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Research Article

Dragon Tames the Mekong: China's Normative Power in Transboundary Water Management

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Abstract

This study investigates China's motivations for establishing the Lancang–Mekong Cooperation (LMC) through a normative lens, applying Amitav Acharya's framework of norm subsidiarity. The research employs qualitative and desk review methods to examine China's efforts to reshape transboundary river governance in the Mekong Region. Findings reveal that China's refusal to join the Mekong River Commission (MRC) and its rejection of the UN Watercourses Convention (UNWC) are closely tied to its anti-Western sentiment and historical memory of the "Century of Humiliation." By positioning the LMC as an alternative cooperative framework, China advances new norms that diverge from established international standards. These include asserting its role as the upstream and leading state, maintaining sustainability without hindering economic development, and emphasizing the principle of state sovereignty. Such norms stand in contrast to the obligations outlined in the UNWC and Mekong Agreement, which stress prior consultation, equitable use, and minimizing harm among riparian states. This study contributes to understanding China's normative strategies in regional governance and offers insights into how emerging powers employ norm subsidiarity to influence international rules.

Keywords: China, Lancang-Mekong Cooperation, Mekong River, Norm Subsidiarity, Transboundary Water Management

INTRODUCTION

The Mekong River, extending over 4,300 kilometers and traversing six countries—China, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam—constitutes one of Asia's most critical transboundary freshwater systems. Referred to as the Lancang Jiang in China, it originates on the Tibetan Plateau and empties into the South China Sea with its delta situated in Vietnam. The river underpins the livelihoods of more than 65 million people, supplying essential water resources for agriculture, fisheries, transportation, tourism, and energy generation (MRC, n.d.-a). In Cambodia, for instance, the Mekong River supplies at least 89% of the country's fisheries sector, while Tonle Sap Lake—one of its key tributaries—serves as a primary source of freshwater for local communities and hosts the Siem Reap floating villages, a notable tourist attraction (Sreynou & Rotha, 2020). Similarly, fisheries derived from the Mekong contribute approximately 12.8% to Laos's economic growth. In contrast, the Viet Nam Mekong Delta (VMD) accounts for 90% of Viet Nam's rice exports, owing to the river's fertile flows (Binh et al., 2022; Hunt, 2016).

The Mekong River also holds significant economic and geopolitical importance for China. Economic exchanges between China and the five downstream Mekong countries have expanded substantially, with total trade reaching approximately US$416.7 billion in 2022, while trade between Yunnan Province and these countries amounted to US$12.8 billion in 2019, underscoring deep economic integration along corridors linked to the Lancang–Mekong watershed (China Daily, 2019; State Council, 2023). More importantly, the Mekong River has long functioned as a critical trade artery linking Yunnan and southern China with the Mekong countries (Hamlin, 2008). At the same time, China has constructed multiple large hydropower dams on the Lancang, including the Nuozhadu Dam (5,850 MW), one of the region's largest reservoirs, which not only supplies electricity but also enhances Beijing's capacity to regulate water flows that affect downstream ecosystems and economies (Biba, 2012; Gong, 2023). These developments are central to China's broader geopolitical strategy in mainland Southeast Asia, where infrastructure investment and water management serve as levers of influence amid intensifying strategic competition, particularly with the United States, for regional leadership and access to critical resources.

