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Is Water Diplomacy Working in the Mekong, and What Does This Mean for Asia?

By Barbora Valockova

Water diplomacy in the Mekong River Basin reveals the complexities inherent in managing shared resources across multiple states. The nearly 3,000 miles long Mekong River is one of the world's most valuable waterways and has been vital to political power in Southeast Asia for centuries, serving as both a lifeline for regional development and a source of diplomatic challenges. Approximately 70 million people live in the Lower Mekong Basin, and 75 percent of the population depends on fishing and farming for their income. However, hydropower, sand mining, and climate change have created pressures on the ecological balance of the Mekong Basin and affected the livelihoods of its residents.

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How are Mekong countries and external partners navigating these complex waters and what lessons does their experience offer for transboundary river diplomacy? Given the competing pressures and stakeholder interests, assessing whether water diplomacy is effectively addressing the Mekong's challenges requires careful consideration of multiple perspectives.

At the interstate level, water diplomacy has demonstrated considerable success in maintaining peaceful relations and preventing conflict escalation. The **Mekong River Commission** (MRC), established in 1995 among Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam, has provided an institutional framework for dialogue and technical cooperation that has weathered various challenges. The **1995 Mekong Agreement** emphasised the importance of equitable sharing of water and maintenance of minimum flows, recognising these issues as potential sources of interstate tension. During periods of dispute—such as disagreements over the **Xayaburi Dam** or during severe drought conditions—diplomatic channels have remained functional, facilitating continued dialogue rather than confrontation.

However, the MRC has been **criticised** for not ensuring consistent adherence to agreed procedures and guidelines among member states due to the consensus-based decision-making approach. Additionally, China's upstream position and its decision not to join the MRC has created a governance structure that does not include all key stakeholders, presenting challenges for comprehensive basin-wide coordination on the most consequential water management decisions. The institutional landscape has therefore evolved with the emergence of complementary frameworks that reflect different approaches to regional cooperation. China's establishment of the **Lancang-Mekong Cooperation** mechanism in 2016 created an alternative structure that includes all six riparian states while operating under different principles and priorities. The coexistence of multiple frameworks provides states with different avenues for engagement while raising questions about coordination and coherence in basin-wide governance approaches.

The effectiveness of water diplomacy appears different when evaluated from the perspective of affected communities and ecosystems. Some **argue** that diplomatic processes have largely excluded local voices, operating through state-centric mechanisms that prioritise technical and institutional approaches over community-based knowledge and ecosystem perspectives, revealing limitations in current practices. Moreover, climate change has introduced new variables that existing diplomatic frameworks must address. Traditional water diplomacy developed during periods of relatively stable hydrological patterns, but climate variability has created **more frequent and severe droughts and floods** that stress both ecosystems and institutional arrangements. These changing conditions require adaptive management strategies that can respond rapidly to emerging challenges.

Furthermore, the geopolitical context surrounding Mekong water diplomacy has shifted dramatically with intensifying **US-China strategic competition**. Both powers frame their engagement in the basin through broader strategic lenses, with water cooperation often seen as a platform for advancing wider regional influence. In addition, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has played a **peripheral role** in Mekong governance, which reflects the organisation's broader challenges in addressing issues that span multiple member states.

Given these complex dynamics, it is essential to ask: Is Water Diplomacy Working in the Mekong, and What Does This Mean for Asia? To address these questions, the Centre on Asia and Globalisation (CAG) invited three experts for its **16th Counterpoint Southeast Asia (CSA)** public panel discussion on 20 August 2025: Anoulak Kittikhoun (LKYSPP, NUS), Hoang Thi Ha (ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute), Zhang Hongzhou (RSIS, NTU).

Anoulak Kittikhoun draws upon his experience as former CEO of the MRC to argue that water diplomacy has succeeded through flexible soft rules, cooperative spirit, robust institutional capacity, and well-managed external partnerships, while warning against reactive approaches and narrative distortions that undermine collaborative solutions.

Hoang Thi Ha contends that in contrast to the militarised South China Sea, the Mekong represents asymmetric competition where China leverages developmental advantages while the United States faces structural constraints, with regional dynamics reflecting states navigating between rapid economic growth and sustainable development approaches amid this competition.

