

HYDRO-POLITICS IN THE MEKONG BASIN

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COMMENTARY

The Mekong River is the eleventh largest river in the world extending from China, over 4900km long and flowing through Myanmar , Laos , Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam.

Due to the geographic location and shape of the river basin, it is a transboundary basin that flows through various countries. Thus it is not surprising that conflicts would arise over this river since the water in the basin is a shared resource, supporting 60 million people in SouthEast Asia. Any modifications or political plans implemented by any country over their section of the Mekong River, may have adverse effects on rivers downstream. Thus, the Mekong River is a constant and ongoing source of political dispute among countries who share this geographical location with the river.



Thus China is criticised to be threatening the water security of downstream states and the Mekong basin becomes a geopolitical source of dispute among different countries.



So what has led to the conflict over this huge transboundary basin that is so important to livelihood of its people? In order to meet the huge energy needs of China, which is expected to increase 75% in the next 25 years, they have decided to construct dams across their section of the Mekong river to harness the hydroelectric power to generate power. This may be an eco-friendly method of generating power, however this has detrimental effects on countries downstream. With the construction of a dam, this allows China the power to control water flow downstream, which may deprive downstream states of the volume of discharge flowing through their section of the river.

Not only is China building dams, other countries downstream are also embarking on dam projects in order to secure their water supply and protect their livelihood like Vietnam and Laos. With the increasing number of dams build by upstream countries, what would make of the final water supply that Cambodia, who is located right at the bottom of the Mekong River, would have access to? The geographical location of Cambodia is thus a massive disadvantage for them in this political dispute.

With the disputes, there would of course be an organisation formed to resolve it. The Mekong River Commission consists of the four riparian states tangled in this dispute founded in 1995. They are working towards developing sustainable hydropower with the increasing number of such projects by countries due to the huge economic benefits that arising from undertaking of these projects. For example, China plans to provide funding to help the downstream states in their construction of the dams which was widely popular among the states. However, the advantages can be offset by China simply reducing the discharge released since their geographic location gives them such an advantage over the rest of the states. Thus, resolving such a dispute is definitely not easy since it requires transparency and trust among the different countries which is clearly lacking.