

The U.S. Perspective on Mekong sub-regional cooperation and policy implications for Vietnam¹

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Abstract: *The Mekong sub-region, not only rich in resources and dynamically developing but also of great geostrategic importance, has attracted the attention of major powers such as China, Japan, South Korea, and the United States. In particular, it has emerged as a critical area of influence in the context of the intensifying US-China competition. Numerous cooperation initiatives have been launched between major countries and the Mekong sub-region as well as among its members. While the U.S. was initially slow to establish cooperative ties with countries in the Mekong sub-region, recent years have seen a marked shift, with certain achievements in development, security, and environment. Given this context, the possibility of cooperation between the Mekong sub-region and the U.S. shall bring several new opportunities that Vietnam needs to carefully consider and leverage.*

Keywords: Mekong Sub-region, Cooperation, the U.S., Vietnam

1. Introduction

The Mekong subregion is a strategically significant area that has attracted the attention of major powers, leading to the implementation of extensive cooperative activities. The prospects for cooperation between the United States and Mekong subregion countries are expected to

intensify in the coming period, in line with the strategic orientations and policies of both sides, as well as the realities of the international and regional contexts.

2. The Mekong subregion - Strategic significance and cooperation context

Originating from the Tibetan Plateau and flowing through Southeast Asia before emptying into the East Sea (South China Sea), the Mekong river ranks among the world's major waterways. The Mekong subregion encompasses five countries within the river basin: Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam, and serves as the economic artery of mainland Southeast Asia, offering abundant resources

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such as freshwater, fisheries, fertile alluvial soil, and crucial transportation routes, among other vital functions. Strategically located along the Asia-Europe economic corridor, the subregion connects the East Asia-Pacific region with the Indian Ocean through both land and maritime routes. Its accessibility to major global markets provides the Mekong subregion with a distinct advantage in leveraging its existing potential to emerge as a hub for manufacturing, consumer markets, and an essential link in global production and trade networks. In terms of culture and development, the Mekong subregion represents a unique cultural space, home to diverse communities that have coexisted and thrived for generations. At the same time, it serves as an ecological sanctuary, hosting thousands of plant and animal species, making it one of the most biodiverse regions in the world. These factors collectively endow the subregion with immense value and a critical role in preserving natural and cultural heritage for future generations.

Given its strategic significance, the Mekong subregion has drawn the engagement of nearly all major external partners. China has participated in the Greater Mekong Subregion Economic Cooperation Program (GMS Program) since its inception in 1992, represented by Yunnan and Guangxi provinces. In 2016, China initiated the establishment of a more comprehensive and institutionalized cooperation framework, known as the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) mechanism. ASEAN engagement with the subregion primarily takes place through the ASEAN-Mekong Basin Development Cooperation (AMBDC), launched in 1995. India, Japan, South Korea, and Australia have also institutionalized various cooperation

frameworks with the Mekong subregion, including the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) in 2000, the Mekong-Japan Cooperation in 2007, and the Mekong-Republic of Korea Cooperation in 2011. These countries also participate in a range of regional development initiatives. In addition, the subregion has benefited from the involvement of several key development partners such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), and the World Bank (WB), among others.

Partners of the Mekong subregion engage in both regional and extra-regional cooperation, offering support and coordination on several key issues, including: 1/ Growth and sustainable development in the subregional countries, such as economic cooperation, financial resource mobilization, human resource development, and infrastructure enhancement; 2/ Natural resource management and environmental challenges in the subregion; 3/ Non-traditional security challenges in the subregion, including combating transnational crime, health security, and cybersecurity.

3. U.S. cooperation policy toward the Mekong subregion

The United States' policy toward the Mekong subregion is currently guided by its broader strategic frameworks for the Asia-Pacific, Indo-Pacific, and Southeast Asia. The country's growing interest in the subregion became particularly evident under President Barack Obama's administration, which promoted the "Rebalance to Asia-Pacific" strategy, prioritizing cooperation with Southeast Asia. Additionally, U.S.

engagement in the Lower Mekong region was further strengthened, marked by the launch of its first comprehensive initiative, the Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI), established in 2009.

** Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI)*

The establishment of the Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI) in 2009 marked the United States' formal entry into the Mekong subregion. Designed to address cross-border challenges within the subregion, six key areas of cooperation were agreed upon by the involved parties, including: (1) *Agriculture and food security*: The United States supports LMI partner countries in promoting sustainable agricultural growth and ensuring food security; (2) *Connectivity*: By promoting physical, institutional, and people-to-people connectivity, the U.S. collaborates with partner countries to narrow the development gap within ASEAN; (3) *Education*: The United States provides assistance to LMI partner nations through both bilateral and multilateral educational programs; (4) *Energy security*: The U.S. collaborates with LMI partner countries to enhance energy security and regional economic competitiveness by promoting the development of renewable and alternative energy sources, ensuring equitable energy access, and advancing regional connectivity; (5) *Environment and water*: The U.S. engages with LMI nations to develop a regional approach to sustainable environmental management and strengthening capacity for the effective governance of water resources; (6) *Health, gender, and other issues*: The United States supports LMI countries in addressing transboundary challenges to improve public health, while also contributing to programs that empower women, thereby reducing development disparities within the subregion (U.S. Department of State, 2013).

