

## Words Can Speak Louder Than Actions: Examining China's Discourse Approach in Mekong Governance

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China's economic ambitions have propelled heated debates surrounding the country's growing presence in the Mekong area.<sup>1</sup> Although China's influence permeates the subregion, Beijing now has more reasons to worry about the efficacy of its economic strategy there. First, China's neighborhood environment has deteriorated after Washington's "rebalance to Asia" at the start of the Obama administration.<sup>2</sup> Beijing perceives the U.S.-led Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI), formed in 2009, as the United States' attempt to sow discord between China and the Mekong partners and limit its influence and water resource cooperation.<sup>3</sup> Washington's "free and open Indo-Pacific" strategy led to the upgrading of the LMI into the Mekong-U.S. Partnership (MUSP) in 2020, making this subregion more salient in the strategic competition between the United States and China.

Second, Beijing is increasingly concerned about its image and reputation among societal actors in the Mekong countries, which have scrutinized China-funded infrastructure projects in the subregion.<sup>4</sup> Tensions have arisen between Chinese investments and local communities over the use of water resources. According to Beijing, the conflicts over water resources between China and the Mekong countries are largely proliferated by international NGOs, which are backed by the United States and other Western countries to defame China's subregional role.<sup>5</sup> With water resource conflicts being the biggest regional flashpoint after the territorial and maritime disputes in the

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<sup>1</sup> Xue Gong, "Non-traditional Security Cooperation between China and Southeast Asia: Implications for Indo-Pacific Geopolitics," *International Affairs* 96, no. 1 (2020): 29–48.

<sup>2</sup> Fuyi Luo, "Cong DaMeigonghejizhi dao LanMeihezuo: Zhongnanbandao shang de guoj zhidujingzheng" [From Greater-Mekong to Lancang-Mekong Cooperation: Institutional Competition in the Indochina Peninsula], *Waijiao pinglun*, no. 6 (2018): 119–56.

<sup>3</sup> Nian Peng, "Jingti Mei da Meigonghe 'shengtaipai'" [Be Warned That the United States Will Play Politics in the "Environmental Issue" in Mekong], National Institute for South China Sea Studies, September 17, 2020 ~ [http://www.nanhai.org.cn/review\\_c/477.html](http://www.nanhai.org.cn/review_c/477.html).

<sup>4</sup> Sebastian Biba, "Desecuritization in China's Behavior towards Its Transboundary Rivers: The Mekong River, the Brahmaputra River, and the Irtys and Ili Rivers," *Journal of Contemporary China* 23, no. 85 (2014): 21–43.

<sup>5</sup> Peng, "Jingti Mei da Meigonghe 'shengtaipai.'"

South China Sea,<sup>6</sup> Beijing is worried that transboundary water disputes may be internationalized.

The protection of its overseas business interests, prevention of further escalation of water disputes, and construction of its image in the subregion have become critical aspects of China's Mekong policy. This essay argues that, although providing economic incentives as part of its foreign policy, Beijing is more concerned about strengthening its discourse power to cement China's influence in the region. With the establishment of the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) mechanism, Beijing has been relatively successful in using discourse power to coax the region to accept its leadership.

### *Economic Incentives Come with a Story*

Alongside economic incentives, Beijing is now investing more than ever in using verbal signaling to shape the regional order by constructing meaning, identity, and interests.<sup>7</sup> Through discourse, Beijing aims to build a positive image of itself by framing its achievements, experiences, and ideas as ways to enhance regional cooperation.<sup>8</sup>

After Xi Jinping assumed the helm of government in 2012, discourse power became a critical part of China's foreign policy.<sup>9</sup> Chinese leadership considers it "embarrassing" and "unreasonable" that global governance is still dominated by Western hegemonic discourse.<sup>10</sup> According to Xi, "We are still using Western concepts to describe China's practice. Experiences show that Western theories cannot explain China's practice." Instead, China "must develop [its] own theories, construct [its] own discourse, and speak a language that helps the international society understand China."<sup>11</sup> There is, therefore, "more work to be done" to strengthen China's discourse power in three areas: constructing a Chinese narrative, providing Chinese

<sup>6</sup> Zhang Hongzhou and Li Mingjiang, "The Thirsty China and Its Transboundary Waters," in *China and Transboundary Water Politics in Asia*, ed. Hongzhou Zhang and Mingjiang Li (New York: Routledge, 2018), 5.

