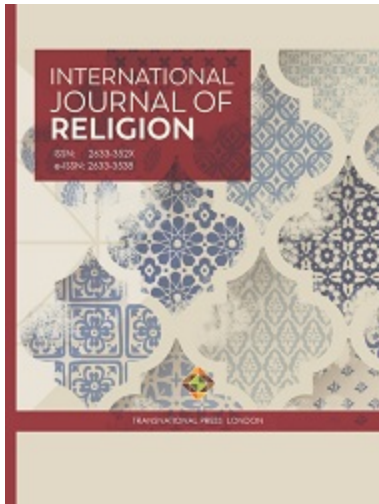




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The Strategic Adjustments of the United States and China in Southeast Asia: A Case Study of the Mekong Subregion

Phan Thi Hai Yen¹

Abstract

The Mekong subregion has become an important strategic area in the context of increasing great power competition tensions in the Indo-Pacific region. With its crucial geo-strategic position presiding over the “heart” of the Indo-Pacific region, the Mekong subregion has become an important hotspot in the efforts of great powers, especially the United States (US) and China, to increase their global influence. Since 2013, the Mekong subregion has been heavily impacted by the US-China strategic competition, with China’s strong rise and ambition to maintain US leadership shaping a global power competition that will determine the direction of the new world order. Consequently, the US-China rivalry has been and is seriously affecting the political and security situation of the countries in the Mekong subregion, posing many challenges and opportunities for this region. Using a qualitative analysis method through a survey of secondary data, the article analyzes the position and role of the Mekong subregion in the US-China strategic rivalry in the Indo-Pacific region, while analyzing and examining the US and China’s strategic adjustments during 2009-2021. From there, it provides forecasts and solutions for the Mekong subregion in general and Vietnam in particular.

Keywords: Mekong Subregion, China, US, Southeast Asia, Strategic Competition.

INTRODUCTION

The warm relationship between the US and China during and after the Cold War period (1972-2000) created advantages for the development of the Mekong subregion in particular and the Asia-Pacific region in general (White 2011). In the 21st century, the Mekong subregion plays a very important role as a transportation, trade, and investment link between the countries of East and South Asia (Yoshimatsu 2015). Rapid urbanization and the expansion of light manufacturing industries have brought the countries of the Mekong subregion closer to the center of the global production supply chain (Center 2020). With the increasing importance of the Mekong subregion in the current global context, this has brought opportunities and challenges from the strategic rivalry adjustments between great powers in the region. Therefore, with its geographical position adjacent to China, the political and security situation in this region is undergoing complex and unpredictable changes, along with China’s rise and its rivalry with the US in the Indo-Pacific region. Currently, China is the world’s second largest economy after the US, but China’s advantage is very large and “China today is closer to the US than even the Soviet Union during the Cold War” (Kiet and Tuyen 2023). This means that the gap in national power between the US and China will continue to narrow, implying that the more balanced distribution of power between the two great powers will intensify comprehensive competition across all domains in the future. This will have a profound impact on the world order and the political and security situation of the countries in the Mekong subregion in particular and globally in general.

Therefore, US influence in the Mekong subregion is currently tending to decline as China is increasingly striving to enhance its comprehensive influence through hard and soft power on the countries in this region. In particular, China’s challenge to the US in this region has become increasingly intense since 2013 when Beijing launched the “One Belt, One Road” (OBOR) initiative, later renamed the “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI) in 2016. As a result, US influence in this region is declining severely due to China’s effective, flexible, and pragmatic strategies toward the Mekong subregion countries. Recognizing China’s strong rise and ambition to become a superpower that could challenge US global leadership, President Barack Obama announced the “Pivot to Asia” strategy in 2011 to constrain China’s rise (De Castro 2018). The US focused

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on strengthening relations with allies and partners and engaging them in the region to rebalance power against China. With their crucial geo-strategic position, the countries of the Mekong subregion received special attention from the US and other allies, especially India - the number one power in South Asia. Therefore, with its geo-political position presiding over the “heart” of the Indo-Pacific region, this has pushed the Mekong subregion to become a “hotspot” of strategic rivalry between the US and China in particular, and other great powers with strategic interests in this region in general.

This study aims to analyze and examine the strategic rivalry adjustments between China and the US in the Mekong subregion, mainly during the period 2009-2021. Specifically, the study identifies and analyzes the competitive strategies, initiatives, and activities of the US and China in the Mekong subregion. It evaluates the motives, goals, and impacts of these strategies and initiatives on the political, security, economic and social development situations of the countries in the Mekong subregion. From these analyses, the study will survey and analyze the impacts of the US-China strategic rivalry on the countries of the Mekong subregion in general and Vietnam in particular. Through this, the study will seek answers to the following three research questions:

How important is the Mekong subregion to the US-China rivalry in the Indo-Pacific region?

What are the specific strategies and policies of the US and China aimed at increasing their influence in the Mekong subregion? What impacts have these efforts and initiatives created on security, environment, and economic development in the region?

What challenges and opportunities does the US-China strategic rivalry in the Mekong subregion pose for the countries in the region, especially Vietnam? What countermeasures and directions should these countries take to overcome the challenges and effectively seize the opportunities?

The research results have important theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, the study will contribute to the field of research on great power rivalry and geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific region in general and the Mekong subregion in particular. The research findings will clarify the overall picture of the developments, strategies, and impacts of the US-China rivalry in this region, contributing to expanding knowledge and theory on the issues of geopolitics and great power competition. Practically, the study will provide useful assessments, analyses, and policy recommendations for the countries of the Mekong subregion in general and Vietnam in particular in formulating appropriate guidelines and strategies to respond to the intensifying US-China strategic rivalry situation in the region. In addition, the study also provides perspectives and theoretical bases for policymakers, international and regional organizations in promoting cooperation and stability for the Mekong subregion in the face of challenges from the increasingly tense great power competition in the time to come.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The geopolitical motivations and strategic competition between great powers like the US and China in the Mekong subregion have attracted considerable attention from scholars and policy analysts in recent years. This literature review examines existing research on the evolving strategies of the US and China in mainland Southeast Asia, their motivations, and the impacts on the countries in this subregion including Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Laos and Myanmar.

