar. Finally, I am happy to introduce a new section of JGMS - the first in a new series of book reviews. In this edition, Bradley J. Murg reviews Sebastian Strangio's *In the Dragon's Shadow: Southeast Asia in the Chinese Century*.

On behalf of HRH Samdech Norodom Sirivudh, the Chairman of CICP, I would like to thank all of our authors for their excellent contributions to furthering understanding of the subregion.

Ambassador Pou Sothirak

Executive Director, Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace

CONTENTS

THE MEKONG-U.S. PARTNERSHIP: WHY THE MEKONG REGION MATTERS TO THE UNITED STATES, ASEAN, AND THE INDO-PACIFIC	11
<i>H.E. Mr. David R. Stilwell</i> Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Department of State	
THE MEKONG SUBREGION’S GROWTH PARADIGM AND COMMITMENTS TO REDUCE INEQUALITIES	17
<i>Solinn Lim</i> Country Director, Oxfam Cambodia	
ASEAN CENTRALITY AND ATROCITIES PREVENTION IN THE MEKONG: MAINSTREAMING PROTECTION OF VULNERABLE POPULATIONS	31
<i>Dr. Noel M. Morada</i> Director of Regional Diplomacy and Capacity Building Asia Pacific Centre for Responsibility to Protect (APR2P)	
WATER SECURITY IN CAMBODIA: BETWEEN TOO MUCH AND TOO LITTLE	41
<i>Dr. Mak Sithirith</i> Water Governance Specialist	
PROTECTING HEALTH SECURITY IN THE GREATER MEKONG SUBREGION	53
<i>Yang Jiayi and Dr. Li Fujian</i> China Foreign Affairs University	
LAOS, CHINA AND TRANSNATIONAL SECURITY OF ELECTRICITY PRODUCTION	61
<i>David Hutt</i> Southeast Asia Columnist, The Diplomat	
NON-TRADITIONAL SECURITY CHALLENGES IN MYANMAR AND THE GREATER MEKONG SUB-REGION	69
<i>David Scott Mathieson</i> Independent Analyst	

FOOD SECURITY AND ITS IMPLICATION IN THE MEKONG REGION 77

Dr. To Minh Thu

Deputy Director General, Institute for Foreign Policy and Strategic Studies, Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam (DAV)

BOOK REVIEW

SEBASTIAN, STRANGIO. (2020). 83

IN THE DRAGON'S SHADOW: SOUTHEAST ASIA IN THE CHINESE CENTURY. YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 352PP.

Dr. Bradley J. Murg

Lead Editor, JGMS

Distinguished Fellow & Senior Advisor, CICP

LIST OF BIOGRAPHIES



H.E. Ambassador Pou Sothirak

Editor-in-Chief, JGMS

Executive Director, CICP

In addition to being the Executive Director of the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace (CICP) since 2013, Ambassador Pou Sothirak also serves as Advisor to the Royal Government of Cambodia as of February 2014.

He was appointed as Secretary of State of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Cambodia from September 2013 to January 2014. He was a Visiting Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) in Singapore from January 2009 to December 2012. He also served as Cambodian Ambassador to Japan from April 2005 to November 2008. He was elected Cambodian Member of Parliaments twice during the national general election in 1993 and 2003. He was appointed as Minister of Industry Mines and Energy of the Royal Government of Cambodia from 1993 to 1998.

He graduated from Oregon State University in the U.S. in March 1981 with a Bachelor Degree in Electrical and Computer Engineering and worked as an engineer at the Boeing Company in Seattle, Washington from 1981-1985.

He has written extensively on various issues concerning the development of Cambodia and the region.



Gwen Robinson

Lead Editor, JGMS

Visiting Senior Fellow, CICP & Senior Fellow, ISIS Thailand

Gwen Robinson is Editor-at-large of Nikkei Asian Review, an online and weekly journal of Asian affairs, and is a Senior Fellow at the Institute of Security and International Studies at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok. She was a Visiting Fellow at the Sydney-based Lowy Institute in 2004 and was for 18 years a correspondent and editor with the Financial Times in Europe, Asia, and America (1995-2013). Among earlier positions she was Tokyo-based correspondent for The Times of London (1993-95) and an editor and writer with Nikkei Weekly (1990-93). She previously covered key events in Southeast Asia for U.S., Australian and British media organizations from 1985 to 1993.



Dr. Bradley Jensen Murg

Lead Editor, JGMS

Distinguished Fellow & Senior Advisor, CICIP

Dr. Bradley J. Murg is Associate Professor of Political Science and Dean of the Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences at Paragon International University. Additionally, Dr. Murg holds positions as Distinguished Fellow and Senior Advisor at CICIP; Senior Research Advisor at Future Forum; and Distinguished Fellow at the Royal University of Law and Economics. His work, supported by grants from the Social Science Research Council and the International Research and Exchanges Board, focuses on contemporary international relations in Southeast Asia; the political economy of foreign aid; and the Greater Mekong Subregion as a whole. Dr. Murg graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Emory University with a B.A./M.A. in philosophy, received an MSc. in economic history from the London School of Economics, and his M.A. and Ph.D. in political science from the University of Washington.



H.E. Mr. David Stilwell

Assistant Secretary of State, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Department of State

David R. Stilwell is the Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs. Prior to his appointment as Assistant Secretary on June 20, 2019, he served in the Air Force for 35 years, beginning as an enlisted Korean linguist in 1980, and retiring in 2015 in the rank of Brigadier General as the Asia advisor to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. He served multiple tours of duty in Japan and Korea as a linguist, a fighter pilot, and a commander. He also served as the Defense Attaché at the U.S. Embassy in Beijing, People's Republic of China, 2011-2013. Most recently, Mr. Stilwell served as the Director of the China Strategic Focus Group at U.S. Indo-Pacific Command in Hawaii 2017-2019 and an Adjunct Senior Fellow at the East West Center in Honolulu from 2016-2019. He earned a B.S. in History from the U.S. Air Force Academy (1987), and a Master's Degree in Asian Studies and Chinese language from the University of Hawaii at Manoa (1988) and is a 2009 graduate of the Executive Leadership program at the Darden School, University of Virginia in Charlottesville, Virginia. He was awarded the Department of Defense Superior Service Award in 2015. He speaks Korean, Chinese and limited Japanese.



Solinn Lim

Country Director, Oxfam Cambodia

Solinn is a Cambodian who has 20+ years of hands-on experience in countries across Asia, Europe and United States, in building community economic resilience and social protection, natural resource management and climate change, humanitarian relief and preparedness, and civic engagement and governance. In particular, Solinn has worked with resources dependent communities and collaborated with impact investors and champions in governments across Mekong subregion. Solinn became a member of Asia Society's Young Leaders in 2015. She holds a BA degree in Sociology from Royal University of Phnom Penh as well as an MSc. degree in Environmental Policy from Oxford University. She is a mother of two young children and currently based in Cambodia.



Dr. Noel M. Morada

*Director of Regional Diplomacy and Capacity Building
Asia Pacific Centre for the Responsibility to Protect*

Dr Noel M. Morada is former Professor of Political Science at the University of the Philippines Diliman and was a Distinguished Visiting Professor at the School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) at the Johns Hopkins University in Washington DC. In 2005, he was commissioned by the Canadian Embassy in Manila to undertake research on responses to R2P in Southeast Asia from which a R2P Roadmap in the region was published and has served as a guide to the work of the Centre. He has developed a template for R2P plan of action in directing the Philippines programme of the Centre and has conducted lectures and seminars on R2P for government officials, civil society groups, and academia in the Philippines and Southeast Asia. He is an advocate of a bottom-up approach in building awareness and constituency around R2P in the region.

Apart from his research and advocacy on R2P, he is also involved in regional security research and dialogue specifically dealing with terrorism, maritime security, and non-traditional security issues in Southeast Asia. He has also done research and publication on ASEAN external relations, the ASEAN Regional Forum and cooperative security in the Asia Pacific, as well as human security and human development in the region.

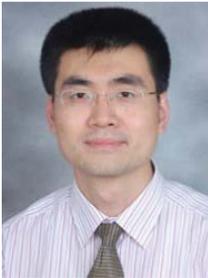


Dr. Mak Sithirith

Water Governance Specialist

Dr. Mak Sithirith received his PhD in geography in 2011 from Department of Geography, National University of Singapore and Post-doc in transboundary water governance in the context of climate change in 2014.

A strong advocate for resource governances in the Tonle Sap Lake and the Mekong, he involves his students and colleagues in activities that support communities in the Tonle Sap Lake and the Mekong. His professional interests focus on research in the Tonle Sap Lake and the Mekong, particularly the resources and water governance. He has produced number of publications on the Tonle Sap and Mekong in the well-known and recognized publishers. In the future, he will publish more papers for his career.



Dr. Li Fujian

Research Fellow, Institute of Asian Studies, China Foreign Affairs University

Dr. Li Fujian, Research Fellow of the Institute of Asian Studies at China Foreign Affairs University. Fujian obtained his PhD in Political Science and International Relations from the University of Western Australia. He has published three books: China's Regional Relations: Evolving Foreign Policy Dynamics (2014), The Belt and Road Initiative: ASEAN Countries' Perspectives (2019) and Preventive Diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific (2020).



Yang Jiayi

PhD Candidate, China Foreign Affairs University

Ms. Yang Jiayi, PhD Candidate in International Relations at China Foreign Affairs University. Her research interests include China-ASEAN relations and international development studies.



David Hutt

Southeast Asia Columnist, The Diplomat

David Hutt is a political journalist who was based in Cambodia between 2014-2019, covering Southeast Asian affairs. He is Southeast Asian Columnist for the Diplomat, and a columnist and correspondent for Asia Times, and writes for Nikkei Asia, Foreign Policy, and other international publications. He was president of the Overseas Press Club of Cambodia between 2018-2019.



David Mathieson

Independent Analyst

David Scott Mathieson is a Myanmar-based independent analyst working on conflict, peace, humanitarian and human rights issues. From 2006 to 2016 he was the Senior Researcher on Myanmar for Human Rights Watch based in Thailand and Myanmar, and has contributed reports for the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) and the International Crisis Group (ICG). He has contributed articles to the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, The Irrawaddy, Foreign Policy, and is a regular contributor to Asia Times.



Dr. To Minh Thu

Deputy Director General, Institute for Foreign Policy and Strategic Studies, Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam

Dr. To Minh Thu is a Deputy Director General of the Institute for Foreign Policy and Strategic Studies (IFPSS), the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam (DAV). At the IFPSS, she is in charge of development and non-traditional security issues. She also serves as Director of the APEC Study Center, the Vietnam Global Center for Mekong Studies and the country coordinator for several academic networks, including the Network of East Asia Think tanks (ASEAN Plus Three), Network of ASEAN-China Think tanks.

Dr. To got her B.A. in International Economics from the Hanoi Foreign Trade University and her MBS in International Economics from Massey University (New Zealand). She earned her Ph.D of Public Policy in Economics from the Osaka University (Japan) in 2010. Her research interests include application of general equilibrium model of trade in assessment of FTAs, Vietnam's economic integration, non-traditional issues and cooperative mechanisms in the Mekong sub-region. She has published extensively on Vietnam's economic integration policy and on water security issues.

THE MEKONG-U.S. PARTNERSHIP: WHY THE MEKONG REGION MATTERS TO THE UNITED STATES, ASEAN, AND THE INDO-PACIFIC

*H.E. Mr. David R. Stilwell **

*Assistant Secretary of State, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs,
Department of State*

A secure, open, and prosperous Mekong region is integral to the future of the Indo-Pacific and to ASEAN. In 2019, United States deepened our investment in the five countries of the Mekong by launching the Mekong-U.S. Partnership. Through the Partnership, we are committed to helping the region combat and recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, sustain the health of the Mekong River, and counter threats to sovereignty, economic prosperity, and security. The United States has been a positive presence in the region for decades and we look forward to growing our partnership well into the future.

The Strong and Growing Mekong-U.S. Partnership

The Mekong-U.S. Partnership expands on more than eleven years of cooperation between the United States, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam under the Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI) with a comprehensive approach to new and emerging challenges, including governance, transboundary water and natural resources management, and transnational crime, including the trafficking of people, drugs, wildlife, and timber.

U.S. engagement with the countries along the mighty Mekong is nothing new. Since founding the LMI in 2009, the United States has provided more than \$3.9 billion to narrow the development gap, help the region sustainably manage its water and other natural resources, develop human capital, and spur entrepreneurship. Our work with the region builds on our solid bilateral relationships. Thailand, for example, is one of our oldest allies and we just celebrated 25 years of diplomatic relations with Vietnam. Moreover, more than three million U.S. citizens and residents trace their ancestries to Mekong-region countries. That is a powerful link.

Economically, the Mekong-region countries are growing fast, with young and dynamic populations. Our trade with the region exceeded \$133 billion in 2019. American companies have operated in the region for decades, and the United States was the

** H.E. Mr. David R. Stilwell is the Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs.*

largest source of foreign direct investment in ASEAN in 2019. There are nearly 1,000 U.S. companies operating in the Mekong region, bringing jobs, skills, and technology.

At the inaugural Mekong-U.S. Partnership ministerial meeting in September, the United States highlighted more than \$150 million in new U.S. government assistance. Some key programs include \$52 million to battle COVID-19, \$33 million to support energy systems and trade through our Asia EDGE (Enhancing Development and Growth through Energy) program, and \$55 million to counter transnational crime, including various forms of illicit trafficking. The U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) has already invested more than \$1 billion in Southeast Asia and is eager to catalyze billions more in the Mekong. DFC is also deploying more local representatives to scout and secure deals.

The U.S. Trade and Development Agency, the U.S. Commerce Department, and the U.S. Export-Import Bank are also hard at work as part of our Embassy Deal Teams, which help U.S. companies trade, invest, and find local partners in Mekong countries.

The new Mekong-U.S. Partnership also includes programs to support the skills and talents of people in the Mekong region. These include the new Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI) Academy at Fulbright University Vietnam, which will offer executive-level seminars to young professionals from across Southeast Asia, and our NexGen Mekong, which helps young scholars develop critical skills, including on important public health issues. There is also our Young Scientists Program, which launches civic-minded innovators and entrepreneurs on the path to success. Our ongoing Information Sharing Program has facilitated direct contact between Mekong government and U.S. public health officials, most recently to share best practices and advanced tools for preventing and addressing mosquito-borne diseases such as dengue fever and the Zika virus.

We continue to focus on exchanging expertise and best practices. The Mekong River Commission, Mississippi River Commission, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and other regional counterparts are improving safety in dam construction and maintenance, for example.

We will continue to partner with Japan to realize transparent regional energy markets under the Japan-U.S.-Mekong Power Partnership (JUMPP). Just one example of JUMPP's work is assisting Vietnam to reliably integrate over 4,500 MW of new solar and other renewable energy sources. JUMPP is actively engaging governments and the private sector to build capacity and stimulate investment.

The United States will also continue to support transboundary water governance, including the work of the Mekong River Commission (MRC). At the Mekong-U.S. Partnership ministerial meeting in September, the foreign ministers lauded the U.S.-

supported Mekong Water Data Initiative as an important tool for monitoring and managing water resource challenges.

In all of our efforts, we will work closely with our partners, including South Korea, Australia, Japan, and all the members of the Friends of the Mekong group. A reinvigorated Friends of the Mekong is an important mechanism to improve donor coordination. Members include the Asian Development Bank, Australia, Cambodia, the European Union, Japan, Lao PDR, Myanmar, New Zealand, Republic of Korea, Thailand, the United States, Vietnam, and the World Bank. The Friends of the Mekong has supported the Mekong River Commission's capacity to collect and use water data to craft science-based policies, among other projects.

The Mekong River in Crisis

Our expanded engagement is more crucial than ever, as the region faces record challenges, especially to water security. The Mekong River, which touches the lives of scores of millions of people, is under threat from both natural and man-made forces.

The consequences are stark. Water shortages have damaged nearly 100,000 hectares of rice fields across the region. These shortages have reduced crop yields from other harvests across Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam by 50 percent. And they have also cut the available fish catch in Cambodia by as much as 90 percent. In Vietnam's An Giang province fishermen have reportedly seen their daily fish catch reduced by more than half. There are fisherman in other parts of Vietnam who used to catch 200 kilos of fish per day but now bring in fewer than 10 kilos per day. Water shortages have also exacerbated saltwater intrusion into the delta, up to 90 kilometers inland, according to media reporting. These are the highest levels ever recorded, and they imperil agriculture and rice crops.

A growing body of evidence shows that these downstream problems are made worse by the construction and operations of upstream dams in China. Experts say that these dams hold enough water to supply all 8.3 million residents of New York City for 35 years. Beijing argues that its dam operations benefit downstream nations by increasing water flows in the dry season, yet by its own admission these dry-season water releases are done to maximize profit for China's electricity producers. Beijing has long refused to operate its vast network of upstream dams in an open and transparent way, exacerbating the impacts of historic droughts. This has harmed the livelihoods of tens of millions of people in Southeast Asian communities.

In response to calls from Mekong-region countries and partners, Beijing recently agreed to share more water data. China has reportedly started sharing year-round data from two hydrological stations in Yunnan province, an extension of a previous data-sharing agreement in which Beijing shared only wet season data from these same two stations. Experts say the new data is limited in scope. It does not include, for example, information on upstream dam operations that Mekong countries need to manage

agriculture and other industries that impact livelihoods. There is also concern about the quality of the data Beijing shares. We support Mekong governments as they encourage China to increase transparency in its use of the Mekong River's waters.

The Mekong, China, and Choices

Beijing's unilateral manipulation of upstream dams is just one of a number of troubling trends. We hear from communities in the Mekong that are concerned about infrastructure-linked debt and the predatory business practices of Beijing's state-owned actors. We hear concerns about ties between Beijing-backed special economic zones, casinos facilitating money laundering, and a boom in trafficking of persons, drugs, wildlife, and timber. Beijing's failure to curb corruption tied to these PRC-controlled projects threatens to further strengthen criminal networks that undermine the security and autonomy of not only Mekong countries but other ASEAN members.

We also hear concern about Beijing's extra-territorial river patrols under the guise of law-enforcement support, even as criminal elements expand their control and freely import PRC-sourced chemicals to manufacture methamphetamine at record levels. In the first six months of 2019, Myanmar alone seized nearly 70 million methamphetamine pills, and 8.76 metric tons of powder precursors and over 150,000 liters of liquid precursors for methamphetamine. The proceeds from drug sales support instability in Myanmar and allow drug trafficking organizations to procure more weapons, many of which come from the PRC.

Criminal elements with roots in China operate transnational networks in the Mekong region, raising concerns of increased criminality. We have seen reports that PRC-linked casinos and special economic zones are enabling armed groups in Myanmar with new sources of financing and increased flows of illicit weapons. In addition, the new proposed port near the Kings Roman Casino in Laos will likely increase trafficking through the Golden Triangle. In 2018, the United States sanctioned the Zhao Wei Transnational Criminal Organization for drug trafficking, human trafficking, money laundering, bribery, and wildlife trafficking, much of which is facilitated through the Kings Roman Casino.

These are indeed troubling trends. We welcome a China that respects the autonomy of its neighbors. However, the Chinese Communist Party has demonstrated in multiple countries that its actions often disregard host country interests and come at the detriment of local communities.

We believe the people of the Mekong, like people all around the world, should enjoy the benefits of choice. Both at home and abroad, the United States supports pluralistic systems governed by freedom, rule of law, and respect for the rights of one's neighbors. Pluralism is about the coexistence of multiple things—whether states, groups, principles, opinions, or ways of life. In short: diversity and openness. In a pluralistic

Indo-Pacific, the Mekong's diverse countries can continue to thrive as they wish. In a pluralistic Indo-Pacific, states are secure in exercising their sovereignty and autonomy, and no hegemonic power dominates or coerces them.

