

Lancang-Mekong Cooperation: The Balance-of-Risk Behind China's Multilateralist Approach in the Greater Mekong Subregion

Idil Syawfi^{1*} and Cherrie Angel Wijaya²

^{1,2}Department of International Relations, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Parahyangan Catholic University, Bandung, Indonesia 40141

¹idil.syawfi@unpar.ac.id; ²angelcherriewijaya@gmail.com

*Corresponding author

How to Cite: Syawfi, I., & Wijaya, C. A. (2026). Lancang-Mekong cooperation: The balance-of-risk behind China's multilateralist approach in the Greater Mekong Subregion. *Journal of ASEAN Studies*, 14(1), 45-68. <https://doi.org/10.21512/jas.v14i1.10194>

Abstract

This research examined the key factors shaping China's shifting approach to multilateralism in the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), with a particular focus on the establishment of the Lancang Mekong Cooperation (LMC). The LMC represents a significant shift from China's previous strategy of acting unilaterally as a hydro-hegemon, which granted it the power to build hydropower dams on the Mekong River without meaningful consultation with downstream neighbors. Utilizing Jeffrey Taliaferro's balance-of-risk theory, the analysis investigates how great powers adjust foreign policy in response to anticipated changes in the relative distribution of power within the international system and a state's prospects. According to Taliaferro, states are more motivated by the fear of anticipated losses in their relative power than to anticipated gains. From this perspective, China's move to establish the LMC was a calculated response to the increasing involvement of external actors in the GMS, which threatened its influence. China's multilateral turn is best understood as a pragmatic, risk averse adjustment aimed at anticipating a relative decline in power in the near future if it maintained a unilateral approach. This research contributes to our understanding of how great power engage with regional institutions and demonstrates the importance of risk management in China's water diplomacy in mainland Southeast Asia.

Keywords: balance-of-risk, China, foreign policy, Greater Mekong Subregion, Lancang-Mekong Cooperation

Introduction

In Southeast Asia, the GMS, centered on the Mekong River, comprises China and five other ASEAN members: Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam (Haefner, 2013). At the upstream end, the river originates in Qinghai Province, China, before flowing downstream into the five ASEAN member states. As the main source of water, the main driver of agriculture, and a key factor in transportation, the Mekong River is a primary factor in economic development in the subregion (W. Feng et al., 2022). Especially for downstream nations, everyday food and water security relies heavily on Mekong waters for agriculture and fisheries, which are the main sources of livelihoods for the people (Eyler, 2022).

In this subregion, China stands as the undisputable great power. Aside from being recognized as an economic giant, China has long been considered a regional power within the ASEAN partnership, underscoring its tremendous influence in the region (Singh & Teo, 2020). In addition to its international reputation, China's power stems from its strategic geographic location as an upstream country, granting it a significant advantage over other riparian countries in Mekong River transboundary hydro-politics, thereby allowing the state to claim the title of a "hydro-hegemon" (Zhang & Zhang, 2021).

As a hydro-hegemon, China can control the quantity and quality of water flows in downstream regions in line with its objectives and interests (Haefner, 2013; Yoshimatsu, 2015). The position causes China to adopt a unilateral approach to maximize its gains in the subregion, as reflected in China's rejection of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Use of International Watercourses (UNWC), which opposed a multilateral approach to resolving transboundary water issues and prioritizing national sovereignty in harnessing its national water sources potential (Menniken, 2007). In short, China opposed the creation of international institutions because they might disrupt its national water interests (Biba, 2012). As a result, China has either shown no interest in becoming a member of any multilateralism aimed at regulating the Mekong River's water resources, such as the GMS program by the Asian Development Bank, or, in the case of the Mekong River Commission (MRC), remained as an observer (Su, 2012; Biba, 2012).

However, China's unilateral approach shifted when it launched the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) in 2015, which became the first institutional framework agreed upon by all Mekong riparian nations (Busbarat et al., 2021). LMC was a turning point in China's previous unilateral approach, given China's commitment to leading the development of the GMS. To show its commitment, China even increased hydrological data and information sharing with downstream countries to mitigate drought conditions in the subregion (Lee & Shin, 2026). Furthermore, on its 10th anniversary, China launched LMC 2.0, which aims to advance LMC as a golden platform for regional cooperation, support the development of the Belt and Road Initiative, and increase the overall influence of the Global South (Zhipeng, 2025). Inserting multilateralism into its policy might sacrifice some of the advantages China previously had as a hydro-hegemon, due to its obligation to accommodate the mutual interests of all riparian nations above its own national interests. Based on that proposition,

this research aims to examine why china shifted its approach to multilateralism through the establishment of the lancang-mekong cooperation in the GMS.

China's shifting approach in the GMS has been the subject of many prior research inquiries. Conventional wisdom from researchers explain that LMC is established to enhance China's overall power and influence in the subregion through institutional leadership, that may secures China's position as the ultimate hydro-hegemon with the power to shape regional agendas according to its national interests (Biba, 2018; Zhang & Zhang, 2021; Busbarat et al., 2021; Po & Primiano, 2021; Gong, 2020; Wu, 2020). Despite the consensus, there are also debates over the factors behind China's decision to establish the LMC.

The first strand asserts that the key factor behind the LMC was threats coming from extra-regional powers against China's regional leadership and geopolitical agenda. As a regional institution reserved only for Mekong riparian states, LMC serves as a form of institutional balancing to secure China's leadership and great-power status against the influence of the U.S. and its allies among other riparian states. This way, China can maintain its superiority over other preexisting regional mechanisms initiated by extra-regional powers and assert dominance in the regional agenda-setting process (Busbarat et al., 2021; Po & Primiano, 2021; Wu, 2020).

Conversely, some argue that LMC is established to reduce ongoing suspicions from downstream riparian countries about China's ambitions in the GMS. By prioritizing the subregion's internal security, the creation of LMC was intended to foster a new regional identity based on shared geographical conditions and a water governance agenda (Gong, 2020). China's LMC initiative thus serves to ease tensions arising from China's previous unilateral actions and to ensure that its hydro-hegemony status is accepted by other Mekong countries (Zhang & Zhang, 2021). Since water can be a source of conflict among Mekong riparians, LMC was modeled to address water security issues, with the hope that China's involvement would help ensure the region's sustainable development (Xing, 2017).

However, the existing literature rarely portrays China's decision-making process from the perspective of a great power. To understand the reasons behind China's shift from a unilateralist to a multilateralist approach required an extended analysis of how China perceived these factors and weighed the gains and losses of the nature of cooperation with other Mekong countries, using the Balance of Risk framework coined by Taliaferro (2004a). This article presents a new perspective on China's deliberations as a great power in formulating multilateralism in the form of LMC as its new strategy in the Greater Mekong Subregion. The article argues that China's shifting approach was intended to minimize anticipated losses that may arise if China decides to remain unilateral by establishing a regional institution led by China.

Balance-of-Risk

This research utilizes the balance-of-risk theory, coined by Jeffrey Taliaferro (2004a), as its framework analysis. The framework explains a great power's foreign policy strategy in

responding to international threats by combining defensive realism and prospect theory. Taliaferro (2004a) defines great power intervention as involving a certain level of risk, potential loss, or potential gain. The risks depend on objective measures such as state capabilities, including military forces, territory, and economic resources, and subjective items such as leader calculations, including reputation, credibility, and prestige (Taliaferro, 2004b).