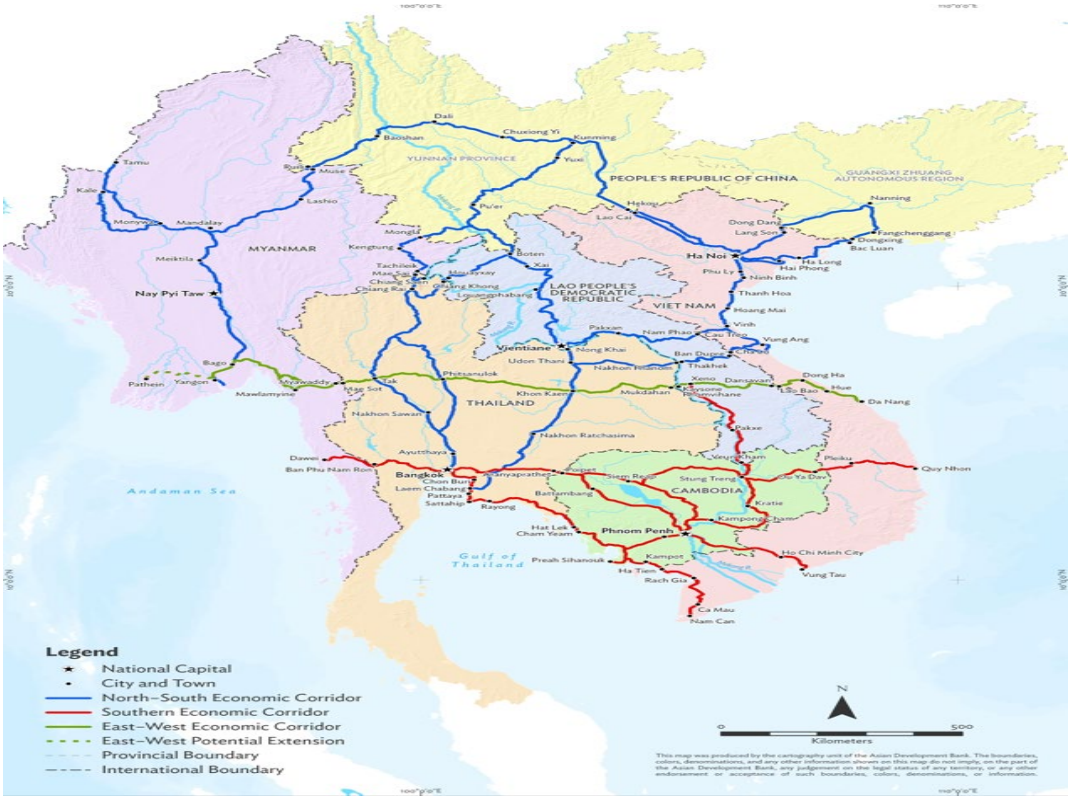
Given the Mekong River's vital importance to its riparian states, multilateral cooperation has long been established to ensure the sustainable management of this transboundary waterway. The Mekong River Commission (MRC) serves as the principal intergovernmental body responsible for sustainable development and governance of the river basin. Formed in 1995 under the Mekong Agreement, the MRC comprises four member countries—Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam—while China and Myanmar engage as dialogue partners. Anchored in principles of cooperation and data sharing, the Commission plays a pivotal role in water diplomacy by advancing integrated water resources management, promoting transparency, and mitigating cross-border environmental impacts. Significantly, the MRC reflects an indigenous effort by the lower Mekong states to collectively govern and steward the shared river basin, even in the absence of China and Myanmar as full members.

Furthermore, in pursuing its vision of fostering a region that is "*economically prosperous, socially just, environmentally sound, and climate-resilient*", the organization has established five key procedures for managing the Mekong River, including procedure for Data and Information Exchange and Sharing (PDIES);, procedures for Water Use Monitoring (PWUM), procedures for Notification, Prior Consultation, and Agreement (PNPCA), procedures for the Maintenance of Flows on the Mainstream (PMFM) and procedures for Water Quality

These five procedures enable the downstream countries to jointly ensure that any utilization of the river or development activities along its course do not adversely affect the river's ecosystem, including aquatic life and the hydrological cycle. The PNPCA procedure obliges MRC member states to provide prior notification regarding proposed projects involving the Mekong River—such as the construction of hydropower dams—that may generate transboundary impacts (MRC, n.d.-b)

Another long-standing framework in the region includes the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), Friends of the Mekong (FOM), and the Ayeyawady–Chao Phraya–Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS). Among these three, ACMECS represents another indigenous cooperation mechanism involving all Mekong riparian countries—excluding China—while the GMS and FOM were established under the sponsorship of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the United States, respectively. Established in 1992, the GMS is the oldest multilateral cooperation framework in the region following the Mekong Committee, created in 1957 and later transformed into the Mekong River Commission (MRC) in 1995. Given China's participation, the GMS is often considered the most inclusive framework, although its activities have primarily focused on economic development. In the aftermath of the Asian Financial Crisis, the GMS created three economic corridors linking activities across the region, as illustrated in Figure 1, to help support the economic recovery of the Mekong countries (Tan, 2014).

Figure 1. GMS Economic Corridors



Source: Greater Mekong Subregion (2017)

