

# China with Lancang - Mekong cooperation: current situation and prospects

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Received February 1, 2019; published June 25, 2019

**Abstract:** *China is the upstream country of the Lancang - Mekong River which flows through Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam before draining into the East Sea. Therefore, the cooperative attitude is shown by the Chinese has played an important role in sustainable exploitation and development of this river. This paper presents and analyses China's guidelines and policies in Lancang-Mekong cooperation both at national and local levels, from which some preliminary remarks and assessments are drawn.*

**Keywords:** China, Lancang - Mekong River, International Cooperation

## I. Introduction

Lancang - Mekong is an important river in Asia, originating from China's Qinghai - Tibet Plateau. It is called Lancang River in China, while its downstream, running across Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, and flowing into the East Sea, is called Mekong River, measuring 4.909 kilometres in length, covering an area of 795.000 square kilometres. (<http://vnmc.gov.vn/neusdetail/101/luu-vuc-song-mekong-tai-viet-nam.aspx>).

China is the upstream country of the Lancang - Mekong River. Thus, the cooperative attitude of China plays the central role in sustainable exploitation and development of this River.

## II. China's National Stance and Policy on Lancang - Mekong Cooperation

In 2012, Thailand came up with the initiative of the Lancang - Mekong Sub-region cooperation, which was warmly welcomed by China. China has started its role in the Lancang - Mekong Cooperation since 2014. At the 17<sup>th</sup> China - ASEAN Summit held in Myanmar's Naypyidaw on 13<sup>th</sup> November 2014, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang stated: "For the promotion of ASEAN's regional development, China expresses its positive response towards Thailand's initiative within 10+1 framework to discuss the establishment of Lancang - Mekong dialogue and cooperation mechanism" (Li Keqiang, 2014).

Since 2014, the Lancang - Mekong Cooperation Framework has held three Leaders' meetings, three working group meetings, and one Foreign Ministers' meeting (FNM). In November of 2015, at the first FNM, all parties officially declared to launch Lancang - Mekong cooperation process, and agreed on cooperation in three key areas of *political security, economy and sustainable development*, and *humanity society*.

In particular, on 23<sup>rd</sup> March, 2016, China proactively held the first Lancang- Mekong Cooperation Leader's meeting in Sanya, Hainan Province, under the theme of "*Shared River, Shared Future*". In his speech, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang affirmed: "The Lancang - Mekong Cooperation is an useful complement to China - ASEAN cooperation framework, conducive to promoting socio - economic development of the member States, narrowing the development gap, and building a new version for China - ASEAN full-round cooperation. This is also a new practice of the South - South cooperation, demonstrating our firm determination to work together to materialize the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Goals." Accordingly, Premier Li made four cooperation proposals (Li Keqiang, 2016), including:

*First*, together form a community of shared destiny among the Lancang - Mekong countries.

*Second*, strengthen connection and cooperation on production capacity, accordingly, China sought to align development strategies of the other countries, expedite critical projects, such as China - Laos, China - Thailand railways, China - Myanmar sea and land

transport complex, consider opening border economic zones, industrial zones, investment zones, transport link, through which constantly improving the Lancang - Mekong infrastructure. Beside, China would establish a fund for preferential loans and 10 billion USD quota loans, including 5 billion preferential loans for the buyers, 5 billion reserved to production capacity cooperation projects, etc.

*Third*, on the implementation of the UN Agenda for Sustainable Goals, China would prioritise 200 million USD of the South - South Cooperation Aid Fund to assist five countries in fulfilling the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Goals. At the same time, a fund would be established for the Lancang - Mekong Cooperation, within 5 years (2016-2021), to offer 300 million USD cooperation projects for small and medium enterprises of 6 countries. China sought, together with the Mekong countries, to establish the Environmental Cooperation Center and Lancang - Mekong Water Resources Cooperation Center, etc., and strengthen cooperation on prevention of trans-border transmitted diseases, etc.

*Fourth*, fill the gap for people-to-people exchange. China desired, together with other Mekong countries, to set up diverse channels for people exchange in areas of education, technological science, culture, tourism, youth, etc. For 3 years (2016-2019), China has offered 18,000 government scholarships and received 5,000 people coming to China for training; meanwhile it has considered establishing Vocational Training Centre for the Mekong countries. In addition, China proposed to found the Integrated Law Enforcement and Security Cooperation of the Lancang - Mekong

River to set up joint law enforcement operations and employee training.