The framework argues that a great power tends to initiate risky interventions in its periphery. The periphery refers to regions at a certain geographical distance from the core, whose power cannot threaten a great power's homeland. However, it remains a valuable asset for enhancing its great-power status. This is because decision-makers tend to deploy risk-acceptant policies when facing anticipated losses, in attempt to avoid a decrease in relative power or status. In this case, risk-acceptant behavior occurs when decision-makers select policy options with more outcomes than are available, negative outcomes are least likely, and they recognize that their subjective probability may be flawed or completely incorrect (Taliaferro, 2004b). The balance-of-risk theory uses three variables to analyze a foreign policy: anticipated changes in relative power as the independent variable, expectation level as the intervening variable, and the foreign policy result as the dependent variable (Taliaferro, 2004a), as shown in Figure 1.

Balance-of-risk operates under the assumptions of defensive realism, in which the anarchic international system hardly motivates expansion because moderate foreign policy is sufficient to sustain state survival. Therefore, expansionist policies by great powers are the result of an elite decision-making process, after being filtered and shaped into a foreign policy. Anticipated increases or decreases in relative power are of great importance to decision-makers during the foreign policy formulation process as independent variables. Decision-makers are highly sensitive to international relative power because it determines the state's position in the international system. Thus, what is considered a threat to great powers is the "development" of peripheral regions. As cores, great powers are concerned that peripheral development might shift the distribution of power in the international system (Taliaferro, 2004a).

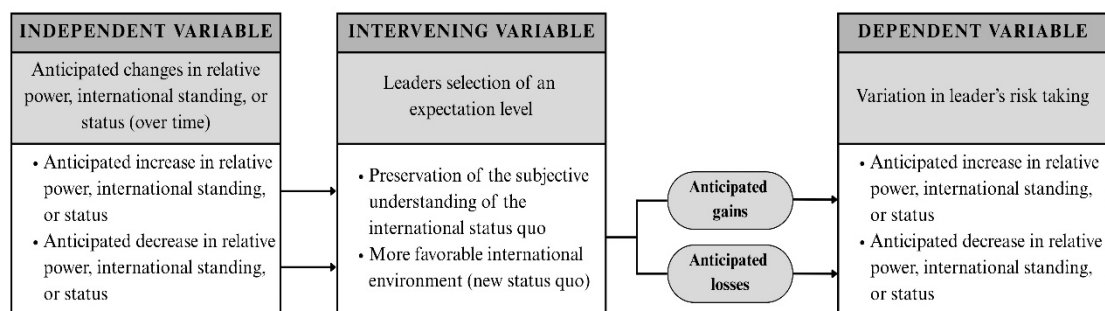


Figure 1. Causal Logic of Balance-of-Risk Theory

Source: Taliaferro (2004a).

However, measuring a state's relative power relies heavily on subjective perceptions of state leaders in shaping internal foreign policy. It established a desired "expectation level," which serves as a parameter for evaluating policy outcomes in light of the current status quo and power dynamics. Unlike Taliaferro's use of state leaders, this article considers the state's expectations as a whole unit of analysis. Expectation levels are usually expressed as specific goals or aspirations that the state cannot compromise on, such as territorial aspirations, diplomatic expectations, minimum bargaining positions, and so on. By integrating expectation level with the anticipated changes in relative power, an expectation level aims to preserve a state's relative power (Taliaferro, 2004a).

After comparing the expectation level with the reality of the independent variable, a state may be satisfied with the status quo or have the urgency to create a more favorable one. When a nation anticipates an increase in relative power that aligns with its expectations, the status quo becomes favorable, and moderate foreign policies are sufficient to preserve the expected gains. In return, when a nation anticipates a decrease in relative power that undermines the expectation level set, decision-makers tend to search for a more favorable status quo by creating a new one to avoid the prospect of loss. This leads many leaders to prioritize loss prevention in their foreign policy decision-making process (Taliaferro, 2004a).

Foreign policy is the outcome of the interaction between anticipated changes in the international system and the evaluation process, which is informed by the level of expectation. Two directions of foreign policy can be produced. First, being satisfied with the current status quo means the state anticipates long-run gains, leading to a risk-averse strategy to secure them. A state will deploy moderate foreign policies because they have low risk and, therefore, fewer possible negative outcomes. On the other hand, establishing a new status quo after a potential decrease in relative power indicates that the state anticipates losses, leading to risk-acceptance strategies that involve gambling on an outcome that aligns with the expected level. In this case, a state pursues expansionist policies with various possible outcomes, making it a risky intervention. However, since the balance-of-risk's main argument is that averting perceived losses in relative power weighs more heavily than the possibility of gains in the same regard, it follows that risky interventions are driven by anticipated losses (Taliaferro, 2004a).

To avoid anticipated losses, a great power must adopt a risk-acceptance strategy. Policies created to avoid anticipated losses are "risky" because they require more resources, even if the gains are small. This is because the state wants to renormalize to perceived losses but has failed to adjust its high expectations. The longer a state maintains a particular expectation level, the less likely it is to revise it downward in response to the new status quo. This results in great powers continuing their advances in the periphery even if the policy proves ineffective, in hopes of recovering the costs of implementing it (Taliaferro, 2004a).

Research Method

This research explores the reasons behind the establishment of LMC as China's main foreign policy in the GMS. In the Mekong River, LMC is an interesting case because it is the first among others to show China's involvement in multilateralism. Before LMC, China had limited involvement in multilateralism. In the Mekong River Commission (MRC), China, along with Myanmar, remains only an observer, specifically dialogue partners, due to lack of benefits available to an upstream country (Biba, 2012; Mekong River Commission, n.d.-a; Mekong River Commission, n.d.-b). Secondly, China's participation in the GMS Economic Cooperation Program, initiated by the Asian Development Bank, is limited to Yunnan and Guangxi Provinces as subnational actors, even though other riparian countries had fully agreed to become official members (Su, 2012). Although China is the largest contributor to funding projects in the region, whose funding exceeded even ADB's, China's non-membership indicated that it wished to remain a third-party actor (Yoshimatsu, 2015).

Using qualitative research, the analysis is provided to understand the phenomenon from the perspective of a state and its relationship with other actors involved (Bryman, 2012). Thus, the role of non-numerical data, including history, perception, and intention, is analyzed inductively, using the balance-of-risk theory to formulate arguments (Neuman, 2014). The most essential data to be collected are evidence of a state's expectations level, traces from planning documents, official public statements, diplomats' instructions, and other documents, such as mass media publications and virtual documents, such as academic journals and online books (Taliaferro, 2004a; Bryman, 2012). Data from these sources are required to understand the distribution of relative power in the GMS and the diplomatic relationships between China and other actors over time.

These data are interpreted through case studies to explain the causal occurrence of specific cases. The case study is applied to identify the underlying cause of China's shift in foreign policy orientation in the GMS. Moreover, process tracing is used as the within-case method of analysis, which emphasizes the role of intervening variables in the chosen theory for explaining a case (Bennett, 2004). This is where the balance-of-risk theory is employed to assess the significance of the expectation level in understanding the establishment of LMC.

China's Shifting Transboundary Water Policy in the Mekong River

According to Zhang and Zhang (2021), as shown in Figure 2, there are three main sources of China's status as a hydro-hegemon. First, China's hard power was indisputable, as it has the largest military, economy, and population among the downstream nations. Second, China has accumulated significant soft power influence in Southeast Asia over the years as a regional power-becoming ideational bargaining that indirectly affect China's overall power. Third, China's position as the upstream nation has also become an important bargaining power, strengthening the state's position relative to the other Mekong countries. Thus, China's decision to either act independently or cooperate in LMC plays a major role in shaping the region's transboundary water policy.

