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Hydro hegemony in mekong sub-region revisited

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Abstract
As one of the longest and largest rivers on Earth, the Mekong river flows along six countries. Mekong River Basin is a home of various plants, animals and fish as well as providing great economic value to supply for more than sixty million people living along it. Nevertheless, the natural environment and local communities are on the verge of alarming danger because of huge hydropower dam constructions. The development of big constructions and human activities without the careful examination lead to the high tension among riparian states. In the large picture, the Mekong river sub-region now shifted into the playifng ground of riparians and powers.
By applying the hegemony and power theory to transboundary water analysis as well as non-traditional security perspectives, the purpose of the article is to draw the current situation of power game playing, hydro hegemony challenged from examining the impacts of hydropower constructions to searching for water influence in in Mekong sub-region.

Keywords: non-traditional security; mekong sub-region; hydropower; ASEAN

Introduction

Being one of the longest and largest rivers on Earth, the Mekong river flows/runs through along six countries including China, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam. In mainland Southeast Asia, some powerful empires once existed and developed by employing resources in the Mekong basin. Funan from a small polity had become a first large trade-oriented empire (maritime polity). Later on, Khmer empire entered the golden age with a massive agricultural irrigation system rooted by Mekong branches and Great Lake (or Tonle Sap) as well as Angkor Wat which embodied the biggest Buddist temple construction. Those mighty ancient polities in Southeast Asia not only demonstrated the intimate links between suitable environmental conditions and advancement, but also displayed the relations of water and power. The Mekong river today is renowned for magnificent biodiversity (just followed by the Amazon river basin) and supplies important resources for the livelihood and food security of more than 60 million people along the river. The Mekong river, recently, still plays a significant role in changing the dynamic economy of China (upstream) and the mainland Southeast Asian countries (downstream). However, in the last few years, it could be seen that the phenomena of extreme drought in Northeast Thailand and Laos, the lower level of water in Tonle Sap (Cambodia) and the increasingly saltwater intrusion (Cuu Long delta, Vietnam) caused by continously hydropower dams many years ago leading to high tension among riparians.

Rivers are characterized by stability, but not immutability. The flow of a river depends on the hydraulic discharge and the speed of the flow. Therefore, in theory, international water relations are always complicated because they are rarely transparent or easily quantifiable. Even knowledge and information produced on transboundary water matters is always influenced by riparian interest [6, p.3]. However, the high demands of water used for various purposes lead to the change of the potential importance and the salience of transboundary waters. When water resources can no longer meet national food self-sufficiency requirements or provide enough environmental water supply, it is high time for riparian governments to shift from comfortable water endowments and easy hydro-politics to critical relations of conflicts. In addition, the conflictual framework was reinforced by the intuitive self-interested adoption of the contradictory principles of upstream sovereignty and downstream integrity [6, p.5].

When it comes to the intensity and form of conflicts, the water users would try to compete for their own interests at any levels of hydro-politics. Consequently the conflictual relations emerge among them. Most importantly, the hidden reasons of intensities of conflict were rooted by the power asymmetries and the hegemonic nature of international water relations. By numerous ways, the powers have sustained their privileged shares of transboundary waters. In transboder river relations, bigger entities utilize water to gain power, meanwhile smaller entities use power to get more water [5, p.4].

At the river basin level, hydro-hegemony would allow a deeper understanding of trans-boundary water conflicts. Hydro-hegemony is hegemony active over water issues, hegemony on the waterfront. When economies are vulnerable and unable to

adapt to water scarcity, the power asymmetries will occur. Due to the power asymmetries, the more powerful actor could influence over other riparians. The original piece developing the framework of hydro-hegemony illustrated that the use of force/coercion (sticks) and consent/attraction (carrots) coupled with the establishment of ideas on a basin is much more determining of the outcome than international water law, water sharing ethics or riparian position [6, p.10].

The framework of hydro-hegemony is applied to the Nile, Jordan and Tigris and Euphrates river basins, but it is also useful to analyse recent situations in the Mekong river basin. It is proposed that the framework provides an analytical paradigm with insightful approach for considering the options of powerful or hegemonic riparian and how they might move away from domination towards cooperation [5, p.1].

From dams construction in downstream

China has advantages over the lower Mekong countries in terms of both financial and technical resources and the history of hydropower development over many decades. Turning back to the water and river itself of the Mekong river, while providing a lot of financial aid for infrastructure downstream, China also keeps on construction of new hydropower dams and reservoirs. From 1993 to 2018, it is shown that the Government of China built a series of dams during the period of time.

