

PERSPECTIVE

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China's Hydro-Politics Through the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation

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Ferries transport passengers and vehicles across the Mekong River in Phnom Penh on 26 June 2022. Picture: TANG CHHIN Sothy/AFP.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- China has actively pursued water diplomacy with Lower Mekong countries through the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) to ensure a stable and friendly periphery and to counter US criticism and securitisation of Chinese cascade dam-building.
- Central to the Chinese discursive construction is the positive framing of its dams as providing regional public goods through “regulating floods and replenishing droughts” for downstream states.
- The LMC embodies China’s top-down, state-centric approach that places emphasis on engaging with the Lower Mekong governments, using political and policy dialogues, economic cooperation and development assistance as the main conduits of engagement.
- This state-centric approach has served to soft-pedal and suppress riparian communities and local civil society which have been more vocal on the Mekong’s environmental problems and the impact on their livelihoods.
- The LMC is a prime example of Sino-centric multilateralism, in which China is the one who sets the rules and frameworks rather than being absorbed into pre-existing institutions such as the Mekong River Commission (LMC).

INTRODUCTION

The Mekong basin – covering China upstream and Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam downstream – is emerging as an ecological and geopolitical hotspot in Southeast Asia. Home to the world’s largest inland freshwater fishery, highly biodiverse basins and fertile farmlands,¹ the Mekong ecosystem – and the livelihoods of riparian communities along the river and its tributaries – are being jeopardised by the accumulative impact of climate change and unsustainable uses of water resources, including upstream and downstream hydropower dams.²

China controls the Mekong’s headwaters and has built 11 mainstream dams and 95 tributary dams within its portion of the river (“Lancang” in Chinese).³ It is also the largest financier of energy projects in the basin, a large bulk of which is hydropower.⁴ In the past few years, China’s Lancang dams have come increasingly under international scrutiny, especially from the US⁵ as the two great powers get locked in a contest for primacy in Asia. This – together with China’s broader foreign policy goals in mainland Southeast Asia – has prompted Beijing to shift towards “a more active and more preventive hydro-political strategy regarding the Mekong”.⁶ Central to this strategy is the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) established in 2016 as the multilateral platform for China to engage downstream states on Mekong water resources management.

Using discourse and content analysis, this article canvasses LMC documents, websites of China-administered LMC institutions and Chinese media to examine how China has exercised its water diplomacy through the LMC while remaining faithful to its water sovereignty. In this process, the LMC’s institutional design and cooperation activities are engineered to co-opt downstream countries towards endorsing the Chinese approach to Mekong water governance, legitimise its upstream dam-building, and construct a counter-discourse to US criticism of Chinese uses of Mekong water resources.

CHINA’S APPROACH TO MEKONG WATER GOVERNANCE

Upholding water sovereignty as the overriding principle

China exerts its sovereignty and jurisdiction over water resources of all international watercourses in its territory, including the Mekong, shying away from global or regional transboundary water governance regimes. Its transboundary water treaties “are primarily bilateral... rather than embracing a basin-wide approach.”⁷ China voted against the 1997 UN Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses at the United Nations General Assembly in 1997,⁸ which is the first global instrument regulating international cooperation over transboundary water resources. A key obligation under the Convention requires that States “take all appropriate measures to prevent the causing of significant harm” to other States sharing an international watercourse.⁹ In the Mekong context, Beijing is a dialogue partner and not a member of the Mekong River Commission (MRC) – a

transboundary basin organisation operating on the principle of integrated water resources management between Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam.

China's insistence on its water sovereignty is driven by geographical, historical and economic factors. First, thanks to its upstream position and the precipitous terrain of the river's upper reach, China can afford a maximalist approach to water sovereignty and hydropower development. According to Sebastian Biba, an upstream hegemon has little incentive to engage in cooperative arrangements "as these would only be seen as a constraint to unlimited future action and discriminatory use of a river's resources".¹⁰ Similarly, Salman Salman pointed out that in international water law, upstream states emphasise the principle of equitable and reasonable utilisation over the obligation against causing significant harm because "it provides more scope for states to utilise their fair share of the watercourse for activities that may impact downstream states."¹¹

