

Hydropower Development and Sustainability in the Mekong River Basin

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Abstract

The study aims to evaluate the complexity of relationships between the riparian states - China, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia - in the Mekong River Basin since the mid-1990s with special reference to the discourse on hydropower development. A special emphasis will be put on the influence of China on hydropower development. Although a variety of issues on the river basin have been discussed among the riparian states, none of them has been effectively implemented owing to the lack of China's commitment to the discussions for sustainable water management. Now, a new turning point is observed in the region with emergence of the issue on hydropower development, not only in the upper basin but also in the lower basin. The discourse on hydropower in Mekong has quickly drawn attention of the public, accelerated by the onset of construction of the Xayabury Dam in Laos since November 2010.

The influence of China as the upstream country with its political, economic, and military power has increasingly grown in the region over the last few decades, and such trend recently intensifies together with an expansion of Chinese commercial interests in the region. Since the establishment of the Mekong River Commission (MRC) in 1995, the four MRC members have striven to push forward a sustainable use of water resources in the basin. But the legitimacy of the MRC system has been eroded due to the lack of participation by Myanmar and China, and in particular, the Chinese absence has made the four riparian states blind about the change of water regime due to the Chinese dams upstream.

Environmental damages due to hydropower development might be possible, including a drop of fish yields, crop production, and damages to the river's ecosystems. Vietnam and Cambodia have already expressed their concerns over the dam construction towards China as well as Laos by pointing out detrimental impacts of the dams to their economies. China's move to collaborate with the other riparian states since 2010 has given a positive signal in terms of sustainable water management in the river. However, this phenomenon never confirms China's proactive contribution to the cooperative activities within the framework of the MRC system. Laos' initiative to build a new dam in the lower basin alarms those who are opposed to dam construction in the fear of its far-reaching damages to the environment. The question goes back to the year-long debate on policy priorities given to economic growth or the environment. The riparian states require wisdom based on a consensus about sustainable water use rather than hydropower development based on individual growth dreams.

Keywords : Mekong River Basin, Riparian States, Mekong River Commission, Hydropower Development

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