Table 1: Dams, Reservoirs and Electrical production on the Upper Mekong [1, p.11]

Dams listed by date of construction	Reservoir size in cubic meters	Electrical production by date turbine ommissioned
Manwan	920,000,000	1993
Dachaoshan	940,000,000	2002
Jinghong	249,000,000	2008
Xiaowan	15,130,000,000	2009
Nuozhadu	27,490,000,000	2012
Gongguoqiao	120,000,000	2012
Miaowei	660,000,000	2017
Huangdeng	1,613,000,000	2017
Dahuaqiao	293,000,000	2018
Lidi	75,000,000	2018
Wunonglong	284,000,000	2018

Based on the new study of Basist and Williams, the correspondence of the annual cycle between the predicted and gauge measurements remained strong even after the second dam, Dachaoshan, was completed and the reservoir was filled. Specifically, one can look at the predicted and measured flow during the period 1994 and 2008 and see that there is generally excellent correspondence, with some notable exceptions. The relationship between gauge height and natural flow began to deteriorate after 2012, when a couple of major dams and reservoirs were built, which greatly restricted the amount and timing of water released upstream [1, p.11]. The continuing studies recently have indicated that the more dams and reservoirs constructed upstream, the less water downstream countries gain from the river.

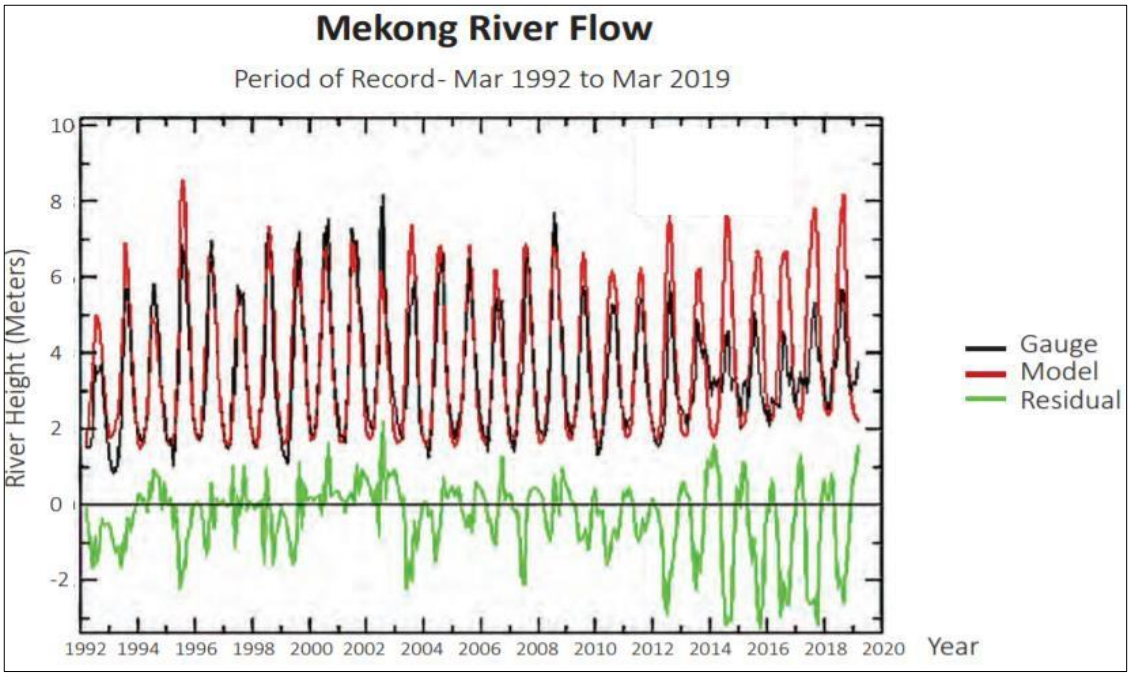

Fig 1: Time series of gauge and model predicted measurements at Chiang Saen (Jan 1992-March 2019). The green is the difference field. If the values are negative, the gauge is missing water, and if they are positive there is excess water at the gauge [1, p.11]

The residuals (gauge measurements minus predicted natural flow) have shown a very clear and recurring annual cycle over the last decade. Relative to the gauge, the satellite measurements show there is missing water during the wet season. Conversely, excess water is released during the dry season. This is presumably to distribute electrical production more equitably throughout the year. This is particularly so after 2012, when the largest of the dams, Nuozhadu, and its reservoir were completed. The lack of water during the wet season is most pronounced after the largest generators began operating. The dams greatly expand

institutional capacity to regulate the river flow, with corresponding impacts downstream that need to be addressed through holistic solutions [1, p.18].

