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Mekong-U.S. Partnership Plan of Action 2021-2023

The Mekong-U.S. Partnership (MUSP) (hereafter referred to as “The Partnership”) promotes the stability, peace, prosperity, and sustainable development of the Mekong sub-region through cooperation between Mekong-region countries and the United States in addressing transboundary challenges. It further reinforces the strong and longstanding relationships among the United States, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam. The Partnership strengthens our cooperation and dialogue and expands collaboration on new challenges and opportunities. The Partnership, which complements the ASEAN-U.S. Strategic Partnership, supports the implementation of the ASEAN Community Vision 2025, the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework, and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, which aims to safeguard and preserve ASEAN centrality and to maintain peace, security, and prosperity for the peoples in Southeast Asia as well as in the Indo-Pacific region. In addition, the Partnership seeks to promote complementarity with the Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS), the Mekong River Commission (MRC), and other Mekong cooperation mechanisms.

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This Plan of Action is guided by the Partnership's Foundational Document and Joint Ministerial Statement, which were approved by the Partners on September 11, 2020, at the first Partnership Ministerial meeting and by the Friends of the Mekong Policy Dialogue on January 12, 2021. The Plan outlines unique opportunities for U.S. engagement with Mekong communities, government decision makers, and international partners, including scientists, academia, development partners, and other stakeholders. The United States and Mekong countries intend for the Partnership to serve as a platform for high-level cooperation on strategic challenges and policy-making in the Mekong sub-region on shared priorities between the United States and Mekong countries. By implementing this Plan of Action, Partners endeavor to strengthen transparency and good governance; enhance connectivity, economic integration, and inclusive and sustainable development; and help narrow the development gap in the region.

Areas of Cooperation: The Partnership expands on more than 11 years of cooperation through the Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI) with a comprehensive approach to emerging challenges, including but not limited to: (1) economic connectivity; (2) sustainable water use, natural resources management, and environmental conservation and protection; (3) non-traditional security issues including trafficking in persons, trafficking in narcotics, wildlife and timber, health security, cybersecurity, and disaster response and preparedness; and (4) human resource development. This Plan of Action and the activities listed in its Annexes promote collaborative approaches to regional challenges and opportunities.

Partnership Activities: Partners will cooperate through various means and mechanisms, and report progress at least annually. Partnership activities aim to promote peace, stability, and prosperity, promote respect for international law and member countries' domestic laws and regulations, and support the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Activities promote inclusive economic growth and sustainable development through connectivity; narrowing

the development gap; digital economy and human resource development; transparent, rules-based approaches to addressing the region's development challenges; regional integration; innovative capacity building; and strengthening friendship and partnership among the Mekong countries and the United States. Activities also assist Partners to address shared challenges, such as transnational crime, natural disasters, and health security, and promote climate change adaptation and mitigation, water-food-energy security, and effective sustainable natural resource management, including in fisheries resources.

Information Sharing on Partnership Activities: All partners will share developments of all activities under this Plan of Action openly and transparently through Policy Dialogues and Senior Officials Meetings (SOM).

Friends of the Mekong: Mekong countries, the United States, Australia, the European Union, India (invited), Japan, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, the Asian Development Bank, the Mekong River Commission Secretariat, and the World Bank coordinate their priorities for the development of the Mekong region as the Friends of the Mekong (FOM). The FOM are committed to the shared principles of the Mekong-U.S. Partnership, including values that have underpinned peace and prosperity across the Indo-Pacific region for decades, and to respect the principles of transparency, inclusivity, good governance, ASEAN centrality, multilateralism and the UN-centered international system, a rules-based order with respect for international law, and complementarity with existing cooperation frameworks.

Structure and Schedule of Meetings: Partnership meetings are co-chaired by the United States and one of the five Mekong member countries, rotating annually in alphabetical order. Friends of the Mekong meetings may be scheduled together with these meetings or individually:

Track 1.5 Dialogue Series: Implemented by the Stimson Center and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, a series of seven in-depth dialogues that are scheduled to take place from 2021 – 2023 to explore solutions to key policy and sustainability challenges facing the Mekong region. Partnership Track 1.5 Dialogues bring together experts from MUSP member countries, experts from other dialogue partner countries, private sector experts, and others. Each Dialogue will publish a report to inform Partnership Senior Officials and the public and to assist in MUSP program development.