Zhang Hongzhou demonstrates that China's water diplomacy has successfully prevented escalation while advancing strategic objectives through development-oriented frameworks, positioning hydropower as central to addressing energy security and climate challenges across Southeast Asia.

The implications for Asia extend beyond the immediate basin to encompass broader questions about regional governance, great power competition, and sustainable development pathways. The Mekong experience reveals both the possibilities and constraints of multilateral diplomacy in managing shared resources when power asymmetries are significant and development pressures intense. Whether water diplomacy works depends ultimately on the criteria for success. For maintaining interstate peace and providing platforms for technical cooperation, diplomatic mechanisms have proven reasonably effective. For protecting ecosystems, supporting community livelihoods, and managing climate adaptation, current approaches require continuous institutional innovation and political commitment to address these challenges more inclusively and effectively.

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Guest Column

What Should and Should Not Be Learned from Mekong Water Diplomacy?

By Anoulak Kittikhoun

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Transboundary water diplomacy succeeds through flexible soft rules, sustained cooperation spirit, robust institutional capacity, and well-managed external support, as demonstrated by the Mekong River Commission's experience. The Mekong model offers valuable lessons for other contested river basins, provided they avoid reactive approaches and resist narrative distortions that compromise cooperative solutions.

Mismanagement of transboundary rivers would impact **153 countries sharing their common resources**. This is over three billion people or 40 percent of the earth's population. In our region, mismanagement of the Mekong River would not only directly impact six riparian countries and seventy million people, but also the whole region. This is due to the Mekong's increasing importance for the rest of ASEAN's food, energy, tourism, transport, and environment.

Like other large international rivers, the Mekong faces daunting challenges—balancing development and environment, responding to climate vulnerability, and managing geopolitical contestation. Yet, there is a growing recognition that **Mekong transboundary management has gotten something right.**

As my colleagues and I have shown in "**Water diplomacy and conflict management in the Mekong**" and **River Basin Organizations in Water Diplomacy**, the Mekong River Commission (MRC) demonstrates that water diplomacy does work in the Mekong. Despite lacking enforcement power, the MRC has diffused crises (e.g. Vietnam-Cambodia over the impact of the Yali Falls dam, Vietnam-Laos over the construction of the Xayaburi dam, and Cambodia-Laos over the development of the Don Sahong dam), managed interstate water tensions (Thailand-Laos over the proposed Sanakham dam, China-Mekong countries on drought impact), and contributed to more sustainable design and management of major clashing infrastructure projects. Through the MRC mechanisms, even major powers have found something that they can get along with in the management of the Mekong geopolitical hotspot. Stakeholders of various stripes recognise that MRC's processes give them data, information, knowledge, and

opportunities to raise their voices openly that they otherwise would not have.

While the Mekong's challenges persist, its model of cooperative transboundary water governance has therefore drawn increasing attention from other contested major international river basins such as the Amazon, Aral Sea, the Ganges, the Nile, and Senegal. In these rivers, one often finds inadequate river monitoring, sporadic data sharing, no prior consultation of projects, no inclusive stakeholder platforms, and general mistrust. As one leader of a major basin told the author: "we just don't like each other very much."

But what should and should not be learned from the Mekong's experience? Let's start with the former: soft rules, a cooperative spirit, a strong secretariat, and supportive network of partners.

What Should Be Learned

First, build and use "soft" rules.

The **Mekong Agreement** of 1995 which establishes the MRC – along with its five **water use Procedures** (data sharing, water monitoring, maintenance of flows and quality, notification and consultation on projects, etc.), basin strategies, and technical guidelines—provides a "soft rules" regime: clear obligations with flexible and cooperative implementation. These take years to develop, negotiate, and agree by states—and thus have legitimacy. But unlike hard law, this approach does not seek to penalize but provides a framework for regional cooperation.

