



# Counterpoint Southeast Asia

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 Lee Kuan Yew  
School of Public Policy

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## Will the Mekong River be the next South China Sea?

By Evan A. Laksmana

Southeast Asia as the strategic fulcrum in the Indo-Pacific remains fractured by regional flashpoints—from the South China Sea to Myanmar. Analysts have recently added the Greater Mekong region—covering parts of China, Myanmar, Lao, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam—as one of those flashpoints.

The Mekong River is considered the world's largest inland fishery source as well as a critical source of agriculture production and hydropower for the riparian states. Geopolitically, the region's "**strategic importance**" has grown along with the dam-building activities affecting the downstream communities, as well as great

Counterpoint Southeast Asia is published regularly by the Centre on Asia and Globalisation at the National University of Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. It seeks to answer major questions of strategic significance for Southeast Asia by bringing in diverse voices from around the region. Each issue will tackle one question from three different perspectives.

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power politics, injecting not just the US-China competitive dynamics, but also drawing in India, Japan, South Korea and others into the fray.

Amidst the worsening ecological—exacerbated by climate change—and geopolitical challenges, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as Southeast Asia’s preeminent regional organisation remains a **“bystander”** to Mekong-related activities. All five riparian countries are ASEAN members and yet the Mekong has not yet topped the grouping’s list of strategic priorities.

Some may argue the lack of urgency and energy for ASEAN on the Mekong is partly a deliberate effort to prevent the “broader internationalisation” of the issue. After all, many of the riparian states have developed almost a dozen cooperative mechanisms—including some involving extra-regional partners—to manage the shared challenges surrounding the river. Some may also prefer these mechanisms rather than an ASEAN-wide regime *ala* the South China Sea Code of Conduct process, for example (for our second issue on this problem see [here](#)).

But on the other hand, the intensifying great power politics over the Mekong will have strategic implications for the whole of Southeast Asia and for ASEAN’s centrality in the regional security architecture. How the US and China, for example, developed their Mekong strategic engagements may shape how the riparian ASEAN member states

behave on a range of other issues within the grouping’s ambit, including the South China Sea. Some are worried that the growing strategic ties and dependence of some riparian states to China, for example, would effectively give Beijing “veto power” of their ASEAN-related strategic policies.

Will the Mekong River then become another great power geopolitical playground? Will riparian states increasingly concerned with hydropower and ecological disasters be more likely to securitise the river? Will extra-regional power engagement increase the chance of strategic overcrowding? In short, given the growing geopolitical stakes and strategic asymmetries, will the Mekong River be the next South China Sea?

To address these questions, we invite three Southeast Asian analysts to examine the geopolitics of the Mekong River.

**Ming Li Yong**, a fellow at the East West Center in Honolulu, argues the Mekong River will not be the next South China Sea due to differing geopolitical realities and the transboundary water governance arrangements that prioritise cooperation over conflict. Critically, she notes, the contestations over the Mekong’s water resources are driven by disruptions to the mobility and flow of natural resources, not territorial disputes.

**Charadine Pich**, the deputy director of the Cambodian Institution for Cooperation and Peace, further adds that the proliferation of sub-regional cooperative mechanisms and the

absence of overt militarisation—unlike in the South China Sea—has kept the peace in the Mekong. There are certainly challenges to the existing overlap of cooperative mechanisms, but they have not been sufficient to merit being the top regional problem for ASEAN.

But **Pianporn (Pai) Deetes**, the Regional Campaigns Director, Southeast Asia Program at International Rivers, underscores the fact that whatever the geopolitics of hydropower brings to the Mekong River, the people living alongside it must have a greater say in its future development. Unfortunately, she further adds, the views and concerns of the local communities living alongside the river have been not fully considered by regional leaders.

The authors presented their arguments at a public webinar on 8 August 2022 ([video link here](#)). The debates during the webinar—and as you will see in the pages that follow—suggest that while there are many challenges surrounding the management of the river, there does not appear to be strong evidence that the river will become *exactly* like the South China Sea.