In the year 2020, it is experiencing a second year of low flows and the delayed onset of the wet season. It means the local communities would be heavily affected by such environmental conditions because most of them depend on the river for their livelihoods, on the river system and the river life that supports the river's functions, and on the governments of the four countries that manage it.

Preliminarily, the 2020 low flows conditions will result in significant implications for the Tonle Sap Lake and the Mekong Delta. With the prevailed low flow conditions, the following adverse impacts may come into play:

1. Ecological imbalance
2. Reduced nutrient-rich sediment mobilization and transportation;
3. Significantly decreased household fish catches, and (iv) Socio-economic impacts [8, p.27].

Recent years, the lower Mekong region has suffered heavily from extreme climate change impacts, especially flood and drought. The upstream hydropower dam operation and reservoirs is an evocative issue which is important to nation security, local livelihoods and ecological health. Many concrete examples have been documented in downstream countries including Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam. However, the levels of ecological and socio-economic impacts are not the same in each country.

In a drought year of 2019, Cambodia witnessed reverse flows into the Tonle Sap Lake are lower than they were at the same time last year, and considerably lower than those in 2018. The low flows could have severe impacts on Cambodia due to a loss of fisheries and irrigation potential. The Tonle Sap Lake is one of the most important economic areas in Cambodia. Fisheries itself contribute to over 60% of total annual fish catch in Cambodia (770,000 tons). The critical interruption and lower reverse flows in 2020 may additionally decrease the fish catch in Cambodia, cause to the concerns of food security for the most vulnerable peoples in the country and in the region [8, p.27]. Vietnam is one of the countries that is considered to be most affected by climate change, changing environment and lack of water for living [23]. In the year 2016, Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia have been squabbling over dam construction and water usage, particularly as a severe drought threatens rice crop yields across the Indochina Peninsula [11]. Vietnam experienced the worst drought and increasingly saltwater intrusion in Cuu Long delta (Vietnam). China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs claimed that "People living along the Lan-cang-Mekong River are nourished by the same river... It goes without saying that friends should help each other when help is needed [11]." Subsequent joint research by the MRC and China's Ministry of Water Resources (2016) - an act of specific reciprocity-concluded that water releases helped alleviate regional drought. Nonetheless, downstream societies are more skeptical of China's plans, stating that the water releases were no different from previous years to facilitate river navigation. In Thailand's Bangkok Post between the Chinese embassy in Bangkok, titled 'False report undermines Mekong cooperation' [16] and Thai society, titled 'China Must be Sincere on Mekong' "If China and other governments are sincere about making the Lancang-Mekong "a river of friendship, cooperation and prosperity", the priority should be listening to the voices of people living along the Mekong who live with the river and continue to rely on its resources" [17]. In order to gain long-term trust building, China should complete data sharing, transparency and avoid the data politicalization "With a joint study, maybe it won't be perfect, but as long as we can get one foot in the door and keep cooperating, maybe we can reach our goal for a future of a more transparent data-sharing regime" [18]. "The outflow of the Lancang River only accounts for 13.5% of the runoff at the estuary of the Mekong River", "A shared river is a shared future" [16].

In case of Laos, with the first step of operating new hydropower dams, it is expected a new chapter for economic development of this country. However, on the other hand, because of the high cost in big infrastructure associated with hydropower, Laos is facing with a severe debt burden. In a report published in Nikkei Asia, although with the ambition of hydropower projects would transform Laos becoming a "battery of Southeast Asia" by exporting electricity to its neighbors, many believe that Laos is rapidly sinking into debt behind dams financed by foreign money, some of which cost billions of dollars [19].

Even before SARS-CoV-2 hit, many observers had concerns about Laos' ballooning debt to China. In recent years, the government has invested heavily in hydropower dam projects in hoping to transform Laos into the "The Battery of Southeast Asia." According to a separate report in the Financial Times, in addition to Laos's own sovereign debt of $12.6 billion (equivalent to around 65 percent of gross domestic product), EDL [Électricité du Laos] holds an estimated $8 billion of debt. According to a study in 2019 by the Australia-based Lowy Institute put Laos debt to China at 45 percent of GDP [20].

September 2020, a report from Reuter said that "The poor, small Southeast Asian country of Laos is set to cede majority control of its electric grid to a Chinese company" [20]. The deal comes at a time when critics accuse China of "debt-trap diplomacy" [22, 21] to gain strategic advantage in countries struggling to repay loans taken out under the global "Belt and Road" infrastructure initiative [20].

