

## Rising Strategic Competition Between the United States and China in Mekong River Subregion

Duong Van Huy\* • Tran Thi Hai Yen\*\*

**Abstract** In recent years, the Mekong River Subregion has become central to the strategies of major global powers due to a series of economic and geopolitical factors. The growing importance of the Mekong Subregion in global dynamics spurred several actors to develop specific strategies. While the United States (US) created regional fora for policy discussions as well as development funds, China increased its presence by offering loans, constructing infrastructures, and creating a specific regional institution. Due to the rising strategic competition by powers, so that, Mekong River Subregion is now at the crossroads of great power competition, especially the strategic competition between the US and China in the Indo-Pacific region. The US-China strategic competition in the Mekong Subregion differs from the maritime Southeast Asia regions, especially in the South China Sea, in this region; the competition is between China, which has almost won the foothold in the region, and the United States, which is trying to find ways to increase engagement in the region to find a place for itself. This scenario would be detrimental for Mekong River Subregion countries. The countries in the Mekong River Subregion pursue the “hedging strategy” to respond to the growing competition between the US and China, to manage the regional order. In pursuing such a strategy, the countries in the region look to other external powers such as Japan, India, South Korea, Australia, Russia, and the European Union (EU) not only for the pursuit of security cooperation but also for deeper economic involvement. However, the “hedging strategy” through economic cohesion gives the impression that the smaller powers in Southeast Asia are actively chasing the larger powers for funding and privileges.

The effectiveness of such a cohesive strategy largely depends on how larger powers allow things to happen. Given that situation, this article seeks to explain and analyze the rising strategic competition between the US and China in Mekong River Subregion and how the Mekong River Subregion countries respond to this situation in detail.

**Keywords:** China, the United States, China-US relations, Mekong River Subregion, Strategic competition

---

Duong Van Huy\*(✉), Tran Thi Hai Yen\*\*

\*Associate Professor, PhD, Research Fellow at Institute for Southeast Asian Studies, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, Vietnam.

E-mail: huyiseas@gmail.com

\*\* PhD, Research Fellow at Institute of Chinese Studies, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, Vietnam.

E-mail: haiyenbn1987@gmail.com

## Introduction

Mekong River is about 4,350 km long, flows through 6 countries, including Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and China. Its upstream area in Chinese territory is called Lancang River by this country. This is considered one of the lifeblood of Southeast Asia; this region is home to nearly 242.8 million people (in 2018) and is the source of life for about 65 million people living in the downstream area. Its natural resources really attract huge economies, including China, the US, and Japan, South Korea, India, etc. In addition, the need to take advantage of the competitive advantage of human resources and the need to expand markets of major countries' areas that are also met by the inherent conditions of the Mekong Subregion further boost their presence in this region. The countries of the Mekong Subregion also welcome the presence of many major countries with interests in taking advantage of other competitive advantages in capital, advanced science and technology, and management experience.

Besides the South China Sea, the Mekong region has now become a strategic point for strategic competition between the US and China. In recent years, the Mekong Subregion has seen the re-engagement of foreign powers, especially the US, Japan and South Korea. The China factor remains to be the main reason for this re-engagement. The re-engagement is characterized by creating a new impetus for existing narrow multilateral cooperation mechanisms, namely the US's Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI), the Mekong - Japan Cooperation and the Mekong - South Korea Cooperation. These cooperation mechanisms place emphasis on economic improvements and human development indices in this Subregion. Each major power not only has its own policy towards the Mekong Subregion, but also links their respective policies together and collaborates through projects. These re-engagements will diversify financial and technical support for the Mekong Subregion in the context of China's increasing economic and political influence. It also enhances the subregion's position in the foreign policy of regional powers. The re-engagement of major countries, especially the US in the Mekong Subregion in the context of China's increasing influence in this region, signals fierce competition for power in Southeast Asia. Despite the medium-term benefits, the region will face challenges in its equivocation defense strategy.

The increase in strategic competition between China and the US in the Mekong region has now become the concern of countries in the region. In geostrategic terms, the Subregion also has a special geographical location, connecting with major Asian markets and dynamic economies such as China, India, as well as ASEAN countries. With their strategically important trading positions, the countries of the Mekong Subregion were once the places where major powers established their institutions and outposts in the past. In the current period, the Mekong Subregion becomes the place where Japan and China compete for increasing influence in the region. It is also a "buffer zone" for China to develop its influence over the wider parts of Asia - the Pacific and the Indian Ocean, where it wields its rise to the international community.

This is the buffer zone for the US to implement Asia policy, exercise restraint on China. The US's LMI and China's Mekong Subregion Countries Summit have overlapping components. On the other hand, the Mekong Subregion is also a potential area for development and competition in international economics. (Duong Van Huy, 2020: 14101-02) Currently, the Mekong Subregion is becoming a new hot point in strategic competition between the US and China. This not only creates an opportunity to expand cooperation space for countries in the Mekong Subregion, but also creates many new challenges that those countries are facing.

For the research methodology, the research design of this research follows a way of qualitative analysis with the case study as the main research methodology. Besides, the main research questions of this research are: Why is the Mekong River Subregion becoming strategic competition between the US and China? How do the US and China increase in strategic competition in this region? To answer these questions, the paper highlights the sections as follows: the first section is the introduction, the second section mainly analyzes the strategic objectives of the US and China to the Mekong Subregion. The third section of the article analyzes the ways to promote competition between the US and China in the Mekong River Subregion. The fourth section of the article assesses the response of the countries in the Mekong Subregion to the rising strategic competition between the US and China in this region. And, the last section is the conclusion and findings.

## **1. The Strategic Objectives of the US and China in the Mekong River Subregion**

### **For China**

The country also has ambitions to create a belt of influence of this country in the South. At the beginning of the 21st century, China wisely implemented the strategy of "Dongwen Beiqiang Xijin Nanxia" (东稳、北强、西进、南下) that would "stabilize in the east, gather strength in the north, to advance to the west and descend to the south" (*Huanqiuwang*环球网, 2012), "is the doctrine that can be seen as China's long-term strategy for transport exits beyond its borders, which Xi Jinping is actively realizing" (Minakir, P. A. and Suslov, D. V, 2017), thus creating a safe "buffer zone" around China. In which, "descend to the south" (Nanxia南下) focuses on tightening economic relations with neighboring ASEAN countries in the South, brings China's economy into integration with this market (Duong Van Huy, 2020: 14102).

Thus, the region where China can gain influence more easily is the South, which is home to a group of smaller and weaker neighbors compared to China. The Mekong region is the one that China most easily exerts its influence, and also the one that China has had relatively good relations with the countries in. China's objective of approaching the Mekong Subregion is shown in several aspects.

Firstly, *promoting China's presence in its "traditional influence area."* Mainland Southeast Asia, namely the Mekong Subregion bordered by China's Guangxi and

Yunnan Provinces – China’s relatively low-developed region in the southwest, including the “*Xibu Da Kaifa Zhanlue*” (西部大开发战略), that would “Great Western Development” (GWD) policy and the opening-up in the Southwest region of China, which is also the door to go down to Southeast Asia by road, and go into the Indian Ocean via Myanmar. In addition, the region includes mainly the countries with close trade relations with China, especially now that many countries in this region are increasingly tightening their relations with China. Therefore, for China, this area can be seen as Beijing’s “traditional influence area” (Duong Van Huy, 2020: 14102), so promoting a new, more efficient cooperation mechanism will be of major role in the overall strategy of China in Southeast Asia.

Secondly, *the Mekong Subregion has become a “pilot” place for China’s cooperation initiatives such as “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI) and building a “Community with shared future” (Mingyun gongtongti 命运共同体) (Renminwang 人民网, 2019) between China and its neighbors.* Currently, China is promoting the strategy of building a “Community with shared future for mankind” in the region, so mainland Southeast Asia (countries in the Mekong Subregion) is considered a “pilot” area for China to implement the Asian Community with Shared Future strategy. China also emphasized the “cooperation in solving competition for water resources for transboundary rivers in the spirit of community with shared future for mankind of regional cooperation” to enjoy the water of the same river; the future is closely linked.” Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC), and more broadly BRI is an important tool to promote building a community with shared future. China also assessed that the Lancang - Mekong cooperation is a newly innovative regional cooperation model. This cooperation model aims to inherit the spirit of building an Asian community with a shared future for mankind. This mechanism will not replace the existing regional cooperation mechanism but rather new addition. This can be considered as an important cooperation mechanism in China’s neighboring diplomatic strategy (Liú, Jūnshèng 刘均胜, 2016).

This area is an important gateway for China to implement China’s “go out” strategy and consolidate the regional infrastructure network connecting China with Southeast Asia and South Asia. China is involved in the development of the North-South Economic Corridor (NSEC) because it has a role in assisting Yunnan province and Northern Laos provinces to access important seaports. (Duong Van Huy, 2020: 14102) The corridor also connects to the existing road network from Kunming to Beijing. Currently, NSEC is almost complete, except for several transport routes between Laos and Thailand. In addition, China is also promoting the economic corridor of Kunming - Lao Cai - Hanoi - Hai Phong - Quang Ninh, the economic corridor of Bangladesh - China - India - Myanmar (although it has not yet achieved any practical results). Building China’s Trans-Asia railway from Kunming to Singapore.