First, research relates to China’s increasing engagement in the Mekong subregion. China’s growing influence and presence in the Mekong subregion through the BRI and Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) mechanisms have been widely studied. Scholars such as Xue Gong (2018) and Lu Gangsheng (2016) highlight infrastructure connectivity projects and frameworks like the China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor as key components of Beijing’s regional strategy to extend its geo-economic footprint. Duong Van Huy (2021) argues that the LMC exemplifies China’s proactive regional governance approach, where the subregion serves as a testing ground for Beijing’s efforts to shape norms and rules. However, researchers like Le Hai Binh (2020) point out that the LMC has faced criticism for lacking transparency and adequate consultation with local communities impacted by BRI projects. Additionally, some works delve into the strategic underpinnings driving China’s rapid outreach to the Mekong region. Pham Truong Binh (2019) argues that the Mekong River figures prominently in Beijing’s efforts to build a stable periphery and buffer zone to

address security threats to its southern flank. Moreover, analysts like Edward Grumbine and Jianchu Xu (2011) highlight the importance of the subregion's natural resources like water and energy reserves in sustaining China's economic development and meeting its rising resource demands.

Second, research relates to the US pivot policy and engagement in the competition with China in the Mekong subregion. Academic assessments of the US approach to the Mekong region tend to situate it within the broader context of America's strategic rebalancing or "pivot" to Asia under the Obama administration. Scholars like Thai Van Long (2018) argue that the US's reinvigorated engagement through initiatives like the Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI) aimed to counterbalance China's rising clout while promoting a rules-based regional order aligning with US interests. Some academics like Le Van Thang et al (2019) contend that the LMI's limited funding and primarily civil developmental focus constrained its ability to effectively counterbalance China's expansive connectivity and infrastructure drives under the original BRI framework. However, Sebastian Strangio's (2020) study shows that the LMI's evolution into the Mekong-US Partnership (MUSP) in 2020, with increased funding and clearer focus on regional security cooperation, signaled Washington's efforts to enhance its strategic standing in the subregion. Additionally, some analyses have examined the potential impacts of US-China rivalry spilling over into the Mekong region. Hidetaka Yoshimatsu (2015) highlights the risk of Mekong countries becoming arenas for major power competition, which could constrain their strategic autonomy and policy choices. Similarly, Jenn-Jaw Soong (2021) warns that heightened geopolitical tensions could undermine subregional cooperation frameworks like the ASEAN-led Mekong forums.

Third, research relates to how the US-China rivalry in the Mekong subregion impacts Vietnam in particular and other countries in the region. As a country that can be considered to have the most important position and role in the Mekong subregion, Vietnam is currently receiving special attention from the US and China. Pham Quoc Thang (2021) argues that Hanoi's strategic maritime rivalry with Beijing in the South China Sea and concerns over China's upstream damming activities have incentivized Vietnam to carefully counterbalance Chinese dominance by strengthening ties with the US and its allies like Japan. However, the work of Nguyen Thi Que and Mai Hoai Anh (2019) emphasizes that Vietnam still seeks to avoid provoking excessive hostility with China and has pursued a more nuanced, multi-directional foreign policy of engaging multiple partners to maximize strategic autonomy and developmental prospects. Some scholars have also examined the challenges facing Mekong subregional cooperation and integration amid the US-China rivalry. Researchers like Paul Vineles (2019) highlight how the Mekong countries' divergent external alignments could undermine collective action and consensus-building on critical issues like sustainable development and shared water resource management of the Mekong River. Meanwhile, some analysis from the East-West Center (2020) suggests that enhanced US engagement, coupled with stronger coordination between Washington and its allies in areas like infrastructure investment and environmental governance, could provide the Mekong countries more leverage and alternative options to avoid overreliance and influence from China.

In summary, the existing literature provides valuable insights into the evolving strategies of the US and China to expand their clout in the Mekong, the intricate interplay between major powers and Mekong subregional dynamics, as well as the challenges and opportunities for countries like Vietnam caught in these geopolitical currents. However, the rapidly shifting strategic landscape necessitates continued monitoring and analysis to fully capture the long-term impacts on the Mekong subregion. Hence, this paper will fill a gap as currently there is no dedicated study analyzing the US-China strategic rivalry adjustments in the Mekong subregion during the 2009-2021 period.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs qualitative analysis methods, specifically content analysis, policy analysis, historical and logical methods through relevant secondary data sources to analyze and examine the strategic competition adjustments between the US and China toward the Mekong subregion during 2009-2021.

Content analysis is used to study documents, reports, official statements and remarks related to the policies and activities of the US and China in the Mekong subregion. Source materials include policy papers, reports

from international and non-governmental organizations, speeches and interviews by leaders and officials from both sides. Analyzing the content of these materials will help better understand the motivations, strategies and specific actions of the US and China in the region. Additionally, policy analysis is used to examine and evaluate the policies and strategies of the US and China in the Mekong subregion. This analysis includes investigating the objectives, means, and impacts of initiatives and projects initiated by the two great powers, such as the US Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI) and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This method helps assess the motivations, strategies and ambitions of both sides in this rivalry. On the other hand, the historical and logical methods are used to examine the historical evolution of the US-China strategic competition in the region, as well as to analyze the logic behind the actions and reactions of the two sides in the regional geopolitical context. This method helps understand the process of events, as well as the reasons and consequences of the two great powers' strategic decisions. By combining these methods, the study can provide a comprehensive picture of the US-China strategic rivalry in the Mekong subregion during 2009-2021, thereby assessing the challenges and impacts of this competition on the countries in the Mekong region, especially Vietnam.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Importance of the Mekong Subregion in the US-China Strategic Competition in the Indo-Pacific

The Mekong subregion comprises five countries: Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam. It is an area of particular geo-political, geo-economic importance with diverse and abundant natural resources. The cultural, social, and historical similarities, along with the presence of the Mekong River flowing through, have linked these countries into a distinct subregion. The Mekong subregion occupies a strategic location between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, and with its dense river system, the region has strengths in developing the maritime economy, hydropower, and aquaculture. The Mekong River basin plays a crucial role in sustaining over 70 million inhabitants, with biodiversity second only to the Amazon basin (Grumbine and Xu 2011). Fish from the Mekong River alone brings in over \$2 billion annually for basin countries (Long 2018). Moreover, this subregion is considered the world's largest rice granary, with the economic value from the Lower Mekong fisheries estimated at around \$17 billion per year (Center 2020). With a population of around 334 million, 40% under the age of 25, the Mekong subregion has become a major potential market attracting great power attention (Asia Development Bank 2015).

