

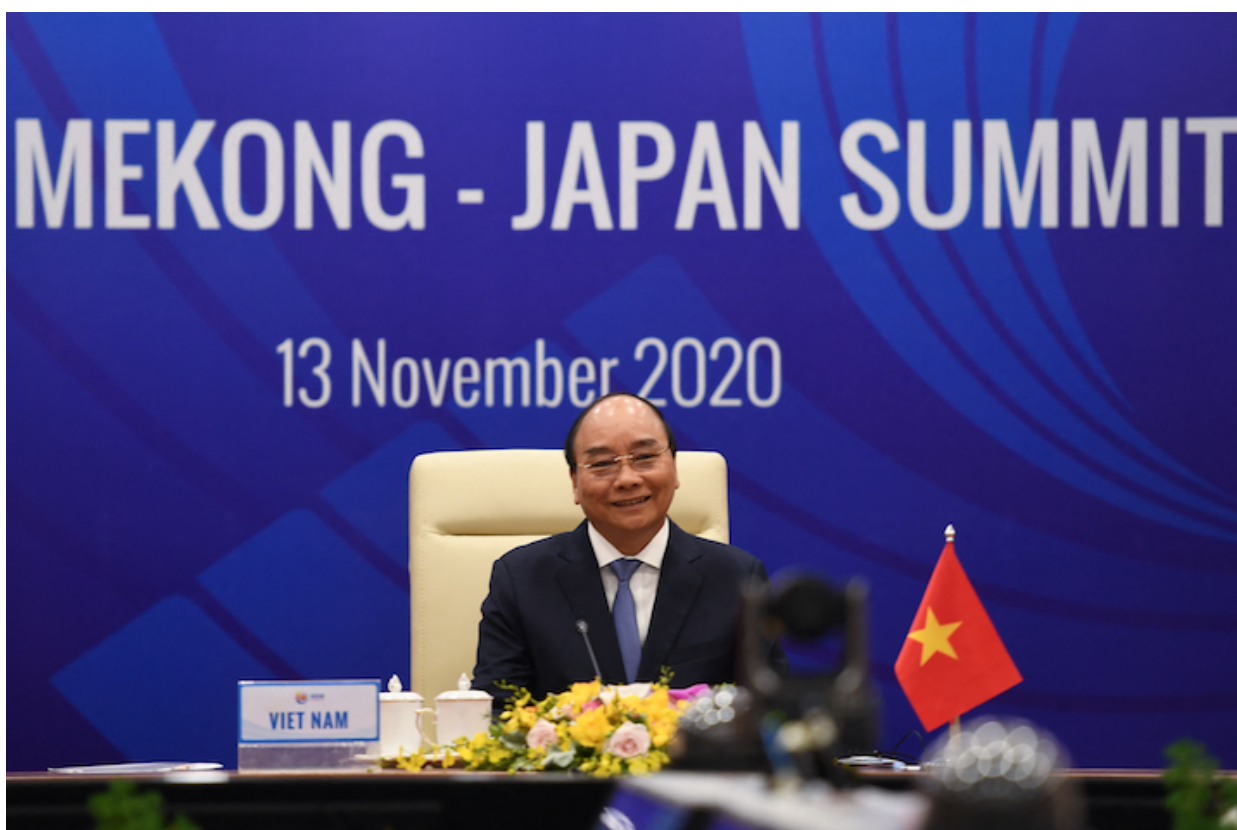
PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

Singapore | 17 December 2021

“Adapting to Nature”: A Preliminary Assessment of Vietnam’s Mekong Water Diplomacy since 2017

*Truong-Minh Vu and Tram Nguyen**



Vietnam’s Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc addresses counterparts at the Mekong - Japan Summit of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), on a live video conference held online due to the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic, in Hanoi on 13 November 2020. Photo: Nhac NGUYEN, AFP.

** Truong-Minh Vu is a lecturer at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities - Ho Chi Minh City. He has also been a senior fellow of The Indiana University School of Public and Environmental Affairs (SPEA) since 2018. Tram Nguyen is a lecturer at the School of Business, International University, Vietnam National University - HCMC.*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Adopted in November 2017, the Vietnamese Government’s Resolution 120 on “Climate Resilience and Sustainable Development of the Mekong Delta Region” has provided a long-term strategic vision and outlined the direction for Vietnam’s water diplomacy to address problems threatening its Mekong Delta.
- After four years of implementing the Resolution, Vietnam has achieved some positive outcomes in gaining international recognition and support towards the sustainable development of the Delta.
- However, the reluctance of some ASEAN maritime states in engaging with Mekong issues, as well as the differences among Mekong countries and the major powers involved in the sub-region regarding how to address these issues, continue to hamper the realization of the Resolution’s goals.
- A reasonable way to tackle these issues could be the adoption of a win-win approach that goes beyond water issues, in order to facilitate the achievement of key priorities pursued by the individual parties involved.

