

*China's Hydro-Hegemony and the United States in the
Mekong River basin*

Kensaku AMANO, Yamato University

Introduction

The Mekong River basin has seen significant conflict between China and the United States (US). Since the Indochina War, Southeast Asian countries have increased their unity, but China, whose territory includes the upstream area of the Mekong River, has built multiple dams on the river, causing friction with the countries that lie below it. China's actions have been criticized as demonstrations of hydro-hegemony due to its unilateral development along the river. But in recent years, it has entered talks with the Mekong River Commission, composed of the downstream countries, and is providing hydrological data, indicating towards a more cooperative attitude. As China began to build relations with the basin countries, taking advantage of this relaxation of friction, it advanced into the Mekong River basin, although the United States appeared to curtail such movement, and is seeking to strengthen its relations with the other countries that share the Mekong basin.

This paper describes the progress of China's relationship with the countries of the Mekong River basin in the context of the official administration strategy headed by Obama (rebalancing to Asia), Trump (America First), and Biden (an internationalism). It presents disputes over water resources from the perspective of non-traditional security in the absence of military power. The Mekong River was referred to as the River of War during the Vietnam War, and later, it became a cooperation area in which various international organizations were working peacefully. If the Sino-US conflict deepens, it could revert to this previous identity, propelling us to keep an eye on the future.

1. Obama administration’s “rebalancing to Asia”

Why is the United States, a third country that does not fall under the international rivers’ basin and is more than thousands of kilometers away, involving itself in the Mekong River?

In discussing its post-war involvement, the United States Bureau of Reclamation sent an advance team after the United States International Cooperation Agency signed an investigation agreement with Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam in 1956. In the 1970s, communism in Indo-china (i.e., Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia) forced the suspension of the United States’ involvement policy due to the failure of its communist containment policy in Southeast Asia. Since then, no sign of its active involvement was observed in the Mekong River region until the Obama administration’s “rebalancing to Asia.”

Myanmar’s transition, which was under the military government, to civil authority in March 2011 triggered the return of the United States to the Mekong River. With the transfer of civilian rule, foreign companies entered the market and foreign investment became active. As “the last frontier in Asia,” it was bubbling with the Myanmar boom.

The Obama administration of the Democrats, established in January 2009, changed from the unilateral activism of the Bush administration to multilateral cooperation based on reflections, such as the swamping of the Iraq War when the United States overthrew the dictatorial Hussein administration (Clinton, 2011). In the July 2009 ASEAN Ministerial Meeting, Thailand, then-United States Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, declared that, “the United States is back.”

In the same year, Clinton launched the Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI), centered on environment-related fields, along with the Mississippi River Commission (MRC) and the Mekong River Commission (MRC), which shared the same abbreviation. For this reason, they called the two MRCs “sister rivers” and proposed to establish a cooperative relationship (United States Department of State, 2012a). At the 5th LMI Ministerial Meeting in July 2012, the United States promised to provide support and funding for water resource management and infrastructural development (United States Department of State, 2012b).

At Clinton’s request, the intelligence authority released a report entitled Global Water Security in the March of the same year. The report stated that the Mekong River was a “strategically important” river basin (Intelligence Community Assessment, 2012) and that the water resource problem not only amplified the instability of the nation and led to its division but also supported the security of the United States.

2. Involvement of the Trump administration

In 2017, the United States transitioned from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party, where Donald Trump was appointed president. Since Trump advocated “America first,” he has seemingly returned to the isolation policy from the perspective of the international community. His stance is reflected in his continued absence from the East Asia Summit, an important diplomatic event in ASEAN, such that ASEAN members have displayed disappointment over the fact that the United States is disrespecting Asia. Alternatively, although China has a territorial problem in the South China Sea, it individually proceeds to incorporate it into its own camp.

However, scholars pointed out that the Trump administration tended to strengthen foreign relations in lieu of the Mekong River basin. As a premise, a memorandum entitled Strategic Framework in the Indo-Pacific was prepared in February 2018 (White House, 2021). When fully disclosed, this memorandum (declassified in January 2021) states under its Alliance and Partnership section its emphasized involvement in the region and the concept of a free and open Indo-Pacific arena.

