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Anand, Vinod. "China's Policies of Exploitation in Mekong River Region". *National Security*, Vivekananda International Foundation Vol.II (1) (2019) pp-73-92 .

<https://www.vifindia.org/sites/default/files/national-security-vol-2-issue-1-article-vanand>

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Article

China's Policies of Exploitation in Mekong River Region

Vinod Anand

Abstract

China is an upper riparian state for many of the Asian countries in Central Asia, South Asia and South East Asia. However, there is no evidence to show that while developing its hydro-power sector or for that matter developing other associated infrastructure and ancillaries China has kept the interests of lower riparian countries in mind. This is especially so in the case of downstream countries through which Mekong River passes—Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. One of the major worries for downstream nations has been the building of dams and reservoirs on the Mekong River in Yunnan province of China that has resulted in lower water flows to the Southeast Asian countries in the lower Mekong basin system. With its control over Mekong river waters and economies of the Mekong countries' China has been trying to bring within its strategic orbit as many Mekong countries as possible. Beijing's policies in Mekong have also been compared with its approaches to the South China Sea (SCS) issue. China has been able to divide ASEAN centrality on the question of SCS issue; Mekong has become another playground for China to pursue such policies

Mekong River is one of the several rivers that originates in the Tibet Plateau that is also known as the water tower of Asia. China is thus an upper riparian state for many of the Asian countries in Central Asia, South Asia and South East Asia.

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However, there is no evidence to show that while developing its hydro-power sector or for that matter developing other associated infrastructure and ancillaries China has kept the interests of lower riparian countries in mind. This is especially so in the case of downstream countries through which Mekong River passes. Mekong River after descending from the heights of Tibet passes through Yunnan province of China, entering Myanmar and then it courses through Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam. Mekong is also called Lancang Jiang (Upper Mekong) in China and has a length of about 4,850 kilometers. One of the major worries for downstream nations has been that the building of dams and reservoirs on the Mekong River in Yunnan has resulted in lower water flows in the lower Mekong basin system that comprises of all other countries along the river except Yunnan which is in the upper Mekong River basin.

This region is also known as Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) and it was in the year 1992 that a cooperative effort and a mechanism to uplift the economy of the sub-region was evolved. Besides Chinese provinces of Yunnan and Guangxi, all the other lower riparian countries were included in the grouping. Overall objective was to improve connectivity through building of multimodal corridors, facilitation of cross border travel as also for addressing social and environmental concerns. The Asian Development Bank had launched the development programme and Japan had also chipped in as part of its Overseas Development Aid (ODA). Later on, the lower Mekong basin countries, except Myanmar, joined to form Mekong River Commission (MRC) to coordinate their policies on development of the river in 1995. China and Myanmar only opted for a dialogue partner status in the MRC. In order to promote its own narrative and discourse on development China evolved its Lancang-Mekong River Cooperation Mechanism (LMRCM) in March 2016. Evidently, this alternative mechanism with China at the helm came at a time when China had acquired much economic and military heft and therefore, could set its own regional agenda. However, despite the existence of MRC and LMRCM there is not much evidence to show that there has been either equitable distribution of water and allied resources of the river or for that matter enough attention has been paid to integrated and sustainable hydropower and river basin development.

Besides Mekong River development activities China has gone in for promoting connectivity and a variety of infrastructure projects in the mainland South East Asia. While China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was first announced in October 2013, there were several infrastructure and development projects that preceded this

initiative. Later on, all such projects were brought under the umbrella of 'One Road One Belt' (OBOR)/ BRI in the shape of China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor. Though such projects were meant to be mutually beneficial it would be seen that while such projects were useful to an extent for the region and its development they did have many negative repercussions.

This paper examines China's developmental policies in the Mekong River region and their impact. It also seeks to reflect upon what implications it might have for India in the light of China's approach to trans-boundary rivers in the light of rivers flowing out of Tibetan plateau into India.

Impact of Dam Building in Yunnan on Lower Mekong Region

As mentioned earlier, Mekong is known as Lancang River in China and it flows through the Yunnan province. Being an upper riparian state, China has been constructing dams on Lancang without much regard for downstream countries who have been impacted adversely by such activities. While exploitation of hydropower sources might be necessary for development and for a variety of other reasons, its impact on environment and on the livelihood of people displaced and on changes in water flows not only adversely impact the lower riparian countries but also have a bearing on the people in the upper reaches of the river.