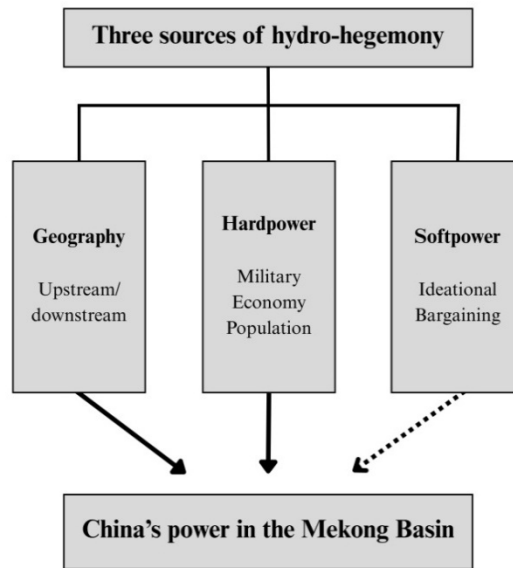


Figure 2. China's Source of Hydro-Hegemony in the GMS

Source: Zhang and Zhang (2021).

Before establishing the LMC, China took a unilateral stance in the Greater Mekong Subregion to secure its interests in generating hydroelectric power. This stance is related to the sudden rise in domestic energy consumption driven by China's economic boom following the 1978 national reform (Biba, 2012). Besides relying on coal and oil, China is beginning to prioritize cleaner hydropower by developing hydropower projects. Accordingly, China has become the country with the most dams globally (Biba, 2012). Generating sufficient hydroelectric power was essential to sustain China's growing population and Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Hennig et al., 2013; Hofstedt, 2010).

The Mekong River, also known as the Lancang River (referring to the upstream part of Mekong) in China, is one of the most crucial rivers for China's dam-building operations. It has the second-highest hydropower potential, as shown in Table 1. It has become a high priority in China's hydropower development policy to address severe electricity scarcity in highly industrialized cities (Magee, 2006). Through hydropower stations on the Lancang River, China sold electricity to other Southeast Asian countries (Goh, 2004).

Since the Lancang River is one of the most important sources of hydropower, dam projects in Yunnan Province directly affect China's international activities on the Mekong River. Table 2 shows that China currently has seven active hydropower dams along the river (Chuthong et al., 2019). Additionally, China is developing five additional dams in the upper cascade of the Lancang River (Biba, 2018).

Table 1. The hydropower potential of rivers in the Yunnan Province

Watershed	Hydropower potential		Exploitable hydropower resources	
	Theoretical potential (Megawatt)	Theoretical generation (Terrawatt-hour/year)	Exploitable potential (Megawatt)	Exploitable generation (Terrawatt-hour/year)
Jinsha (Yangtze)	40,282.5	352.87	35,435.3	195.491
Nanpan (Xi jiang/Zhu jiang)	4,246.5	37.2	1,870.2	9.283
HongYuan (Red)	9,800	85.85	3,575.1	20.124
Lancang (Mekong)	25,500.9	223.39	19,686.0	106.33
Nu (Salween)	19,740.1	172.92	10,306.3	61.505
Irawaddy	4,102	35.93	295.0	1.72
Provincial total	103,672	908.16	71,167.9	394.453

Source: Li as cited in Magee (2006).

Table 2. List of Chinese Hydropower Dams along the Lancang-Mekong River

Hydropower Project	Commission (Year)	Installed capacity (Megawatt)	Mean annual energy (Gigawatt)	Height (m)	Total storage (km ³)	Active storage (km ³)
Manwan	1993	1,670	7,784	132	0.50	0.12
Dachaoshan	2001	1,350	7,021	111	0.94	0.36
Jinghong	2008	1,750	7,858	108	1.14	0.31
Xiaowan	2009	4,200	18,885	294.5	14.91	9.90
Gongguoqiao	2011	9,00	4,041	105	0.35	0.05
Nuozhadu	2012	5,850	23,912	261.5	23.70	11.34
Miaowei	2017	1,400	5,999	131.3	0.75	0.17

Source: Chuthong et al. (2019).

The construction of hydropower dams has been the sole reason for China's unilateral stance on the Mekong River. The unwillingness to accept the UNWC's proposal reflected China's view of transboundary water management, namely that national interests and sovereignty over resource exploitation within its borders take precedence (Menniken, 2007). International cooperation on this issue would require China to take greater responsibility, which may erode its established advantage and undermine its domestic interests (Walker, 2014). Although China was not the only riparian nation to build hydropower dams along the Mekong River, it is undisputed that China remains the sole monopoly because it is the uppermost region, with 21% of the river basin in Yunnan before the river flows downstream (Sung, 2015).

Hence, tensions between China and other riparian countries on water resource usage were unavoidable. The downstream part of the Mekong accused China of being uncooperative, as Chinese dams have been proven to negatively affect their water access to Mekong River (Zhang & Zhang, 2021). For instance, China's lack of transparency regarding

dam schedules and construction on the Mekong River results in unpredictable large-scale water releases or drought, which, on several occasions, has damaged fishing communities and agricultural areas downstream (Eyler, 2022). Aside from rising environmental concerns, China's exclusive control of the Mekong water flow was seen as a political threat to other riparian states (Biba, 2018).

However, China's unilateralist nature changed drastically when LMC was launched at the 17th China-ASEAN Leaders' Meeting in November 2014 (Lancang-Mekong Cooperation, 2017b). LMC cooperation was guided by three pillars (political and security, economy and sustainable development, and social, cultural, and people-to-people exchanges) and five priority areas (interconnectivity, water resources, cross-border economy, production capacity, and agriculture and poverty reduction) for long-term cooperation in the GMS (Lancang-Mekong Cooperation, 2017a). The establishment of LMC indicates China's new approach in the GMS as a regional leader in transboundary water politics because its primary purpose was to enhance cooperation with downstream nations:

We, LMC countries, need to jointly uphold peace, stability, and tranquility in our region, and work hand in hand to pursue cooperation and development. We need to maintain the hard-won momentum of growth in our region, and build a community of shared future that features solidarity, mutual assistance, equal-footed consultation, shared benefits and win-win cooperation. This way, we will be able to ensure that in the Lancang-Mekong region, people's lives continue to improve, countries enjoy even broader prospects of development, and harmony and tranquility continue to prevail (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2016).

China's commitment to LMC is very high, as the initiator and principal investor. In 2018, China invested approximately US\$300 million to improve the livelihoods of downstream countries through LMC-supported cooperative projects (Qing, 2018). This mechanism has helped approximately 666 development projects (X. Li, 2022), including facilitating other riparian countries, especially Cambodia and Laos, in building hydropower dams on their share of the Mekong River (The ASEAN Post team, 2019). Moreover, LMC is also interested in enhancing multilateralism to address Mekong issues by welcoming other regional institutions for further cooperation. As Li Keqiang stated:

We further welcome the strengthening of cooperation under existing Mekong subregional cooperation mechanisms, such as the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC), the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) and the ASEAN-Mekong Basin Development Cooperation (AMBDC) and other relevant sub-regional frameworks to support efforts to narrow the development gap in the region (Qing, 2018, pp. 76-77).

This commitment was repeatedly discussed. At the 5th LMC Foreign Ministers' Meeting in February 2020, China expressed interest in working multilaterally with MRC, GMS, and other related frameworks, in contrast to its initial decision to decline any membership invitation (Grünwald, 2021). This commitment was shown by the establishment of the Lancang Mekong Water Resources Cooperation Center (LMWRCC), a collaboration between

LMC and MRC, funded by the LMC Special Fund to fulfill its promise of transparent hydrological datasharing (Lao News Agency, 2018; Y. Li, 2022).