At its core, the Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI) represents a pivotal element in the United States' broader efforts to reassert its influence in Southeast Asia, particularly in mainland Southeast Asia. The initiative aims to support downstream Mekong countries in river management planning and in addressing pressing challenges related to environmental degradation, human trafficking, wildlife smuggling, drug trafficking, and emerging infectious diseases. Simultaneously, U.S. engagement in the Mekong subregion serves a strategic objective: To promote greater cohesion and autonomy among Mekong countries in response to China's growing influence. The U.S.'s direct support for China's neighboring countries in tackling developmental and non-traditional security challenges highlights its rebalancing strategy and the shift in U.S. foreign policy focus toward the Asia-Pacific region (To Minh Thu, 2022: 268).

During the implementation phase of the Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI), U.S. bilateral assistance to the Mekong subregion (2010-2020) primarily focused on technical support and capacity building to promote good governance, transparency, and infrastructure development standards. A prominent example is the *Mekong Safeguards Initiative*, jointly funded by the United States and Australia, which incorporates environmental, social, and corporate governance (ESG) standards into energy and transport projects across the Lower Mekong countries. Another notable program, the East-West Transport Connectivity Program, supported by the U.S. Department of Transportation, seeks to strengthen institutional capacities and legal frameworks to ensure that regional transport connectivity aligns with international best practices.

** The Mekong-U.S. Partnership (MUSP)*

Building on the success of the Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI), the United States elevated its engagement in 2020 by launching the Mekong-U.S. Partnership (MUSP). This renewed focus on the Mekong subregion aligns with the U.S.'s strategic interests in the area, particularly as U.S.-China strategic competition intensified under President Donald Trump's administration (2017-2021). The succeeding administration of President Joe Biden (2021-2025) has continued to support the MUSP, adopting the phrase "a free and open Mekong" (U.S. Mission to ASEAN, 2021), signaling the integration of long-term strategic engagement in the Mekong subregion into the broader Indo-Pacific Strategy.

The MUSP is aligned with the core principles outlined in both the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific and the United States' Indo-Pacific Strategy. It underscores key values including equality, good governance, openness, transparency, economic growth, and respect for national sovereignty. MUSP is not a standalone initiative; rather, it fosters coordination with existing regional cooperative mechanisms, including ASEAN, the Ayeyarwady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS), the Mekong River Commission (MRC), and other development partners operating in the Mekong subregion. Within the framework of the MUSP, four key pillars of cooperation have been identified: (1) economic connectivity; (2) sustainable water use, natural resource management, environmental conservation, and protection; (3) human capital development; and (4) non-traditional security. Building on these pillars, a number of significant

programs have been implemented through the collaboration among the United States, Mekong subregional countries, and external partners, such as the Mekong Safeguards, the Mekong Water Data Initiative (MWDI), the Track 1.5 Policy Dialogue Series, and the Pathfinder Health Program, among others.

The MUSP involves 14 U.S. government agencies and departments, with over 50 programs designed to enhance cooperation in addressing shared interests and challenges. From 2009 to 2021, the U.S. government provided more than \$4.3 billion in non-refundable assistance through both bilateral and multilateral channels to the five Mekong partner countries. Of this total, nearly \$4 billion was allocated by the U.S. Department of State and USAID (U.S. Department of State, 2021).

As part of its broader cooperation with the Mekong subregion, the United States initiated the establishment of a coordination mechanism between Mekong countries and the "Friends of the Mekong". Originally launched in July 2011 as the Friends of the Lower Mekong (FLM), the group was renamed the Friends of the Mekong (FOM) in 2020. Its membership comprises the Mekong countries, the United States, Australia, the European Union (EU), India, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the Mekong River Commission Secretariat, and the World Bank (WB). This mechanism aims to strengthen coordination among donors, international financial institutions, and multilateral organizations in delivering development assistance for the Mekong subregion. It seeks to improve aid effectiveness by identifying and addressing programmatic and resource gaps, while minimizing duplication and overlap.

