

Mekong River: Emerging Geopolitics and Challenges to Environment

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Mekong river is a transboundary river in East Asia and Southeast Asia and is 4,350 kilometres long.¹ The river drains an area of 795,000 square kilometres and it discharges 475 million cubic metres of water annually.² Mekong originates in Tibetan Plateau and flows downstream through China, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. It is considered to be one of the most fertile rivers in the world and has resulted in these countries being known as the 'Rice Bowl of South East Asia'. It provides life and sustenance to approximately 60 million people living in its lower basin, with inland waterways facilitating fisheries to the people along the region.³

Mekong is thus Asia's most strategically important transboundary waterways and is a major trade route between western China and Southeast Asia. The river has been facing extreme season variations in flow and the presence of rapids and waterfalls which makes navigation difficult. Mekong is fast turning into hotbed of regional and international politics as it is a source of urgent worry for nearly 60 million people who depend on it for farming and fishing along the course of the river, especially in the lower basin. The river flows from China, where it is known as Lancang, through Southeast Asia, before emptying through Vietnam's delta into South China Sea.⁴ Nearly three-fourths of the drainage of Mekong River traverses on its lower course, through Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam.

China has been the main player in the Mekong River issues: whether it is construction of its own dams; or financing the construction of hydropower projects in other countries. All regional players have remained involved in one way or the other in utter defiance of all scientific reports. It has been the interventions by civil society that moratorium on construction on dams have been achieved in recent past. Nevertheless, indiscriminate exploitation of the river resources and man-made interventions have slowly and gradually turning out to be disastrous. A kind of blame-game has already ensued and both regional and international players on Mekong are trying to fix the

liability on each-other. China has also been accused of: 'weaponization of water'; pursuing aggressively its BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) infrastructural projects in the region luring the countries of the region; pushing smaller neighbours in the region into debt-trap through loaning them for infrastructure projects; and using water as a geopolitical tool to create a favourable geopolitical balance for itself. This paper is an endeavour to explore the questions that have been raised above.

China and the Mekong River

China's inclusion of Tibet as its territorial entity, has capacitated China considerably. Tibet is the largest headwaters of major rivers flowing through South and South East Asia. The Tibetan plateau is often termed as the "Third Pole", owing to its glacial expanses and vast reserves of freshwater. There are nine countries surrounding the region for which these waters are a cause of concern. China has claimed ownership over Tibet's waters, which makes it an upstream controller of seven of the South Asia's mightiest rivers: the Indus, Ganges, Brahmaputra, Irrawaddy, Salween, Yangtze, and Mekong. These rivers flow into Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam, and form the largest river run-off from any single location. According to estimates, 718 billion cubic metres of surface water flows out of the Tibetan plateau and the Chinese administered regions of Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia to neighbouring countries each year. Nearly, half of that water, i.e., 48% runs directly into India.⁵ India is thus at the receiving end of the water dispute in the region.

China has constructed 11 dams⁶ on the Mekong. Accordingly, it has been conserving water in the reservoirs. These dams provide China geopolitical leverage over downstream nations. These dams have held water from the Mekong to fill local reservoirs for long-term storage. China has done this to sustain its ever-increasing energy needs. The management of water flows has thus been cause of concern for those living along the course of the river, and the situations is exacerbated by the fact that there are no water treaties or agreements that allow the sharing of data between China and Lower riparian countries.⁷ Even the Mekong River Commission cannot restrain China's dam-building frenzy, which has gone unabated. China was using control of the upstream Mekong to parch the lower basin countries. Therefore, there is presence of normal volume of water in upstream Mekong that largely belongs to China and the downstream portion of the river has been drying up to the extent that cracked riverbeds have become visible. Earlier countries along the upstream and downstream have suffered together the pitfalls of draught and floods.

Thus, China's dam-building⁸ has led to excess power production from Mekong, which has deprived the river system of its natural flow and in effect, killing the river and its ecosystem in downstream countries. China is in control of most of the major river of the region, and aspires to be the world power. Accordingly, China has also started using 'water as a weapon', and as a geo-political tool for coercive diplomacy. It is using water as an exclusive commodity, irrespective of the fact dams have a damning effect on the downstream communities by changing the natural flood and drought cycle, hence affecting the ecosystem adversely.