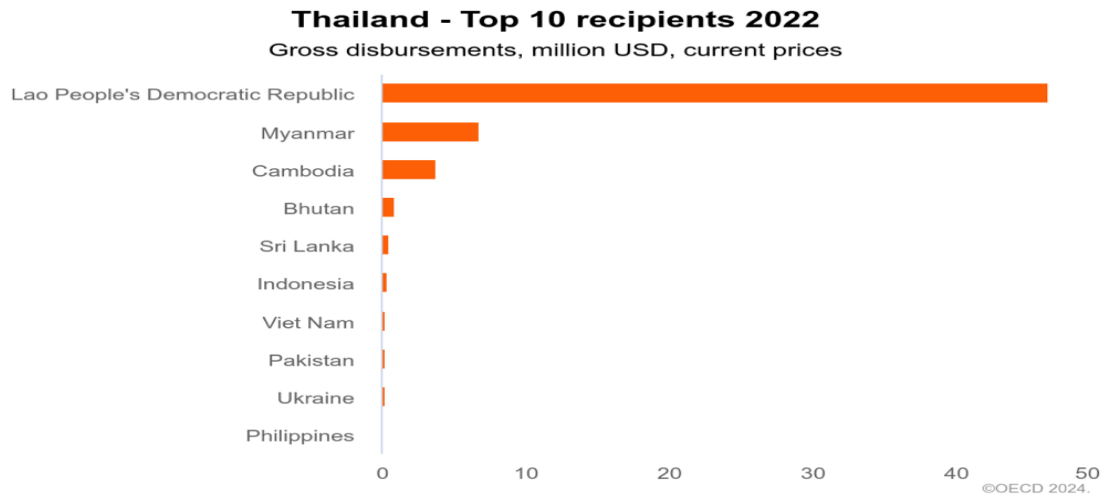
The Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) initiative has been instrumental in advancing economic development and strengthening regional connectivity among the Lower Mekong countries. Through its emphasis on infrastructure development, trade facilitation, and energy cooperation, the GMS framework has facilitated the construction of over 12,000 kilometers of roads and 700 kilometers of railway lines. These upgrades have improved cross-border transportation and mobility, while

simultaneously stimulating regional trade and tourism. Additionally, the framework has supported the generation of approximately 3,000 megawatts of electricity, providing power to about 150,000 households across the region (ADB, 2021). Beyond these concrete achievements (2018) underscore the GMS's role as an institutional platform for deepening interstate cooperation, fostering mutual trust, and potentially laying the groundwork for broader regional integration. In this regard, the GMS serves not only as a vehicle for development but also as a basis for building a more cohesive and stable Mekong community.

Alongside ongoing efforts within the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) framework, the Mekong Basin's geopolitical landscape has seen the rise of a new institutional arrangement. In 2016, under China's leadership, the Mekong countries inaugurated the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) during a Leaders' Summit held in Hainan Province, China. This meeting produced the Sanya Declaration, which laid the foundation for the new partnership. While the GMS framework maintains a more focused mandate, the LMC encompasses a broader spectrum of collaboration. According to the Sanya Declaration, the LMC activities are organized around three primary pillars: political and security cooperation; economic and sustainable development; and social, cultural, and people-to-people exchanges (LMC, 2016b).

The establishment of the LMC has drawn attention and raised questions regarding China's underlying objectives as its primary initiator. This scrutiny stems from China's consistent decision not to join the MRC it promotes the creation of a new cooperative framework. According to Po and Primiano (2021), China's motivation for launching the LMC was to counterbalance the influence of other actors in Mekong governance, such as the United States-backed Friends of the Mekong (FOM) and the Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS) led by Thailand. Thailand, in fact, wields significant influence in the Mekong region, serving as a donor to its neighboring ASEAN members—Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia—as illustrated in figure 1.

Figure 2. Recipient of Thailand's Foreign Aid 2022



Source: OECD, 2025

In a similar vein, according to Biba (2018), Beijing seeks to secure a greater and more influential role in the governance of the Mekong River through the LMC. Meanwhile, another study by Gong (2020) contends that the LMC is not only significant for China in strengthening its leadership role but also constitutes an institutional platform through which it can exercise greater agency and bargaining leverage vis-à-vis China.

The China-led LMC framework is also viewed as offering little substantive difference from existing mechanisms, as it similarly prioritizes economic development over balancing growth with environmental preservation. China's desire to position itself as the leading power in the Mekong region is further reflected in its assertive diplomacy under Xi Jinping, exemplified by Beijing's refusal to participate in the International Conference on Sustainable Development in the Lancang-Mekong Sub-Region (ICSD) organized by the Thai government (Busbarat et al., 2021). Nonetheless, despite debates over China's intentions, the LMC—given its membership, areas of focus, and high-level design—represents a potential alternative platform for Mekong riparian states, particularly in advancing regional economic development (Junlin et al., 2021). Furthermore, amid the growing impacts of climate change on the Mekong's hydrology and persistent political frictions related to transboundary pollution, the LMC is anticipated to contribute to improving water security in the region (Xing, 2017).