In addition, the promotion of the “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI) will help China accelerate the expansion and formation of transport infrastructure in the Greater

Mekong Subregion (GMS) in the past five years and China is a driving force. The appearance of “International Hubs” linked and driven by China is not only changing “geo-economics”, but also shaping visions of “geostrategy and geopolitics” in the area. Infrastructure de-bottlenecks are forming other economic and strategic bottlenecks, of which Beijing is the coordinator.

Thirdly, *strengthening cooperation with the Mekong River Subregion, China wants to reduce the presence of other powers in this region, such as the US, Japan, South Korea, India, etc.* In the recent period, the subregion’s potential for development has attracted the attention of many investors and development partners who capture the trend of regional and international integration. Up to now, in the Mekong Subregion, many cooperation mechanisms have been formed within the Mekong countries as well as between the Mekong countries and major partners such as the US, Japan, Korea, India and the EU. Cooperation mechanisms such as the Mekong- Japan, the Mekong-Korea cooperation mechanism, the US Ganges-Mekong River Cooperation, etc. These cooperation mechanisms are strongly competing with China’s cooperation with the region. Therefore, the strengthening of bilateral and multilateral cooperation mechanisms under the “Belt and Road” framework is hoped by China to create a new space for China to increase regional influence, to compete with the increasing influence of other external powers, especially the US and Japan. (Duong Van Huy, 2020: 14103)

Fourthly, *China aims to “contain” the Taiwan factor in Mainland Southeast Asia, especially in the context of Taiwan’s implementation of the “New Southbound Policy” in the Era of Ms. Tsai Ing-wen.* Although Taiwan has no formal diplomatic relations with mainland Southeast Asian countries, Taiwan’s influence on this region is enormous, especially in the economic and human exchange fields. Taiwan is still an important economic partner of many mainland Southeast Asian countries, especially Vietnam and Thailand. Even Taiwan is trying to sign a free trade agreement with Thailand, especially where Thailand has set out the national development strategic target “Thailand 4.0”, which can create a lot of cooperation space between Taiwan and Thailand. (*ThailandBusinessNews*, 2021) As a result, Taiwan will increase its strongly increasing presence to the Southeast Asia area as well as mainland Southeast Asia by “New Southbound Policy.” (*Nationthailand*, 2017; Tu Lai, 2019; Lín, Tíngguī林廷輝, 2020) This makes China feel anxious, so China’s stepping up its regional strategy may also mean increasing pressure on Taiwan’s economic cooperation space and calling the countries to support China’s “one China” policy (Duong Van Huy, 2020: 14103).

### **For the US**

Strategically, to contain China’s increasing influence in the Mekong Subregion is the most important reason for the increased re-engagement of the US and its allies in this region. The Mekong Subregion is of paramount importance in the context of broader developments in US policy, including increasing US-China competition and the free

and open Indo-Pacific strategy of the Trump administration. Moreover, at various times in history, the Mekong has served as the point of connection or conflict between mainland Southeast Asian countries and among the major powers fighting there, including the United States during its peak period of the Vietnam War. The Mekong's importance in the US's Asia policy has only grown in recent years, with the Mekong countries' increasing their economics but grappling with governance challenges and China's growing assertiveness. Meanwhile, the Mekong itself is under threat due to a series of developmental pressure, demographics, and climate change, including the rise of hydropower dams. Today, the Mekong remains the center of the US's Asia strategy. Indeed, in the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy as outlined by the Donald Trump administration, the Mekong Subregion is where principles of freedom and openness are arguably the biggest challenge. This Subregion is also the best example of the connection between the three main FOIP pillars, including security, economics, and governance that the US officials have outlined because of existing cross-border challenges. The future of the Mekong region also looks towards the US's broader objectives, including fostering alliances and partnerships, fostering ASEAN's greater unity, increasing the US's economic engagement, and managing China's rise. (Prashanth, Parameswaran, 2019) As stated by US's Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo in a press release dated September 14, 2020, "The inception of the Mekong-US Partnership has reflected the importance of the Mekong region towards the US. Our relationship with the Mekong region partners is an integral part of our Indo-Pacific vision, as well as our strategic partnership with ASEAN." (*Vn.usembassy.gov*, September 2020)

In addition, the US's increase in involvement in the region not only strengthens relations with allied nations and partners in the region but also reinforces the role and influence of its allies in the Mekong Subregion, especially Japan and Korea. The US's promotion of LMI also provides a foundation to bring Japan, South Korea and other stakeholders to collaborate on joint projects. For example, the US partners with Japan will provide \$ 29.5 million to develop power line systems in the region. LMI is funding a project with South Korea on satellite imagery to improve the assessment of floods and droughts in the Mekong basin. The US also supports a Thailand's recent initiative to utilize the Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS) as a platform to coordinate projects related to agricultural development and capacity creation.

## **2. The Ways to Promote Competition Between the US and China in the Mekong River Subregion**

### ***2.1. The Increase in Diplomatic Disputes between the US and China over the Mekong issue***

The Mekong River, with its part located in Chinese territory called Lancang River, has a length of 4,350 km, is the 12th long river in the world. Currently, the life of 60 million

people in the Mekong basin countries in Southeast Asia is estimated to depend on the health of the Mekong River. According to the Mekong River Commission (MRC), hydroelectric dams can cause water flow in the downstream area of the Mekong River turn from mobile water to dead water, preventing fish from moving and causing a decrease in fish species from 26% to 42%. Hydropower dams will make agricultural land of downstream countries lose their fertility due to the absence of sediment and even turn into barren land (*Mrcmekong*, 2010).

The Mekong River is becoming a geopolitical issue between China and the US, very similar to the South China Sea issue and cause of the dryness of the Mekong River leads to the China-US war of words. In 2019, the highest drought in the downstream area of the Mekong River in the past decade was recorded. In recent years, the people of the area share that the number of aquatic products caught has been less and less and of smaller and smaller size. A US Ambassador described that China's storing water in 11 dams on the Mekong River part that flows through the country has affected the lives of millions of people in the countries located in the downstream area of the river. The river's upstream area reaches 4,350 km (2,700 miles) long, damaging the livelihoods of millions of people in downstream countries. Meanwhile, the China Foreign Ministry responded to Reuters that the US's charges were unfounded. The ministry emphasized: "Countries outside the region should refrain from causing trouble." China Foreign Ministry told Reuters that any suggestion by the United States that Beijing is trying to take over the Mekong conversation was groundless (Johnson, Kay and Panu, Wongcha-um, 2020). The US Ambassador in Thailand has criticized China for blocking water resources, while the China Ambassador in Thailand has rejected the US Ambassador's statement and said that this opinion is intended to cause disagreement between relevant countries. China emphasized, "ignoring the joint efforts made by China, Thailand and other relevant parties to promote Mekong water resources cooperation for the benefit of the people in the region, these groundless accusations mislead the readers, and undermine the good atmosphere of sub-regional cooperation." (*Chinaembassy.or.th*, 2021)

The research category supported by the US's LMI is also notable. In April 2020, the Water Resources Monitoring Organization released a research report, which suspects that China keeps a large amount of water resources, indirectly causing drought in the countries in the downstream area of the Mekong river. This information went viral. Immediately, China, through the Embassy in Thailand, issued a rebuttal, stating that countries along the Mekong River experiencing drought is due to climate change, and China's hydroelectric dam has the function of regulating the amount of water flowing downstream of the Mekong River, assisting relevant countries to deal with drought. In addition, since 2002, China informed the countries in the downstream area of the Mekong river every time they flooded but was criticized for giving too little information. In February 2020, at the Foreign Ministers Meeting of the Mekong River Cooperation, China committed to expanding hydrological information sharing.

However, according to Reuters news agency, officials in the Mekong River basin implicitly expressed some doubts. Sebastian Strangio-author of “In the Dragon’s Shadow,”-states that the countries in the downstream area of Mekong rivers basically do not trust China, but due to dependence on China for living resources, it is difficult to challenge Beijing’s hydroelectric dams. (Johnson, Kay and Panu, Wongcha-um, 2020) In addition, the US and China recently turned to the scientific aspect when the two governments released a separate report on China’s 11 dams impacting downstream countries. China’s dam construction in the upstream area has affected the flow of the Mekong River in the downstream countries such as Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam - countries with the Mekong river’s important role in agriculture and aquatic products. The US has for decades promoted projects on the Mekong River to exert more influence on the region. Mr. Witoon Permpongsacharoen at the Mekong Ecology and Energy Network commented: “This has become a geopolitical issue like the South China Sea, between America and China” (*Straitstimes*, 2020).

The war of words between Beijing and Washington erupted after research by a Washington-backed US-based company named Eyes on Earth in April concluded that China’s dams stored much water during the drought in 2019. Also, according to Eyes on Earth’s research, based on satellite images and MRC data, they show that the water “is lost” in the downstream area, starting from about 2010. US Ambassador in Cambodia Patrick Murphy said he was “quite amazed” by the staggering findings. Mr. Murphy said, “the main source of the river level’s decline and the changes in the downstream area of the Mekong river is what is happening in the upstream China-basically is storing water.” China reacted outrageously with its embassy in Thailand, accusing the study of “politically motivated, aimed at China with malicious intent.” In July 2020, Global Times (Huanqiu) published an article that disproved the report of the Eyes on Earth (Johnson, Kay and Panu, Wongcha-um, 2020).

