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Mekong-Ganga in Indo-Pacific: Boosting Sub-Regional Ties?

By Nazia Hussain

SYNOPSIS

In a crowded field of sub-regional frameworks operating in the Mekong, the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) initiative continues to remain strategically relevant. It might benefit from exploring synergies with existing sub-regional cooperation initiatives and ASEAN.

COMMENTARY

THE 11TH Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) Foreign Ministers' Meeting took place [earlier this year](#) with high level officials of the five Mekong countries – Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam – and India convening virtually to chart out the future course of the [oldest sub-regional cooperation framework](#) between Mekong countries and an external partner. Key [issues on the agenda](#) were medical cooperation in COVID-19 prevention and control; post-pandemic economic recovery through connectivity, infrastructure and manpower development; and sustainable management of water resources.

As one of the many sub-regional frameworks to crop up in the geo-strategically important Mekong region, the MGC could have gone down the road to obscurity in a crowded field of 13 [Mekong-related intergovernmental cooperation](#) frameworks. However, what makes the MGC initiative particularly relevant now for all parties involved is the geopolitical reality of an evolving Indo-Pacific regional order where both India and the Mekong countries feature as prominent actors amid intensifying major power competition.

Convergence of Strategic Interests

Growing convergence of strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific and jostling for influence

by external partners in the Mekong sub-region has provided New Delhi an impetus for adopting a tangible results-oriented approach towards MGC initiatives. India has launched 68 community-oriented projects worth US\$3.4 million under the [Quick Impact Projects \(QIP\)](#) scheme during 2016-2020 — of which 38 projects have been completed and 30 other projects are [under implementation](#).

These short-term [community-oriented QIPs](#) aim to directly benefit the locals and are geared towards upgrading the physical infrastructure as well as address social issues such as sanitation, water resource management, elementary education and women empowerment.

The MGC's active presence and implementation of projects in the Mekong thus far has fared better compared to other sub-regional groupings such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) which failed to generate interest and visibility in the first 20 years of its establishment.

Climate change and hydrological conditions leading to unpredictable droughts and floods remain pressing challenges for the lower riparian Mekong states and for India along the Ganges basin. The MGC could consider cooperation between the Mekong River Commission and the National Ganga River Basin Authority for improved capacity in [early forecasting and disaster management](#).

Prioritising cooperation to address climate change and water resource management will go a long way for the MGC, particularly when Mekong countries have been lamenting the neglect of Mekong issues at regional-level forums owing to geopolitical considerations. India has agreed to fund seven [water management projects](#) at a cost of approximately US\$350,000 in four Mekong Delta provinces which have long been facing severe saltwater intrusion and the consequent lack of freshwater for irrigation and drinking.

Geopolitical Considerations

There remains enough political will from MGC member countries to ensure the grouping's continued relevance in the sub-region. From a foreign policy perspective, India aims to cultivate deeper relations with Mekong countries to advance its key foreign policy initiatives — the “Act East” and “neighbourhood first” policies.

Drawing attention to India's priorities vis-à-vis its eastern neighbours, Indian [External Affairs Minister](#) S Jaishankar tweeted: “Much of India's interests and relationships now lie to its East, a testimony of its ties with ASEAN.”

From a domestic viewpoint, development and connectivity of India's frontier north-eastern region requires transnational cooperation with ASEAN countries, particularly with its Mekong neighbours which share geographical and cultural proximity to India's northeast. For example, the [Kaladan Multi-modal Transit Transport Project](#) jointly developed by India and Myanmar will enable sea access for India's landlocked northeastern states via the Kaladan river in Myanmar.

As the sub-region becomes a theatre of US-China rivalry, Mekong countries would want to effectively engage all external partners rather than face further consequences

of being overly reliant on either of the big powers. India provides an alternative infrastructure development model as well as access to markets, and has extended a [US\\$2 billion loan](#) towards projects on developing water resources, infrastructure, digitalisation, rural electrification, irrigation, and education.

In fact, the 11th MGC Foreign Ministers' Meeting co-chaired by Cambodia, which was the most recent, was seen as a [multilateral mechanism](#) towards diversification of Cambodian foreign policy. Meanwhile, Mekong countries look to enhance security ties with India. Vietnam has been cultivating closer ties with New Delhi — the two countries conducted a [joint naval exercise](#) in the South China Sea earlier this year.

Moreover, Thailand, Myanmar and India participated in a military exercise under the ambit of BIMSTEC that aimed to [boost inter-operability among forces and exchange best practices in counter-terrorism](#).

Exploring Synergies

Amid calls for ASEAN to elevate Mekong issues on its agenda, sub-regional frameworks such as the MGC, BIMSTEC and the Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS) could consider consolidating their often overlapping initiatives in the Mekong by exploring synergies with one another and with ASEAN. The ACMECS is a cooperation framework linking five ASEAN economies – Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam.

For example, the proposed plan to extend the India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway to Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam might be better served through collaborative efforts under the BIMSTEC Connectivity Master Plan and the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025. The project has lagged behind deadlines for years.

Moreover, the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) encourages potential synergies with sub-regional frameworks since it does not intend to create new mechanisms or replace existing ones.

In any case, geopolitics of the Mekong is only getting more heated with the involvement of major powers and as the premier regional organisation in Southeast Asia, ASEAN might want to be more proactive in representing Mekong issues. Maybe ASEAN could start with paying attention to the impending 12th MGC Ministerial Meeting set to take place on the sidelines of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting in 2022.

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