Additionally, the geo-strategic position of this region has become increasingly important in the context of the US-China power competition. The Mekong subregion occupies a vital geo-political location in Southeast Asia, acting as a link connecting the two Eurasian continents, as well as bridging Southwest Asia, the Middle East, North Africa with Northeast Asia and North America. The Mekong subregion is also viewed as the hinge between South Asia and Southeast Asia, bordering China and India, connecting the Indian Ocean with the Pacific, and situated at the Malacca Strait gateway. This area has a favorable system of seaports, straits, and maritime routes, lying along one of the major global trade arteries. The Malacca Strait, considered the lifeline of the East-West maritime route, sees about one-third of world trade passing through annually. It is estimated that 70-80% of Japan's and China's crude oil imports also transit through this route (Tuan 2022). The US Energy Information Administration assesses that oil flows through the Malacca Strait to the South China Sea are three times greater than those through the Suez Canal and 15 times greater than flows through the Panama Canal (Energy Information Administration 2013). Due to the geo-economic importance and strategic location of the Malacca Strait, the Mekong subregion has become an intense arena for great power rivalry over influence, especially between the US and China. The countries in this region not only export products through this strait but also play a crucial role in ensuring security and freedom of navigation along this globally significant maritime route.

Given the importance of the Mekong subregion, despite comprising smaller nations, it is a strategic area with vested interests of most great powers around the world, especially Vietnam - a country occupying a geo-strategic position astride the vital maritime routes in the South China Sea. Since the 19th century, the Mekong subregion became a colony of British (Myanmar) and French (Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia) imperialism. Entering the 20th century, this colonial region was continuously contested and controlled by imperial powers,

however, the national liberation movements in the Mekong countries grew very strong, and Vietnam put an end to the era of imperialism by defeating the US military in the 1970s. By the 21st century, the position of the Mekong subregion has been elevated and attracted much attention from great powers around the world, especially the US and China. Both of these powers have been actively building and participating in various cooperation initiatives and mechanisms in the region to increase their presence and linkages with Southeast Asian nations. 2009 marked the US's return to this region, putting forth the Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI) under President Barack Obama's administration, which has been continued by subsequent administrations like Donald Trump and Joe Biden until now. In 2016, China launched the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) mechanism to deepen relations with countries in this region as it officially promoted the global Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In addition to initiatives with the two great powers, the Mekong subregion has formed various other cooperation mechanisms such as the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), Mekong River Commission (MRC), Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam Development Triangle, Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS), Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC), Mekong-ASEAN Development Basin Cooperation (AMBDC), Quadrilateral Economic Cooperation (QEC)... creating a multi-faceted and multi-tiered cooperation model. The active participation of other development partners like the US, China, India, Japan, South Korea,... has played a very important role, opening up many economic development options for the Mekong subregion. However, maintaining a stable balance among great powers, especially the US and China, is currently the greatest challenge for countries in the region.

The efforts by the US and China to increase their influence in the Mekong subregion stem from the strategic threat of their global power rivalry. For the US, enhancing its presence in this region aims to prevent China from establishing a "military control belt from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific" and ensure freedom of navigation and overflight along strategic sea lines of communication in the South China Sea (Yoshimatsu 2015). Conversely, China is increasing its clout in the region with the desire to reduce its dependence on sea routes controlled by the US Navy passing through the Malacca Strait by building an overland route linking Myanmar's Kyaukpyu port to China's Yunnan province, while also strengthening its control over maritime routes in the South China Sea. This is also a key point in Beijing's strategy to secure export routes and energy supply lines from the Indian Ocean to China's territory. As a result, the Mekong subregion is gradually becoming the focus of the US-China power competition. The two great powers' increased presence has strongly impacted the political and security situation of countries in the region. Currently, the five countries in this area are facing increasing pressure in exploring choices to maintain a balance and avoid being drawn into conflict between the two powers.

Strategic Adjustments of the US and China towards the Mekong Subregion

China's Strategic Adjustments

Since the 20th century, China has paid special attention to Southeast Asia during and after the Cold War period. Studying China's relations with Cambodia, scholar Nayan Chanda (2002) argued that "since the collapse of the Soviet Union, unencumbered by a major constraint, China has focused more on Southeast Asia". Through this, in the 1990s, China made adjustments to its foreign policy and strengthened cooperative relations with Mekong subregion countries when it began normalizing diplomatic ties with Vietnam in 1991. In China's traditional foreign and security policy towards Southeast Asia (especially the Mekong subregion countries), it aimed to maintain political divisions and relative national weakness among these countries to limit the possibility of any country in the region unifying politically and forming an alliance outside of China's "control" (Gungwu 2001: 193). However, entering the 21st century, along with China's strong rise, Beijing made strategic adjustments in its diplomacy with Southeast Asia in a more positive, peaceful direction by participating in regional forums, expanding multilateral relations, and asserting its strong influence for "a friendly, cooperative and peaceful" relationship in this region, especially the Mekong subregion. In 2010, China initiated the "Community of Common Destiny" concept to establish closer ties with Southeast Asian nations (Rolland 2017). According to Chinese leaders including President Xi Jinping, this initiative aims to promote comprehensive and mutually beneficial cooperation, creating a "sense of inescapable connectedness of fates" between China and ASEAN. Through this, China wants to accelerate the deep integration of

Southeast Asia (especially the Mekong subregion) into a new order centered on Beijing, competing with the “Washington Consensus” led by the US.