A telling contrast lies with the previous Mekong Committee era (1957-1994), when a **1975 rule** allowed any country to veto another's mainstream project—an idea that eventually proved unworkable. Similarly, early attempts to impose legalistic transboundary environmental impact assessment (**TbEIA**) rules in the Mekong modelled on Europe's water frameworks stalled for eighteen years. It was only when the MRC made the TbEIA voluntary, with the state proposing the project retaining final say, that consensus was achieved.

Soft rules may not work immediately or all the time. But the key is that, if properly designed, implemented and followed up, they can still generate cooperation: meaningful data sharing, independent review, consultation with neighbours and broad stakeholders, betterment of the proposed project than originally designed, and impact monitoring during operation.

Second, nurture a cooperative spirit.

In a world where one superpower leads by might, transactions and deals, a cooperative spirit based on mutual understating, compromise, generosity and win-win outcomes are more important than ever. Central to Mekong cooperation is the intangible but important "Mekong Spirit"—the ethos that, even amid disagreement, countries should engage in dialogue, find mutual understanding and compromise, and certainly not walk away when the going gets tough. The "one Mekong, one Spirit" need to be nurtured, as it has managed tensions and

sustained relations in a Southeast Asian region fraught with extraordinary diversity and past conflicts.

During tense episodes in Mekong water contestations—**Vietnam's request for ten year delay over Xayaburi**, **Cambodia's challenge to bring Laos' Don Sahong project to an international court**, and **Thailand's ongoing objection to Sanakham** project on its border with Laos—countries continued to engage and found compromise. Xayaburi was redesigned while a major study was launched to reconsider future dams, Don Sahong went ahead, but with joint monitoring, Sanakham's consultation process was delayed by four years but remained on track. The Mekong spirit of cooperation continues in spite of the recent border clashes between two Mekong states, as exemplified by Cambodian and Thai representatives working together on a joint Cambodia-Thai project on flood management in the border area.

Third, build a strong secretariat.

A river basin organisation without strong technical and diplomatic capacity is a hollow shell. The MRC Secretariat (MRCS) has shown how a technically robust executive body with diplomatically skilled leaders can support and facilitate cooperation. A strong secretariat takes time to develop, with investment in staff, technical capacity, and impartiality. Both member states and their development partners must be credited for spending large amounts of money to building up a well-established MRC secretariat.

The MRCS' work during major disputes offers compelling examples. During the **Xayaburi Dam controversy,** while Laos locked horns with Vietnam and Cambodia, MRCS carried out rigorous assessments, facilitated dialogues between the countries, and offered practical design modifications—many of which Laos accepted and implemented at half a billion dollars of additional investment cost. The project became one of the most advanced dams in the world. In relations with China, the MRCS led joint studies and institutional cooperation with Chinese water-related agencies. These proved critical in securing China's agreement in data sharing, dam releases to alleviate drought, and dam management to alleviate floods.

The secretariat provided states with tools to increase understanding and reduce tensions, potentially, paving the way for future cooperation. The lesson: a strong secretariat does not tell states what to do; it offers the best possible solutions based on science and facilitates cooperation through public and quiet diplomacy.

Fourth, leverage but manage external partners.

External actors (donors, technical partners) can be useful but should not dominate. **Early in the MRC's history, some donors were often overbearing, pushing their own agendas.** This approach backfired during Xayaburi, when donor opposition "failed" to stop the project.

Over time, however, as Mekong countries became less poor and the MRC matured—with countries contributing more financially, and riparian MRCS CEO demonstrating stronger leadership—donors stepped back and began supporting priorities and approaches set by the MRC. They helped fund **joint monitoring regimes**, supported quiet diplomacy on controversial projects instead of publicly shaming the countries, and provided technical and diplomatic support to the MRCS' brokering agreements on dam data sharing and regional guidelines. Development partners work effectively when they trust the leadership and ownership of the institution in place, put resources where needed, and put their "logos at the back."

What Should Not Be Learned

While the world's contested rivers can reflect on the above four good lessons of the Mekong, there are two particularly bad lessons of Mekong water governance that the rest of the world could probably do without: reactive planning and biased narrative.

Don't just follow reactive planning.

The first weakness of Mekong governance has been its tendency to react to already planned national projects rather than proactively shape basin-wide development. The MRC has often focused on assessing impacts and mitigating harms after projects are already designed—necessary but not sufficient.