Second, as noted by James Nickum, there is historically "little awareness of the international dimensions of river flows" among Chinese public, policymakers and experts, a condition that he attributes to objective factors such as "geography, history, and the minority ethnicity of most of China's borderlands".¹² This deficit of situational awareness has led to the silence "on the international dimensions of China's river basins, much less that there might be some controversy over their development", hence the lack of "an overall operational plan or management organisation for international basins".¹³ Few Chinese people know of the Lancang's extended life beyond the Chinese border.¹⁴ According to a 2004 report by Evelyn Goh, "existing Chinese studies largely do not take into account environmental costs downstream of the Lancang cascade" while "a few more recent studies of downstream impacts focus on the potential positive effects and dismiss the likely negative ones."¹⁵

Third, hydrological engineering holds a significant place throughout Chinese history and nation-building where "competence in water management is seen as a proxy for fitness to rule".¹⁶ The Chinese' ability to conquer floods along the Yellow and Yangtze rivers enabled the birth and expansion of their ancient civilisation. In the modern era, this "taming the rivers" spirit has turbocharged China to build the colossal Three Gorges Dam and become the world's largest hydropower superpower.¹⁷ The "man must conquer nature" mindset has shaped China's interventionist approach to the Mekong water resources such as leveraging the cascade for dam-building, regulating the flows to alleviate floods/droughts or blasting the rapids for navigation.¹⁸ Enabled further by advanced hydrological engineering, China's predominant approach to the Lancang-Mekong river in the past three decades has been development-centric.

Reconciling water sovereignty with water diplomacy

While retaining its water sovereignty, China has actively engaged in water resources cooperation with downstream states in recent years, especially through the LMC. Some analysts attribute such cooperation to a gradual shift within the Chinese policy elite towards "more comprehensive and non-traditional, even cooperative concepts of security", which "would allow more consultation and coordination with neighbours, and participation in regional institutions governing Mekong development."¹⁹ Domestically, the growing tension between untrammelled economic development and environmental degradation has led President Xi Jinping to declare China's "principal contradiction" between "unbalanced and

inadequate development and the people's ever-growing needs for a better life".²⁰ China's own experience of more severe and frequent droughts and floods along its riparian plains also brings home the urgency to prioritise sustainability in the country's national – and potentially global – development agenda.

The extent to which China externalises this imperative of development-environment balance beyond its borders, including in the Mekong basin, remains unclear. Despite Xi's pledge to make the Belt and Road Initiative more "green and sustainable", the roll-out of Chinese investment and overseas development financing involves various Chinese stakeholders. These include local authorities of borderland provinces (especially Yunnan in the Mekong context) and Chinese hydropower companies. These stakeholders' vested interests – i.e. growth targets, energy consumption demands and corporate profits – often dictate that development comes first and environment remains an afterthought.

Geopolitics is arguably the most important driver for China's increasingly active Mekong water diplomacy, with two foreign policy objectives in mind. First, to ensure a stable and friendly periphery in the basin, China cannot completely disregard the need to engage with downstream countries on the river issues, given the latter's growing concerns over unpredictable changes in the Mekong's hydrological conditions, especially excessive droughts, drying flows and dwindling fish stock which have had serious ramifications on their socio-economic well-being.²¹ To this end, China has employed the "shared river, shared future" discourse in its diplomatic and economic outreach towards Lower Mekong countries.

Second, China's water diplomacy has become more urgent as the Mekong emerges as a "new front for U.S.-China rivalry in Southeast Asia".²² During the Trump administration, the US stepped up its criticisms of Chinese dams and upgraded American engagement in the sub-region through the Mekong-US Partnership (MUSP).²³ The Trump administration adopted a securitisation strategy – defined as "the discursive construction of particular issues as security threats"²⁴ – regarding water and environmental issues in the Mekong basin, pointedly connecting these problems to China's upstream dam-building. Following the release of the Eyes on Earth report in April 2020 that showed how Lancang cascade dams were altering the river flows in Lower Mekong, many high-level US officials, including then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, sharply criticised China's upstream dam operations and lack of transparency on its river water use.²⁵ The methodology of the Eyes on Earth report, however, is assessed by the MRC as not providing "robust scientific evidence" for its findings, and its data has been criticised as "being overinterpreted for political ends".²⁶ In its counter-moves as analysed in the subsequent section, China has instrumentalised the entire architecture of the LMC to de-securitise Mekong water issues and bolster the legitimacy of its upstream dams.