This vision is shared by ASEAN countries. The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific emphasizes "inclusivity" to urge respect for all the region's nations, large and small, and the ASEAN Charter calls for upholding the principle of "unity in diversity."

If a pluralistic world is one in which countries have the freedom to be themselves, that means they have the freedom to make choices. Pluralism and choice go hand-in-hand. There is a commonly heard concern that countries will be forced to choose between the United States and the PRC. No country will be forced to make such a choice if it is up to the United States. When we say that America's vision is pluralistic and inclusive, our record shows it. We aspire to friendly relations with Beijing and have no objection if other countries similarly strive to engage Beijing in cooperative, mutually beneficial ways.

ASEAN and the Mekong Region

When ASEAN member states developed the ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific, other countries took note. The world also took note in June 2020 when ASEAN leaders stated that any Code of Conduct negotiations on the South China Sea must comport with international law, including the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. These are examples of ASEAN standing up for its sovereign rights. There is strength in this collective voice.

We applaud Vietnam for its efforts as ASEAN Chair to elevate Mekong issues. The challenges faced by the countries of the Mekong region—from addressing transboundary threats, ensuring public health, and building economic prosperity—are not only local issues. They have implications for ASEAN and the broader Indo-Pacific. The mainland countries of Southeast Asia make up half of ASEAN; their continued autonomy and prosperity are fundamental to ASEAN unity and centrality. We encourage ASEAN to develop a common position on the Mekong Basin, as it has in the South China Sea. The threat to ASEAN unity arising from the Mekong region is no less existential. For our part, the United States will continue to raise our support for secure, sovereign, and prosperous Mekong states in ASEAN-related fora, particularly at the East Asia Summit and ASEAN Regional Forum. We encourage our partners to do the same.

The five countries of the Mekong region have an enduring partner in the United States. Through the Mekong-U.S. Partnership, the broader Friends of the Mekong, and the U.S.-ASEAN Strategic Partnership, we look forward to continuing these efforts long into the future.

THE MEKONG SUBREGION'S GROWTH PARADIGM AND COMMITMENTS TO REDUCE INEQUALITIES

*Solinn Lim**

Country Director, Oxfam Cambodia

Abstract

Mekong nations have enjoyed rapid economic growth and millions of their citizens have escaped extreme poverty. Part of this growth is owed to unsustainable economic models of natural resources extraction. This article discusses the notion of inequality and challenges experienced by citizens of the 6 riparian nations that are directly dependent on the rich resources of the Mekong river and its ecosystems for their livelihoods, given the reduction of the river's ecological integrity. The future of the Mekong lies with its dynamic people, affordable technologies, inclusive and resilient management of the Mekong River Basin as well as strong collaboration among various Mekong institutions and platforms. It is argued that more secure and prosperous Mekong societies can be attained if nations pursue joint sustainable landscape-level planning and development of the Mekong and its riverine systems. Important factors to consider are the ecological outcomes, the creation of safe spaces for meaningful discourse with decision makers, and a more equitable sharing of resources that respect the rights, livelihoods and ways of life of all Mekong people

The Mekong Subregion's Economic Growth and Reduced Ecological Integrity

Over the last decades, Mekong nations have successfully lifted millions of individuals out of poverty. China and Thailand have attained upper-middle-income status, while Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar and Laos have climbed up the economic ladder as lower-middle-income countries. The Greater Mekong sub-region (GMS) is characterized by rapid population growth and urbanization, growing inter-connected economies, changing geo-politics, including the increasing importance of Asian institutions. In addition, it is defined by the rise of investment and trade within the region, and the continued emphasis of large-scale natural resource exploitation that contributes significantly to economic growth. The region's rapid economic growth continues to be built upon a paradigm of resource extraction and development, including on major river systems. This comprises the damming of rivers for hydropower development, water diversion for irrigation, forest clearing, land use changes, mining comprising of riverbed mining and dredging for navigation and

** Solinn is the Country Director of Oxfam Cambodia.*

disposal of waste/pollution. Collectively, these activities pose threats that undermine the health of river systems. Key learnings from the *People Protecting their Ecosystem in the Lower Mekong* (PEM) project (2013-2019), implemented by Oxfam, have highlighted that at the Mekong watershed level, rapid land use change, degradation of forest and riverine ecosystems, and water pollution, due to a lack of control in waste management from industrial and agro-business development, have caused the deterioration of certain parts of the Mekong river systems.

Transboundary Water Resources of the Mekong and CLV Development Triangle

There are 13 provinces across Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam that share administrative borders and physical borders with the Mekong river. They fall within the so-called Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam Development Triangle Areas (CLV-DTA), which includes the Mekong and 3S rivers. CLV-DTA is 1 of the 5 socio-economic development corridors of the GMS. The Mekong river is an international waterway that flows near 6 countries, cutting directly and indirectly across to the 5 GMS development triangle areas. The CLV-DTA connects to the Sekong river system that has distributaries from Laos and Vietnam and is met in Stung Treng in Cambodia. Between its countries, the CLV-DTA aims to foster transboundary development in the following areas: (i) investment promotion; (ii) trade facilitation; (iii) cooperation with enterprises; (iv) industrial master planning; (v) small and medium-sized enterprise development; (vi) human resource development; and (vii) rural development (Ishida, 2012). While the CLV-DTA has the potential to bring further social and economic development to the region, this development may have consequences, resulting from risks and challenges such as: (i) risks of using unsafe chemicals in agriculture; (ii) challenges in increasing the demand in natural rubber that could lead to further deforestation; (iii) challenges in the extraction of mineral resources; and (iv) challenges to hydropower generation. These risks and challenges would place additional pressures on the Mekong and especially the Sekong River system, including degrading the quality of watersheds, water pollution and the over-use of water resources.

The major rivers, their watersheds and floodplains continue to play an essential role on the rural livelihoods of the majority living across the Lower Mekong Countries. The rivers of the region offer multiple resources that provide water for vital ecosystems that support the integrity of biodiversity, offer critical sources of food and income, allow energy to be produced through hydropower, provide sand for the construction industry and enable routes for trade and environmental services. The Lower Mekong inland water transport industry for cargo and passengers was valued at 6.8B USD for cargo (2007), transporting an estimated 69.4M passengers and employing approximately 750,000 individuals (in 2014). The annual value of wetlands was estimated at 2.9B USD (2010) and for capture fisheries 11.2B USD (first-sale price). In addition, an estimated 3.33M individuals were directly involved in capture fisheries. Smaller and less

documented industries, such as sand mining, were valued at an estimated 175M USD annually (MRC, 2019).

The cumulative impact of river resource exploitation rarely considers the complex ecological, economic and cultural values with which it is associated, and whose impact is only be seen downstream and at a distance from the actual site of development. Recent studies have indicated that the Mekong Delta is sinking, owing to reduced sedimentation caused by disruption to the flow of sediment. This is due to obstructions such as hydro-electricity dams and excessive sand mining. A team from Utrecht University, estimated that at its current rate of subsidence, the Mekong Delta could be under 0.8 meters of sea within 57 years, forcing over 12 million people to relocate. Moreover, the adverse effects of climate change are leading to rising sea levels, and reduced sediment reaching the Mekong Delta, resulting in saltwater intrusion, which is majorly impacting the lives, livelihoods and ecosystem of the Mekong Delta (InfoRD, 2016).

Mekong and Sustainable Energy Options

In the past decade, the lower stretch of the Mekong river has witnessed construction and operation of mainstream hydropower dams, notably the Xayaburi dam and Don Sahong dam in Laos, which began operating in 2019. Four mainstream dam projects have recently been submitted (with Sanakham project, currently reviewed under the Procedures for Notification, Prior Consultation and Agreement process) (MRC, 2020). The use of hydropower dams to generate electricity has been one of the main sources of energy production in the Mekong region. However, there is apprehension over the construction of the hydropower infrastructure, notably how the process has been largely unilateral and uncoordinated, with concerns over site selection, design and impact playing minimal roles in the decision-making process. There is rich literature and discussion on the impact of current exploitative technologies and practices on livelihoods, sustainability and productivity of key natural resources and ecosystems of the rivers and freshwater habitats, food security and nutrition, as well as fishery resources and internationally recognized conservation sites such as Ramsar Sites. These are complemented by growing regional and global expertise on alternative models of renewable and sustainable energy options. At the same time, more sustainable and equitable renewable energy options are increasingly feasible and cost-competitive with hydropower and fossil fuel generated energy such as large-scale solar and wind farms, as well as decentralized microgrids that further challenge current national energy models. As Weatherby & Eyler (2017) note in *The Letters from the Mekong*, Laos and Cambodia should consider prioritizing the production of a power development plan that not only examines the business-as-usual scenario of proposed projects, but also a variety of alternative economically feasible development scenarios for the coming decade. As for Thailand and Vietnam, both countries are encouraged to reflect on climate change emissions and the sustainability of energy sources when signing power

purchase agreements to import electricity from neighboring countries. Moreover, GMS countries should consider the storage of renewable electricity sources and utilizing this electricity during peak demand periods during the warmer dry season, eliminating the need for some of the additional reserve capacity in the long-term.

Key river infrastructure projects are being reviewed in Cambodia, and it has been announced that “from 2020 to 2030, there will not be any development of hydropower on the main river” (White, 2020). This signifies the decision of the Cambodian government to delay the Sambo and Stung Treng mainstream dam construction. Similarly, the cabinet decision in Thailand, which formally called for the cancellation of the Lancang-Mekong Navigation Channel Improvement Project, also referred to as the ‘rapids-blasting’ project, (Deetes, 2020) is another bit of welcoming news for the citizens of the Mekong.

Moreover, there is increased momentum from governments and institutional donors to foster greener and more circular economies where alternative and sustainable forms of energy, such as solar energy, can be used to power domestic appliances or larger facilities at the community or sub-national level. This momentum has brought with it opportunities for developing innovative business models under public and private partnerships to promote energy efficiency and best energy management practices.

The Concept of Inequality in the Mekong

More than 72 million individuals directly dependent on the Mekong river for their livelihoods, and 300 million depending on the produce from its basin. The extraction economic model, as well as unsustainable agricultural practices and other forms of large surface land uses, have collectively applied pressures on the watershed and riverine systems of the Mekong basin across the 6 riparian nations. There is a worrying outlook regarding the sustainability and deterioration of the natural environment, and the impacts of climate change. The Asian Development Bank estimates that between 1.7% to 24.8% (ADB, 2012-2018) of the Mekong’s population¹ live below the poverty line, with gaps widening between the rich and poor due to the unsustainable management of natural resources. These issues must be addressed as preconditions to the livelihood development of rural and ethnic minorities, in addition to the lack of sustainable economic opportunities. Growing inequalities in wealth in relation to unequal access to and large-scale concentration of land ownership are observed across the region.

Many forms of inequality persist within and between countries of the Mekong. Governments, private sector actors, urban populations and upstream countries tend to benefit the most. In contrast, the negative economic, environmental, and cultural impacts tend to fall on rural, forest and riverine communities, particularly women, girls,

¹ Across Cambodia, China, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam.

the poor, remote and often ethnic minority communities and those living in downstream locations. For the hydropower and major water infrastructure sector in particular, many of its social and environmental costs are externalized to local poor and rural communities downstream with inequitable benefit sharing that favors urban populations and international consumers.

Forest and riverine communities are particularly vulnerable to large-scale resource exploitation, rapid changes in the Mekong river ecosystems due to their reliance on locally available natural resources, lack of information and understanding of potential impacts, and low engagement in and influence over decision-making processes that impact their lives. When these communities, comprising indigenous groups and women, are better informed and empowered with the support of civil society and stronger national and regional platforms, these vulnerable communities can better voice themselves and participate in decision-making and planning processes that could lead to improved processes that benefit individuals and economies.

The strong economic growth enjoyed by countries across the Mekong region over the past decades has been severely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Mekong governments have demonstrated exemplary achievements in controlling and managing outbreaks and protecting vulnerable communities and businesses. Governments have been praised for their rapid response to offer immediate relief to the most vulnerable. However, further actions are required to support broader groups, such as persons with disabilities and the homeless, with accessing social assistance. Numerous workers have resorted to unsustainable coping strategies that negatively impact the environment, such as fishing or logging in protected areas, to alleviate the financial burdens of their families (FAO, 2020). Most of these families are already struggling with indebtedness, and susceptible to falling into further debt. The deeply-rooted gender inequalities already faced by women and girls in the region have been exacerbated by the Covid-19 outbreak, which has placed further pressure on women and girls to take up precarious jobs and increased their risk of sexual exploitation. This pandemic has not only forced millions of people back into poverty, but also deepened inequality across the region. Studies have shown that countries that have invested significantly in healthcare and social protection are better prepared in tackling this pandemic (Oxfam, 2020).

Mekong Governments' Commitment to Reduce Inequality

Extreme inequality fuels poverty. Inequality is not inevitable or accidental. It is the result of deliberate policy choices. Oxfam's global commitment to reduce inequality index (CRII) ranks 158 governments on their policies and — on most indicators— their practices in relation to public services, tax and workers' rights. These 3 areas are pivotal to reducing inequality and weathering the Covid-19 crisis. In most countries, health and social spending remain far too low to provide universal coverage; tax systems are unfair —with the wealthiest people and corporations paying a relatively small amount in tax—

and do not collect enough revenue (in part because many countries act like tax havens) while labor rights, such as the right to sick pay, are not upheld. Minimum wages are falling well short of what is needed to ensure a decent standard of living. CRII 2020 results shows that only 26 out of 158 countries were spending a recommended 15% of their budgets on health prior to the pandemic, and in 103 countries, at least 1 in 3 workers lacked basic labor rights and protection, such as sick pay, when the virus struck.

Oxfam tracks the commitment of Mekong governments to tackle inequality both in policies and practices. In terms of overall commitment, the 2020 ranking illustrates that all Mekong governments have improved their performance considerably compared to previous years, with China in the lead ranking at 57, and Thailand and Vietnam closely trailing behind at 68 and 77 respectively. In 2018, the index ranked Cambodia at 121 out of 158 countries, and today the country has climbed to 111. The increase in rank demonstrates the positive progress that Cambodia has made in 2 out of 3 policy areas: tax policy and workers' rights.

MEKONG COUNTRIES IN FIGHTING INEQUALITY



Myanmar, which had a lower ranking in the 2018 CRII, tops all Mekong countries by far on labour rights in 2020. In addition to the introduction of various policies and improved practices in protecting the rights of workers — which increased its ranking — the government has found a new impetus in response to the pandemic, which was to enroll an additional 21 million informal economy workers into the social protection program. This saw an increase of 8,684% to its program. Thailand and Cambodia are also performing better by increasing minimum wages and introducing programs to support migrant workers. Three out of six Mekong countries remain at the lower end of the index (China, Laos and Vietnam) because they do not allow independent unions.

REDUCING INEQUALITY THROUGH RESPECT FOR LABOUR RIGHTS AND FAIR WAGES



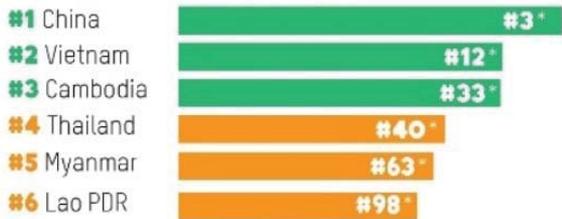


Yangtze River Delta, a migrant family. Farmers work in cities to improve their livelihoods. In recent years, more families are moving to cities, but they face many challenges in social inclusion. Photo by Wenyan Wang/Oxfam

It is important to note that Vietnam recently agreed to ratify the International Labour Organization’s Convention on Freedom of Association by 2023, which will allow independent unions as of 2021 to be part of the recently negotiated European Union–Vietnam Free Trade Agreement embedded in the legislation.

Relatively few countries have changed their VAT rates since 2018, with only China making a significant cut of 4%, reflecting a wish to reduce its reliance on indirect taxes. Vietnam’s tax collection is strong, especially compared to other countries in the region. There could still be potential for tax incentives favoring

REDUCING INEQUALITY THROUGH PROGRESSIVE TAX POLICIES



*Global Ranking

TAX RANK

corporations to be further reduced in the country. While both China and Vietnam have performed exceptionally better on making tax policy fairer, ranking in at 3rd and 12th place respectively among 158 countries, Cambodia and Thailand have also progressed to earn 3rd and 4th place among the Mekong countries in this category.

Oxfam recommends governments to invest 15% on social spending. China, Thailand and Vietnam have all exceeded the recommended level, which has significantly contributed to narrowing inequality. Since the 2018 CRIL, Vietnam has doubled health spending. However, there is further need



to reduce health inequalities and the substantial amount that individuals are paying for the cost of healthcare. Following reforms of its healthcare system, Vietnam’s response to the Covid-19 pandemic has been among the best in the world. The government is also considering integrating the reduction of inequality as a central part of its upcoming 10-year plan, which would be a very important and positive step.

Thailand has a highly efficient universal healthcare system that provides a comprehensive package for all citizens, disbursing 277 USD per capita, whereas in the United States, where millions of people are still not insured, spending is at 11,000 USD per capita. 80% of Thailand’s healthcare is delivered by the public sector, compared to the United States, where it is mainly delivered by the private sector and based on private health insurance, thereby rendering it extremely expensive. Moreover, Thailand spends 15.6% of its budget on public health, and counts itself among the top 25 countries in the world to invest in this sector. Although Cambodia, Myanmar and Laos rank in the same places as previous years given the limited increase in public spending towards essential services, these countries have demonstrated an incredible effort to rapidly mobilize budgets to safeguard public health as soon as the Covid-19 pandemic was declared.

The Governance of Transboundary Water Resources is Complex

Good practice in water governance, particularly for transboundary rivers, emphasizes on rule- and knowledge-based regional cooperation. However, in certain sectoral and political contexts, these practices challenge the traditional culture of non-interference between countries and reinforces power inequalities. Decisions on how water and related resources are shared, developed and managed will determine whether the millions of people in the Lower Mekong - who rely on water resources and wild capture fisheries of the Mekong region - will improve their food security and strengthen their livelihoods or are further disadvantaged.

There are many actors, institutions and programs involved in water governance, each with different powers, approaches and varying degrees of influence. The diverse interests from investors, officials in government agencies, local users such as fishers and

farmers are challenging to reconcile despite the rhetoric of trade-offs, benefit-sharing and win-win solutions. As a result, water resource use and development continue to be contested within and between countries, particularly between upstream and downstream users and sectors that see unilateral decisions on the construction of major infrastructure such as mainstream hydropower dams despite public social and environmental concerns and investments in rule-based and formal multilateral processes.

There is a large and complex array of inter-governmental organizations and initiatives involved in water governance in the GMS. The emergence of new institutions and programs, in addition to the already broad array of actors, reflect changing geopolitics within the region, and this poses significant challenges to coordination, with different actors involved in different institutions, and to the multiplication of processes and new ways of engagement.

Marginalization is experienced in the formal processes of deliberation convened by governments, or through mandated processes within the Mekong River Commission, centered on intergovernmental facilitation, which lack the requirements for enabling meaningful public participation. It is also experienced in decision-making and approvals for specific projects, where requirements such as the Environmental and Social Impact Assessment are poorly implemented, or narrowly scoped. Those who benefit from development are not those who bear the risk, and public involvement in the consideration of development options is rare (ICEM, 2010). Formal requirements for stakeholder consultation and public participation are not standardized in policy or practice throughout the GMS.