This approach limits the MRC's ability to reconsider potentially damaging projects or create joint projects with greater basin benefits. It also risks sparking tensions, as countries that have not participated in planning the projects would certainly feel uncertain about them. The **Mekong Committee's indicative basin plans** of the 1970s-1980s, despite their flaws, had a more proactive vision: basin-wide planning for shared benefit. That spirit needs revival if the region is to move from damage control to future-building.

Don't let biased media and NGOs dictate the narrative.

While civil society and media can play important roles in raising awareness, transparency and accountability, their interventions are sometimes irresponsible and not fact-based. In the Mekong, certain actors have been overly alarmist or selectively using "evidence," fuelling mistrust rather than cooperation.

Examples include exaggerated **claims about dam displacement impacts**, oversimplified explanations for **complex hydrological events** like droughts and unsubstantiated **allegations about military uses** of water infrastructure projects. One-sided narratives inflame tensions and undermine the diplomacy and cooperation needed for transboundary governance. Fair and balance reporting must prevail over sensationalism and provocative headlines.

Conclusion

The Mekong River is the beating heart of ASEAN and a symbol of Southeast Asia's interdependence, complexity, and potential. Its water diplomacy model—anchored in soft rules, cooperative spirit, a strong secretariat, and well-managed partnerships—is not only to be built further but also offers lessons for the world's other complex rivers. But the Mekong experience is not a blueprint to be copied wholesale. Diplomacy must be grounded in regional context, responsive to state interests, reflective of basin vision, and alert to the risks of reaction and distortion. If studied carefully, the Mekong can inspire good actions for other global rivers—and that's ultimately good news for the world.

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Guest Column

The Geopolitics of the Mekong: Development as Power

By Hoang Thi Ha


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Unlike the security-focused competition in the South China Sea, the Mekong Basin represents asymmetric competition where China leverages developmental advantages while the US faces structural constraints. Regional dynamics reflect states navigating between rapid economic growth and sustainable development approaches amid this competition.

The geopolitics of Southeast Asia are often framed through the US–China strategic rivalry, with two arenas standing out: the South China Sea and the Mekong River Basin. While both have seen growing contestation involving different major powers, the Mekong represents a qualitatively different space. Unlike the South China Sea—a militarised maritime theatre characterised by the high politics of security, sovereignty, and power projection—the Mekong dynamics are shaped by developmental and environmental contestations, where influence is exercised less through military means and more through hydrological, economic, infrastructural, and discursive levers.

In the South China Sea, Washington and Beijing compete with a measure of strategic symmetry. The US has an extensive alliance network and maintains an enduring interest in freedom of navigation and power projection across the Indo-Pacific as an offshore balancer. China counters by building anti-access/area-denial and blue-water naval capabilities, while deploying grey-zone tactics and legal–diplomatic instruments to assert expansive maritime claims. Caught between these powers are Southeast Asian claimant states, whose territorial and maritime disputes —particularly with China—are highly securitised and politically charged, making the South China Sea both a focal point of great-power rivalry and a potential regional flashpoint.

China's Structural Advantages in the Mekong

The Mekong is fundamentally different. Here, the asymmetries between Washington and Beijing are overwhelmingly in China's favour. Geography alone dictates much of this imbalance: China controls the river's

headwaters, and the water flows upon which tens of millions of people downstream depend for livelihoods. China has also entrenched itself as the dominant economic partner, infrastructure financier, and political ally of all Lower Mekong ruling regimes. By contrast, the Mekong carries far less strategic weight in Washington's calculations. This asymmetry of interests and resources grants China structural advantages vis-à-vis the US in shaping the regional dynamics.

China's Mekong strategy is leader-driven, prioritising elite-level political ties and macro-economic incentives to the Lower Mekong states. Through regular leader exchanges, large infrastructure loans, and extensive trade and investment, Beijing's influence flows primarily through the governments and business sectors of downstream states. This top-down focus effectively sidelines local communities and civil society groups, whose concerns over the environmental impact of upstream dams—especially altered river flows, reduced sediment deposits, and declining fisheries—are drowned out by the promise of macro-economic growth and elite patronage.