4. Remarks on U.S. cooperation policy toward the Mekong subregion

First, regarding strategic priorities, the Mekong subregion has gained growing significance within the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy. The United States has adopted a more proactive approach, emphasizing stronger partnerships and support for Mekong countries in tackling regional development challenges. Moreover, U.S. policy toward the subregion is situated within its wider Indo-Pacific framework and reflects a competitive orientation, aimed at expanding American influence in an area traditionally shaped by deep-rooted and long-standing ties with China.

The United States' increasing engagement with the Mekong subregion complements a previously imbalanced policy orientation toward Southeast Asia - one that disproportionately emphasized maritime concerns while neglecting the continental dimension (Hoang Thi Ha, 2023). The East Sea (South China Sea) has attracted the U.S.'s attention and is regarded as the primary arena of U.S.-China strategic rivalry. However, the Mekong subregion is increasingly recognized as an emerging hotspot, where major powers are actively expanding their presence and influence. For the U.S., the Mekong serves as a crucial testing ground for its foreign policy through environmental issues, development, and governance.

Second, in terms of cooperation modalities, the United States prioritizes a bottom-up approach that promotes active engagement and empowers riparian communities, academia, and local organizations to enhance knowledge exchange and information sharing. U.S. initiatives aim to cultivate "soft infrastructure", encompassing the strengthening of public institutions, empowering civil society, promotion of

social justice and human rights, and the support for inclusive and sustainable development. This approach stands in sharp contrast to China's model, which primarily focuses on "hard infrastructure" through concessional loans for the construction of roads, bridges, ports, and power plants.

Third, concerning cooperation outcomes, the United States has emerged as a pivotal contributor to cooperative frameworks in the Mekong subregion. Although a relative latecomer compared to some other major regional partners, the United States has positioned itself as a central actor in contemporary cooperation efforts, ranging from initiatives in natural resource management to human capital development, emergency health support, humanitarian aid, and economic and development assistance. The United States' comparative advantages in capacity and resources have enabled Mekong countries to effectively address urgent regional challenges while improving the quality of life in local communities¹. Moreover, U.S. engagement has helped elevate Mekong subregional issues on the international agenda, attracting greater attention from the global community.

However, despite achieving notable results, the United States' cooperation policy in the Mekong subregion faces certain limitations. The Mekong continues to receive limited attention within U.S. strategies. Several key strategies under President Joe Biden's administration, such as the Indo-Pacific Strategy (released in February 2022) and the National Security Strategy (October

¹ The non-refundable aid provided by the U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) through LMI and MUSP from 2009 to 2021 amounted to approximately USD 4.3 billion (see U.S. Department of State, 2021).

2022), make no explicit reference to the Mekong. U.S. cooperation in the region is primarily integrated into its bilateral relations with Mekong countries and within the ASEAN framework, often occupying a secondary position relative to other strategic priorities. This reality undermines the significance of initiatives between the two sides. Moreover, bilateral cooperation continues to encounter discrepancies as Mekong subregion countries seek greater support for “hard infrastructure”, while the U.S. prioritizes “soft infrastructure”. In certain cases, several countries in the subregion do not perceive environment protection and the construction of high-quality infrastructure as fully aligned with their national interests. For instance, despite adverse impact on the environment and downstream communities, the construction of hydropower dams is viewed by some countries as essential for securing domestic energy security and increasing revenue from electricity exports to neighboring countries. Furthermore, the U.S. demands more proactive involvement from the Mekong subregion countries, despite their limited capacity for policy formulation.

Finally, the prospects for U.S.-Mekong cooperation in the near future are likely to be influenced by the foreign policy shift under President D. Trump’s second term. His initial approach during the second term suggests a diminished focus on Southeast Asia, including a decrease in development and humanitarian aid to the region. Budget cuts to USAID have disrupted initiatives under the U.S.-Mekong cooperation framework. However, President Trump elevated this relationship during his first term by leveraging Mekong water security issues to criticize China. Given that China remains the primary concern in Trump’s policy, the Mekong

region is expected to maintain a certain level of relevance. However, the Trump administration’s approach is likely to shift toward “politicizing and securitizing Mekong issues”, utilizing this cooperation framework as a platform to counter China. Additionally, cuts in support for community initiatives and development organizations under the MUSP could immediately undermine key pillars of the initiative, such as Economic Connectivity and Non-Traditional Security.

In the long term, the geopolitical position and the unique connection between the Mekong subregion and China make it a critical factor in shaping U.S. strategies in the Indo-Pacific region. Moreover, U.S.-ASEAN cooperation has been elevated to a strategic level, further highlighting the importance of the Mekong-related issues as they are included in agendas and multilateral cooperation frameworks. Furthermore, U.S. engagement in the Mekong subregion will reflect Washington’s more nuanced approach to the region’s critical issues, effectively building its image as a key, proactive partner committed to collective development. These factors are expected to act as key drivers in the long-term evolution of the U.S.-Mekong partnership.