Indeed, the existing literature has made attempts to analyze the driving factors behind China's efforts to establish the LMC. However, the deeper root causes underpinning these interests remain insufficiently explored. Considering this gap, this study seeks to examine the underlying motivations behind China's behavior. What compels China to counterbalance other mechanisms sponsored by external powers? What factors contribute to the Chinese government's hesitancy to join platforms such as the MRC, ACMECS, or ICSD, and instead to create its own mechanism? These questions will be addressed through the lens of norms to offer an alternative perspective on understanding this cooperation. As Alexander Wendt, emphasized state actions in the international system are shaped by their interests. However, these interests do not emerge spontaneously—they are constructed through actors' identities, values, beliefs, and ideas (Burchill, 2005). Drawing on this, the study contends that the LMC reflects China's effort to advance the formation of new regional norms in the Mekong area, arising from the perceived need for locally grounded regulatory frameworks that prioritize state sovereignty and national interests in the management of transboundary resources.

METHOD

Considering that norms are inherently intangible and non-material, this research adopts a qualitative approach as the most suitable method for examining ideational dimensions. This methodological choice aligns with the study's objective to explore why China initiated the establishment of the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation despite the existence of several other mechanisms with similar objectives. As Guest, Namey, and Mitchell (2013) note, qualitative research is

particularly effective 'to answer the whys and hows of human behavior, opinion, and experience, offering a depth of understanding that quantitative methods cannot comprehensively provide

Data collection and analysis are conducted using a desk review method, the use of the use of a wide range of credible secondary sources, including journal articles, books, official reports and websites, available statistics, and news articles from diverse media outlets. The desk review method generally involves three key stages (Guerin et al., 2018). First, the research begins by formulating clear and focused research questions. Second, the researcher systematically identifies, selects, and critically evaluates relevant literature and data sources. Finally, the collected evidence is synthesized to yield coherent, well-substantiated research findings.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employs norm subsidiarity, introduced by Amitav Acharya, as the analytical framework to examine China's establishment of the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation. Norms in international relations have been defined in various ways. Raymond (1997) and Krasner (1982), for example, focus on standards of behavior that establish the rights and obligations of states. Constructivists emphasize the role of actor identity, within which a set of expected and appropriate behaviors is embedded, while a sociological approach views norms as the result of habitual practices among actors (Björkdahl, 2002; Gurowitz, 1999). Acharya (2011) argues that Third World and developing countries have the potential to act as agents in creating new norms and rules within the international system to 'preserve their autonomy from dominance, neglect, violation, or abuse by more powerful central actors. This theory differs from norm localization, also developed by Acharya, which emphasizes a top-down process of norm formation and diffusion, in which norms are created and disseminated primarily by major or even superpowers.

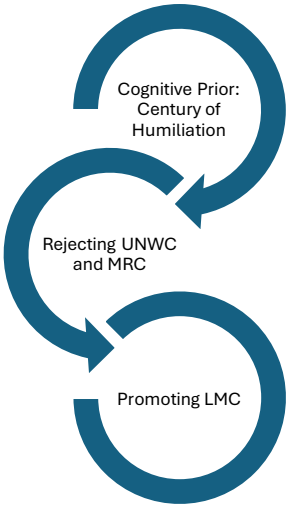
Furthermore, norm subsidiarity comprises three phases, beginning with the concept of *cognitive prior*, which Acharya defines as 'existing set of ideas, belief systems, and norms, which determine and condition an individual or social group's receptivity to new norms' (Acharya, 2011) Based on this definition, the historical experiences, beliefs, and worldviews of Third World and developing countries—many of which endured Western colonialism—provide a strong motivation to advocate for new norms. This is particularly the case because, when many existing norms, rules, and treaties were established, these countries were either newly independent or still under colonial domination, resulting in minimal contributions to the international normative order. Consequently, many prevailing norms are heavily shaped by Western interests and are often misaligned with the priorities and local values of such states. In addition, the inconsistency of Western and more powerful countries in adhering to established norms further encourages peripheral states to reject or challenge those norms, thereby constituting the second phase of the norm subsidiarity process.

The final stage involves the creation of new norms by local actors, typically less powerful states. In this phase, peripheral countries possess the potential to diffuse

their values, norms, and beliefs at both regional and international levels, functioning as what Finnemore and Sikkink term 'norm entrepreneurs.' According to Finnemore and Sikkink (1998), norms undergo a dynamic process known as the *norm's life cycle*, meaning they can be abandoned or replaced over time as new norms emerge. In proposing new norms, norm entrepreneurs do not act in a vacuum environment; instead, they must actively resist existing norms while persuading other states to adopt and internalize the norms they promote. Nevertheless, by engaging in norm subsidiarity, local actors can assert their authority and shape governance over regional issues, thereby diminishing the influence of more powerful foreign actors.

