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China and Globalization Cooperation toward Conflict Prevention in the Mekong River Basin

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Abstract: *Water resources and sharing constitute one of the main sources of tensions between riparian countries. In order to meet the need of its nationals and sustain its economic growth and development, the People Republic of China (PRC), for the past few years, has unilaterally initiated several dams building projects. This has created a continuing tension between the PRC and the members of the Mekong River Commission (MRC) since those projects will have negative impacts on the livelihoods of people in the LMRB. This paper argues that conflicts between the PRC and the members of the MRC are manageable as a result of the increasing economic interdependence between China and ASEAN (ASEAN+1). China's growing international influence compels it to show good will in order to be a regional and international reliable and accountable stakeholder. This inclusive and holistic management approach will pave the way for a better participatory and collaborative engagement for planning and development while ensuring prevention, management and lessening of tensions. This paper also suggests that the MRC be given more authority in terms of conflict management policies, implementation, plans and mechanisms at both regional and country levels.*
Key words: *Mekong River Commission, Conflict Management, Tension, and Prevention*

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I. Introduction

For the past few decades, human extraction and utilization of water have been one of the major sources of tension between countries that share rivers not only in Asia not around the world. As demand for water is tremendously increasing, a consequence of urbanization and the need to sustain economic development, water scarcity and sharing, alongside environmental issues, make it very complex for riparian countries to reach cooperative arrangements.

Generally, causes of river basin conflict may be classified into two categories: (1) water quantity and (2) water quality. The competing demands for water in the Mekong River, which is creating increasing pressures on land and water uses and are resulted in a rising number of social, economic and environmental issues are exclusively about water quantity. The construction of dams by the People's Republic of China (PRC) up stream for irrigation and hydropower in order to meet water and energy services for economic growth have drawn complains and concerns from leaders of countries for instance Cambodia, Thailand, Laos DPR, and Vietnam, which are located at the lower section of the river basin.

The detrimental impacts of PRC's dams building, such as the disintegration and transformation of the Mekong River, the destruction of the river's ecosystem, debt burdens of the Lower Mekong River Basin (LMRB) countries, population displacement and the inequitable sharing of costs and benefits of those projects, have led scholars, government officials of the other riparian countries, and environmental NGOs to worry about tensions and the eventuality of conflicts over the use of water in the Mekong River Basin (MRB).

It is undeniable that the livelihoods of people living in the LMRB are intricately pertained to the availability of the river's water resources. Thus, are conflicts in the MRB over water resources manageable? Will the PRC be willing to cooperate as the country is economically and politically becoming stronger both regionally and internationally? What conflict prevention approach may be the most effective to facilitate cooperation among the riparian countries of the Mekong River? Those are the questions that this paper seeks to answer.

II. Topic Centered Discussion

I. Physical Characteristics of The Mekong River

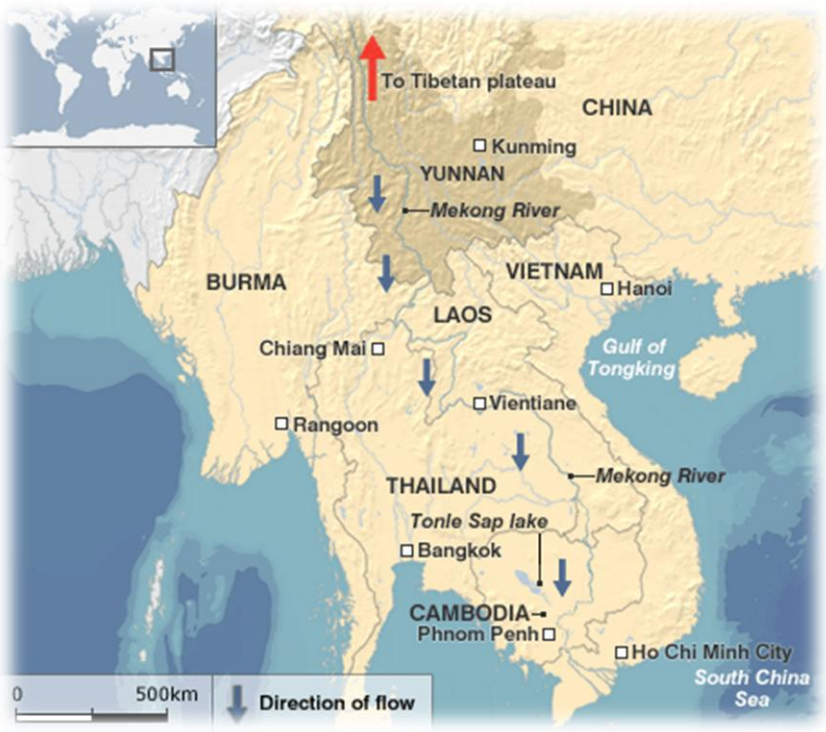
I.1 The Mekong River Region And Its Boundaries