The authors note, for example, the series of cooperative mechanisms that coexist with the various geopolitical contestations by regional and extra-regional powers. Even though they also underscore the dangers of

ecological disasters looming and the need for multi-party cooperation across the board. But there was no clear reason, they argue, that the river's overt militarisation—or arms race—is an immediate prospect.

Nevertheless, the absence of ASEAN's full engagement, the lack of a strong dispute management and resolution of existing cooperative mechanisms, and the complicated geopolitics of hydropower developments suggest that the Mekong River remains a potent regional flashpoint. After all, all the authors also underscore the growing centrality of both the US and China in the region. We hope this latest edition of *Counterpoint Southeast Asia* could highlight the need for Southeast Asian analysts and policymakers to focus on this issue more.

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# Different geopolitical and material realities

By Ming Li Yong

*The Mekong River will not be the next South China Sea due to differing geopolitical realities and the transboundary water governance arrangements that prioritise cooperation over conflict.*

The South China Sea (SCS) dispute is driven by competing territorial and maritime claims between China and several Southeast Asian states. At stake are massive untapped hydrocarbon resources, fishing areas, and freedom of navigation along critical sea lanes. Tensions have grown over unsafe encounters in and around disputed waters, land reclamation, and the militarisation of the disputed islands and reefs. As military escalation continues to be a major concern, the SCS has amplified great power politics and presents a challenge for ASEAN unity.

At a glance, the transboundary Mekong River may appear similar to the SCS, especially in the context of China's growing influence on Southeast Asia and its interconnection with natural resource competition. Water shortages amidst drought conditions in 2016 and during 2019-2021 have also drawn attention to large hydropower dam reservoirs and operations in China, which analysts see as a chokehold over downstream states.



*Image Credit: Flickr/Guillaume Lacombe/Cirad*

Meanwhile, competing uses of water resources for irrigation and hydropower generation amidst the looming spectre of climate change further raise concerns over water shortages, dovetailing with popular narratives that suggest 'water wars' may erupt over them. China is also not a member of the intergovernmental Mekong River Commission (MRC), and therefore not obligated to abide by the commitments set out in the 1995 Agreement on the Cooperation for the Sustainable Development of the Mekong River Basin. The absence of a basin-wide mandate to manage the waters of the Mekong River limits the ability of the MRC to address challenges and disputes arising from transboundary water governance.

But the geopolitical and material realities of the Mekong River are unlike the SCS. Critically, contestations over the Mekong's water resources are not driven by territorial

disputes. Rather, they are driven by disruptions to the mobility and flow of natural resources (e.g., water and fish) that affect downstream states. Hydropower dams is one such example that produces downstream flooding, water fluctuations, and a loss of ecosystem services.

And yet, there has never been an outbreak of war between two countries over water. Indeed, it would be erroneous to over-emphasise the potential for conflict in the transboundary water basin, given how cooperation has co-existed with competition among countries in the region. The 1995 Mekong Agreement between Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam which led to the establishment of the MRC reflects this commitment to cooperation and the recognition of territorial sovereignty and the sovereign rights to economic development. Unlike hydrocarbon resources, water is a renewable resource after all.

Notably, when the Mekong basin was hit by one of its worst droughts in 2016, China acquiesced to Vietnam's request to release water from its dams. Indeed, while downstream states are concerned about the impacts of the upstream dam-building along the transboundary Mekong River and its tributaries, the threat of military conflict arising from these issues has never been a concern.

Instead, downstream states have been relatively muted in their criticisms. Even

though Cambodia and Vietnam have expressed strong concerns over the transboundary impacts of the Xayaburi and Don Sahong dams in Laos, the MRC's weak dispute resolution mechanisms left these issues to be resolved bilaterally; Laos eventually unilaterally moved forward with the construction.

These examples again reflect a general reluctance among Mekong governments to interfere with another country's sovereign right to economic development. In addition, all Mekong governments see economic benefits in developing the river's water resources, and are unlikely to want their own investments and interests in Mekong hydropower dams to be similarly curtailed.