INTRODUCTION

The Mekong Delta is Vietnam's most fertile region, accounting for much of the country's rice, aquatic and fruit export. However, in recent years, climate change and extreme weather events, including floods, droughts, and saltwater intrusion, have been affecting the livelihood and food security of 17 million people living in the Delta, as well as the whole region's ecological system. The construction of upstream hydropower infrastructure and intense economic activities in the region have also contributed to the degradation of water quality and change in water flow and alluvial soil.

Acknowledging the need for a long-term strategic vision and for international cooperation to address the problems threatening the Mekong Delta region (MDR), on 17 November 2017, the Vietnamese government issued Resolution 120/NQ-CP on "Climate Resilience and Sustainable Development of the Mekong Delta Region" (hereafter "Resolution 120"), also known as the "Thuan Thien" (Adapting to Nature) Resolution.¹ Resolution 120 emphasizes the need to put humans at the centre of development and adopts the sustainable and economical use of natural resources as the key development principle. The document also calls for regional and bilateral cooperation towards effective and sustainable use of water and other resources in the Mekong River Basin, based on mutual benefits.

Resolution 120 outlines three activities for Vietnam's Mekong water diplomacy: (i) coordinating bilateral and multilateral cooperation with Mekong upstream countries, as well as major river basins and deltas in the world; (ii) promoting Vietnam's active participation in the Mekong River Commission (MRC), existing cooperative mechanisms of Mekong River Basin countries, and cooperative mechanisms between Mekong River Basin countries and development partners; and (iii) developing strategic partnerships with other countries and international development partners to mobilize external resources (funding, knowledge, and technology) towards addressing climate change and promoting sustainable development in the MDR. The National Committee on Climate Change, the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are tasked with implementing these goals. This paper provides a preliminary assessment of Vietnam's Mekong water diplomacy since the adoption of Resolution 120.

VIETNAM'S MEKONG WATER DIPLOMACY SINCE THE ADOPTION OF RESOLUTION 120

Involvement in Bilateral Cooperation and Intra-regional Mechanisms with Upstream Countries

Vietnam has consistently contributed to the success of Mekong regional cooperative mechanisms by actively proposing and implementing initiatives, getting involved in drafting key documents, and allocating resources to support joint projects. In March 2018, Vietnam hosted the 10th Cambodia–Laos–Vietnam Summit on Development Triangle Area and the 6th Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) Summit, along with its sideline event, the GMS Business Summit.² Following the completion of the MRC's Study on Sustainable Management and Development of the Mekong River, including the Impact of the

Hydropower Development Projects (also known as the Council Study) in 2017, meetings were held among the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, Vietnam National Mekong Committee, and representatives from key NGOs, development partners, academia and civil society. These meetings resulted in the development of several Council Study national uptake action plans.³ Vietnam also participated in the implementation of the MRC's Notification, Prior Consultation and Agreement procedure by organizing national consultation activities for Laos' Pak Lay hydropower project.

In 2020, the State Audit Office of Vietnam proposed an environmental audit on water management in the Mekong River Basin. Started in March 2021, the audit assessed the fulfilment of UN sustainable development goals concerning the use, management and protection of water resources in the Mekong River Basin. Two upper-stream countries – Myanmar and Thailand – agreed to participate in this initiative.⁴ On data sharing, in November 2018, the Vietnam National Space Center signed a memorandum of understanding with the MRC on using satellite data from the Vietnam Data Cube system in monitoring and assessing water and other resources in the Mekong River Basin.⁵