The China-led **Lancang–Mekong Cooperation (LMC)** framework exemplifies this top-down, development-driven approach. Established in 2015, the LMC has rapidly overshadowed other Mekong mechanisms in terms of financing, scope, and institutionalisation, encompassing political, economic, and functional cooperation across all levels, from leaders' summits to technical working groups.

Through the LMC, China has de-securitised Mekong water management, framing its upstream dam-building and Chinese-led hydropower projects in other Mekong states as regional public goods that moderate seasonal flows and enhance energy security. By embedding water management within a broader agenda of economic development, it effectively recasts the regional discourse, shifting attention from sensitive water security issues to comprehensive "win-win" economic partnerships.

The US' Contrasting Approach to the Mekong

For its part, the US has sought to amplify the voices of local communities, civil society, and experts on the environmental and socio-economic cost of unsustainable water exploitation, particularly criticising China as an irresponsible "upstream hegemon." Through development aid and technical assistance, it has directed support towards good governance, transparency, and environmental advocacy. Whereas Beijing deploys vast resources in hard infrastructure in the region—building railways, highways, bridges, dams, and industrial zones—Washington prioritises "soft infrastructure," focusing on capacity-building, regulatory standards, and environmental awareness.

Yet, American engagement in the Mekong faces a persistent challenge: sustaining attention amid its shifting international priorities and domestic politics. The asymmetry of US-China strategic interest in the region is evident in the rapid

consolidation of the LMC, in contrast to episodic US engagement through the **Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI)**, later reconfigured as the **Mekong–US Partnership** (MUSP). While the LMC has maintained high-level engagement throughout Covid-19 disruptions and Myanmar's post-coup instabilities, the MUSP has struggled to sustain momentum: no ministerial meeting occurred in 2022, 2023, and 2025. US development aid, a primary channel for its engagement in the sub-region, has been curtailed by the **USAID closure**. The second Trump administration's withdrawal from the global development agenda and tariff hikes on mainland Southeast Asian states have further undermined its regional influence.

Beyond Great Power Competition: Regional Agency and Development Choices

For Lower Mekong states, a conventional balance-of-power approach to counter China's influence is neither feasible nor optimal; nor is it accurate or useful to frame the region's dynamics through the US-China competition prism. The Mekong cooperation landscape has been "the more, the merrier:" enmeshing China for economic gains and more responsible water resource management, while engaging other powers to bolster environmental oversight, provide alternative development pathways and economic partners, and strengthen institutional capacity, regulatory standards, environmental safeguards and good governance.

It is also important to note that the Mekong hosts differentiated—even conflicting—interests among riparian states: downstream Vietnam has sought to internationalise Mekong water issues, while upstream Laos, more reliant on hydropower development, has been reluctant to do so. Therefore, viewing the Mekong primarily through the lens of US–China competition risks obscuring the agency of Lower Mekong states and the shared responsibility they bear for the river's management. While China, as the upstream power, holds outsized influence, downstream states also shape the river's ecological and developmental outcomes.

Ultimately, the choice for Lower Mekong states is not one between the US and China, but about their own development path: whether to pursue sustainable growth that cares for the sustenance of the river and local communities, or to prioritise rapid economic expansion where the vested interests of certain industry players and political leaders come first. This consideration will then inform and influence all policy decisions with regard to the choice of partners, platforms and projects at both the national and regional levels.

