

**IS CHINA USING THE LANCANG-MEKONG COOPERATION TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF
LOWER MEKONG COUNTRIES?**

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By
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On my honor as a University student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments.

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The Mekong River is the longest river in Southeast Asia, the seventh longest in Asia, and the 12th longest in the entire world (Jacobs, 2019, p.1). Its winding 4,350 km of running water provides irreplaceable resources for six different countries: China, Myanmar, Laos PDR, Vietnam, Thailand, and Cambodia (Jacobs, 2019, p.1). For centuries, millions of people have relied on the Mekong for agriculture, aquaculture, water needs for domestic and industrial purposes, and as a mode of transportation. As Southeast Asia continues to develop and urbanize, the need for energy, as well as agricultural and fishery production, steadily grows. The Mekong provides much needed food, water, and energy for a near 60 million people (Sabo, 2017, p.1). Since the early 1960's, the creation of hydropower infrastructure and sand-mining for concrete production have been crucial factors that have spurred urbanization and economic growth in the region (Sabo, 2017, p.1).

World Wildlife Fund (2016), one of the world's largest nonprofit conservation organizations, reports that the Mekong River is currently facing a critical point in its existence where upcoming developments and environmental changes will define economic performance for decades to come (p.1). Of the many drivers of environmental change in the region, there exist three specific drivers of change on the Mekong river system with significant economic and social effect: hydropower development, climate change, and sand-mining. The technical portion of this paper will analyze the land and water use of the Mekong in its current state to quantifiably model the dynamics and relationships of drivers of change in the Mekong river system as a whole. In order to accomplish this, data has been collected from multiple sectors and statistical tests have been conducted using installed capacity as the dependent variable. Very tightly coupled through its hydropower and regional relation, the STS portion will explore the current dynamics of the Chinese government's involvement in the Mekong River system and its resources. In particular,

the STS research will focus on the Chinese government's interaction with the Mekong River Commission, as well as their creation of the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation. The goal is to use actor network theory to analyze current political structure between Mekong region countries and research potential solutions to the political power of China, fostered by the creation of the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation, in the region.

A HISTORY OF STRATEGIC DIPLOMACY IN THE REGION

Although the Mekong River stretches thousands of miles through Southeast Asia, there is one small portion of the River that seems to have an inordinate amount of control over the Mekong region. The Mekong River starts in the southern portion of China and flows 4,350 km south to the South China Sea (Wang, 2017, p.1). The Chinese government has built seven mainstream dams on the Mekong, or Lancang as its referred to in China, since the year 2000 (Beech, 2019, p.1). As China is in control of the very upper reaches of the river flow, decisions made by the Chinese government on hydropower operation and construction play a massive role in the economy of Lower Mekong Region countries; particularly Lao PDR, also known as Laos, and Cambodia. In fact, as cited by the U.S. Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo (2019), Mekong river flows have been at all-time lows, predominantly caused by operations of the numerous dams in upstream China. At a conference with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, Pompeo (2019) noted that there was “a spree of upstream dam building which concentrates control over downstream flows. The river has been at its lowest levels in a decade – a problem linked to China’s decision to shut off water upstream” (p.1).

From a historical perspective, the Chinese government has frequently made controversial decisions in regard to neighboring countries with the hope of economic expansion. For example, Lieutenant Michael Studeman (1998) of the U.S. Navy wrote about controversy arising in the South China Sea relating to Chinese attempts at securing natural resources, specifically oil, off the Vietnamese coastlines (p.68). Lt. Studeman explains that though China asserts sovereignty and nationalism as their claim to resources, “sensitivity to resource encroachments and a growing fear of economic dependence has emerged as a primary determinant of China’s willingness to assert itself physically” (p.68).

It has long been understood that much of China’s foreign policy in the Southeast Asian region relates to their motivation to economically expand and assert control. Although this research is focused mainly on hydropower policy and development, China has long been motivated to secure greater Mekong region resources through multiple forms of diplomacy. Chinese diplomacy including their history of dam building, refusal to join the Mekong River Commission, and establishment of the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation will all be analyzed.