At meetings organized under intra-regional cooperative mechanisms, Vietnamese officials highlighted the critical situation of the Mekong Delta and urged member countries to cooperate in water resource management and promote sustainable development in the region. For example, at the 3rd MRC Summit in 2018, then-Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc raised the water security problems in the Mekong region and called for the effective implementation of MRC regulations, cooperative mechanisms for water resource management, and transparent data sharing among Mekong countries. At the 2019 Ministerial Meeting of Lancang–Mekong Water Resources Cooperation, then-Deputy Minister of Natural Resources and Environment Le Cong Thanh reiterated these points and called for the effective implementation of the Five-year Action Plan on Lancang–Mekong Water Resources Cooperation (2018-2022). Environmental degradation was once again underscored as one of the urgent issues for the Mekong–Lancang Cooperation (MLC) countries at the 6th MLC Foreign Ministers' Meeting in June 2021. Addressing the meeting, Vietnamese Foreign Minister Bui Thanh Son advocated for data sharing, joint efforts in water resource management, and greater coordination with other cooperative mechanisms.

Vietnam's active participation in these mechanisms shows that it considers not only national interests but also the region's sustainable development prospects. This approach is faithful to a core principle of water diplomacy, i.e. water diplomacy is more than just water resource management, but also a means to achieve the broader long-term objective of improving regional security, stability, and prosperity.⁶ Nevertheless, the outcomes of Vietnam's water diplomacy so far have been mixed. This can be attributed to the nature of intra-regional cooperation in the Mekong region. Except for the MRC, all existing intra-regional cooperative mechanisms are non-binding policy consultation platforms.⁷ Most of the meetings under these mechanisms can be classified as action-orientated conferences, which focus mainly on building basic principles and guidelines for interaction and collective action, rather than formulating legal norms.⁸ Additionally, comprised of mostly ASEAN countries, they reflect ASEAN's diplomacy features, including lenient management, consensus-based decision-making, and prioritization of maintaining dialogue over conflict

settlement.⁹ As meetings often conclude with an agreement on statements of intent rather than a legal framework, implementation deficits can easily arise.¹⁰

Involvement in Inter-regional Cooperation

Due to its economic potential and geopolitical significance, the Mekong sub-region has attracted the attention of global powers, including the United States, Japan, South Korea, Australia and India, all with their mechanisms¹¹ to engage with the riparian countries.¹² As Hanoi welcomes a multilateral approach to water resource management and sustainable development in the Mekong, it has actively participated in these mechanisms. In November 2020, Vietnam co-chaired the 10th Mekong–Republic of Korea Foreign Ministers’ Meeting and the 12th Mekong–Japan Summit Meeting. In January 2021, Vietnam and the United States co-hosted the first Friends of the Mekong Policy Dialogue under the Mekong-US Partnership.

One central challenge to the Mekong sub-region lies in balancing the developmental and geopolitical interests of multiple internal and external actors. While Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar have relied on China for hydropower infrastructure development, Vietnam has tried to avoid technological dependence on its northern neighbor and resisted China’s infrastructural hegemony in the region.¹³ Inter-regional cooperative mechanisms led by the great powers not only open new windows of opportunity for downstream Mekong countries to address water-related concerns but could also transform the regional order. By boosting ties with external actors and assuming a leading role in inter-regional mechanisms, Vietnam is gradually increasing its diplomatic clout in the sub-region.

Within ASEAN, Vietnam is looking for a common position on the issue of water security in the Mekong basin. As the 2020 Chair of ASEAN, Vietnam hosted the “ASEAN Forum on Sub-regional Development: Converging Mekong Sub-regional Cooperation with ASEAN Goals” in September 2020. The forum discussed the importance of sub-regional cooperation in enhancing ASEAN connectivity and economic links, the challenges to sub-regional cooperation, and the role of development partners.¹⁴ Vietnamese Deputy Foreign Minister and Chair of the forum, Nguyen Quoc Dung, emphasized the strategic role of a prosperous, peaceful and sustainable Mekong sub-region to ASEAN’s regional position and the future of the ASEAN community. In the joint communiqué of the meeting, ASEAN countries agreed to promote sub-regional cooperation frameworks, including those in the Mekong region, and align sub-regional development with the comprehensive development of ASEAN.¹⁵

Vietnam’s attempt to get ASEAN involved in the Mekong has met with mixed responses from other members. Maritime ASEAN states have not shown much enthusiasm for Hanoi’s proposal as they think that the Mekong issues should be addressed through sub-regional frameworks.¹⁶ However, it is too early to evaluate Vietnam’s efforts. The 2020 ASEAN Forum on Sub-regional Development is the first of its kind, and so far, the only time that the ASEAN Coordinating Council has tabled this issue in a separate session.¹⁷ Additionally, sub-regional issues might be viewed as having less urgency than the Covid-19 pandemic,

which has been the primary concern of all countries and a key point of discussion in ASEAN meetings.¹⁸