After that meeting, the Lancang - Mekong cooperation has gone full-fledged with a number of projects completed and developed. On trade, China has become the biggest partner of Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam, and the third biggest of Laos. Bilateral trade between China and 5 Mekong countries reached 220 billion USD in 2017, increased by 16% compared to 2016. China's foreign direct investment into the 5 countries accumulated to 42 billion USD, 20% rise in 2017. Notably, after the first Leaders' meeting, flights from China to the 5 countries peaked at 330, with 30 million turnovers in 2017 (Li Keqiang, 2018).

On 10<sup>th</sup> January, 2018, at the second Leaders' meeting held in Phnom Penh (Cambodia), Chinese Premier Li Keqiang continued raising certain points as follow (Li Keqiang, 2018):

*First*, effectively cooperate on water resources. All parties should value sustainable development of water resources, formulate "5-year Action Program on Water Resources Cooperation", promote the role of the Water Resources Cooperation Centre, hold water resources cooperation forum, intensify policy dialogues, information exchange, technical assistance, and create the playground on water resources cooperation for shared contribution and shared benefits.

*Second*, strengthen cooperation on production capacity, such as water resources infrastructure. China would support its enterprises in building a series of dams, reservoirs, and water and irrigation works in partnership with the Mekong countries for mutual benefits. Beside, production

capacity cooperation in areas of railways, highways, ports, airports, etc. also appeared promising.

*Third*, strengthen cooperation in areas of agriculture. China does not pursue protectionist policy and seeks to import more high quality agricultural products to meet diverse domestic consuming demands. China would support domestic enterprises to partner up with the Mekong countries to process agricultural products, improve added value and competitiveness, and together approach a third party's market. At the same time, this country also seeks, together with the others, to delve in agricultural technical cooperation, establishment of agricultural technical laboratory, facilities for technical experiment samples; agricultural quality standard, prevention of diseases, etc. and founding of the Lancang - Mekong Agricultural Cooperation Centre to establish the playground for technical exchange, integrated research, agricultural investment and trade.

*Fourth*, bolster human resources cooperation. In 2018, China offered 2,000 short-termed and in-service fellowships, 100 four-year undergraduate scholarships, invited numerous senior and mid-level cadres to participate in research courses on agriculture, health, water resources, etc. China proposed an initiative to establish the Lancang - Mekong integrated education working group on superstructure designs in bilateral education cooperation; assist the Mekong countries with the establishment of Lancang - Mekong Vocational Education Centre.

*Fifth*, enhance health cooperation. Within the possible scope, China assists the other countries with improving health services

system, including construction of hospitals, community health centres, etc. In 3 years (2018-2020), China would carry out 100 health aid projects for the Mekong countries, etc.

In short, at the national level, albeit China's late participation in the Lancang - Mekong cooperation framework, it is an active and proactive country to voice up various initiatives covering issues of socio - economic, culture, education, tourism, environment and non-traditional security, etc. This serves an objective to lead the game in this region.

### III. China's Local Stance and Policy on Lancang - Mekong Cooperation

China has two provinces bordering Mekong countries, which are Yunnan province and Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region (here in below referred as Guangxi). Therefore, prior to the national-level engagement, the Chinese Government had paved the way for the local-level engagement of these two provinces/regions with the Mekong countries.

#### 1. Yunnan Province and the Lancang - Mekong Cooperation

Yunnan province is located in the upstream region of the Lancang - Mekong River, covering an area of 390,000 square kilometres, ranked 8<sup>th</sup> among Chinese provinces/zones, with the population of more than 48 million (2017 estimate) (See: <https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E4%BA%91%E5%8D%97%E7%9C%81>).

Originally, Yunnan was a poor province, yet thanks to reform, opening up, and cooperation with the Mekong countries, Yunnan has become a middle developed province in China. In 2018, its economic growth reached 8.9%, ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> in the country, with gross domestic product

was 1,788.112 billion CNY; exports and imports value were 197.312 billion CNY, ranked 5<sup>th</sup> in the country (Kunming Daily News, 28/01/2019).

In particular, with its upstream advantages, Yunnan has implemented the development strategy called "Prosperous Water, Fertile Land", which means taking advantages of upstream water resources for development. With the 1,216 kilometre long river running across Yunnan, the province has constructed a series of dams, lakes, and especially 7,092 reservoirs (water storage lakes) of many kinds (Yunnan Daily News, 8/6/2019).