LMC as China's Balance-of-Risk Strategy

Anticipated Changes in China's Relative Power

The balance of risk is a general theory of foreign policy that assesses diplomatic commitments beyond military ones, as long as they have implications for the great power status. Therefore, this research assumes that a great power has a standing similar to that of a hydro-hegemon in hydro-politics, as a country with water-related powers that has gained hydro-hegemony can assert dominance over other riparian nations on water-related issues (Gupta, 2016). Thus, power relations between a great power and its periphery can be paralleled with those between a hydro-hegemon and its river basin, as the power source derives from water attributes.

By understanding China's great power and hydro-hegemonic status in the Mekong's hydro-political environment, it can be inferred that relative power refers to its prestige and reputation in directing transboundary water issues, namely, China's credibility as a regional leader among riparian nations and its ability to monopolize the Mekong River for its own benefit. This research highlights three threats to China's ultimate hydro-hegemony in the GMS: (1) Thailand's ambition as a regional leader within the Lower Mekong Basin (LMB); (2) the United States' geopolitical interests in the GMS; and (3) the involvement of other extra-regional actors in the Mekong region to expand their respective influence abroad.

First, the GMS is important to Thailand's expansion of its regional influence. Specifically, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam (known as the CLMV countries) have been the center of Thailand's economic and developmental diplomacy in Southeast Asia (Chambers & Bunyavejchewin, 2019). Thailand has the geographical advantage of being closest to the remaining downstream countries, granting it a strategic position to foster stronger bonds with other Mekong countries against China (Po & Primiano, 2021; Parks, 2021). For instance, Thailand promoted the CLMVT framework rather than CLMV to include Thailand in the mix (Chambers & Bunyavejchewin, 2019). However, Thailand's cooperation with other lower Mekong countries became a threat when Thailand expressed concerns about China's unsustainable hydropower projects on the Mekong River, leading to the intention to counter China's influence by gathering more allies in the region, especially in the LMB (Po & Primiano, 2021).

The Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS) in 2003 marked the establishment of the multilateral framework in Thailand's water diplomacy, focusing on regional development, prosperity, and cooperation across various fields (Thailand International Cooperation Agency, 2013). Through the ACMECS Trust Fund, Thailand contributes US\$200 million to development projects, twice the amount provided by the CLMV countries (Po & Primiano, 2021). Thailand also proposed the International Conference on Sustainable Development in the Lancang-Mekong Sub-Region (ICSD) in 2012

to facilitate exclusive multilateral dialogues between China and other Mekong riparians on water management under Thailand's leadership. However, China refused (Busbarat et al., 2021). Overall, both ACMECS and ICSD demonstrated that Thailand's rise in leadership was seen as a threat because it strengthened the Lower Mekong's solidarity against China.

Second, the United States-China competition in the international sphere drives the United States to enter the Mekong region to counter China's growing influence in Southeast Asia (Yoshimatsu, 2015). As a result, the GMS can be considered the new battleground for the U.S. and China to vie for leadership in Southeast Asia. Moreover, the U.S. has close ties with Thailand and Vietnam because of their shared stance against China. The United States states its official support for ACMECS and Thailand's leadership in the GMS, thereby further consolidating Thailand's position in the region (United States Department of State, 2022). Vietnam shares the United States's view that China's assertiveness in Southeast Asia is a geopolitical threat, especially regarding the South China Sea issue. This shared view prompts Vietnam to request the United States assistance in addressing environmental harms caused by Chinese dams in downstream areas (Manyin, 2010).

Furthermore, the United States proactively seeks to gain favor with other Mekong countries by initiating a multilateral framework. The United States launched the Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI) in 2009 to foster stronger cooperation with the lower Mekong countries in the areas of environment, infrastructure development, education, health, and other sectors (United States Department of State, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 2019). LMI established the platform "Friends of the Lower Mekong" (FLM) to facilitate development projects in the region, which successfully invited Japan, Australia, South Korea, New Zealand, and other international institutions, such as the European Union, the World Bank, and ADB, as donors (USAID, 2013). Consequently, those countries' involvement became a more imminent threat to China because U.S. cooperation with the lower Mekong countries focused on sustainable development and water management (Yoshimatsu, 2015). This directly contrasts with China's pragmatic approach toward building hydropower dams for economic sustainability and its tendency to resolve disputes with downstream nations through economic aid and infrastructure development.

Third, other than Thailand and the United States, extra-regional actors such as Japan, South Korea, Australia, and India each initiated competing regional frameworks to expand their international influence in the GMS (Po & Primiano, 2021). First, Japan became the most involved through the Japan-Mekong Summit since 2009, resulting in an ongoing framework called the Mekong-Japan Action Plan 63 and also known as the Tokyo Strategy 2012, focusing on official development assistance and sustainable development (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2009a, 2009b, 2013). Second, South Korea's initiative, the Mekong-Republic of Korea (ROK) Partnership, was created in 2011 to support the region's infrastructure and water management through funding and projects with the lower Mekong nations (Mekong Institute, n.d.). Furthermore, the lower Mekong countries also engage in similar cooperation with India through the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation Initiative (MGCI) and with Australia through the Greater Mekong Water Resources Program (GMWRP), both of which focus on water issues (Mekong-Ganga Cooperation, n.d.; Pech & Mather, 2017).

The involvement of these extra-regional actors enhanced the competitiveness of multilateral frameworks in the region, posing a threat to China's influence. This was especially true since the most popular area of cooperation with CLMVT was sustainable development, which directly sparked tension between China and the rest of the Mekong riparian countries. Moreover, external assistance on the issue was very much welcomed by downstream countries, given their dependence on the Mekong River for survival. Considering CLMVT's asymmetrical power imbalance against China in the region, it is expected that more developmental projects offered by strong extra-regional powers will help financially and geopolitically. Finally, threats coming from Thailand, the U.S., and other extra-regional powers may trigger changes in the relative distribution of power in the future. Since this anticipated change is unfavorable to China's influence in the Mekong region, China is incentivized to implement expansionist policies to prevent it.

China's Expectation Level

The increasing involvement of other powers in the GMS posed a big challenge to China's relative power. In response, Chinese decision-makers would attempt to set a new status quo as the expectation level. Given that China's decision-making power is heavily centralized around Xi Jinping's interests as the state's leader, analysis of China's foreign policies must also incorporate Xi Jinping's views and expectations as an intervening variable within the balance-of-risk framework (Wang, 2017). In general, China is known for its 'peaceful rise.' The term is used to describe that China's rising power is not a threat to the current international structure because "no matter how the international landscape may evolve and how strong we may become, China will never pursue hegemony or expansion, nor will it seek to create spheres of influence" (Xi, 2017). This highlights China's intention to integrate harmoniously as a major player that respects each nation's rights and interests by following the international system established by the United States leadership and the UN.

Thus, China's interests are reflected by the concept of "The Chinese Dream", which Xi Jinping defined as China's ambition to restore its international status and acquire national rejuvenation as a way to take back what it has lost during "the century of national humiliation" to imperialists (Wang, 2014). These concepts eventually became the basis of China's policy in Southeast Asia. It is a mutually beneficial outlook on international politics from the Chinese perspective:

We cannot realize the Chinese Dream without a peaceful international environment, a stable international order, or the understanding, support, and help of the rest of the world. The realization of the Chinese Dream will bring greater opportunities to other countries and contribute to global peace and development (Xi, 2017, p. 574).

Therefore, while China strives to be a major power guided by Chinese values in opposition to the current Western idealism, the nation also wishes to remain open and cooperative. This can be reflected in Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which is designed to be an open platform for cooperation and to uphold and foster an open world economy under both the Chinese and capitalist economic systems (Xi, 2017). However, another point to be

underlined is the importance China places on its image as a “good major power country” in achieving these ideals. China sought to be portrayed as an inclusive international leader. This was later highlighted in Xi Jinping’s speech on the 95th Anniversary of the Founding of the Communist Party of China in 2016:

China’s opening drive is not a solo act. Rather, it is an invitation open to all. It is a pursuit not to establish China’s own sphere of influence, but to support cooperative development of all countries. It is meant to build not China’s own backyard, but a garden shared by all countries (Xi, 2016).