The Mekong River is the longest river of Southeast Asia. It has a total length of approximately 4,900 km. It ranks 12th in the world, 7th in Asia in terms of its length, 21stin terms of its catchment, and 8thin terms of

its discharge. The MR rises in southern Qinghai province, China, flows south through eastern Tibet and across the highlands of Yunnan province, through countries of the Southeast Asian peninsula to the south of Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam, where it discharges to the South China Sea with a total annual runoff of 475,000 million m^3during the rainy season.It is fed from two sources: the monsoon rains and the glaciers from China.

The boundaries of the Mekong River region include the entire MRB and the coastal area adjacent to the Mekong Delta. The MRB itself contains two parts: (1) the Lancang or Upper Mekong River Basin (UMRB) which is located within China and the eastern part of Myanmar and mainly mountainous and the lower part, the Lower Mekong River Basin (LMRB) which is constituted of lowlands and floodplains. The LMRB covers about 70% of the whole MRB and is the most significant environmentally and economically and it's formed with six countries; PRC, Myanmar, Cambodia, Thailand, Laos DPR, and Vietnam.

The MRB forms many sub-basins. The watersheds of the UMRB are contiguous whereas the watersheds of the LMRB are much more complex. The LMRB is consisted of 125 small and large watersheds. Those watersheds are constituted of large areas of forest, paddy fields, and streams and creeks that form a complex, rich and diverse ecosystem supporting over 65 million people.



Mekong River Boundaries Source: Google

I.2 Bio-Geographical Zones Of The Mrb

The MRB is divided into six bio-geographical zones or landforms.

1. The Lancang River Basin (UMRB)

The Lancang river basin constitutes the parts of Qinghai province, the Tibet region and Yunnan province in China. Those areas are formed of high mountains and deep gorges, and are limited arable land. The population living in the UMRB is considerably small compared to that of the LMRB. However, this section of the MRB possesses high flow relief with potential for hydropower development.

2. The Northern Highlands

The Northern highlands are parts of Yunnan province in China, Laos PDR, Myanmar and Thailand. This part consists of high mountains and valley floors. The population living in that area is relatively small due to the rough characteristic of the terrain. This zone has large-scale hydropower schemes. However, the soil is very low in terms fertility due to salinization.

3. The Korat-Sakon Plateau:

The Korat-Sakon plateau, the driest part of the MRB, is bordered by the northern and eastern highlands in Lao PDR and the Petchabun and Phnom Dangrek mountain ranges in Thailand and northern Cambodia. It has

low rainfall and low soil fertility due to salinization

4. The Eastern Highlands

The Eastern Highlands is located within Laos PDR and Vietnam. This zone is the most heavily forested along the Mekong River, the richest in biodiversity, and also has high potential for hydropower. The density of the population in that area is very low.

5. The Southern Uplands

The Southern Uplands are situated in southeastern Cambodia. It is a mountainous area and densely forested. The Southern Uplands contain low population densities and are considered significant areas for nature conservation.

6. The Lowlands

The Lowlands are parts of Cambodia, Lao PDR and Vietnam including the Mekong Delta and its associated coastal area. It inhabits the Tonle Sap, the largest lake in Southeast Asia. The lowlands also comprise the Mekong Delta, which is the most densely populated area of the MRB along with large areas of fertile agricultural lands.

I.3 Climate Conditions In the Mrb

Climate conditions in the MRB vary drastically upstream to downstream. While there are cold temperature and tundra in the UMRB, the climate is typically tropical and monsoonal in the LMRB. There is Southwest monsoon in the latter half of May until early October whereas there is Northeast monsoon from early November to early March. Precipitation in the region varies with location. While rainfall is low on the Tibet plateau, rainfall is the highest in the Mekong Delta.