<sup>7</sup> Xue Gong and Daniel Balazs, "Emerging Soft Turn in China's Energy Security Cooperation with Southeast Asia," *China Review* 21, no. 4 (2021): 109–40.

<sup>8</sup> "Bawo guoji huayuquan youxiao chuanbo Zhongguo shengyin—Xi Jinping waixuan gongzuo silu linian tanxi" [Grasp International Discourse and Effectively Spread China's Voice—Analysis of Xi Jinping's Ideas on Outreach Work], Xinhua, April 6, 2016 ~ [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-04/06/c\\_1118542256.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-04/06/c_1118542256.htm).

<sup>9</sup> Selina Ho, "Infrastructure and Chinese Power," *International Affairs* 96, no. 6 (2020): 1461–85.

<sup>10</sup> "Bawo guoji huayuquan youxiao chuanbo Zhongguo shengyin."

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

wisdom and solutions, and improving China's capability in international communication.<sup>12</sup> All three are mutually enhancing approaches to ensure the success of China's foreign policy.

The emphasis on developing a positive narrative about China to increase its affinity and influence with other states plays into its effort to strengthen its position in regional governance. Therefore, Beijing has based its engagement with the Mekong subregion on the idea of developmentalism and the discouragement of alternative policy prescriptions.

*Framing the idea of developmentalism.* First, China presented the LMC as a public good by tweaking narratives regarding its financing for developing countries to align with the welcomed goal of poverty alleviation. For instance, China issued the Five-Year Plan of Action on Lancang-Mekong Cooperation on Sustainable Poverty Reduction (2018–22) to allow recipient governments to govern how projects are carried out. To complement the narrative of poverty reduction, China provides special funds to local small- and medium-sized projects in Mekong countries to support local procurement.

Second, Beijing spared no effort in framing the LMC as South-South cooperation to depoliticize its economic involvement. Upholding South-South cooperation implies that China, as a member of the global South, has a strong sense of obligation to assist other developing countries to achieve their development goals. Contrary to the West's inward-looking economic policies, China has promoted the LMC as a public good that is “not only conducive to narrowing the development gap within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) but also enriches South-South cooperation to foster a more open, inclusive and balanced globalization that benefits all.”<sup>13</sup>

Beijing has also promoted its goal for “the correct perceptions on righteousness (*yi*) and interests (*li*), putting righteousness first,” identifying morality as a core reason for its presence in the subregion.<sup>14</sup> By emphasizing the ethics of development cooperation, China seeks to claim the moral high ground in assisting the LMC countries' economic growth. The articulation

<sup>12</sup> “Bawo guoji huayuquan youxiao chuanbo Zhongguo shengyin.”

<sup>13</sup> “Speech by Li Keqiang at the Second Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Leaders' Meeting,” State Council of the People's Republic of China (PRC), January 10, 2018, available at China Plus ~ [http://chinaplus.cri.cn/news/politics/11/20180112/77120\\_all.html](http://chinaplus.cri.cn/news/politics/11/20180112/77120_all.html).

<sup>14</sup> “Jianshe LanMei guojia mingyun gongtongti, kaichuang quyue hezuo meihao weilai” [Build a Community of Shared Future for Lancang-Mekong Countries and Create a Bright Future for Regional Cooperation], Lancang-Mekong Cooperation, March 23, 2018 ~ [http://www.lmcchina.org/2018-03/23/content\\_41448157.htm](http://www.lmcchina.org/2018-03/23/content_41448157.htm).

of a development-oriented and South-South-based LMC also appears to be a tactic to make Mekong countries agree on depoliticizing water disputes and ease criticism of China's hydropower activities.

Third, by emphasizing the right to develop, Beijing has tactfully linked security and development issues to legitimize the political and security cooperation, which the Thai and Vietnamese governments had resisted. According to Premier Li Keqiang, China's and the Mekong subregion's security and development interests are closely interconnected, and "the best way to avoid future strife and sustain regime stability is to achieve economic development."<sup>15</sup> As an example of practically linking security and development, China established the Lancang-Mekong Integrated Law Enforcement and Security Cooperation Centre in Kunming in 2017 to work cooperatively on law enforcement and nontraditional security issues with the Mekong states.