With the growing pressure on the great rivers of the GMS and the rapidly changing economic, social and political contexts within each country and the wider region, there is significant potential and need to scale-up support for civil society across the region to play a greater role in shaping the trajectory of water resource and energy development. Good governance of water resources cannot be achieved without the meaningful participation of civil society, including the women and men who rely on these resources. This recognizes the unprecedented social and economic connectivity across the region,



Doan Van Phuc, member of Tan Phu Fisheries Group. The group made an agreement with the Srepok 3 hydropower dam company to use 360 square metres of the reservoir to set up a fish farm. Oxfam's partner has provided the group with training in aquaculture techniques, disease treatment and cage sanitation. The group is reaping the economic benefits of the farm and now working to scale it up, alongside building a community-based ecotourism project. Photo: Oxfam

the growing interest in social and environmental sustainability and the emergence of viable alternatives that challenge established assumptions on river resource valuation and development. This also recognizes that an informed, engaged and effective civil society can and should be able to influence river resource development to better respect the rights of riverine communities and better reflect the environmental, cultural and social values of rivers.

A More Inclusive, Equitable and Sustainable Mekong

Fair and inclusive water resource governance is of paramount importance to the future of the GMS and a key factor in the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.² Across the Mekong Region, women hold the primary role for meeting household water needs. Yet, they are often underrepresented in water governance, including water-user communities. Development policies fail to recognize women as key stakeholders in water management and perpetuate the cycle of gender inequality (Miletto et al., 2019). As noted in the High-Level Panel on Water, convened by the United Nations, it is recommended that practices strengthening water governance and ensuring that gender and social inclusivity are to be implemented alongside integrated water resource management at local, national and transboundary levels (UN, 2018). Oxfam's experience of implementing the *Inclusive Civil Society in Water Governance in the Mekong* project (2014-2020) has indicated that the people who are most affected by hydropower infrastructure development and management such as local and rural communities, women, ethnic minorities and indigenous people, continue to be routinely excluded from participation in decision-making processes. When included, the process is often marginal and characterized by one-directional information flow during gathering or events (Oxfam, 2019). While progress has been made in raising awareness and capacity to engage in policy and decision-making fora at all levels, further progress is needed to embed these examples as standard practice or policy. Furthermore, the documentation and consideration of the social and gendered impacts of water resource development are regularly ignored or understated. While there have been improvements in women's participation in water governance over recent years, the pace of change is far too slow to achieve SDGs 5 and 6. Efforts to advocate for women's representation in water governance and make funding for water development conditional on it must continue (Oxfam, 2020).

The Future of the Mekong Lies with Fostering Closer and More Equal Collaboration

Several arguments in this article have pointed to the growing disparities and discontent between women and men, downstream and upstream communities, and rural and urban populations widened by development initiatives in the Mekong region. There are nonetheless possibilities to bridge these disparities by building on good practices, and

² In particular SDGs 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 10, 13, 14 and 17.

making further commitments to reduce inequalities with fairer taxation, improving labor rights and skill development, increasing social spending targeting vulnerable groups, and deprioritizing large scale unsustainable extractive projects that negatively impact the river and its watershed ecosystem, as well as the livelihoods of resource-dependent communities and their ways of living. In various countries, governments are reviewing how policies can be further enforced to reduce, and ultimately prevent social and environmental impacts caused by development from aggravating these tensions. Mekong governments have the potential to offer its leadership, worldwide, in river management by fostering equal partnerships and jointly exploring an exemplary circular economic investment model for the Mekong region. Development agencies, civil society organizations (CSOs), indigenous groups, women and youth will be key in supporting governments in defining greener development solutions that will enable benefits to be shared more equitably and in the long term.

Emerging from the Covid-19 pandemic, the region has an opportunity to invest differently in new infrastructure and economies that connect sustainably and regenerate ecosystems and communities rather than further fracture and exploit. Enhanced collaboration is key to ensuring that the voices of the most vulnerable are amplified and enacted upon, and this in turn provides governments with opportunities to detect early signs of growing discontent and manage conflicts. Governments have already demonstrated their commitment to foster more inclusive consultations and dialogues with affected communities, CSOs and the private sector. Reducing the pressures emanating from the CLV-DTA on the Mekong and Sekong river system is a locale where further multi-stakeholder dialogue is needed between Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. Agreeing on a coordinated approach would enable all lower Mekong countries to prevent flood disaster and drought, conduct water quality monitoring, as well as address and avoid transboundary water conflicts between existing users and new users, and between small users and large users.

As a recommendation, Mekong institutions should work together to further deprioritize large-scale unsustainable hydropower projects, and instead promote leadership in green economies by exploring joint investment in large-scale alternative energy solutions such as solar and wind power, and focusing on improving off-grid microgrid efficiency for rural populations, especially the floating population and communities on the Mekong and its tributaries to support micro, small and medium sized enterprises in their safe food production.

In recent years, youths across the Mekong region have shown strong engagement in advocating for environmental justice and the protection of natural resources. The worrying impacts of climate change and environment degradation, caused by construction and over-exploitation, are examples of life-threatening realities that future generations will have to face. Recognizing this, youth groups and activists are demonstrating that they are empowered more than ever to hold governments

accountable and demand action. As energetic users of the internet, youths are finding innovative ways to raise awareness of environmental sustainability and exemplifying how digital technologies can deliver impactful messages and outreach, such as through social media activism. Driven by its conviction that youths are critical actors of change, Oxfam actively engages with young women and men to increase their leadership capacity in various thematic areas, including natural resource management. Oxfam has organized various workshops in Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos and China to assist youths with channeling their concerns for the environment and society’s welfare into action plans and strategies that will enable them to participate in development decision making processes to define their own futures. With the appropriate tools and know-how, youths will continually demonstrate that they are force to be reckoned with.



Youths from Mekong nations joined the “Race up the Mekong” campaign to discuss and share each knowledge about the Mekong river. Photo: Oxfam

References

- ADB. (2012). *Poverty Data: Lao PDR*. ADB. <https://www.adb.org/countries/lao-pdr/poverty>
- ADB. (2016). *Poverty Data: Viet Nam*. ADB. <https://www.adb.org/countries/vietnam/poverty>
- ADB. (2017). *Poverty Data: Myanmar*. ADB. <https://www.adb.org/countries/myanmar/poverty>
- ADB. (2018). *Poverty Data: Cambodia*. ADB. <https://www.adb.org/countries/cambodia/poverty>
- ADB. (2018). *Poverty Data: People's Republic of China*. ADB. <https://www.adb.org/countries/prc/poverty>
- ADB. (2018). *Poverty Data: Thailand*. ADB. <https://www.adb.org/countries/thailand/poverty>
- Deetes, P. (2020). *Scrapping of Mekong 'rapids-blasting' long overdue*. Bangkok Post. <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1853119/scrapping-of-mekong-rapids-blasting-long-overdue#:~:text=Small%20boats%20are%20moored%20along,Phanom%20province%20on%20Jan%202029.&text=The%20project%20has%20since%20been,border%20at%20the%20Golden%20Triangle>.
- Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). (2020). *Rapid Assessment of COVID-19 Outbreak on Agriculture and Food Security in Cambodia: Policy Responses*. FAO.
- InfoRD. (2016). *Vietnam needs to act in Mekong Delta as land sinking, seas rising: experts*. InfoRD. <http://inford.org/vietnam-needs-to-act-in-mekong-delta-as-land-sinking-seas-rising-experts/>
- International Centre for Environmental Management (ICEM). (2010). *Summary of the Final Report: Strategic Environmental Assessment of Hydropower on the Mekong Mainstream*. MRC. <http://www.mrcmekong.org/assets/Publications/Consultations/SEA-Hydropower/SEA-FR-summary-13oct.pdf>
- Ishida, M. (2012). *Development of Five Triangle Areas in the Greater Mekong Subregion*, Bangkok Research Centre.

- Mekong River Commission (MRC). (2019). *State of the Basin Report 2018*. Mekong River Commission.
- Mekong River Commission (MRC). (2020). *Sanakham Hydropower Project*. Mekong River Commission. <https://www.mrcmekong.org/news-and-events/consultations/pnpca-prior-consultations/sanakham-hydropower-project/>
- Miletto, M., Pangare, V., Thuy, L. (2019). *Tool 1 – Gender-responsive indicators for water assessment, monitoring and reporting*. UNESCO.
- Oxfam (2020). *Oxfam Briefing Note: Achieving Sustainable Development Goals 5 and 6: The case for gender-transformative water programmes*. Oxfam
- Oxfam. (2019). *Completion Report. Inclusion Project (March 2014–September 2019)*. Oxfam.
- Oxfam. (2020.) *Fighting Inequality in the time of COVID-19: The Commitment to Reducing Inequality Index 2020*. Oxfam. <https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/621061/rr-fighting-inequality-covid-19-cri-index-081020-en.pdf>
- United Nations (UN). (2018). *High-Level Panel on Water outcome document*. UN. <https://www.unwater.org/high-level-panel-on-water-outcome-document/>
- Weatherby, C., Eyler, B. (2017). *Letters from the Mekong. Mekong Power Shift: Emerging Trends in the GMS Power Sector*. The Stimson Center.
- White, H. (2020). *More hydropower proposed as energy demand fluctuates*. Khmer Times. <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/50738965/more-hydropower-proposed-as-energy-demand-fluctuates/>

ASEAN CENTRALITY AND ATROCITIES PREVENTION IN THE MEKONG: MAINSTREAMING PROTECTION OF VULNERABLE POPULATIONS

*Dr. Noel M. Morada**

Asia Pacific Centre for the Responsibility to Protect (APR2P)

Abstract

Protection of vulnerable populations in the Mekong sub-region should be given priority attention by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and elevate the emerging human security challenges posed by construction of hydropower dams as a regional security issue. This essay argues that unless ASEAN takes a central role in the protection of vulnerable populations, the Mekong will soon become a conflict hotspot as some riparian states engage in uncontrolled mega dam development projects that have negative impacts on other states in the sub-region even as geopolitical competition among major powers for influence goes unchecked. Given the limitations of the Mekong River Commission and the potential for increasing risk of atrocities, it is in ASEAN's interest to play a leading role in encouraging its member states to mainstream atrocities prevention as a framework for protecting vulnerable populations by promoting good governance, upholding rule of law and protection of human rights, as well as ensuring accountability and transparency.

Overview

The Mekong sub-region is emerging as a conflict hotspot in Southeast Asia as some riparian states engage in hydropower development activities that have negative impacts on other states in the sub-region. Specifically, several mega dams have been lined up for construction in Laos notwithstanding growing concerns over their environmental impact on marine ecosystems and lives of vulnerable populations in the sub-region. Over the last two decades, the building of hydropower dams in China, Myanmar, and Laos was met with strong resistance not just from local and international environment and human rights protection advocates but also from some riparian states¹ who were concerned about the risks that these hydropower projects pose to human security, food security, and environmental security of affected communities along the lower Mekong

** Dr. Noel M. Morada is the Director of Regional Diplomacy and Capacity Building of the Asia Pacific Centre for the Responsibility to Protect (APR2P).*

¹ A number of Thai and Cambodian NGO networks have criticised ongoing mega dam projects in China, Myanmar, and Laos.

Basin. The threat of climate change, especially drought and flooding, further exacerbates the risks involved in implementing these projects.

Meanwhile, geopolitics is also increasing the risk of a major conflict in the Mekong as China and the US compete for influence among the five downstream ASEAN member states—Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam. These major powers are courting support for their respective initiatives in managing the river's resources, ecosystem, and sustainable development. Specifically, Beijing's Lancang Mekong Cooperation forum that was launched in 2015 is linked to its strategic Belt and Road Initiative and serves as a platform where China and Myanmar could engage with the four ASEAN riparian states who remain the only members of the Mekong River Commission (MRC) since it was launched in 1995. For its part, Washington's Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI) launched in 2009 (and later transformed in September 2020 as the Mekong-US Partnership with five downstream ASEAN members) aims to improve the transboundary management and food and water security across the sub-region. In 2011, the US Congress passed the Mekong River Protection Act, which directed its American officials in the World Bank and Asian Development Bank to oppose any loan or financial and technical assistance for the construction of hydroelectric dams in the Mekong River Basin unless the Secretary of the Treasury "submits a related report providing certain assurances" (Piesse, 2020). The revitalized involvement of the US in the Mekong attempts to counter China's growing economic influence in the sub-region, which it views as 'predatory' for some of the poor states like Laos who may be falling into infrastructure-linked 'debt trap' and opaque business practices of Beijing's state-owned corporations. With China's robust infrastructure development projects in the Mekong and geographic proximity to riparian states, Washington is facing enormous difficulty in competing with Beijing in the subregion due to the latter's strong influence and capacity to exert pressure on Cambodia and Laos, for example (Piesse, 2020).

South Korea and Japan have also formed a similar partnership with the five ASEAN members in the Mekong in pursuit of their strategic and economic interests. The second Mekong-ROK Summit and the 12th Mekong-Japan Summit were both held in November 2020. Some Chinese scholars view the involvement of external powers like the US as responsible for heightened criticisms of China's mega dam construction in the upper Mekong from lower riparian states. They warned ASEAN members to be wary of 'external forces' politicising issues in the Mekong and that the sub-region 'must not become second South China Sea' (Zhai & Deng, 2020).

Amidst all of the above developments, ASEAN has neither been front and central in managing the growing human security concerns in the Mekong nor elevated them as part of the region's strategic issues. Although a dialogue mechanism was set up in 1996 called the ASEAN Mekong Basin Development Cooperation (AMBDC), its last ministerial meeting was held in August 2013 and it has not been convened since then. Even so, the objectives of the AMBDC were quite narrow, focusing primarily on raising

funds for trade and infrastructure development among lower Mekong ASEAN member states and donor countries.² It appears that ASEAN has consciously allowed MRC to take the lead in dealing with various issues affecting the riparian states (even as Myanmar and China are not members of the Commission). The Mekong Summit of Leaders among its four member states—Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam—did not take place until 2010 and is held only every four years. China and Myanmar have sent ministerial level representatives to participate in the last three summit meetings along with one representative from the international donor community. As an inter-governmental coordinating body, the commission has not been effective in addressing some of the major concerns raised by non-state stakeholders in the Mekong. For example, the legitimacy of the MRC’s approval process of the Luang Prabang hydropower project’s environmental impact was questioned by Thai stakeholders in November 2019 for not being transparent. It also cited the lack of transparency in the Xayaburi dam project, Laos’ first large Mekong mainstream dam, which accepted only 4 out of 800 recommendations submitted to the dam developer and failed to consider other recommendations that are more relevant in addressing environmental impact issues (Radio Free Asia [RFA], 2019).³ The MRC, which also lacks enforcement capability can only encourage the cooperation of member states and cannot sanction an erring member as this would violate its sovereignty. That China is not a member of the Commission renders it incapable of holding Beijing to account for the negative impacts of mega dams already operating in the Upper Mekong Basin, particularly their role in causing severe drought in the lower riparian states for the last two years (RFA, 2019).

Mainstreaming the Protection of Vulnerable Populations

ASEAN must begin to recognise that the foregoing concerns in the Mekong are issues that affect the stability of the region. Specifically, in the context of promoting human security and mainstreaming the protection of vulnerable populations, the Association should start elevating these issues as part of its priority regional security agenda for three reasons. First, the negative impact of mega dams in the Mekong could undermine ASEAN’s goal of narrowing the development gap among its members. Poverty levels in the Lower Mekong Basin remain high despite notable progress in alleviating its incidence among communities in the subregion. They are also vulnerable to displacement or dislocation not only because of more dams being built, but also due to climate change, drought, flooding, and other dam-related disasters, which altogether could exacerbate further the poverty level in affected communities in the Mekong Basin. That Myanmar is not a member of the MRC means that it is excluded from the

² See Basic Framework of ASEAN-Mekong Basin Development Cooperation, Kuala Lumpur, 17 June 1996, from <https://www.asean.org/wp-content/uploads/images/2013/economic/mbdc/basic%20framework%20of%20ambdc.pdf>

³ The accepted recommendations dealt with sediment, fish migration, and transnational impact. Other recommendations such as unusual changes in water flow, arbitrary opening and closing of dam gates, and bank erosion were not accepted for consideration.

coordination of strategic plans related to addressing the environmental problems facing the Mekong basin.

Second, ASEAN cannot ignore the fact that internal conflicts in some of its member states have spillover effects in the stability of the region. For example, failure to address the legitimate grievances of non-state stakeholders could increase the risk of violence and atrocities in the Mekong sub-region. This is particularly so if governments and state agents resort to the suppression and violation of human rights of affected communities and environmental protection NGOs that are advocating in their behalf. In Myanmar, for example, construction of dams in conflict-affected areas could exacerbate internal displacement of persons and increase outward migration of people to neighbouring countries. Under Myanmar's National League for Democracy (NLD), the revival of Myitsone dam construction in 2018 raised concerns among the people in Kachin state. The dam has been at the center of continuing conflict between ethnic armed groups and the Tatmadaw as the latter provided security to the China Power Investment Corporation involved in the hydropower project. The expanded military presence contributed to the outbreak of violence in Kachin state, which forced the Thein Sein government to suspend the project in 2011 (Lindsay, 2019). In Cambodia, there was also strong community resistance to the construction of the Cheay Areng Dam and the Lower Sesan 2 Dam (Hensengerth, 2017).

Finally, ASEAN needs to fill in the gaps stemming from limitations in the mandate and capability of the MRC with regard to addressing the root causes of conflict in the Mekong among state and non-state stakeholders and in mitigating the negative impact of hydropower projects. While the commission is based on an international treaty and a set of water usage rules, it cannot deal with political dimensions of conflicts in the Mekong that may otherwise be negotiated or managed through annual ministerial meetings or summit of ASEAN leaders, for example.

As noted above, the Mekong Summit of Leaders only takes place every four years and policy coordination is undertaken mainly through the respective national committees across four MRC member states. As the Commission undertakes decentralisation process as part of its strategic plan and donor contributions decline, the MRC will likely fail to respond to serious concerns raised by various stakeholders concerning the negative impact of continuing hydropower dam construction. For now, the Commission will continue to give priority to conducting technical studies or strategic surveys funded by donor countries on how to deal with the impact of dam constructions on ecosystems, livelihood, and food security. However, it can only rely on the voluntary cooperation of its members to implement its recommendations.

To some extent, the MRC is also careful not to tread into politically sensitive areas within member states, particularly when linking - for example - the Mekong's current state with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In its State of the Basin

Report 2018 (2019, p. xxi), the MRC identified six SDG goals that are relevant to the current state of the Mekong, namely: SDG 2 (end hunger, achieve food security, and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture); SDG 6 (ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all); SDG 7 (ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all); SDG 13 (take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts); SDG 14 (conserve and sustainable use of oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development); and SDG 15 (protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss).

While the report noted significant progress in achieving SDGs 2, 6, and 7 by MRC member states, it also pointed to a major concern, which is the “decline in wetland areas, deforestation, and threat to ecosystems” (MRC, 2019). As regards SDG 15, it also noted that “pressures are increasing on capture of fisheries and remaining environmental assets” which necessitates “urgent action...to address these issues” (MRC, 2019). However, it did not specify what actions need to be undertaken by MRC states to address these concerns both at the domestic and sub-regional levels. Importantly, the report did not include SDG 16 (promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels), which is quite relevant in addressing the legitimate grievances of affected communities and various non-state stakeholders in the sub-region. This is particularly true not only in conflict affected areas in the Mekong such as Shan state in Myanmar but also in Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand where there is strong community-level resistance to the construction of mega dams. Accordingly, SDG 16 is also important in building accountability mechanisms not only for MRC member states but also for China and Myanmar given the increasing clamour for more transparency in approving dam construction projects, monitoring of ecosystems, and the sharing of data across all Mekong riparian states.