Besides, in a press statement dated September 14, 2020, US Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo said: “The unilateral decisions of the Chinese Communist Party to keep the upstream water have exacerbated add historical drought. The United States will stand side by side with the region and the Mekong River Commission in calling for transparent data sharing. We encourage countries in the Mekong region to request the Chinese Communist Party to be responsible for a commitment to share its water data. Data must always be made public. Data must be disclosed throughout the year and include water and water-related data, as well as land use, construction, and operation of dams. Data should be shared through the Mekong River Commission, which serves the interests of the countries of the Mekong region instead of Beijing.” (*Vn.usembassy.gov*, September 2020) At the same time, Mr. Pompeo also criticized the economic and security risks that China may pose to countries in the region: “We are also concerned about debts related to infrastructure and take advantage of shady business activities of Beijing’s state-owned enterprises, such as China Media Construction Company. We



are also concerned about the explosion of human, narcotics, and wildlife trafficking, largely stemming from organizations, companies, and special economic zones linked to the Chinese Communist Party.” (*Vn.usembassy.gov*, September 2020)

## ***2.2. The US and China promotes the building of multilateral mechanisms led by themselves in the Mekong River Subregion***

In recent years the Mekong River Subregion has drawn the attention of great powers (such as China, Japan, the US, and the European Union (EU)), as well as medium powers (such as South Korea, India and Australia). Significantly, the Mekong River Subregion has become a new front in US-China rivalry. China and the US have rival bodies working with Mekong countries: The Beijing-based Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) and the Washington-based Mekong-US Partnership (Johnson, Kay, and Tostevin, Matthew, 2020).

### **For the US**

Washington promotes the Mekong Subregion regional mechanism, which promotes the MRC and the LMI. The MRC stems from the US’s efforts to promote development during the Cold War. This commission has worked with the governments of Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam to promote sharing and sustainable development of the river and its resources.

The US promoted relations with the Mekong River Subregion by proposing the LMI in 2009 and has been unanimously agreed upon by countries in the lower region of the Mekong River, including Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam. The LMI is a program to promote cooperation in this Mekong Subregion further. The cooperation program covers six main areas: Agriculture and Food Security, Connectivity, Education, Energy Security, Environment and Water, and Health, Gender, and Other Issues and Overlays. LMI is created as a forum for partners participating in LMI to work together to develop common solutions to the most urgent cross-border development challenges. The Lower Mekong Subregion countries share a wide range of interests, including issues such as transboundary water resources management, infectious diseases such as dengue fever, and pandemic flu, and vulnerability due to climate change. The objective of LMI is to assist in building a common regional understanding of these issues and promote effective solutions with coordination among countries (*Usaid*, 2019).

From the time LMI was born in 2009, the United States also emphasized that the nucleus of the current US-Southeast Asian relationship is the newly established LMI-intending to call for efforts from all parties to improve the quality of education, environment, health, and infrastructure in the region. The policy also clearly has a geopolitical objective to balance external influence over the ASEAN region, where China’s influence has grown steadily over the past decade. In spite of being a fast-growing region, Mekong is also facing many difficult decisions, especially issues

related to energy security and water security. Hydropower is the focus of recent proposals, but the trend of using hydropower in the region is minimal or pays no attention to adverse environmental and socio-economic impacts. The US can provide technology and assist in identifying and promoting regional solutions to address energy, food, and security needs. LMI strengthens information sharing between US agencies operating in the basin and regional governments and provides new equipment to improve information quality and support decision-makers.

Cooperation between the US and Mekong region has also achieved some cooperation results. Over the past ten years, US's agencies have provided more than \$ 3.5 billion in assistance to countries in the Mekong region. Direct investment from the US in the region hit \$ 17 billion in 2017, increasing compared to \$ 10 billion in the previous decade. Two-way trade reached \$ 109 billion in 2018. Since 1999, US's exports to the Mekong countries have created more than 1.4 million jobs in the US in industries such as electronics, agricultural products, and machines. More than 33,000 students in the region were enrolled in US colleges and universities in 2018 alone. More than 72,000 young people in the region have been members of the US-initiated Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI) since the Initiative's official launch in Manila in December 2013 (*State.gov*, 2019).

Projects under the LMI framework have brought significant improvements to people's lives in the Mekong region, in particular. (*Vn.usembassy.gov*, 2019) At the same time, the United States has also strengthened the region's capacity to respond to and recover in emergencies through Pacific Disaster Response Maneuvers and Exchange organized by the Army Corps of American (*State.gov*, 2019).

Under the administration of President Donald Trump, despite foreign policy adjustments, with the lower Mekong region, the Donald Trump administration continued to actively participate in this region through the LMI with two outstanding activities. Firstly, the Mekong Water Data Initiative (MWDI) proposal at the 10th LMI Foreign *Ministerial* Meeting (August 2017). Secondly, the active participation of US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo at the 11th (August 2018) and 12<sup>th</sup> (August 2019) LMI Foreign *Ministerial* Meeting proves the interest of the Donald Trump administration to LMI.

Besides, the US also affirmed that the Mekong region is currently facing new challenges, including dependence on loans; the massive construction of hydroelectric dams to focus on flow control downstream; river-bed dredging and expansion plans; border patrols on the river; and pressure of some parties in introducing new rules to govern the river in a way that undermines the role of existing institutions. The US commits to coordinate with countries in the Mekong region to cope with these new challenges. At the same time, the US is also coordinating its efforts with the "Lower Mekong Friends" Group to strengthen coordination between donors and the Asian Development Bank (ADB), Australia, EU, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, and World Bank (WB). Together with

countries in the LMI, the United States cooperates to implement programs based on shared values, principles, and visions for this region (*State.gov*, 2019).

On August 1, 2019, the 12<sup>th</sup> LMI *Ministerial* Meeting (LMI-12) took place while the 52<sup>nd</sup> ASEAN *Ministerial* Meeting (AMM-52) was taking place, in which the US and the small countries in the Mekong Subregion emphasized the implementation of the Mekong Water Data Initiative (MWDI) and puts the “Mekong Water” data page intending to support strengthening the role of MRC, promoting push data sharing for disaster forecasting and policy-making support. The Ministers also welcomed the US’s initiative on the LMI Joint Impact Program to align LMI’s projects with the actual needs of each locality. At the same time, the parties also agreed to continue supporting the activities of the Mekong River Commission; enhancing information sharing and coordination between LMI and the activities of the Friends of the Lower Mekong (FLM) working group; and supporting the development of the Ayeyarwady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS) and other cooperation mechanisms among the Mekong countries. On the other hand, the US also pledged to join Japan to establish “Japan-US Mekong Power Partner” (JUMPP) to support Mekong countries in sustainably ensuring energy security.

On the other hand, in the first Mekong - US Partnership *Ministerial* Meeting that took place online on September 11, 2020, the Meeting officially announced the upgrade of cooperation to the Mekong - US Partnership (MUSP) based on the successes of the Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI) mechanism established in 2009, laying the foundation for promoting the potential of the partnership, effectively contributing to the sustainable and prosperous development of the region in a new period. At the Meeting, the US Department of State announced that the US would spend nearly \$ 153.6 million on cooperation projects in the Mekong region, of which \$ 55 million on cross-border crime prevention projects, \$ 1.8 million on supporting the Mekong River Commission to increase water resource data sharing for policy-making, and several disaster management projects, organized a multilateral policy dialogue on developing Mekong region (*Baoquocte*, 2020).

In addition, the US funded a project of using satellites to monitor and publish water levels at China’s dams in the Mekong River. The Mekong Dam Monitoring Project, partly funded by the US State Department, uses data from trans-cloud satellites to monitor the water level of dams in China and other countries. A separate “surface humidity” indicator of the project will somewhat indicate the cooler or drier level than usual level, which shows how dams affect the natural flow.

## **For China**

Beijing accelerates the construction of the Mekong-Lancang Cooperation (MLC) mechanism and accelerates implementing the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China promotes the use of the Lancang-Mekong initiative as a multilateral mechanism

to promote regional cooperation. Deepening the practical cooperation and friendly neighbor relationship of the six countries of the Lancang-Mekong, promoting the socio-economic development of the Lancang-Mekong countries, creating a river basin economic development region, together, building a community with the shared future of the Lancang - Mekong countries. Enhancing the well-being of people of all countries, supporting the building of the ASEAN Community (AC) and regional integration process, and contributing to promoting of the South-South cooperation program and implementing 2030 Agenda of UN on sustainable development. Member countries: China, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Main mechanisms: Summit, Foreign Ministers Meeting, Senior Officials Conference, Diplomacy, and Joint Working Groups for priority fields.

One noteworthy point is in the Vientiane Declaration of the 3<sup>rd</sup> LMC Summit, held on August 24, 2020, in the online form, with the participation of senior leaders of 6 member countries (include China, Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam) the issue of strengthening political and security cooperation was brought to the top position. (*Xinhua* 新华网, 2020) This shows that, China is worried about major country strategic competition in the region, especially the increasing engagement of the US and its allies in the region, in the South China Sea and the Mekong region as well, which intensifies the pressure on Beijing.