*Constraining alternative policy prescriptions.* Beijing has emphasized the Mekong subregion's geographic limits to attempt to constrain alternative policy options to Mekong countries. By doing so, China can exert its own influence by setting norms, promoting new concepts, and redefining subregional cooperation.<sup>16</sup> One approach, for example, has been its use of the geographic label "Lancang-Mekong" to limit membership in the LMC. To differentiate the LMC from alternative subregional institutions, Chinese leadership has emphasized its shared history and culture to construct an identity shared with the Mekong countries. For instance, Premier Li pointed out that "China and the five Mekong countries are connected by mountains and rivers. China is a natural partner and close friendly neighbor."<sup>17</sup>

Another approach is Beijing's affirmation of the LMC as the actualization of the important regional norms—consensus and noninterference based on South-South cooperation. By emphasizing such cooperation, Beijing hopes that regional states can see China's LMC operating under a different normative framework than North-South cooperation. Touting equality, local autonomy, noninterference, and reciprocity, China is attempting to cultivate a convergence of preferences through highlighting ASEAN norms and values. Beijing hailed that the

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<sup>15</sup> "Address by H.E. Li Keqiang Premier of the State Council of the People's Republic of China at the First Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Leaders' Meeting," Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), March 23, 2016 ~ [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/topics\\_665678/2016zt/lkqcxboaoyzt2016nnh/201603/t20160324\\_704426.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/2016zt/lkqcxboaoyzt2016nnh/201603/t20160324_704426.html); and "Speech by Li Keqiang at the Second Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Leaders' Meeting."

<sup>16</sup> Gong, "Non-traditional Security."

<sup>17</sup> "Speech by Li Keqiang at the Second Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Leaders' Meeting."

“LMC will not replace other mechanisms”<sup>18</sup> and should be seen “as a useful complement to China-ASEAN cooperation, promoting economic and social development of its members, narrowing development gaps, and upgrading overall cooperation.”<sup>19</sup>

Furthermore, China has highlighted “efficiency” and “speed” as key words in promoting the LMC, contrasting its organization with the inefficiency of existing subregional mechanisms.<sup>20</sup> Beijing understands that Mekong countries prefer projects with quick outcomes and has thus emphasized the benefits of its task-oriented approach. In the words of Beijing’s leadership, the “LMC is not an empty talk shop but a pragmatic actor,”<sup>21</sup> and “compared with other mechanisms, LMC better serves regional countries’ practical needs.”<sup>22</sup>

### *Assessing Effectiveness*

In using discourse to persuade the Mekong subregional states to accept China’s policy prescription in the case of the LMC, Chinese leadership, scholars, and media have used a repertoire of economic, political, and security cooperation to present the LMC in several ways: as (1) an inescapable reality, (2) a representation of norms desired in regional governance, (3) a set of instrumental policies focused on economic development, and (4) a symbol of equal South-South cooperation.

Without the mobilization and articulation of the LMC as a development initiative, the Mekong countries, particularly Thailand and Vietnam, would have likely lost interest in joining. Through emphasizing ideas such as the provision of public goods and local ownership, China has appeared successful in retaining support from Mekong countries, at least via the setting up of the LMC, and shifting rhetoric from the securitization of water disputes to the development of water resources. Accompanying this narrative, China also aims to institutionalize nontraditional security cooperation and promote Chinese technology and standards.

Despite this success in setting up a China-led institution, Beijing’s influence through discourse power has been constrained by a trust deficit in

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<sup>18</sup> “Speech by Li Keqiang at the Second Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Leaders’ Meeting.”

<sup>19</sup> “Address by H.E. Li Keqiang.”

<sup>20</sup> Lu Guangsheng, “China Seeks to Improve Mekong Sub-Regional Cooperation: Causes and Policies,” S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Policy Report, February 2016.

<sup>21</sup> “Speech by Li Keqiang at the Second Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Leaders’ Meeting.”

<sup>22</sup> “Wang Yi: LMC Should Not Be a Talking Shop but a Grounded Bulldozer,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), July 24, 2017. <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/ceun/eng/zgyw/t1480129.htm>.

the subregion. Downstream countries such as Thailand and Vietnam worry that China might use its upstream position to undermine their autonomy, and that China's control of the South China Sea and Lancang/Mekong River will sandwich the region with its influence.<sup>23</sup> Also, China's discourse efforts have not stopped regional countries from carrying out counter-institutional balancing actions, such as joining Japan and U.S.-led institutions and undertaking their own subregional activities. For example, Thailand revived the Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy, a subregional Mekong-oriented organization that does not include China.