China is a power that has already emerged and is an economic powerhouse, hence in dire need of energy. Therefore, it is reaching out to most countries and region of the world to maximise upon its energy security. China has made inroads into Africa, Latin America, Middle East and thus in Mekong too. Given Mekong river's vast expanse and water along with other resources, China has been making all efforts to keep complete control over Mekong River waters, both economically as well as strategically.

Sinking Health and Vitality of the River

The indiscriminate exploitation of Mekong River waters and resources through construction of dams and harnessing of fishes and water for irrigation has affected the river itself in myriad of ways. Mekong river, thus gradually began to grow dry in late 2019. While China's southwestern province had above-average rainfall from May to October 2019, there was severe lack of water in the lower Mekong. This was revealed through study by US and Chinese agencies which was based on satellite data from 1992 to 2019.⁹The Mekong River Commission, which has China only as "dialogue partner", blamed insufficient rainfall during the rainy season with delayed arrival and early departure of monsoon rains and El Nino effect as the reason for drying of the riverbeds.¹⁰

The lower basin region of the river suffered the most serious impact of the draught. Reportedly, Thailand which has been one of the world's leading sugar exporters, it is expected to produce up to 30 percent less sugars compared to previous years. In Vietnam, about 94,000 hectares of rice field are expected to be affected owing to saltwater intrusion across the Mekong river basin.¹¹ Mekong River also enables Vietnam to be the world's second largest coffee producer and third largest rice exporter. Vietnam accounts for an estimated 42 % of the Mekong's irrigation equipped land and the river supports tens of millions of

Vietnamese, including many subsistence farmers and disadvantaged poor.¹²

Cambodia too depends on Mekong for its power related needs and commerce. It has dam projects which is backed by China. Sambor dam of Cambodia as reported would potentially generate more power than the real need of Cambodia. Accordingly, substantial production would be exported to Vietnam and Thailand. Environmental impact reports revealed that the dam would cause major disruption to migratory fish flows and the movement of nutrient-rich sediment into Vietnam. However, these warnings of man-made environmental disasters in the making have largely been ignored.¹³

Laos is another lower riparian country which has built and operationalised two major dams on the mainstream of the river to produce hydropower. Laos is also a partner with China in its BRI (Belt and Road Initiative). Laotian government has approved over 140 dams along the Mekong and its tributaries.¹⁴ Accordingly, Laos stands at a high risk of collapsing both on account of 'China's Debt-trap diplomacy' and making of 'environmental disasters' if the dams are constructed.

Though, China too has claimed that its farmers are suffering from arid lands but satellite imagery information are to the contrary. Thus, China has been posing itself as victim even though all available facts are against it. However, China is largely considered as the culprit for the ensuing disaster on account of Mekong's exploitation, without thinking of its replenishments.

However, after sustained campaign by International NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations) and internal reporting on the hazards of the dam that Cambodian government has put a moratorium on the dam construction and Sambor dam has been put on hold. Other countries too have started thinking about the pitfalls of the projects on mainstream Mekong. Debates, discussion and analysis have started all over the region as well as at the international level owing to involvement of some of the major powers of the world involved in the region, especially USA.

Issues Pertaining to Mekong and China

China's selfishness and vested interests in the Mekong and the region through which it traverses has given rise to number of issues.

Firstly, as stated above, China has started weaponizing water. Accordingly, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam and Thailand are facing its

consequences. On the one hand, China has taken the world for a full stride with a Chinese-origin pandemic. On the other hand, these countries of southeast Asia are additionally dealing with the worst drought as calamity in living memory, the origin of which is once again, China.¹⁵The 2019 draught stated above is a case that suggests about the calamity.