Atrocity Prevention and Protection of Vulnerable Populations

The connection between mass atrocities and climate is a novel research area among scholars. According to Charlotte Blatt, available research in this area “discusses the intersection between the environment and civil war, rather than the impact of environmental degradation on human security outcomes like mass atrocities.” Accordingly, scholars have started “to focus more explicitly on connecting climate change to the potential for mass atrocities” specifically by using “demographic-environmental stress (DES)”, which monitors “rapid population growth, overexploitation of renewable resources, and unequal access to these resources.” Specifically, scholars have demonstrated that DES “can set up two pathways to conflict—through state failure and state exploitation—both of which could result in mass atrocities” (Blatt, 2017).

Among Mekong riparian states, Myanmar is at very high risk for atrocity crimes given its decades-old ethnic armed conflicts and the Tatmadaw's impunity against ethnic minority groups and the Rohingya people. While international attention has focused on the Rakhine crisis in Myanmar since August 2017, there is no question that strong community-level resistance to mega dam construction projects in Kachin state could also exacerbate further the risk of atrocities in that part of the country. Specifically, the risk of violent protests erupting again in Kachin state is quite high, especially if the NLD government pushes through its plan to revive the construction of the Myitsone dam project. Mega dam projects are also planned along the Salween in Shan state, which are opposed by local communities in the conflict area. As it is, tension is already quite high in the state in the aftermath of two assassinations of an election official and a newly elected MP who won a seat for the NLD in the recent national elections (Zaw Zaw Htwe, 2020). Although fighting between Ta'ang and Shan ethnic armed groups has declined in the state, armed clashes increased four-fold in 2020 compared to the previous year between the Tatmadaw forces and the combined Restoration Council of Shan State/Shan State Army-South (RCSS/SSA-S) troops even though the latter is a signatory to the 2015 National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) (Bynum, 2020). Since 2016, unarmed civilians have been targets of attacks in Shan state with at least 31 civilians killed. Several armed groups from the military, military-backed militias, and ethnic Ta'ang and Shan forces operate in Kyaukse, the state's capital (Zaw Zaw Htwe, 2020).

Although the risk of atrocities remains low in Laos and Cambodia at the national level, the situation sub-nationally along the Mekong may be quite different. Here, social and economic risk factors for atrocities are higher as vulnerable people's legitimate grievances are not addressed and their expectations are not met. For example, over 600 Lao families who were displaced by Chinese-backed dam projects and resettled in villages are reportedly facing hardships and lack of access to livelihood or work. They have not been appropriately compensated for lost land, property, and crops even as they could not grow rice in the area they were resettled. Some also complained of lack of access to clean water (RFA, 2020a; 2020c; 2020d) while other families had no choice but to accept the state's compensation even though they are below the fair amount they were expecting (RFA, 2020e). Meanwhile, survivors of the dam collapse in July 2018 that caused the worst flooding in Laos in decades are reportedly still struggling to recover due to inadequate support from the dam project developers and the Lao government. Some 71 people were killed and over 14,000 were displaced as the flood wiped out all or part of the 19 villages in Champassak province (RFA, 2020b). A number of human rights and environmental NGOs have been demanding government and corporate accountability for the disaster even as they criticized the slow and inadequate response of the Lao government for appropriate compensation for survivors (RFA, 2020b). Many survivors are still complaining of late compensation payments for houses and land lost in the disaster (RFA, 2020f).

Meanwhile, in Cambodia, a coalition of NGOs called the Cambodia Mekong Alliance (CMA) composed of 52 organizations criticized the MRC for failing to respond to many of the concerns it raised with regard to the mega dam projects in Laos. In 2018, it declined to participate in a forum organised by the Commission due to take place in Vientiane after its concerns over the potential impacts of the Pak Lay and Pang Beng dams were ignored (RFA, 2018). The most affected vulnerable communities in Cambodia are those whose livelihoods are dependent on fishing in the Tonle Sap Lake along the Mekong. Many Cambodian fishermen have complained about the significant decline in their fish catch, which have declined by 10 to 20 percent of their usual fishing haul. Extreme low flows along the Mekong have reduced the rich nutrients that provide sustenance to hundreds of species in the Tonle Sap. Apart from climate change factors that contribute to drought such as the El Niño phenomenon, the dwindling current in the Mekong river was also due to mega dam projects in China and Laos. In July 2019, for example, both countries conducted tests on two hydroelectric dams, which sharply reduced the flow of water in the river for several weeks (Los Angeles Times, 2020). (The tests also had an impact on many farmers in northern Thailand whose crops were already destroyed by long drought and forced the Thai government to declare an emergency and mobilised its military to respond to the crisis [Bangkok Post, 2019]).

Conclusion

Based on the foregoing discussion, the risk of social unrest remains very high in affected communities along the Mekong. If governments respond to the legitimate grievances of vulnerable populations with repression, impunity, and systematic human rights violations, escalation of conflict leading to atrocity crimes may become inevitable. It is therefore important that ASEAN member states in the Mekong be responsive to the plight of affected communities by promoting good governance and upholding the rule of law and human rights protection especially of the poor and marginalised people. They should also adhere to relevant international and ASEAN norms on protection of minorities who will be affected by hydropower dam projects.

From a strategic perspective, ASEAN should take a more proactive and central role in dealing with traditional and human security challenges in the Mekong sub-region. ASEAN's centrality in the regional security architecture may be undermined if the growing involvement of major powers engaged in a geopolitical competition in the Mekong goes unchecked. It is also in the group's interest to be directly involved in protecting vulnerable populations in connection with ASEAN's goal of narrowing the development gap in the Mekong, particularly in alleviating poverty and improving the overall level of human development of peoples of Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar.

References

- Bangkok Post. (2019, July 19). *Prayut orders army to be on alert*.
<https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1715975/prayut-orders-army-to-be-on-alert>
- Bengali, S. (2020, January 20). 'No fish': How dams and climate change are choking Asia's great lake. *Los Angeles Times*. <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-01-20/how-climate-change-and-dams-threaten-one-of-the-worlds-great-lakes>
- Blatt, C. (2017, August 16). Climate Change and Mass Atrocities: A New Research Frontier. *US Holocaust Memorial Museum*. <https://www.ushmm.org/genocide-prevention/blog/climate-change-and-mass-atrocities-a-new-research-frontier>
- Bynum, E. (2020, November 6). 2020 Elections in Myanmar: Political Violence and Demonstration Trends. *ACLEDA*. <https://acleddata.com/2020/11/06/2020-elections-in-myanmar-political-violence-and-demonstration-trends/>
- Hensengerth, O. (2017, August 24). Water conflicts and development in the Mekong: What role for ASEAN?. *The Asia Dialogue*.
<https://theasiadialogue.com/2017/08/24/water-conflicts-and-development-in-the-mekong-what-role-for-asean/>
- Lindsay, S. (2019, April 29). A Chinese mega-dam in Myanmar is hampering the peace process. *ASEAN Today*. <https://www.aseantoday.com/2019/04/the-chinese-mega-dam-in-myanmar-that-is-hampering-the-peace-process/>
- Mekong River Commission. (2019). *State of the Basin Report 2018*, p. xxi.
- Piessé, M. (2020, July 16). Chinese Intentions Towards the Mekong River and Mainland South-East Asia. *Future Directions International*.
<https://www.futuredirections.org.au/publication/chinese-intentions-towards-the-mekong-river-and-mainland-south-east-asia/>
- Radio Free Asia. (2018, September 13). *Cambodian NGOs Reject Invitation to Regional Forum on Proposed Lao Dams*.
<https://www.rfa.org/english/news/cambodia/forum-09132018160330.html>, accessed on 27 November 2020.
- Radio Free Asia. (2019, November 11). *Stakeholders Question Farness of MRC's Impact Assessment for Laos' Luangprabang Dam*.
<https://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/laos-luang-prabang-jinghong-11112019162545.html?searchterm:utf8:ustring=%20mekong%20river%20800%20recommendations>
- Radio Free Asia. (2020a, January 9). *Lao Villagers Displaced by Dams Struggle to Survive in Resettlement Sites*. <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/struggle-01092020131031.html?searchterm:utf8:ustring=%20mekong;>

- Radio Free Asia. (2020b, July 22). *Survivors of Laos' Worst Dam Disaster Still Struggling Two Years Later*. <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/xepian-xenamnoi-two-year-07222020211103.html>
- Radio Free Asia. (2020c, July 28). *Lao Villagers Displaced by Dams in Luang Prabang Still Wait for Promised Land*. <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/land-07282020183459.html?searchterm:utf8:ustring=%20mekong>
- Radio Free Asia. (2020d, August 18). *Lao Villagers Displaced by Dam Are Left Without Farms, Money For New Land*. <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/displaced-08182020144049.html?searchterm:utf8:ustring=%20mekong>
- Radio Free Asia. (2020e, September 15). *Last Group of Families Displaced by Laos' Nam Theun 1 Dam Accept Compensation*. <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/compensation-09152020193034.html?searchterm:utf8:ustring=%20mekong>
- Radio Free Asia. (2020f, November 25). *Compensation Delays for Survivors of Laos' Worst Dam Disaster*. <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/pnpc-11252020154134.html>
- Zaw Zaw Htwe. (2020, November 23). Myanmar's Parties Demand Justice for Assassinated Shan State Newly Elected MP. *The Irrawaddy*. <https://www.irrawaddy.com/elections/myanmars-parties-demand-justice-assassinated-shan-state-newly-elected-mp.html>
- Zhai, K. & Deng, H. (2020, August 31). Chinese academics: Mekong must not become second South China Sea. *ThinkChina*. <https://www.thinkchina.sg/chinese-academics-mekong-must-not-become-second-south-china-sea>

WATER SECURITY IN CAMBODIA: BETWEEN TOO MUCH AND TOO LITTLE

*Dr. Mak Sithirith**
Water Governance Specialist

Abstract

Cambodia has too much water during the wet season, and too little water in the dry season, which drives a cycle of frequent floods and drought. These extremes have destroyed crops, property, infrastructure, and lives. The cycle has contributed to the country's poverty. Thus, water management is key to the development of Cambodia. This article seeks to answer the question: Why does Cambodia remain vulnerable to these extremes of water supply and how does the on-off cycle undermine the country's development? What can we do to improve the water resources management and livelihoods of Cambodian population? In answering these questions, this article examines Cambodia's water resources, its management systems, and the external implications thereof, using case studies of irrigation schemes in Cambodia and hydropower development in the Mekong subregion. It concludes that the issue of water management is equated with irrigation management. Cambodia's irrigation systems are unable to cope with tremendous volumes of water. Further complications have arisen from the construction of hydropower dams in the Upper Mekong and rubber dams in the Lower Mekong in Vietnam's Mekong Delta. These have contributed to water insecurity in Cambodia.

Background

Cambodia has too much water during the wet season and too little water in the dry season, which drives a relentless cycle of floods and droughts. These extremes have destroyed crops, properties, infrastructure, and lives. In addition to earlier periods of conflict, these conditions have contributed to poverty. This article seeks to explain why Cambodia is so vulnerable to droughts and floods, and how these conditions undermine the country's development and stature. It also examines what can be done to improve the country's water resources management and livelihoods of the population. Crucial factors are water resource availability in Cambodia, its management systems and the external implications. The challenges are illustrated by case studies of irrigation schemes in Cambodia and hydropower development in the Greater Mekong sub-region.

** Dr. Mak Sithirith is water governance specialist. He is a strong advocate for resource governances in the Tonle Sap Lake and the Mekong.*

Floods and water scarcity are two key dimensions of water security. Water security has been defined as the reliable availability of an acceptable quantity and quality of water for health, livelihoods, and production, coupled with an acceptable level of water-related risks (Grey & Sandoff, 2007). UN (2013) defines water security as “the capacity of a population to safeguard sustainable access to adequate quantities of acceptable quality water for sustaining livelihoods, human well-being, and socio-economic development, for ensuring protection against water-borne pollution and water-related disasters, and for preserving ecosystems in a climate of peace and political stability.”

Water security underlies all dimensions of human health and well-being, and is fundamental to both food and energy production (Srinivasan et al., 2017).

The most common threat to water security is water scarcity, or the lack of sufficient available water resources to meet the demands of water usage within a region. Water scarcity involves water stress, water shortage or deficits, and water crisis. Water scarcity can be a result of two factors: physical (absolute) water scarcity and economic water scarcity, where physical water scarcity results from inadequate natural water resources to supply a region's demand, and economic water scarcity results from poor management of the sufficient available water resources (Falkenmark et al., 2006).

Flooding is another key aspect of water security. Floods can be defined as a temporary covering of land by water outside its normal confines. Flooding in most cases is a natural phenomenon which, for example, in natural floodplains cannot be classified as a threat, such as in Cambodia's Tonle Sap lake and the Mekong floodplain. However, floods in intensively used catchments are often influenced by man, through land use, river training etc. (Schanze, 2006). Floods can also occur when the flow rate of a river exceeds the capacity of the river channel, particularly at bends or in the waterways. Damage to elements exposed to floods depends on their vulnerability, which can be divided into three basic areas of flood vulnerability: social and cultural, economic and ecological vulnerability. Social and cultural vulnerability refers to loss of life, health impacts (injuries), loss of vitality, stress, social impacts, loss of personal articles, and loss of cultural heritage. Economic vulnerability alludes to direct and indirect financial losses by damage to property assets, basic material and goods, reduced productivity, and relief efforts. Ecological vulnerability comprises anthropogenic pollution of waters, soils and ecological systems with their biota (Messner & Meyer, 2005).

Improving water management is key to addressing water security. On one hand, it concerns the capacity of societies and ecosystems to respond to water insecurities in terms of variations in either quantity or quality of water as well as water-related disasters through measures such as building infrastructure and investing in technology to make water available and accessible for health, livelihoods, the ecosystem, and productive economies (Varis et al., 2017). On the other hand, much depends on the capacity of societies and ecosystems to adapt and build resilience to the changing water

quantity and quality (Sustainable Water Partnership, no date). In addition, water security is about “securing the ability to engage with and benefit from the sustainable hydro-social process that support water flows, water quality, and water services in supports of human capacities and well-being,” (Jepson et al. 2017).

This paper takes the conceptual discussion above to analyze water security in Cambodia. It is beyond the scope of this study to examine water security across the entire country. Rather, the study focuses on areas where critical water issues, particularly the problem of too much or too little water, are affecting the livelihood security of rural communities and risk impairing the functioning and sustainability of ecosystem services. The study begins with reviewing the theoretical framework related to water management and governance; exploring the policies, legal and institutional frameworks as well as the opportunities that exist to help improve water management throughout Cambodia; and examines two case studies to analyze water management – irrigation management in Cambodia and hydropower development in the Mekong region.

Results and Discussion

Water Resources in Cambodia

Cambodia covers an area of 181,035 km². About 86% (156,000 km²) of Cambodian territory falls in the Mekong catchments. Geographically, Cambodia is a lowland and downstream country in the Mekong. Hence, Cambodia has abundant water resources. About 120.6 km³ of water comes from within Cambodia territory and another 355.5km³ flows from outside, particularly via the Mekong River. Total renewable water resources (TRWR) in Cambodia are estimated at about 476 km³ annually. The TRWR per capita in Cambodia is estimated at about 30,352km³. This suggests that Cambodia has abundant water resources.

Only a small proportion of water resources flowing through Cambodia are utilized. About 2 million m³ of water is used in Cambodia each year, with agriculture the largest user, accounting for 94% of usage. Irrigation water withdrawal consumes an estimate of 1,928,000 m³ annually. The rest of the water is used for domestic uses and industry. The total amount of water withdrawal per capita is estimated at about 159 m³/year.

Table 1: Water resources availability and its uses in Cambodia

Water Resources	Volume of water
Internal Renewable Water Resources	120.6 Km ³ /year
External renewable water resources	355.5 Km ³ /year
Total renewable water resources (TRWR)	476.1 Km ³ /year
TRWR per capita	30,352 m ³ /year
<i>Source: FAO Database, 2020; http://www.fao.org/nr/water/aquastat/data/query/results.html</i>	

The internal water resources of Cambodia originate from five main river basins: (i) the Tonle Sap river basin, (ii) the Upper Mekong river basin; (iii) the 3S river basin; (iv) the Mekong Delta river basin; and (v) the Coastal river basin. The Tonle Sap river basin comprises 16 sub-river basins; the Upper Mekong river basin contains five sub-river basins; the 3S comprises three sub-river basins; the Mekong Delta, eight sub-river basins and the coastal river basin, eight sub-river basins. These rivers and sub-river basins provide abundant freshwater for Cambodia. The Mekong River is the source of external water flowing into Cambodia and then to the South China Sea, providing Cambodia with abundant water resources.

Water Management in Cambodia

Cambodia has a diverse range of freshwater sources including rivers, streams and lakes, most of which are designated as state property. The effective management of such water is a key responsibility of the Cambodian state. Water management in Cambodia has long been dominated by a centralized management system (Ojendal, 2000; Kumm, 2009). The centralized water management system in Cambodia is devoted to the development and management of irrigation systems. In this regard, water management has been equated as irrigation development and management.

There are over 2,500 irrigation schemes in Cambodia, categorized into small (50 to 200 ha), medium (200 to 5,000 ha) and large scale (5,000 ha-plus). There are a total of 47 large, 1,243 medium, and 1,254 small-scale schemes. In terms of irrigated areas, this corresponds to an annual total irrigated area of some 498,200 ha for large-scale schemes, 931,900 ha for medium, and 131,290 ha for small-scale schemes, giving a total of over 1,561,390 ha. Of total schemes, about 1,926 schemes have potential for rehabilitation (Ministry of Water Resources and Meteorology [MOWRAM], 2019).

Indeed, only 23% of these schemes function during the dry season, 49% function during the wet season and 23% function during both seasons. Of the 2,525 schemes, only 6% function well, 32% function only partially and 62% do not function as intended. More than 2,400 schemes need rehabilitation or reconstruction (Center for Agriculture Development Study [CEDAC], 2009). Regardless, irrigation in Cambodia takes water to cover only about 1,928 km³/year. This is a relatively small proportion of water given the country's relatively large volumes of total renewable water resources (see Table 2).

Thus, irrigation schemes are too small to deal with vast volumes of water in the wet season.

On the other hand, a common cause of operational problems in irrigation schemes is the way in which they are designed and/or constructed (Cambodia Development Resource Institute [CDRI], 2010). Some schemes date back to the Angkorian period (Chea, 2010), while others were conceived under the Khmer Rouge regime in the late 1970s. These schemes were old designs, and they are now coping with heavier flooding in the wet season and increasing water scarcity in the dry season, with double-cropping becoming more common. Indeed, most schemes were originally designed and built to provide wet-season supplementary irrigation only (Chea et al., 2011). As a result, these schemes do not retain enough water during the wet season for use later in the dry season (CDRI 2010). Flawed designs in relation to hydrological and geographical realities have also contributed to several existing schemes falling into disrepair, with failure already built into the design and/or occurring during construction.

Nonetheless, many large-scale irrigation schemes do not operate in the dry season due to a shortage of water, while many small-scale irrigation systems, such as those suitable for small farmers, were not completely built. Hence, the efficient use and governance of water resources continue to be a challenge to Cambodian farmers.

Table 2: Irrigation water withdrawal versus the total water resources

No.	Water Withdrawal	
1.	Agriculture	2.053 Km ³ /year
1.1	- Irrigation water withdrawal	-1.928 Km ³ /year
2.	Municipal water uses	0.098 Km ³ /year
3.	Industry	0.033 Km ³ /year
4	Total water withdrawal	2.184 Km ³ /year

Source: FAO Database, 2020; <http://www.fao.org/nr/water/aquastat/data/query/results.html>

In conclusion, water resources management policy has not been properly or concisely developed. It has been equated with management of the irrigation system. However, irrigation management per se does not necessarily address water resource issues, neither for agriculture nor water management. Consequently, agriculture remains vulnerable to water shortages or flooding. Thus, the country will continue facing the problems of excess water in the wet season and too little water in the dry season if water resources management is not appropriately addressed through implementable policies.