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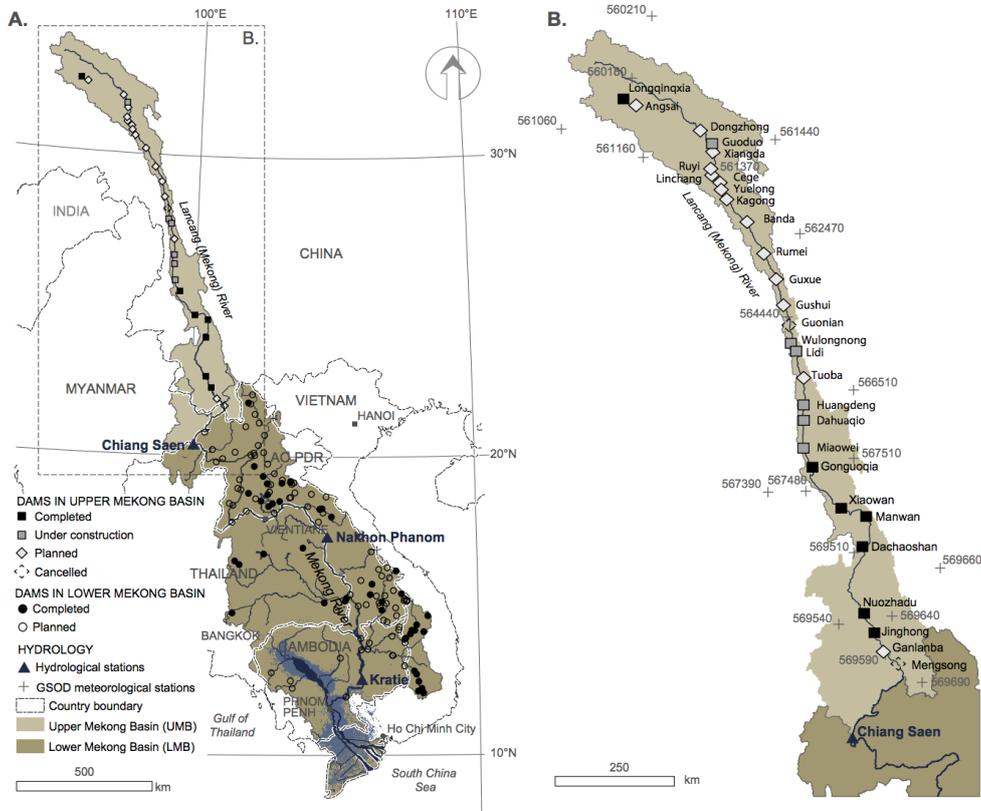


Fig. 1. Map of (A) the large dams (height > 15 m) in the Mekong River Basin and the (B) existing, under construction and planned hydropower projects in the Upper Mekong Basin (UMB). The hydrological stations for discharge analyses are shown with blue triangles (A). (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)

Source: Timo A. Räsänen et al., *Journal of Hydrology* (2017)

In early 1990s China constructed a hydropower dam in Manwan with 1670 MW capacity; thereafter it developed several such projects on Lancang with massive capacities, the most recent in 2014 with a capacity of 5850 MW. In fact, as the map given above shows, it has been developing a series of dams called the Lancang-Jiang cascade of hydro power projects, one of which was completed in November 2016 and others are in advanced stages of completion. Overall plan is to complete the projects on the main Lancang River and its tributaries by 2030.¹ According to one report there were major fluctuations in river flows from 2011 onwards which impacted downstream countries like Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. Such changes in the river flows impact adversely the ecology and economy of the Mekong River. A large number of people of lower riparian nations like Laos, Cambodia and others are dependent upon fisheries and food security that is the result of the Mekong River's resources. Even in Yunnan, according to Chinese reports, there have been reduction

in number of fish species during the construction of dams.² Over the years the environmental problems due to construction have worsened but China has been saying that it is beneficial to the downstream countries because of the power generation and a portion of electricity supply to Laos contributes to development and economic growth. The above factors are further compounded by the deleterious impact of climate change on water flows from the glaciers in Tibet.