China promotes investment, aid and trade activities in the Mekong Subregion. In particular, the economic factor is considered as a “gift” for China to use in exchange for the political support of the countries in the region. China has actively built a network of economic links relatively closely with this region. Infrastructure is an important means of supporting effective trade, investment and cooperation in other fields between countries and regions. Realizing this, since the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, after the comprehensive increase in synergy, China has accelerated its infrastructure connection with the GMS countries, in order to realize the strategy of connecting comprehensively with the region (Duong Van Huy, 2020: 14104).

The China government has urgently promoted road connectivity and infrastructure construction on the North-South Economic Corridor. The North-South corridor system has been put into operation, connecting traffic between China and GMS countries. The West route of the North-South corridor (Kunming-Laos-Bangkok highway) was officially opened in 2008. The Chinese government and the Thai government have provided half of the funding to build the third-largest bridge crossing the Mekong River connecting the border between Thailand and Laos; the project was officially started in February 2010 and completed at the end of 2012. The mid-route of North-South Economic Corridor (Kunming-Hanoi-Hai Phong). Roads on the South route of North-South Economic Corridor (Kunming-Dali-Shuili-Myanmar) with a total length of 820 km, September 2010 up to now, the two countries China and Myanmar, have established the Joint Work Group to initiate the master planning for this route.

In connecting the railway, China actively participates in Trans-Asia railway cooperation. The plan to build three railway routes including East, Mid and West railway routes in the master plan of Trans-Asia railway, particularly the sector located in Chinese territory, has been included in the “Mid-to-Long-Term Railway Network Plan” (Zhongchangqi Tieluwang Guihua 中长期铁路网规划) by China’s government and is being urgently deployed by this country. Thus, an international traffic network with the focal point is Kunming-China has spreaded and will spread across Southeast Asian countries, from the road system in the North-South Economic Corridor project connecting China with Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, to the trans-Asia railway stretching from Kunming to Singapore.

Besides, China is also actively promoting connection in terms of national development strategy. China promotes strategic connections for development with mainland Southeast Asian countries. For Myanmar, China increased the connection of the BRI with Myanmar’s national development plans, including the two parties’ promoting the construction of the China - Myanmar Economic Corridor, considering this as an essential part of the two countries in promoting the construction of BRI. In May 2017, China and Myanmar also signed a BRI cooperation agreement. In August 2017, the two parties also established the Belt and Road Initiative Development Association. For Thailand, Thailand associates a national development strategy, such as the “Thailand 4.0” vision, with China’s BRI. In 2016, Thailand officially launched a new value-added economic model that is the “Thailand 4.0” economic strategy. Thailand and China connected the “Thailand 4.0” strategy to BRI. In the “Thailand 4.0” strategy, the connection of Thailand’s East Economic Corridor and BRI of China is the central task of connecting development policy. Thailand has proposed such an East Economic Corridor development strategy in order to utilize and develop economic connectivity with China through the BRI.

For Vietnam, China and Vietnam have also committed to connecting the One Belt One Road Initiative with “Two Corridors, One Belt.” It is known that the framework of “Two Corridors, One Belt” is the idea to build an economic development area between Vietnam and China jointly. The “Two Corridors” here are Guangxi-Quang Ninh-Hai Phong and Yunnan-Lao Cai-Hanoi-Hai Phong. And “One Belt” includes several border provinces in southern China and some northern provinces of Vietnam, extending as far as Quang Binh province. Infrastructure connectivity between Vietnam and China has been strongly promoted. Currently, the deployment of infrastructure connection between Vietnam and China has also achieved certain development steps, especially the connection between the two parties through “Two Corridors, One Belt”. At the same time, China’s contractors are flooding into Vietnam for bidding for infrastructure projects such as road traffic and electricity (Duong Van Huy, 2020: 14105).

In recent years, China has strengthened digital economic cooperation with ASEAN countries, especially with the Mekong Subregion countries, including cooperation

on digital infrastructure construction included in China's "Digital Silk Road" (数字丝绸之路 *Shuzi sichou zhilu*, also known as the 信息丝绸之路 *xinxi sichou zhilu*, "Information Silk Road"), such as 5G technology cooperation, Artificial Intelligence (AI), smart city network building cooperation. In the Joint Declaration of the 3rd Lancang - Mekong Cooperation Summit, this was emphasized: "Strengthening cooperation in new growth points such as digital economics, artificial intelligence, promoting socio-economic recovery of Lancang - Mekong countries, overcoming the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, promoting sustainable economic growth" (*Xinhua* 新华网, 2020).

China and other countries are gradually setting up the Digital Economic Dialogue Mechanism. In the immediate future, China-Thailand have built a Ministerial Dialogue Mechanism on Digital Economic Cooperation, and in March 2019, the two parties held the first Conference. During this conference, the two parties introduced their digital economic development, and discussed topics such as digital economics, smart city, unified applications, software, and IT services, infrastructure connectivity and 5G, industrial networks, network security, artificial intelligence. At the same time, the E-commerce cooperation mechanism between China and ASEAN countries has gradually been formed. In November 2017, China and Cambodia signed the Memorandum of Understanding on E-commerce Cooperation with Vietnam in May 2017. In August 2018, China and Malaysia kicked off the negotiation process to sign the Memorandum of Understanding on bilateral cross-border e-commerce cooperation. In December 2018, in Beijing and Hangzhou, there were two State-owned Enterprise Partnership Dialogues with partner countries on "Silk Road E-commerce" (*Sichou zhilu Dianzi Shangwu* 丝绸之路电子商务), to implement the MOU on e-commerce cooperation signed with countries related to BRI, deepening cooperation in the field of electronics within the BRI framework.

At a higher level, China wants to promote the process of building a community with shared future for China and the Mekong Subregion countries. We know that, in 2018, China launched an initiative to build a Lancang - Mekong Community with Shared Future. (*Zhongguozhengfuwang* 中国政府网, 2018) In fact, China has signed agreements to realize a community with a shared future between China and other countries. For example, for Cambodia, China will put Cambodia as a model in building BRI." The ultimate goal of the BRI deployment in Cambodia is to build a China-Cambodia Community with Shared Future. And the Community with Shared Future of these two countries also serves as a model for building the China-ASEAN Community with Shared Future, then proceeding to the Asian Community with Shared Future and finally, the Community with Shared Future for Mankind. (*Renminwang* 人民网, 2018) On April 28, 2019, China and Cambodia signed the China-Cambodia Action Plan to build a Community with Shared Future. According to the assessment of the Chinese Ambassador in Cambodia Wang Wen Tian, this Plan represents that the China-Cambodia

comprehensive strategic partner relationship has achieved a high level of historical development, and became a ‘promotion’ for China-Cambodia relations”, been the “glue” in the promotion of confidence in neighboring cooperation and been the “pilot field” of building a Community with Shared Future (*Xinhua* 新华网, 2019).

### ***2.3. The US and China promote bilateral cooperation with countries in Mekong Subregion***

#### **For the US**

Among Southeast Asian countries, the Mekong Subregion countries is strategically vital to the US. The US states that “the Mekong region-including Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam-is strategically important to the US. The region is central to the US’s Indo-Pacific Strategy, and is an essential part of the cooperation between the US and ASEAN. Through its cooperation with its Mekong partners, the US seeks to maintain and promote sovereignty, transparency, good governance, ASEAN-centricity, and a rules-based order. The US’s relations with the Mekong region have been tightened”. (*Xinhua* 新华网, 2019) Therefore, the US now actively promotes bilateral relations with the Mekong Subregion countries.

First of all, *the US continues to strengthen its alliance with Thailand*. Of the five treaty allies in the Asia-Pacific, Thailand is clearly being left out of the US’s strategy towards the region. For Thailand, the US remains an important economic partner and security partner that it chooses. For the United States, military cooperation - especially Thailand’s periodic permitting of American military vehicles entering into the country - is irreplaceable in Southeast Asia, making a significant contribution to the overall strategy of the US in this region. Every year, the two parties still hold the Golden copperhead military exercises. The US-Thailand relationship provides important opportunities for the US to pursue its interests in Southeast Asia and, more broadly, the Indo-Pacific. For the US, coordinating with Thailand in the efforts mentioned above will be the prelude to the US-Thailand cooperation relationship in a broader region, with a solid foundation of existing cooperation between the two parties according to LMI. Outward-looking economic policies will bring US economic sectors many opportunities to invest in Thailand and the region.

Recently, the two countries’ relations are recovering strongly after a period of declining relations. However, Thailand is the US’s oldest ally in Southeast Asia, especially after the military coup in 2014, headed by Mr. Prayuth Chan-o-cha leading to overthrowing the civilian government; the relations between the two countries became strained. The US then discontinued its military training and aid program to Thailand. However, the visit of Thailand’s Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-o-cha to the US in October 2017 improved bilateral relations in various fields. This is a move that marks a significant change in the US’s stance towards Thailand since the 2014 coup. The administration of President Donald Trump insisted that it would only restore

full relations with Thailand when this country comes back to democracy. This is also considered a move to cope with China's influence over countries in this region, especially Southeast Asia, including Mekong Subregion.