In the 21st century, the Mekong subregion plays a very important role in China’s security policy. In geopolitical terms, the Mekong subregion countries are important basing areas for China to exert its international role in “managing” policies related to the Mekong River (Qiaosu 2014). Additionally, this region is a shield protecting China’s southern border security and a bridge connecting China to maritime Southeast Asia in particular and the Indian Ocean-Pacific region in general. In geo-economic terms, with a large market potential of around 40% of the total 344 million population under 25 years old, the Mekong subregion countries are important trade partners for exporting Chinese inexpensive goods to this area. Therefore, under the trends of globalization and a peace, cooperation and development-led foreign policy, the 18th National Congress Report (2012) emphasized the strategic goals of China’s diplomacy towards neighboring countries as serving the objectives of “national rejuvenation, consolidating friendship, safeguarding national sovereignty, security and development interests, strengthening political ties with regional countries, enhancing economic interdependence, deepening security cooperation, and establishing close cultural relations” (Communist Party of China 2012). Hence, China’s foreign policy in the Mekong subregion can be understood as attaching importance to building friendly relations with neighboring countries. However, although enhancing economic interdependence, China is more concerned with political goals than economic interests.

In an effort to expand its influence and develop regional cooperative relations, China initiated OBOR in 2013 and renamed it BRI in 2016 (Guangsheng 2016). This is a global strategy aimed at promoting infrastructure connectivity and facilitating trade and investment between China and other countries. Within the framework of BRI, the LMC was established in 2015, bringing together China and the downstream countries of the Mekong River (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam). This reflects China’s efforts to enhance sub-regional cooperation and management of the Mekong River resources (Huy 2021). Within a few years, the LMC has become an important forum for regional cooperation, although other initiatives had previously existed. At the 2nd LMC Summit in 2018, the parties adopted the LMC Plan of Action until 2022, setting out directions for future cooperation (Huy 2021). This event demonstrated China’s determination to promote the BRI in the Mekong region, which is attracting many key infrastructure projects such as roads, cross-border railways and economic corridors (Gong 2018). The Mekong region plays a pivotal role in connecting China to the West through the China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor (CIPEC). In recent years, CIPEC has made significant progress in building infrastructure and developing cross-border economic cooperation zones (Zhuning 2019). Notable projects include the Kunming-Bangkok Highway completed in 2008, along with railways under construction connecting China with Laos and Thailand (Lancang-Mekong Cooperation 2018). Additionally, cooperation is also taking place in building the China-Laos Economic Corridor and developing the Eastern Economic Corridor of Thailand. Through initiatives such as the BRI and LMC, China aims to enhance infrastructure connectivity and promote economic cooperation in the Mekong region, which plays a strategic role in Beijing’s global trade network.

The BRI is seen as a new guiding strategy for China’s foreign policy and establishing its global sphere of influence. The BRI has made solid progress in economic cooperation between China and the countries of the Mekong Subregion including Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam and Thailand. As a result, the five Mekong countries accounted for nearly half of the ASEAN projects supported by the BRI in 2018, approximately USD 355.2 billion out of a total of USD 739 billion (Vineles 2019). With China’s steady economic growth and if their attention on the LMC is maintained, deeper economic cooperation between China and the Mekong Subregion will certainly increase these countries’ economic dependence on China, and with it China’s influence over this region’s long-term policy orientations. As such, the LMC could be a geo-economic-political tool dividing ASEAN member states into opposing camps. Overall, the impetus behind this initiative is aimed at economic, political, diplomatic and domestic goals. All of these objectives serve the purpose of creating dependence and bondage of the Mekong countries on China. First, China wants to build a secure buffer zone around it to protect its national security, pushing threats as far away from its geographical borders as possible. Creating a network that brings about economic dependence will reinforce China’s leadership position in the region, forming a Beijing-friendly “alliance” network as a counterweight to the US

alliance structure in Asia. For example, China sees Cambodia becoming a geostrategic, geo-economic and geo-political position, especially a hub in the Indochina region through strategies deployed by China such as the “Going South” strategy and the BRI, viewing Cambodia as an important part of China’s “String of Pearls” for Beijing to project power into the South China Sea, the Pacific and Indian Oceans (Chanda 2002). For instance, Cambodia’s Sihanoukville port would provide an excellent facility for China to deploy its maritime power into the Gulf of Thailand and the Malacca Strait. And importantly, Cambodia’s membership and that of China-dependent countries in ASEAN will be crucial, as their support would serve China’s interests considerably in the region, including in the South China Sea. This was evidenced in 2012 when Cambodia, as the rotating ASEAN Chair, decided not to discuss the South China Sea issue at the ASEAN Summit despite efforts by other members (British Broadcasting Corporation 2012).

In geoeconomic terms, with a population of over 1.4 billion, China needs access to consumer markets, fuel sources like oil and gas, and other natural resources to sustain economic growth and prevent widespread unemployment. Due to rapid industrialization and climate change, China risks facing an increasingly severe supply shortage (Xie 2022). Failure to ensure supply could likely lead to widespread social unrest, threatening the Communist Party’s leadership and China’s territorial integrity. To address this, the Chinese government issued the “Going Out Strategy” including the “Going Southwest” strategy to promote the development of Yunnan and Guangxi provinces in cooperation with the Mekong countries. Additionally, a new “one axis, two wings” foreign policy strategy toward Southeast Asia was also deployed to invest in overseas water and energy resources, access new markets, expand markets and exploit benefits from regional labor flows (Binh 2021). Without these strategies, China’s economic growth would risk collapse. Due to the need to exploit resources for domestic use, China has had to strengthen cooperation with the Mekong region to legally extract resources, while also turning this into a tool for political leverage over the downstream Mekong countries. Moreover, the BRI initiative will help restructure China’s outdated, growth-constrained economy. The BRI’s mega infrastructure projects help China address the oversupply issue from domestic manufacturers and create jobs for hundreds of thousands of workers. China is transitioning to a high-quality economy, moving away from its previous low-cost economic model. The BRI focuses on key investment areas of heavy industry such as infrastructure, transportation, shipbuilding, metallurgy, logistics...and associated supply chains. If Beijing can successfully transfer high-speed rail, transportation and energy technologies to developing countries, China will achieve a dual economic benefit: exploiting surplus resources and creating geopolitical influence in the recipient countries. This will provide opportunities for China to innovate technological capabilities, develop high-tech products like telecommunications, electronics, 5G, while also accessing new energy sources like rare earths, gemstones, minerals, and promote the internationalization of the Renminbi.

