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Is the US a Serious Competitor to China in the Lower Mekong?

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The Mekong-US Partnership Page on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/MekongUSPartnership>. This partnership was set up to promote the stability, peace, prosperity, and sustainable development of the Mekong sub-region through cooperation among Mekong partner countries and the US.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- After decades of benign neglect, the US has increased its engagement in the Lower Mekong in the last decade, partly driven by the US-China competition.
- The US' strategic intent is to enhance the Lower Mekong states' resilience to Chinese influence by supporting their "autonomy, economic independence, good governance and sustainable growth".
- Whereas China adopts a top-down, state-centric approach to Mekong cooperation, the US places emphasis on engaging local institutions, riparian communities, civil society and scientists to increase knowledge on the river's ecosystem and empower voices from the grassroots.
- China invests in building a comprehensive connectivity network with Lower Mekong states while the US focuses on building 'soft infrastructure' to ensure environmental safeguards in large-scale transport and energy projects.
- The US' affirmative agenda helps cultivate enabling conditions in Lower Mekong states towards achieving a better balance between economic needs and sustainability requirements.
- However, there are structural constraints that limit US geopolitical influence in the Lower Mekong: (i) The US Indo-Pacific strategy puts more emphasis on the sea than the land; (ii) The Mekong issues are environmental, developmental and governance in nature, holding little relevance for American military power; (iii) China's economic influence in the region is far more prevalent than that of the US in terms of trade, connectivity, investments and integration in the regional supply chains; (iv) US emphasis on environmental protection and quality infrastructure does not always suit the political-economic imperatives of Lower Mekong governments and their corporate affiliates; and (v) The democratic backsliding and authoritarian consolidation in Lower Mekong states has alienated their ruling regimes from Washington and driven them further into China's embrace.

INTRODUCTION

From the “river road to China” in the 19th century to the “hotbed of communism” and the “hottest war” during the Cold War era, the Lower Mekong (or mainland Southeast Asia)¹ has been historically intertwined with global politics, involving both China and further afield powers like France, Britain, Japan, the Soviet Union and the US. In the first two decades after the Cold War, there was an interlude of “strategic calm” among the major powers;² and with it, economic integration and connectivity building were put at the forefront of international relations in the sub-region. A “crowded field” of development- and economy-centric sub-regional mechanisms with “considerable overlap” in their areas of priority and focus emerged³ – some involving only the riparian states and others sponsored by extra-regional powers such as Japan, Republic of Korea (ROK), India and the US.

In the past decade, however, the Mekong River is increasingly framed in “apocalyptic” terms due to its accumulative environmental-ecological degradation associated with dam-building by the riparian states⁴ while the Lower Mekong is increasingly viewed through the “geopolitical” lens of US-China competition. Environmental and developmental issues in the region are now overlaid with rising great power tensions, which in turn heighten the controversies and contestations over the use of the river’s transboundary water resources.

The discourse on the Mekong as “a new flashpoint of the Indo-Pacific” or “a zone of great power competition”⁵ is often assumed rather than examined, especially with regard to the US’ strategic intent and the capabilities it can bring to bear in the sub-region. How important is the Lower Mekong to the US’ interests and strategy in Asia? What are the priorities in the US’ Mekong agenda? Is the US a serious peer competitor to China in this sub-region? This *Perspective* seeks to address these questions by examining the US approach towards the Lower Mekong and its structural constraints in juxtaposition with China as their contest for influence unfolds in the sub-region.