CHINA'S HYDRO-POLITICS THROUGH THE LMC

Overview of the LMC and its water resources cooperation

In 2014, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang proposed the establishment of the LMC to promote socio-economic development, narrow the development gap, support sustainability and advance South-South cooperation. The first LMC Foreign Ministers Meeting in 2015 adopted the 3+5

cooperation framework covering three pillars (i) political and security issues, (ii) economic and sustainable development, and (iii) cultural and people-to-people exchanges; and five priority areas (i) connectivity, (ii) production capacity, (iii) cross-border economy, (iv) water resources cooperation; and (v) agriculture and poverty reduction. In 2016, the inaugural LMC Leaders' Meeting adopted the Sanya Declaration, setting the strategic guidelines and institutional framework for LMC cooperation.²⁷ The LMC has since outpaced other Mekong sub-regional platforms in terms of institution-building, cooperation scope and project financing. Its institutional architecture spans from leaders to ministers, senior officials and working groups.

The LMC is led and invested in by Beijing in a hub-and-spokes fashion. The website of the LMC China Secretariat effectively serves as the LMC website which features all-round cooperation between China and Mekong countries, bilaterally and through the LMC, including high-level exchanges, connectivity projects, and economic and socio-cultural interactions.²⁸ The LMC Special Fund – comprising US\$300 million of Chinese concessional loans – is administered by China to support small and medium-sized projects by Mekong countries, with disbursement made through bilateral agreements.²⁹ As of 2021, the LMC Special Fund had reportedly supported over 500 projects in agriculture, health, poverty reduction, environment and other areas.³⁰ Most LMC water cooperation activities are also hosted and sponsored by the Chinese.

The LMC is an important instrument for China's water diplomacy in the Mekong basin. One of its objectives and priority areas is to "enhance cooperation among LMC countries in sustainable water resources management and utilisation". Its water agenda has made significant milestones in setting the cooperation framework and establishing relevant institutions (Table 1).

Table 1: Highlights of LMC Water Resources Cooperation³¹

Institutions		
	- JWG on Lancang-Mekong Water Resources Cooperation	2016
	- LMC Water Centre	2017
	- Ministerial Meeting of Lancang-Mekong Water Resources Cooperation (<i>ad hoc</i>)	2019
	- Lancang-Mekong Environmental Cooperation Centre (LMECC)	2019
Information-sharing		
	- MOU under the JWG of Lancang-Mekong Water Resources Cooperation, in which China commits to provide hydrological data in flood season from Yunjinghong and Man'an stations	2019
	- China's agreement to provide year-round hydrological data from Yunjinghong and Man'an stations	2020
	- Establishment of the Lancang-Mekong Water Resources Cooperation Information Sharing Platform	2020
Guiding Documents		
	- Five-year Action Plan on Lancang-Mekong Water Resources Cooperation (2018-2022)	2018
	- MOU between the MRC Secretariat and the Lancang-Mekong Water Resources Cooperation Centre	2019
	- Joint Statement on Enhancing Sustainable Development Cooperation of the Lancang-Mekong Countries	2022
	- Lancang-Mekong Environmental Cooperation Strategy	
High-level Events		
	- 1 st Ministerial Meeting of Lancang-Mekong Water Resources Cooperation	2019
	- 1 st Lancang Mekong Water Resources Cooperation Forum	2018
	- 2 nd Lancang Mekong Water Resources Cooperation Forum	2019
Joint Studies		
	- Joint study on the Hydrological Impacts of the Lancang Hydropower Cascade on Downstream Extreme Events	2019
	- Joint Study on the Changing Pattern of Hydrological Conditions of the Lancang-Mekong River Basin	Ongoing

The LMC approach: state-centric, all-round cooperation, and development-first

The LMC embodies China's top-down, state-centric approach that places emphasis on engaging with the Lower Mekong governments, using political and policy dialogues, economic cooperation and development assistance as the main conduits of engagement. According to the 2016 Sanya Declaration, the LMC cooperation will feature "leaders' guidance" and follow a "government-guided model". The biennial LMC Leaders' Meeting is the top policy-making body that maps out "strategic planning for long-term LMC development" while the annual LMC Foreign Ministers' Meeting conducts "policy planning and coordination".³² The role of local governments in fostering LMC cooperation is also promoted through the Initiative on

Deepening Cooperation among Local Governments of Lancang-Mekong Countries.³³ The 2018-2022 LMC Five-Year Plan of Action (POA) seeks to enhance political dialogues, official exchanges and visits, including among law enforcement agencies, police, judicial bodies and even political parties.