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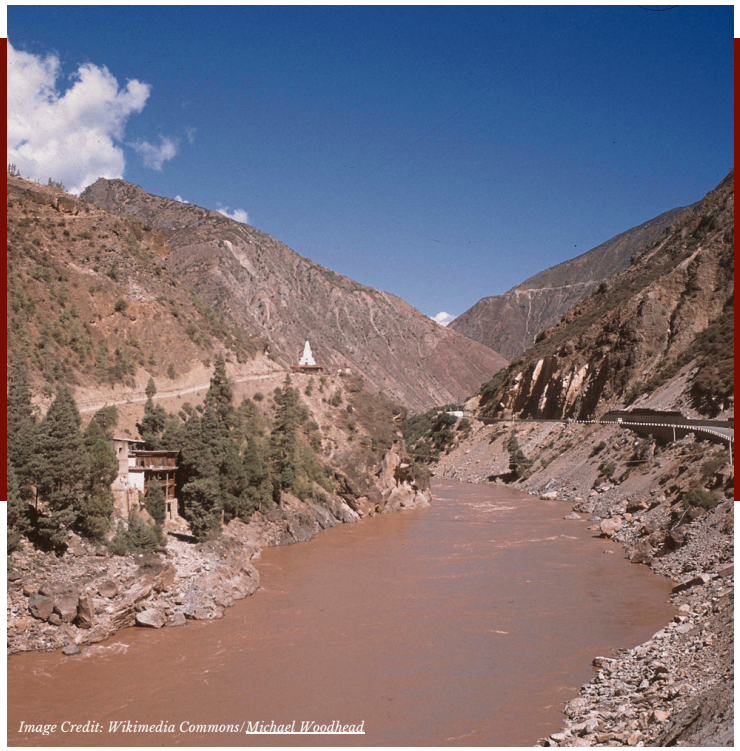
Guest Column

China's Water Diplomacy: What It Has Achieved and What It Means for the Region's Energy and Climate Governance?

By Zhang Hongzhou



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China's water diplomacy in the Mekong has successfully prevented escalation of water conflicts while advancing strategic objectives through the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation framework. This development-oriented approach has reshaped regional water governance and positioned hydropower as central to addressing energy security and climate challenges across Southeast Asia.

The Mekong River, one of the most biodiverse and geopolitically important rivers, sustains the world's largest inland fishery and millions of livelihoods. Since the 1980s, China's upstream dam construction on the Lancang (Upper Mekong) has drawn criticism for environmental damage and sparked tensions with downstream Southeast Asian states, worsened by Beijing's refusal to join the Mekong River Commission (MRC). Although a dialogue partner since 1996, China had adopted a rather passive approach to water issues in the Mekong until launching the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) in 2016. The LMC marked a shift of Chinese Mekong policy toward proactive, institutionalised multilateral water diplomacy.

Defining China's Water Diplomacy Objectives

As the LMC enters its tenth year, a key question arises: Has China's water diplomacy been effective in achieving its objectives? To address this, we must first define "water diplomacy" in the Chinese context and clarify the objectives it serves. While "water diplomacy" has become a popular term—used by officials, scholars, and journalists—it remains conceptually ambiguous, with no universally agreed definition. Generally, there are two main approaches to define water diplomacy. The first is the narrow approach, where "water diplomacy" is used interchangeably with "water cooperation" or "transboundary water management." Water diplomacy encompasses all measures—by state and non-state actors—aimed at preventing or peacefully resolving (emerging) conflicts and facilitating cooperation over water availability, allocation, or use, both between and within states, and among public and private stakeholders.

The second is a broad conceptualisation, which has been adopted by many Chinese scholars and policymakers. This approach defines water diplomacy as the elevation of water issues to the foreign policy domain, with long-term goals extending beyond crisis management or conflict prevention. These goals include enhancing regional security and stability, promoting regional integration, strengthening trade relations, and expanding geopolitical influence.

In the Chinese context, water diplomacy in the Mekong region serves two primary objectives: Conflict prevention—to ensure the Mekong does not become the "second South China Sea," in other words, to prevent water disputes from escalating into a major source of tension between China and its neighbours. Strategic regional engagement—to use water cooperation as a means of creating favourable conditions for implementing the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), including promoting regional integration, boosting trade relations, enhancing security and stability, and expanding China's geopolitical influence.

Assessing the Success of Chinese Water Diplomacy

With these two overarching objectives, China's water diplomacy under the LMC appears largely successful. First, despite periodic tensions over floods and droughts, the worst-case scenario has been avoided, and the Mekong remains a much lower diplomatic and security priority than the South China Sea disputes.