Transboundary water governance must therefore also be contextualised within the political-economic drivers of hydropower development. Economic and infrastructural connectivity are emphasised under frameworks such as the Greater Mekong Subregion. Indeed, the use of water resources for hydropower development should not be considered a zero-sum game.

The China-led Lancang-Mekong Cooperation can also be seen as an umbrella mechanism where economic and water resource cooperation takes place alongside one another. Regional state and private actors also stand to benefit from the lucrative hydropower sector through dam construction and power trading. These vested interests have tended to trump concerns over

the transboundary environmental impact of dam-building.

Studies show the environmental costs of hydropower will be significant. Along the Mekong River, millions of people that make up the riparian communities will suffer from the loss of fish, sediment, and ecosystem services on which their livelihoods, food security, and way of life are dependent on. If anything, where there has been conflict, it has resulted from strong community resistance against large dams, as seen, for example, in the strong protests by environmental movements in Thailand and the regional Save the Mekong Coalition.

Indeed, local communities and civil society groups play a strong role in the Mekong transboundary water governance. This is particularly seen in their counter-narratives around hydropower development. They point out, for example, how dams create environmental injustice amongst vulnerable populations. They also question the energy sector driving hydropower development.

In general, the Mekong River has increasingly become embroiled in the growing US-China rivalry, particularly around China's leverage over the headwaters of the Mekong River, and by extension, over downstream states. But the geopolitical realities and transboundary water governance arrangements around

ahydropower development distinguish the Mekong River from the SCS. But that also means that the Mekong River may fail to occupy a central space in ASEAN's priorities, for better or for worse.

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# Proliferation of cooperative mechanisms hinder conflict

By Charadine Pich

*The proliferation of sub-regional cooperative mechanisms and the absence of overt militarisation—unlike in the South China Sea—has kept the peace in the Mekong.*

The Mekong River runs from the Tibetan Plateau through China, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam before discharging into the South China Sea. The Mekong Basin is one of the **richest areas of biodiversity** in the world, sustaining around 66 million people, i.e., 10% of the total population of all members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

With the current geopolitical flux, the Mekong is no longer just a river but also a core competing ground for major power rivalry. But for the time being and the foreseeable future, the Mekong River seems unlikely to be the next South China Sea.

First, the situation in the Mekong has not been deemed ‘alarming’ enough to be placed on ASEAN’s top regional agenda. In fact, Vietnam, during its 2020 chairmanship, tried to do so but its efforts **“yielded limited progress”**. Thailand, on the other hand, has often made references to its own homegrown Mekong initiative—the Ayeyawady-Chao



Image Credit: Wikimedia Commons: Gunawan Kartorbrana

Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS)—but has not made a significant effort to push the Mekong issue to the top of the ASEAN agenda. For maritime ASEAN members, the Mekong is seen as only affecting the mainland states and should be **dealt with at the sub-regional level**.

Moreover, Mekong-related issues are generally perceived as environmental and technical issues rather than region-wide security issues.

Most members are also hesitant to get involved in another ‘body of water’ problem, given how strategically draining the South China Sea disputes have been. In any case, the strategic divergence within ASEAN over the Mekong makes it unlikely for the issue to be catapulted into the regional grouping’s top list. Even though major power competition in the Mekong is growing, albeit with the continued elevation of the respective mechanisms in various forms of

development and governance aspects, external stakeholders have not shown any obvious sign of interest in pushing the Mekong issue as part of the ASEAN agenda. That is to say, the Mekong mechanism is being utilized as an opportune track for them to continue their engagements with the Mekong countries at the development front rather than political.

Second, the Mekong issue has little to no obvious security threats at the moment, although it is getting increasingly politicised. Instances of piracy or armed robberies are quite common along the Mekong River, just like any other busy waterway. While this may necessitate stronger brown water capabilities as well as more intensive patrolling operations, such efforts are unlikely to contribute to an arms race along the Mekong, since they are aimed at combating maritime criminal activities, rather than pursuing military operations against neighbouring states. Unlike the South China Sea, there is no military presence surrounding the area.