5. Policy implications for Vietnam

First, in terms of Mekong cooperation, Vietnam should continue to play an active and proactive role. In the current context, the country should aim to position itself as a leader in regional cooperation, promoting international norms, proposing new initiatives, and acting as a key intermediary in Mekong cooperation frameworks. Active involvement in Mekong-related issues offers Vietnam several advantages. First, the Mekong is both an urgent and vital issue for Vietnam, with a significance comparable to that of the East Sea (South

China Sea). Vietnam's engagement in Mekong cooperation enables the country to address challenges that cannot be resolved unilaterally. In particular, Vietnam welcomes contributions from external developed partners, as the Mekong subregion countries remain developing nations with limited resources and capacity to manage regional challenges.

In addition, Vietnam's participation in Mekong cooperation helps the country enhance effectively its international role. Vietnam has articulated its aspiration to be "an active and responsible member of the international community". The ASEAN and Mekong forums provide the most suitable platforms for Vietnam to begin realizing this commitment.

Moreover, through active engagement and substantive contributions to Mekong cooperation, Vietnam can position itself as a leading actor in the subregion. Among Mekong countries, Vietnam and Thailand are generally regarded as having the necessary capacity and resources to assume leadership roles. However, Vietnam holds a distinct geographic advantage over Thailand, being situated at the intersection of mainland and maritime Southeast Asian countries, affording the country strategic interests in both domains and enabling it to harmonize and coordinate shared agendas across these subregional groupings. Vietnam is also well-positioned to lead the CLMV countries, known as Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam, in narrowing the development gap with the more advanced ASEAN members. Besides, Vietnam maintains constructive and wide-ranging relations with all major external partners engaged in Mekong cooperation, which provides a strong foundation for it to further consolidate its role as a regional connector.

Second, in enhancing cooperation with the United States in the Mekong subregion, Vietnam should actively support key initiatives that benefit the region and strengthen coordination with the U.S. through both multilateral and bilateral Mekong frameworks. Among Mekong countries, U.S. priorities, particularly those related to environmental protection and water resource management, most closely align with Vietnam's national interests, as the country lies downstream and bears the greatest consequences of upstream activities. Cooperation with the U.S. offers essential frameworks and concrete actions to mitigate both immediate and long-term risks for Vietnam in the Mekong. The recent elevation of the Vietnam-U.S. relations to the highest level provides a favorable foundation for enhancing bilateral cooperation in the subregion.

Moreover, in recent years, the United States has substantially expanded both the scope of its cooperation and the resources allocated to the Mekong subregion. While the Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI) primarily concentrated on capacity building and addressing non-traditional security issues in the region, the Mekong-U.S. Partnership (MUSP) has broadened its agenda to encompass infrastructure investment and energy through collaboration with private corporations and energy cooperation with Japan. This evolution indicates growing U.S. interest and engagement in the region, presenting a timely opportunity for Vietnam and other Mekong countries to more comprehensively and effectively leverage American support.

Third, one of the most pressing challenges to Mekong cooperation today is the intensifying great power rivalry between the United States and China, which can undermine cooperative processes in

the subregion. Although major-power competition in the Mekong remains relatively subdued at present, it is likely to intensify due to the increasingly complex and unpredictable nature of U.S.-China tensions. Mutual accusations and criticisms regarding Mekong-related issues have become more frequent. U.S. initiatives in the region have largely excluded China, instead emphasizing the participation of close allies, while China has developed its own cooperation framework, the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC), and provided substantial financial support for it. Similar to the East Sea (South China Sea) and Taiwan, the Mekong could become another strategic flashpoint in the ongoing U.S.-China rivalry. This situation presents a significant challenge for Vietnam and other Mekong countries, which will need to skillfully and prudently navigate these tensions and make thoughtful decisions in their partnerships. However, traditional security or territorial sovereignty issues are not central to Mekong cooperation. Rather, the primary concerns are economic aspects, development, and environmental sustainability that help mitigate the risks of armed conflict, with cooperative tendencies continuing to prevail. Given this context, Vietnam and other Mekong countries can leverage cooperation with both the United States and China, especially as these collaborations are strengthened and mutually complementary.

6. Conclusion

Since adopting its “Pivot to Asia” policy, the United States has placed growing emphasis on the Mekong subregion. However, China has leveraged its strengths to deepen engagement in the area and exert considerable influence. Consequently, the U.S.’s competition for influence in the Mekong subregion has become more challenging. Recent U.S. cooperative

initiatives in the region have been assessed as significantly more robust and expansive than previous efforts. Should the U.S. broaden its focus to encompass not only security and climate change but also development issues, cooperation between the U.S. and the Mekong subregion would present numerous opportunities for countries in the region, including Vietnam □

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