Strengthening Strategic Partnerships with Development Partners

As of 2021, Vietnam has engaged more than 20 development partners in the implementation of Resolution 120. These development partners, with diverse experiences, expertise and resources, have committed to lend Vietnam a total of US\$2.2 billion to facilitate the implementation of the Resolution.¹⁹

The World Bank is one of Vietnam's most active and largest partners. The organization has engaged in cross-cutting collaboration with Vietnam in three major fields of governance: environmental sustainability, inclusive economic growth, and human resource and knowledge development.²⁰ Most World Bank projects are funded through its Investment Project Financing instrument, which provides the MDR with not only the necessary budget but also knowledge transfer and technical assistance for the long-term success of project implementation and institutionalization.²¹ The Vietnamese Ministry of Planning and Investment has also been working with the World Bank on a future budget support programme of US\$1.05 billion to improve infrastructure, prevent droughts and saltwater intrusions, and adapt to climate change in the MDR.

Another long-term partner of the MDR is the Netherlands. Resolution 120 specifically mentions the diplomatic task of expanding and strengthening the Strategic Partnership with the Netherlands on climate change adaptation and water management, which was established in 2010. Both countries have also affirmed that sustainable agriculture and food security remain the key pillars in the Vietnam–Netherlands Comprehensive Partnership.²² The Dutch Fund for Climate and Development, with a budget of EUR160 million (US\$185 million), also committed to fund businesses seeking to support climate-resilient ecosystem and community in the Mekong Delta.

Additionally, the United States, France, Germany, Japan, Australia and the European Union have also expressed their appreciation for and commitment to the implementation of Resolution 120.²³ These diplomatic endorsements show that Vietnam has successfully expanded and strengthened strategic collaboration with development partners to mobilize resources for the MDR. International support in terms of knowledge sharing, technology transfer, and investment is crucial to Vietnam's proactive adaptation to nature and to its bid to turn challenges of climate change into opportunities.

THE WAY FORWARD FOR VIETNAM'S MEKONG WATER DIPLOMACY

After four years of implementing Resolution 120, Vietnam's water diplomacy has yielded positive outcomes. Through its active participation in bilateral and multilateral mechanisms, Vietnam has shed light on the pressing water security issues facing the MDR. Proactive engagement with various stakeholders within and outside the Mekong sub-region has earned Vietnam international support in the form of knowledge sharing, technology cooperation, and investment. Similar to the South China Sea dispute, Vietnam seeks to internationalize

and multilateralize the Mekong issue. Particularly, Hanoi has taken some initial steps to generate greater international awareness of transboundary water management problems in the Mekong River Basin, starting with raising the topic in ASEAN meetings. Moving forward, Vietnam should continue to advocate for the inclusion of key sub-regional matters in the broader regional agenda.

By delivering clear and consistent messages on problems facing the MDR and the effective management of the Mekong River Basin's resources to a broader foreign audience, Vietnam can further garner international attention and support in realizing Resolution 120's development goals while enhancing the country's diplomatic credentials in sub-regional mechanisms. With the involvement of external actors in the Mekong region, discussions on China's control of the upstream Mekong through hydropower dams will gain momentum. One of the tasks for the next five years is to enhance Vietnam's presence in the MLC and encourage China to be transparent and responsive about sharing water-related data, especially information about the planning and operation of its hydropower dams, as well as how water is discharged downstream.²⁴ Additional attention from the international community might induce greater cooperation from China, and thus make this task more achievable.

Another challenge ahead for Vietnam is to harmonize its interests with those of the upper-stream countries. Transboundary water management in the Mekong River Basin is a complex issue as each country follows a different development path and has divergent interests in the Mekong River. For example, Laos and Cambodia aim to harness the Mekong's hydropower potential for energy generation.²⁵ However, Vietnam, as the most downstream country, is concerned about the negative impacts of upstream hydropower dams on the survival of the MDR and has therefore advocated for the effective and sustainable management of transboundary water in the region.