Norm subsidiarity enables this study to analyze LMC not merely as a cooperation forum, but as an arena where China acts as a norm entrepreneur, promoting alternative governance principles aligned with its development and interests. As an upstream riparian state, China is a local actor in the Mekong region whose approach to international relations is shaped by entrenched cognitive priors, particularly skepticism toward Western-led norms of transboundary resource management, which are often perceived as infringing on state sovereignty and domestic control over natural resources. This normative disposition helps explain China's long-standing refusal to accede to the Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses (UNWC) and its decision to remain outside the MRC, both of which are grounded in principles China views as externally imposed. Rather than internalizing these external norms, China has responded by assuming the role of a norm entrepreneur, spearheading the establishment of a regional framework and anchoring it through dedicated funding mechanisms and prioritized development-oriented projects. To unpack this argument systematically, the analysis proceeds in three steps: first, examining China's cognitive priors; second, analyzing its rejection of prevailing normative frameworks; and third, assessing China's entrepreneurial role in constructing an alternative regional normative order through the LMC.

Figure 3. China's Norm Subsidiarity Process



Source: Created by the author

RESULT AND ANALYSIS

Categorizing China

Given that Acharya limits the actors in norm subsidiarity to less powerful states, it becomes essential to examine China's status within this process. Indeed, China's remarkable economic growth in the twenty-first century has rendered its power status increasingly contested. On 28 March 2023, the United States House of Representatives passed H.R. 1107, titled *'PRC Is Not a Developing Country Act'*, urging adjustments to U.S. foreign policy toward China in both bilateral relations and multilateral forums (PRC Is Not a Developing Country Act, 2023). This legislative action was partly motivated by the 2022 *World Economic Situation and Prospects* report issued by the United Nations, which continued to categorize China as a developing nation (UN DESA, 2023). Furthermore, in 2021, the World Bank—one of the most prominent international organizations—classified China as an upper-middle-income country, noting that a significant portion of its population still earns below the World Bank's income threshold (World Bank, n.d.). This contested status has afforded China several advantages, including reduced financial contributions to the UN's annual budget, greater flexibility in complying with WTO regulations, and the ability to abstain from joining initiatives such as the Global Methane Pledge—a coalition of more than 150 countries aimed at reducing methane emissions (Global Methane Pledge, n.d.; Green, 2023).

In fact, within the international system, no universally agreed-upon definition distinguishes developing from developed countries; rather, obligations exist, particularly within international organizations and regimes. Weinhardt and Petry (2024) mention that such status is highly context-dependent, further blurring any clear-cut distinction between the two categories. To bridge this debate, Farias (2019) highlights an important point: terms such as 'developing,' 'developed,' and 'least developed', function more as labels or identities than as mere categories based solely on material indicators. Over recent decades, the world has witnessed a shift of wealth from the Global North to the Global South, marked by the emergence of several Southern states—such as Brazil, India, China, and South Korea—as both emerging economies and aid donors. Nevertheless, these countries continue to regard themselves as developing states or, in some cases, as middle powers. In the context of China, the government has consistently and explicitly described the country as a developing nation, as Xi Jinping during reaffirmed in his speech at the Leaders Meeting on Climate and the Just Transition in April 2025: "China will vigorously deepen South-South cooperation and continue to provide help for fellow developing countries to the best of its capability"(China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025).

Another status that warrants clarification in this section is the Third World country term. Ma (2010) suggests that the notion of the Third World can be interpreted through two closely linked lenses, namely political and economic. From a political perspective, shaped by the dynamics of the Cold War, global powers were categorized into three groups: the First World—consisting of capitalist nations under U.S. leadership and its Western allies, the Second World—representing the socialist bloc under the Soviet Union, and the Third World—comprising states that opted for

neutrality and upheld the principles of non-alignment. From an economic standpoint, however, this tripartite classification does not align perfectly with material realities. During the early rise of capitalism and the growth of international trade, peripheral nations were placed in subordinate positions and exploited through colonial domination. Beginning in the 1960s, the label 'Third World' became increasingly synonymous with underdeveloped or developing countries—partly because First World nations were generally industrialized and economically powerful, at some time, the Non-Aligned Movement was composed mainly of poorer, newly independent states (Wolf-Phillips, 1987).

Based on the preceding discussion of the concepts of developing countries and the Third World, this study argues that China meets the criteria for a state capable of engaging in norm subsidiarity. Despite U.S. efforts to strip China of its developing-country status, in practice, Beijing continues to be recognized as a developing nation by major international organizations and its own government. Moreover, China appears to deliberately maintain this identity, as reflected in official statements consistently emphasizing its active role in South-South Cooperation. Notably, the United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation defines such collaboration explicitly as partnerships among developing countries.