Although China outwardly appears focused on economic goals, an underlying global strategy looms, with economic as well as political dominance. Unsurprisingly, these pragmatic policies and approaches are accompanied by a rapid rise in China’s power and political influence over the Mekong countries, which could ultimately increase the divide between mainland and maritime Southeast Asia. China wants to become the rule-maker in the region. In the “National Security Strategy Outline” adopted by the CPC Central Committee on January 23, 2015, China sees Japan and the US as its main competitive rivals. While not viewing smaller ASEAN countries like Vietnam and the Philippines as direct rivals, there is a risk they could cooperate with other countries against China (Wang 2015). Hence, China continues to make tougher sovereignty claims, but still aims to maintain stable relations with Vietnam to prevent it allying with the US. At the same time, China also isolates the Philippines to prevent Vietnam from cooperating with it to form a US-Japan-Philippines-Vietnam counterweight against China. Thus, China implements a “carrot and stick” policy toward its Mekong neighbors. Clearly, with power concentrated under President Xi Jinping, China has become more assertive. President Xi is determined to increase China’s influence and ability to lead and shape a new international order. Today’s China is ready to set the rules and play a more prominent international role. Mainland Southeast Asia is Beijing’s prime concern.

In the broader context, China’s active engagement in the Mekong Subregion will relate to Beijing’s foreign policy strategy on global and regional leadership roles. To counter the US’s return to the Mekong Subregion

and Southeast Asia more broadly, the BRI will serve as a counterweight to the US's Indo-Pacific Strategy under Presidents Donald Trump and Joe Biden. Politically, the BRI will be an instrument to enact China's foreign policy of creating a new maritime order that draws relevant countries into China's orbit and sphere of influence. At the same time, it also ensures imports of fuel resources including oil and gas, and enhances existing maritime economic activities with 90% of foreign trade carried by sea and over 60% of domestic consumption needs imported and shipped by oil tankers. In military and security terms, globally, by building the MSR, China wants to achieve several important geostrategic ambitions including counterbalancing the US's strategic "pivot" to Asia-Pacific, helping balance power with the US; uniting Asian and European markets, even pulling Europe away from US political dependence; pushing Russia out of its sphere of influence in the southern borderlands; creating a "String of Pearls" around Southeast Asia to contain India's influence. Regionally, China hopes the BRI will help push the US and Western countries out of the region, gradually legitimize the "nine-dash line", moving toward realizing its ambition to monopolize the South China Sea (Anh 2020: 120). Diplomatically, China will attempt to draw Southeast Asian countries away from the US using a "carrot and stick" approach. Too much stick, and these countries will bind more tightly to defense treaties with Washington; too much carrot, and they may not follow Beijing's dictates (Marshall 2015: 193-195). Clearly, China is building "facts on the ground" through an economic leverage strategy to increase its clout. What Beijing has done and continues to do in the region shows it is scheming to change the perceptions of Mekong countries as well as wanting to change how the US perceives and acts, by continually pushing its own agenda until competitors have to give way. US interest in the Asia region, particularly its policy toward China, and how China views the US position play an extremely important role in China's foreign policy toward the Mekong Subregion. In other words, China relies on the US's posture and position to adjust its approach and strategy toward this region.

In summary, in the early 2000s, China's approach to the Mekong Subregion was primarily driven by economic interests, seeking to expand influence through investing in infrastructure projects like dams and transportation networks. However, as the US began shifting attention to the Asia-Pacific region under the Obama administration, China's strategy in the Mekong Subregion underwent a significant adjustment. From 2009 onward, China's economic initiatives in the region took on a more strategic dimension aimed at countering perceived US influence in Southeast Asia. The launch of the LMC mechanism in 2016 was a key move in this regard. The LMC serves as a platform for China to strengthen economic and political ties with Mekong countries, effectively undermining ASEAN's central role on regional issues. Moreover, China's investment in the Mekong Subregion, particularly in infrastructure projects like hydropower dams and railways, is driven not just by economic considerations but also by a desire to create economic dependencies and leverage those dependencies for political influence. The BRI, seen as China's ambitious global infrastructure development strategy, has played an important role in this, with a number of BRI projects being implemented in the Mekong countries. Furthermore, China's approach in the Mekong Subregion is characterized by a disregard for environmental and human rights issues that often conflicts with the interests of local communities and international norms. This approach, coupled with China's support for authoritarian regimes in the region, has raised concerns in the international community, including the US, about China's long-term strategic intentions. Overall, the adjustment in China's strategy towards the Mekong Subregion from 2009 to 2021 has been marked by a shift from primarily economic focus to a more assertive posture using economic leverage as a tool to expand political influence and counter US presence in the region. This shift has been facilitated by initiatives like the LMC and BRI, while also being characterized by a disregard for environmental and human rights concerns, raising worries in the international community and prompting pushback from the US.