A study done in 2014 pointed out that 14 of the 19 proposed Mekong River dams are located within a seismically sensitive zone that is prone to earthquakes. International Commission on Large Dams, has observed that nine of these dams are classified as being in an 'extreme hazard' class and therefore, need observation and also the monitoring of hazardous earthquakes.³ Frequent flooding and drought in Mekong region have often been caused by such unrestricted dam building in Yunnan and such dam construction activity has also been extended to mainland South East Asia. Because of variations in the water flow even navigation through the river has been negatively impacted. There have been unusual floods in Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam and Thailand. For instance, in July and August 2018 there was heavy flooding in Laos and Cambodia. In Attapeu province of Laos a hydro-electric dam collapsed in July 2018 due to a combination of negative factors. Construction of dams in Yunnan as also over lower Mekong is said to have contributed to such calamities. Further, China also failed to provide timely information about water flows to the Mekong region countries. This has been attributed to the fact China is not a member of the Mekong River Commission where only lower Mekong River nations are members with China and Myanmar as 'Dialogue Partners'. Thus, China does not feel obligated to provide such data, though at times it does provide some hydrological data using it as some kind of leverage.

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Promoting Chinese Narrative on Mekong

The need for evolving a coordinated response to their problems related with the Mekong River was realized early enough by Laos, Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam in the shape of setting up of Mekong River Commission (MRC) in 1995. It was also the time when building of dams in the Upper Basin of Mekong River, i.e. Lancang, was gaining momentum. Though as early as 1957 these countries,

encouraged by the United Nations, had formed a Committee for Coordination of Investigations on the Lower Mekong Basin or the Mekong Committee. Being a trans boundary river the aspect of coordination between lower and upper riparian countries was the most important aspect to be dealt with under the charter of MRC. Conspicuous by its absence from MRC was China that had much to do with problems caused to downstream countries. Though, Myanmar was also not a member but then only a shorter portion of about 100 kilometers length of the river passes through that country and thus it can do without being an active member of MRC. However, MRC countries had been making attempts to bring in China as a full member so that it would abide by the rules and understandings reached under the MRC framework. China's reluctance to submit to a rule-based order that might curb its ambitions could

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also be gauged from its behavior in not agreeing to a legally binding Code of Conduct in the South China Sea so far. It has been pending since the Declaration of COC of 2002 wherein all the ASEAN countries and China were the signatories. Though China says that it

will sign a COC in the South China Sea in next three years yet it has not given any undertaking that it will be legally binding. According to Elliot Brennan *"Control of both the South China Sea and Mekong River will strategically sandwich mainland Southeast Asia. Indeed, Beijing's control of Southeast Asian rivers looks set to be the other half of its "salami slicing" strategy in the region."*⁴

Evidently, China as an upper riparian hegemon did not wish to share a platform where its actions were more likely to be criticized or opposed even though the MRC charter stated that it would only be a coordinating body without any binding agreements on water allocation and hydropower development.⁵ The fact that nothing substantive could be achieved by MRC countries over a period of two decades has been largely due to lack of participation by China as a full member. For instance, China could have taken a lead by cooperating with the MRC in mitigating the effects of China's upstream activities. This would have also encouraged further cooperation between the Lower Mekong Basin Countries. In fact, the bad example set by China has also led to lack of cooperation amongst the MRC members as different approaches on water security between adopted by upper and lower riparian states of the lower Mekong region have compounded some of the related problems.

Laos and Cambodia while developing their hydropower projects that would necessarily have impact on the water flows and other associated aspects were remiss in not consulting the downstream countries. Laos had constructed the Xayaburi dam in 2012 without due diligence and disregarding the concerns of Cambodia and Vietnam-- its downstream neighbours. Impact on livelihoods, socio-economic factors, sustainable development were not given due attention. (However, the collapse of Attapeu dam seems to have dampened the fast pace push for construction of dams on Mekong River.)

China, with a view to advance its own political, security and economic agenda on the Mekong River basin and the mainland ASEAN countries, established in March 2016 the Lancang-Mekong River Cooperation (LMRCM) mechanism. China, Myanmar and four MRC countries joined together to coordinate their efforts for development cooperation on political and security issues, economic and sustainable development in addition to connectivity, cooperation on water sources, economic cooperation, public health and poverty reduction.