China’s foreign policy nature hinted at its ambitions in the GMS. Southeast Asia has been regarded as China’s periphery since the early 1980s, when the nation launched the “periphery policy” or “good neighborhood policy” to maintain peaceful relations with Asian countries (Zhao, 1999). China became the “core” in this relationship not only because of its superior relative power compared to Southeast Asian nations but also because the region was heavily dependent on China for economic support since the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997 (Zhao, 1999).

China’s main hydro-political interests in the GMS can be summed up in the right-protection and stability-protection concepts. The right protection means safeguarding China’s right to develop the water resources of the upstream Mekong River passing through its territory. At the same time, the latter refers to the interest in maintaining China’s international image and in reducing the negative impacts of its hydropower dams on the stability of its relationships with other Mekong riparian countries (Zhang & Li, 2020). Even though the Mekong River’s physical sustainability is part of China’s interests, the Chinese government has always prioritized efficient water governance because it enhances the rulers’ national legitimacy (Xie & Warner, 2021). In addressing water-related risks, such as scarcity, unequal distribution, or unsustainability, China had to adopt risk-averse strategies. These strategies include a state-centric approach to securing water resources, even if this affected its international stance (Xie & Warner, 2021). Risk aversion was favorable, as China’s unilateral actions in the GMS fulfilled.

However, the status quo becomes unfavorable when unilateral hydropower dam construction drew criticism from the LMB (Zhang & Zhang, 2021). Although the GMS is just a periphery with less power than China, the tension created also provides room for development in the downstream area, thereby disadvantaging China. When there is a possibility that international reputation might be harmed, China shifted its priority towards ‘stability protection’ by improving goodwill among other Mekong riparians (Zhang & Li, 2020). Maintaining stable relations with the downstream Mekong is crucial, since throughout this period China lack the soft power to secure compliance from lower Mekong countries and mainly relied on its superior material power and upstream position to advance its hydropower agenda in the river (Zhang & Zhang, 2021). In the worst-case scenario, China’s inability to maintain goodwill would incentivize CLMVT to strengthen its ties with the United States and other extra-regional actors, giving the downstream nations more leverage and increasing extra-regional involvement in Southeast Asia (Gong, 2020).

To achieve 'stability protection', China needs to increase its influence as a hydro-hegemon and repair its reputation as a cooperative upstream nation by using water diplomacy in the GMS (Zhang & Zhang, 2021). Therefore, regional cooperation within a multilateral framework is the most ideal way to address China's growing threat in the GMS, as it fosters trust among the riparian states involved and helps them achieve common goals without sparking water conflicts (Y. Feng et al., 2019). This move also aims to reduce the intensity of other Mekong countries' relationships with extra-regional powers (Gong, 2020). Therefore, China's expectation is to emerge as a leader that strives to ensure regional stability through multilateralism and a good neighborhood, eventually expelling extra-regional influence from the GMS.

China's Loss-Aversion Strategy: LMC up to ASEAN

China's anticipated relative power decline, driven by the influence of Thailand, the United States, and other extra-regional powers, contrasts with its expectation of maintaining a stable relationship with the other Mekong riparians. Therefore, LMC is created as a means to address China's expectations and counter threats in the GMS, in order to preserve its international reputation and prestige as a hydro-hegemon. LMC is considered a great power's intervention in the balance-of-risk theory because it has the same purpose of dominating a peripheral region. This means that LMC is also expansionist, seeking to expand China's influence beyond being merely a strong upstream nation into other areas of cooperation in the GMS.

To understand the function of LMC in China's diplomacy, it is important to recognize that LMC was established in light of anticipated losses that might arise if China stayed unilateral, rather than the gains it could acquire in the long run. China's decision-making process highlighted three main anticipated losses. First is the loss of influence over Thailand in the Mekong subregion. Thailand's initiatives would only strengthen the solidarity of the lower Mekong countries, which could be seen as a loss for China because they increase the power of downstream countries to pressure China collectively. Second, China's hydro-hegemony is threatened by the growing ties between extra-regional powers and CLMVT. Japan, South Korea, India, and Australia can be categorized as close allies of the United States whose presence in the GMS indirectly challenges China's position. The presence of the United States and its allies not only serves as a counterweight to China but also provides funding for sustainability projects around the Mekong River. Lastly, diminishing influence in the GMS would make it harder for China to exploit the region as its periphery. China needs unchallenged power to build hydropower dams across the Lancang River to meet domestic demand for hydroelectricity, which is detrimental to its growing economy. This interest currently requires connectivity with other Mekong riparians on infrastructure, economy, and diplomacy. However, if the upstream-downstream tension between China and CLMVT were to worsen, it would harm China's hydro-hegemony by providing more opportunities for extra-regional powers to interfere (Po & Primiano, 2021). Since a riparian states's hydro-political power is detrimental to its geopolitical position, this will further complicate China's relationship with CLMVT, ASEAN, and the United States (Zhang & Zhang, 2021).

At last, these anticipated losses may affect China's overall economic cooperation in Southeast Asia outside of the Mekong. Previously, China's interest in Southeast Asia was reflected in its growing economic activities and its relationship with ASEAN. China has actively maintained ASEAN's trust by participating in ASEAN+3 and the ASEAN Regional Forum, and by serving as the main financial supporter of ASEAN members during the Asian financial crisis (Kee, 2022). In the 2017 white paper on Asia-Pacific security cooperation, China stated its interest in building a Lancang-Mekong community among China, ASEAN, Asia, and the Asia-Pacific (The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2017). Moreover, the development of the Mekong River environment has also been a key point of interest for ASEAN-China (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Indonesia, 2012). Hence, China's stance on Mekong issues would also negatively affect its economic cooperation with ASEAN, resulting in a greater loss for the state.

Overall, if China remained unilateral, its great-power influence in the GMS would be threatened, resulting in a relative loss of power, as anticipated in Southeast Asia. Prioritizing anticipated losses, however, does not mean there are no anticipated gains to be harvested from LMC. It is just that the prospects of "gains" are only additional bonuses after China succeeds in overcoming the anticipated losses in the status quo. Even if they may benefit China, these "gains" alone cannot be considered the main reason for LMC's establishment. For example, LMC can arguably be used to enhance economic cooperation with ASEAN nations. However, this benefit alone is not enough to convince Chinese leaders to abandon their more advantageous unilateral position, especially since it already has many other foreign policies focused on economic relations. Regional cooperation, such as the BRI and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), or economic diplomacy in ASEAN, is a better alternative for discussing economic benefits than involving sensitive transboundary water issues in the Mekong region.

Another potential gain for LMC is fostering cooperation in Mekong water management, which may enhance China's regional reputation. Before LMC, China was known for using its hydro-hegemony power. On the other hand, being part of a multilateral framework focused on water management requires China to be involved in the Mekong River's sustainability, another burden for a nation whose initial goal was to extract as much water as possible from the Lancang River. Thus, anticipated gains from establishing LMC are insufficient to persuade decision-makers to shift their approach. In contrast, anticipated losses from failing to establish LMC pose a greater urgency for China's grand foreign policy in Southeast Asia.