To address this challenge, firstly, Vietnam needs to cooperate with other Mekong countries in conducting joint studies and generating scientific analyses and assessments of the situation of the Mekong River Basin. Vietnam should also continue to promote information sharing and data transparency. These measures would produce agreed-upon scientific knowledge and shared understanding between parties, resulting in a more collaborative decision-making process and more trustful relationships. Second, Vietnam should propose mutually beneficial options that allow one side to achieve their most important priorities, while satisfying the other side's top interests.²⁶ This approach requires Vietnam and its partners to look beyond the surface to understand the underlying drivers of Mekong countries' water policies. Consequently, the possibilities for effective transboundary water management may lie in other economic sectors, such as agriculture and energy production, and water negotiations should therefore not be viewed as a zero-sum game.²⁷

CONCLUSION

Vietnam's water diplomacy since the adoption of Resolution 120 in November 2017 reflects the country's concerns over the MDR's sustainable development prospects in the context of climate change and intensive human interventions in the Mekong River Basin. Treating

Mekong issues as a national security matter, Vietnam has mobilized resources for the development of the MDR and promoted regional cooperation towards a sustainable Mekong River Basin.

However, the divergence in development direction and interests of Mekong countries, as well as the region's complex interactions with external actors, remains a challenge. The key to overcoming these barriers is a win-win approach to water diplomacy, in which water is viewed as a shared resource, and all parties realize that they can best achieve mutually beneficial outcomes by addressing common water issues while taking into consideration the broader economic, social and environmental contexts that each country is facing.

¹ Full text of the Resolution (in Vietnamese) is available at:

<http://dwrn.gov.vn/uploads/laws/file/2017/120-nq-cp-ve-phat-trien-ben-vung-dbscl-thich-ung-bdkh.pdf>

² VOV World, "Vietnam Contributes to Regional Economic Connectivity through GMS", 15 March 2018, <https://vovworld.vn/en-US/content/NTQ1OTEz.vov>.

³ MRC, "Basin-Wide Assessment of Climate Change Impacts on Hydropower Production: Final Report", 2019, https://www.mrcmekong.org/assets/Publications/Basin-wide-Assessment-of-Climate-Change-Impacts-on-Hydropower-Production_report-13May19.pdf.

⁴ Nhan Dan Online, "Vietnam to Host Audit of Water Management Cooperation in Mekong River Basin", 23 December 2020, <https://en.nhandan.vn/scitech/item/9426402-vietnam-to-host-audit-of-water-management-cooperation-in-mekong-river-basin.html>.

⁵ VNSC, 'Vietnam National Space Center coordinates with Mekong River Commission in exploiting satellite data application', 4 December 2018, <https://vnsc.org.vn/en/news-events/vietnam-national-space-center-coordinates-with-mekong-river-commission-in-exploiting-satellite-data-application/>.

⁶ Susanne Schmeier and Zaki Shubber, 'Anchoring water diplomacy – The legal nature of international river basin organizations', *Journal of Hydrology* 567 (2018): 114-120.

⁷ Han Phoumin and Minh Thu To, "Water Resources Management in the Mekong Basin", in *Subregional Development Strategy in ASEAN after COVID-19: Inclusiveness and Sustainability in the Mekong Subregion (Mekong 2030)*, edited by Fukunari Kimura (Jakarta: ERIA, 2019), pp. 161–190.

⁸ Volker Ritterberger, "Global Conference Diplomacy and International Policy-Making: The Case of UN-Sponsored World Conferences", *European Journal of Political Research* 11 (1983): 167-182.

⁹ Koichi Sato, "The Rise of China's Impact on ASEAN Conference Diplomacy: A Study of Conflict in the South China Sea", *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies* 2, no. 2 (2013): 95-110.

¹⁰ Ritterberger, 'Global Conference Diplomacy'.

¹¹ The inter-regional cooperative mechanisms include Mekong–US Partnership, Mekong–Japan Summit, Mekong–Republic of Korea Summit, Mekong–Ganga Cooperation, and Mekong–Australia Partnership.

¹² Fabio Figiaconi, “Geopolitical Competition in the Indo-Pacific: The Mekong Region”, *ISPI Online*, 2 April 2020, <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/geopolitical-competition-indo-pacific-mekong-region-25627>.

¹³ Chris Sneddon and Coleen Fox, “Power, Development, and Institutional Change: Participatory Governance in the Lower Mekong Basin”, *World Development* 35, no. 12 (2007): 2161-2181; Truong-Minh Vu and Maximilian Mayer, “Hydropower infrastructure and regional order making in the Sub-Mekong region”, *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional* 61, no. 1 (2019).