THE US’ LOWER MEKONG ENGAGEMENT: FROM BENIGN NEGLECT TO ENHANCED ENGAGEMENT

Mainland Southeast Asia was historically not on the US’ strategic radar, except when it was deemed as critical to America’s overriding goal of preventing any other power from “establishing exclusive hegemonic control over Asia and the Pacific”.⁶ During the 2nd World War, US assistance to Viet Minh forces in fighting against Japan in Indochina was meant to complement Britain’s war effort in Southeast Asia. Washington then provided aid to French attempts to re-colonialise Indochina (1946-1954) on the grounds that such assistance was necessary to enable France to fulfill its security commitments in Europe.⁷ Afterwards, American support for South Vietnam against North Vietnam, which eventually led to the deployment of millions of American troops in the 2nd Indochina War (1954-1975), was considered indispensable to its containment of global communism led by the Soviet Union and China.⁸

In the first two decades after the Cold War, Washington's approach to mainland Southeast Asia was characterised by benign neglect and lacklustre engagement: its alliance with Thailand drifted as the strategic rationale of containing communism receded; Washington completely shunned the Myanmar junta regime; and Vietnam was "seen largely as a historical artifact by the Vietnam generation, or a great place for backpacking by the X generation",⁹ which also applied to Laos and Cambodia. During the Clinton administration (1993-2001), when engagement with China won the day and the West believed that liberal democracy was the final form of government for all nations, American engagement in the sub-region focused on promoting economic reform, political pluralism and human rights in mainland Southeast Asian states. Under the George W. Bush administration (2001-2009), Washington was pre-occupied with the global 'war on terror', and Southeast Asia – especially the largely terrorism-free mainland states – slipped out of its strategic radar.

Viewed through this long arc of history, the US' increased engagement in the Lower Mekong in the past decade or so is a recent phenomenon. Its return to the Mekong sub-regional architecture first gained momentum under the Obama administration's rebalancing strategy towards Asia-Pacific in which engagement with Southeast Asia was made a priority (2009-2017).¹⁰ Some factors contributed to raising American stakes in the Mekong, including the improvement in US-Vietnam bilateral ties, Myanmar's transition to democracy since 2011, which led to the lifting of American sanctions and made it politically palatable for the US to embrace Myanmar-included Lower Mekong cooperation, and US concerns over transnational challenges in the region, including environment degradation, human, wildlife and drug trafficking, and emerging infectious diseases.

In 2009, the US established the Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI) with Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam (CLMTV), with an annual LMI foreign ministers meeting and six cooperation areas: agriculture and food security, connectivity, education, energy security, environment and water, and health. Most LMI activities – with a total funding of US\$120 million¹¹ – focused on providing technical assistance, human development, capacity-building, empowerment of youth, women and marginalised communities.

The US' strategic interest in the Mekong increased during the Trump administration (2017-2021) as its competition with China intensified. 2020 was a high point of US engagement in the sub-region with US senior diplomats upping their criticisms of Chinese upstream behaviour and the LMI being upgraded to the Mekong-US Partnership (MUSP) with a view to becoming "more strategic, focused, and effective".¹²

Other developments also converged in 2020 to deepen the nexus between hydro-politics and geopolitics in the Lower Mekong. First, Vietnam actively brought the Mekong issues to the world's attention and sought to mainstream them into the regional agenda during its 2020 ASEAN chairmanship.¹³ Second, international media reports and scientific studies increasingly shed light on the environmental problems and socio-economic ramifications of the Mekong River's hydrological changes: its water levels in 2019 were at their lowest in more than 100 years and saltwater intrusion in Vietnam's Mekong Delta region reached record highs in 2020. A notable development was the release of the Eyes on Earth report in April 2020 which says that "the severe lack of water in the Lower Mekong during the wet seasons of 2019 is largely influenced by the restriction of water flowing from the Upper Mekong during that time", hinting at the impact of Chinese cascade dams on the river flows.¹⁴ Using the report as an evidential basis, many US officials, including then Secretary of State Mike Pompeo,

ratcheted up criticisms of China's dam operations and the lack of transparency on its river water use.¹⁵

The Biden administration has maintained the US' Mekong engagement through the MUSP and stepped up collaboration with other development partners. In 2021, the MUSP adopted its three-year plan of action (2021-2023) covering both multi-year programmes initiated during the previous administrations and new initiatives in pandemic response, climate change action and sustainable manufacturing. The Biden administration introduced the term "free and open Mekong"¹⁶ to rhetorically align with its broader Indo-Pacific Strategy, which seeks to "advance freedom and openness and offer "autonomy and options"¹⁷.