In addition, *the US promotes the "partner" relationship with Vietnam*. Vietnam is now considered a key partner in the US's current regional strategy in geostrategic aspects. Therefore, strengthening the comprehensive relationship between the US and Vietnam is one of the key US's priorities over the Southeast Asia region, including the Mekong Subregion. US-Vietnam relations have developed rapidly in recent years. Even the Vietnam-US relationship has been described by Mr. Pham Quang Vinh, former Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Vietnam in the US, that "up to now, not only the 'comprehensive characteristic' has been increased, but also the 'strategic characteristic' has been included in it." Vietnam and the US established a Comprehensive Partnership in 2013, thereby enhancing and expanding cooperation in all fields, from politics, diplomacy, economics, investment to defense, security, culture, education, science and technology, overcoming consequences of war and people exchange. Especially President Donald Trump chose Vietnam as the first destination in Southeast Asia in the first year of his term.

In addition, US National Security Advisor Robert C. O'Brien visited to Vietnam during November 20 - 22, 2020, to celebrate the 25th anniversary of US - Vietnam diplomatic relations and to highlight the joint efforts of the two countries to promote a Free and Open Indo - Pacific (*Vn.usembassy.gov*, November 2020).

On the other hand, *the US promotes democratic reform in Myanmar*. Marking a turning point in the relationship between the US and Myanmar was reflected in the fact that on October 7, 2016, President Barack Obama officially removed the sanctions that lasted for nearly two decades applied to the Southeast Asian country. This event opened up the process of "thawing" and improved relations between the two countries. This move by the United States was intended to encourage US businesses and nonprofit institutions to increase Myanmar investment while expressing the hope that Naypyidaw would increasingly become a democratic and prosperous partner of the US in the region. Myanmar's democratic transition and the dynamic between Naypyidaw and Washington have been prioritized in the US's Asia policy. China's long-lasting influence in Myanmar and Myanmar's new moves to diversify its relations seem to provide geostrategic implications for the US-Myanmar relationship.

So far, investments from the US and the West have not been compared with investments from China. Therefore, now the US and its allies, especially Japan, are increasing their influence in Myanmar to compete with this nation's increasing influence. However, in recent times, the relationship between the two countries has faced many challenges not only related to the Chinese factor in this country, but also related to the Myanmar government's inadequate handling of the Rohingya issue. Especially on July 16, 2019, the US State Department issued sanctions on Myanmar's



four top military commanders for their involvement in the mass murder of Rohingya Muslims in the state of Rakhine in the North of this country. This also has a significant impact on the current relations between the two countries.

Furthermore, the coup in Myanmar in early February 2021, abruptly curtailed the country's democratic transition and has sparked mass protests that could lead to deadly violence. Myanmar's coup will benefit China in the US-China competition in the Indo-Pacific (Yun, Sun, 2021); this means that, it would benefit the US. The coup might also push Myanmar closer to China, by necessity, if many democracies downgrade links to the country and apply more pressure. Even so, Beijing is not necessarily thrilled by the military takeover. Chinese leaders had built close links with Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD (National League for Democracy) government, and China prefers stability in neighboring states, which the military coup hardly guarantees (Kurlantzick, Joshua, 2021).

In addition, *the US has strengthened relations with Laos and Cambodia although the US's relationship with these two countries has not really changed significantly*. In 2009, the US removed Laos and Cambodia from the trade blacklist, which opened a new era in the US's relations with these two countries. However, the US and Cambodia relations have recently been somewhat tense regarding the dissolution of the CNRP by the Government of Cambodia until the absolute victory in the election of the 6th National Assembly (July 2018), the US and the West always showed disapproval and performed acts to increase pressure on Cambodia. The decline in relations between Cambodia and the West had been shown before the occurrence of the election.

After the end of the election, relations between Cambodia and the US and the West worsened; even after the election took place, the US and the West expressed their views on increasing sanctions against Cambodia, mainly limiting the blockade of assets and increasing immigration orders to some Cambodian officials. Typically, on November 17, 2017, the US announced stopping funding Cambodia's 2018 election. Next, on June 12, 2018, the US Department of the Treasury announced sanctions against General Hing Bun Hieng, the commander of Prime Minister Hun Sen's Bodyguard Force, which has thousands of soldiers. The sanctions accused General Hing Bun Hieng of engaging in serious human rights abuses over the past 21 years. With these sanctions, this Cambodian general will not have access to any of his assets on American territory. Meanwhile, the relationship between China and Cambodia has increased rapidly in the current period; China is almost present in almost all fields in this country. This is creating a big challenge for the US in the region today.

However, the US and Cambodia relations have improved dramatically since the beginning of November 2019; the two countries' relations have shown big changes with the fact that on November 21, Cambodia's Prime Minister Hun Sen received a letter from the US President Donald Trump with content that America wants to strengthen long-term friendship with Cambodia. Responding to goodwill from the US, Cambodia also moved to show goodwill on improving human rights records such as

on November 9, 2019, the Cambodian government ordered the release to opposition director Kem Sokha, who was under house arrest on charges of treason in 2017.

At the same time, on November 21, 2019, Prime Minister Hun Sen met with the US Ambassador in Cambodia, Patrick Murphy in Phnom Penh. Through this meeting, Mr. Patrick Murphy sent Mr. Hun Sen two letters from President Donald Trump. The meeting between Mr. Murphy and Mr. Hun Sen also mentioned democracy, human rights that promote bilateral relations. (*Khmertimeskh*, 2019) At the same time, Donald Trump also pledged that the United States would assist in maintaining Cambodia's national sovereignty, continue to help Cambodia build a solid and transparent financial management system, prevent money laundering and supply technical aid, increase the friendship and trust between the US and Cambodia.

### **For China**

China has many advantages over the US in promoting bilateral relations with countries in the Subregion. China shares a common border with mainland Southeast Asian countries, and is located in the upstream area of the Mekong river system, which is a huge advantage of China forcing countries in this region wanting to develop stably to strengthen friendly cooperation with China as they have no other choices. In addition, China's economic relations with countries in this region are on the rise, the level of dependence of those countries on Chinese economics is increasing. Therefore, China is a crucial partner of the countries in the region. Therefore, China is easier to increase relations with the countries of the Mekong Subregion, although doubts of countries towards China are not small. However, with the asymmetric nature of this bilateral relationship, those countries do not dare to criticize Beijing in certain circumstances.

China promotes the "quasi-alliance" relationship with Cambodia: Cambodia is considered a country having a "quasi-alliance" relationship with China in the region. At the same time, China has good political relations with Thailand, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam. China built Cambodia into the "political center" of China in the Mekong Subregion and Southeast Asia. Political relations of China and Cambodia have developed strongly in recent years. China is increasingly involved in Cambodian politics. So far, analysts assess Cambodia as one of China's "closest allies" (HENG, Pheakdey, 2012) or "quasi-alliance" (BBC, 2021). Cambodia's Prime Minister Hun Sen also emphasized that "China is Cambodia's most trusted friend" (*Atimes*, 2021), the two countries have considered each other's best friends. Accordingly, China and Cambodia comprehensively support each other in bilateral and multilateral relations and aim to build a "a new type of strategic partnership" model. (*Renminwang* 人民网, 2017) Besides, the two countries also aim to build a China-Cambodia community with a shared future (*Xinhua* 新华网, 2018).

In the economic field, on October 12, 2020, China and Cambodia signed a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) on the occasion of China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi's visit

to Cambodia (October 11-12, 2020). This agreement creates tariff reductions for each other's products, affecting many fields, including trade, tourism, and agriculture. The signing marks this as the first free trade agreement officially reached by Cambodia with a foreign country. Previously, the talks between the two parties started at the end of 2019 and did not take as many years as usual, showing that Cambodia hopes that such bilateral agreement with China could mitigate the impact of sanction order of the European Union (EU) to the country of pagodas. According to Xinhua News Agency, during a meeting with Cambodia's Deputy Prime Minister Hor Namhong on October 11, 2020, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi said he chose Cambodia as the first destination on his Southeast Asia tour because "our two countries are trustworthy friends and are a community with shared future for mankind." Mr. Wang said China would continue to help Cambodia in the fight against COVID-19, including supplying vaccines developed by China on a priority basis and importing more high-quality Cambodian agricultural products. Chinese Foreign Minister said that in addition to traditional fields, the two parties also needed to expand cooperation in newly emerging fields such as artificial intelligence (AI), 5G network, big data, cloud computing.

Besides, *China strongly promotes its relations with Laos*. For Laos, the two countries' political relations have been increasingly tightened and rapidly developed in recent years; the two parties make efforts to promote the healthy and stable development of the Sino-Laos comprehensive strategic cooperation partnership and efforts to revive the cause of socialism. At the same time, Laos also believed that the achievements and experiences of China also encouraged and initiated Laos to continue building a unique Lao socialist society. (*La.china-embassy*, 2013) Even China is trying to promote political-diplomatic relations between China and Laos as a polity with a shared future, shared interests and especially the phrase "special relations" (Teshu guanxi) was used. In response, Laos also stated that "Laos attaches great importance to the relationship of 'Sharing joys and sorrows' ('Tong gan ku, gong huan nan' de guanxi 同甘苦共患难的关系) with China." (*La.china-embassy*, 2013) In addition, China and Laos pledged to connect China's "One Belt and One Road" with the strategy of "Turning a continental nation into a connection nation". The two parties also work together to promote the building of a "Community with shared future", and propose a cooperation planning outline to promote the construction of "One Belt and One Road" (*Meiritoutiao*每日头条, 2016).

