

Power Asymmetry in the Mekong River Basin: The Impact of Hydro-Hegemony on Sharing Transboundary Water

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Abstract

Does the allocation of transboundary water strengthen cooperation among states or cause international conflicts? This is a question that is highly disputed among several scholars, whereas the arguments of both sides seem equally rational. An analogous dissent can be seen in the research area of the Mekong River. For that reason, it is rational to avoid engaging in this everlasting disagreement and rather look at the problematic question from another viewpoint. This article deals with the Mekong case from a relatively new angle by combining the concepts of power, hydro-hegemony, and coexistence of conflict and cooperation as proposed by the London Water Research Group for analysing the impacts of hydro-hegemony on water allocation. This approach enables us to observe that the power asymmetry deriving from four types of power (geographic, material, bargaining, and ideational power) gives China the position of the hydro-hegemon that is followed by five weaker non-hegemons in the following order: Laos, Thailand, Myanmar, Vietnam, and Cambodia. Despite the great number of collaborative groups, the non-hegemons have not been able to resist the hydro-hegemony of China effectively, as the unity of non-hegemons is mostly hampered by different national interests. Therefore, the bilateral relations of China with the other riparian states individually—especially with Laos and Cambodia—have been stronger than on the multilateral basis with the Mekong River Commission.

Keywords: power asymmetry, hydro-hegemony, transboundary water, Mekong River Basin



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