When anticipated losses outweigh anticipated gains, China adopts a risk-acceptance strategy and becomes more expansionist. Creating a multilateral framework becomes China's loss-aversion strategy, because it understands that its uncooperative behavior on subregional agendas raises suspicions among other Mekong countries. Moreover, openly denying the harmful hydropower projects through LMC is also internally acceptable for China because it aligns with President Xi's foreign policy objective of promoting multilateralism and positioning China as a leader in international agenda-setting. In general, the LMC has two main roles in the recovery of China's international reputation as a cooperative hydro-hegemon.

First, LMC serves as a tool to prevent any actor from expanding their influence in the GMS. Conceptually, LMC is designed to encompass multiple areas of cooperation simultaneously and is more flexible than the frameworks initiated by the United States or other external powers. Moreover, lower Mekong countries are more inclined to join the LMC because it is the only multilateral framework in the Mekong region in which China, the most powerful upstream nation, participates as a permanent member (Busbarat et al., 2021; Po & Primiano, 2021; Gong, 2020; Wu, 2020). By making LMC exclusive towards Mekong riparian states, CLMVT is closer to China and less likely to reach out to extra-regional powers on Mekong issues.

Second, LMC ensures that China has the greatest influence over regional agenda-setting, benefiting its hydropower interests. Through LMC, China can shape some regional projects as common interests, casting a more positive light on its activities in the Mekong River. For example, when China announced its willingness to share hydrological data with the lower Mekong countries to demonstrate its commitment to LMC, the announcement was well received. It portrayed China as a cooperative riparian (Cambodia Ministry of Information, 2020). However, through selective agenda-setting, China can continue its dam-building on the Lancang River until very recently (see Table 2) with less upstream-downstream tension.

The two roles of LMC are projected to achieve China's expectations in the new status quo, in which China leads the GMS without extra-regional interference and becomes the regional rule-maker. Subsequently, LMC may also foster a closer relationship with ASEAN by utilizing Mekong issues as an entry point. China's strategy was to develop the Mekong as a subregional identity alongside the CLMVT through a shared relationship with the Mekong River (Zhang & Zhang, 2021). The formation of the Mekong as a new identity and part of China's efforts in enhancing China-ASEAN cooperation was further explained at the 1st LMC Leaders' Meeting:

Lancang-Mekong cooperation is forged among countries that drink the same water, water that nourishes everything without causing contention. The five Mekong River countries are important members of ASEAN, and China is a strong supporter of ASEAN integration and community-building. The Lancang-Mekong Cooperation mechanism (LMC), as a useful complement to China-ASEAN cooperation, helps promote economic and social development of its members, narrow their development gaps, and upgrade overall cooperation between China and ASEAN (Keqiang, 2016).

Therefore, LMC was designed as a multilateral initiative that connects other riparian countries with China, as an extension of China's diplomacy with ASEAN. By leveraging transboundary water issues, China found an opportunity to deepen its involvement in ASEAN affairs and expand LMC's lines of cooperation into other sectors. This explains why, although water management was the main agenda, LMC eventually included other forms of cooperation, including economic regionalization plans with its Southeast Asian members (Wang et al., 2022). Economic integration was identified as one of LMC's key future directions during the 7th LMC Foreign Ministers' Meeting, including infrastructure projects such as the China-Laos Railway, China-Laos-Thailand Railway, and the New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor (Mission of the People's Republic of China to the European Union, 2022).

Ultimately, LMC pursued a mission similar to BRI's economic statecraft in Southeast Asia, aiming to expand its economy overseas (Chheang, 2018).

Aside from the economy, LMC's flexibility in agenda-setting can be seen as a strategy for China to keep things open-ended, allowing it to shape geopolitical agendas in line with the prevailing context (Wu, 2020). When China proposed enhancing cooperation in six key areas (water resources, agriculture, education, the digital economy, and public health), it came right after the U.S. announced the launch of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) (Anqi & Cui, 2022). This demonstrates the importance of LMC to China's geopolitical interests in Southeast Asia. According to Wu (2020), LMC can also weaken ASEAN's collective power as a regional institution against China by enhancing its relationship with CLMVT, also known as ASEAN's mainland members, which have several separate interests from the maritime members. One occasion where a divided ASEAN was advantageous towards China's position was when the ASEAN-China Special Foreign Ministers Meeting in 2016 failed to produce any joint statements regarding the South China Sea issue, reflecting ASEAN members' differing stances on cooperation with China just two months after the establishment of LMC in the same year (Middleton & Allouche, 2016).

According to Taliaferro's theory, China fits the character of a great power that is more sensitive to anticipated losses. China responded by pursuing a risky expansionist policy under a new, more favorable status quo to prevent these prospects. LMC is used as a tool of loss aversion, leveraging its leadership as a great power and hydro-hegemon in the GMS to control regional water agendas. Given its impact on broader geopolitical dynamics in Southeast Asia as its periphery, there is an urgent need to strengthen its influence as a hydro-hegemon by maintaining a strong reputation and fostering closer ties with the CLMVT.

Despite its ability to maintain both China's hydropower activities on the Lancang River and a good relationship with CLMVT, another consequence of focusing on anticipated losses is the risk acceptance of other potential losses caused by a change in the status quo. The most apparent risk of LMC is the decision to share its interest in water management. This means that China would have to drop its long-standing defense, potentially leaving it unable to exploit the waters of the Lancang River as much as before. Moreover, expanding LMC's cooperation line to sectors beyond water management can complicate the clear division between economic and water cooperation that it previously had with Mekong countries. In the end, LMC is not purely limited to transboundary water issues but is intertwined with China's geopolitical interests.

The balance-of-risk theory is technically unable to decide whether a foreign policy is inherently harmful or beneficial because it only serves as a tool to explain a great power's judgment in weighing a policy's possible gains and losses. While the purpose of this research is not to declare LMC a harmful policy, the risks China incurred in initiating LMC are similar to those of an intervention that could provoke a backlash from the targeted peripheral region. For instance, if perceived negatively, LMC might give the impression that China wanted to dominate the GMS, thereby worsening Mekong riparians' distrust of China and intensifying the involvement of extra-regional actors (Gong, 2020). This means that China's decision to rely

on LMC was also a gamble that could either address China's concerns or exacerbate tensions with the Mekong countries.

Conclusion

This research concludes that China's approach in the GMS shifted to multilateralism to avoid anticipated losses from maintaining a unilateral stance. In response to the increasing influence of other actors in the GMS, whether from downstream countries or extra-regional actors who desire to challenge China's position as a hydro-hegemon, China's expectations shifted from prioritizing the freedom to use the Lancang River for hydropower purposes to maintaining stable relationships with other Mekong countries. By establishing the LMC, China rebranded itself as a good hydro-hegemon and great power in the subregion. In doing so, LMC becomes a tool to strengthen China's position in shaping regional agendas in line with its hydropower.

This research offers three findings regarding China's main consideration in establishing the LMC as its primary strategy in the GMS. First, China is more sensitive to the possibility of losing some of its relative power to external influences rather than pursuing material gains in the region. Thus, the creation of LMC is projected to secure China's leadership, deepen its relationship with lower Mekong countries, and exclude extra-regional actors from the subregion. Second, President Xi Jinping's peaceful rise contributed to the use of multilateralism to resolve transboundary water issues in the Mekong River. Lastly, this article also proved that foreign policy formulation is an imperfect process. Even if LMC was created to avoid losses, its practice also posed the risk of abandoning its comfortable position as the ultimate policy-maker in the Mekong and exacerbating tensions with lower Mekong countries.