Hydropower Developments and Its Impacts

Hydropower development in the Mekong region has affected the external renewable water resources that flow into Cambodia, and therefore the country's water resources management. Indeed, between 1965 and 2005, 22 major dams were constructed in the four lower Mekong countries, with active storage capacity of about 15,328 million cubic meters (mcm) (MRC, 2017). After the 1990s, more hydropower projects were built in different countries in the Mekong region. China has put into operation 65 water dams along what it calls the Lancang River, or the upper half of the Mekong River, and its tributaries. In addition to the 65 dams, it planned to build 23 more dams in the Lancang River (Qingsheng, 2020). Among the 23 planned dams, 11 mainstream dams were built between 1993 and 2020, with electricity generating capacity of 21310 MW and the storage capacity of 47,644 MCM. Overall, the total water storage capacity of these dams will reach 130 billion cubic meters in the near future (Qingsheng, 2020).

In the lower Mekong region, Laos has planned to build nine mainstream dams and Cambodia has planned two dams. Two mainstream dams in Laos were completed and four more dams are under planning. In addition, some 132 hydropower projects are proposed, planned, or already built on tributaries in the lower Mekong river basin—25 dams are operational, 13 dams under construction, 23 dams licensed, and 74 dams planned (MRC, 2017). In the 3S river basin, 42 dams are planned, of which, three major hydropower dams have been completed on the Sekong, eight on the Sesan and seven on the Srepok, while 23 dams are under the planning (Piman et al., 2013).

The Chinese dams together with dams in the Lower Mekong Basin and the 3S dams could have storage capacity of 129 km³. These dams release water downstream to generate electricity, and water flows through Cambodia to Vietnam before entering the South China Sea. However, in the Vietnamese Mekong Delta, Vietnam built up the embankments and dike systems to control floods and protect agricultural lands from flooding (Le Thi Viet Hua et al., 2006). There are more than 1,000 man-made canals in the Vietnamese Mekong Delta region; massive engineering structures for transport, salinity protection, land reclamation and urbanization, and storm protection, that include roads and dikes against flooding, weirs to mitigate salinity intrusion, sewers that affect water quality, and embankments and landfills for urbanization (Hung et al., 2013; Yasuyuki, 2001; Huy, 2010; Hung et al., 2011). At the border areas between Vietnam and Cambodia, along the Vinh Te Canal, Vietnam also built dike systems to protect rice fields from floods. In 1999, Vietnam built rubber dams to control floods flowing from across the Cambodia border, for instance the Tha La and Tra Su rubber dams. These measures have led to increasing water levels and inundation on the Cambodian side of the border every year. When Vietnamese farmers finish harvesting their paddy rice, they start opening the rubber dams to allow water to flow from Cambodia to Vietnam (GIZ, 2016; Le et al., 2018).

Due to its lack of flood management infrastructure, Cambodia experiences severe floods every year along the border areas, particularly in Takeo, Prey Veng and Svay Rieng provinces. In Takeo Province, flood damage has occurred regularly in six of 10 districts near the border areas. There are four to five rubber dams constructed along the border areas by Vietnam, and their operations have exacerbated the flooding situation, prolonging the flooding duration in Cambodia. Apart from flooding, the province experiences dry-season droughts in its upper delta region. Thus, the hydropower dams and the rubber dams have made Cambodian territory and river system a reservoir of the Mekong and heightened water security issues (Sithirith, 2015).

As mentioned, Cambodia has experienced frequent floods and drought in the past two decades. The heavy floods in 1996, 2000 and 2011 destroyed crops, livelihoods, houses, infrastructure and roads (MRC, 2011). The floods in 2000 killed 350 people and caused US \$150 million's worth of damage to crops and infrastructure (NCDM, 2002). In 2011, a heavy flood killed 247 people and damaged property worth US\$521 million, with 220,000 ha of rice fields destroyed (MRC, 2011).

So far, the most severe droughts occurred in 2002 and 2012, and led to crop damage, lack of food, and disease (Phnom Penh Post, 2012). The drought in 2002 affected more than 2 million people and destroyed more than 100,000 ha of paddy fields (Nguyen & Shaw, 2011). The drought in 2012 devastated 9,990 ha of paddy fields and affected 122,297 ha across the country. Floods accounted for 70% of rice production losses between 1998 and 2002, while droughts accounted for 20% of losses and severely impacted food security (Royal Government of Cambodia [RGC], 2006). In 2016, the Cambodian government declared a state emergency due to lack of water for human consumption and so, the Cambodian state distributed water to its population across the country. In the Mekong Delta, more than 2 million Vietnamese and the majority of Vietnam's rice production area was impacted by low water levels and severe saline intrusion in 2016, resulting in over \$670 million of losses. In March 2016, China released water from upstream dams to relieve a drought in Vietnam (Eyler, Kwan & Weatherby, 2019).

The drought continued in 2019-20, partly due to disruptions to the annual reverse flow from the Mekong River to the Tonle Sap, which takes place from mid-May to mid-October. However, in 2019 and 2020, the main reverse flow into the Tonle Sap Lake only started in August, due to low water levels on the Mekong mainstream (Figure 1). Although the reverse flows started from early August, the water volume of the lake was still lower than its usual minimum level. Figure 1 shows seasonal changes in monthly flow volume up to Aug. 31 2020 for the TSL compared with the volumes in 2018, 2019, and the fluctuating levels (1997-2019). It shows that in July and August, the lake's water volume was at a critical level, compared with 2019 and historical minimum levels in the same period. This reveals that the Tonle Sap Lake is still affected by low inflows from the Mekong River and insufficient rainfall in the surrounding sub-catchments.

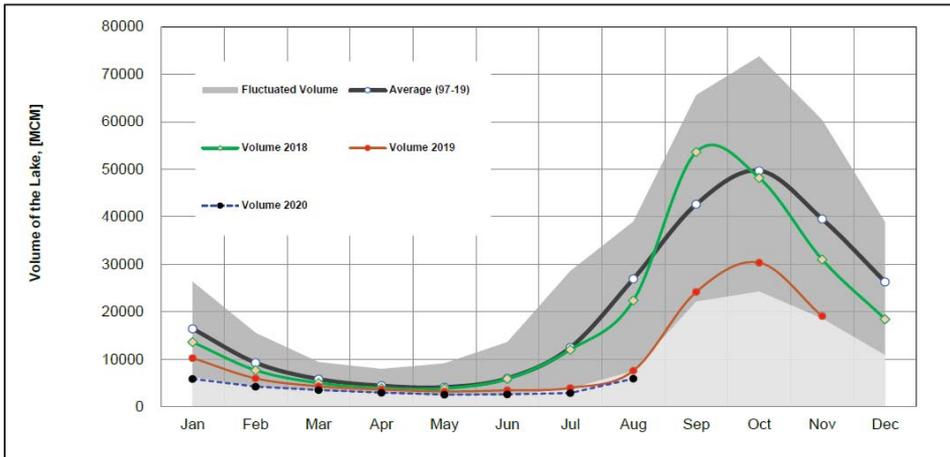


Figure 1. Monthly flow volume of the Tonle Sap (Source: MRC, 2020)

Successful management of water between the “too much” and “too little” scenarios is key to the future of Cambodia. The question is how to manage the excess water situation and bring it to manageable levels so that it can be utilized for the drought periods. Striking such a balance would enable far more effective water usage and facilitate Cambodia’s development. But this would require coordinated efforts at all levels to manage the water – something that is both challenging and requires political will. Cambodian leadership in different periods took note of the importance of water management for development of the state.

Conclusion

Cambodia has excessive water resources, and its water management infrastructure cannot deal with the huge volumes. At the same time, the country’s irrigation system has been too small to deal with the large volume of water. Thus, the large volume of water in the wet season becomes very destructive to livelihoods and infrastructure. Ultimately, Cambodia is only a channel for water flows from the Mekong river, and when the flow stops, not enough water remains. Therefore, irrigation systems cannot be equated to water management in Cambodia and should be replaced by large reservoirs and water-diversion schemes. The country’s water management must be reconsidered, with the aim of bringing together social, environmental, and engineering approaches in a more holistic approach to water management.

While Cambodia’s irrigation system is too small to deal with the huge volume of water from the Mekong and inside the country; hydropower dams in China, in the lower Mekong river basin and the 3S rivers discharge large volumes of water to Cambodia. However, Vietnam in the Mekong Delta locks the Mekong rivers with rubber dams and dike systems in August each year to allow the paddy rice to be harvested, causing heavy floods in Cambodia. The hydropower dams in the upper Mekong and the rubber dams

in the lower Mekong in Vietnam have made Cambodia a reservoir of the Mekong River Basin.

Given Cambodia's increasing vulnerability to water insecurity, water resources management is key to the country's future development. Yet it remains at the mercy of riparian countries, both upstream and downstream. At the same time, Cambodia's water policy has been largely consigned as "irrigation management," and agriculture suffers heavily due to water shortages, while flooding damages crops and agriculture almost every year. This is a crucial challenge for Cambodia that future generations must deal with.

References

- Cambodian Development Research Institute (CDRI). (2010). Empirical Evidence of Irrigation Management in the Tonle Sap Basin: Issues and Challenges. CDRI Working Paper Series No. 48. CDRI: Phnom Penh.
- Center for Agriculture Development Study (CEDAC). (2009). Inventory of Irrigation Schemes and Famer Water User Communities in Cambodia. CEDAC and Water Program, CEDAC: Phnom Penh.
- Chea, C. (2010). The Local Governance of Common Pool Resources: The Case of Irrigation Water in Cambodia. Working Paper Series No. 47. CDRI: Phnom Penh.
- Chea, C.; Phirun, N., Whitehead, I., Hirsch, P. and Thompson, A. (2011). Decentralised Governance of Irrigation Water in Cambodia: Matching Principles to Local Realities. Cambodia Development Resource Institute (CDRI) Working Paper Series No. 62. 46pp. Phnom Penh, Cambodia.
- Eyler, B., Kwan, R., and Weatherby, C. (2019). How China Turned Off the Tap on the Mekong River. Stimson, April 13, 2019. Available on <https://www.stimson.org/2020/new-evidence-how-china-turned-off-the-mekong-tap/>. Accessed on 12 October 2020.
- Falkenmark, M., Lundqvist, J., and Widstrand, C. (2006). Macro-scale water scarcity requires micro-scale approaches: Aspects of vulnerability in semi-arid development. *Journal of Water Resour. Plan. Manage.*, 132:129–132.
- GIZ. (2016). Water Management in the Upper Mekong Delta. Pre-feasibility study for the An Giang / Kien Giang floodway project. Available on <https://www.unique-landuse.de/images/publications/vereinheitlicht/Water-Management-in-the-upper-Mekong-Delta.pdf>. Accessed on 11 November 2020.
- Grey, D. & Sadoff, C. W. (2007). Sink or Swim? Water security for growth and development. *Water Policy*, 9 (6): 545–571, doi:10.2166/wp.2007.021. Retrieved 2020-11-16.
- Hung, N. N., Delgado, J. M., Tri, V. K., Hung, L. M., Merz, B., Bárdossy, A. and Apel, H. (2011). Floodplain hydrology of the Mekong Delta Vietnam. *Hydrological Processes* DOI: 10.1002/hyp.8183.
- Hung, N.N., Delgado, J. M., Günter, A., Merz, B., Bárdossy, A., and Apel, H. (2013). *Hydrological Processes*, Doi: 0.1002/hyp.9856.
- Huy, S. N. (2010). Methodology and adapted measures in Mekong delta for sustainable development in the climate change scenarios. Technical Report. National Research Project, Water Resource University, MARD, 2010.

- Jepson, W., Budds, J., Eichelberger, L., Harris, L., Norman, E., O'Reilly, K., Peason, A., Shah, S., Shinn, J., Staddon, C., Stoler, J., Wutich, A., and Young, S. (2017). Advancing human capabilities for water security: A relational approach. *Water Security*, 1:46-52. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wasec.2017.07.001>.
- Kummu, M. (2009). Water management in Angkor: Human impacts on hydrology and sediment transportation. *Journal of Environmental Management*, 90 (3):1413-1421.
- Le Thi Viet Hoa, L. Huu Nhan, H., N., Wolanski, E., Cong, T. T., & Shigeko, H. (2006). The combined impact on the flooding in Vietnam's Mekong River delta of local man-made structures, sea level rise, and dams upstream in the river catchment. *Estuarine, Coastal and Shelf Science*, 71:110-116.
- Le, T. N., Bregt, A. K., van Halsema, G. E., Hellegers, P. J. G. J., & Nguyen, L-D. (2018). Interplay between land-use dynamics and changes in hydrological regime in the Vietnamese Mekong Delta. *Land Use Policy*, 73, 269-280. DOI: 10.1016/j.landusepol.2018.01.030.
- Mekong River Commission (MRC). (2011). Flood Situation Report. November 2011, MRC Technical Paper No. 36, Mekong River Commission, 57 pp.
- Mekong River Commission (MRC). (2017). Thematic Report on the Positive and Negative Impacts of Hydropower Development on the Social, Environmental, and Economic Conditions of the Lower Mekong River Basin. The Council Study. Vientiane: MRC Secretariat.
- Mekong River Commission (MRC). (2020). Weekly Wet Season Situation Report in the Lower Mekong River Basin for August 25-31, 2020. Vientiane: MRC Secretariat.
- Messner F. and Meyer V. (2005) Flood damage, vulnerability and risk perception – challenges for flood damage research.
- Ministry of Water Resources and Meteorology (MOWRAM). (2019). National Irrigation and Water Resources Management Investment Program 2019-2033. MoWRAM: Phnom Penh, 2019.
- Nguyen, H. & Shaw, R. (2011). Chapter 3 Adaptation to Droughts in Cambodia, in Rajib Shaw, Huy Nguyen (ed.) *Droughts in Asian Monsoon Region (Community, Environment and Disaster Risk Management, Volume 8)*, Emerald Group Publishing Limited: UK, pp.49-66.
- Ojendal, J. (2000). *Sharing the Good: Modes of Managing Water Resources in the Lower Mekong River Basin*, (Göteborg University Department of Peace and Development Research).

- Phnom Penh Post. (2012). Drought hits Cambodian rice export. 21 August 2012. Available on <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/business/drought-hits-cambodias-rice-exports>. Accessed on 15 October 2020.
- Piman, T., T. Cochrane, M. Arias, A. Green & Dat, N.A. (2013). Assessment of Flow Changes from Hydropower Development and Operations in Sekong, Sesan, and Srepok Rivers of the Mekong Basin. *Journal of Water Resources Planning and Management*, 139, 723–732.
- Qingsheng, Meng. (2020). Why China built dams along the Lancang River. CGTN, dated 25th August 2020. Available on <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-07-23/Why-has-China-built-dams-along-the-Lancang-River-SmLDy7Yq08/index.html>. Accessed on 11 November 2020.
- Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC). (2006). National Adaptation Program of Action to Climate Change (NAPA). Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC), Phnom Penh.
- Schanze, jochen. (2006.) Flood risk management – a basic framework. In: Schanze J., Zeman E., Marsalek J. (eds) *Flood Risk Management: Hazards, Vulnerability and Mitigation Measures*. NATO Science Series, vol 67. Springer, Dordrecht. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-4598-1_1.
- Sithirith, M. (2015). Transboundary Cooperation between Cambodia and Viet Nam: Integrated Water Resources Management in the Mekong Delta. Consultancy report. Cambodian National Mekong Committee: Phnom Penh.
- Srinivasan, V., Konar, M. and Sivapalan, M. (2017) A dynamic framework for water security. *Water Security*, 1: 12-20.
- United Nations. (2013). Water Security and the Global Water Agenda. Policy and Analytical Briefs, 08 May 2013. Available on <https://www.unwater.org/publications/water-security-global-water-agenda/>. Accessed on 25 October 2020.
- Varis, O., Keskinen, M. and Kummu, M. (2017). Four dimensions of water security with a case of the indirect role of water in global food security. *Water Security*, 1:36-45.
- Yasuyuki K. (2001). Canal development and intensification of rice cultivation in the Mekong delta: A Case study in Can Tho province Vietnam. *Southeast Asian Studies*, 39: 70–85.

PROTECTING HEALTH SECURITY IN THE GREATER MEKONG SUBREGION

*Yang Jiayi and Li Fujian**
China Foreign Affairs University

Abstract

Since the end of the Cold War, there has been profound changes to the concept, subject and meaning of maintaining national security. With countries more closely interlinked, state behaviour is more exposed to external constraints and influence than ever before. Especially in public health, an international public health crisis not only directly threatens the safety of the people, but also profoundly affects the political stability and economic development of a country.

After weathering the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), avian influenza, Ebola, and other epidemics, the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) has conducted many successful practices of cooperation. This paper will first elaborate the relationship between health and security, followed by a discussion on the achievements of, and challenges to, health security cooperation in the GMS.

Public Health Cooperation from the Perspective of Non-Traditional Security

Traditional concepts of security focus on the military and political domains of a state and contest that security threats primarily come from state actors. Meanwhile, the concept of non-traditional security focuses on both trans-national and domestic security issues, with security threats from non-state actors. The seriousness and urgency of an international public health crisis could make a social and human security issue rapidly escalate into a national security challenge.

There is no value in addressing non-traditional security issues in the same way as with traditional security issues by adopting zero-sum game measures, such as self-defence, competition for resources, or mutual accusations and conflict (Mingst & Arreguín-Toft, 2016). The correct path is to fully engage in international cooperation and the exchange of information, and leverage the roles of multiple actors, including governments, social organizations and individuals.

** Ms. Yang Jiayi is a PhD Candidate in International Relations at China Foreign Affairs University.
Dr. Li Fujian is a Research Fellow of the Institute of Asian Studies at China Foreign Affairs University.*

There are suggestions that international cooperation in the GMS is less successful than in other regions. Compared with regional cooperation within the European Union (EU), cooperation in the GMS is less institutionalized and developed. Therefore, regional countries are not able to take coordinated measures to cope with a sudden outbreak of regional crises (Beeson, 2020). However, alternative suggestions assert that the GMS countries uphold harmony without uniformity and form unique regional norms, giving rise to cooperation processes that are distinct from regional integration in the EU (Qin & Wei, 2007).

There are multiple cooperation mechanisms in the region overlapping one another. These mechanisms include the Mekong River Commission (MRC), GMS economic cooperation and Lancang–Mekong Cooperation (LMC), among others. When designing and leading these cooperation frameworks, the GMS countries emphasize the norms of equality, coordination and narrowing gaps among countries (Wei, 2010). In terms of development goals, the countries are committed to promoting the overall economic and social development of the region, as well as the living standards and wellbeing of their populations. These have laid a solid foundation for national actors to continue participating in non-traditional security cooperation, including public health cooperation (Wei, 2010).

1. Features of Public Health Cooperation in the Greater Mekong Subregion

Public health cooperation in the GMS has a clear crisis-driven characteristic. The urgency and severity of public health incidents place strict requirements on the speed of responses and demand a collective response. After more than 10 years of development in public health cooperation, the GMS has established not only a response mechanism against sudden crises, such as SARS and the COVID-19 pandemics, but also a prevention and control network for long-standing epidemic diseases, such as schistosomiasis and malaria. Public health cooperation in the GMS has the following characteristics.

1.1. Combination of government leadership and non-governmental forces

Government leadership has its advantages in responding to public health security challenges. Strong central governments, and regional norms of non-interference and respect for sovereignty, are common features of the GMS countries. However, although in recent years Southeast Asian countries have seen a growing demand for civil society to play a more active role, civil society cannot replace governments. The cross-border nature of public health crises, which require professional expertise, highlights the advantages of government-led international cooperation (Murray, 2019).