On water resources cooperation, the POA intends to “carry out *top-level design* for cooperation among LMC countries in sustainable water resources and utilisation” and “strengthen policy dialogue on water resources”.³⁴ This state-centric approach has been criticised as “giv[ing] limited opportunity to the public to participate in its processes”.³⁵ It could soft-pedal and even suppress the voices of riparian communities and local civil society groups which have been more vocal on the Mekong’s environmental problems and the impact on their livelihoods.³⁶ Granted, the Sanya Declaration also refers to “multiple-participation” and “broad participation”, i.e. the inclusion of non-official actors such as journalists, students, youths, academia and media in LMC activities. However, all LMC activities are organised and coordinated through the inter-governmental channel over which China retains control in administering the process, shaping the outputs, and narrating the outcomes.³⁷

Given the LMC’s all-round cooperation, water security is not its only and central concern. Instead, it puts emphasis on “economic development” as both the incentive and the main prism for Mekong basin cooperation. The LMC’s preoccupation with economic benefits “from and beyond the river”³⁸ is reflected in the goals of its 2018-2022 POA, namely “(i) contributing to the economic and social development of sub-regional countries, (ii) enhancing well-being of the people, (iii) narrowing the development gap within the region, and (iv) building a Community of Shared Future of Peace and Prosperity among Lancang-Mekong Countries”. As noted by Nickum, “the bases for cooperation are more strategic and economic than environmental”, and therefore “the fate of shared river basins may remain an afterthought.”³⁹

Bringing water governance “back to the realm of normal politics”

China’s approach towards de-securitising Mekong water issues through the LMC fits into what is coined as the “transformation strategy”, i.e. “moving issues off the security agenda” and “back into the realm of normal politics”.⁴⁰ As part of this “transformation strategy”, water resources cooperation is incorporated into the LMC agenda with a broad aperture that includes (i) water resources and green development, (ii) climate change adaptation, (iii) water infrastructure, (iv) agricultural water use, (v) sustainable hydropower development and water-food-energy nexus, (vi) transboundary river cooperation and information sharing, and (vii) coordination with other areas such as agriculture, fishery, tourism, health and poverty reduction.⁴¹ This holistic approach makes sense, given the multitude of socio-economic, environmental and governance problems facing riparian states. However, it also serves to dilute and de-escalate the scrutiny over dam-building, which is the most controversial aspect of Mekong water development.

Most importantly, the LMC provides a multilateral platform to co-opt downstream countries towards endorsing the Chinese approach to Mekong water governance and legitimising Lancang dam-building. To this end, key Chinese initiatives are embedded in the LMC’s institutional set-up. These include the Lancang-Mekong Water Resources Cooperation Information Sharing Platform (LMC-ISP),⁴² the Lancang-Mekong Water Resources

Cooperation Center (LMC Water Centre), and the Lancang-Mekong Environmental Cooperation Centre (LMECC), all headquartered in China and administered and represented by Chinese officials.⁴³

The LMECC is considered the “main implementing agency” of the Lancang-Mekong Environmental Cooperation Strategy (2018-2022),⁴⁴ and one of its objectives is to “disseminate China’s theory of environmental governance”.⁴⁵ Similarly, apart from sharing hydrological data from Yunjinghong and Man’an stations,⁴⁶ the LMC-ISP website focuses on disseminating China-centric news and perspectives about Mekong water resources cooperation. This infosphere basically mirrors Chinese media reports that “downplay negative impacts downstream, and instead bring forth the commonly repeated narratives of flood control, carbon-neutral energy generation, and national development”.⁴⁷

Central to this Chinese discursive construction is the positive framing of Lancang cascade dams as providing regional public goods. According to this narrative, which is emphasised throughout LMC engagements, Chinese dams help regulate the Mekong’s seasonal flows, which in turn have “brought benefits to drought relief, water supply, navigation and ecology downstream”.⁴⁸ The LMC has also been utilised to co-opt the voices from downstream in pushing positive messages about Chinese dams through various study tours and visits to China by officials, diplomats, youth and media from downstream states.⁴⁹

Apart from amplifying the positive impact of cascade dams and negating their detrimental effects, China has zeroed in on climate change as the main reason for the Mekong’s hydrological changes.⁵⁰ The modality of conducting joint studies has been leveraged to shift the weight of evidence to the climate change factor. The LMC’s 2018-2022 POA directs its joint research and analysis towards “Lancang-Mekong water resources and influences of climate change” (without any mention of dam impact).⁵¹ This includes a joint study to be undertaken by the MRC and the LMC Water Centre on the changing hydrological conditions in the Mekong basin,⁵² with its scope and direction as prescribed in the 2021 LMC Foreign Ministers’ Joint Statement being to provide “engineering and non-engineering measures to tackle climate change”.⁵³ Although climate change plays a big part in the Mekong hydrological uncertainties, the single focus on this factor runs the risk of obscuring the controversy over hydropower development from the river.