Secondly, Mekong River has also become another front in Sino-US rivalry, according to environmentalists. China has taken over US so far as investment and influence over downstream countries are concerned. Downstream countries are at the mercy of China's control over river's water. The confrontation arose during the Donald Trump's presidency, when it continued the funding of an Obama-era environmental and development program in the lower Mekong, which later started losing ground.¹⁶ The confrontation that ensued led to debate over China's 11 dams on the river are harming the nations downstream or not? As stated above, the dams have given China extensive control over waters that flows down to Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam. All these countries have long depended on the river for agriculture, and fisheries. Laos has increasingly dependent on the river water for its hydropower. The control has enabled China to determine the development linked to waterway along the river. This led to exclusion of US after decades of investment in projects related to Mekong, through which US was interested towards enhancing its influence in the region. Accordingly, the river has put China and US at loggerheads in the region.

Thirdly, China has also created an intergovernmental body known as Lancang Mekong Cooperation Group (LMC), through which it has stepped-up its activities. US administration has decried it as China's endeavour to marginalise the 25-year-old Mekong River Commission (MRC). MRC too is an intergovernmental body that was created through US initiatives to promote development in the region during the days of cold war. It works with the governments of Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam to share the river water and its resources ensuring sustainable development.¹⁷ Even though China has been denying such allegations as groundless, Mekong is fast turning into a geopolitical issue like South China Sea, between US and China. However, thus far the conflict has been limited to allegation and counter allegations through war of words alone.

Fourthly, US administration funded a study by 'Eyes on Earth', a US-based research and consulting company specialising in water. The study on the basis of satellite imaging and MRC data, reported that 'missing

waters downstream' started in 2010 and that it was on account of hoarding of waters by China through dam's construction.¹⁸ China's government owned newspaper 'Global Times' carried an article in response to this report and refuted the US study and claimed that River dams in China helped alleviate draught along Lancang-Mekong region. However, another study by Tsinghua University and the China Institute of Water Resources reported that China's dams in future could help alleviate draught, and not that it did in the year 2019. China reportedly has for half of 2019, held back vast volumes of vital waters from flowing down the river, which significantly added to the draught. Sebastian Strangio has authored a book titled, *In the Dragon's Shadow*, on Southeast Asia's relations with China, and mentions that certainly the Mekong's downstream neighbours trust China's narrative less, but China's regional might can't be ignored. Hence, they cannot openly challenge China's dam-building. Accordingly, none of the affected countries have commented on either Chinese or US study reports on Mekong.¹⁹ Thus, both the major stakeholders have instituted studies to survey the impact of Mekong River projects and have resorted to allegations and counter allegations refuting the claims of each other.

Fifthly, United States has spent \$120 million on its Lower Mekong Initiative ever since it was conceived 11 years ago. On the other hand, China's LMC set up a \$300 million fund in 2016 for research grants to be awarded for the five downstream countries. Thus, both the major stakeholders have made considerable investment in the region and neither of them are interested in leaving the turf to the other uncontested.

Lastly, US is opposed to China's LMC and has been asking China to work with MRC. Even then MRC has expressed intentions to cooperate with LMC and China. The main reason is that MRC and the member Governments want more data about China's dams, which reportedly hold back a combined capacity of 47 million cubic metres of waters. Since 2002 China has been notifying downstream countries as to when it is going to release water so that they can take care of floods in their countries.²⁰ However, China has been sceptical and has not shared any constructive data so far. The absence of any water-sharing treaty between China and other countries is also a drawback which has incapacitated downstream countries vis-à-vis China.

China's Dam on Mekong: Impact and Implications for India

India does not have any water-sharing agreement with China but they share hydrological data and is also at the receiving end on account of

being a lower riparian. Thus, sharing resource of transboundary rivers is an insurmountable challenge before India, especially in the light of China being an upper riparian country. Given Sino-Indian border dispute, China holds the key to chokehold India's economy in view of scale of control over waters that it had and it has built over last couple of decades. Moreover, Chinese policy-makers are the children of Sun Tzu, which becomes evident even from China's policy on water over the recent past. They have learned from Sun Tzu's saying of "subduing the enemy without fighting as the acme of skill." Thus, China has started using water as weapon.

China has also been using dams as a safe-vaults to keep river waters as deposits to be encashed and used as a leverage to settle geopolitical disputes without firing a bullet, when the need arises. India faces severe threat from China's dam-building adventures as India receives more than half of all river waters originating from Tibet. China has been weaponizing water to serve its strategic, economic and geopolitical ambitions is clear from a number of incidents.