Evidently, with China at the helm of affairs in the new mechanism the Mekong River countries hoped to have better cooperation from not only China but also amongst each other. The role of LMRCM is said to be similar to MRC but with China in the driver's seat. Apparently, China wants to be at the head of every regional institution so that it is in a dominant position to control the narrative, set the agenda and rules.⁶ Thus, the LMRCM led by China has a wider scope that encompasses areas other than issues related to Mekong River basin management. What was the need for China to go ahead with a new organization when the MRC already existed and in which it could have become a full member, and why did Beijing feel the need to evolve a new framework? Apparently, China did not want to be tied down by MRC's rules, terms and conditions and environmental restrictions, especially regarding hydropower development projects and their negative impact.

With growing differential of power between China and the Mekong river countries is there a possibility of China ever discarding its interests whether economic or otherwise in favour of these less endowed nations? Will China treat these countries in a benign manner eschewing its well-known preferences for achieving its so called 'China Dream' that could come at a cost to several of its neighbours whose policies too are premised around realizing their own objectives of achieving prosperity? Development of infrastructure and investment enables China to spread its geopolitical influence and even buy elites of these countries through opaque means.

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Not only it impacts the domestic politics but also in expanded debt burden of the countries, which, in turn, is used by Beijing to exercise an economic and strategic stranglehold over them. Laos and Cambodia are prime examples of such a situation in the Mekong region but other countries are also to a greater or lesser degree affected by such policies of China.

In January 2018 the Foreign Ministers of Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMRCM) had met in Yunnan where China's Foreign Minister propagated China's vision of development and declared that Beijing would be financing over a dozen projects along the route of the river. Such projects range from connectivity to industrial parks, border trade agriculture and water resource research centres, etc. Cambodia's Foreign Minister Prak Sokhonn had praised China's leading role in

LMRCM and termed the progress made by China as unprecedented. Wang Yi, China's Foreign Minister did not either discuss or reflect upon the environment concerns expressed by different stakeholders. Laos is planning to construct a third dam on Mekong in order to export surplus power without paying heed to lower riparian Vietnam's concerns about its environmental impacts on the downstream region. Neither MRC nor the new China led LMRCM has taken note of such concerns with a view to promote an integrated and sustainable development of the region.

In 2016 Vietnam had faced one of the severest droughts in its history which led to shortages in availability of water and grain production. Other countries in the Mekong region also suffered drought conditions. Some analysts surmised that China's upstream and dam building activities besides the changing weather patterns were the main factors responsible for such a situation. China had then released some water from its upstream dams in order to alleviate the adverse effects in the lower riparian region. The release of water had little or no discernible impact as such release of water to be effective need predictability.⁷ However, there was also a great degree of skepticism among the MRC members as some of them viewed this as China showing off its control of the river waters.⁸ Further, the drought occurred shortly after the LMCM was established in March 2016 and thus gave Beijing a handle to propagate the benefits of cooperation with China. Though it was not the first time that China had released much needed water for the downstream nations.

It also needs to be noted that China does not subscribe to the UN Water Courses Convention of August 2014 which encapsulates the global legal framework for cooperation over water resources between countries.⁹ Article 27 and 28 provide for what to do during emergency situations and during certain contingencies. Under the provisions of the Convention the upper riparian countries are obliged to cooperate with lower riparian countries on questions of floods and droughts. Therefore, adhering to international norms and good practices

would go a long way in fostering substantive cooperation between China and lower riparian countries whether as part of MRC or for that matter LMCM. The principles of 'equality', 'no harm' and 'community of co-riparian states' are generally accepted (but not always) and form part of the UN Watercourses Convention and Berlin Rules.

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The fundamental understanding has to be that every riparian state has the right to use the waters of the international river, but is under corresponding duty to ensure that such use does not harm other riparian countries. There are UN Water reports and conventions which have articulated such principles. The 'UN-Water Courses Convention' is a mechanism that pushes for devising strategies for integrated management of water resources. The fundamental principle that is regarded as the cornerstone of the Convention, and has legal validity is 'equitable and reasonable utilization and participation'. Another provision requires that States "take all appropriate measures to prevent the causing of significant harm" to other States sharing an international watercourse. Part III of the Convention sets forth the principle of prior notification of planned measures and elaborates in some detail on the various aspects of that obligation. There are many other details which deal with principles and measures for sharing of waters of trans-boundary water courses.

Whether LMRM be an effective platform for development and exchange of views on the connected issues and would it also be conducive for sustainable development of the region, only time would tell. However, China's past record on the developmental issues does not inspire much confidence that outcome would be entirely positive for the lower riparian States.