THE US VERSUS CHINA IN THE LOWER MEKONG

The US's vision for the Mekong sub-regional order is the reverse of that of China. Beijing's strategic design is to bind mainland Southeast Asia into its orbit economically and geopolitically¹⁸ whereas Washington's vision is to support "integrated sub-regional cooperation" among the five mainland states and bolster their "*autonomy, economic independence* [emphasis added], good governance and sustainable growth".¹⁹ The US' strategic intention is to enhance the Lower Mekong states' individual and collective resilience to Chinese influence, which it considers "important also for the unity and effectiveness of ASEAN".²⁰ The US approach to the Lower Mekong is, therefore, diametrically opposed to China's, particularly in the following dimensions:

Bottom-up versus top-down: China adopts a top-down, state-centric approach to Mekong cooperation, focusing on leadership exchanges, policy dialogues, economic cooperation and development assistance to exert its influence over the ruling regimes of Lower Mekong states. The US approach, meanwhile, places emphasis on engaging and empowering riparian communities, civil society, conservationists, scientists, academia and local institutions so as to increase knowledge and information-sharing on the Mekong River's ecosystem and amplify voices and perspectives from the grassroots level. This bottom-up approach helped create linkages between many American sub-national and non-governmental stakeholders with their Mekong counterparts (Table 1).

Soft infrastructure versus hard infrastructure: China has given multi-billion-dollar loans to finance infrastructure projects in the Lower Mekong, including highways, railways, bridges, ports, energy pipelines and power plants. Dam-building is the most controversial aspect of Chinese infrastructure financing in the sub-region: Apart from 11 Mekong mainstream dams and 95 tributary dams within its territory, China is a big investor in multiple hydropower projects in the basin. In order to strengthen Lower Mekong states' capacity to meet financial and environmental safeguards in taking Chinese infrastructure loans, US development assistance to the region focuses on 'soft infrastructure' – i.e. to "strengthen public institutions, empower civil society, promote social justice and human rights, and support sustainable and inclusive development".²¹ US aid to the sub-region – which amounts to US\$ 2 billion through bilateral and regional initiatives between 2010 and 2020²² – mainly provides technical assistance and capacity building to promote good governance, transparency and standards of infrastructure building (Table 2). A telling example was US technical support in reviewing

Myanmar’s infrastructure contracts in 2019, which reportedly led to the scaling-down of the China-funded Kyaukpyu deepwater port’s price tag from US\$7.3 billion to US\$1.3 billion.²³

Internationalisation versus regionalisation: Under the banner of constructing a Lancang-Mekong River community of common destiny, China has utilised the LMC – which operates like a hub-and-spokes system – to promote exclusive cooperation among the six Mekong riparian states.²⁴ The Chinese approach of “regionalisation” stands in contrast with the American approach of “internationalisation” that seeks to engage and synergise with other extra-regional development partners.²⁵ The Friends of the Lower Mekong (FLM) under the LMI is rebranded as the Friends of Mekong (FOM) under the MUSP. Since 2020, the MUSP has sought to align its efforts with “those of other development partners, namely Japan, Australia, the ROK, and other Friends of the Mekong” (Table 3).²⁶ Given the US’ limited economic footprint in the region, forging such synergies with its friends and partners is pragmatic and necessary to bring about greater impact through joint action.

Securitisation versus de-securitisation: The US has been securitising the Mekong water issues by highlighting the negative environmental and socio-economic impact of China’s upstream dam-building for Lower Mekong states. This securitisation – defined as “the discursive construction” of the Mekong water problems as “security threats”²⁷ – was particularly dialed up during the Trump administration. Beijing meanwhile seeks to de-securitise the Mekong water issues by adopting a development-first approach to the Mekong water resources management, using the LMC’s top-leadership engagement to soft-pedal and suppress local environmental concerns, and promoting a positive discourse about its upstream dams as providing public goods for downstream states.²⁸