The US Strategy Adjustment

The Mekong countries are important diplomatic, economic and security partners of the US. As of 2021, the US has allocated over \$4.3 billion in development assistance for bilateral and regional initiatives in the Mekong region (Blinken 2021). In 2009, the US State Department launched the LMI to promote regionalism and sustainable development in this area. The LMI is a multilateral partnership aimed at addressing complex, cross-border policy and development challenges. Since its inception, the US and Mekong countries have had

58 high-level visits between national leaders and ministerial-level officials. As of 2019, the US government has provided over \$120 million for LMI programs (Center 2020). Moreover, the US has built the Friends of the Lower Mekong group of countries (FLM) to continue increasing influence in the region. The first ministerial meetings between the US, Mekong countries, Australia, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand, the EU representative, the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank were held in July 2011. Additionally, the US has strengthened bilateral alliance relations with Japan, South Korea, Australia, Thailand, and the Philippines on the basis of maintaining political consensus on the core values of the alliances; ensuring flexible alliances to deal with new challenges as well as seizing new opportunities. Southeast Asian countries, especially those sharing the South China Sea with China like Vietnam and the Philippines, support the US pivot strategy to counter China's escalating provocations in the South China Sea. Therefore, maintaining good relations with the US will bring many benefits to Southeast Asian countries in general and the Mekong Subregion in particular. As such, the US is highly regarded in the strategic calculations of most Mekong countries. The US is therefore an indispensable force for peace and stability in this region.

However, US diplomatic policy toward Southeast Asia has suffered from a certain lack of consistency, especially toward the Mekong Subregion with unclear commitments and lack of emphasis under President Obama, allowing China to find a power vacuum in this "backyard" and succeed in promoting its own cooperation mechanisms. It was not until the US introduced the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy in 2018 that the region witnessed a significant change in US commitment. The US's increasing involvement in Mekong river issues aims to increase influence and politicize the Mekong water resources issue as part of efforts to constrain China's growing influence in the region. The LMI has been revived as a tool for the US to strengthen cooperation with the Mekong Subregion. In 2018, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo reaffirmed that the LMI is key to promoting connectivity, economic cooperation and sustainable development, political stability (Mekong US Partnership 2018). The US committed \$45 million to support LMI projects to improve quality of life, including education, English teaching, clean drinking water, improved sanitation, infrastructure enhancement and sustainable development (US Embassy & Consulate in Thailand 2019). In 2019, the US continued to propose a \$15.5 million investment in research projects related to the Mekong Subregion (US Embassy in Burma 2019). Secretary Pompeo stressed that the US is ready to protect the sovereignty and security of Mekong countries, investing \$14 million to combat transnational crime, maintain cross-border stability, and share hydrological information (US Mission to ASEAN 2019a). From 2009 to 2020, the US has provided nearly \$3.5 billion in support to the Subregion (US Mission to ASEAN 2019b). In the 2014-2019 period, the US implemented the \$12.3 million Connecting the Mekong through Education and Training (COMET) project. For 2016-2021, there was the \$35 million Counter Trafficking in Persons (CTIP) project; and the \$16.3 million Asia Enhancing Development and Growth through Energy (EDGE) project. Since 2018, the US has rolled out a series of subregional and Asia-wide projects and initiatives with ambitions to create a more apparent influence in the region. On September 11, 2020, the US upgraded the LMI to become the MUSP, aiming to upgrade connectivity, improve governance and basic development in the region, reflecting a tougher stance against China's expanding influence. The US and Mekong countries continue and expand cooperation in economics, energy security, quality of life development, water and cross-border resource management, and non-traditional security issues. The US announced a total funding commitment of \$156.4 million for initiatives under the Mekong-US Partnership, including \$52 million for post-COVID-19 economic recovery support; \$55 million to combat transnational crime; \$33 million for energy market development; \$6.6 million to improve energy infrastructure and markets in the Mekong Subregion and \$2 million to combat human trafficking (US Embassy & Consulate in Thailand 2019).

The cooperative initiatives between the US and the Mekong Subregion play a positive role in maintaining a peaceful, stable, prosperous and secure regional environment, creating important drivers for countries in the region to promote socio-economic development. These initiatives have contributed to strengthening information sharing between US agencies operating in the basin and with the governments of countries located in the Mekong River Basin. The constructive role of the US will promote cooperation among countries in the basin, toward building "Mekong Standards". The reality of US cooperation with the Mekong Subregion in recent years shows that the US can facilitate the formation of a forum bringing together

stakeholders, sharing technology, and supporting the promotion of regional solutions to create environmental impact assessment standards related to infrastructure and water resources. The US has been and is implementing policies to adjust its approach in the Mekong region. Instead of focusing on large-scale, state-funded projects, the LMI provides projects related to innovative technologies from the private sector and consultations on impact assessments and standards from the US Mississippi River Commission and US Geological Survey. Additionally, the US has also expressed concerns to China about the “threat to the natural environment as well as economic autonomy in the Mekong region”, according to a statement by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo at a virtual meeting with ASEAN Foreign Ministers (Pompeo 2020). Notably, in a September 2020 press statement, Secretary Pompeo reaffirmed the “challenges from the Chinese Communist Party increasingly threatening the natural environment and economic autonomy of the Mekong region” (Pompeo 2020).

Clearly, the US accusations show their political motives, along with announcing the launch of the Mekong-US Partnership as an integral part of the “Indo-Pacific Strategy”, could be a new front in the strategic competition with China. Simultaneously, the US is also placing the Mekong Subregion in the context of the US-China strategic competition and the “Indo-Pacific” policy as a response to China’s increasing influence. Specifically, the US has also addressed the tendency of discontinuity and bias toward bilateral relations in its relations with the Mekong countries. The 2019 “Indo-Pacific Strategy” report stated: “The People’s Republic of China [...] is undermining the international order from within by exploiting its benefits while eroding the values and principles of the rules-based order” (US Department of Defense 2019). The report concluded that China’s actions in the South China Sea “endanger the free flow of trade, threaten the sovereignty of other nations, and undermine regional stability” and that “such activities are inconsistent with the principles of a free and open Indo-Pacific” (US Department of Defense 2019). From the US perspective, the Mekong Subregion will become an arena for hard power competition between the US and China. The US focus on regional power dynamics is a top priority in the Mekong Subregion. This indicates a partial shift in the LMI’s mission towards regional security issues, becoming an important counterbalancing factor against China’s influence. At the same time, the US is trying to become a key ally of the Mekong countries in dealing with outside interference in the region. Additionally, the LMI also provides a platform for like-minded countries such as Japan, South Korea, Australia, and India to participate. For example, the US cooperates with Japan and the Mekong countries to build a power partnership and invest \$29.5 million (US Embassy in Burma 2019). The US and South Korea also cooperate on satellite imagery projects to support drought assessment in the Mekong River Basin. The increasing involvement of the US and its allies in the region has formed a bipolar order. This reaffirms the important geopolitical position of the ASEAN countries.