In Southeast Asia, leaders' meetings play an extremely critical role in regional cooperation (Zhang, 2020). Mutual trust and confidence among policymakers are often the most important prerequisites for solving cross-border, non-traditional security (Mahbubani & Sng, 2017).

However, being state-centric does not mean suppressing non-governmental forces. The GMS countries believe that governments and the communities are not detached or oppositional, but can cooperate effectively, and they emphasize social involvement with multiple participants. For example, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have played an active part in responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

1.2. Loose but flexible institutional cooperation

The cooperation process in the GMS is mainly informal, with low-level institutionalisation (Wei, 2019). Scholars who regard the EU as a benchmark often believe that regional cooperation is difficult to carry out without institutional guarantees. However, the GMS's loose institutions have proved to be effective and successful in practice (Wei, 2019). China and the lower Mekong countries have cooperated in multilateral mechanisms, such as the ASEAN plus China (10+1), ASEAN plus China, Japan and Republic of Korea (10+3), East Asia Summit, GMS economic cooperation and LMC. These various mechanisms support and complement each other.

On 29 April 2003, a special leaders' meeting of China and the ASEAN countries was held in Bangkok, Thailand, in response to the SARS pandemic, and created a China-ASEAN SARS prevention and control information network. At the end of 2003, the avian influenza epidemic broke out. Because the bird flu epidemic occurred just after the SARS pandemic, many of the mechanisms and experiences in response to SARS were directly applied to the prevention and control of avian influenza (He & Li, 2003; Yin, 2017).

In 2004, the China-ASEAN Public Health Fund was launched. Since 2005, China, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam have carried out joint, cross-border prevention and control projects for infectious diseases, such as malaria, dengue fever and AIDS. China has regularly held coordination meetings and information exchange seminars with these Mekong countries, and has conducted regional medical personnel technical training and talent-cultivating projects.

Since 2006, public health cooperation in the GMS has expanded to areas such as traditional medicine, stomatology, and quarantine inspections. Since 2008, China and Vietnam have carried out joint prevention and control projects for AIDS in areas near their shared border (Commission, 2019). Public health cooperation in other fields is also rolling out in an orderly manner. In 2017, the Yunnan Red Cross Society assisted with prosthetic installing and rehabilitation projects for patients with disabilities in the limbs

in Vietnam's Lao Cai Province (Yan, 2020). High-level meetings for public health development under the 10+1 and 10+3 frameworks have been conducted regularly.

1.3. Comprehensive security with equal emphasis on public health and economic development

The major philosophy of public health cooperation in the GMS is a comprehensive security concept that places equal emphasis on public health and economic growth. This is rooted in the development practice of the subregion, where living standards and sanitation conditions still have much room for improvement. When an epidemic breaks out, ordinary people may not only lack medical care and medicine, but also lose their sources of income. This vulnerability means that the GMS countries cannot separate public health policies from economic policies when solving a public health crisis. Both policies are vital for the security of the people.

The dominant practice GMS cooperation is development; that is, the overall promotion of national economic development and the substantial improvement of people's living standards and wellbeing (Wei, 2019). This philosophy of focusing on both public health security and economic development has been consistent in the process of subregional public health cooperation. The Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Action Plan on SARS, for example, specifically included measures to promote trade facilitation in order to minimise the impact of SARS on the regional economy. Most East Asian countries, including the countries of the Greater Mekong Basin, pledged to keep their borders and economies open, and not to issue warnings against travelling to other countries in the region.

In the fight against COVID-19, economic and trade cooperation is also an important part of regional cooperation. The GMS countries have conducted considerable coordination and cooperation to maintain the stability of the bilateral industrial supply chains, as well as wider issues of economic cooperation. In the first quarter of 2020, Chinese-funded enterprises created tens of thousands of jobs in Vietnam. When the Myanmar textile industry was struck by the breaking of the regional supply chain, China airlifted 15 tons of raw materials used in the garment industry to Myanmar. This has to a certain extent alleviated the pressure brought by the rising business suspension rate and unemployment rate.

2. Challenges to Public Health Cooperation in the Greater Mekong Subregion

Non-traditional security can directly affect national security stability and socioeconomic development; countries in the subregion should work to eliminate the negative impact of public health crises on the processes of subregional cooperation.

2.1. Consider public health cooperation with a security lens

Countries should pay more attention to health security and make public health cooperation a priority in political security cooperation. Greater attention to issues of public health cooperation should be added in documents steering the GMS cooperation, such as the Sanya Declaration, Phnom Penh Declaration, Vientiane Declaration and Five-Year Plan of Action on Lancang-Mekong Cooperation, to reflect increased attention to, and enhanced cooperation in, public health.

We should strengthen people-centred cooperation and fully leverage the dominant role of the government. During the COVID-19 pandemic, countries in other regions have often competed for anti-epidemic resources, making it hard for regional systems to function effectively. In the GMS, the leaders' summits, high-level exchanges and other dialogue mechanisms have effectively played the role of political guidance. For example, governments have donated money and supplies to one another during the pandemic, and the Vientiane Declaration on the LMC states clearly that all countries should have fair access to vaccines and medicines. If another similar crisis occurs, the leaders' meetings may achieve inter-state coordination and make up for the system failure.

2.2. Enhance the medical and health capacity of the regional countries

In the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, because of a weak public health system, Laos did not have sufficient testing kits and struggled to effectively check the spread of the virus. This reminds us that the lack of capacity of one-member state in the subregion may become a weak link in the public health security of the subregion. The Vientiane Declaration on LMC states that countries in the subregion should promote information and experience sharing, carry out scientific research cooperation, and strengthen exchanges and cooperation between centres for disease control of member states and relevant regional institutions. However, the cooperation in this field still needs to be expanded and upgraded, such as by establishing a comprehensive public health knowledge centre. In addition, it is necessary to train professionals with multidisciplinary backgrounds to enable overall improvement of the regional health security management ability (Public Health Management, 2011).

2.3. Increase community public health awareness and give full play to the role of social actors

The people-centred and people-oriented concepts advocated by the Mekong countries under the ASEAN norms are similar to China's 'people-centred' security concept. Both pay attention to community security and comprehensive security, emphasize the important role of the people and give priority to the people's right to development. Countries in the subregion should increase their population's awareness of health security, narrow the gaps individual health disparities, and encourage more people to engage in health and epidemic prevention courses. Social actors, such as schools, enterprises and media, should play a more constructive role because they can help improve the socioeconomic status of the people, disseminate health knowledge and facilitate the implementation of public health projects (Public Health Management, 2011).

References

- ASEAN. Working Together to Address Complex Health Challenges. Retrieved from <https://asean.org/asean-socio-cultural/asean-health-ministers-meeting-ahmm/overview-2/>
- Beeson, M. (2020). A plague on both your houses: European and Asian responses to Coronavirus. *Asia Europe Journal*, 18(2), 245-249. doi:10.1007/s10308-020-00581-4
- China, F. M. o. t. P. s. R. o. (2011). China-ASEAN Cooperation: 1991-2011. Retrieved from https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjb_673085/zzjg_673183/yzs_673193/dqzz_673197/dnygjlm_673199/xgxw_673205/t877316.shtml
- Commission, N. H. (2018). Keeping More Countries Away from Tropical Diseases. Retrieved from <http://www.nhc.gov.cn/wjw/mtbd/201805/87bf6b0235d2481784f7cc3f268de8d9.shtml>
- Commission, N. H. (2019). Reply of People's Republic of China National Health Commission to Recommendation No. 6598 of the First Session of the 13th National People's Congress. Retrieved from <http://www.nhc.gov.cn/wjw/jiany/201901/c1dfddd0d2424ad5b3335fe2cea6e5e9.shtml>
- GMS. Health Cooperation and Human Resource Development. Retrieved from <https://www.greatermekong.org/health-and-hrd>.
- He, S., & Li, C. (2003). The Influence of SARS on ASEAN. *Academic Exploration* (10), 32-35.
- Li, X. (2017). The Process of Regional Cooperation in East Asia: An explanation of Practical Rationality. *Forum of World Economics & Politics* (3), 27-43.
- Luo, Y. The Influence and Challenges of Global Health Diplomacy for China. *international Political Quarterly*, 32(2).
- Mahbubani, K., & Sng, J. (2017). *The ASEAN MIRACLE: A Catalyst for Peace* (K. Zhai & L. Wang, Trans.). Beijing: Peking University Press.
- Mingst, K. A., & Arreguín-Toft, I. M. (2016). *Essentials of International Relations* (7th ed.): W. W. Norton & Company.

Murray, P. (2019). Managing Security: Reimagining ASEAN's Regional Role. *Asian Studies Review*, 44(1), 44-60. doi:10.1080/10357823.2019.1680605

Penh, P. (2020). China's Blue Sky Rescue Team to Disinfect Public Places Across Cambodia. Retrieved from <https://cambodianess.com/article/chinas-blue-sky-rescue-team-to-disinfect-public-places-across-cambodia>

Public Health Management. (2011). (Y. Guo Ed. 2nd ed.): Peking University Medical Press.

Qin, Y., & Wei, L. (2007). Structures, Processes and the Socialization of Powers: China and Regional Cooperation in East Asia. *World Economics and Politics* (3), 7-16.

Sending, O. J., & Neumann, I. B. (2011). *International Practices* (E. Adler & V. Pouliot Eds.): Cambridge University Press.

Wei, L. (2010). Norm, System, Community – The Structure and Direction of East Asia Cooperation. *Foreign Affairs Review* (2), 67-81.

Wei, L. (2019). Development Regionalism and East Asian Cooperation. *Journal of Area and International Studies*, 4(1), 67-91.

Xi, J. (2015). Forging a Strong Partnership to Enhance Prosperity of Asia. Retrieved from <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/ceuk/eng/zgyw/t1313923.htm>

Yan, H. (2020). Discussions on China's Disaster Relief Assistance to ASEAN Countries Since the 21st Century. *Journal of Hunan Administration Institute* (3), 5-17.

Yin, H. (2017). History, Trends, Challenges, Implications for the Health Cooperation of China, Japan and Korea. *Contemporary Korea* (2), 15-24.

Zhang, Y. (2020). Epistemic Communities and the Regional Public Health in East Asia: The Necessity and Prospects of Sino-Japanese Cooperation. *World Economics and Politics* (3), 62-77, 157.

Zhu, X., Su, P., & Qi, F. (2006). Construction of Public Sanitation Cooperation Mechanism in East Asia. *Northeast Asia Forum*, 15(6), 8-12.

LAOS, CHINA AND TRANSNATIONAL SECURITY OF ELECTRICITY PRODUCTION

*David Hutt**

Southeast Asia Columnist, The Diplomat

Abstract

Across the world, disputes over the collective rights of multiple states to shared resources and the sovereign rights of individual states do as they see fit with their share of the resources are often settled by international law. In the Greater Mekong Region, attempts to settle disputes over the effects of Laos and China's dam-building on their stretches of the Mekong River are conducted through through diplomacy and consensus. But is this a workable solution for transnational security as downstream nations raise increased concerns about the consequences of Vientiane's decisions?

In a rather frank interview with the Thai journalist Suthichai Yoon in 2017, Lao Prime Minister Thongloun Sisoulith appeared to take a more moderate position than his colleagues on the country's ambitions to become the so-called "battery of Asia," a reference to the land-locked state's development of hydropower capabilities. "If Laos is to the battery of Asia," Thongloun said, "this might be overly ambitious." Laos might become a battery but only a "small battery," he appeared to joke.

Such humility does not, however, conform to the plans of Thongloun's government. Around 50 dams built in the last 15 years, while another 50 more under construction and 288 planned, many along the more than 4,000km-long Mekong River which begins in China and extends through Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia before opening into the ocean in Vietnam's southern delta. If all planned projects are completed, Laos' hydropower capacity will increase to 27,000 MW, from 700 MW in 2005.

Since the 2000s the ruling, communist Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) has bet on debt-funded hydropower production as the solution to its economic development, with the excess energy produced exported to Thailand and Vietnam. This is somewhat justifiable, as despite undergoing the same free-market reforms as Vietnam in 1986 (through the "New Economic Mechanism") Laos has struggled to find any other economic niche. The second-poorest Southeast Asian state by GDP (US\$19.2bn in 2019), Laos' lack of ports and its poor road-connections prevents large export sectors, meaning

** Mr. David Hutt is a political journalist who was based in Cambodia between 2014-2019, covering Southeast Asian affairs.*

it cannot rely on low-cost manufacturing like Vietnam or Cambodia. The tourism sector is nascent (Menon, Warr, 2013). It also resisted opening up its economy to Western investment during the 1990s and 2000s (unlike Vietnam), which means it relies heavily on trade with only China, Vietnam and Thailand. US-Laos trade was worth only around US\$160m in 2019.

Because of its China-inspired model of infrastructure-led development, much of which has been funded and constructed by Chinese state-run firms, relations with the two states have consolidated in recent years (Cook, 2019). This, in turn, has led to accusations that Vientiane's dependency on Chinese trade, loans and largess has turned Laos into something of a client-state for China. "Most local China-watchers have resigned to the fact that Laos will soon be a colony. We watch the huge incoming investment program, accompanied by a wave of Chinese people spreading through the country from the north, and it seems an inevitability," said a local source, who requested anonymity (author's interview). There are also allegations that this relationship doesn't always work in Laos' favor.

In September 2020, a deal was signed between Laos' state-owned Electricite du Laos (EDL) and China Southern Power Grid, a state-owned enterprise headquartered in China's Guangzhou province, which will give majority control of the new Electricite du Laos Transmission Company Limited (EDLT) to the Chinese company. In effect, this provides a Chinese state-run firm authority over Laos' electricity grid, and potentially considerable influence over the government's energy policies.

Chinese news agency Xinhua wrote on September 2 that the takeover "marks a significant progress in enhancing win-win cooperation between Laos and China in the power industry." In the same article Khammany Inthirath, Lao minister for energy and mines, was quoted as saying that the "experience, technology and human resources" of Chinese state-run firm "will bring a fresh outlook to the Lao power industry."

Indeed, China plays a considerable role in Laos' energy plans. On November 30, operations began in its first oil and gas-producing refinery, a joint-venture between Chinese state-owned Yunnan Construction and Investment Holding Group (which holds an 80 percent share) and the Lao State-run Lao State Fuel. Once all three-stages are operational, before 2024, it is expected to considerably reduce Laos' reliance on petroleum imports.

Technically, Laos' EDL can buy back shares in the EDLT from the Chinese state-run firm, but realistically the state's considerable debts makes this highly unlikely for the foreseeable future. The Fitch Ratings agency reported in September that EDL had roughly US\$5 billion in outstanding debt (roughly 26% of Laos' GDP), much of which consists of on-lending from the government (Fitch, 2020). This, the agency warned, poses "contingent liability risk for the government if EDL is unable to meet its external

debt service obligations.” Additionally, the Lao government faces considerable problems from its wider debt, most of which is owed to China. (Laos’ debt to China accounts for 45% of its national GDP, according to a study in 2019.)

Earlier in 2020, Fitch noted that Laos has foreign exchange reserves of \$1 billion and will owe \$900 million in external debt payments that year. Moreover, because state revenue and savings are expected to have declined considerably in 2020 because of the coronavirus-induced pandemic, it could struggle to repay its external debt payments between 2021-2025, which are expected to climb to USD1.1 billion a year over that period. As a result, Fitch downgraded Laos’ credit rating to CCC on September 23, after having been downgraded to B- in May. In August, the US-based ratings agency Moody’s downgraded Laos to junk territory, from B3 to Caa2, noting “severe liquidity stress.”

As a result of this debt, chiefly owed to China, analysts reckon that the deal to assign majority shares of Laos’ electricity grid to a Chinese state-firm was intended to limit these liabilities, and some regard it as an example of Beijing’s so-called “debt-trap diplomacy”, in which China takes ownership of foreign infrastructure projects in lieu of repayments. There is equally compelling evidence to suggest that this isn’t a Machiavellian plot by Beijing, but rather the result of poor planning and governance by foreign governments over their infrastructure projects. Indeed, Laos has been warned for years by international groups to reduce its liabilities and cut state-spending (Gunn, 2020)

Nonetheless, this could pose considerable problems for the Lao government. “If you allow a foreign country to control your national grid, that will be a serious problem,” Le Hong Hiep, a scholar with the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore, commented in September. “If anything happens to the national grid, for example, the whole country will be blacked out.” The deal over EDLT, he added, signified that the Lao government values “development over security.”

Additionally, it could potentially allow the Chinese government, mediating through the state-run China Southern Power Grid, to exert a greater influence on the Lao government’s energy policy, including where and how it constructs hydropower dams along the Mekong River and how the generated energy is exported. “Much of Laos’ power generation is slated for export not only to China but also to neighbors such as Thailand and Vietnam, meaning China will indirectly gain commercial and strategic leverage over those two neighboring countries,” suggested the analyst Bertil Lintner in the Asia Times in September 2020.

The New South China Sea

But the issue is not only about whether China will now be able to exert too much influence over Laos' domestic policies, but also how this impact over states in the Mekong region. "Since China began building these dams in the early 1990s, the downstream countries have worried China could use its massive cascade of reservoirs...to hold them hostage," Brian Eyster, Senior Fellow and Director of Southeast Asia at the Stimson Centre, wrote in *Foreign Policy* in April. The same month, Eyster, Weatherby (2020) published a major report alleging that China may be altering the flow of water from its eleven mega-dams to affect environmental changes in the downstream states. The report noted:

[D]uring a severe drought in the lower Mekong Basin in 2019, China's upper basin enjoyed high rainfall and snowmelt and China's upstream dams restricted nearly all of the record rainfall and snowmelt from the downstream. If China's dams did not restrict flow, portions of the Mekong along the Thai-Lao border would have experienced above average flows from April 2019 to the present instead of suffering through severe drought conditions.

In September, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo warned that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) "increasingly threatens the Mekong's natural environments and economic autonomy. The CCP's unilateral decisions to withhold water upstream have exacerbated an historic drought." Indeed, the intimation is that Beijing's ability to control the water flow of the Mekong – potentially stopping water flowing when needed by countries like Vietnam and Cambodia during droughts or increasing water flow when they suffer flooding – equips the Chinese government with a considerable threat that could be used to extract concessions, potentially from Vietnam, a rival claimant to China for territory in the South China Sea (Eyster, Weatherby, 2020).

However, if Beijing sought to inflict damage upon Vietnam by altering water flows of the Mekong River by opening or closing dams situated in China's sovereign stretches of the Mekong River, then Laos would also be negatively affected by these actions. But if the Chinese government could threaten Vietnam with an alteration of water flows by opening or closing dams in Laos instead, this would not only increase the scale of the environmental change for Vietnam but also allow China not to inflict damage upon Laos in the process.

Pundits in the past have dubbed the Mekong River disputes the "next South China Sea". But it is far more serious than that. If, for instance, the Vietnamese government were to accede to all of China's territorial claims in the SCS, it would be a political embarrassment for Hanoi but would have minimal impact on food security and propensity of the Vietnamese people. But any serious change to water levels of the Mekong would have profound consequences on ordinary Vietnamese. (Yoshida et al, 2020).

Communal Property and Resolutions

Multilateral bodies like the Mekong River Commission - between Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam - and the China-backed Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) have been created in order to attempt to mediate regional solutions to problems created by the unilateral actions of the five Mekong River states, but these bodies possess no legal or formal powers to intervene in the sovereign decisions of the government of one of the members. Indeed, the 1995 Mekong treaty signed by Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam means consultations must take place between the states whenever a new project is planned, but no state can veto the development of hydropower dams of another.

