

Transboundary hydropolitics in the Mekong Basin

Ugly cooperation or pretty conflict?

Topic and Research Question

Transboundary rivers are prone to become a source of challenges, as they are shared by states with potentially differing interests. Such situation can translate into a conflict or cooperation scenario. The aim of this thesis is to explore the widespread normative assertion of 'any cooperation is desirable and a conflict should be avoided' by analysing the water interactions between the riparians in the Mekong basin. Based on these objectives, the following research questions are addressed:

How does the relative power distribution among the Mekong riparian states influence the upstream-downstream dynamics of water interactions in the basin?

What is the nature of China's behaviour towards its co-riparians in terms of water resources on the Mekong and what is their perception of it?

Identifying the driving forces of the dynamics of the water-interactions between the riparians enhances the understanding and prevents misinterpretation for future initiatives of policy-makers and analysts.

State of the Art

The majority of hydropolitical academic work focusing on transboundary rivers has polarized into two groups. The proponents of the first group (see i.e. Bulloch and Darwish 1993; Gleick 1993; Naff and Matson 1984; Homer-Dixon 1994) are claiming the possibility of future wars over water and even though providing systematic empirical evidence to support this claim has proven problematic, the "water war hypothesis" is heavily overrepresented in public media and discourse. The second group revolves around shared water as means to promote cooperation and solution-finding measures, in the sense of "good water management" (see i.e. Thomas and Durham 2003: 24; Ahmad 2003) or the cooperative-enhancing nature of water is often presented in the existence of water-related treaties (see Wolf et.al. 2005).

A new string of research emerged in the last decade, which proposes and analysis a simultaneous co-existence of conflict and cooperation in transboundary water-relations. This thesis is guided by it, enhanced with other rather underrepresented theory-based analytical works on the Mekong River i.e. Bakker (1999), Schmeier (2009).

Methodology and Approach

To answer the research questions, the Framework of Hydro-Hegemony has been chosen as the analytical framework, enhanced with the concept of power.

Riparians compete for control over the resource, to realize their objectives – utilization, management, allocation and benefits derived from water – by deploying strategies and tactics (Zeitoun and Warner 2006: 439). Whether the states are able or not able to realize their objectives is depending on how much power they possess and their ability to exploit it. As shown in Table 1. these tactics are linked to three dimensions of power: material (comprising of military, economic, geographical and technological powers), bargaining and ideational power. The following situation of power asymmetry and relationships of control and mutual dependency in the basin taken together form a situation of power asymmetry, labeled as hydro-hegemony (Lukes 1991: 86-90; cited in: Daoudy 2009: 364). The most powerful and most successful state in this interaction is depicted as the hydro-hegemon (Cascão and Zeitoun 2010: 30).

Dimension of Power (based on Lukes)	Compliance-Producing Mechanisms (Lustick)	Efficiency
Material Power	1. Coercive	Low ↓ High
Bargaining Power	2. Utilitarian 3. Normative Agreement	
Ideational Power	4. Ideological Hegemony	

Table 1. Compliance producing mechanisms (tactics), their efficiency and respective form of power, adapted from Zeitoun (2008: 32).

Thus, by analyzing the tactics, strategies, the relative power distribution in the Mekong basin and the nature of behavior of its most powerful state; and how positive or negative it is perceived by its co-riparians, the driving forces of the dynamics in the basin can be identified which can either enhance or frustrate future basin initiatives or counter-hegemonic attempts to move the development away from ugly cooperation or pretty conflict.

Main Facts

Without the consent and consultation of the downstream states, China harnesses the hydropower potential of the Lancang part of the Mekong on its territory by constructing a series of dams which have a serious impact on quantity and quality of the flow downstream. Maybe against the expectations, this development triggered plans of the lower Mekong riparians to start the construction of their own dams on the river as well. Laos is interested in becoming the battery of Southeast Asia by harnessing its large hydropower potential, Thailand and Vietnam are interested in electricity trade to meet their growing energy demands, so they invest and construct hydropower projects in Laos and Cambodia. It has been suggested, that the mainstream dams on the lower parts of the Mekong are even more dangerous to the natural river flow, than the Lancang dams.

The often praised Mekong River Commission should be the representative of binding cooperation on the Mekong, however its Secretariat has no enforcement power, because its member states have decided against binding rules that would endanger their national sovereignty and possibly restrict their autonomy on water projects in the basin.

Results

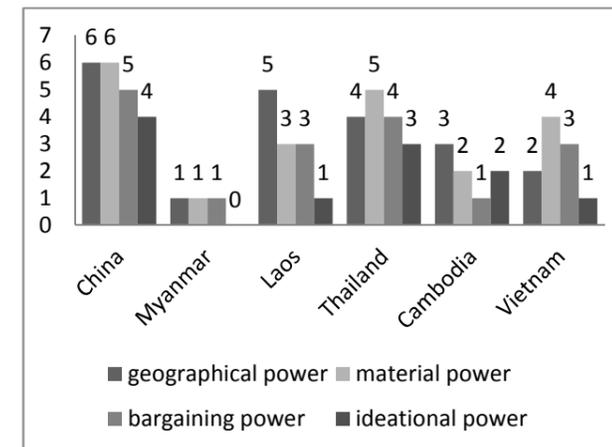


Figure 1. Relative power distribution in the Mekong basin according to the score 0-7. Based on own assessment of the author.

Figure 1. summarizes the rankings of power distribution in each of the four dimensions of power. The power

asymmetry, with China as expected the most powerful state in the basin, has led to a situation of hydro-hegemony, with China being the hydro-hegemon. The picture of highly conflictive water relations and almost looming war on the Mekong presented in the media and mainly popular literature should fit the expected reaction of the lower riparians which necessarily bear the negative consequences of China's hydro-hegemony. However, it does not. The thesis analysed the actors behind the reported criticism and it can be concluded, that the majority of the protests and opposition to dams on Lancang emanates from the civil society, not the governmental level of the states, which apart from some cases where the states voiced their concerns in the arena of the MRC, has remained silent on the issue. To date, China has not been propelled to face any sustained and serious criticism towards its unilateral development of dams. Why the lower riparian states do not confront China despite the negative effects and despite their counter-hegemonic potential especially in realm of bargaining power?

The combined effects of these two power strategies can explain the missing motivation of the co-riparians: Firstly, China is wielding its bargaining and ideational power tactics in bilateral, multilateral cooperation towards the end of inducing closer economic ties with the states in the basin and projecting economic development as the main driving force of the basin while driving the focus of attention away from its unilateral dam construction. Secondly, the own imperative of economic development to sustain the legitimacy of the political regimes in the basin states, is the prevailing focus that trumps the equitable and sustainable allocation of the resource.

References

All references can be found in the full version of the MA thesis available at <http://othes.univie.ac.at/>.

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