China's Belt and Road Initiative in Mekong Region

One of the major reasons for China to come up with LMRCM is to push its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and strengthen its political, economic and cultural influence in the region. The 'One Belt and One Road' (OBOR) initiative first announced in October and 2013 and then formalized through a paper issued by China's National Development and Reforms Commission 'Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road' in March 2015 predates the establishment of LMRCM. Through the economic allurements and possible benefits offered by its BRI/OBOR projects in the shape of infrastructure development Beijing also aims to attenuate the opposition and distrust of the Mekong River countries in its hydropower development activities in the Upper Mekong, i.e., Lancang. But so far, economic cooperation with some of the countries like Laos and Cambodia has not produced the desired results or reduced poverty in these countries. And these are the countries that are largely in Beijing's sphere of influence when one looks at the ASEAN grouping and its emerging geopolitics.

China is the largest investor in the Mekong river countries and has strengthened its presence in Thailand.¹⁰ In early January 2018 Cambodia signed 19 agreements with China that included construction of highway from the capital city of Phnom Penh to Sihanoukville on the coast and construction and expansion of capital's airport. With all such infrastructure development and investment China has been able to buy political support from Cambodia to support its ambitions and activities in South China Sea. Not only this, Cambodia also favours China's dam building activities both on the platforms of MRC and LMRCM, thus creating dissensions and conflict within the Mekong countries. There have been protests in Cambodia about some of the projects being undertaken by China, but Phnom Penh authorities have ignored such protests.¹¹ Such projects also have implications for Cambodia's sovereignty and human rights conditions. In fact, Cambodian government's strong relationship with China has enabled it to overlook political rights of its citizens and enabled it to become more authoritarian in its approach, which in turn has resulted in the Western nations moving away from their aid and development plans in Cambodia. It needs to be noted that in 2015 the China-built dam Lower Sesan 2 was reported to have adversely affected the livelihoods of over 45,000 Cambodians.¹²

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On the other hand Cambodia views cooperation with China as an important factor in offsetting the influence of its stronger neighbours Vietnam and Thailand. According to one estimate China had signed by end 2017 construction projects worth about 18 billion USD with Cambodia, whose nominal GDP for 2017 is just around 22 billion USD. The World Bank sounded a warning for Cambodia in April 2018 that such a large scale investment poses fiscal risks.¹³ As mentioned earlier Cambodia has become central to China's geopolitical and strategic game plans in the ASEAN, especially in regards to South China Sea issue and also in the Mekong region.¹⁴

Similarly, Laos has seen a massive influx of funds from China, especially in the rail project from Kunming, Yunnan to the Laos capital of Vientiane which was announced in 2016. The high speed rail line is further planned by China to be extended to Singapore passing through other South East Asian countries. It has adversely impacted over 4000 families of Laos and it is estimated to cost US dollars 6 billion which is 35 percent of Laos' GDP of 17 billion USD for 2017. This would balloon the public debt to 65 percent of the GDP in 2018 as pointed out with concern by the

IMF.¹⁵ Therefore, servicing the debt would pose fiscal challenges. Though Laos has given some mining concessions to Chinese entities there is a lack of transparency regarding such arrangements. Further, there has been little or no 'trickle down' or beneficial impact on the local economy such as creation of jobs for the locals. While Prime Minister Thongloun Sisoulith during a conference in Tokyo acknowledged that it would not be possible for Laos to come out of the Least Developed Countries group tag by 2020, a goal set by the government back in 2001, he was of the view that Laos was unlikely to get into debt trap.¹⁶



Laos has also been supporting China on the question of South China Sea disputes as Cambodia has been doing.¹⁷ Laos' world view is being shaped by strong Chinese political and economic influence on Vientiane's internal and external affairs. China has also been able to promote its narrative in Laos as Xinhua News, a Chinese news agency, contributes over 30 percent of content in the Vientiane Times.¹⁸ Over the last ten years or so Thailand too has gravitated towards forging a closer economic and strategic relationship with China. While Thailand has been promoting its own the Eastern Economic Corridor of Innovation (EECI), which is premised to cover three provinces and improve its capabilities in infrastructure development and upgrade the U-Tapao International airport. Bangkok has also favoured China's BRI plan of linking the Eastern coast and beyond with a high speed rail link. The high speed rail link would connect China's province of Yunnan with Laos, Thailand and Malaysia. However, debt issues and connected objections raised by countries in SE Asia and elsewhere regarding BRI projects have made Thailand cautious.¹⁹ Unless, Thailand

gives a go ahead, the rail cannot be extended to Malaysia and Singapore. However, China has been pressurising Thailand and other countries to speed up the rail project.