In addition, increasing comprehensive relations with Myanmar, China, and Myanmar relations have been strengthened in recent times. During the official visit to Myanmar by Chinese President Xi Jinping from January 17 - 18, 2020, the two parties officially announced the joint building of a China-Myanmar community with a shared future. This event is considered to mark not only a strong development in the relationship between China and Myanmar but also a new development step of Beijing in promoting the building of a community with a shared future for humankind between

China and other countries around, especially Southeast Asian countries. Besides, China and Thailand also increased strongly, especially in the economic field. At the same time, the relationship between China and Vietnam has also been strongly strengthened, although the two parties still have disagreements regarding the South China Sea issue. Recently, China has pushed “vaccine diplomacy” in Southeast Asia, including Mekong River Subregion countries. Southeast Asian nations now seek help from international partners to cope with the coronavirus pandemic, particularly in securing access to vaccines. China is eagerly answering the call. The US, by contrast, has been a non-factor in the region’s early vaccine diplomacy. From January 11 to 16, 2021, Foreign Minister Wang Yi of China toured four countries in the region: Myanmar, Indonesia, Brunei, and the Philippines. It also follows a tour from October 11 to 15, 2020, that took Wang Yi to Cambodia, Malaysia, Laos, and Thailand *and paid* a transit visit to Singapore. Mr. Wang Yi then visited Vietnam, Cambodia and Singapore from September 10 to 15, 2021. The aim of Wang Yi’s visit was to bolster the cooperative relationship between China and these countries. At each of his stops, Wang coupled promises of Chinese vaccine access with other foreign policy priorities, including advancing major projects under China’s BRI, which have been stalled amid the pandemic. Beijing promising help with vaccine distribution and cooperation on infrastructure and trade to fuel the post-pandemic recovery. China’s offer of vaccines to ASEAN nations is part of the national “Health Silk Road” (Jiankang Sichouzhilu健康丝绸之路) agenda to ensure economic recovery after the pandemic remains a priority for both China and Southeast Asian governments (Eugénia, C. Heldt, 2021; *Renminwang*人民网, 2020; Strangio, Sebastian, 2021; Devonshire-Ellis, Chris, 2021; Gregory, B. Poling and Tran Hudes, Simon, 2021).

### **3. The response of the countries in the Mekong Subregion to growing competition between the US and China**

Three decades ago, Southeast Asia was concerned about the strategic dilemma of maintaining the balance between the US and China, including Mekong countries. This concern is not only present in islands Southeast Asia, where disputes in the South China Sea occurred. The recent growing role of China in the Mekong Subregion and the growing US involvement has also raised concerns among countries in the region.

The countries in the Mekong Subregion pursue the “hedging strategy” to respond to the growing competition between the US and China, in order to manage the regional order. In pursuing such a strategy, the countries in the region look to external powers such as the US, China, Australia, India, Japan, South Korea, Russia, and the European Union (EU) for the pursuit of security cooperation and for security cooperation deeper economic involvement. This two-pronged strategy aims-to prevent any major powers from gaining a dominant role while creating economic interdependence and benefiting from cooperation.

However, the “hedging strategy” through economic cohesion gives the impression that the smaller powers in Southeast Asia are actively chasing the larger powers for funding and privileges. The effectiveness of such a cohesive strategy largely depends on how larger powers allow things to happen. Their success is primarily because these small powers are not seen as a threat to major powers.

Now, this strategic trend, instead, appears to be led by certain regional powers. Such powers as the US, Japan, and South Korea have become more proactive in increasing their presence and reinforcing their importance in the region. Mekong Subregion is one of the most critical areas where this phenomenon can be observed.

So far, although the influence competition between the US and China in the Mekong Subregion has intensified more and more, countries in the region are very limited in expressing their views on this issue. Perhaps the main reason is that those countries are still confused in finding ways to deal with US-China competition in this region. Countries in the region expressed concern about being forced to choose between the US and China. Countries in the region try to exercise balanced or equivocation defense diplomacy in their relations with the US and China, but this is not easy if the US-China tensions in the region continue to increase.

Cambodia is an example of an attempt to demonstrate an equivocation defense diplomacy strategy in relations with the US and China. Although relations between Cambodia and China have grown dramatically, the country exhibits a balanced foreign policy in its relations with China and the United States. Although the Western world has criticized Cambodia as an “ally” of China, Cambodia has always denied this.

This balance is reflected in the case of Cambodia’s dealings with China and the US regarding the COVID-19 pandemic issue. On the one hand, Cambodia asserted it as a loyal friend of China in the context of this pandemic breaking out strongly in China from late 2019 to early 2020. Along with that, Cambodia has actively improved relations with the US, for example, in November 2019, the two countries’ relations showed strong changes with the event that on November 21, Cambodia’s Prime Minister Hun Sen received a letter from US President Donald Trump with content that the US wants to strengthen long-term friendship with Cambodia. Next, Cambodia also actively improved its image with the US and the West when on February 12, 2020, the country agreed to let Holland America Line’s MS Westerdam cruise dock in Sihanoukville town on February 13, Cambodia after two weeks of wandering at sea, and allow tourists to get ashore in the context of Westerdam cruise falling into the irony of being refused to dock by five places.

For the Vietnam case, its response to the growing competition between the US and China in Mekong Subregion is somewhat different from that of the other countries in the Mekong region. Vietnam has pursued its hedging strategy towards China and encourages continued US presence in the region. Vietnam and China have similar political institutions; both countries are pursuing the path to socialism. However,

Vietnam's attitude towards China is somewhat more complicated than that of other countries in the region. Officially, Vietnam has always shown strong support in cooperation with China as well as the cooperation mechanisms that China introduced in the Mekong region, but the concerns on the influence of China in the region are shown clearly in the elite division and people of Vietnam. This is also related to the sovereignty dispute in the South China Sea between China and Vietnam, as well as the conflict on the use of water between the downstream. Among Mekong countries, Vietnam bearing the biggest impact from the change in the Mekong flows in relation to upstream hydroelectric dams (to date, China has built 11 dams on the Lancang River, and a further 11 mainstream dams in the lower Mekong and 120 dams in the tributaries are under construction or being planned) (Haefner, Andrea, 2020), as well as China makes Vietnam express more anxiety on the rise of China's influence in the Mekong region. According to the assessment of Chinese experts Li Wei and Luo Yifu, it is also emphasized: «In the relations between the Mekong countries, there is an existence of potential concerns about historical resentment, territorial disputes and interests conflicting that make LMC an unstable element which is difficult to be predicted in relations between countries. The sovereignty disputes in the South China Sea are like a 'timeless bomb' between China and Southeast Asian countries; in the relationship between China and mainland Southeast Asian countries, the China-Vietnam relation is the most strongly affected... As this dispute has not been resolved in a fundamental way, it is difficult for China-Vietnam relation to stabilize in the long term". (Lǐ, Wēi and Luō, Yífù李巍 罗仪馥, 2020) At the same time, Vietnam pursues a cooperation strategy with the US; however, Hanoi would not align itself with Washington against Beijing. Indeed, increased diplomatic relation with both Washington and Beijing shows that Vietnam's multidirectional foreign policy is growing even stronger in the face of a Sino-US comprehensive confrontation, and including strategic competition of two powers in the Mekong Subregion. Vietnam has been promoting diplomacy at both high and low levels with the US and China.

## Conclusion

In recent years the Mekong Subregion has drawn the attention of powers. This region is now at the crossroads of power competition, especially between the US and China. So that, the Mekong Subregion risks becoming a battleground for powers. This scenario would be detrimental for Mekong Subregion countries. The countries of the Mekong Subregion are currently receiving a lot of China's investment in the framework of the BRI of President Xi Jinping. Meanwhile, in the approach to the Mekong Subregion, China focuses on increasing its comprehensive engagement with the region, in which it focuses on implementing the model of "top-down approach", using relationships in terms of politics and using economic tools as the main spearheads. China is the region's most significant power and the country where the Mekong originates from

the Tibetan Plateau; China is constantly using its economic influence to achieve larger objectives. Greater control right from the Mekong River up to the South of Vietnam gives Beijing a decisive voice in using the river's key resources and has the advantage to force countries to follow its political intentions. China uses its "traditional" approach to increase influence on the Mekong Subregion by "using economic factors", mainly in infrastructure investment and aid, in exchange for political support from these countries. Currently, China can be considered to be in a dominant position in the Mekong Subregion compared to the US, even Japan. (Duong Van Huy, 2020: 14109)

At the same time, the US's increase in engagement in Mekong Subregion is an important part of the Indo - Pacific strategy's deployment and is also a key move to strengthen the belt of restraint of the increase in China's influence in the region. The US uses its "traditional" approach to increase influence on the Mekong Subregion by "using an environmental protection approach" and reviving 'China threat' theory (*Zhongguo Weixielun* 中国威胁论) to attack the Chinese factor in the Mekong Subregion, including the US have further aggravated the problem of the notion of Chinese "debt-trap" diplomacy (*Zhongguo de Zhaiwu Xianjing Waijiao* 中国的债务陷阱外交). The US is thus attempting to become an essential ally to Mekong states against foreign interference. In other words, Washington is advocating to become a security guarantor, essential to counterbalance China. Therefore, the Mekong Subregion has become a new location for competition between major countries, especially between the US and China. The main driving force behind this competitive trend is China's increasingly proactive foreign policy and the increase in influence through the BRI and MLC in this region.