Policy Dialogue: Held at the Deputy Director General level, this meeting is intended as an exchange of views on shared annual priorities for the Partnership, provide an annual update on progress of Partnership activities and to inform Senior Officials. Additional working-level meetings may be held, as necessary, to coordinate responses to and projects addressing specific regional challenges identified by the Partners.

Senior Officials' Meetings (SOM): Including the MUSP Senior Officials' Meeting and the FOM Senior Officials' Meeting, held concurrent with ASEAN SOM meetings and/or when necessary, senior officials will exchange views on shared priorities in the region, and prepare for the MUSP/FOM Ministerial Meetings.

Ministerial Meeting: Held concurrent with ASEAN + series of Foreign Ministers' Meetings, the Ministerial Meetings are intended to be the premier annual diplomatic engagement of the Partnership and the Friends of the Mekong.

Leaders' Meeting: By agreement of the Partners, may be scheduled with the ASEAN – U.S. Summit.

Annex I: Areas of Cooperation in Mekong-U.S. Partnership (MUSP) Plan of Action

MUSP members cooperate to achieve shared goals under the Partnership's four areas of work. Projects and activities should demonstrate concrete benefits to all parties.

Economic Connectivity, including support for quality infrastructure, national electricity market development, cross-border energy trade, cross-border transport facilitation, renewable and clean energy acceleration and deployment, micro-small- and medium enterprises (MSMEs) development, agriculture, transportation, trade and investment facilitation, promoting sub-regional production linkages and supply chains, digital infrastructure, and digital economy development. Partnership programs include but are not limited to:

1. Flagship Program: USAID Mekong Safeguards
 - a. Timeline: 2018-2023
 - b. USAID Mekong Safeguards works to minimize negative environmental impacts of infrastructure projects, especially in transportation and power generation, by fostering more robust and consistent application of environmental, social, and governance standards. The program also helps stakeholders apply international best practices. USAID Mekong Safeguards supports the Mekong Infrastructure Tracker and other platforms.

2. USAID Southeast Asia Smart Power Program
 - a. Timeline: 2021-2026
 - b. USAID's Southeast Asia Smart Power Program is designed to support modern, reliable, and resilient sustainable energy systems, with a particular focus on Mekong sub-region countries. The program aims to decarbonize and strengthen the region's power systems by increasing regional energy trade, accelerating the deployment of renewable and zero-

emissions energy technologies, and actively engaging private sector leaders. The program will determine specific activities on a rolling basis and coordinate its activities with relevant ASEAN and other regional organizations.

3. Japan-U.S.-Mekong Power Partnership (JUMPP)

- a. Timeline: Launched in 2019, ongoing
- b. JUMPP works with Japan and Mekong governments to promote regional electricity integration and market development through the expansion of flexible, transparent, and competitive markets for clean energy and advanced power system technologies. JUMPP also provides technical training to electric utilities and grid operators to reliably integrate variable renewable energy and cross-border power trade.

4. Mekong Energy Security/Power Sector Program/Surge VI

- a. Timeline: Ongoing
- b. The program strengthens energy security by improving abilities to govern power sectors, reliably integrate renewable energy and other technologies, and adopt market-based approaches to power sector governance that incentivize renewable energy and private investment.

5. MUSP Department of Transportation East-West Transport Connectivity Program

- a. Timeline: 2020-2022
- b. The Department of Transportation (USDOT) will consult with stakeholders, including Mekong and third-country governments, multilateral development banks, U.S. government interagency partners, ACMECS, and the private sector to strengthen institutional capacity and legal and regulatory frameworks to support international best practices for transport connectivity.

6. MUSP Seed Trade Capacity Building

- a. Timeline: 2018-2021
- b. This program, led by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, strengthens national and regional seed trade capacities; cooperate on and harmonize test guidelines, seed standards and seed policies; and encourage public-private partnerships for seed investment.

