

Introduction

Sarah Teo

The Mekong River's importance is difficult to overstate. Originating from the Tibetan Plateau, the 4,350-kilometer river flows through China's Yunnan Province and onward through Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam before draining into the South China Sea. At least 60 million people depend on the river for their lives and livelihoods. As the world's largest inland fishery as well as a vital source for rice production and hydroelectricity to the riparian countries, the Mekong subregion has been progressively regarded as an area of strategic importance. This view has emerged alongside several trends. First, dam-building activities on the Mekong, intertwined with the worsening impact of climate change, pose an existential threat to the river's ecosystem. Downstream communities that rely on the Mekong for survival have been particularly vulnerable to the river's fluctuating water levels. Second, the effects of Sino-U.S. rivalry have seeped into the subregion, with Beijing and Washington stepping up their engagement with the riparian countries. The Mekong subregion is a crucial area for China's Belt and Road Initiative and a key element of the United States' "free and open Indo-Pacific" strategy.

Since the early 1990s, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam have been variously involved in more than ten cooperative arrangements—including several with partners such as China, Japan, and the United States—targeted at managing challenges related to the Mekong River. Overlapping in membership and scope, these arrangements have generally been concerned with the management of shared water resources, sustainable development, infrastructure building, and regional economic integration. Over the past few years, cooperation has intensified with newer initiatives led by the major powers. These include the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) forum involving China, which officially launched in 2016, and the Mekong-U.S. Partnership (MUSP) involving the United States, which was established in 2020 and builds on the Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI). Other regional countries, such as India, Japan, and South Korea, have similarly enhanced their engagement with the Southeast Asian riparian countries. Some of these external partners have moreover

SARAH TEO is Assistant Professor and Coordinator of the Regional Security Architecture Programme in the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) at Nanyang Technological University (Singapore). She can be reached at <islsteo@ntu.edu.sg>.

collaborated in providing assistance and support to the subregion, such as the Japan-U.S.-Mekong Power Partnership (JUMPP) inaugurated in 2019. Meanwhile, Thailand has sought to revive the Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS)—involving only the five Southeast Asian Mekong countries—which has made slow progress since its launch in 2003. In light of these initiatives, it is clear that cooperative activities in the Mekong are increasing to address the challenges faced by the subregional countries. At the same time, such cooperation also carries a competitive aspect amid ongoing geopolitical undercurrents.

Despite all five riparian countries being members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) since the late 1990s and the establishment of the ASEAN Mekong Basin Development Cooperation platform in 1996, ASEAN has mostly remained a “bystander” to Mekong-related activities.¹ Although Vietnam attempted to include Mekong issues on ASEAN’s agenda during its term as chair in 2020, its efforts were reportedly met with reservations from its fellow member states.² For all its claims of regional centrality and apprehension over potential regional instability caused by major-power rivalry, ASEAN has not appeared as active or high-profile as some of the external partners in Mekong initiatives. This hands-off approach has led some observers to deem the Mekong subregion a test for ASEAN centrality to which the association should respond decisively and urgently.³

Given the Mekong’s increasing importance to regional geopolitics and vice versa, the Regional Security Architecture Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) convened a workshop in November 2021 for analysts and scholars from around the region to examine the contestation over interests, initiatives, and influence in the subregion.⁴ This roundtable features the essays presented at the workshop.

The first three essays, by Brian Eyler, Zhang Li, and Xue Gong, delve into the intricacies of U.S. and Chinese approaches toward the Mekong and explore the dynamics of major-power competition that have emerged toward

¹ Hoang Thi Ha and Farah Nadine Seth, “The Mekong River Ecosystem in Crisis: ASEAN Cannot Be a Bystander,” ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, Perspective, no. 69, May 19, 2021 ~ <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2021-69-the-mekong-river-ecosystem-in-crisis-asean-cannot-be-a-bystander-by-hoang-thi-ha-and-farah-nadine-seth>.

² Ibid.

³ Chen Chen Lee, “ASEAN Needs to Act on Mekong River,” Asialink, October 19, 2020 ~ <https://asialink.unimelb.edu.au/insights/asean-needs-to-act-on-mekong-river>; and Prashanth Parameswaran, “ASEAN’s Growing Mekong Challenge,” Wilson Center, Asia Dispatches, November 30, 2021 ~ <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/aseans-growing-mekong-challenge>.

⁴ The author would like to thank all the workshop panelists and participants for contributing their views and insights, with appreciation also to See Seng Tan and Bhubhindar Singh for serving as discussants.

the subregion. Eyler outlines how China and the United States have engaged with the Mekong subregion since the 1990s, with a focus on the last decade. He notes the anxiety that China's dam-related activities have caused among the downstream countries, as well as the polarized atmosphere during the Trump administration that led the riparian countries to feel pressure to choose between the two major powers. Meanwhile, Zhang highlights the differences between the types of water multilateralism that China and the United States conduct with the Mekong countries. He conceptualizes China's approach as a form of "regionalization," which keeps cooperation exclusively among Mekong-based countries and organizations, and the U.S. approach as a form of "internationalization," which seeks to involve actors from outside the subregion.