The US policy in the Mekong Subregion has become more competitive and directly confrontational with China compared to before. Therefore, the US’s return and high regard for the region provides an impetus to address the challenges facing the countries in the Subregion. China’s control over the Mekong river flow and a significant portion of the regional economy will gradually make the Mekong River the “next South China Sea” - a strategic waterway over which Beijing makes expansionist claims, tightening control, where China has already taken very clever steps. However, it must be acknowledged that the US is also building global multilateralism to strengthen the connection between the US and the Mekong countries. Moreover, the US approach will help create a sense that the US is the leading, democratic, transparent country acting in line with anything that brings common benefits to the region. Therefore, the US also wants to demonstrate its ambitions in this region through a coordinated plan aligned with national interests. This could facilitate mutual economic dependence and deepen trust as well as a sense of sharing or common interests. The US’s increased engagement in the Mekong Subregion is an important step to narrow the gap within the group and nurture true community building.

Moreover, the Mekong countries will face more traditional and non-traditional challenges in the future, such as disease, climate change, cybersecurity, and water security. This is driving the Subregion to turn to the US and other major powers for cooperation to address these issues. In this situation, without a large or equal mechanism to restrain them, countries will be drawn into an order centered on China’s dominance. China has been and is “ready to deepen political trust between countries” (Soong 2021), which could cause ASEAN to

be divided and challenged as China increasingly intervenes deeply in each region and ASEAN country. The US's growing concern over the Mekong river issue will at least force China to listen more to other countries in the basin. Additionally, competitive or "interventionist" factors from the US and Japan, for example, denouncing China's investment in Myanmar through non-governmental organizations, reduce the spillover effect in achieving broader cooperation between China and the Subregion countries. An imbalance has emerged between economic costs and political benefits in China's relations with the Subregion countries. The strategic effectiveness of China's policy of "promoting political relations by developing economic cooperation" in the region is beginning to decline. Therefore, the US has an opportunity to differentiate its vision for the Mekong region by targeting support towards the global energy transition process.

In summary, during the 2009-2021 period, the US made significant adjustments to its strategy in the Mekong Subregion to counter China's growing influence. Initially, the Obama administration established the LMI in 2009 to promote regionalism and sustainable development in this area. However, in the early stage, the US's commitment and focus on this region remained quite limited, leaving a vacuum for China to increase its influence through initiatives like the BRI and LMC. During the Trump administration, the US demonstrated a clearer determination to strengthen its role in the Mekong Subregion in an effort to prevent China's dominance. The US has strongly and harshly criticized China for threatening the natural environment and economic autonomy of the Mekong region, with the "politicization" of Mekong water resources always an issue for the US to condemn China. Notably, the US upgraded the LMI to the MUSP in 2020, aiming to enhance connectivity, improve governance and basic development in the region, reflecting a tougher approach to China's growing influence. Additionally, the US also established the FLM to maintain its influence, along with strengthening cooperation with allies such as Japan, South Korea, and Australia in this region. Overall, during the 2009-2021 period, the US's strategic adjustment in the Mekong Subregion reflects the goal of curbing China's expanding influence in this area. From starting with the more technical and development-oriented LMI, the US gradually shifted to a more political and security-oriented approach, directly confronting China's growing presence in the Mekong Subregion.

Challenges for the Mekong Subregion in General and Vietnam in Particular

Both China and the US have different goals in the Mekong Subregion. China wants to play a more comprehensive role in Mekong Subregion cooperation and demonstrate the effectiveness of its initiatives and power through its own rules, while the US wants to curb China's rising influence (Expert Briefings 2015: 45-50). Dealing with great powers in this era is extremely complex and challenging. Survival is no longer the highest priority, instead, the main challenge for small countries is to maintain autonomy in action, protect national interests to the maximum extent possible under pressure from great powers. Competition for influence among great powers forces countries in the region to adjust their policies accordingly. Changes in the power structure among great powers bring both opportunities and challenges for the Mekong Subregion. The trends of multipolarization and increasing strategic competition among great powers pose many challenges to the security and development of this region. The countries of the Mekong Subregion risk becoming passive witnesses to the struggles for power and economic influence. This will be disadvantageous for the Mekong countries - for example, Vietnam currently has a solid economy, attracts resources, and has the ability to pursue autonomous strategies. Currently, climate change, environmental pollution, and over-exploitation of resources are direct threats to ensuring security and culture for the entire community of downstream Mekong countries. The dual impact of climate change and hydropower projects in the upper Mekong River basin could lead to potential conflict between countries in the Mekong Subregion, especially between Vietnam and China. It can be seen that Vietnam is facing a tense situation from two sides, the East Sea with the risk of military conflict with modern weapons; and the West with potential conflict with the strategic weapon of water from the Mekong River (Thang et al. 2019).