7. USAID Mekong Sustainable Manufacturing Alliance

- a. Timeline: 2021-2023
- b. This USAID program works to improve the competitiveness of the manufacturing sector in the Mekong region through private sector partnerships and the application of environment, social, and governance (ESG) safeguards and standards.

Sustainable Water, Natural Resources Management, and Environmental Conservation and Protection, including support for a technically sound, well-coordinated and consensus-based approach to managing the shared resources of the Mekong River Basin; support for the MRC's promotion of cooperation for the sustainable development of the Mekong River Basin; encourage co-studies/researches between the Friends of Mekong and the MRC on Mekong water resources; support for environmental conservation, protection and resilience in the Mekong sub-region; and enhance member countries' capacity in the sustainable conservation and management of natural resources, including fishery resources, for sustainable food security. Partnership programs will include but are not limited to:

1. Flagship Program: Mekong Water Data Initiative (MWDI)
 - a. Timeline: Launched in 2018, ongoing
 - b. The MWDI works to strengthen the capacity of Mekong countries to collect, analyze, and manage water and water-related data and information to reduce water-related risks, improve regional responses to environmental emergencies, and promote sustainable economic development across the water, food, energy, and environment nexus. Resources and data tools under MWDI are hosted on MekongWater.org.

2. Mekong Dam Monitor
 - a. Timeline: Launched in 2020; ongoing
 - b. The Mekong Dam Monitor supports the MWDI. It provides objective satellite data on Mekong River water levels behind mainstream river dams, giving Mekong communities information to plan economic activities and climate mitigation strategies.

3. Sustainable Infrastructure Partnership (SIP)
 - a. Timeline: Launched in 2014; ongoing
 - b. Established by the Friends of the Mekong to improve understanding and management of shared natural resources, improve joint planning and coordination, and deploy new technologies, approaches, and methodologies concerning sustainable development and management of natural resources. SIP is implemented by Pact and works in collaboration with government agencies within and beyond the Lower Mekong region to build capacity to apply technical and conceptual tools for monitoring, forecasting, and planning.

4. USAID Smart Infrastructure for the Mekong (SIM)

- a. Timeline: 2013-2022
- b. SIM works to ensure the sustainable development of large infrastructure and land use projects through assistance to Mekong governments on water security, biodiversity conservation, and disaster risk reduction.

5. MUSP NexView

- a. Timeline: Launched in 2019; ongoing
- b. A collaboration between the U.S. Geological Survey, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and Arizona State University, NexView works to strengthen Mekong River Commission efforts to promote good governance and transboundary cooperation with decision support tools to explore the impacts and trade-offs of decisions on water, energy, food and environment, capacity building on groundwater management, and training opportunities for the next generation of young scientists working in the Mekong.

6. U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE)/MUSP Sister Rivers Partnership

- a. Timeline: Launched in 2010; ongoing partnership between the Mekong River Commission and Mississippi River Commission
- b. This program promotes the sharing of best practices in water and river management. Through annual reciprocal exchanges, collaborative engagements, and technical exchanges, the Sister Rivers Partnership enhances transboundary river governance, disaster risk mitigation, and sustainable development to promote stability and prosperity.

7. MUSP-Republic of Korea Collaboration for the Mekong

- a. Timeline: Launched in 2019; ongoing
- b. This project provides Mekong countries and the Mekong River Commission with modeling and real-time forecasting tools and training to better predict and mitigate the impacts of natural hazards, such as floods and droughts, through a collaborative partnership between MUSP SIP, the Korea Water Resources Corporation (K-water), the National Aeronautics & Space Administration (NASA), and USACE.

8. USAID SERVIR-Mekong

- a. Timeline: 2014-2022
- b. This project supports the MUSP, and in collaboration with NASA, supports climate resilience studies, providing early warning of dramatic changes in regional water and disasters, air quality, food security, weather and climate, and land cover and land use.

9. USAID Mekong for the Future

- a. Timeline: 2020-2023
- b. This project works to increase transparency and access to data and information and promote participation of area specific and specialized social, political, and professional organizations, think-tanks, and other interested stakeholders in scientific and evidence-based natural resources management in the Mekong region.