From 4<sup>th</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> July, 2005, the second Greater Mekong Sub-region Summit was held in Kunming (Yunnan province, China) with a theme of "*A Stronger Partnership for Common Prosperity*". The summit issued the Kunming Declaration, which broadened sphere of influence of China in general and Yunnan in particular on the Greater Mekong Sub-region cooperation.

In 2017, the Lancang - Mekong Sub-region Research Centre, Centre for Diplomatic Research on adjacent countries (under Yunnan University), collaborated with the Social Sciences Academic Press to publish "*Report on the Lancang - Mekong Development Cooperation*". Accordingly, Yunnan takes a proactive role in the national development strategy *Belt and Road* with the purpose to transform Yunnan into a centre with spill-over effect on South and Southeast Asia (Blue Book on Lancang - Mekong Cooperation, 2017).

On the official stance, Yunnan's 2018 working report identifies: the Province would support overseas-bound enterprises for construction of a series of industrial zones, promote international production

capacity cooperation, support the formation of transnational transport corporations, etc., increase agricultural product exports, develop processing and transit trade; establish overseas trade centres, through which promote Yunnan's products going overseas; consider trans-border currency reform, innovation of trans-border currency operation, bolster the internationalization level of the Chinese Yuan Renminbi<sup>1</sup>.

Before that, the thirteenth 5-year master plan of the Province had affirmed: Proactively serve and participate in *Belt and Road* strategy of the country through activities, such as promoting construction of infrastructure of railways, highways, airways; expediting manufacture of spare parts and international production capacity cooperation with South and Southeast Asian Countries; promoting the Province's central role in building Bangladesh - China - India - Myanmar, China - Indochinese Peninsula economic corridors; helping industries, such as cement, steel, etc., move their production overseas; taking full advantages of the Chinese population, overseas Chinese in terms of capital, technology, and social influence, to access the South, Southeast, and West Asian markets; expediting the building of trans-regional electricity network connecting to the neighbouring countries; given electricity resources in the Greater Mekong Sub-region, building the Electricity Exchange Centre for South and Southeast Asia.

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<sup>1</sup> Government Working Report presented by Governor Ruan Chengfa in the first meeting session of the thirteenth People's Congress of Yunnan on 15<sup>th</sup> October, 2018, Yunnan Daily News, 2<sup>nd</sup> February, 2018.

Thereby, Yunnan has seen *Belt and Road* strategy as a good opportunity for its enterprises to accelerate foreign investment, particularly into Mekong Sub-region countries in the areas of agriculture, construction of transport infrastructure, and production cooperation. For example, Yunnan Construction and Investment Holding Group Co. Ltd. (In short: Yunnan Construction Corporation) is considering signing a contract on construction of highways and international trade centre in Laos (See: <http://www.tlzgs.net/news/detail/id/117.html>).

## 2. Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region and the Lancang - Mekong Cooperation

Although Lancang - Mekong River does not flow through this region, yet since 2005, Guangxi has got the approval of the Chinese Government to take part in the Lancang - Mekong Cooperation Framework. Unlike Yunnan, Guangxi borders on land and at Tonkin Gulf with Vietnam. Guangxi area is 236,700 square kilometres, with population of 48,38 million in 2016, including 12 ethnicities accounting for 37.94% total population, of which Zhuang ethnic group makes up for 32.15% (according to population statistical survey of 2010); many ethnicities live along the China - Vietnam border. Previously, Guangxi was a poor region, yet ever since reform and opening up, Guangxi has risen to the middle developed province in China. In 2017, its economic growth was 7.3%, surpassing the country's average growth, gross domestic product was 2,039.625 billion CNY, GDP per capita exceeded 6,000 USD (<http://silkroad.news.cn/2017/1026/65282.shtml>)

On participation in the Lancang - Mekong Cooperation, Guangxi raises the issue of

connecting the Action Program *Belt and Road*, taking Guangxi as the main lead to promote connection of industries among the domestic region, the Eastern region, and Indochinese Peninsula, erect Nanning - Singapore corridor as the pillar for China - Indochinese Peninsula economic corridor, etc.; implement organic combination of *Belt and Road*, *Two Corridors*, *One Belt*, and Greater Mekong Sub-region Cooperation, etc.; proactively participate in the Greater Mekong Sub-region electricity network, cooperate with ASEAN countries in areas of coal, oil, hydroelectricity, etc. (See: <http://silkroad.news.cn/2017/1026/65282.shtml>).