¹⁴ Viet Nam News, “Mekong sub-regional co-operation must converge with ASEAN goals: official”, 14 June 2020, <https://vietnamnews.vn/politics-laws/749602/mekong-sub-regional-co-operation-must-converge-with-asean-goals-official.html>.

¹⁵ Full text of the joint communiqué is available at: <https://asean.org/joint-communique-of-the-53rd-asean-foreign-ministers-meeting/>.

¹⁶ Hoang Thi Ha and Farah Nadine Seth, “The Mekong River Ecosystem in Crisis: ASEAN Cannot be a Bystander”, *ISEAS Perspective* (2021/69).

¹⁷ An Nhien, “ASEAN Cần Tập Trung Vào Các Khía Cảnh Khác Nhau Của Phát Triển Tiểu Vùng” *Công An Nhân Dân Online*, 9 September 2020, <https://cand.com.vn/Su-kien-Binh-luan-thoi-su/ASEAN-can-tap-trung-vao-cac-khia-can-ghac-nhau-cua-phat-trien-tieu-vung-i580025/>; Asian Development Bank, “ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting - Masatsugu Asakawa”, 10 September 2020, <https://www.adb.org/news/speeches/asean-foreign-ministers-meeting-masatsugu-asakawa>; ASEAN Vietnam 2020, “ASEAN Forum on Sub-Regional Development Opens”, 14 July 2020, https://www.asean2020.vn/xem-chi-tiet1/-/asset_publisher/ynfWm23dDfpd/content/asean-forum-on-sub-regional-development-opens.

¹⁸ Phan The Thang, “Vietnam’s efforts and initiatives as ASEAN Chair 2020 - Challenges of and response to the COVID-19 pandemic”, *Vietnam Pictorial*, 14 May 2020, <https://vietnam.vnanet.vn/english/vietnams-efforts-and-initiatives-as-asean-chair-2020---challenges-of-and-response-to-the-covid-19-pandemic/446014.html>.

¹⁹ VGP, “Preliminary Outcomes Of Three-year Implementation Of Resolution On Climate-resilient development Of Mekong Delta”, 13 March 2021, <http://news.chinhphu.vn/Home/Preliminary-Outcomes-Of-Threeyear-Implementation-Of-Resolution-On-Climateresilient-development-Of-Mekong-Delta/20213/43202.vgp>

²⁰ “WBG Country Partnership Framework for Vietnam 2018 – 2022: Key Priorities”, World Bank, 5 July 2017, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/infographic/2017/07/05/wbg-country-partnership-framework-for-vietnam-2018-2022-key-priorities>.

²¹ World Bank, “Investment Project Financing (IPF)”, worldbank.org/en/what-we-do/products-and-services/financing-instruments/investment-project-financing.

²² Vietnam Investment Review, “Vietnam-Netherlands Issue Joint Statement”, 9 April 2019, <https://vir.com.vn/vietnam-netherlands-issue-joint-statement-66987.html>.

²³ Ousmane Dione, “Mekong Delta Conference”, World Bank, 19 June 2019, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/speech/2019/06/19/mekong-delta-conference>.

²⁴ VGP, “Preliminary Outcomes Of Three-year Implementation”.

²⁵ Vu and Mayer, “Hydropower infrastructure and regional order making in the Sub-Mekong region”.

²⁶ Shafiqul Islam and Lawrence Susskind, “Using Complexity Science and Negotiation Theory to Resolve Boundary-Crossing Water Issues, *Journal of Hydrology* 562 (2018): 589-598.

²⁷ *ibid.*

| | | |
|--|---|--|
| <p>ISEAS Perspective is published electronically by: ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute</p> <p>30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace Singapore 119614 Main Tel: (65) 6778 0955 Main Fax: (65) 6778 1735</p> <p>Get Involved with ISEAS. Please click here: https://www.iseas.edu.sg/support</p> | <p>ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute accepts no responsibility for facts presented and views expressed.</p> <p>Responsibility rests exclusively with the individual author or authors. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without permission.</p> <p>© Copyright is held by the author or authors of each article.</p> | <p>Editorial Chairman: Choi Shing Kwok</p> <p>Editorial Advisor: Tan Chin Tiong</p> <p>Managing Editor: Ooi Kee Beng</p> <p>Editors: William Choong, Lee Poh Onn, Lee Sue-Ann, and Ng Kah Meng</p> <p>Comments are welcome and may be sent to the author(s).</p> |
|--|---|--|