Moreover, regional civil society actors greatly value certain Western concepts of global development and governance, despite China's dismissive attitude toward them. For instance, local actors have criticized many Chinese projects for violating the principle of "free, prior, and informed, consent" that requires public engagement and consultation with the community.<sup>24</sup> Although Chinese actors have softened their reservations on engaging with local NGOs and have pledged to improve overseas investment behavior, domestic norms continue to limit them from engaging closely with different foreign actors.

Owing to the opaqueness in its top-down and self-censored discursive approach, China's focus on positive storytelling can also become counterproductive in the Mekong's local communities. China has increasingly and deliberately used mass communication platforms to convey its economic cooperation ideas. For instance, the Chinese company Wanbao used media such as Facebook to explain its vision of a mining project to develop the local economy in an effort to build a positive image in Myanmar; however, protests over the project still continue.<sup>25</sup>

### *Implications for U.S.-China Discursive Competition in the Mekong*

China has become a global power, yet its discourse power is not commensurate with its economic power. Although the United States is in decline, U.S. soft power still dominates, sometimes doing more harm than

<sup>23</sup> Elliot Brennan, "China Eyes Its Next Prize—The Mekong," Lowy Institute, Interpreter, June 5, 2018 ~ <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/china-eyes-its-next-prize-mekong>.

<sup>24</sup> International Finance Cooperation, "Performance Standard 7: Indigenous Peoples," January 1, 2012 ~ [https://www.ifc.org/wps/wcm/connect/3274df05-7597-4cd3-83d9-2aca293e69ab/PS7\\_English\\_2012.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CVID=jiVQI.D](https://www.ifc.org/wps/wcm/connect/3274df05-7597-4cd3-83d9-2aca293e69ab/PS7_English_2012.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CVID=jiVQI.D), 3–5.

<sup>25</sup> Xue Gong, "Chinese Mining Companies and Local Mobilization in Myanmar," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 25, 2022 ~ <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/01/25/chinese-mining-companies-and-local-mobilization-in-myanmar-pub-86262>.

good to Chinese interests. For instance, Washington has been successful in circulating the “debt trap” narrative, which has raised global concerns over Chinese overseas financing. Although some research indicates that such a narrative is overblown, a few Southeast Asian countries, such as Myanmar, are wary of massive debts to China and have thus scaled down Chinese loans.<sup>26</sup>

The revived MUSP indicates that this subregion is a key part of Washington’s overall strategic rivalry with China. To major powers, the subregion is not just about economic interests but also about rule-setting. The Biden administration has strategized to counter Beijing’s influence with the “Build Back Better” initiative. Although China may not see a direct confrontation with the United States in the Mekong subregion, it has already faced pressure from nonstate actors supported by the United States. For instance, a report by the U.S.-based group Eyes on Earth raised concerns about progress on China’s commitments made under the LMC.<sup>27</sup> This negative coverage has cast a shadow on the good story China is telling about itself in the region.

As Beijing joins the discursive battle with Washington for influence and soft power, its discourse power should not be underestimated. China’s capacity to frame narratives has been demonstrated in the Covid-19 pandemic. Its fast control of the pandemic, for example, provided an opportunity for Beijing to shape new rhetoric surrounding its role in global governance and diplomacy. In contrast to Washington’s initial passiveness in sharing vaccines, China was the first country to donate and sell vaccines to states in Southeast Asia.

Words convey concepts, ideas, and values that are the foundation on which the regional architecture is built, and they command how the world order is run. With the intensifying rivalry between the United States and China, the Mekong subregion will witness more ideational, material, and discursive competition for influence. ◆

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<sup>26</sup> Deborah Brautigam, “A Critical Look at Chinese ‘Debt-Trap Diplomacy’: The Rise of a Meme,” *Area Development and Policy* 5, no. 1 (2019): 1–14.

<sup>27</sup> Richard Grünwald, “Lancang-Mekong Cooperation: Overcoming the Trust Deficit on the Mekong,” *ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, Perspective*, no. 89, July 2021.