MUSP versus LMC: The US-led MUSP and China-led LMC – with their respective strategic visions, guiding principles and cooperation priorities – signify the two powers’ contrasting approaches to the Lower Mekong (Table 4). For example, although “connectivity” is covered under both frameworks, the software-centric MUSP focuses on addressing the environmental impact of infrastructure projects, promoting sustainable energy systems and clean energy, and strengthening institutional capacity and legal-regulatory frameworks on transport connectivity in the sub-region;²⁹ the hardware-centric LMC meanwhile supports the development of a comprehensive connectivity network of highways, railways, waterways, ports and air linkages as well as power grids, telecommunication and Internet between China and Lower Mekong states to promote trade, investment and business travel.³⁰

Table 1: Promoting Multi-stakeholder Governance in the US’ Mekong Initiatives

1	US Army Corps of Engineers (USACE)/MUSP Sister Rivers Partnership, including the partnership between the Mississippi River Commission and the Mekong River Commission (MRC)	To promote the sharing of best practices in water and river management through collaborative engagements and technical exchanges
2	Wonders of the Mekong project involving the University of Nevada Global Water Center and the Inland Fisheries Research and Development Institute of Cambodia (funded by USAID)	To conduct applied research, capacity-building, outreach and communications to highlight the economic, ecological, and cultural values of biodiversity and

		ecosystem services associated with the Mekong River
3	Mekong Water Data Initiative (MWDI) at MekongWater.org, involving over 60 organisations with over 50 tools (including the Mekong Dam Monitor) of river basin mapping and hydrology, weather forecasting, open-source data analysis and ecosystems	To collect, analyse, and manage water and water-related data to promote sustainable water and natural resources management.
4	Sustainable Infrastructure Partnership (SIP), a non-profit programme managed by Pact Thailand (funded by the US Department of State)	To collaborate with academic and government agencies to improve skills and deliver tools for studying, monitoring and planning for wise use of Mekong water resources
5	Mekong-US Partnership Track 1.5 Dialogue on Infrastructure and Energy, implemented by the Stimson Center and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (funded by the US Department of State)	A series of track 1.5 dialogues to explore solutions to key policy and sustainability challenges facing the Lower Mekong
6	Mekong-US Partnership Young Scientist Program (implemented by the Arizona State University)	To foster collaboration, knowledge sharing and networking of young scientists in MUSP countries
7	SERVIR-Mekong Program (supported by USAID and the US National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA))	To use satellite technologies to support Lower Mekong states in addressing climate-related challenges such as disaster preparedness and response, water resource, and land management
8	Connect the Mekong through Education and Training (COMET), implemented through the MekongSkills2Work Network – a group of universities, vocational colleges, and industry partners	To better prepare youth for employment by bridging the gap between education institutions and employers and equip them with market-driven skills

Source: Compiled by author, based on public sources

Table 2: Promoting Infrastructure Building Standards in the US’ Mekong Initiatives

1	US-Australia Mekong Safeguards	A multi-component programme that works with local governments, developers and communities to integrate environmental, social, and corporate governance standards (ESG) in energy and transport projects in Lower Mekong countries
2	Navigating the BRI Toolkit platform – developed by the Asia Society Policy Institute and funded by the Ford Foundation	Designed with multiple Southeast Asian languages to support local communities and stakeholders in BRI host countries and China to ensure stakeholder engagement and environmental and social impact assessment (ESIA) in an infrastructure project
3	Smart Infrastructure for the Mekong	A multi-component programme which provides training for hundreds of Laotian dam operators and Vietnamese local officials
4	East-West Transport Connectivity Program (funded by the US Department of Transportation)	To strengthen institutional capacity and legal and regulatory frameworks to support international best practices for transport connectivity