CHINA’S DAM BUILDING IN THE REGION

Over the past 30 years, increasing concerns about carbon dioxide emissions have driven our Earth’s biggest polluters, such as China, to look toward more renewable sources. China is notorious for its dam construction. In 1994, China started plans for the Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze River, the largest engineering project in the country at the time (Wee, 2012). By 2006, when the dam was completed, it was the largest dam in the world (Wee, 2012). In the process, however, the Chinese government relocated 1.3M people. According to Sui-Lee Wee (2012), a reporter for Reuters, hundreds of thousands of people will continue to be relocated due to geological threats. Examples of previous hydropower projects in China, such as the Three

Gorges Dam, highlight the Chinese government's commitment to political and economic agendas, regardless of the network in which those agendas are acting. Recent actions in the Mekong have apparent similarities to the actions taken by the Chinese government in the construction of the Three Gorges Dam. Similar to the Three Gorges example, China has constructed dams with little concern for the common villager. Where as victims of the Three Gorges Dam construction were Chinese citizens, victims of the seven mainstream Mekong Dams in the Yunnan Province are citizens of downstream countries, such as Lao PDR or Cambodia (Beech, 2019, p.1). Chinese damming on the Mekong does not stop within their borders, however. Hannah Beech (2019) of the New York Times reports that 11 mainstream dams have been proposed on the Mekong River in downstream countries such as Lao PDR (p.1). In addition to these 11 mainstream dams, a near 300 dams have been proposed in Lao PDR on Mekong River feeder waterways (Beech, 2019, p.1). China has had heavy involvement in the funding of these hundreds of planned dams. According to Beech (2019), nearly 50% of the 300 proposed dams in Lao PDR are funded by Chinese entities (p.1). Nathaniel Matthews and Stew Motta (2015) analyzed Chinese State-owned entities involvement with downstream damming, insisting that every step in the construction of a new dam is controlled by China (p. 6275). Matthews and Motta (2015) state that projects are “financed, developed, constructed, and contracted” primarily from Chinese state-owned entities (p. 6275). This rapid expansion of hydropower funded by China in the region can be visualized in Figure 1, a bar graph created by the U.S. Energy Information Administration (2013) showing the cumulative hydroelectric capacity additions for Lao PDR, Cambodia, and Myanmar.

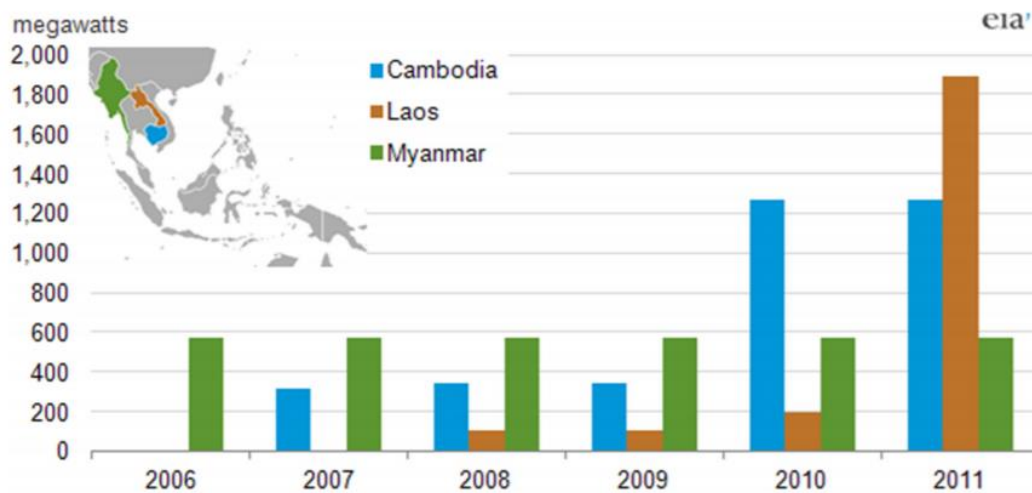


Figure 1: Cumulative hydroelectric capacity additions financed by China from 2006-2011 (EIA, 2013)

Countries such as Lao PDR are eager to sustain economic growth through the use of hydropower and thus allow China to implement large scale damming projects. China, however, is taking advantage of these Lower Mekong countries by offering improvement to their energy sector with little concern for the farmers, fishers, and villagers who will feel the consequences most.

RESISTANCE TO THE MEKONG RIVER COMMISSION

In the struggle to balance resources of the Mekong, countries have looked to cooperate with each other on all major decisions being made to the river. One organization, the Mekong River Commission, has been looking to appropriately share the benefits of the river since 1995. According to the Mekong River Commission (1995), their mission is as follows

“to cooperate in all fields of sustainable development, utilization, management and conservation of the water and related resources of the Mekong River Basin ... in a manner to optimize the multiple-use and mutual benefits of all riparians and to minimize the harmful effects that might result from natural occurrences and man-made activities. (p.1)