To a search for water influence in Mekong sub-region

Hydropower development on the Mekong River has been ongoing for over two decades. Although the river is known as no political boundaries, the geopolitical landscape impacts significantly on the Mekong. Because of this, it is easier to understand the Mekong mainstream dams, and the Mekong River Basin itself, in terms of an upper and a lower basin.

The Mekong River plays an important role not only for riverine ecosystems, but also as a driving force for agricultural and industrial development. It could be seen that with the valuable water resource from Tibet running through Yunnan province, China has taken advantage of the significance of the Mekong's water for irrigation and energy production purposes since 1950. China under the the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of President Xi Jingping, wants to further step into the region of lower Mekong. In March 2016, The Lancang - Mekong Cooperation mechanism (LMC) was formally launched at a gathering of heads

of government from China, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam in Sanya, Hainan.

Currently, the LMC participates in an overlapping mechanisms of cooperation in the Mekong region such as the Mekong River Commission (MRC), the Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS), the Greater Mekong Sub-region initiative of the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the Lower Mekong Initiative under the support of the US, Mekong-Japan Cooperation, Mekong Ganga Cooperation, the Mekong Republic of Korea Partnership, and the ASEAN Mekong Basin Development Cooperation [9, p.2]. With the initiative of Chinese leaders, along with such three pillars of cooperation as (i) political and security issues, (ii) economic and sustainable development, and (iii) social, cultural and people -to-people exchanges [10], the LMC identifies five priority areas of cooperation including: interconnectivity, production capacity, cross border economic cooperation, water resources, agriculture, and poverty reduction. This "3+5 model" (the LMC's three pillars and five priority areas) served as the guiding framework for project development within the LMC.

China's cooperation with mainland Southeast Asian countries on water using issues was legally confirmed in the 2016 declaration. Given the Declaration in Sanya (China) (March 2016), the leaders from six LMC members have agreed to "enhance cooperation among LMC countries in sustainable water resources management and utilization" [4] Additionally, for water resources cooperation purposes, a center could be established to serve as a platform for technical exchanges, capacity building, drought and flood management, data sharing, and joint research among other cooperation initiatives [4]. This is a step that is expected to bring practical cooperation among member countries to bring about water stability, economic developments and protection of the ecosystem in the region.

Since the beginning, China has helped lower Mekong countries constructing the number of big construction projects, especially hydropower dams along mainstream and tributaries of rivers in Laos (Xayaburi dams is the biggest one) and Cambodia. In the case of Laos, in the year of 2020, with new commissions totaling 1.89 GW, Laos is second-highest in new added capacity across the region. The growth includes two major projects; the 1,295 MW Xayaburi run-of-river power station and 270 MW Nam Ngiep 1 project. These will produce electricity for local use as well as export to Thailand. In addition, the new 260 MW Don Sahong project will supply electricity to Cambodia. The Laos government will continue to promote sustainable hydropower with the aim of reducing energy imports, as well as reducing electricity prices [3, p.42].

It is shown that the priority of LMC cooperation focuses more on big infrastructure than water benefits itself as mentioned before based on three pillars and 5 priorities of cooperation. Only under the 2018-2019 "foundation laying" period, the LMC has already offered many tangible benefits to the downstream Mekong countries in terms of interconnectivity, water resources management, poverty reduction, and regional economic integration through infrastructure investment and trade growth. Interconnectivity vision from Beijing under the LMC and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has started many projects in Laos, Thailand and Cambodia. For example, the China-Laos railway, the Kunming-Bangkok road, the Phnom Penh-Sihanoukville expressway - included in both frameworks and entailing a diversity of funding sources inclusive of the LMC special fund, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and the Silk Road Fund. But based on the information of observers, these sources remain a deficiency of transparency as to how the LMC relates even to China's own steadily expanding set of development institutions.

