



FORGET ABOUT THE SOUTH CHINA SEA, MEKONG RIVER DELTA IS THE REAL (WATER) CONFLICT

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For years, the South China Sea territorial issue has influenced Southeast Asia's security strategy. The extremity of disputes over key sea lines transporting up to one-third of world trade, costing US\$5 trillion yearly, has made bitter connections between Southeast Asian claimant countries and China.¹ At the same time, external players such as the United States have intervened in the turmoil, keeping a check on China's maritime ambitions. Although the popular narrative leans towards the increasing hegemonic competition between superpowers in the South China Sea, this perception overlooks Asia's looming water conflict in the Mekong Delta. The clash over the resources of the Mekong River could be an even bigger breaking point than the South China Sea.

Up to 60 million people directly rely on the Mekong basin which is under the risk of natural disasters and regional stability.² The Mekong

River, a waterway that stems in China and flows through Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam, is an emerging security issue among the Southeast Asian countries. China has constructed 11 dams and has intentions to build an additional eight on its upper stretch of the river, which starts in the Tibetan Plateau.³ Alongside the environmental impacts, there is a rising strategic element to the dams; it is a typical case of upstream versus the downstream countries. The deeper problem is of safeguarding water and food security for specific countries, namely Vietnam and Thailand that are the world's largest producers of rice, with the Mekong Delta being a vital lifeline for its production.⁴ China contains substantial power over the fate of the Mekong River as it could easily disrupt the agricultural economies of the downstream nation-states, giving rise to a food crisis.

Every country on the Mekong exploits the watercourse; Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos have collectively constructed 40 dams, with an extra 80 planned. Each country has complained about the Chinese threat of holding the Mekong's water. Villagers residing near the Mekong in Thailand and Laos faced difficulty earlier this year when Chinese authorities opened the gates of Jinghong Dam located on the Mekong River in China's Yunnan province for maintenance; it caused flooding in Thailand and Laos, disrupting families, crops, and fisheries.

The repair work took place during July when a drought struck Southeast Asia, the level of river dropped to its lowest in decades, leading to appeal by Thailand and Laos to release more water downstream.⁵ A promise by the Chinese to increase the flow downstream by releasing water from the dam to lessen the water crisis has only created fears over the river's natural cycles. The people who have relied on it for generations have found that the flow of water has been repeatedly disrupted. *"Now China is completely in control of the water,"* stated Premrudee Deoruong of Laos Dam Investment Monitor, an environmental group. *"From now on, the concern is that the water will be controlled by the dam builders."*⁶ Certainly, if China's robustness in the South China Sea is perceived as a method of "gunboat diplomacy" then its behaviour on the Mekong river is an indirect but possibly more strong "stopcock diplomacy."

Vietnam, as the Mekong's furthest downstream country, has been the most vocal objector of China's actions in the South China Sea as it would be the worst affected if Beijing ever stopped the flow of the Mekong river. Vietnam is prone to natural disasters, which means the condition of crop failure is extremely high. Hence, assuring national food security becomes an important strategic issue.⁷ Besides, Vietnam has been bearing the brunt of industrial and plastic pollution flowing from the upstream countries, particularly from China. The heavy metal pollution in the Yunnan province of China has affected the Mekong River and created trans-boundary pollution.⁸ As climate change is damaging agriculture across Asia, water conflicts and resource disputes could turn into even bigger threats. This is precisely why riverside countries should encourage multilateral diplomatic moves to peacefully handle disputes. The foundation of the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation mechanism, which includes China and Southeast Asian riverside nations, provides a crucial platform for all water-sharing parties to curb the approaching conflict and adopt required adaptation and mitigation solutions for distressed communities.⁹ Action-oriented diplomacy is the only way ahead. China is already water-scarce. Any potential water shortage would make China control the flow of Mekong for its own utilization, thereby endangering downstream countries. The question about the Mekong water dispute is not related to national sovereignty – like in the South China Sea – but

rather to collective ownership, which is a far less clear-cut concept under international law.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹ "How Much Trade Transits the South China Sea," *China Power CSIS*, October 10, 2019 Available at <https://chinapower.csis.org/much-trade-transits-south-china-sea/> Accessed on October 18, 2019

² Richard Heydarian, 'Proactive diplomacy' in Mekong River dispute only way to resolve brewing conflict," *South China Morning Post*, January 14, 2018 Available on <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/2128079/proactive-diplomacy-mekong-river-dispute-only-way> Accessed on October 21, 2019

³ David Hut, "Water War Risk Rising in the Mekong," *Asia Times*, October 16, 2019 Available on <https://www.asiatimes.com/2019/10/article/water-war-risk-rising-on-the-mekong/> Accessed on October 21, 2019

⁴ Jeremy Luedi, "Under the Radar: Forget the South China Sea, this is Asia's Real Water War," *Global Risk Insights*, July 26, 2017 Available at <https://globalriskinsights.com/2017/07/mekong-river-asias-real-water-war/> Accessed on October 21, 2019

⁵ "Villagers in Laos and Thailand Suffer as China Opens the Floodgates on Mekong River Dams," *Radio Free Asia*, July 3, 2019. Available at <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/china-dam-mekong-laos-thailand-07032019151600.html> Accessed on October 23, 2019

⁶ Panu Wongcha Um, "Missing Mekong waters rouse suspicions of China," *Reuters*, July 25, 2019 Available on https://in.reuters.com/article/mekong-river-idINKCN1UK1A2?utm_campaign=trueAnthem%3A+Trending+Content&utm_content=5d39d92aba8d0400013c6557&utm_medium=trueAnthem&utm_source=twitter Accessed on October 24, 2019

⁷ Liu Zhen, "China and Vietnam in stand-off over Chinese survey ship mission to disputed reef in South China Sea," *South China Morning Post*, July 12, 2019 Available at <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3018332/beijing-and-hanoi-stand-over-chinese-survey-ship-mission> Accessed on October 29, 2019

⁸ Richard Bernstein, "China's Mekong Plans Threaten Disaster for Countries Downstream," *Foreign Policy*, Available on <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/09/27/chinas-mekong-plans-threaten-disaster-for-countries-downstream/> Accessed on October 29, 2019

⁹ Lancang Mekong Cooperation China Secretariat, Available on <http://www.lmcchina.org/eng/>, Accessed on October 29, 2019