The Mekong River Commission (1995) has representatives from Myanmar, Lao PDR, Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand (p.1). Since the Mekong River Commission's inception in 1995, China has consistently refused to join. Although a plethora of reasons may exist, Dr. Sebastian Biba (2018), a Research Fellow in Political Science at Goethe University in Frankfurt, Germany with a focus on China and East Asia, insists there are multiple key reasons for China's lack of cooperation. (p. 623). For one, China has a very powerful upstream position. Any lasting effects of damming on the Mekong are not felt by the Chinese as they remain an upstream country. In a literal sense, the consequences of Mekong damming, such as reduced flow, do not directly affect Chinese citizens, only their downstream neighbors (Biba, 2018, p. 623). The Chinese government has little stake in the health and well-being of villagers in Cambodia and Lao PDR, and therefore, has little incentive to make significant changes to their river policy that may restrict their freedoms. Additionally, entering into the Mekong River Commission requires that China abide by a set of rules. Biba (2018) explains that China has long believed these rules undermine the value that upstream countries provide while solely looking to benefit downstream countries (p. 624). Most importantly, China has long aspired to create political power through economic dominance. This particularly applies to the energy sector. If China were to become a full Mekong River Commission member, there would be serious threats to their expansion of political power. If forced to abide by a certain set of rules and regulations, China would be unable to use their upstream position to control river resources with the goal of asserting political dominance over their downstream neighbors (Biba, 2018, p. 624). China's economic dominance and geographical advantage is what allows them to refuse cooperation with the Mekong River Commission.

CHINA'S USE OF THE NEW LANCANG-MEKONG COOPERATION

Following years of lacking cooperative efforts in the Mekong region, and an increase in international conservationist attention, China decided to form an organization focused on cooperation on the river. China's foundation of the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation in 2016 aimed to open cooperative river resource sharing efforts between China and other Mekong region countries (Biba, 2018, p. 632) The Lancang-Mekong Cooperation contains all six Mekong region countries and has five priority areas: connectivity, production capacity, cross-border economic cooperation, water resources, and agriculture and poverty reduction (Biba, 2018, p. 634). Biba insists that although the Cooperation states that all members are equal, China is clearly in a disproportionally powerful position. Their rationale for the creation of the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation, as Biba (2018) claims, is most evidently related to China's desire to increase their institutional influence on the Mekong river (p.635). A very important feature of the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation is the focus on a project-oriented model. In stark contrast to the Mekong River Commission, this new Cooperation is not concerned with being an international river basin organization that follows codes and rules of cooperation defined by the UN Watercourse Convention (Middleton & Allouche, 2016, p.109). All factors considered; China has made it clear that they refuse to be governed by the desires of downstream countries being affected most by actions on the river. Highly publicized examples include the 2016 release of upstream reservoir water during a serious downstream drought period. Downstream countries such as Vietnam were pleading for China to release water holdings on the river. Although not mandated, China decided to release holdings, highlighting a frightening reality of the new Lancang-Mekong Cooperation. Without the necessary rules and regulations defined by the UN Watercourse

Convention to help to promote equality of all representatives, China is able to make massive decisions purely based upon goodwill (Middleton & Allouche, 2016, p.109). The loosely defined institutional framework of the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation is an intentional move by the Chinese government to allow themselves a greater amount of power in decisions regarding the river while promoting the illusion of cooperation and unity (Biba, 2018, p. 639). The 2016 drought serves as prime example of the promotion of this illusion.

USING ACTOR-NETWORK THEORY TO DESCRIBE CURRENT RIVER DYNAMICS

Actor-network theory (ANT), developed by Michel Callon and Bruno Latour (1984), will be used to describe the network of relationships between actors in policy related to China's hydropower developments. It becomes clear that certain actors, such as the Chinese government, have inordinate amounts of power, while commission forces are becoming increasingly less relevant and a network of imperative individuals are suffering desperately. As shown in Figure 2, on page 10 the current state is one in which China has strong control of the Lancang-Mekong Commission due to its loosely defined institutional framework and thus strong control over Laotian and Cambodian political action as well as new hydropower infrastructure plans in the region.