Hence, given particularities of each region, the two provinces/regions, Yunnan and Guangxi of China, have played a positive role in the Lancang - Mekong Cooperation, especially in efforts to connect it to the national strategy *Belt and Road*, accordingly, to promote development cooperation on transport infrastructure, trade and investment, education, culture with the Mekong countries, etc.

#### **IV. Reflection, Assessment and Proposals**

##### *1. Preliminary reflection and assessment*

Through studying China's stance, policies, and practice on Lancang - Mekong Cooperation at national and local levels, we come up with certain preliminary reflections as follow:

1.1. China's engagement in the Lancang - Mekong Cooperation serves its strategic geopolitical objectives.

Geopolitical location of the Southeast Asian continent may open the way to the Pacific and Indian Oceans for China. Therefore, with the rise of its hard power, China seeks to widen sphere of influence abroad. Engagement in the Lancang -

Mekong Cooperation is a step forward to materializing their ambitious objectives.

Beside, maintaining a friendly and stable relation with the Mekong countries helps ensure China's Western and Southern security. The Western region of China is lagging behind in terms of socio-economic growth and facing potential risks of domestic insecurity due to three doctrinisms: secessionism, religious extremism, and terrorist extremism. Believers of such doctrinisms normally operate through the Mekong countries or refer to a third country for training, then return to China to organize terrorist acts.

Finally, Southeast Asian continent is an area where China's competitors, especially the United States and its regional allies, seek to contain the rise of China, which can challenge the hegemony of the U.S. Recent global development has shown a sign of "cold confrontation" or "Cold War mentality" just got started, accordingly, the U.S. and the West will move heaven and earth to contain Russia's reclamation under V. Putin in Europe and China's rise under Xi Jinping in Asia. Therefore, China cannot afford being idle and inactive.

1.2. China proposes and implements initiatives for promotion of cooperation in the Lancang - Mekong region with a view to materialize above objectives.

On politics, insisting on "shared water", China has intensified its efforts to communicate, mobilize, and persuade for other Mekong countries' cooperation to build a China - Lancang - Mekong Common Community of shared destiny. In nature, this is an essential diplomatic policy of China, which Secretary General, President of China, Xi Jinping, has voiced up and pursued, that is Community of

Common Destiny, which he considers “the Chinese approach” and “the Chinese wisdom”. In addition, it also finds its place in China’s good neighbour foreign policy of the new era as the Instrument of the XIX National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party indicates: “Deepening relations with neighbouring countries”. Among China’s neighbouring countries, ASEAN, including the Mekong countries, are considered the most important. Therefore, China will bolster comprehensive cooperation in various areas with the Mekong countries.

On economics, this is seen as “a carrot” which China “generously” gives to sub-regional countries. Prospectively, a series of mega projects will be carried out with a view to combine China’s *Belt and Road* initiative and development strategies of the Mekong countries, notably the operation of oil pipelines from West Myanmar port to Kunming, China; China - Laos, China - Thailand railways, etc. In the recent leaders’ meeting within Lancang - Mekong Cooperation in Cambodia, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang emphasized: “The era of high speed railways” has started. Coupled with that, forums, conferences, exhibitions, research and training centres, study fellowships and scholarships to China, etc. are promoted pompously by China (at national and local levels) towards the Mekong countries. Strikingly, China is not short of infrastructure links building projects, yet its bigger ambition is to construct both small and huge strategic economic corridors connecting to the Mekong countries, such as China - Laos economic corridor, Cambodia’s development strategy, etc., China - Indochinese Peninsula economic corridor

in a broader and more permanent context. All of these aim at “deepening ties with the neighbouring countries” as indicated in the Instrument of the XIX National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party.

On culture and society, along with promotion of economic cooperation, China will accelerate investment for training and fostering of cadres capable of good linguistic skills, comprehensive and deep research ability with regard to the Mekong countries; send many communication cadres and people’s institutions to the Mekong countries for learning and exchange purposes. In particular, new flights to provinces/cities between two parties will be launched, paving the way for their people, including businesses, to navigate for tourism and investment opportunity seeking.

1.3. Many of China’s projects are faced with critics from the Mekong countries, along with containment by powers outside the region given its hastiness in pursuing the ambitious objectives, together with a lack of coordination, even competition, among corporations of interests from both sides.