I.4 Water Resources, Biodiversity, And Critical Habitats In The Mrb

The MRB is consisted of a high aquatic biodiversity and large water catchment area. According to study conducted and published by the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, IUCN, the Mekong region is one of the nine richest habitats for fish biodiversity globally, with 298-recorded species, including the endemic Giant catfish.

Laos PDR contains the largest catchment area in the MRB followed respectively by Thailand and China. Laos PDR also makes the greatest contribution to the MR in terms of discharge both in rainy and drying season. In the rainy seasons, Laos has an average discharge of 166195 million m^3(35%) followed by Cambodia and Thailand with an average discharge of 90193 million m^3 (19%) and 80732 million m^3 (17%) respectively. However, during the drying season, China makes the most important contribution of discharges after Laos PDR with an average of 19032 million m^3 (24.1%) and 24929 million m^3 (31.6%).

I.5 Socio-Economic Characteristics of The Mrb

There are approximately 73 million people living in the MRB. In 2000, about 84% of that population lived in the LMRB with 29% living in urban areas. According a report published by the ADB in 1999, the Mekong River population is expected to increase by 65% and may reach 120 million by 2025. The river provides the staple diet for approximately 300 million people.

The majority of the MRB's inhabitants are farmers and fishermen The density of the population is generally low in the UMRB (59person/km) and high in the LMRB (88 person/km). The Vietnamese part of the LMRB only has a density of 260person/km, the highest in the entire Mekong Region Basin.

The Mekong Region has 70 ethnic groups with their own languages and traditions. The infant mortality rate is high in Cambodia and Laos PDR. In general, the Mekong Region lacks basic and adequate education and health infrastructures and services, especially in Cambodia and Laos. Malaria and HIV/AIDS are the two leading public health problems across the region.

Agriculture is the dominant economic sector in the Mekong River Basin. About 75% of the population in the MRB is dependent on agriculture and fisheries. According to FAOSTAT 2004, agriculture contributed 11% of Thailand's national income and 52% of Lao PDR's national income in the past few years. During 1987 to 1997, growth in the agricultural GDP was largest in Vietnam at 5.4% per year. Farmers in the MRB use waters from the Mekong River and its tributaries to irrigate their crops. Fish is the major source of low-cost and high quality protein for the people in the MRB. Fisheries also provide income-earning opportunities for the unemployed and under-employed local communities.

Navigation is an important mode of transport particularly for bulk cargo in the MRB. Water transport is the principal means of travel for much of the population, especially for those in remote areas. About 1.4 million Cambodians depend totally on inland waterways for transport, while in Lao PDR around 320 000 people depend

on water transportation for most of the year. In Vietnam about 73% of the country's cargo tonnage and 27% of its passengers travel by water thefollowing figure highlights the environmental and socio-economic situations of the MRB in early 2000. Those statistics may be quite different in 2017.

Ii. Regional Cooperative Activities Toward Conflict Prevention In The Mekong Region

For the past three decades, riparian countries have been building dams, dikes, irrigation infrastructure, and navigational waterways that potentially affect the Mekong River livelihoods, a result of increasing economic development of the Mekong sub-regions. Consequently, it becomes more difficult and challenging the Mekong region countries to adopt and enforce policies that facilitate participatory and collaborative engagement for planning and development, that support sustainable development and that foster economic and social prosperity, at the same time ensuring prevention, management and mitigation of conflict.

Many international and regional partners have closely worked with the MRC through multilateral programs in order to enhance effective regional cooperation. Those institutions include UN agencies, the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank (ADB), International NGOs, ECO-Asia) and others. There are also bilateral programs that are often facilitated through government international assistance agencies such as the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA), and the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), among others.

II.1 The Mekong River Commission (Mrc)

The MRC is a regional agency that fosters intergovernmental cooperation among the four lower Mekong countries of Cambodia, Lao, Thailand, and Vietnam. It was established in 1995 in replacement of the Interim Mekong Committee. Its primary aim is to promote and co-ordinate sustainable management and development of water and related resources for the LMRB countries' mutual benefit and people's well-being by enforcing strategic programs and activities and providing scientific information and policy advice. Specifically, the mission of the MRC is to:

- Conserve the natural resources and environmental quality of the river basin
- Foster economic growth and development of the Mekong region
- Encourage participatory and joint decision-making within and among the Mekong countries
- Enhance effective regional cooperation by identifying potential trans boundary issues for negotiation, mediation and conflict prevention, and develop mediation and conflict management capacity.