This will be an extremely complex issue if China uses both the East Sea and the Mekong River factors to exert pressure on Vietnam, which China has already been doing. This shows that the issues of the Mekong River and the East Sea are both related to China's influence. Additionally, the differences in the use and exploitation of Mekong River water resources among countries, as well as the differences in perspectives and

pursuit of national interests among members of the Mekong Subregion, will lead to varying levels of commitment to addressing regional security risks and challenges. Moreover, the involvement of great powers in the Mekong Subregion in various aspects and degrees will make it difficult to shape a common, unified view. This is considered the greatest challenge for the Mekong Subregion countries in ensuring the geostrategic values of the region. They have to both cooperate and balance with great powers, while considering how to cooperate without affecting the future. The process of deeper integration could be slowed down if there is a division of views within the bloc (Severino 2007). Therefore, the Mekong Subregion needs to be cautious in its relationships to maintain balance and avoid conflicts in the context of great power competition. The countries in the Mekong Subregion need to unite, reach consensus, and send a clear message that enhancing cooperation with external great powers does not mean “choosing sides” (Binh 2020). Moreover, the Mekong Subregion needs a broader relationship, including the participation of major countries such as the US, Japan, and South Korea in this region, to address the difficult situation that the downstream Mekong countries have to endure. The enhanced cooperation of the US, Japan, and South Korea with the Mekong Subregion countries not only brings benefits to the countries in the region but also opens up more choices to promote economic development.

Vietnam - a country with an increasingly important geostrategic position and great development potential in the Asia-Pacific region in general and the Mekong Subregion in particular, is attracting attention from great powers in many aspects, including defense and security, with both positive and negative implications. Therefore, considering and choosing appropriate policies in the context of US-China strategic competition is always a cautious and complex issue. China is a neighboring great power, has a traditional relationship, and is a strategic partner of Vietnam. However, Vietnam also needs the US to promote economic and social development, and to some extent, reduce its dependence on China. Given Vietnam’s unique geostrategic position and diplomatic history, the most reasonable approach for Vietnam in its relations with other countries is independence, autonomy, diversification, multilateralism, and absolutely avoiding being “single-sided” with any country; while implementing a dynamic balancing policy between great powers (Thanh 2021). Specifically with China, Vietnam must continue to “be wary,” and cannot choose a confrontational foreign policy or openly and directly participate in groups of forces to strategically restrain China. Vietnam needs to “clearly define the principles and directions in foreign relations, avoiding potential negative impacts. Vietnam should respond in a way that balances relations with major countries, both attracting resources for national development and consolidating a good and sustainable relationship with China” (Que and Anh 2019).

Participating in various multilateral mechanisms can also help Vietnam avoid extreme policies and pressure from China. While not having found a common approach to China, attempting to maintain good relations with Beijing while seeking support from the international community seems to be the most feasible measure that Vietnam can currently implement. In addition, Vietnam should proactively and actively promote regional cooperation in exploiting the benefits from the Mekong River with major countries. Evidence of this is that Vietnam has passed Resolution 120 and achieved positive results with more than 20 development partners participating in its implementation (Vu and Tram 2017). Vietnam needs to seize the opportunity to create a movement to oppose China’s dams on the Mekong River, together with the Mekong River Basin countries, to adjust the direction of reducing the number of hydropower dams, negotiate with the governments of the downstream Mekong countries to consider temporarily suspending hydropower projects in the region to conduct a comprehensive, independent, and transparent assessment; while seeking alternative energy solutions and sustainable development policies, because promoting new energy solutions and sustainable development initiatives will help enhance resilience for the entire Southeast Asian region. In addition, it is necessary to make full use of the initiatives of the US, Japan, India, South Korea, Australia, the EU, etc. for sustainable development in this region. By doing so, Vietnam’s role in the region will become increasingly larger, as well as creating a sustainable development environment, mitigating impacts, and creating a level playing field among countries, reducing pressure from Beijing on Vietnam.

CONCLUSION

The increasing strategic competition between the US and China to gain influence in the Mekong Subregion poses serious challenges for countries in the region. As the two superpowers vie for leadership positions in

economics, politics, and security, the relatively small countries in the Mekong Subregion risk becoming bystanders in this great power rivalry or worse, getting drawn into the vortex of escalating geopolitical conflict. The interests at stake on this strategic battleground include control of vital waterways and strategic maritime chokepoints, market access and natural resources, military positioning and spheres of influence. For the Mekong countries, the biggest challenge is navigating skillfully the shifting partnership landscape of new investment deals, diplomatic outreaches, and subtle political pressures from the great powers. Overdependence on either the US or China could undermine their policy autonomy. Yet, maintaining neutrality also carries its own risks such as isolation or inducing new economic dependencies. Enhancing regional cooperation and the role of bodies like ASEAN provides some counterweight, but the bloc remains divided over issues of outside intervention and human rights, undercutting its credibility and bargaining power. Environmental factors like climate change, water scarcity, deforestation, and biodiversity loss are also intimately linked to geopolitical tensions. The damming and flow regulation of the Mekong River by upstream countries like China has become an important bargaining chip fraught with potential conflict. Building a common stance and coordinating to uphold the legal principles and institutional frameworks around transboundary river basins and riparian rights is an urgent priority to prevent future “water wars.” Yet, the region remains divided in its capacity and political will to counter China’s unilateral control over this vital shared resource.

In reality, the Mekong countries cannot avoid entanglement with the activities of larger powers, as evidenced by the flurry of strategic initiatives and involvement from the US, Japan, India, the European Union, and others in the region. However, they can attempt to shape the terrain and conditions of this geopolitical contest by maintaining neutrality principles, building comprehensive connectivity-focused and sustainable development-oriented economic architectures, while deftly leveraging the diverging interests of external partners to balance one another. Proactively shaping a shared vision for the region’s peaceful and prosperous coexistence-rather than merely reacting to outside pressures-is the wisest path forward. While acknowledging the rising strategic value of the Mekong Subregion in an increasingly bipolar world, the common policy orientation of countries in the region should be to turn this vulnerability into an opportunity to assert ASEAN’s centrality and autonomy, becoming a neutral buffer zone straddling the US-China rivalry. By uniting and promoting the region’s shared economic, environmental and security imperatives, the Mekong countries, especially Vietnam, can build collective heft to maintain a precarious balance between the vying great powers. This requires a robust political foundation, consistent foreign policies, and close coordination among ASEAN members on critical transboundary issues like energy security, transboundary water resource management and climate adaptation when engaging with the great powers.

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