> 'South-South cooperation for development is a process whereby two or more developing countries pursue their individual and/or shared national capacity development objectives through exchanges of knowledge, skills, resources and technical know-how and through regional and interregional collective actions, including partnerships involving Governments, regional organizations, civil society, academia and the private sector, for their individual and/or mutual benefit within and across regions' (UN South-South, n.d.)

Shaping Regional Norms for the Mekong River: China's Cognitive Prior: Century of Humiliation

State behavior in the international system is often shaped by *cognitive priors*, understood as how states perceive the international order through their beliefs and values (Acharya, 2011). When these beliefs align with prevailing international norms, states tend to adopt a more passive and supportive stance toward other actors and existing rules. Conversely, if a state's norms and beliefs conflict with those upheld by the more powerful members of the international community, it is more likely to question, challenge, and even actively seek to reshape the established rules and frameworks. Such tendencies are evident among groups like the BRICS, which have repeatedly emphasized the need for reforms to global governance structures, including the exclusive veto power held by to the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (BRICS, 2025).

The analysis of LMC's establishment should not be confined solely to China's material interests but must also consider the underlying factors shaping its behavior. Under Xi Jinping's leadership, China has often been labeled by the West—particularly the United States—as increasingly assertive, given its Belt and Road Initiative maneuvers, military modernization, and the opening of its overseas

military base in Djibouti (Starr & Cole, 2022). The creation of the LMC clearly occurred during Xi's era, which marked a shift in approach from previous administrations in managing the Mekong River. Prior to the LMC's formation, China largely adopted a unilateral strategy, particularly in constructing hydropower dams along the upper Mekong and by remaining outside the MRC framework (Biba, 2018). Thus, it is unsurprising that the LMC is frequently associated with China's growing assertiveness and its strategic rivalry with the United States.

Being "aggressive" in the sense of acting more proactively within the international system and "competing" with the United States are two distinct notions. Japan, South Korea, and, to some extent, India are examples of states that have been or are currently classified as emerging economies. The latter two have pursued geoeconomic strategies—South Korea's New Southern Policy (NSP) and India's Look East policy. Nevertheless, these countries maintain relatively positive relations with the United States and its Western partners—unlike China. This competitive dynamic underscores China's cognitive prior, which reflects a fundamentally anti-Western orientation.

To trace the root causes of this negative sentiment, it is essential to revisit China's history of Western imperialism beginning in the late 19th century. The Opium War, which took place in 1840-1842, marked a decisive turning point for China's fate as a civilization. Sparked by China's policy of banning the opium trade brought in by British merchants, the conflict not only ended the Qing Dynasty's more than two centuries of dominance but also introduced China to a new world order—the Westphalian international system—which fundamentally differed from its traditional tributary framework. China's defeat in the Opium War led to the cession of Hong Kong to Britain and compelled the Qing Empire to open strategic ports such as Shanghai, Ningbo, Fuzhou, Xiamen, and Canton to British traders (Scott, 2008). These outcomes opened the door to deeper foreign imperialism in China. In fact, Britain was not the only power involved—France, Russia, the United States, and Japan soon followed suit, imposing their influence through a series of 'unequal treaties' (Brötel, 1999; Roberts, 1999).

Table 1. Unequal Treaties between China and Foreign Countries After the Opium War

Treaty	Year	Parties	Substance
Treaty of Nanking	1882	Qing Empire-Britain	Cessation of Hong Kong to Britain Opening of strategic ports Establishment of British consulates in port cities Payment of war indemnities
Supplementary Treaty of Bogue	1843	Qing Empire-Britain	Extraterritorial right Britain as the most-favored nation
Wanghia Treaty	1844	Qing Empire-The United States	Extraterritorial right Export-import tariffs had to be lower than those of other countries Opening of consular offices

Whampoa Treaty	1844	Qing Empire-French	Trade tariff Extraterritorial right Opening of consular offices
Treaty of Tientsin	1858	Qing Empire-The United States	Officials from the United States had the right to conduct business visits to China Protection of missionaries' rights Most-favored nation for the United States
Treaty of Shimonoseki	1895	Qing Empire-Japan	Korea's independence from the Chinese Empire Cession of several Chinese territories to Japan, such as Taiwan, Fengtian Province, and the surrounding small islands Payment of war indemnities Establishment of a Joint Commission of Delimitation to set the boundaries for China's territories ceded to Japan China–Japan agreements must be based on treaties previously signed between China and Western countries
The Mackay Treaty	1902	Qing Empire-Britain	The Chinese Empire had to open more ports for international trade Lower taxes and customs duties for foreign products Mining rights for foreigner Chinese citizens were allowed to invest in Western companies Reform of the judicial system Trademark protection

Source: Compiled by the author

A series of treaties that progressively weakened China during the Qing Dynasty continued to be signed. Among these various agreements, extraterritorial rights to foreigners were perhaps regarded as one of the most humiliating concessions, as the Chinese people were effectively "forced" to exempt foreigners from local laws even when violations occurred (Cassel, 2016). Furthermore, China's defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War culminated in the Treaty of Shimonoseki, formally strengthening Japan's colonial presence on Chinese territory through its occupation of Taiwan. Japan's invasion of China further escalated during World War I, as the focus of Western powers shifted from Asia to Europe—the main theater of the war.