Since 2019, the Trump administration incorporated LMI as part of the Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS). Furthermore, a new initiative was launched to meet the needs of countries in the lower reaches of the Mekong River (Thao, 2020). A project of the Mekong River Water Data Initiative was positioned as a share of hydrological data to improve the role of the MRC, enable the prediction of floods and droughts, and aid policy decisions. LMI provided the United States with financial and technological resources for the development of countries in the lower Mekong River with the United States providing support for a total amounting more than \$3.5 billion.

Information warfare aimed at hitting China can also be observed. The United States-funded environmental researcher Eyes on Earth published a report in April 2019 (Basist & Williams, 2020). The report examines the impact of successive dam constructions in China, upstream of the Mekong River, based on satellite imagery data between 1992 and 2019. According to the report, when the Nuozhadu Dam started operation in 2012, the river flow has changed significantly due to the influence of successive dams in China. Especially in 2019, the record decrease in water volume in the lower reaches was attributed to the restriction of dam discharge in the country.

Notably, security issues have become a major driver of cooperation. In June 2019, the Pentagon prepared the IPS report, in which the United States is helping the Mekong River to protect border security or prevent the smuggling of drugs, wildlife, and weapons (United States Department of Defense, 2019). At the 12th LMI Ministerial Meeting held in August

2019, secretary of State Mike Pompeo celebrated the 10th anniversary of LMI's founding and said that, "We will continue to help protect your sovereignty and security, help you prosper economically, and safeguard your rich cultures and environment." This statement reflects the importance of security on the Mekong River as a major pillar of the IPS. At the same time, the United States LMI needed to be rebuilt to counter China's rapidly expanding Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC).

In September 2020, an online ministerial-level meeting was held between the countries in the lower reaches of the Mekong River and the United States. The agenda surrounded the concept of developing and eliminating the LMI that has been ongoing since 2009 and building on its success to strengthen the Mekong–United States Partnership. The joint declaration adopted states that the United States will play a role in strengthening transparency and enhancing governance, economic integrity, and comprehensive sustainable growth. Additionally, it will help close the gaps in regional development. Lastly, it announced that it contributed more than \$150 million to related businesses (United States Department of State, 2020).

Moreover, it will complement China's restraints in the new United States–China conflict that emerged under the Trump administration. The economic conflict between the two nations began when the United States had a large trade deficit with China and imposed additional tariffs on the grounds of China's infringement of intellectual property rights. This conflict bore a history of shifting the focus from the state of imposing sanctions and tariffs on each other to the battle for leadership over the high-tech industry.

Myanmar was the country whose situation significantly changed due to the United States' involvement in the Mekong River basin countries. In February 2021, the armed forces in Myanmar suddenly issued a state of emergency and seized power due to the current government's election fraud. The international community accused the country of being a coup run by the armed forces. The situation is fluid, whereas the involvement of the United States in the Mekong River region, including China's speculation, is unclear at this point.

References

- Basist, Alan and Claude Williams (2020) “Monitoring the Quantity of Water Flowing Through the Upper Mekong Basin Under Natural (Unimpeded) Conditions,” <https://www.eyesonearth.org/reports>.
- Clinton, Hillary R. (2011) “America’s Pacific Century,” *Foreign Policy*, October 11, 2011.
- Intelligence Community Assessment (2012) “Global Water Security,” <http://www.state.gov/e/oes/water/ica/index.htm>.
- Thao, Chu Minh (2020) “Role of the US Lower Mekong Initiative in the Mekong Region,” *INDO-PACIFIC ANALYSIS BRIEFS 2020*, Vol.10.
- US Department of State (2012a) “Lower Mekong Initiative,” <http://www.state.gov/p/eap/mekong/index.htm>.
- US Department of State (2012b) “Lower Mekong Initiative,” <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/07/194963.htm>.
- US Department of Defense (2019) *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report*, June 1, p. 51, <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jul/01/2002152311/-1/-1/1/DEPARTMENT-OF-DEFENSE-INDO-PACIFIC-STRATEGY-REPORT-2019.PDF>.
- US Department of State (2020) “Mekong-U.S. Partnership Joint Ministerial Statement,” <https://asean.usmission.gov/mekong-u-s-partnership-joint-ministerial-statement/>.
- White House (2021) “United States Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific,” <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/IPS-Final-Declass.pdf>.