Practice has shown that China’s huge projects in the Mekong countries, for many reasons, are faced with opposition of the receiving countries, such as the Myanmar oil pipelines project, China - Laos, China - Thailand railways, Cambodia’s Sihanoukville port economic zone, etc. It not only hurts economic interests of both sides, but also bruises China’s national image and bilateral relation between China and other Mekong countries.

In addition, the ambitious rise of China with its grand project *Belt and Road* has challenged the hegemony of the U.S., as

well as threatened maritime and overflight security at the East Sea. It urges the U.S., its allies and other regional players with aligned interests at different levels to collaborate and cooperate in order to contain China. Apart from economic and political benefits, the recent engagement of Japan and South Korea in the Greater Mekong Sub-region countries serves the purpose of competition for sphere of influence against China in this region. Notably, the Indo-Pacific strategy set forth by the U.S. recently is headed in the same direction for containment of *Belt and Road* strategy and the rise of China.

## 2. Proposals and solutions

Through study, preliminary reflection aforementioned, we make concrete proposals in the climate of China strengthening the Lancang - Mekong Cooperation as follow:

### 2.1. On mindset

*First*, China's increasing engagement in the Lancang - Mekong Cooperation serves its needs for development and Southern security as well as regional competition against the U.S. and its allies.

*Second*, given the need for development, a number of Mekong countries have agreed on cooperation with and connection between their development strategies and China's *Belt and Road*.

*Third*, the U.S. and its allies have intensified efforts to cooperate with the Greater Mekong Sub-region countries to not only help boost development, reduce reliance on China, but also contain China's rise.

*Fourth*, in the climate of cooperation and competition, mutual containment between China and the U.S. in relation to the Mekong countries has been rising, in which advantage is tilting towards China,

Viet Nam should persist its foreign policy on independence, self-reliance, further multilateralization and diversification of foreign relations, respect of the Mekong countries' choice, keep the balance, and refrain from siding with any party in the power play in the region.

### 2.2. Solutions

*On political diplomacy*, given its geostrategic location, with the front of the Mekong countries overlooking the Pacific Ocean, Vietnam should take the bridging role in connecting horizontal development among the Mekong countries, vertical development between China and the Mekong countries, through which it may take positive steps to flexibly propose and implement various initiatives, such as: forum, exhibitions, tourism, cultural exchange, education, sports, cuisine, fashion, etc. at the national and local levels.

*On economics*, Vietnam should avail itself of big powers', such as China, the U.S., increasing cooperation with the Mekong countries to boost its labor productivity, competitiveness and ability for international integration.

*On infrastructure*, to pave the way for the Mekong countries to the Pacific Ocean, Viet Nam should enlist the support of Japan, South Korea and international organizations to invest in East - West transport highways connecting to other Mekong countries. At the same time, Viet Nam may consider port investment, transform into trade ports as its growth factor with spillover effect on the Mekong countries. As a result, it helps boost economic growth, Viet Nam's international image in relation to big powers, cultural soft power in the international and regional arena.

*On national security*, in the cooperation with China, particularly in connection with China's *Belt and Road* and *Two Corridors One Belt* strategies, Viet Nam should stay cautious in selecting projects qualifying for economic development and national security requirements. In addition, in relation to two neighboring countries, Cambodia and Laos, on the one hand, Viet Nam should respect their choice of development partner; on the other, it should follow up, gather information, and proactively address fast-changing developments on strategic connection between China's *Belt and Road* and development policies of those two countries, as well as "expediting to expand the territory" and "expediting to build the sea power" as indicated in the Instrument of the XIX National Congress of Chinese Communist Party; its impacts or influence on Vietnam's national security.

#### V. Conclusion

Given the location and importance of the Southeast Asian continent, China has strenuously pushed for cooperation with the Mekong countries, and considered it a priority in good neighbor foreign policy. The Mekong countries, such as Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, have availed themselves for development. However, this is also the strategic competition zone of big powers, China's rising influence in the region and in competition with the U.S., Japan. On the other hand, it is the zone of the U.S. and Japan's choice to compete and contain China's rise. Thereby, it paints a picture where big powers cooperate with, yet compete against and contain each other, posing risks of unstable regional security. In the climate of cooperation and competition intertwined, with complicated developments, unidentifiable and

unexpected factors, Viet Nam should avail its geostrategic location for bolstering cooperation with regional countries and big powers, and proactively address negative effects from the cooperation and competition among big powers. The Southeast Asia of peace, stability and development is of great importance to not only development but also national security of Viet Nam □

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