Meanwhile, the US is at the forefront in this strategic competition, especially in the Indo - Pacific framework. The LMI re-activation has become a policy tool specific to the Mekong Subregion. The US's action has encouraged and facilitated the participation of other major countries in the region, namely Japan and South Korea. Faced with the increase in competition among major countries in the Mekong Subregion, countries in the region have also gained many economic and technical benefits and benefits in increasing the ability to choose to promote their own economic development. However, maintain a delicate balance between great powers, especially between the US and China. This task becomes more difficult as the confrontation between China and the United States becomes increasingly fierce and fierce, placing countries in the Mekong Subregion at risk of choosing between two parties - which no nation wants.

In the race to increase influence between the US and China in the Mekong Subregion currently, China has more advantages in many aspects, such as: Firstly, China has the geographical advantage of in promoting relations with the Subregion countries because China is a country located in upstream Mekong river, so the countries in downstream Mekong river are forced to find ways to increase cooperation with China in Mekong River management and cooperation. China and the countries

of the subregion have a shared future on security aspects with the region, especially non-traditional security issues. Secondly, China has a longer and deeper history of cooperation than the US; Thirdly, China is now the most important economic partner of the Subregion countries, the economic relationship between China and the Mekong Subregion countries is increasing and growing faster than the economic relationship of the Subregion countries with the US. However, the US also has an advantage over China in increasing influence in this region; for example, the US's soft power in this region still outperforms China, the building of China's image has not yet kept up with the growing political and economic influence in the region.

The US-China strategic competition in the Mekong Subregion differs from the maritime Southeast Asia regions, especially in the South China Sea, in this region; the competition is between China, which has almost won the foothold in the region, and the United States, which is trying to find ways to increase engagement in the region to find a place for itself. Accordingly, the US and its allies aiming primarily at the Chinese factor are two issues: First, it is the issue of water resources in the Mekong River related to China's hydroelectric dams upstream; Second, it is that the US aims at the risk of a debt trap over China's investment projects in the BRI framework in this region. Therefore, the competition here mainly are activities of criticizing each other and seeking to entice countries in the region to restrain each other, which promotes the attraction of Thailand and Vietnam in preventing the increase of China's influence in the region. Therefore, the risk of a China-US collision in the Mekong Subregion is much lower than US-China competition in the South China Sea region./.

## Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

## References

- Atimes*. (2021). "Hun Sen sings a different tune on China". March 3, 2017. Available at <http://www.atimes.com/article/chinese-largesse-shields-cambodian-repression/> cccessed February 08, 2021
- Baoquocte*. (2020). "Mekong-Mỹ hướng tới mục tiêu thúc đẩy hoà bình, ổn định, thịnh vượng tại khu vực" [The Mekong-US aims to promote peace, stability and prosperity in the region]. September 11, 2020. Available at <https://baoquocte.vn/mekong-my-huong-toi-muc-tieu-thuc-day-hoa-binh-on-dinh-thinh-vuong-tai-khu-vuc-123601.html> accessed February 05, 2021
- BBC. (2021). "Zhōngguó huò yuán jiǎnpǔzhài zhànjiàn dǎzào dōngméng "zhǔn méngyǒu" 中国或援柬埔寨战舰 打造东盟“准盟友” [China may aid Cambodian warship to build ASEAN's "quasi-ally"]. 2016年 2月 26日. Available at [http://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/world/2016/02/160226\\_china\\_cambodia\\_navy](http://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/world/2016/02/160226_china_cambodia_navy) accessed February 08, 2021



- Chinaembassy.or.th.* (2021). “Chinese Embassy Spokesperson’s Remarks on Mekong-related Media Report Targeting China. 2019/07/05. <http://www.chinaembassy.or.th/eng/sgxw/t1678896.htm> accessed January 23, 2021
- Devonshire-Ellis, Chris. (2021). “China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi’s Mini 2021 ASEAN Tour: Highlights”. *China Briefing*, January 18, 2021. Available at <https://www.china-briefing.com/news/chinas-foreign-minister-wang-yis-mini-2021-asean-tour-highlights/> accessed February 09, 2021
- Duong Van Huy. (2020). Assessing China’s Rising Influence on Mekong Subregion: A Vietnamese Perspective. *International Journal of Current Research*, Vol. 12 (10): 14101-14111. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24941/ijcr.39905.10.2020>
- Eugénia, C. Heldt. (2021). “China’s “Health Silk Road” Offensive: How the West should Respond”, *Global Policy Journal*, 09 December 2020. Available at <https://www.globalpolicyjournal.com/blog/09/12/2020/chinas-health-silk-road-offensive-how-west-should-respond> accessed February 08, 2021
- Gregory, B. Poling and Tran Hudes, Simon. (2021). “Vaccine Diplomacy Is Biden’s First Test in Southeast Asia”. *The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)*, January 28, 2021. Available at <https://www.csis.org/analysis/vaccine-diplomacy-bidens-first-test-southeast-asia> accessed February 09, 2021
- Haefner, Andrea. (2020). “The Mekong River Is Becoming a Geopolitical Hotspot”. *Brink*, November 9, 2020. Available at <https://www.brinknews.com/the-mekong-river-is-becoming-a-geopolitical-hotspot/> accessed February 09, 2021
- HENG, Pheakdey. (2012). “Cambodia–China Relations: A Positive-Sum Game?”. *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 31, 2, 2012. <https://doi.org/10.1177/186810341203100203>
- Huanqiuwang*环球网. (2012). “Lǐ chángjiǔ: Zhōngguó quánqiú zhànlüè “dōng wěn, běi qiáng, xī jìn, nánxià” 李长久：中国全球战略“东稳、北强、西进、南下” [Li Changjiu: China’s Global Strategy “stabilize in the east, gather strength in the north, to advance to the west and descend to the south”]. December 16, 2012. Available at <https://world.huanqiu.com/article/9CaKrnJycfC> accessed December 12, 2020
- Johnson, Kay and Panu, Wongcha-um. (2020). “Water wars: Mekong River another front in U.S.-China rivalry”. *Reuters*, July 24, 2020. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mekong-river-diplomacy-insight-idUSKCN24P0K7> accessed January 23, 2021
- Johnson, Kay and Tostevin, Matthew. (2020). “Chinese dams under U.S. scrutiny in Mekong rivalry”. *Reuters*, December 14, 2020. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/mekong-river-idUSKBN28N0N4> accessed January 25, 2021
- Khmertimeskh.* (2019). “Prime Minister Hun Sen meets with US Ambassador Patrick Murphy”. *Khmer Times*, November 22, 2019. Available at <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/50663152/prime-minister-hun-sen-meets-with-us-ambassador-patrick-murphy/> accessed February 08, 2021
- Kurlantzick, Joshua. (2021). “The regional implications of Myanmar’s coup”. *Aspeniaonline*, Feb 12, 2021. Available at <https://aspensiaonline.it/the-regional-implications-of-myanmars-coup/> accessed February 26, 2021
- La.china-embassy.* (2013). “Lǐ Yuáncháo huìjiàn lǎowō guójiā fù zhǔxī běn yáng” 李源潮会见老挝国家副主席本扬 [Li Yuanchao Meets with Lao Vice President Bounngang]. June 02, 2013. Available at <http://la.china-embassy.org/chn/zlgxdbwj/t1046401.htm> accessed