Following the collapse of the Qing Dynasty in 1911, China become a republic under its first president, Yuan Shikai. On May 9, 1915, the Chinese government acquiesced to the majority of Japan's ultimatum, known as the Twenty-One Demands. This decision provoked widespread domestic unrest, as many provisions of the demands significantly undermined Chinese sovereignty, including the placement of Japanese advisors within the Chinese government to oversee political, economic, and military affairs (Huang, 2015). The Twenty-One Demands subsequently stimulated anti-Japanese movements both within China and

internationally. In Tokyo, for instance, thousands of Chinese students organized protests, while Chinese merchants began boycotting of Japanese goods (Luo, 1993). Furthermore, China suffered from substantial human and material losses during the Japanese invasion from 1937 to 1945, with estimates indicating approximately 20 million civilian and military fatalities, 15 million injuries, and property losses amounting to US$383 billion based on the July 1937 exchange rate (Yi, Du, Yi, & Tao, 2015).

The Second Sino-Japanese War lasted from 1937 to 1945. During this period, numerous Chinese territories, including Nanking, Peking, Wuhan, Canton, Tianjin, and Hainan, were occupied by Japanese forces. The occupation of Nanking in 1937 was marked by the tragic Nanking Massacre, which resulted in the deaths and sexual assaults of millions of Chinese civilians (Gordon, 2006). Colonialism had a profound impact on Chinese civilization, contributing to the weakening of the so-called "Middle Kingdom." Socially, it introduced foreign values such as liberalism and capitalism, which were often incompatible with local cultural norms (Roberts, 1999). Consequently, the period from the Opium Wars to the end of Japanese occupation in China has come to be known as the Century of Humiliation, a legacy that continues to resonate with both the government and the general populace. Zhou (2021) characterizes these historical events as "the most influential" in shaping Chinese society, a factor that remains a motivating force for contemporary Chinese leadership, including Xi Jinping, who has emphasized national modernization in speeches such as those delivered at the 14th National People's Congress.

> 'Since its founding, the Communist Party of China (CPC) has closely united and led the Chinese people of all ethnic groups in working hard for a century to put an end to China's national humiliation. The Chinese people have become the masters of their future, the Chinese nation has achieved the great transformation from standing up and growing prosperous to becoming strong, and China's national rejuvenation has become a historical inevitability. From now until the middle of the century, the central task of the Party and all Chinese people is to complete building China into a great modern socialist country in all respects and advance national rejuvenation on all fronts' (Xinhua, 2023).

Challenging Global Water Conventions: China's Norm Entrepreneurship via the LMC

Prior to the establishment of the LMC in 2016, the Mekong region was governed by multiple multilateral frameworks, most notably the MRC. In a broader global context, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the UNWC in 1997, which serves as a framework for state to cooperation in managing shared water resources for non-navigational purposes such as development. However, the convention only entered into force in 2014, following Vietnam's ratification, making it the sole Mekong country to do so. UNWC explicitly outlines at least five key principles, namely equitable and reasonable utilization; the obligation not to cause significant harm; cooperation and information exchange; prior notification, consultation, and negotiation of planned measures; and the peaceful settlement of disputes. These principles are consistent with earlier international agreements—

such as the Rio Declaration, the Helsinki Rules, and the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) Water Convention—which emphasizes that the use of shared water must remain within reasonable limits and avoid causing adverse impacts on other states (Schmeier, 2020; UNECE, 2004). Collectively, these norms establish the "expected behavior" that states sharing cross-border waterways are obligated to uphold.

Similar principles are also embodied in the Mekong Agreement, such as the concepts of reasonable and equitable utilization (Article 5) and the prevention of adverse impacts (Article 7). Furthermore, Article 5 of the Mekong Agreement obliges member states to provide prior notification and engage in consultations with other riparian countries before undertaking any development projects along the river, including its tributaries that may affect neighboring states (MRC, 1995). China's unilateral approach prior to the establishment of the LMC was therefore inconsistent with the principles adopted by both the United Nations and the MRC. It is also significant that the MRC operates based on sovereign equality and territorial integrity, affirming that all Mekong countries have equal rights to use the Mekong River. This framework plausibly constrained China's position as both an upstream and the largest state in the Mekong region.