Overall, LMC is a strategic move for China to solidify its position in the GMS. However, the authors believe that LMC's flexibility in agenda-setting has led to a significant shift in focus, with previously mediating water management issues now seen as an extension of China's economic interests in Southeast Asia and ASEAN. As time passed, developmental projects under LMC had become strikingly similar to BRI's infrastructure investments. To the authors, this results in convergence of objectives between the LMC and BRI, making it difficult to distinguish the LMC's sole contribution to China's transboundary water politics and raising the question of whether the LMC is merely an extension of China's long-standing interest in expanding its influence in ASEAN. Supposedly, if China's strategy is to direct the focus of the Lancang-Mekong countries toward regional development issues while keeping its

China's shifted policy towards Mekong countries, which is more inclusive, cooperative, and grounded in multilateralism, may have increased ASEAN's relevance, attracting the constructive involvement of great powers in the region. This may have benefited ASEAN, as regional cooperation consists of peripheral countries that enables them to engage with great powers cooperatively. This model shall be deployed and replicated towards other great

powers, so that they shall participate in ASEAN to avoid losses and enhance their gains in global politics.

Acknowledgement

The Authors would like to express our utmost gratitude to the Parahyangan Catholic University for its support of this research. It is an honour to witness the growth of this research paper from an undergraduate thesis to a piece of academic research article.

About The Authors

Idil Syawfi is an Assistant Professor at the Department of International Relations, Parahyangan Catholic University, where he has been a faculty member since 2011. His research and teaching center on great power politics, foreign policy, strategic studies, and International Relations in Southeast Asia and Indo-Pacific. He has published in outlets including Jurnal Ilmiah Hubungan Internasional, RSIS Commentaries, The Habibie Center's edited volumes, Global: Jurnal Politik Internasional, Intermestic: Journal of International Studies, and writes public commentary for Kompas, The Jakarta Post, The Conversation, and 360info.

Cherrie Angel Wijaya is an alumnus of the Department of International Relations at Parahyangan Catholic University. During her undergraduate studies, she had a special interest in security and socio-economic issues, as well as power politics in Asian countries, focusing on regional dynamics between East Asia and Southeast Asia. Currently, she works in the private sector industry.

References

- Anqi, F., & Fandi, C. (2022, July 4). *China proposes 6 programs with Lancang-Mekong countries despite 'customary' Western provocation of ties*. Global Times. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202207/1269760.shtml>
- Bennett, A. (2004). Case study methods: Design, use, and comparative advantages. In D. F. Sprinz & Y. Wolinsky-Nahmias (Eds.), *Models, Numbers, and Cases: Methods for Studying International Relations* (pp. 19-55). The University of Michigan Press.
- Biba, S. (2012). China's continuous dam-building on the Mekong River. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 42(4), 603-628. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2012.712257>
- Biba, S. (2018). China's 'old' and 'new' Mekong River politics: the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation from a comparative benefit-sharing perspective. *Water International*, 43(5), 622-641. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02508060.2018.1474610>
- Bryman, A. (2012). *Social research methods* (4th Ed.) Oxford University Press.

- Busbarat, P., Bunyavejchewin, P., & Suporn, T. (2021). China and Mekong regionalism: A reappraisal of the formation of Lancang-Mekong Cooperation. *Asian Politics & Policy*, 13(2), 193-211. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aspp.12575>
- Cambodia Ministry of Information. (2020, Aug. 25). *MRC welcomes China's pledge to share more Mekong data*. <https://www.information.gov.kh/articles/1966>
- Chambers, P., & Bunyavejchewin, P. (2019). Thailand's foreign economic policy toward mainland Southeast Asia. *ISEAS Perspective*, 2019(64).
- Chheang, V. (2018, August 15). *China's economic statecraft in Southeast Asia*. ISEAS. <https://vannarithchheang.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/chinas-economic-statecraft-in-southeast-asia.pdf>
- Chuthong, J., Liu, H., Xu, F., Cheng, D., Zhang, W., Leh, M., & Lacombe, G. (2019). *Joint research on hydrological impacts of the Lancang hydropower cascade on downstream extreme events: Final report*. Mekong River Commission.
- Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Indonesia (2012, November 19). *China-ASEAN Cooperation in 2012*. https://id.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/sgdt/201211/t20121119_2048381.htm
- Eyler, B. (2022). China as An Upstream Riparian State: Implications for Southeast Asia. In The International Institute for Strategic Studies (Ed.) *Asia-Pacific Regional Security Assessment 2022* (pp. 248-273). Routledge.
- Feng, W., Lei, Z., & Zhou, Z. (2022). Mekong river basin international cooperation: The organizational and geopolitical mobilizations. *Proceedings of the 2021 International Conference on Public Art and Human Development (ICPAHD 2021)*, 638, 323-328. <https://doi.org/10.2991/assehr.k.220110.063>
- Feng, Y., Wang, W., Suman, D., Yu, S., & He D. (2019). Water cooperation priorities in the Lancang-Mekong river basin based on cooperative events since the Mekong river commission establishment. *Chinese Geographical Science*, 29(1), 58-69. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11769-019-1016-4>
- Goh, E. (2004). *China in the Mekong River basin: the regional security implications of the resource development on the Lancang Jiang* (RSIS Working Paper, No. 69). Nanyang Technological University.
- Gong, X. (2020). Lancang-Mekong cooperation: Minilateralism in institutional building and its implications. In B. Singh & S. Teo (Eds.) *Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific: The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Mechanism, and ASEAN* (pp. 57-73). Routledge.
- Grünwald, R. (2021, July 1). *Lancang-Mekong cooperation: Overcoming the trust deficit on the Mekong*. ISEAS. <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2021-89-lancang-mekong-cooperation-overcoming-the-trust-deficit-on-the-mekong-by-richard-grunwald/>
- Gupta, J. (2016). The watercourses convention, hydro-hegemony and transboundary water issues. *The International Spectator*, 51(3), 118-131. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2016.1198558>
- Keqiang, L. (2016, March 23). *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 of the People's Republic of China. <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/gjhdq665435/2675665437/2696663396/2698663400/202406/t2024060711407051.html>

- Haefner, A. (2013). Regional environmental security: cooperation and challenges in the Mekong subregion. *Global Change, Peace & Security*, 25(1), 27-41. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14781158.2013.758099>
- Hennig, T., Wang, W., Feng, Y., Ou, X., & He, D. (2013). Review of Yunnan's hydropower development. Comparing small and large hydropower projects regarding their environmental implications and socio-economic consequences. *Renewable and Sustainable Energy Reviews*, 27, 585-595. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.rser.2013.07.023>
- Hofstedt, T. (2010). China's water scarcity and its implications for domestic and international stability. *Asian Affairs: An American Review*, 37(2), 71-83. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00927671003791389>
- Kee, K. K. (2022, January 21). *The China-ASEAN relations in the era of big power competition*. China Today. http://www.chinatoday.com.cn/ctenglish/2018/commentaries/202201/t20220121_800273555.html
- Lancang-Mekong Cooperation. (2017, December 14). *About "3+5 cooperation mechanism*. http://www.lmcchina.org/eng/gylmhz/jzjs/hzkj/202512/t20251230_11790259.html
- Lancang-Mekong Cooperation. (2021, Aug). *About Lancang-Mekong Cooperation*. http://www.lmcchina.org/eng/gylmhz/jj/202512/t20251224_11782624.html
- Lao News Agency. (2018, Nov. 7). *Mekong Lancang Cooperation: China welcomes MRC's call for a closer tie*. <https://kpl.gov.la/detail.aspx?id=40375>
- Lee, S., & Shin, N. (2026). The emergence of the Lancang Mekong cooperation and its impacts on the Mekong river basin. *International Journal of River Basin Management*, 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15715124.2026.2636051>
- Li, X. (2022, July 19). *Lancang-mekong cooperation built on mutual political trust, voluntary participation: Chinese ambassador to Myanmar*. Global Times. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202207/1270900.shtml>
- Li, Y. (2022, July 4). *Joint study between LMC water center and MRC officially launched*. http://www.lmcwater.org.cn/dynamic_news/202207/t20220706_35930.html
- Magee, D. (2006). Powershed politics: Yunnan hydropower under great western development. *The China Quarterly*, 185, 23-41. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741006000038>
- Manyin, M. E. (2010). *U.S.-Vietnam relations in 2010: Current issues and implications for U.S. policy*. Congressional Research Service.
- Mekong Institute. (n.d.). *Mekong-Republic of Korea cooperation fund*. <https://mekonginstitute.org/what-we-do/mkcf-fund/introduction/>
- Mekong River Commission. (n.d.-a). *Mekong River Commission*. <https://www.mrcmekong.org/mekong-river-commission/>
- Mekong River Commission. (n.d.-b). *History*. <https://www.mrcmekong.org/history/>
- Mekong-Ganga Cooperation. (n.d.). *Mekong-Ganga Cooperation*. <https://mgc.gov.in/about>
- Menniken, T. (2007). China's Performance in International Resource Politics: Lessons from the Mekong. *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs*, 29(1), 97-120.