II.2 GOVERNANCE ISSUES

In the MRB For the past two decades, China's unilateral actions to carry out several dams building projects at the UMRB have deeply alarmed the LMRB leaders. Given that China is not a member of the MRC, the PRC leaders do not feel compel to consult with the other riparian countries. In addition, the PRC enjoys a geo-strategic advantage over all the other countries since the Mekong originates in its territory. Moreover, there is a visible reluctance of the LMRB countries to take any form of political action against China. Perhaps this is due to what China politically and economically represents in the region. For the past two decades, China has emerged as a great regional power. What makes matters even worst is the fact that member countries of the MRC are dealing directly with China and with each other on hydropower provision, thus undermining the ability of the MRC to apply consistent policies and responses to China's dam building projects. Laos for example, has agreed to a transmission line from Yunnan. In addition, four countries of the Mekong region, namely, Lao PDR, Thailand, China, and Myanmar have signed the Upper Mekong Navigation Agreement improved shipping access. It is irrefutable that those independent actions of member states in the Mekong region constitute further impediments to create a framework that promote cooperation among the riparian countries.

III. Approaches To Conflict Prevention

According to the Cooperation theorists, there are three main forces that lead to effective intergovernmental cooperation on environmental issues:

I. Increasing scarcity of resources and a worsening of trans boundary and global environmental conditions will lead to a perception of need and induce governments to cooperate and that national interest and altruism will become conjoined. Thus, cooperation will increase.

II. Increasing interdependence of countries

III. The changing nature of international politics In contrast, conflict theorists argue that as conditions worsen, the likelihood of conflict between nations will increase. In that case, national interests will tend to prevail. Conflict theorist rejects the view that perceptions of the need for cooperation will lead to effective cooperation.

III.1 Underlying Principles for Conflict Prevention Mutual gain The mutual gain theory argues that conflict may be prevented if parties to a potential dispute identify benefits to each party from reaching agreement Equity The principle of equity argues that the equitable access to and distribution of resources would be expected to reduce conflict over resources Integrative Principles This underlying principle encourages the establishment of governing rules which integrate processes and decisions by relating them to a consistent conceptual framework. Ex: MRC

IV. Lessons From Other River Basins

River basins for instance the Nile, Zambezi, Tigris-Euphrates, Jordan, and Ganges face similar challenges with the Mekong region. They all deal with the issue of water quantity besides other issues such as ideology, geo-politics, and religion, among others. The issue with Danube and Rhine is more about water quality.

It is interesting to see that most agreements that have been signed by those riparian countries were bilateral. This explains why many of those conflicts over water sharing remain, until today, unresolved. However, there are great signs of willingness to cooperate, as riparian countries tend to adopt integrative principles through the establishment of consistent conceptual frameworks. This is the case with the Nile (Nile-SEC and ICCON), Jordan (Joint Water Committee), and Ganges (Indo-Bangladesh Joint Rivers Commission).
It is worth noting that in Europe, there's been the adoption of a broader cooperation model in the case of Danube and Rhine rivers. Given that the riparian countries of those river basins are all members of the European Union, they form their commissions under the auspices of the EU. Thus, it becomes easier for conflicts to be avoided. Unfortunately, this is not the case for the Mekong River. Although China has become a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN+1), the policy of non-interference of that regional institution makes it almost impossible for riparian countries to seek help from ASEAN.

V. Conclusion

There are several reasons that make us strongly believe that regional conflicts were manageable in the Mekong River Basin. First, the accession of China to ASEAN (ASEAN +1) will pave the way for greater cooperation in the MRB and thus prevent conflicts as result of increasing economic interdependence between the PRC and the others ASEAN members.

Second, China had no other choice than taking a stance in the region as a reliable and accountable stakeholder. That's the only way the PRC could be trusted by its neighbors. In addition, China's growing international political and economic influences compel it to show good will toward cooperation and the provision of public goods. Otherwise, the longstanding bad reputation of the country will remain.

I also think that the MRC must be given more authority/power in terms of conflict management policies, enforcement, plans and mechanisms at both regional and country levels. Otherwise, sovereignty may be an obstacle to greater cooperation. Any "cooperation framework" must be also drawn on a regional governance basis and the Convention on the Law and the Non- Navigational Uses of International Watercourses. Regional governance requires the willingness of member countries to surrender some sovereignty to the MRC as an international means of gaining cooperative action, and the ability of the states' representatives on the MRC to act in the regional interest.

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