Consequently, the risk of some sort of arms race occurring in the Mekong region appears low. In fact, the Mekong countries, and especially China, has reaffirmed that the river should be seen as a shared river, and its resources and benefits should be managed together.

Third, there is an overlapping web, if not strategic congestion, of sub-regional cooperation mechanisms in place—more than a dozen at the moment. These include, *inter alia*, the recently elevated Mekong-US

Partnership, the Japan-US-Mekong Power Partnership, the Friend of the Lower Mekong, the Mekong River Commission, the Greater Mekong Sub-Region Economic Cooperation, the Mekong-Lancang Cooperation (MLC) and others. The China-backed MLC was rolled out in 2015 and has captured the strategic attention of the riparian countries.

There is perhaps a ‘missing link’ in how different stakeholders can work together—rather than compete—across these different sub-regional mechanisms. Notwithstanding their overlapping goals and objectives, the proliferation of these sub-regional mechanisms allows Mekong countries to strongly benefit from different projects and initiatives. The same cannot be said for the situation in the South China Sea, which is more concerned with addressing clashes at sea. The Mekong, in other words, has more cooperative and beneficial mechanisms than the geopolitics-heavy South China Sea. There exist different subregional frameworks in the Mekong region which provide tangible economic and infrastructural benefits to the Mekong countries. Such mechanisms are not present in the South China Sea, which is more focused on competing interests around issues like freedom of navigation and overflight, as well as competition for resources. Although dam building has been a major source of tensions, many Mekong countries have begun to focus on seeking practical solutions, such as looking for alternative sources of energy and negotiating mutually acceptable compromises including energy outsourcing.



Last but not least, the challenge facing the Mekong countries is not territorial disputes, but the management of hydropower, particularly dam construction and its spill over effects on the downstream countries. Although upstream countries have been blamed for undertaking dam construction at the expense of downstream countries, many riparian countries have begun either looking for alternative sources of energy or seeking compromises from their immediate neighbours. Laos, for example, been outsourcing its energy production to Cambodia and Thailand.

Even with all these constraints, for both environmental and economic reasons, the proposition to have any binding 'Code of Conduct' (CoC) on the Mekong would be highly unlikely, and thus place the Mekong at a much lower legal stress for the foreseeable future. There had been a preliminary discussion to have a CoC on the Mekong a few years back, as the construction of hydropower dams upstream, especially in China, was causing severe environmental degradation in downstream countries. The proposition was not popular as countries in both mainland and maritime Southeast Asia did not want to associate the Mekong with the already-exhausted CoC discussion of the South China Sea.

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# Geopolitics are not accounting for local communities

By Pianporn (Pai) Deetes

*Whatever the geopolitics of hydropower brings to the Mekong River, the people living alongside it must have a greater say in its future development.*

In times of geopolitical uncertainty, will new configurations of power bring meaningful changes to the Mekong River's management and the local communities who depend on it? The Mekong River itself may provide an answer as it has started to protest, showing signs that it may be reaching an ecological tipping point.

And yet, key decisions over the river are hardly driven by the local communities and their concerns, even if they rely on the multiple social, economic, and cultural benefits from the river. Instead, communities are expected to assume the costs of development "externalities" that lead to marginalisation and increasing inequality, while vested interests profit.

For the past two decades, I have worked with community-based organisations and networks within and beyond Thailand to advocate for a more sustainable and socially-just management of the Mekong River basin. During this period, I witnessed how local communities have struggled to have their voices heard and their rights recognized by those in positions of



*Image Credit: iStock/quangpraha*

power and privilege, whether within their own countries, across the borders, or beyond the region.

There is no clear sign yet that recent contending geopolitical interests will fundamentally change this problem. After all, the region is all too familiar with powerful neighbours and periods of geopolitical change.

Historically, various kingdoms and cities in the region were tributary states of China. During the reign of King Rama IV, foreign relations were configured to benefit Western countries in exchange for Thailand's independence. Indeed, the French were the first to place strategic importance on the Mekong River as a potential alternative trade route.

But in recent decades, the tide is turning yet again, and great power politics has returned.

