

# Time to Walk the Walk: Mekong-Lancang Cooperation Leaders Meeting

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Originating in the Himalaya, the Mekong River, also known as the Lancang in China, traverses 4,350 kilometers through China and five Southeast Asian countries, Laos, Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia and Vietnam, before emptying into the South China Sea. For centuries, the Mekong has sustained millions of lives and complex biodiversity. No fewer than 70 million people's lives and livelihoods directly depend on the Mekong for agriculture, transportation and fish; and an additional 250 million inhabitants indirectly rely on the river for rice cultivation and protein. In recent years, reports of historically low levels of water in the down-stream sections of the Mekong and drought have raised concerns of potentially irreversible damage to the region's biodiversity, lives and livelihoods.

For Cambodia, the Mekong is the main artery connecting to the Tonle Sap (Great Lake) and numerous tributaries which collectively form an indispensable source for fish, agriculture, horticulture and biodiversity. It was this hydraulic network compounded by the ingenuity of ancient Khmers that gave birth to the world renown Angkorian civilization. Recent reports offer challenging prospects for Cambodia<sup>1</sup> in particular and the lower Mekong Basin in general.<sup>2</sup> Historically low water

flow levels in the lower Mekong reduced the Tonle Sap's seasonal flood plain, plummeting the fish stock which is the primary source of protein for the vast majority of Cambodians. This condition, if persists, poses a potential threat to Cambodia's food security and biodiversity.

The drastic decline in water flow in the lower Mekong and drought also has adverse effects on rain fed and irrigated agriculture in the sub-region. In Vietnam, reduction of fresh water discharge into the Mekong delta has led to rising levels of salination endangering agriculture and horticulture in the delta. Given that Vietnam, Thailand and recently Cambodia are rice exporters, changing water patterns and levels in the lower Mekong could have serious ramifications for food security in Southeast Asia and hence social stability.

Two developments contribute to the low levels of water flow in the downstream Mekong: climate change and hydroelectric dam construction on the upstream of the Mekong i.e., in China and Laos. Eleven dams in China and two in Laos are currently in operation. Governments of countries along the Mekong-Lancang are considering construction of additional dams on the Mekong/Lancang and its

<sup>1</sup> Stehan Lovgren, "Cambodia's Biggest Lake Is Running Dry, Taking Forest and Fish with It," *National Geographic*, August 17, 2020. Online @ < <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/2020/08/cambodia-tonle-sap-lake-running-dry-taking-flooded-forest-fish/>>.

<sup>2</sup> A. Basist and C. Williams, "Mentoring the Quality of Water Flowing Through the Mekong Basin Through Natural (Unimpeded) Conditions, Sustainable Infrastructure Partnership," Thailand, April 10, 2020. Online @ < [https://558353b6-da87-4596-a181-b1f20782dd18.filesusr.com/ugd/bae95b\\_0e0f87104dc8482b99ec91601d853122.pdf?index=true](https://558353b6-da87-4596-a181-b1f20782dd18.filesusr.com/ugd/bae95b_0e0f87104dc8482b99ec91601d853122.pdf?index=true)>.

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tributaries. Some reports and studies suggest that although climate change contributed to low levels of water and drought in the Lower Mekong Basin, hydroelectric dams upstream—particularly those in China—were largely the cause.<sup>3</sup> China has denied these claims and pointed to climate change as the cause.<sup>4</sup> Whether the unprecedented low level of water in the Mekong is caused by upstream hydroelectric dams, the correlation between the increased number of dams and the low level of water in the lower Mekong Basin is of critical concern and requires transparent and honest discussion within an effective transnational institutional framework. Only then can potential ecological disaster be averted and sustainable developments along the Mekong-Lancang be achieved.

In many parts of the world, transboundary water management has limited success due to two factors: riparian countries' prioritization of short-term national interests over long-term transnational interests and weak transnational institutions. Within these contexts, effective and sustainable management of Mekong-Lancang water requires a strong transnational institution and commitment from member states toward long-term sustainable management of the water resources of the Mekong-Lancang. As far as a transnational institutional framework is concerned, it was not until 1995 that Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam established the Mekong River Commission (MRC); its core objective is to coordinate water management of the Mekong. China, with its rising economic and geopolitical influence and a riparian status of the Mekong's upstream, holds only observer status within the MRC. Given the asymmetrical power between China and the remaining riparian countries, the MRC cannot serve as an effective mechanism for

sustainable management of the Mekong-Lancang without China's full and active participation.

With its rising economy, China has become active in shaping global and regional economies and geopolitics through bilateral and multilateral mechanisms. Following the inauguration of the Belt and Road Initiative—a broad scheme to deepen global interconnectivity with special emphasis on comprehensive South-South developments—China in 2015 initiated the formation of Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Framework (LMC). LMC's scope is multi-dimensional encompassing not only water management of the Mekong-Lancang but also other vital areas for inclusive and sustainable development including health, infrastructure, agriculture, trade and investment.<sup>5</sup> During this year Mekong-Lancang Cooperation Leaders Meeting, China declared its action plan for enhancing transparency and cooperation of water management of the Mekong to mitigate floods and droughts associated with China's upstream water management. This is the first significant step in the right direction for trust building among riparian states of the Mekong-Lancang.

To conclude, evidence seems to point to a direct link between hydroelectric dam construction on the upper Mekong-Lancang and changing water flows and droughts in the lower Mekong Basin. As a major investor and creditor in infrastructural development in Southeast Asia and riparian of the upstream Mekong-Lancang, China through the LMC can play a critical role in coordinating the management of water and future hydroelectric dam construction on the Mekong-Lancang and its tributaries in ways that ensure sustainable development in the sub-region that preserves and

<sup>3</sup> A. Basist and C. Williams, "Mentoring the Quality of Water Flowing Through the Mekong Basin."

<sup>4</sup> Zhai Kun and Deng Han, "Mekong Must Not Become Second South China Sea," *ThinkChina*, August 31, 2020. Online @ <<https://www.thinkchina.sg/chinese-academics-mekong-must-not-become-second-south-china-sea>>

<sup>5</sup> Speech by Chinese Premier Li Keqiang at the third Mekong-Lancang Cooperation Leaders' Meeting, 25 August, 2020. Online @ <[http://www.lmcchina.org/eng/zyxw\\_5/t1808972.htm](http://www.lmcchina.org/eng/zyxw_5/t1808972.htm)>.

enhances the vitality of livelihoods and biodiversity of the Mekong Basin. It is apparent that due to global geopolitical shifts, the Greater Mekong Subregion can become an ongoing site of great-powers competition. Given its economic power and proximity, China is the natural leader in the Greater Mekong Subregion. However, credibility depends on its commitment to its claim for a shared

prosperity for Mekong-Lancang region. In other words, China must “walk the walk” in coordinating and implementing LMC’s action plans in the spirit of a shared future for all riparian states.

***\*The Author chooses to use footnote as referencing style.***



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