Water diplomacy within the bounds of water sovereignty

China’s water diplomacy through the LMC has not fundamentally shifted towards embracing greater accountability or a basin-wide perspective in its use of Mekong water resources. As noted by Biba, de-securitisation does not mean China’s complete renunciation of unilateral actions and embrace of full-blown cooperation. Rather, it indicates that “China may pursue cooperative strategies of non- or de-escalation – despite a possible continuation of unilateral actions” which he coined as “on and off cooperation”.⁵⁴

It remains to be seen whether China’s cooperative gestures through the LMC would have any meaningful impact on the ground. In 2020, China agreed to share year-round hydrological data from Yunjinghong and Man’an stations, which was hailed by the MRC as supporting its “independent analysis of the flow regime in the upper part of the basin”.⁵⁵ While useful, the

data is assessed to be “incomplete” (about water levels rather than dam operations, from two stations only, not all upstream dams)⁵⁶ and not timely enough.⁵⁷ In 2021, the MRC continued to urge wider exchange of data among all riparian states, including prior notification of the Lancang cascade’s planned operations.⁵⁸

It also remains to be seen whether the MRC can undertake “independent analysis”⁵⁹ with the LMC Water Centre’s direct and – apparently directive – involvement. While benefiting from China’s data-sharing, their joint studies may be influenced by Chinese narrative-control. For instance, in January-February 2021, the MRC issued media releases indicating that the Mekong water levels dropped due to power grid maintenance in Yunjinghong dam,⁶⁰ that the blue-green colour in some sections may return to its sediment-rich brown if upstream and tributary dams release large volumes of water,⁶¹ and that there was discrepancy between the MRC and Chinese data on the outflow at Yunjinghong.⁶² At a follow-up meeting with the MRC, Chinese experts indicated that Yunjinghong’s average discharge levels in January and February 2021 were respectively 79% and 94.7% more than the average charge between 1960-2009 (when the Lancang flows were not regulated by dams). They also noted that the MRC’s technical error had caused data discrepancy, and that the MRC would “use the latest updated rating curve provided by China ... to maintain the scientific nature and consistency of hydrological data”.⁶³ While China’s sharing of additional data would enable more accurate and comprehensive analysis of the river’s hydrological conditions, this also means that the script of the Mekong story would likely be written according to China’s narratives while alternative views could be suppressed.

The crux of the matter remains the unilateral discretion of Chinese dam operators to utilise Lancang water resources, not subject to any basin-wide oversight or consultation mechanism with downstream states to properly take into account the impact in the Lower Mekong. A Mekong Dam Monitor report in 2022 pointed out that the two big reservoirs upstream, Xiaowan and Nuozhadu, generally restricted a similar amount of water regardless of low flow and drought conditions downstream between 2018 and 2020, and that the 2020 wet season flows at Stung Treng (Cambodia) and Chiang Saen (Thailand) would have been 9.3% and 63% higher respectively without restrictions from the two dams.⁶⁴ For all its image-building and propaganda, altruism for downstream states is neither the operating principle nor a consistent practice of Chinese dams’ operations.⁶⁵ The consistent Chinese view on the Mekong remains that “water in China is China’s to do with as the state sees fit.”⁶⁶

CONCLUSION

While China has invested substantially in LMC water cooperation, it is doubtful that its water diplomacy has led to any moderation to its water sovereignty principle. In the broader scheme of things, the LMC is not only an instrument of China’s hydro-politics but, more importantly, a vehicle of its statecraft in the basin. It is designed not only to shape the discourse and direction of Mekong water governance but also to bind mainland Southeast Asia economically and strategically into a Chinese hub-and-spokes system. Powered by China’s diplomatic activism, geographical advantage and financial largesse, the LMC is a prime example of Sino-centric

multilateralism, in which China is the one who sets the rules and frameworks rather than being absorbed into pre-existing norms and institutions.

ENDNOTES

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