

The New Zealand Asia Institute (NZAI) undertakes research focusing on engagement with Asia, provides a forum for informed debates, and offers a bridge to Asia-related expertise and research within the University of Auckland.

Opportunities and challenges for the Greater Mekong Subregion: Building a shared vision of “our” river

Originating in the Tibetan Plateau and emptying into the South China Sea, the Mekong River flows through China (Yunnan Province), Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam. The “Mother of Rivers” drains a landmass the size of Western Europe and contains a population slightly smaller than that of the USA. For millennia, it has provided millions of riparian residents with food and livelihood. The river is hence a vital and valuable resource, with huge development potential for the six states through which it flows.

The six member states of the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) differ in the rates and level of their economic development. As described in a major recent research project, the economic disparities and power differentials have unsurprisingly bred anxieties over uneven distribution of the Mekong’s resources.* Striving to ensure an adequate measure of fair and equitable resource sharing, the six countries are actively engaged in diplomatic negotiations and joint development programmes. At the same time, however, they have also been racing to maximise their own benefits by pressing ahead with national hydroelectric, water diversion, and channel dredging projects on the stretches of the river within their respective boundaries.

The fear that ever more development schemes are being introduced or implemented without sufficient region-wide consultation has led many to worry that resource rivalries may ultimately become the fault lines between the countries in the Mekong area. Economic growth pressures, in the forms of hydroelectric dams, industrial development, intensive farming, rapid urbanisation, and navigation improvement attempts have also given rise to serious concerns about increasing environmental, ecological, social, cultural, and livelihood disturbances.

The GMS subregion has a strong shared incentive to reduce poverty and realise economic development. Many communities along the river have pinned their hopes for prosperity on the Mekong. The impetus for coordinated and sustainable development of the River will have to come from within the region. This in turn necessitates a sense of regional belonging among the six states and their constituent communities that would motivate them to

adopt policies and behaviours for upstream-downstream and lateral cooperation over the appropriation and use of their shared resources. In this regard, the conversion of battlefields into market places in the 1990s has enabled the Greater Mekong Subregion to lift the flood gates to economic and social contact among its six members.

Researchers investigated whether increased horizontal links among the peoples in the GMS helped awaken a sense of shared identity and a desire for regional cohesion in the Mekong development. Another key question is whether closer interdependence of the Mekong countries accommodated the development of a political-social-cultural space conducive for the growth of a regional “we-ness” among not only political elites, but also the general public.

The contributors to this New Zealand Asia Institute research project approach these questions through their analyses of the historical evolution of the Mekong as a region, the potentially vital role of the tourism sector, the Mekong Power Grid in regional identity formation and sustainable development, the relationship between economic growth/prosperity and community construction, the impact of the US-China strategic rivalry on the subregional geopolitical landscape, and the domestic policy deliberations and public debates respectively in Vietnam, Thailand, and China on water resources development. These thematic inquiries shed fresh conceptual and empirical light on efforts and challenges in the Mekong subregion to bring fragmented and competitive water interests into an integrated and coordinated allocation and management framework for the ever more threatened “Mother” river.

*The full study results are available in Johnston, C.S. and Chen, X. (Eds.) 2020. Opportunities and Challenges for the Greater Mekong Subregion: Building a Shared Vision of “Our” River. Routledge.

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