For some, the China-backed LMC has sown further divisions between the Mekong states, with Laos increasingly unreceptive to its neighbours complaints. Laos' intransigence is partly understandable: it lacks the economic capabilities of Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam, and feels hydropower is a silver-bullet for its development. One also imagines there is latent historical animosity, as the Lao kingdoms became vassal states of Siam (now Thailand) in the late 18th century and the ruling LPRP often treated as a mere junior partner by the more authoritative Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) in the 20th century (Stuart-Fox, 1979).

But it also reflects the waning influence of its historical partners: Vietnam, whose VCP greatly assisted in the LPRP's power-grab in 1975, and Thailand, its western neighbour, historic trading partner and close cultural ally. Because of these relations in the past Hanoi and Bangkok were able to exert considerable influence over Vientiane's decisions. But the arrival of China in recent years has fundamentally changed the situation, with both Hanoi and Bangkok increasingly losing leverage in Vientiane. One question is whether China's newfound authority over Laos' electricity grid, and therefore its energy policy, escalates regional tensions. On the one hand, Beijing has sought to calm fears. In August, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang pledged to share all of its hydrological data on the Mekong River for the whole year with its Southeast Asian partners, when it has only shared data during the wet season, from June to October, and not during the dry season.

On the other, the Mekong River will likely continue to play a geopolitical role amid the US-China rivalry, which is unlikely to change significantly under the incoming Joe Biden administration in Washington. In September, the Southeast Asia states and the United States launched the new Mekong-U.S. Partnership which will boost US spending in the region.

Meanwhile, there are also bilateral ways in which other Southeast Asian states can pressure Laos to change course. In November, Somkiat Prajamwong, secretary-general to the Office of National Water Resources in Thailand, was quoted by the Bangkok Post newspaper as saying it had grave concerns about the development of the Sanakham

dam, which is located about two kilometers from the Thai border within Laos. “The country’s territory is our paramount concern,” he stated. The Sanakham dam will be constructed by a subsidiary of Datang International Power generation, a Chinese state-owned power company, and is expected to be completed by 2028. Somkiat also made what could be a worrying threat to Laos, when he intimated that Thailand may no longer need to import energy from Laos. Indeed, if Thailand and Vietnam were to cut their energy imports from Laos - when exports of energy to those states are one of the main driving factors for Laos’ development of the hydropower dams - then this may pressure Vientiane to reconsider its options. Alternatively, it may also result in China committing to importing more energy from Laos, not a major necessity for Beijing but would serve to bolster its influence in Vientiane and escalate Laos’ dependency.

References

- Cook, M. "Divergence and Displacement: Southeast Asia-China Trade, 2013-2018", ISEAS Perspective, 23 October 2019. https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2019_88.pdf
- Eyler, B and Weatherby, C. "New Evidence: How China Turned off the Tap on the Mekong River". The Stimson Center. April 13, 2020. <https://www.stimson.org/2020/new-evidence-how-china-turned-off-the-mekong-tap/>
- Fitch Ratings, "Fitch downgrades Laos to CCC as pandemic, debt maturities weigh on liquidity," 23 Sep, 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.spglobal.com/marketintelligence/en/news-insights/latest-news-headlines/fitch-downgrades-laos-to-ccc-as-pandemic-debt-maturities-weigh-on-liquidity-60457976>
- Gunn, G.C. "Laos in 2019: Moving Heaven and Earth on the Mekong". Southeast Asian Affairs 2020(1), 173-188. <https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/754746>.
- Menon, J, and Warr, P. "The Lao Economy: Capitalizing on NaturalResource Export". ADB Economics Working Paper Series, No. 330. January 2013. <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/30138/economics-wp330-lao-economy.pdf>
- Stuart-Fox, M. Factors Influencing Relations between the Communist Parties of Thailand and Laos. Asian Survey, 19(4), 333-352, 1979. doi:10.2307/2643855
- Yoshida Y, Lee HS, Trung BH, Tran H-D, Lall MK, Kakar K, Xuan TD. "Impacts of Mainstream Hydropower Dams on Fisheries and Agriculture in Lower Mekong Basin". Sustainability. 2020; 12(6):2408.

NON-TRADITIONAL SECURITY CHALLENGES IN MYANMAR AND THE GREATER MEKONG SUB-REGION

*David Scott Mathieson**
Independent Analyst

Abstract

This article argues that a multitude of non-traditional security issues face Myanmar, including rampant narcotics production, proliferation of non-state armed groups, casino capitalism, and trafficking in persons and wildlife. These must be included in discussions of the country's broader development and in the moribund nationwide peace process. Failing to include these longstanding issues will prolong a carte-blanche condition in which these illegal industries, which have had major impacts on Mekong states security - especially the drug trade - will continue to flourish in porous and unevenly regulated borderlands. This will necessitate greater engagement not just in regional conferences and cooperation but augmenting on the ground initiatives and finding ways to support necessary reforms within Myanmar to conclusively address the sources of instability.

Myanmar is a key GMS state for non-traditional security challenges, a major producer of illicit narcotics, home to transnational criminal networks, inbound and outbound migration, human trafficking and environmental degradation from natural resource extraction and contract farming. Myanmar's non-traditional security challenges have often been subsumed by the seven-decades long armed conflict with multiple ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), and efforts since 2012 to pursue peace with many of these insurgencies. However, Myanmar's lengthy borders with China and Thailand, and its Mekong River border with Laos, have long been a hub for a range of security challenges, exacerbated by uneven and contested governance and the manifold opportunities for profit seeking in illicit or unregulated economies.

There is an intricate connectivity to traditional security challenges in Myanmar's borderlands that cannot be separated from non-traditional challenges. Many EAOs, the Myanmar security forces, and private sector actors often construct multiple diverse portfolios for extraction. Moving forward, analysis of Myanmar's role in the GMS and its non-traditional security challenges should be viewed in the light of multiple intersecting dynamics, and understand more clearly the role of multiple actors. This article looks primarily at the zones of North-Eastern Myanmar in Shan State, the

** Mr. David Scott Mathieson is a Myanmar-based independent analyst working on conflict, peace, humanitarian and human rights issues.*

frontline of the GMS, but necessarily expands to other areas of the country which are often production and transit zones of threats that often transit through the tri-border area.

Eastern Shan State also affords a prime case study of prolonged militarization and 'durable disorder' with its multiple non-state armed groups, including the Mong-La based National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA), the Southern Wa State of the United Wa State Army (UWSA) along the Thailand Myanmar border, major operational area of the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS) one of the largest ethnic Shan EAOs, the headquarters of the Myanmar military Triangle Command, and scores of ethnic Lahu and Akha militias with involvement in local drug production and other illicit activities.

Myanmar's Drug Trade

Myanmar has been one of the world's largest producers of illicit narcotics since the late 1960s, and continues to produce not just heroin, but amphetamine type substances (ATS) known regionally as yaba, and in the last several years astonishingly large volumes of methamphetamines, or ice. It was the growth of the yaba trade in the mid-1990s that caused a surge of drug consumption in GMS countries, especially Thailand, Laos and Cambodia. Unlike in previous decades when the United Wa State Army (UWSA) was the major producer of heroin and yaba, the trade in ATS has become more diffuse with multiple actors often linked to nominally pro-government Pyithu Sit (People's Militia) groups producing yaba for domestic production and consumption. A series of seizures in this area in early 2020, around the town of Kutkai, including crystal methamphetamines and large quantities of chemical precursors, led to the disbanding of the local Kaung Kha militia alleged to be protecting narcotics producers (Davis, 2020).

For the past several years, Chinese narcotics entrepreneurs have established a production zone in Northern Shan State that houses super-labs of crystal methamphetamine (and other drugs) production, utilizing access to China's chemical industries to manufacture high-purity productions for international trafficking, and contracting local militias for on-site security and domestic transit through the GMS and further south to the Yangon port for export (International Crisis Group, 2019). These 'tea-bag' branded packets are primarily for export to GMS countries, including Thailand and Vietnam, and to other parts of South-East Asia, Australia, New Zealand, Taiwan and Japan.

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2019), methamphetamine seizures in the GMS between 2014 to 2018 have skyrocketed, with growth in official seizures by 870 percent in Myanmar, 925 percent in Laos PDR, 480 percent in Thailand, 700 percent in Cambodia, and 395 percent, with total Southeast Asia seizures of 120 tons: estimated to be worth US\$30-61 billion dollars. Estimated of heroin production are between US\$8.7 to \$10.3 million. The majority of these narcotics

originates in Myanmar, one of the world's largest illicit drug production zones, which have adapted to uneven official interdiction efforts to supply regional demands.

Casinos and Transnational Crime

North-eastern Myanmar's border casino complex also fuels transnational criminal networks and are hubs for money laundering, drug supply, and trafficking in persons, for the sex trade as well as indentured labor. The main established casinos have operated for decades in Tachilek, with several large established hotels and golf clubs such as the Regina, and a string of small entertainment complexes which include gambling rooms, karaoke rooms with sex workers such as the allegedly Lahu militia operated Shwe Bu Thee (Golden Gourd) Hotel. The larger of these casinos were established in the 1990's, with smaller establishments built over the past decade as Myanmar's lax regulations permitted border operations to flourish. Further north from Tachilek is the border casino enclave of Mong La, established by the National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA), an armed group formed following the collapse of the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) in 1989, and granted extra-territorial status as Shan State Special Region-4, an ostensibly informal agreement with no legal standing, but in effect closed off from Myanmar administration for over 30 years.

The casinos of Mong La, as well as alleged drug production, and being a major hub in the illegal wildlife trade, have been a notorious node for cross-border gamblers from China. Mong La is off-limits to many prospective gamblers from inside Myanmar, who instead travel to Tachilek, which also attracts Thai and Chinese visitors. The massive Chinese financed and operated 'entertainment' complex of Myawaddy in Kayin State of Myanmar, in an enclave controlled by Border Guard Forces (BGFs), paramilitary forces of the Myanmar army, in the town of Shwe Ko Ko have elicited alarm from regional states, concerned about the spread from Cambodia to Myanmar of Chinese transnational networks (Tower & Clapp, 2020). The Chinese embassy in Myanmar (2020) has refuted any claims the project is part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and have pledged to undertake its own investigation of the investors behind it.

Tachilek's casino complexes gained attention in early December 2020, when positive cases of Covid-19 were detected from Thai women who had been working at the 1G1-7 Hotel and crossed illegally back into Thailand, as the surge in positive cases spread around Myanmar since August, and Thai authorities blocked all legal and illegal border crossings (Bangkok Post, 2020).

The effective lynchpin of this ostensible 'Casino Triangle' linking Mong La and Tachilek in the GMS is the Kings Roman Casino in Laos' Bokeo Province Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone across from Thailand's Chiang Saen, whose Chinese operator, Zhao Wei was sanctioned by the United States Treasury Department (USDOT) in 2018 for money laundering (citing the UWSA as one partner), human trafficking, and drug trafficking. The expansion of the casino includes a new river port construction project.

According to the regional director of UNODC, Jeremy Douglas (2019), putting Myanmar's casino economy into a broader GMS context, "It appears that some countries in Southeast Asia are struggling to properly oversee their casino industries. Licenses are easily obtained and rarely revoked, and there is little to no supervision, due diligence or record keeping. And these are jurisdictions where the integrity and capability of government institutions are often questioned."

Human Trafficking and Wildlife Trafficking

Myanmar has failed to adequately address the smuggling of persons and human trafficking of women for the sex trade and forced marriages, mainly to China according to human rights groups and researchers, and the UNODC estimates some half a million people are smuggled to Thailand annually (Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2019; John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health [JHSPH] & Kachin Women's Action Network-Thailand [KWAT], 2018). According to Washington's annual Trafficking Report (2020), "(t)raffickers subject members of (Myanmar's) vulnerable populations to sex trafficking and forced labor in seasonal strawberry and longan harvesting, year-round orange farming, manufacturing in registered and unregistered factories, and construction of roads and city government facilities across the border in northwestern Thailand. Traffickers use deceptive recruitment tactics and immigration status-based coercion to subject migrant workers from Shan State to forced labor on sugarcane plantations in China's Yunnan Province." Myanmar's efforts to tackle illegal trafficking are insufficient to meet the scale of the problem, and while it routinely publishes figures on arrests of traffickers and persons freed from traffickers, it remains a Tier 3 country for the U.S. State Department.

Eastern Shan State and Northern Myanmar have long been major hubs for trafficking in wildlife and animal parts, especially through Mong La and Tachilek. North Eastern Myanmar is a major hub to the rest of the GMS for trade in pangolins, elephant parts and skin, tiger parts, bear bile and other wildlife trafficking. Government efforts to combat the illegal trade are stymied by uneven enforcement efforts and high demand from China. Passing a Protection of Biodiversity and Protected Area Law in 2018, and exerting pressure on the Mong La authorities to close their wildlife markets are sound steps, but greater cooperation with GMS countries to slow demand is necessary. The trade in wildlife has broadly followed other illicit commodity trafficking supply lines, underscoring the need to look at the range of non-traditional security issues in a more holistic manner and not as siloed challenges.

Internal and External Migration

Myanmar's north-east has been a major source of out-bound migration for 30 years, with hundreds of thousands of people fleeing armed conflict, the demands of multiple armed actors on livelihoods and local security, poverty, and in the 1990s, the HIV-AIDS epidemic. Many have moved to northern Thailand and live in uneven state of illegal

and registered migrant workers with patchy access to basic services. Myanmar has experienced this as a whole since the early 1990s, with an estimated four million migrant workers living in Thailand, some half a million potentially in Malaysia, and tens of thousands of more middle class migrants to Singapore. Eastern Shan State has seen a gradual depopulation that has limited state building in the area and rendered local control of armed groups more prevalent, with increased Myanmar migration to Tachilek, and increased Thai labor migration to work in entertainment venues, and also growing numbers of Chinese irregular migration.

One driver of internal migration in Myanmar is the surge in contract farming, especially in the northern and eastern states, which draws millions of agricultural day workers from Rakhine State, the Irrawaddy Delta, the Dry Zone regions of Magwe, Bago and Mandalay, causing significant demographic shifts in ostensibly 'ethnic states'. Many come to work on the burgeoning 'tissue banana' plantations of Kachin State, farming bananas for export to China. These plantations cause significant land disputes, as customary land owners are displaced by land grabs from brokers and local armed groups on behalf of Chinese investors (Haywood et al., 2020).¹ Some of the land is acquired from communities displaced by the conflict in Kachin State, which resumed in 2011 and caused over 100,000 civilians to be uprooted, the majority who still live in camps of internally displaced persons (IDPs).

The environmental impact of tissue banana plantations and other agro-business operations is increasingly damaging, with heavy use of chemicals and low safety standards, and adds to the degradation caused by a range of mining operations, including gold and jade mining. Increasingly, there are banana plantations opening in Mong La and Eastern Shan State drawing several thousand ethnic Rakhine workers.² This could in part be explained by the decision of Laos in early 2017 to ban Chinese banana plantations due to extensive environmental damage and dangers to farmers.

Conclusion

The relatively weak state of government control in Myanmar's border areas with neighboring GMS states as well as the proliferation of armed groups and uneven and contested Myanmar military control, have all contributed to an environment in which non-traditional security challenges remain insufficiently addressed. For regional states, and for investors and aid donors to Myanmar, addressing 'hard security' issues in tandem with what is often seen as policing issues of illegality is essential. Myanmar government officials routinely attend regional human trafficking conferences and cooperate with the UNODC and drug officials from the United States and Australia on

¹ For the underlying violence and intimidation related to contract farming, see Kevin M. Woods, "Smaller-scale land grabs and accumulation from below: Violence, coercion and consent in spatially uneven agrarian change in Shan State, Myanmar", *World Development*, no.127, 2020, pp.1-15.

² Information gathered during research in Kentung in Eastern Shan State, May 2019.

intelligence sharing, however some senior officials see 'non-traditional security' in part through counter-terrorism cooperation, and not necessarily through the durable disorder of their own violent hinterlands.

Including many non-traditional security issues and the relationship between EAOs, militias and BGF auxiliaries', and the role of the Myanmar military and police as primary state agents in lieu of weak civilian administrative power in many border areas, within the broader Myanmar peace process is an essential start. Eastern Shan State where Myanmar meets the Mekong, is all but separated from the nationwide peace process: only the RCSS is a formal signatory to the 2015 'Nationwide' Ceasefire Agreement (NCA). Including broader discussion of, and effective programming by the government and foreign aid organizations, to many of these issues and how they will impact investment, development programs, and humanitarian responses. The flourishing of civil society is essential if Myanmar is to pursue a state-making project that is not incessantly limited by illegality and disruptive influence of non-state actors, transnational crime, and deeply embedded corruption within government and security forces.

References

- Bangkok Post. (2020, December 5). *1G1-7 Hotel: the Covid hotspot*, p.1.
- Davis, A. (2020, April 21). New strategy to address escalating insurgency in Western Myanmar leaves military locked into conflict. *Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Monitor*.
- Douglas, J. (2019, February 2019). Asian organized crime doubles down on casinos. *CNN.com*. <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/02/13/opinions/casinos-southeast-asia-intl/index.html>
- Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Union of Myanmar. (2020, August 25). *China supports Myanmar in handling the Shwe Kokko New City issue in accordance with laws and regulations*. <http://mm.china-embassy.org/eng/xwdt/t1809150.htm>
- Hayward, D., Ko Lwin, Yang Bin and Htet Kyu (2020). Chinese Investment into Tissue-Culture Banana Plantations in Kachin State, Myanmar. MRLG Case Study Series #4. Vientiane, Yangon: Mekong Region Land Governance.
- Human Rights Watch. (2019, March 21). *"Give Us a Baby and We'll Let You Go": Trafficking of Kachin "Brides" from Myanmar to China*.
- International Crisis Group. (2019, January 8). *Fire and Ice: Conflict and Drugs in Myanmar's Shan State* (No. 299). Brussels, Belgium: ICG.
- John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. & Kachin Women's Action Network-Thailand (KWAT). (2018, December). *Estimating trafficking of Myanmar women for forced marriage and childbearing in China*.
- Tower, J.& Clapp, A. P. (2020, April 20). Chinese Crime Networks Partner with Myanmar Armed Groups. *United States Institute of Peace Commentary*.
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2019). *Transnational Organized Crime in Southeast Asia: Evolution, Growth and Impact*, pp.1-2. Bangkok, Thailand: UNODC.
- United States Department of the Treasury. (2018, January 30). *Treasury Sanctions the Zhao Wei Transnational Criminal Organization*.
- United States Department of State. (2020) *Annual Trafficking in Persons Report: Burma*. Department of State: Washington DC.

FOOD SECURITY AND ITS IMPLICATION IN THE MEKONG REGION

*Dr. To Minh Thu**

Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam (DAV)

Abstract

The Mekong River plays an important role in the development of riparian countries, especially as a source of food in the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS). For centuries, the river has been a crucial lifeline that nourishes tens of millions of people, but it and its basin are now undergoing considerable pressure, such as water shortages, changes in flood cycles, lack of sediment, and salt intrusion. These all severely affect fishing and the production of rice and other crops, and therefore people's lives.

This article first explains the role of the Mekong River in regional food security. It then assesses the challenges of food security in the region and, finally, presents some recommendations for future development.

The Role of the Mekong Subregion in Regional Food Security

The World Summit on Food Security in 2009 declared: "Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy lifestyle" (WSFS 2009, p.1). According to the World Food and Agriculture Organization (2006), food security has four dimensions: (i) *availability*, meaning that the quantity and quality of the food supply is sufficient for human needs; (ii) *accessibility*, meaning the ability for people to exercise control over adequate means, such as land, inputs, and money, etc., to acquire the food they need for good health; (iii) *utilization*, meaning that the preparation, consumption and disposal of food is supported by clean water, dietary knowledge, and safe sanitation; and (iv) *stability*, meaning the stability and resilience of the food supply amid acute shocks, and chronic or cyclical events, to ensure sustained availability and access at all times (Smajgle and Ward, 2013).