It seems that there are several different points between Mekong River Commission (MRC) and LMC laying in its aims of cooperation. Under the Article 1, Chapter III of Agreement on the Cooperation for the sustainable development of the Mekong river basin (1995), all participants claimed "To cooperate in all fields of sustainable development, utilization, management and conservation of the water and related resources of the Mekong River Basin" [13, p.3] and "to minimize the harmful effects that might result from natural occurrences and man-made activities [13, p.3]". It means water issues should be on top of priority of mutual co-operation that benefit all riparians. Meanwhile, the LMC tries to maintain a significantly broader purview, incorporating two additional pillars, i.e., political and security issues and socio-cultural topics. Moreover, while earlier cooperation mechanisms (including other Mekong Initiatives of others such as the US, Japan...), it seems the LMC just involves 5+1. According to Hao Su, China Foreign Affairs University's Director of Department of Diplomacy, in the field of infrastructure development, the LMC is expected to replace the long standing, Asian Development Bank-funded cooperative arrangements for the GMS [9, p.4]. In addition, with the expansion of big projects in terms of road, railway, hydropower dams in smaller countries, some have raised their voice and questioned the hidden targets in the region. Yu Xuezhong has noted that water in the Mekong is seen as "the most basic resource, and it also is a national strategic resource with crucial implications. The trans-boundary effects of hydroelectric installations are a major source of tension and conflict in the Lancang-Mekong region" [9, p.4]. At the same time, the ongoing competition between China and Japan in the area of infrastructure provision is increasingly seeming. Beijing is dominating the development of the North-South corridor (with Kunming serving as China's bridgehead to the region) while Tokyo remains its center of attraction in East-West and Southern connection. In the context of rising tensions in Sino-American relations, the development of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy and the establishment of "the Quad" mini-lateral arrangement (comprising the United States, Japan, Australia, and India), deeper inter-institutional cooperation is absolute certain. Another significant point also needs to be noticed is the debt. Many countries now need to be more careful to avoid falling into deep debt through any type of financial assistant and aid from outside. In the Mekong region, with the smaller size of economy, Laos was the only LMC member included in the Center for Global Development's list of countries considered "vulnerable" to debt burden stemming from an identified channel of Chinese project lending [14, p.12]. Furthermore, according to *The Diplomat*, economically, Cambodia is now one of several countries around the world whose debt to China amounts to more than 25 percent of their gross domestic product (GDP) "Overdependence on China undermines Cambodia's national security. We know because it's happened before" [15].

It is easy to see that the sub-regional countries (except China) remain limited in economic potential and capacity and still relied

in outside capitals and aids. Nonetheless, the biggest challenge for the countries is that there are so far a good number of overlapping cooperation mechanisms and terms. Ironnically existed and existing strutures are dead in practice. To sum up, on one hand, under the investment from various funds of Chinese investors under the LMC mechanism, Laos could be able to construct some big hydropower dams and generate energy, although the pros and cons of those projects still need to be considered in the future. Thailand, Cambodia also received the investment from LMC and BRI mechanism, but the concerns regarding national security, especially in Cambodia, still remains unanswered.

Conclusion Remarks

In the large picture, the Mekong sub-region now becomes the playing ground of both six riparians and big outside powers. However, the role of China with the LMC and BRI mechanism is gradually becoming more influential in the region. With a lot of dam constructions and reservoirs in upstream and large project investments in lower river countries, various impacts have been pointed out. Besides, concerns of national security, people living, environment devastation still remain a question and look for effective solutions. In fact, facing a number of challenges, the mainland Southeast Asian countries have their own advantages and in "counter-hegemonic tactics and strategies form the basis of an interesting body of literature highlighting how the seemingly disadvantaged party may either level the playing field or change the rules of the game" [6, p.10]. As suggested by Lukes about the second dimension of power, and some others called "bargaining power" this structure of power consists essentially of stripping the weaker party of the capacity to choose between compliance or non-compliance when confronted with the demands of the stronger party [6, p.7]. Moreover, the interaction between actors in the structure is influential - if each is legitimate in the eyes of the other, an actor that has much less of the material form of power may still retain influence over the stronger actor [6, p.7]. China maintains the role of a dialogue partner with MRC and the priority of LMC is for political and economic purposes and water management, six riparians should be gathered and institutionalized as a sort of mechanism in which China and other members could actively provide enough information and transparent data. With that, water governace, flood and drought issues could be dealt with in more effective ways. In addition, because of high demands of society and economic development, downstream countries should carefully consider the other choices of energy generated instead of heavily relying on hydro electricity. Solar and wind energy are gradually more effective and competitive in using and cost than fossil fuels and hydropower. Given a political economy perspective, downstream riparians have a further option in the long run. A dynamic and healthy economy always prevails over a natural resource-dependent economy. This would overcome the impacts of power asymmetry are mainly determined by political economy processes [6, p.11]. In a positive outlook of recent Mekong river issues, people still hope that man-made activities along the river can be solved as long as the goodwill of all riparians and cooperation would overwhelm the conflicts. By this way, it could be possible to avoid any unexpected circumstances that would unfold and protect the last days of the mighty Mekong as it was once [2].

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