- Middleton, C., & Allouche, J. (2016). Watershed or powershed? Critical hydropolitics, China and the 'Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Framework'. *The International Spectator*, 51(3), 100-117. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2016.1209385>
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. (2009a, November 7). *Tokyo Declaration of the First Meeting between the Heads of the Governments of Japan and the Mekong region countries: Establishment of a New Partnership for the Common Flourishing Future*. <https://worldjpn.net/documents/texts/IPSEA/20091107.D2E.html>
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. (2009b, November 7). *Mekong-Japan Action Plan 63*. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/mekong/summit0911/action.html>
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. (2013, December 14). *Mid-term review of "Tokyo Strategy 2012 for Mekong-Japan Cooperation"*. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/sa/sea1/page3e000145.html>
- Mission of the People's Republic of China to the European Union. (2022, July 5). *Wang Yi Talks about Six Key Future Directions of Lancang-Mekong Cooperation*. http://eu.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/mhs/202207/t20220705_10715479.htm
- Neuman, W. L. (2014). *Basics of social research: Qualitative & quantitative approaches* (3rd ed.). Pearson Education Limited.
- Parks, T. (2021, November 23). *Can U.S. Assistance Reinvigorate the US-Thai Alliance?*. East West Center. <https://www.eastwestcenter.org/publications/can-us-assistance-reinvigorate-the-us-thai-alliance>
- Pech, S., & Mather, R. (2017). *Evaluative Study: DFAT Greater Mekong Water Resources Program Approach to Policy Dialogue*. Australian Government: Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT).
- Po, S., & Primiano, C. B. (2021). Explaining China's Lancang-Mekong cooperation as an institutional balancing strategy: Dragon guarding the water. *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 75(3), 323-340. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2021.1893266>
- Qing, L. (2018). Progress and future development of Lancang-Mekong cooperation. *China International Studies*, 70, 71-87.
- Singh, B., & Teo, S. (2020). Introduction: Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific. In B. Singh & S. Teo (Eds.) *Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific: The quadrilateral security dialogue, Lancang-Mekong Cooperation mechanism, and ASEAN* (pp. 1-12). Routledge.
- Su, X. (2012). Rescaling the Chinese state and regionalization in the Great Mekong Subregion. *Review of International Political Economy*, 19(3), 501-527. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2011.561129>
- Sung, H. C. (2015). China's geoeconomic strategy: Toward the Riparian States of the Mekong Region. In Y. Santasombat (Ed.), *Impact of China's Rise on the Mekong Region* (pp. 23-52). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137476227_2
- Taliaferro, J. W. (2004a). *Balancing Risks: Great power intervention in the periphery*. Cornell University Press.
- Taliaferro, J. W. (2004b). Power politics and the balance of risk: Hypotheses on great power intervention in the periphery. *Political Psychology*, 25(2), 177-211. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9221.2004.00368.x>
- Thailand International Cooperation Agency. (2013, November 4). *Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS)*. <https://tica-thaigov.mfa.go.th/>

[en/content/40616-ayeyawady-chao-phraya-mekong-economic-cooperation-strategy-\(acmeecs\)?cate=5d7da8d015e39c3fbc0074ab](http://en/content/40616-ayeyawady-chao-phraya-mekong-economic-cooperation-strategy-(acmeecs)?cate=5d7da8d015e39c3fbc0074ab)

- The State Council the People's Republic of China. (2017, January 11). *China's Policies on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation*. http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2017/01/11/content_281475539078636.htm
- U.S. Department of State. (2022, July 9). *The United States-Thailand Relationship*. <https://2021-2025.state.gov/the-united-states-thailand-relationship/>
- United States Department of State, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs. (2019, February 21). *Lower Mekong Initiative*. <https://2021-2025.state.gov/lower-mekong-initiative/>
- USAID. (2013). *Lower Mekong Initiative: Friends of the Lower Mekong*.
- Walker, B. (2014, August 18). *China and India ignore UN watercourses convention*. Dialogue Earth. <https://dialogue.earth/en/climate/7229-china-and-india-ignore-un-watercourses-convention/>
- Wang, R. Y., Liu, X., & Zhang, W. (2022). China's water governmentality and the shaping of hydrosocial territories in the Lancang-Mekong Region. *The China Quarterly*, 252, 1233-1255. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741022000820>
- Wang, S. (2017). Xi Jinping's centralisation of Chinese foreign policy decision-making power. *East Asian Policy*, 9(2), 34-42. <https://doi.org/10.1142/S1793930517000149>
- Wang, Z. (2014). The Chinese Dream: Concept and context. *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, 19, 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11366-013-9272-0>
- Xing, W. (2017). Lancang-Mekong river cooperation and trans-boundary water governance: A Chinese perspective. *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies*, 3(3), 377-393. <https://doi.org/10.1142/S2377740017500233>
- Wu, S. S. (2020). Lancang-Mekong Cooperation: The current state of China's hydro-politics. In B. Singh & S. Teo (Eds.), *Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific: The quadrilateral security dialogue, Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Mechanism, and ASEAN* (pp. 74-87). Routledge.
- Xi, J. (2016, July 1). *Speech by President Xi Jinping at a Ceremony Marking the 95th Anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of China*. CSIS Interpret: China. <https://interpret.csis.org/translations/speech-by-president-xi-jinping-at-a-ceremony-marking-the-95th-anniversary-of-the-founding-of-the-communist-party-of-china/>
- Xi, J. (2017). *The Governance of China II*. Foreign Languages Press Co. Ltd.
- Xie, L., & Warner, J. (2021). The politics of securitization: China's competing security agendas and their impacts on securitizing shared rivers. *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 63(3), 332-361. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2020.1870516>
- Yoshimatsu, H. (2015). The United States, China, and Geopolitics in the Mekong Region. *Asian Affairs: An American Review*, 42(4), 173-194. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00927678.2015.1106757>
- Zhang, H., & Li, M. (2020). China's water diplomacy in the Mekong: A paradigm shift and the role of Yunnan provincial government. *Water International*, 45(4), 347-364. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02508060.2020.1762369>
- Zhang, L., & Zhang, H. (2021). Water diplomacy and China's bid for soft power in the Mekong. *China Review*, 21(4), 39-75.

- Zhao, S. (1999). China's periphery policy and its Asian neighbors. *Security Dialogue*, 30(3), 335-346.
- Zhipeng, B. (2025). A 'golden model' of regional collaboration. China Daily Global. <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202509/05/WS68ba2aeaa3108622abc9ef40.html>