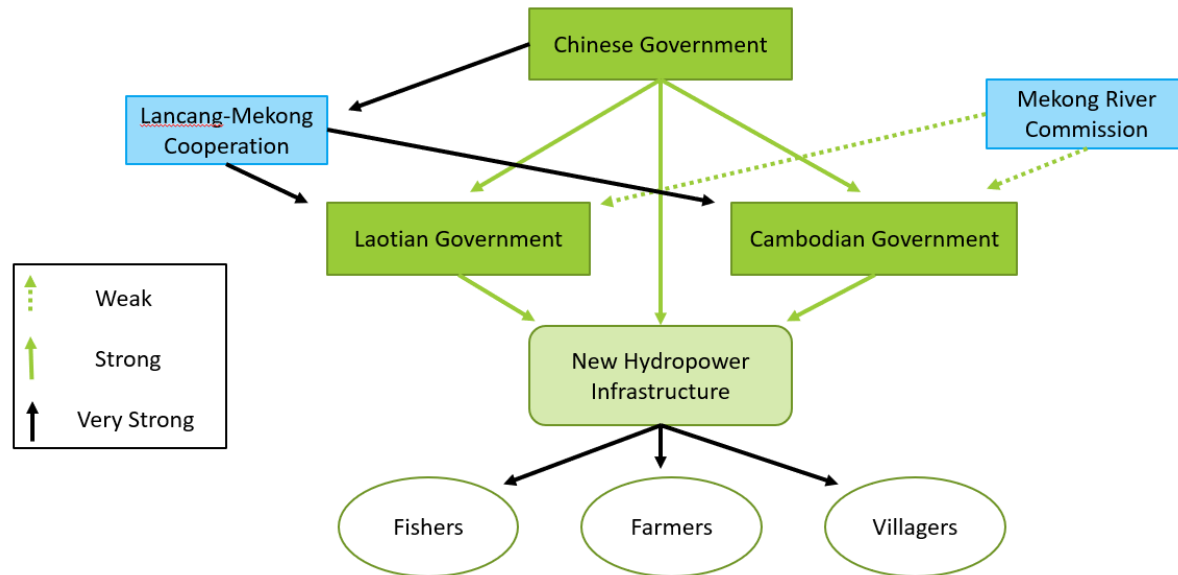


Figure 2: Current ANT of Political and Regulatory system in Mekong: China has significantly more power as an actor. Farmers, Fishers, and Villages are being acted upon in response to new hydropower infrastructure. (Walsh, 2019)

China's continued focus on using the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation to promote direct economic benefits from the river is massively detrimental to those who feel the effects of new hydropower infrastructure the most: fishers, farmers and villagers.

REFORM OF POLITICAL DYNAMICS IS NECESSARY FOR THE PRESERVATION OF THE MEKONG REGION

Current political dynamics where China uses the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation to exert power on countries such as Laos and Cambodia are detrimental and unsustainable. There must be expedited reform of power dynamics and an increased focus on creating sustainable river resource-sharing plans for the future. Actions to be taken in the future must focus on two key pillars: Commission unification and reform, and a heightened focus on trade-off policy.

COMMISSION UNIFICATION AND REFORM

Unification and equality are essential to the reform steps necessary for the Mekong. Rather than having two commissions as actors with different levels of power, the Mekong River Commission and the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation, both focused on creating policy related to the Mekong, there needs to be a reformed committee in which Mekong region governments have an equal amount of power. As mentioned, the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation has a very loosely defined institutional framework which allows for China to have disproportionate amounts of power in decision-making processes. More specifically, rather than having predefined rules for cooperation, China's Lancang-Mekong Cooperation has 'coordination units' in each member state. If one member state, or actor, is significantly more powerful than others, such as China, they are able to dictate actions of the Cooperation much more than other members (Biba, 2018, p. 634). The Mekong River Commission has a much more intense focus on equal discussion of all member states. China's refusal to join, and subsequent creation of a new organization forces the hand of other Mekong region countries. As China has the most power on the river at the moment, the Mekong River Commission has become an actor with weak effect on the network. A commission unification allows for all parties to cooperate and agree on how resources can be allocated most effectively. Ideally, this new commission will have a well-defined institutional framework and will follow the guidelines put in place by the United Nations in relation to cooperative river efforts.

A NEW FOCUS ON TRADE-OFF POLICY TO ENHANCE THE SHARING OF RIVER BENEFITS

Once a new commission is formed, goals must be formulated and agreed on by all members. In the past, most of China's Lancang policy related to the creation of economic

benefits outside of the river. There must be a new focus on creating direct economic benefits from the river to motivate continued environmental benefits to the river. That is to say, there are methods in which Mekong Region countries can see economic benefit while also preserving the ecology of the river and livelihoods of low-income villagers. It is unrealistic to expect China to conduct all river policy in regard to environmental concern. Previous involvement in river discussions have shown that reform efforts in China are relatively ineffective unless there is some economic benefit. China has the ability to see economic benefits from the river while also balancing environmental trade-offs, thus further strengthening their relationships with downstream countries such as Lao PDR and Cambodia who are heavily reliant on the preservation of the Mekong river ecosystem (Matthews & Motta, 2015, p. 6270). In turn, the farmers, fishers and villagers who are being acted upon the most in the descriptive scenario can begin to have a greater say in river diplomacy. An example of effective trade-off policy is highlighted by John Sabo, ecologist and researcher at Arizona State University. Without undermining the value of the hydropower industry in the Mekong, Sabo (2017) used a data-driven approach to quantitatively define appropriate implementation of flow regimes to manage trade-offs between energy creation and fishery productivity (2017, p.1). Once a truly unified and reformed commission is put in place, data-driven methods can be used to shape trade-off policy. When all members of the unified commission have equal amounts of power there can be a consensus agreement on how trade-off policy is implemented. Finally, once this trade-off policy is implemented, fishers, farmers and villagers are able to realize their importance in the discussion of preserving the resources of the Mekong.