Source: Compiled by author, based on public sources

Table 3: US-initiated Mekong Partnerships

1	Friends of the Mekong (FOM), including Five Lower Mekong states, Australia, the EU, Japan, New Zealand, the ROK, the US, the MRC, Asian Development Bank (ADB) and World Bank
2	Japan-US Mekong Power Partnership, created in 2019 to promote a sustainable energy sector and quality energy infrastructure development in Lower Mekong countries
3	US-ROK-MRC partnership on water data utilisation capacity building
4	USAID and Australia Mekong Safeguards Program to accelerate sustainable infrastructure transition in the Mekong region
5	US-Australia collaboration to support combatting transnational crime in the Mekong region
6	Lower Mekong Regional Fish Passage – a partnership between the US and the Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Center, MRC, Australia, Japan, and Lower Mekong countries

Source: Compiled by author, based on public sources

Table 4: MUSP versus LMC

	MUSP	LMC
Strategic vision	For the autonomy, economic independence, good governance, and sustainable growth of Mekong partner countries	For a community of shared future of peace and prosperity among Lancang-Mekong countries
Leaders' meeting	No	Yes (biennial)
Foreign ministers' meeting	Yes (annual)	Yes (annual)
Senior officials' meeting	Yes (annual)	Yes (annual)
Working group level	Policy Dialogue (at the deputy director general level)	6 joint working groups for the priority areas
Dedicated fund	No – MUSP activities are funded on a programme-basis, drawing from different sources of US funding, most notably USAID and US Department of State	Yes - the LMC Special Fund (US\$300 million provided as Chinese concessional loans)
Guiding principles	Respect for ASEAN centrality, openness, transparency, good governance, equality, consensus, mutual benefit, respect for sovereignty, non-intervention, rule of law, international law, inclusivity, and rules-based frameworks	Consensus, equality, mutual consultation and coordination, voluntarism, common contribution and shared benefits, and respect for the UN Charter and international law Leaders' guidance, government-guided, all-round cooperation, broad participation, project-oriented model
Synergies with other US/Chinese/ASEAN initiatives	Synergies between the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific and the US Indo-Pacific vision Synergies and complementarities between the work of ASEAN and sub-regional cooperation frameworks	Synergy between China's Belt and Road Initiative and LMC activities and projects, as well as relevant development programmes of the Mekong countries, including the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC)
Priority areas	(i) economic connectivity,	(i) connectivity

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (ii) sustainable water, natural resources management, and environmental conservation and protection (iii) non-traditional security (health and pandemic response, transnational crime, cybersecurity, trafficking in persons, drugs, wildlife and timber) (iv) human resource development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (ii) production capacity (iii) cross-border economy (iv) water resources cooperation (v) agriculture and poverty reduction
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Source: Compiled by author, based on public sources

STRUCTURAL LIMITS OF US INFLUENCE IN THE LOWER MEKONG

The US’ enhanced engagement in the Lower Mekong has amplified the voices of downstream communities, conservationists and scientists on the impact of economic activities on the Mekong ecosystem. US technical assistance and collective action with other development partners have contributed to strengthening the capacities of Lower Mekong states towards meeting environmental safeguards in infrastructure projects, especially dam-building. Washington’s increased attention also helped mainstream the Mekong into the regional agenda and put pressure on China to be more accountable and transparent in its upstream water management.³¹

However, there are structural asymmetries between the US and China that tilt the regional balance of influence in China’s favour. First is the “tyranny of geography” which conditions the importance of mainland Southeast Asia – or the lack thereof – in the two powers’ respective grand strategy: While the Lower Mekong is naturally China’s backyard and is therefore critical to China’s neighbourhood diplomacy and foreign policy, the US’ track record in the Lower Mekong indicates that Washington’s engagement in the sub-region waxed and waned subject to its strategic calculations vis-à-vis key US allies and opponents. Post-Vietnam War, the US approach to mainland Southeast Asia is better characterised as ‘offshore balancing’ than ‘deep engagement’,³² and by its emphasis on the maritime rather than the continental domain. The maritime focus is manifest in the US’ Indo-Pacific strategy, a pillar of which is to consolidate alliances and partnerships with maritime democracies such as Australia, India and Japan while leaving the Eurasian landmass largely at the whims of two US strategic competitors, China and Russia.