Even as they acknowledge the different approaches taken by China and the United States toward the Mekong subregion, Eyler and Zhang highlight the potential for Sino-U.S. cooperation or, at the very least, healthy competition. Eyler proposes that both major powers could engage in "productive and positive competitions" on green infrastructure and global climate leadership—both of which are pertinent to the challenges faced by the Mekong countries. Zhang suggests that China and the United States pursue "constructive co-opetition"—cooperation by competitors—which involves leveraging their respective strengths to address water resource issues in the subregion. Taking a different approach from the first two essays, Gong focuses on China's discursive strategy as a complement to its rising economic influence and as a way to legitimize Beijing's leadership in the Mekong subregion. She notes that China's attempts to bolster its reputation in the subregion have been premised on framing the LMC as a South-South development platform and constraining alternative policy options available to the Southeast Asian Mekong countries.

The next three essays, by Kei Koga, Sungil Kwak, and Swaran Singh, focus on the engagement of Japan, South Korea, and India, respectively, with the Mekong subregion. All three authors emphasize the constructive and distinct roles that Tokyo, Seoul, and New Delhi could play regarding the subregion to combat the destabilizing effects of major-power rivalry and strengthen socioeconomic development there. Noting that Japan's policy toward the Mekong has shifted from a socioeconomic focus to a more strategic one since the late 2000s, Koga nevertheless argues that Japan does not necessarily aim to counterbalance China's growing influence in the subregion. He identifies infrastructure building in the Mekong as a possible area of Sino-Japanese cooperation, on the condition that Beijing

demonstrates a commitment to the principles of quality infrastructure. In this regard, Koga posits that China and Japan could collaborate for the benefit of the subregional countries via a working-level bilateral dialogue, the ASEAN +3 group, and the East Asia Summit.

In the case of South Korea, Kwak observes that despite its growing engagement with the Mekong subregion, the Southeast Asian countries have yet to recognize Seoul as a reliable partner. To remedy this, he suggests that South Korea premise its Mekong engagement strategy on addressing the gaps in existing subregional mechanisms as well as on its unique strengths and experiences. One example would be for South Korea to share its expertise in e-government systems or rural development, which would also differentiate Seoul's contributions from the other actors in the subregion. In the case of India, Singh points out the shared historical and cultural ties that India shares with the Mekong subregion and argues that both parties have been more open to cooperating with each other amid Sino-U.S. tensions. Although India's engagement with the Mekong subregion still lags that of China and the United States, Singh notes that New Delhi's growing economic and defense cooperation with the riparian countries reflects its "incrementally expanding role" in the subregion.

The final three essays, by Narut Charoensri, Charadine Pich, and Le Dinh Tinh, focus on the approaches of ASEAN and some of its riparian member states toward the Mekong. In the context of Thailand's traditional leadership role in mainland Southeast Asia and Mekong issues, Charoensri assesses the implications of the country's bilateral relations with China, Japan, South Korea, and the United States for the development of subregional connectivity. He finds that the advantages afforded by its geographic location, economic and political attributes, and membership in (sub)regional initiatives put Thailand in a good position to facilitate a multistakeholder approach toward strengthening connectivity in the Mekong.

Pich and Le similarly emphasize the importance of an inclusive and multistakeholder approach to the subregion but note ASEAN's traditional neglect of Mekong issues. They also stress the need to avoid politicizing Mekong issues. Pich cites concerns that Mekong dynamics could eventually develop in a similar way to the South China Sea tensions. While acknowledging that competition may help curtail the unilateral tendencies of the major and regional powers, Pich cautions that such competition should not derail inclusive engagement in the subregion. She also recommends the exploration of synergies among the existing Mekong

platforms as a basis to strengthen functional cooperation. Likewise, Le advocates for a functionalist approach toward the Mekong, including an emphasis on common interests and expertise in driving cooperation. This approach would imply more pragmatic and flexible forms of collaboration and would help temper competitive dynamics. Le adds that the Mekong subregion should be a priority in ASEAN's development and security agenda, and the association should assume a central role in addressing the subregion's challenges.

As the Mekong subregion increasingly comes under the spotlight, it is timely to look at how subregional relations and dynamics have developed in recent times, what challenges the riparian countries face, and how these challenges could be addressed going forward. The essays in this roundtable examine these critical trends and offer useful suggestions for policymaking toward the subregion. ◆