China also has a strong strategic and economic presence in Myanmar. Though Myanmar had opened up to the West, its policies towards the Rohingya issue have resulted in the Western countries and the US distancing themselves from Myanmar. This has enabled China to further increase its hold over Myanmar. While, due to public uproar, Myanmar had suspended in 2011 the construction of the Chinese built

Myanmar public remains concerned with the lack of transparency and accountability in China related projects.

Myitsone hydropower dam and later in 2012 the concession given for exploitation of Letpadaung copper mine, China has now been able to secure contracts for other infrastructure projects as part of China Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC).²⁰ The corridor will link Kunming, the capital of Chinese province of

Yunnan, to Kyaukpyu on the Arakan coast of Myanmar with multimodal networks. Oil and gas pipelines already exist between the two cities. The access to the Bay of Bengal would overcome a number of strategic vulnerabilities of China. As a measure of abundant caution Myanmar has downscaled the Chinese investments in Kyaukpyu sea port to a third of the original cost.²¹ A costly rail project with a bill of around 20 billion USD was shelved by Myanmar in 2014.²² However, Myanmar government and China have been working to put it back on the track.²³ Myanmar public remains concerned with the lack of transparency and accountability in China related projects.

In so far as Vietnam is concerned it has given diplomatic support to China's BRI although it has been wary of encouraging projects under the BRI rubric. China has been executing one project of Hanoi metro line but that has been under construction since October 2011; meanwhile, the costs have escalated and the new loan extended by China for the increased costs in 2017 has been placed under the BRI. Vietnam wants its private sector to deal with the BRI, it is keener to get loans from Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which Hanoi feels will mitigate the political and strategic implications of the loans.²⁴

Implications and Responses

The CLMVT (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam and Thailand) countries, while attracted by the economic allurements offered by China in various forms, remain wary of Beijing's political and strategic intentions. Laos and Cambodia, two of

the poorest countries in the region have, however, been absorbed into the strategic sphere of influence of China, while Beijing faces some resistance in Myanmar and Thailand. Vietnam has strived to steer a multi-vectored foreign and economic policy. . The matters are also not helped by the US and other western countries reducing their economic aid and investments in most of these countries because of their poor human rights record or for having governments that are either not democratic or are quasi-democratic.

In 1992 the Greater Mekong Sub-region initiative that includes China and CLMVT was devised with the help of Asian Development Bank (ADB) to address a number of issues, including the development of infrastructure and connectivity. The GMS was viewed as 'a natural economic area bound together by the Mekong River, covering 2.6 million square kilometers and a combined population of around 326 million'. Recently, a Hanoi Action Plan for 2018-2022 has been prepared for meeting the objectives of the GMS.²⁵ But the ADB's agenda has been overshadowed by China's BRI and other activities in the region. Meanwhile, the US has announced its Indo-Pacific strategy but it is premised more on components of defence and security cooperation whereas economic element of cooperation in the shape of funds earmarked for connectivity projects is very meagre, i.e., 113 million USD. However, according to the US Secretary of State "*These funds represent just a down payment on a new era in U.S. economic commitment to peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region.*"²⁶

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Japan, however, has been a consistent supporter of not only the GMS but also of other sub-regional initiatives such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi Sectoral Technological and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). The overall objective of Japan has been to provide a counter balance to China's enlargement of its influence. In October 2018 Japan held the 10th summit of Japan and MRC countries in Tokyo for promotion of development programmes to include connectivity and infrastructure projects in the region.²⁷ The Joint Statement took note of Japan's call for a free and open Indo-Pacific and a rule based order, which in effect are articulated to keep China's growing influence in check. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has pledged that Japan will use public funds, overseas loans, investments and Overseas Development Aid (ODA) to provide quality infrastructure and development.