Zooming in at the Southeast Asian theatre, “the focus in Washington on maritime competition with China misses the importance of the land”.³³ The US’ national security interest in Southeast Asia is to ensure its freedom of navigation and military access necessary for American power projection across the Indo-Pacific.³⁴ The South China Sea and the Mekong are often cited as

two concurrent flashpoints of US-China rivalry in Southeast Asia but the latter does not hold the same strategic value to Washington as the former. Besides, while the South China Sea disputes present a conventional security situation where American military power could be brought to bear, the Mekong problems are environmental, developmental and governance in nature and do not warrant a military solution.³⁵

In terms of economic influence in the sub-region, the US has been surpassed by China. China has strong economic relations with all Lower Mekong states across the full spectrum of two-way trade, multi-modal connectivity, tourism, investment, development aid and infrastructure financing. China is the biggest trading partner of all Lower Mekong states, the largest source of FDI in all except Vietnam, and the top source of foreign tourist arrivals to the sub-region.³⁶ Meanwhile, the US economic footprint is hardly felt in Laos and Myanmar. The US is the largest export market for Vietnam, Thailand and Cambodia but China is coming close as the second. Although the US is the largest source of FDI to the ASEAN region, its investments are mainly concentrated in maritime Southeast Asia, especially Singapore.

More importantly, China and Lower Mekong economies are deeply integrated in the regional supply chains. All Lower Mekong states are members of the ASEAN-China free trade area (ACFTA) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which have and will further deepen their economic interdependence. In contrast, the US is absent from all Asian multilateral free trade agreements; Thailand and Vietnam are the only two mainland states joining the US-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) that is still under negotiation and does not offer market access. Unlike big Chinese state-owned firms that actively ‘go global’ in infrastructure building, Corporate America stays out of this business, except in the energy industry. American investments in the region are driven by the private sector whereas the Chinese government exerts strong influence over Chinese companies and can bring them in line with the government’s economic statecraft agenda. These structural realities make China “more central to Asian political economy” and “more able to benefit politically from its private lending and private investment” than the US.³⁷

Furthermore, the US’ emphasis on environmental protection and quality infrastructure does not necessarily dovetail with the prevailing political-economic interests and priorities of Lower Mekong countries’ governments and their corporate affiliates. The Laotian government considers hydropower – which accounts for 80% of its total installed energy capacity – the most important pathway to ensure its national energy security and earn export revenues from selling electricity to neighbouring countries, including Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, Myanmar, Malaysia and Singapore.³⁸ In Thailand, local communities and environmental groups actively campaign against Mekong dam projects but the Thai government continues to buy more electricity from Laos while Thai banks and developers remain the largest investor in hydropower dams in Laos.³⁹ In Cambodia, despite a moratorium on new dam construction until 2030, the well-connected conglomerate Royal Group is seeking to revive a mega dam project in Stung Treng province, with some initial success thus far.⁴⁰

Last but not least, political developments in Lower Mekong states in the past decade have swung the pendulum towards Beijing. The democratic backsliding in Thailand (post-military coup in 2014), Myanmar (post-military coup in 2021) and Cambodia (consolidation of power by the ruling Cambodian People’s Party and its effective marginalisation of opposition parties) have complicated these countries’ bilateral ties with the US. Alienated from Washington, their

ruling elites have increasingly looked towards Beijing, which is willing to give them political-diplomatic support and development finance and to expand bilateral economic ties.

Among the Lower Mekong states, Vietnam appears to share deep environmental and geopolitical concerns with the US about Mekong upstream dams and Chinese strategic inroads in the sub-region. Yet, China can exert significant influence over Vietnam's foreign policy-making through the institutionalised linkages between the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The VCP has also been learning from the CCP's party-building, development and governance model, and ways and means to preserve its political monopoly. As demonstrated in the 2022 visit by the VCP general-secretary Nguyen Phu Trong to Beijing, such close ties between the VCP and CCP provide systemic safeguards against Vietnam veering too far away from Chinese influence, and impose structural limits to the strategic like-mindedness between Hanoi and Washington vis-à-vis Beijing.⁴¹