February 08, 2021

- Lǐ, Wēi and Luō, Yífù李巍 罗仪馥. (2020). “Zhōngguó zhōubiān wàijiāo zhōng de lán méi hézuò jīzhì fēnxī” 中国周边外交中的澜湄合作机制分析 [Analysis of the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Mechanism in China's Peripheral Diplomacy], 来源: Xiàndài guójì guānxì《现代国际关系》, 2019年第5期, 2020年05月11日. Available at [http://www.cssn.cn/gjgxx/gj\\_zgwj/202005/t20200511\\_5126301.shtml](http://www.cssn.cn/gjgxx/gj_zgwj/202005/t20200511_5126301.shtml) accessed February 09, 2021
- Lín, Tíngguāng林廷辉. (2020). “Měiguó jījī jiéméng méigōnghé wǔ guó, táiwān nán xiàng kě wàng yíng shùn fēng” 美国積極結盟湄公河五國，台灣南向可望迎順風 [The United States is actively aligning with the five Mekong River region countries, and Taiwan's New Southbound Policy is expected to face the downwind]. September 28, 2020. Available at <https://www.storm.mg/article/3056979> accessed January 18, 2021
- Liú, Jūnshèng刘均胜. (2016). “Lán Méi hézuò: Shìfàn yàzhōu mìngyùn gòngtóngtǐ jiànshè” 澜湄合作: 示范亚洲命运共同体建设 [Lancang-Mekong Cooperation: Demonstrating the Building of a Community of Shared Future in Asia]. *Zhongguo Jingji Zhoukan* 中国经济周刊 (CHINA ECONOMIC WEEKLY), 2016.4.4. Available at <http://niis.cass.cn/xscg/xslw/qyhz/201611/U020161130519203748520.pdf> accessed January 19, 2021
- Meiroutiao* 每日头条. (2016). “Yīdài yīlù” jiākuài lǎobàoliàn “lù suǒguó” wéi “lùliánguó” “一带一路”加快老挝变“陆锁国”为“陆联国” [The Belt and Road Initiative accelerates Laos' change from a “land-locked country” to a “land-linked country”]. May 06, 2016. Available at <https://kknews.cc/zh-sg/world/23gamr.html> accessed February 08, 2021
- Minakir, P. A. and Suslov, D. V. (2017). “Prospects and Limitations of Russo-Chinese Economic Relations”. *The Asan forum*, October 23, 2017. Available at <http://www.theasanforum.org/prospects-and-limitations-of-russo-chinese-economic-relations/> accessed December 12, 2020
- Mrcmekong*. (2010). “Strategic Environmental Assessment of hydropower on the Mekong mainstream: summary of the final report”. ICEM – International Centre for Environmental Management, October 2010. Available at <http://www.mrcmekong.org/assets/Publications/Consultations/SEA-Hydropower/SEA-FR-summary-13oct.pdf> accessed January 22, 2021
- Nationthailand*. (2017). “Taiwan president keen for free-trade deal with Thailand”. May 07, 2017. Available at <https://www.nationthailand.com/news/30314520> accessed January 12, 2021
- Prashanth, Parameswaran. (2019). “The Mekong in US Asia Strategy: Opportunities and Challenges”. *The Diplomat*, July 08, 2019. Available at <https://thediplomat.com/2019/07/the-mekong-in-us-asia-strategy-opportunities-and-challenges/> accessed January 22, 2021
- Renminwang* 人民网. (2019). “Gòng jiàn yīdài yīlù, gòujiàn yàzhōu mìngyùn gòngtóngtǐ (guójì lùntán)” 共建一带一路，构建亚洲命运共同体 (国际论坛 [Jointly build the Belt and Road Initiative to build an Asian community with a shared future (International Forum)]). 2019年05月02日. Available at <http://world.people.com.cn/n1/2019/0502/c1002-31061383.html> accessed December 12, 2020
- Renminwang* 人民网. (2020). “Jiànkāng sīchóu zhī lù” wéi shēngmìng hùháng” 健康丝绸之路” 为生命护航 [“Healthy Silk and Road” to escort life]. 2020年03月24日. Available at <http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0324/c40531-31645276.html> accessed February 08, 2021
- Renminwang* 人民网. (2018). “Wáng Wén Liú Diǎn, Jiǎnpūzhài: “Yīdài yīlù” guójì hézuò de xīn yàngbǎn” 王文 刘典, 柬埔寨: “一带一路”国际合作的新样板 [Wang Wen Liu Dian, Cambodia: A New Model for International Cooperation in the “Belt and Road” Initiative].

- 2018年01月26日. Available at <http://world.people.com.cn/n1/2018/0126/c1002-29789732.html> accessed February 05, 2021
- Renminwang* 人民网. (2017). “Zhōngguó zhù jiǎn dàshǐ Xióng Bō: Zhōng jiǎn guānxì zài xīn shíqí jiāng bùduàn gǒnggù fāzhǎn” 中国驻柬大使熊波: 中柬关系在新时期将不断巩固发展 [Chinese Ambassador to Cambodia Xiong Bo: China-Cambodia relations will continue to consolidate and develop in the new era]. 2017年10月27日. Available at <http://world.people.com.cn/n1/2017/1027/c1002-29612909.html> accessed February 08, 2021
- State.gov*. (2019). “Strengthening the U.S.-Mekong Partnership”. U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE, August 2, 2019. Available at <https://www.state.gov/strengthening-the-u-s-mekong-partnership/> accessed February 02, 2021
- Straitstimes*. (2020). “Water wars: Mekong River another front in US-China rivalry”. *The Straits Times*, Jul 24, 2020. Available at <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/water-wars-mekong-river-another-front-in-us-china-rivalry> accessed January 25, 2021
- Strangio, Sebastian. (2021). “Amid US Crisis, Chinese Foreign Minister Embarks on Southeast Asia Tour”. *The Diplomat*, January 12, 2021. Available at <https://thediplomat.com/2021/01/amid-us-crisis-chinese-foreign-minister-embarks-on-southeast-asia-tour/> accessed February 09, 2021
- ThailandBusinessNews*. (2021). “Taiwan seeks Free Trade Agreement with Thailand”. July 8, 2010. Available at <https://www.thailand-business-news.com/economics/19239-taiwan-seeks-free-trade-agreement-with-thailand.html> accessed January 19, 2021
- Tu Lai. (2019). “A Vietnam Perspective on Taiwan’s New Southbound Policy”, East-West Center, *Asia Pacific Bulletin*, No. 492, October 2, 2019. Available at <https://www.eastwestcenter.org/system/tdf/private/apb492.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=37298> accessed January 13, 2021
- Usaid*. (2019). “Sáng kiến hạ lưu sông Mê Kông (LMI)” [The Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI)]. August 12, 2019. Available at <https://www.usaid.gov/vi/vietnam/lower-mekong-initiative-lmi> accessed January 25, 2021.
- Vn.usembassy.gov*. (November 2020). “Chuyến thăm Việt Nam của Cố vấn an ninh quốc gia Hoa Kỳ Robert C. O’Brien” [The visit to Vietnam by US National Security Advisor Robert C. O’Brien]. November 22, 2020. Available at <https://vn.usembassy.gov/vi/chuyen-tham-viet-nam-cua-co-van-an-ninh-quoc-gia-hoa-ky-robert-c-obrien/> accessed February 06, 2021
- Vn.usembassy.gov*. (2019). “Ngoại trưởng Michael R. Pompeo Phát biểu khai mạc tại Hội nghị Bộ trưởng Sáng kiến Hạ nguồn Mekong” [Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo Opening remarks at the Lower Mekong Initiative Ministerial Meeting]. January 8, 2019. Available at <https://vn.usembassy.gov/vi/ngoi-truong-pompeo-phat-bieu-khai-mac-tai-hoi-nghi-bo-truong-sang-kien-ha-nguon-mekong/> accessed February 02, 2021
- Vn.usembassy.gov*. (September 2020). “Tuyên bố báo chí: Michael R. Pompeo, Ngoại trưởng Hoa Kỳ” [Press Statement - Michael R. Pompeo, Secretary of State]. September 14, 2020. Available at <https://vn.usembassy.gov/vi/quan-he-doi-tac-mekong-hoa-ky-khu-vuc-mekong-xung-dang-co-duoc-nhung-doi-tac-tot/> accessed January 22, 2021
- Xinhua* 新华网. (2020). “Láncāngjiāng-méigōnghé hézuò dì sān cì lǐngdǎo rén huìyì wànxiàng xuānyán (quánwén)” 澜沧江 - 湄公河合作第三次领导人会议万象宣言 (全文) [The Vientiane Declaration of the Third Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Leaders’

Meeting (full text)]. August 24, 2020. Available at [http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2020-08/24/c\\_1126407752.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2020-08/24/c_1126407752.htm) accessed February 05, 2021

*Xinhuanet* 新华网. (2019). “Zhuānfāng: Zhōng jiàn gòujiàn mìngyùn gòngtóngtǐ xíngdòng jìhuà biǎomíng liǎng guó guānxì dá dào lìshǐ xīn gāodù—fāng zhōngguó zhù jiǎnpǔzhài dàshǐ wángwéntiān” 专访：中柬构建命运共同体行动计划表明两国关系达到历史新高——访中国驻柬埔寨大使王文天 [Interview: The China-Cambodia Action Plan for Building a Community of shared future shows that the relationship between the two countries has reached a new historical height-Interview with Wang Wentian, Chinese Ambassador to Cambodia]. May 05, 2019. Available at [http://www.xinhuanet.com/asia/2019-05/05/c\\_1124453857.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/asia/2019-05/05/c_1124453857.htm) accessed February 05, 2021

*Xinhuanet* 新华网. (2018). “Lǐ Kèqiáng tóng jiǎnpǔzhài shǒuxiàng Hóngsēn jǔ háng huìtán shí qiángdiào xiéshǒu dàzào zhōng jiàn jùyǒu zhànlüè yìyì de mìngyùn gòngtóngtǐ” 李克强同柬埔寨首相洪森举行会谈时强调 携手打造中柬具有战略意义的命运共同体 [During talks with Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen, Li Keqiang emphasized that China and Cambodia will work together to build a strategically meaningful community with a shared future for China and Cambodia]. January 11, 2018. Available at [http://www.xinhuanet.com/2018-01/11/c\\_1122246865.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/2018-01/11/c_1122246865.htm) accessed February 08, 2021

Yun, Sun. (2021). “China’s Stakes in the Myanmar Coup”. *Institut Montaigne*, February 19, 2021. Available at <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/blog/chinas-stakes-myanmar-coup> accessed February 26, 2021

*Zhongguozhengfuwang* 中国政府网. (2018). “Wáng Yì: Jiànshè lán méi guójiā mìngyùn gòngtóngtǐ kāichuàng qūyù hézuò měihǎo wèilái” 王毅：建设澜湄国家命运共同体开创区域合作美好未来 [Wang Yi: Building a community of shared future for Lancang-Mekong countries to create a bright future for regional cooperation]. 来源：人民日报. March 23, 2018. Available at [http://www.gov.cn/guowuyuan/2018-03/23/content\\_5276766.htm](http://www.gov.cn/guowuyuan/2018-03/23/content_5276766.htm) accessed February 05, 2021