USING ACTOR-NETWORK THEORY TO DESCRIBE DESIRED RIVER DYNAMICS

As described, there must be a change in the dynamics of the region in order to ensure the preservation of the region. Figure 3 displays an example Actor-Network model that is much more beneficial for fisheries, agriculture, and overall economic health of downstream countries such as Laos and Cambodia. Governments are working together under a unified commitment to restoring the health of the Mekong, and creating environmentally and relatively economically positive trade-offs for resource usage for the network. In addition, there is a connection from the network back to the actors, as ideally the network has some influence on the actor's policy decisions.

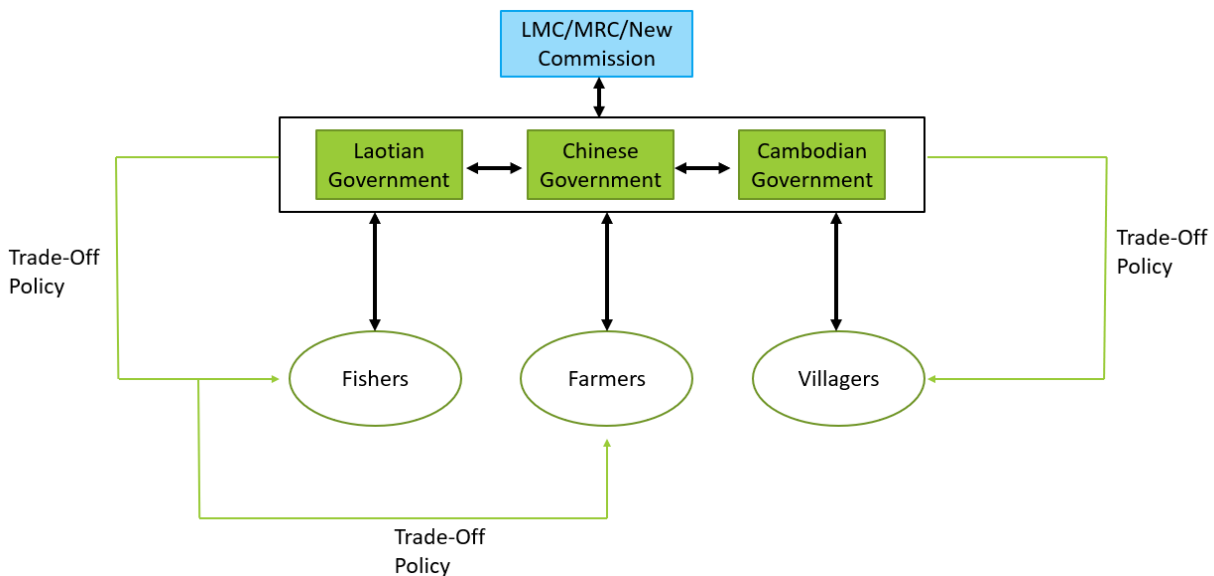


Figure 3: The desired ANT of the Political and Regulatory system in Mekong: A new commission is put forth with all actors in agreement of regulatory environment for trade-off policies relating to land and water usage on the Mekong. Fishers, Farmers, and Villagers being acted upon are now providing feedback to the actors for a more sustainable future. (Walsh, 2019)

This paper examines if China is using the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation to take advantage of countries such as Lao PDR and Cambodia. Based upon evidence provided, it is clear that China is using the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation to their own benefit and has little concern for the consequences being felt by downstream countries. Although China has taken many steps in the right direction, there is still a lack of true equality in Mekong River diplomacy. If current dynamics in the region continue, China will continue to exercise detrimental river diplomacy and expand their political dominance. The Mekong River provides energy and food security for 60 million people in the region, most of which reside in downstream countries (Sabo, 2017, p.1). Without proper reform, millions of fishers and farmers in countries such as Lao PDR and Cambodia are at risk of losing their businesses and going hungry. Changes in Mekong River politics, specifically a unification and reform of river commissions, are imperative to preservation of this undeniably important region.

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