Japan has launched a Japan-Mekong Initiative (JMI) in 2016 much like Ganga-Mekong Initiative (GMI) of India of 2000 vintage, but JMI covers many more areas and has an economic heft behind it. JMI envisages two corridors--the East West Corridor linking Mawlamyaing on Myanmar coast to Da Nang port in Vietnam and the other from Dawei port of Myanmar to Ho Chi Minh City of Vietnam. The loans provided and the terms and conditions of Japanese projects are much more benign and people friendly as compared to China aided or BRI projects.²⁸



Map showing Japan-supported infrastructure schemes. Source: Japan International Cooperation Agency

India, as part of its Look east and now Act East policy, has been engaging the CMLVT countries through its MGI and BIMSTEC, with connectivity projects being at the core of its policies. India is constructing India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway which is to be extended to Cambodia and Vietnam. However, Indian projects are not at the same scale as that of China's BRI projects. Similarly, Australia also has a Mekong Programme designed to address trans-boundary water management challenges, besides addressing trade issues and human trafficking concerns. Since 2005 Australia has committed USD 560 million in support of its ASEAN and Mekong programmes. However, for Australia's Greater Mekong Water Resources Programme the amount spent is quite meagre.²⁹ Further, South Korea has been engaged with the GMS initiative of the ADB and has supported a number of projects through its ODA programmes for Mekong region countries that are estimated to be worth over three

billion USD.³⁰ South Korea also has a cooperative mechanism with Mekong River Commission as part of its engagement with the ASEAN and Mekong sub-region. With unveiling of its 'New Southern Policy' Seoul has planned to strengthen its engagement with the ASEAN and Mekong countries.

On the other hand, it can also be said that combined efforts by Japan, U.S., India, Australia and possibly South Korea in engaging Mekong countries have the potential of not only upsetting China's ambitious plans in the region but also have a beneficial and positive impact on the economy of the lower riparian states as also on the domestic and foreign policy orientations of the Mekong nations.

Conclusion

Beijing controls the water of almost all the rivers flowing into Central, South and South East Asia and as the evidence suggests it is unlikely to let go of this strategic leverage over the lower riparian countries. By controlling river flows it can exert influence on both internal and external policies of the downstream nations. Instead of addressing the concerns of the lower riparian nations China has gone on a dam building spree not only on the Mekong river but has done so in the case of Yarlung Tsangpo or Brahmaputra river that flows through Tibet into India and Bangladesh. Such dam building activities have had not only adverse impact on the environment and ecosystems but also resulted in a negative socio-economic impact. Further, such dam building activity has also given rise to frequent flooding and droughts in the river basin system.

Not wanting to adhere to rules set by cooperative mechanism of Mekong countries, i.e. Mekong River Commission, Beijing promoted its own LMRCM which duplicated all that what MRC was meant to do. Using its rising economic wealth and as a consequence its military heft it has been able to influence not only the economic policies of the Mekong countries but also their foreign and security outlooks. LMRCM is designed to overshadow MRC and usher in a China centric and dominated order in the region.

China's One Belt and One Road initiative now termed as Belt and Road Initiative that offers to develop a variety of infrastructure projects in the region is being viewed with caution by some of the Mekong nations as it has been known to lead to enormous debt obligations which cannot be sustained by the recipient countries. With its control over Mekong river waters and economies of the Mekong countries' China has been trying to bring within its strategic orbit as many Mekong

countries as possible. Further, China's policies in Mekong have also been compared with its approaches to South China Sea (SCS) issue. China has been able to divide ASEAN centrality on the question of SCS issue; similarly, Mekong has become another playground for China to pursue such policies. Laos and Cambodia have been influenced by China to not only diminish the relevance of MRC but also that of ASEAN's central tenet of unity in dealing with regional issues.

It is axiomatic that there is a need for the MRC countries to devise an integrated approach to manage their river basin water management issues, though overwhelming presence of China in terms of economic allurements would always be a challenge. Cooperation with China does make sense but all the affiliated costs of such cooperation would have to be kept in view by MRC nations. As a first step Mekong countries have to forge unity among themselves and coordinate their efforts to address controversial Mekong river issues on the basis of principles enshrined not only in the MRC charter but also reflected in UN Water Courses Convention. Further, ADB needs to fast track its projects in the Mekong region with additional help from Japan, India, Australia and South Korea keeping in sight the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. Other multilateral development banks like the World Bank or even the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) could undertake sustainable development projects in the region. The evolving Indo-Pacific concept or strategy has potential to cater to the development requirements of the Indo-Pacific region, which includes the Mekong region. Such combined efforts would not only help the Mekong region countries to develop and grow in a balanced and sustainable manner, it would also enable them to follow balanced foreign and security policies without the erosion of their sovereignty.

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