The concept of food security, as mentioned above, shows the importance of the Mekong River in all aspects of food security. It is the source of the two major food types in the region—fish and rice— which feeds and supports the livelihoods of some 70 million people in the GMS, as well as globally through exports. Fish and rice are the backbone

** Dr. To Minh Thu is a Deputy Director General of the Institute for Foreign Policy and Strategic Studies (IFPSS), the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam (DAV).*

of food security in the Lower Mekong Basin (LMB) - Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam. Other river-based activities such as transportation and tourism also provide the financial means for local inhabitants to meet their food needs.

The Lower Mekong basin is famous for its fish stock. It is one of the largest fresh water sources in the world, with about 850 freshwater fish species and a total catch of 2.5 million tons/year, which is roughly 2% of the world's entire catch (MRC, 2009). As one of the world's largest inland fisheries, the value of the fishery industry in the LMB was estimated to be worth around USD 17 billion in 2015 (MRC, 2015).

While all the LMB countries rely on the river's supply of fish, Cambodia is the most dependent. The fisheries sector contributes to about 8% of the country's GDP, while fish is an important source of animal protein for the local population. Although proportionally less significant to their national economies, the Mekong fishery sectors in Thailand and Vietnam are also important, both for domestic consumption and exports. In both countries, millions of people rely on subsistence fishing for food security and the fisheries sector supports tens of thousands of businesses, from the shops and food stalls that purchase goods from fishing families to boat builders and fishing-gear suppliers (MRC, 2018a).

Communities living along the river depend heavily on fisheries for their nutrition, with fish making up a large portion - up to 80% in some countries - of their diet. In Cambodia, for example, estimated consumption of fresh fish per capita is as high as 33kg per year. Fish is a valuable source of protein that is both healthy and sustainable. Thus, reduction in the quantity of fish caught in nature will force people to develop alternative sources of food, especially for protein, which could result in unsustainable use of natural resources. Greater imports of foodstuff are another alternative, but it would require changes to economic policy. Because the region is highly dependent on fish from the Mekong River, any disruption to that supply will prove deleterious to food security.

In the far south in Vietnam, the Mekong River separates into numerous distributaries, which then meet in the South China Sea. These various Mekong distributaries create a very fertile Mekong Delta, or the "Nine Dragons River Delta" as it is known locally. The Mekong Delta supports one of the world's most economically important crops: rice. The LMB countries produced more than 109 million tons of paddy rice in 2017, with Vietnam, Thailand, and Myanmar being the 5th, 6th, and 7th largest rice producers in the world, respectively. While a large percentage of this rice is sold to local markets and remains within the countries, the region is also an important rice exporter. Thailand and Vietnam are the world's 2nd and 3rd largest exporters by volume, respectively, and Cambodia is the 8th largest exporter (Statista, 2018). Most rice production in the region is traditional lowland cultivation, in which water is the single most important component for production, making the water from the Mekong a valuable resource.

Indeed, rice cultivation is heavily dependent on the Mekong River, which brings sediment downstream and, together with regular flooding, replenishes the delta's plains with nutrient-rich sediment from upstream, contributing to the delta's fertility. Freshwater irrigated from the river, along with fresh rainwater and groundwater, supports the rice crops, grown and harvested in three separate seasons. Rainwater and groundwater are equally dependent on the regulated climate of the Mekong watershed (Loh, 2020).

Besides fish and rice, the river also hosts a range of economic activities that contribute to the livelihoods of communities within the region. These include aquaculture, tourism, and forest and non-timber forest products, as well as cash crops such as cassava, maize, sugar, coffee, and rubber. These activities enable local people to be economically self-reliant and provide them with the economic means to purchase food.

Challenges to Food Security in the Lower Mekong Basin

The Mekong River has long been a stable source of food and income for its communities. However, the pressure of economic development, unsustainable use of water, and climate change has been threatening its food production, and thus food security.

Most of the LMB countries are still developing economies. Until recently, a high percentage of people in the region still suffered from poverty and malnutrition. Industrialization, urbanization, and intensive farming are considered ways to solve these problems, but they also bring risks to the basin's natural environment. Hydropower development, water diversion for water irrigation, monocropping, and other types of "modern" agriculture all require water, thus intensifying water competition in the basin. Unsustainable development, coupled with climate change's exacerbating effects, can lead to the over-exploitation of natural resources.

Hydropower can be damaging to the environment despite appearing to be an attractive source of clean energy and income. Dams on the Mekong River are no exception. About two third of fish in the Mekong are migratory, swimming from upstream to downstream, from mainstream to tributaries, between tributaries and floodplains, and from the river and the sea. Due to this distinct feature, damming the river means disrupting or even preventing the way of life for these fish species. Damming the river has, therefore, significantly reduced the fish catch, which is well-observed in the region, especially in Cambodia.

According to So Nam, the Chief Environment Management Officer at the Mekong River Commission (MRC), more than 900,000 tons of fish biomass in Mekong River could disappear as a result of impacts from damming by 2040, which is the equivalent to a loss of USD 4.3 billion in economic terms. His research shows that Thailand would have the highest rate of fish loss, with 55% of Thai fish stock gone by 2040, followed by Laos (50%), Cambodia (35%), and Vietnam (30%). The MRC's study further shows that due

to the change of the river's ecosystem because of the creation of reservoirs, many parts of Mekong River will transform into lake ecosystems, which are unsuitable for many native aquatic species of the river. This could eventually drive them to the edge of extinction (Mekong Eye, 2018).

Dams have also impacted the productivity of the region's rice production. More dams on the Mekong will trap greater amounts of the silt and sediment that is vital for replenishing soils, and the lack of sediment influx to downstream agricultural areas will make the soil infertile and reduce the productivity of the region's rice fields.

The sediment loss would also result in other costly impacts to the LMB countries. Hungry water tends to erode riverbeds and banks to compensate for the loss of sediments, inducing riverbank erosion, which pulls riverside structures into the river and rips away vegetation (Eyler, 2019). Research by MRC reveals that by 2040 up to 97% of would be trapped in the reservoirs of upstream dams and only 3% would reach the delta (MRC, 2018). Drought and the lack of sediments also make it easier for saltwater intrusion, which severely impacts the agriculture sector and water-intensive activities.

Food consumption, production, agriculture, and livestock rearing are the most-affected sectors. At the same time, transportation is also under strain; as waterways have dried up earlier than expected, transportation costs by road are higher compared with transport by rivers (the most common transportation means), leading to higher prices for basic household supplies, including food and water.

On top of the man-made challenges, climate change will significantly impact agriculture. and worsen spatial and seasonal food insecurity, creating periods of food and water scarcity in specific areas, as sudden droughts and floods ruin crops. The twin threats of dam construction on the mainstream sections of the Mekong and climate change make it tougher to maintain food security in the sub-region, requiring more cooperation among riparian countries and among the water-competing sectors of the economy.

Next Steps

As a transnational river, food security associated with the Mekong River cannot be tackled by any individual country alone or by the food sector itself. It is inevitable that in areas where the agricultural sector has historically dominated water use, conflicting interests in water usage needs to be accommodated but, at the same time, meet the requirements needed to sustain the ecosystem. The food security issue should be placed as an integral part of the "water-food-energy" nexus, in which the solutions need to be inclusive of water and energy issues, as well.

From the water-management angle, some countries have advantages in accessing water, and can even shape the distribution and flow of the water downstream, because the Mekong River flows from upstream countries to others downstream. Therefore, more rules-based governance of water management in regional cooperation is needed. The member countries should embrace the implementation of the 1995 Mekong Agreement through the five procedures and their technical guidelines, which provide Integrated Water Resource Management-based rules for water-resources development to provide the most benefit and the minimum environmental and social harm. Information sharing and transparency, especially on water usage, is critical to sustainable management of water resources, thus giving rise to more efficient fishing and crop production.

It is undoubtable that the demand for energy will continue to rise with an increasing population, higher incomes, and urbanization. The need for affordable energy in the short run may overwhelm the need to protect the Mekong River's ecosystem and the environment in general. However, with fast-changing technology, especially in green energy, riparian countries should be able to find alternative development opportunities that are less dependent on hydropower or extensive water-use production. Cooperation should be promoted amongst LMB countries regarding the equitable and sustainable use of the Mekong River's resources, including water resources, on the basis of harmony of interests and with the aim of achieving sustainable development for the entire LMB region. In this regard, the important role of local communities and women in bringing local knowledge and providing local solutions should be noted. The community can also be the most effective monitoring force in water-use projects, such as dams or irrigation systems.

Last but not least, riparian countries should strengthen cooperation and support each other in developing a sustainable agricultural and fishing industry that is adaptable to climate change, and apply new technology in agricultural production to be able to maintain food security.

References

- Eyler, Brian (2019), *Last days of the Mighty Mekong*, p. 310-311. Zed Books Ltd.
- FAO. 2006. Policy brief issue 2 – Food security. Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization.
- Mekong Eyes (2016), *The Mekong River will harm food security*.
<https://www.mekongeye.com/2018/04/03/mekong-river-dams-will-harm-food-security/> (accessed on 5 December 2020).
- MRC (2009) *Fishery Research and Development in the Mekong region. Catch and Culture*, Vol.15, No.2, August, 2009.
- MRC (2015), *Fishery research and development in the Mekong region, Catch and Culture*, Vol.21, No.3, December 2015.
- MRC (2018) *Council Study - The Study on the Sustainable Management and Development of the Mekong River Basin including Impacts of Mainstream Hydropower Projects*.
- Peiyong Loh (2020), *The River Drained: Fish, Rice and Food Security in the Mekong*.
<https://cdn-images.kontinentalist.com/static-html/food-security-mekong-river-hydropower-dam-climate-change/index.html> (accessed on 5 December 2020).
- Smajgl, Alexander and John Ward (2013) *The Water-Food-Energy Nexus in the Mekong Region* (pp.61-104), Publisher: Springer.
- Statista (2018), 'Principal Rice Exporting Countries Worldwide in 2017/2018 (in 1,000 metric tons)', <https://www.statista.com/statistics/255947/top-rice-exporting-countries-worldwide-2011/> (accessed on 5 December 2020).
- WSFS. 2009. *Declaration of the world summit on food security*. Rome: World Summit on Food Security.

BOOK REVIEW

SEBASTIAN, STRANGIO. (2020). *IN THE DRAGON'S SHADOW: SOUTHEAST ASIA IN THE CHINESE CENTURY.* YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS.

*Dr. Bradley J. Murg**

Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace

In October of last year, during the Fifth Plenum of the 19th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, the world was given a preview of the outlines of Beijing's 14th five-year plan (2021-2025). With significant emphasis placed on the idea of the development of "domestic circulation," analysts have begun to sense something of a shift in China's economic policy – a change in orientation from an externally oriented China to one turning inward, placing a much stronger focus on the further development of domestic demand; domestic technological development; and the development of supply chains less vulnerable to the pressure that the United States has exerted over the last four years. At the same time, Chinese president Xi Jinping's signature initiative has received a new framing – the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is now modified by the preface "high quality," something of a further official recognition of the problems that BRI has encountered as it was implemented over the last seven years.

It is within this context that Sebastian Strangio's recent book, *In the Dragon's Shadow: Southeast Asia in the Chinese Century* is perhaps most interesting, i.e., whether Southeast Asia's experience with its large, northern neighbor over the last decade is likely to continue in accord with the patterns and trajectories he carefully discerns or whether "the Chinese century" turns into "the Chinese decade" with Beijing – confronting increasing hostility abroad, both popular and official – making a certainly less drastic but still quite significant Ming Dynasty-style inwards turn.

Strangio sets himself a nearly impossible task – a thorough yet readable exploration of China's role in contemporary Southeast Asia – and he succeeds on all fronts. Deeply grounded in the history of Chinese-Southeast Asian relations as well as the increasingly vast literature examining Chinese foreign and economic policy at the global and bilateral levels, Strangio illustrates the differing dynamics that have structured how

* *Dr. Bradley J. Murg is Dean of Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, Paragon International University and Distinguished Fellow and Senior Advisor at CICP.*

Southeast Asia has responded to China's rapid expansion into the region. Eschewing the narrower method taken by many analysts – an ahistorical approach that takes as its starting point the launch of BRI – Strangio, conversely, provides a thorough discussion of the historical, political, and economic factors that have structured state-level policy making regarding China in Southeast Asia.

Through interview after interview with what reads as something of a "Who's Who" of local analysts from across the region, the overly simplified yet popular narrative of a collection of states confronted with the stark decision as to whether to bandwagon with China or balance with the United States is shown to be fundamentally incorrect. Southeast Asian states – particularly, as he notes, those on the mainland of the continent where Chinese influence has been the strongest – have (with the potential exception of Cambodia) hedged when necessary, bandwagoned when useful, and balanced when required.

At the same time, Strangio also depicts consistent patterns both in China's model of engagement as well as in the responses to that engagement in the region. The central role of Yunnan province, China's "bridgehead" to Southeast Asia is well demonstrated, the discussion of Laos (notoriously difficult for analysts) is worth particular attention, where Strangio highlights the regional divides in China's investment and impact and the broader parallels in Lao history. However, the most consistent theme – particularly in the Greater Mekong Subregion – is Beijing's "tin ear for public opinion" and "general insensitivity to the negative responses provoked by its rising power." Strangio clearly depicts the divide in many states between Beijing's close state-to-state ties and rising popular resentment in the form of anti-China nationalism and China taking on the role of the Andersonian "Other" against which national identity in Southeast Asia will increasingly be defined.

Strangio is also more straight-forward than others in examining the "ambivalent" approach taken by the United States to the region in the period following September 11th and the space that such ambivalence opened for Beijing as Washington began to frame the world through the lens of the Global War on Terror – and the realities of the Obama administration's "Pivot to Asia" and the Trump administration's subsequent more belligerent approach towards China. Importantly, he notes that Thailand's "tilt towards China may be the most significant" in the context of Sino-American competition, a point often missed by analysts.

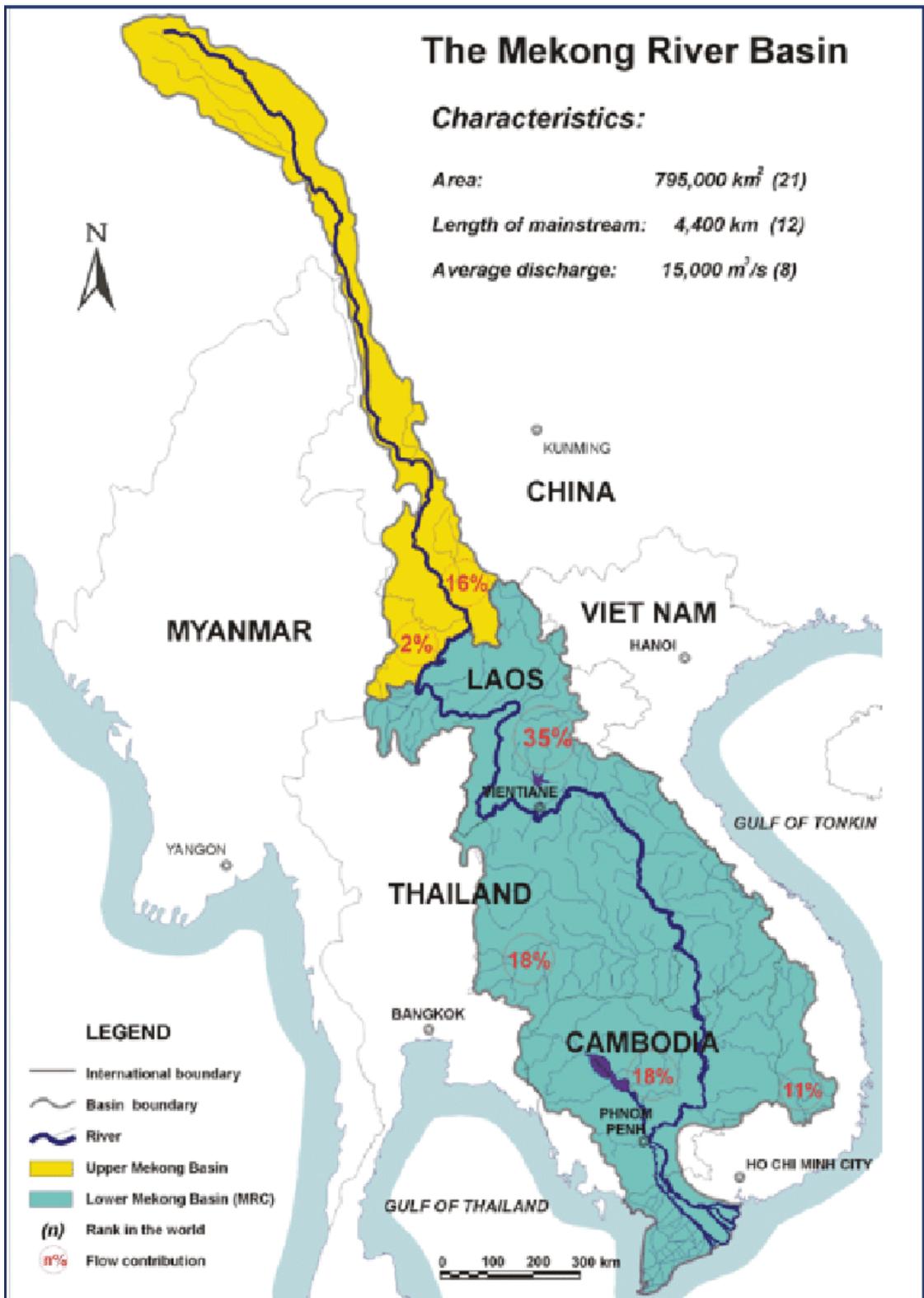
Regarding the role of ASEAN, Strangio highlights both the strengths and the limits of ASEAN as an institution. He provides a particularly memorable summary that is worth quoting in full: "So far, ASEAN's preferred approach has been to bind the Chinese Gulliver with a thousand multilateral threads, to socialize it into the 'ASEAN Way:' the bloc's signature mode of sometimes glacial consensus-based diplomacy. It is an approach that amounts to a sort of narcotization by summitry."

The sheer breadth of the text – incorporating every Southeast Asian state except East Timor and Brunei – makes it required reading for scholars and analysts examining China’s role at the national level as well as for those seeking a broader understanding of China’s role across Southeast Asia as a whole. At the same time, for the general reader, Strangio’s journalistic experience shines through – his ability to deploy both anecdote and descriptive prose capturing the human-level impacts of China’s expansion into the region is sure to keep readers engaged. The only question outstanding is whether, a decade from now, we look back on this book as a chronicle of the early days of the Chinese century or a record of the halcyon days of a brief Chinese decade.

The Mekong River Basin

Characteristics:

Area: 795,000 km² (21)
Length of mainstream: 4,400 km (12)
Average discharge: 15,000 m³/s (8)



Source: https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Map-of-the-Mekong-River-Basin_fig3_255661258

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This journal is made possible in part by a grant from the Embassy of the United States of America in Cambodia

CICP accepts no responsibility for facts presented and views expressed. Responsibility rests solely with the individual contributor. No part of this publication may be produced in any form without permission from CICP.

CAMBODIAN INSTITUTE FOR COOPERATION AND PEACE

No. 204, Street 1966, Phum Paung Peay, Sangkat Phnom Penh Thmey

Khan Sen Sok, Phnom Penh, Kingdom of Cambodia

P.O. Box 1007, Phnom Penh, Cambodia

Email: cicp01@online.com.kh

Webpage: www.cicp.org.kh