Non-Traditional Security, including countering transnational crime like trafficking of drugs, wildlife, timber, and trafficking in persons (TIP), and criminal activity associated with illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing; health security, including emergency preparedness and response for pandemics and epidemics; cybersecurity; and disaster response and preparedness and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR). Partnership programs will include but are not limited to:

1. Flagship Program: Pathfinder Health Program

- a. Timeline: Health dialogues will be conducted in August 2021. Funding and project implementation are expected to occur in the second half of 2021.
- b. The Pathfinder Health Program helps Mekong health authorities identify and respond to future emerging infectious diseases. After working with U.S. government experts to develop action plans, Mekong sub-region Pathfinder fellows expects to receive funds for pilot research programs to help communities prevent disease emergence and spread. The Pathfinder program complements long-standing U.S. support for public health to Southeast Asia, including \$96 million in U.S. assistance to combat COVID-19.

2. USAID: Reducing Demand for Wildlife

- a. Timeline: 2021-2023
- b. In the Asia-Pacific region, the transborder illegal trade in wildlife increasingly threatens regional security. Transnational criminal organizations engaged in wildlife trafficking are ruthless and lawless. The trade in wildlife and wild meat risks exposure to zoonotic pathogens and spillover of diseases such as COVID-19. The Reducing Demand for Wildlife activity will use social and behavioral change communication campaigns to reduce demand for wildlife products and wild meat. This will reduce incentives for criminal organizations to engage in wildlife trafficking.

It will also curb a significant pathway for exposure to zoonotic pathogens and spillover. The activity will also convene policy makers, legislators, enforcement officials, prosecutors, and judges to review and strengthen the region's systems for the regulation of wildlife trade and for the enforcement of wildlife laws. The primary focus will be on global trafficking of wildlife products consumed in Asia and derived from elephants, rhinoceroses, pangolins, and tigers.

3. COVID-19 Assistance for the Mekong

- a. Timeline: Ongoing
- b. The United States intends to provide vaccines, as well as emergency health, humanitarian, economic, infrastructure and development assistance to combat COVID-19 and to expedite recovery from the pandemic in Mekong countries.

4. MUSP Disease Vector Control Information Sharing Program

- a. Timeline: This program – scheduled for March 2020 but postponed due to the pandemic – will re-commence when travel is possible.
- b. This project will bring a group of Mekong government health officials to the United States to provide hands-on, policy-based training for controlling vector borne diseases such as dengue and Zika.

5. MUSP Disaster Relief Exercise and Engagement (DREE)

- a. Timeline: The DREE will resume when travel is possible.
- b. The DREE brings together uniformed and civilian agencies to share best practices and jointly prepare for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief situations.

Human Resource Development, including support for human capital development through education, medical and laboratory research and development, vocational training, youth empowerment, women’s economic empowerment, gender equality, university cooperation, and educational and professional exchanges. Partnership programs will include but are not limited to:

1. Flagship Program: Track 1.5 Policy Dialogues

- a. Timeline: Seven dialogues held between 2021-2023
- b. The Partnership Policy Dialogues are a series of seven, multi-day conferences to explore solutions to key policy and sustainability challenges facing the Lower Mekong. The conferences will explore the following themes including connectivity, energy and infrastructure, non-traditional security, transboundary water governance, and nature-based solutions. Tying the conference experiences together are cross-cutting values of inclusivity, resilience (including climate), and collaboration. Outreach to local universities and youth networks will occur on the sidelines of each conference to engage the next generation of policy practitioners and problem solvers.

2. Mekong Connections

- a. Timeline: 2020-2023
- b. Mekong Connections focuses on governance and transparency in public decision making in three areas:
 - 1) water and water-related ecosystems of the Mekong, Ayeyarwady, and other rivers;
 - 2) combating conservation crimes, including wildlife and timber trafficking; and
 - 3) improving health security, increasing the region’s ability to prevent, detect, and respond to infectious disease threats, especially using the ‘One Health’ approach that recognizes the interdependence of human, animal, plant, and ecosystem health. Mekong Connections will provide financial and capacity-building resources to social, political, professional, and other relevant organizations and individuals working on these issues.