Firstly, it was in the year 2017 when the Doklam standoff between China and India was at its peak, and Assam was inundated on account of unusual flooding in the Brahmaputra River. India asked China to share hydrological data with it, which was refused by China even though it had shared the same with Bangladesh. It was then that India understood that China has started weaponization of water. China's refusal to share hydrological data was in violation of legally binding bilateral accords.

Secondly, in 2018, water in the Siang River, which is one of the tributaries of the Brahmaputra river, had turned blackish grey just before it entered India. China claimed that it has happened on account of earthquake in Tibet, which led to contamination of the waters. However, China's deception became evident as the water in the Siang had turned dirty before the earthquake. Hence, there are possibilities that China may have been re-routing portions of the Brahmaputra towards mainland China, which once appeared outrageous, but it is not so anymore.²¹ Therefore, given China's unilateral coercive actions in the South China Sea and construction of number of artificial islands it makes it more evident that China has been using water as weapon. Thus, threat to Brahmaputra River is real and India needs to devise means and mechanism to contain China's water related aspirations.

Thirdly, China has already started the process of building dams over another tributary, the Lhasa River, transforming it into numerous lakes.

Thus, it becomes obvious from Chinese endeavours in South China Sea, construction of dams on Mekong, Construction of Dams on Brahmaputra, construction of dams on tributaries of the rivers originating from Tibet, and construction of dams in downstream countries of the Mekong region, reveals the fact that China has understood very well that water is the weapon of future with which and for which countries would clash with each other. India will not be an exception to this. Hence, China has started expanding its control over water all over the region.

Thus, India which competes with China in South Asia and Southeast Asian region alongside in different other parts of the world is at the receiving end of China's water related game plans and Chinese geopolitics of water in the region. India needs to be pro-active both diplomatically and through coercive means as well to prevail upon China and bring the other stakeholders on the same platform to contain China's unilateral endeavours.

Conclusion

The concept of Sustainable Development to protect the Environment which was enunciated in 1980s stands severely jeopardized in the wake of nation-states strong urge for development through indiscriminate exploitation of natural resources that belongs to global commons. China's dam-building exercises have been the living example of the way nation-states have been playing around with environment. China has been seriously weaponizing water is also the fact of Chinese strategic economic initiatives over the recent past as well as its geopolitical imaginations.

Mekong mismanagement has contributed towards environmental disasters in the making, which has been evident in the ways in which China has pursued its self-interest increasingly in the Mekong River and the region. This has further exacerbated the effects of climate change and growing geo-regional tensions. First the affected countries and people of the region need to raise the issues loudly complaining about the mismanagement of Mekong. Secondly, the stakeholders must unite and create a platform for themselves towards containment of China. Thirdly, it is high-time for the world community to come forward and prevail over China and Xi Jinping and restrain China to play around with environment, by pressurising them to shun their hegemonistic designs on waters, which belongs to global commons. Fourthly, water must be allowed to exist as resource and not as weapon. Sixthly, water

as resource must be shared-with among the nation-states in the larger interest of human beings.

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- [6] According to some sources 15 large-scale dams have either been completed or are under construction on the Upper Mekong in Tibet and Yunnan. See Russell Sticklor, *Ibid.*, No.3.
- [7] Philip Citowicki, *Ibid.*, No.4.
- [8] China has the nearly largest number of large dams and reportedly some estimates are there that it has more dams than rest of the world put together. See Mayank Singh, *Ibid.*, No.3.
- [9] Ananth Krishnan, "Study on China dams brings the Brahmaputra into focus", *The Hindu*, April 29, 2020. Available at: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/study-on-china-dams-brings-the-brahmaputra-into-focus/article31466673.ece>
- [10] *Ibid.*, No.3.
- [11] The saltwater intrusion occurs when enough fresh river water is not available to push away salt water and sea water encroaches up the

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river. The damage that it brings lasts for long term. As reported by Mayank Singh, *Ibid.*, No.3.

- [12] Philip Citowicki, *Ibid.*, No.4.
- [13] Philip Citowicki, *Ibid.*, No.4.
- [14] Philip Citowicki, *Ibid.*, No.4.
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- [16] Reuters, *Ibid.*, No.4.
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