Chinese influence has steadily grown in the Mekong alongside the rapid development of Southwestern China. The Thai government, for example, had initially acquiesced to a Chinese-led project to blast rapids on the river that would allow large cargo ships to carry goods from Yunnan to Thailand, Laos, and the rest of Southeast Asia, despite the potential environmental damage. It was only after strong opposition was raised by local environmental groups and communities that Bangkok was forced to scrap the project.

Chinese capital also flowed into a range of resource development projects, including hydropower dams on the Mekong River and its tributaries, as well as land-based investments in minerals, timber, rubber, and other commodities to be exported back to China. Beijing has also financed urban developments, industrial parks, and infrastructure projects, including special economic zones in the Golden Triangle, Sihanoukville, and Si Phan Don in Southern Laos.

Beijing has often backed Chinese investors in their dealings with their economically poorer neighbours. As leaders of recipient countries view these investments as critical to their political and economic goals, they have been happy to bestow privileges upon Chinese investors, including tax subsidies, business-friendly policies, cheap access to land and resources, and even project-based allowances for Chinese employees.

Regional leaders are also comfortable with

China's stated policy of non-interference in development cooperation. This has enabled them to circumvent multilateral bank loans that often come with strong environmental and social safeguards and preconditions. China has also shielded regional authoritarian governments from international pressure. China has further deepened its ties and influence through multilateral mechanisms, such as the Lancang Mekong Cooperation.

Similarly, the US has stepped up its regional engagement, including through the Mekong-US Partnership, which expanded the scope of transboundary challenges to include water and natural resource management. The Partnership has funded various organisations and initiatives to improve the transparency and management of the Mekong. Some of these are seen as attempts to curb China's influence and have contributed to the **increased politicisation** of transboundary water governance in the area.

Given these trends, one would think that communities whose livelihoods are dependent on the Mekong River are living in a geopolitical battlefield between China and the US. While the local villagers do not necessarily feel that way, there are serious questions regarding the extent to which great power politics increase or reduce the spaces and opportunities for local communities to have their voices heard and their priorities realised.

For local communities whose lives are inextricably intertwined with the Mekong,

regional governments, developers, and other actors should address the widespread negative effects of existing dams that have resulted in the destruction of resources on which their lives, livelihoods and cultures depend. Local communities want the large new dams in the pipeline to be cancelled, and for governments to recognise and respect their rights.

Ultimately, these communities want a greater say in shaping decisions about the river and their own futures. So far, it is unclear whether China and the Lower Mekong governments will be more inclusive of societal voices in addressing transboundary problems caused by existing dams. Nor is it clear if the US is genuinely committed towards providing more space for riparian community voices and engaging Mekong country leaders, including China, to collectively address the ecological crisis.

The fundamental problem is that decisions on the development and management of the Mekong River Basin have been geared towards the region's political and business elites. Prevailing political economies and institutions of governance continue to marginalise local communities and deny their participation in decisions that would affect their lives. Whatever power configurations emerge out of the current geopolitical uncertainty, what we need is for the people living along the Mekong to have a much greater say in shaping its future.

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The Centre on Asia and Globalisation is a research centre at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore. It conducts in-depth research on developments in the Asia-Pacific and beyond, and aims to provide academics, decision-makers, and the general public with objective analysis on issues of regional and global significance. The Centre's motto "Objective Research with Impact" reflects its commitment towards ensuring that its analysis informs policy and decision makers in and about Asia.

## OTHER CAG PUBLICATIONS

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- *Failure to launch? Indonesia against China's Grey Zone Tactics* by Evan Laksmana (IDSS Paper No.37)
- *Remodelling Indonesia's Maritime Law Enforcement Architecture: Theoretical and Policy Considerations* by Evan Laksmana (Contemporary Southeast Asia 44(1), 2022)
- *Charting Their Own Course: How Indonesians See the World* by Ben Bland, Evan Laksmana and Natasha Kassam (Lowy Institute, 2022)
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- *A Fragile Fulcrum: Indonesia-U.S. Military Relations in the Age of Great-Power Competition* by Evan Laksmana (Asia Policy 16(4), October 2021)
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