The ongoing Myanmar crisis has exposed the political constraints faced by the US in bringing its multilateral Mekong agenda forward. In 2022, the MUSP ministerial meeting did not take place because the US did not wish for the presence of the Myanmar junta's foreign minister, while all Lower Mekong states did not buckle under American pressure. In contrast, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi flew to Myanmar to attend the LMC foreign ministers meeting in July 2022, making the first visit by a high-level Chinese official to Myanmar since the coup.⁴² The LMC is the only Mekong sub-regional mechanism that had ministerial engagement last year as Japan, the ROK and India followed in the American footsteps. Such political grandstanding did not help the US gain any geopolitical mileage in the sub-region. Myanmar has the least stake in the Mekong ecosystem – its territory accounting for only 3% of the basin – but the US' Mekong agenda is being held hostage by the junta's action.

CONCLUSION

The discourse on the Mekong as a new arena of US-China competition is bounded by the fact that the US is not a peer competitor to China in this sub-region in almost every measure. The US Indo-Pacific strategy places emphasis on constraining Chinese behaviour at 'sea' rather than on 'land'. The US' "advanced-nation-centred and ideal-oriented" approach to Lower Mekong development does not "necessarily lead to strengthening political and economic linkages between the US and Mekong countries".⁴³ In contrast, China's gravitational pull for these countries is not only a function of geographic proximity, extensive connectivity and the sheer weight of the Chinese economy; it is also driven by China's long-term investment in deepening economic interdependencies with Lower Mekong states, and Beijing's pragmatism in building relationships with their ruling regimes of all ideological stripes.

Viewing the Lower Mekong from the lens of geopolitics also obscures the spotlight on the primary responsibility of regional states in the use of Mekong water resources for economic gains at the expense of the river's ecosystem and riparian communities' livelihoods. In the final analysis, the choice for Lower Mekong states is not the one to be made between the US or China; rather, it is the choice about their own development path, which requires the balance between economic needs and sustainable requirements and the juggling between competing needs and agendas of different domestic constituencies. The US' affirmative agenda so far has cultivated enabling conditions for regional states to make informed decisions towards

achieving that balance. Contrary to the zero-sum logic of US-China strategic rivalry in other parts of Asia, their contest for influence in the Lower Mekong could potentially yield positive-sum outcomes for regional states.

ENDNOTES

¹ In this article, “mainland Southeast Asia”, “the Lower Mekong” and “the Mekong sub-region”, which comprises five states, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam, are used interchangeably.

² Sebastian Strangio, “What Does the New AUKUS Alliance Mean for Southeast Asia?”, *The Diplomat*, 17 September 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/09/what-does-the-new-aukus-alliance-mean-for-southeast-asia/>

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⁷ Henry J. Kenny, *Shadow of the Dragon: Vietnam's Continuing Struggle with China and the Implications for US Foreign Policy* (Brassey's: Virginia, 2002), pp. 12-17

⁸ Department of State of the United States of America, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952–1954, Indochina, Volume XIII, Part 1, Historical Documents, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v13p1/d716>

⁹ Henry J. Kenny, *Shadow of the Dragon*, op. cit., p. 118

¹⁰ Hoang Thi Ha, “Asean-US relations: Can the momentum be maintained?”, *The Straits Times*, 5 November 2016, <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/us-asean-relations-from-rebalance-to-reset>

¹¹ The Mekong Matters for America/America Matters for the Mekong”, *East-West Center*, 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep25016>

¹² Mekong-U.S. Partnership Joint Ministerial Statement, 16 September 2020, [https://asean.usmission.gov/mekong-u-s-partnership-joint-ministerial-statement/#:~:text=The%20Mekong%20DU.S.%20Partnership%20\(hereafter,countries%20and%20](https://asean.usmission.gov/mekong-u-s-partnership-joint-ministerial-statement/#:~:text=The%20Mekong%20DU.S.%20Partnership%20(hereafter,countries%20and%20)

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