Second, for decades Mekong hydropolitics were framed in terms of upstream–downstream rivalry, focusing on the negative impacts of China's upstream dams. To address this divide, China has promoted a common riparian identity. At the 2015 First Senior Officials' Meeting on Lancang–Mekong Cooperation, Foreign Minister Wang Yi proposed building a "community of common destiny," later reframed as a "community of shared future." China portrays the Mekong as a "bloodline" linking all six countries, using this narrative to reduce sovereignty-based disputes, shift regional attention away from the water conflicts and counter the involvement of external powers —especially the US and Japan—by signalling that Mekong affairs should be managed by riparian states themselves.

Third, China has shifted regional water governance discourse away from donor-driven environmental centred approaches toward a development-oriented model with China at the centre. Given that most Lower Mekong states view water primarily as a driver of economic growth, this framing has been widely accepted. As a result, LMC-led water cooperation has supported rising trade and investment flows, people exchange, as well as security cooperation. For instance, there has been notable achievement in building transport links, including the major connectivity projects such as the China–Laos Railway and the Phnom Penh–Sihanoukville Expressway. Also, the Pan-Asia Railway network is gradually materialising, with planned connections between China–Vietnam and China–Thailand.

Moreover, in terms of trade flows, by 2024, China–Mekong trade had reached $437 billion—125 percent higher than at the LMC's launch.

Finally, the LMC as a regional institution, unique in having all six riparian states as members, has become a key platform not only for managing water-related tensions but more importantly for advancing broader regional integration. Over the years, it has evolved into multileveled and thus growingly comprehensive subregional institutions, including leaders' summit, ministers meetings, working groups meetings on different areas, growing involvement of subnational governments and non-government actors, covering areas from water resource management to agricultural and poverty reduction, trade and investment, security and social governance, and growingly including innovation and AI, which is backed by huge financial support by China through both multilateral and bilateral channels.

Implications for Regional Energy Security and Climate Governance

If China's water diplomacy has been effective in advancing its objectives, what impacts has it had on the region, particularly regarding climate change governance and energy security? This is another important question for two main reasons. On the one hand, mainland Southeast Asia faces chronic energy shortages alongside mounting pressure to transition away from fossil fuels under the Paris Climate Accord.

This energy supply challenge is compounded by surging demand, driven not only by rapid economic growth but also by major technological transformations. Among these, the rise of artificial intelligence has fuelled a boom in data centre construction, spurred by growing internet usage and accelerating adoption of cloud computing. Likewise, the Mekong region is emerging as a key growth market for electric vehicles (EVs), with sharp increases in both EV sales and local manufacturing. Together, these trends are intensifying the region's demand for energy, particularly clean energy. On the other hand, dam building has long been a major source of tension, yet hydropower development, and growingly clear energy cooperation, has become a key area of transboundary water cooperation between China and the Lower Mekong countries under the LMC. In the meantime, China has been the dominant force in hydropower development as well as solar, wind and biofuel across the Mekong subregion, financing, and constructing massive dam projects along the Mekong River.

In this context, increased investment in clean energy, particularly better-designed hydropower projects are seen as critical to meeting energy needs while contributing to climate mitigation goals. This is understandable as among various clean energy sources, in the Mekong region, hydropower offers advantages over wind and solar through higher capacity factors, dispatchable generation, and multi-seasonal storage, enabling reliable baseload and peak power supply.

The growing importance of hydropower is being recognised by regional governments, and this partly explains why some Lower Mekong countries have warmed to hydropower despite longstanding concerns over its environmental and social impacts. Vietnam exemplifies this trend. Once the fiercest critic of upstream dams, it has expanded domestic hydropower capacity and joined Thailand and China in investing in Lao mainstream dam projects.

In addition to boosting regional security supply, joint ventures in hydropower are also advancing broader integration initiatives, such as progress toward the ASEAN Power Grid. Hence, China's sustained promotion of hydropower through investment, technology transfer, and construction has helped build a network of cross-border linkages, technical cooperation, and economic interdependence, bolstering the region's energy security and climate resilience. Nevertheless, the social and environmental risks of hydropower development should not be overlooked. Large-scale dam building in the Lower Mekong carries the danger of resource depletion, ecological degradation, and social unrest—factors that could escalate water-related conflicts.

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