3. Marginalized Populations Workshop

- a. Timeline: 2021
- b. This workshop works to empower marginalized communities in Mekong countries to more fully participate in and contribute to society by exchanging best practices for countering violence and discrimination.

4. Public Impact Program (PIP)

- a. Timeline: 2020, ongoing
- b. This project provides seed funding and mentoring for Mekong social, political, professional, and other relevant organizations and social entrepreneurs who are developing solutions to complex regional challenges. It assists these organizations and entrepreneurs with connections, knowledge, and training so they can their programs can attract funding and have impact. PIP serves as a hub in the Mekong with an emphasis on capacity building, mentorship, grant training and linking others in the Mekong. The program is targeted toward young, female social entrepreneurs in the Mekong countries.

5. Women's Economic Empowerment

- a. Timeline: Launching in 2021
- b. This project works to provide financial literacy training and support to women seeking microinsurance to support women entrepreneurs' micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs).

6. MUSP NexGen Young Scientist Program

- a. Timeline: 2020; ongoing
- b. Building on the LMI Young Scientist Program and implemented by Arizona State University, this program supports the creation and operation of a Young Scientist exchange program to foster collaboration, knowledge

sharing, and the creation of a network of young scientist in the five Mekong countries. NexGen aims to empower early career professionals in the Mekong Region to increase science-policy engagement, build working relationships among future leaders, and foster responsible and sustainable stewardship of the Mekong River Basin and its natural resources. NexGen is focused on promoting interdisciplinary approaches to the complex multilateral challenges faced within the Mekong Region drawing from disciplines within STEM, including the social sciences.

Annex 2: Potential Cooperation and Projects for Future Consideration

(Potential cooperation and projects for future consideration, subject to the availability of appropriated funds, legal requirements, and policy objectives)

Economic Connectivity

Mekong-U.S. CEO Forum: To build relationships and networking among CEOs with the goal of promoting trade and investment opportunities, enhancing intra- and inter-regional value chains among Mekong countries, and reducing production costs to support industrial development in the Mekong region.

Intra/Inter-regional Infrastructure Cooperation: To invest in infrastructure, including road, rail, air, and water transport networks with a focus on regional climate change mitigation and resilience.

Digital Transformation Cooperation: To deepen cooperation in telecommunications infrastructure, including 5G and future communication technologies and promote secure, resilient, transparent, and sustainable digital, telecoms, and ICT infrastructure.

Secure, Resilient Supply Chains and Logistics Cooperation: To promote Mekong supply chain efficiency and linkages with regional and global supply networks.

Sustainable Water, Natural Resources Management, and Environmental Conservation and Protection

Mekong-U.S. Innovative Villages: To promote ideas and concepts from youth based on MUSP goals in each of the six Partner countries and showcase those ideas to tourists and in a MUSP Innovative Exhibition annually in the host country of MUSP.

Mekong Field Trip/Survey Programs: To evaluate the impacts of droughts, saline intrusion, and other water-related risks to strengthen joint planning and management of sustainable water resources.

Non-Traditional Security

Lives Safe from UXO: To remove the obstacle of unexploded ordnance to development in the Mekong region by improving the efficiency of UXO clearance operations and increasing support for UXO survivors.

Counter-Trafficking in Cultural Property: To strengthen the capacity of Mekong countries to combat the looting and illicit trafficking of cultural property.

Human Resource Development

Mekong-U.S. Policy Development Scholarship: To provide master's and PhD scholarships to 20 government officials from each Mekong country to study in the United States in various fields that build policy expertise. Also, to encourage Mekong and U.S. universities to establish sister university partnerships to support pairing programs and to enhance information sharing and research opportunities.

Youth Tourism Empowerment: To convene Youth Tourism Ambassadors from Mekong-region countries and the United States for capacity building and cultural understanding; to promote youth involvement in tourism development; and to identify strategies for sustainable tourism.

Mekong-U.S./FOM Executive Leadership Program: To promote high-level dialogues on issues of great importance to the regional development.