The collective memory of the Century of Humiliation then functions as an enduring ideational backdrop that shapes China's contemporary approach to regional governance and world order, mirroring the second phase of norm subsidiarity in which states resist external norms perceived as undermining sovereignty and national interests. Rather than operating as a deterministic historical narrative, this memory shapes China's cognitive priors by heightening sensitivity to externally imposed rules, hierarchical exclusion, and legal constraints arising from past experiences of foreign domination (Hess, 2010). In the domain of transboundary water governance, for example, China demonstrated early resistance to emerging international norms by joining only two other states in opposing the adoption of the UN Watercourses Convention at the 1997 United Nations General Assembly (Chellaney, 2017; Hall & Swain, 2023; Ibrahim, 2020). As a result, China, as an upstream country for many international rivers, has opted to regulate transboundary water management through bilateral agreements that are comparatively less detailed and comprehensive than the UNWC, including for the Mekong River (Chen et al., 2013). China's reliance on bilateral agreements rather than adherence to comprehensive multilateral conventions on transboundary water management reflects a preference for arrangements that confine cooperation to riparian states, thereby minimizing external oversight and reinforcing principles of sovereignty and non-interference.

Through the LMC, Beijing further institutionalizes its cautious approach to Western-led norms, most notably through leaders' declarations and joint statements that emphasize non-interference and the inviolability of sovereignty and territorial integrity (LMC, 2018, 2020b). Also, in contrast with the UNWC and MRC, Chinese former premier, Li Keqiang, explicitly underlined that this newly established framework should 'give priority to development' and 'focus on concrete project'

during his speech at the inaugural Lancang-Mekong Leaders' Meeting (MOFA China, 2016). The LMC subsequently defined three main pillars of cooperation: political and security issues; economic and sustainable development, and social, cultural, and people-to-people exchanges. Its priority areas include connectivity, production capacity, economic cooperation, water resources, agriculture, and poverty reduction (LMC, 2017). The "3+5" framework indicates that economic objectives occupy a central position within the LMC.

Cooperation within the LMC has indeed evolved, gradually incorporating environmental issues more explicitly into its agenda. In 2017, for example, the LMC established the Lancang–Mekong Environmental Cooperation Center (LMEC) to foster cooperation and dialogue on environmental protection and the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals within the Mekong Basin. The LMEC also launched the Green Mekong Initiative (GMI), a new platform designed to facilitate collaboration between Mekong countries and external partners on climate change mitigation and adaptation. This specialized cooperation has been implemented through various activities, primarily policy dialogues, capacity-building efforts, and seminars that engage not only officials from the six member states but also non-state actors such as scientists (LMEC Center, n.d.).

Nevertheless, it is important to contextualize the activities organized under the LMEC within the broader agenda of the LMC to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the norms China seeks to promote through this framework. From the outset, Beijing has actively linked the LMC to its economic development megaproject, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), as stipulated in the Sanya Declaration. Additionally, economic development projects have remained the primary focus of the LMC, as evidenced by its annual declarations and the establishment of the LMC Special Fund—supported by more than US$1 billion in Chinese funding—to advance development initiatives in the Mekong region (Po & Primiano, 2021).

> 'Highly appreciating China's continued support to LMC Special Fund to implement regional projects with an aim to promote capacity building in the context of the 4th Industrial Revolution, people to people's exchanges and further advance socio-economic development in the region. Commending the importance of these projects, and hope that the Fund could further support more practical and effective projects for the well-being of the peoples of the six countries (LMC, 2020).

Considering the dynamics and projects undertaken under the LMC framework, this study argues that China has introduced three new norms that diverge, to some extent, from established international standards: (1) positioning the upstream state as the primary leader; (2) maintaining the sustainability without sidelining development initiatives; and (3) upholding state sovereignty in the management of the Mekong River. These norms will be examined in detail in the following discussion.

China as the Upper and Leader State

Both international and regional norms promote equality in the utilization of transboundary natural resources. The UNWC and the Mekong Agreement indicate that the concept of equality encompasses both the rights and obligations of each basin state, which may be influenced by factors such as geographical position, socioeconomic conditions, and the degree of community dependence on the shared water resources. For example, under Article 5 of the Mekong Agreement, member states are required to notify the Joint Committee prior to intra-basin water use during the wet season and to consult during the dry season (MRC Secretariat, 2020). This provision carries two key implications: on the one hand, all states share the obligation to provide advance notice and consult with others before utilizing the river; on the other hand, all states hold equal rights to receive such information, given that they may be affected by activities conducted by other countries along the Mekong River.

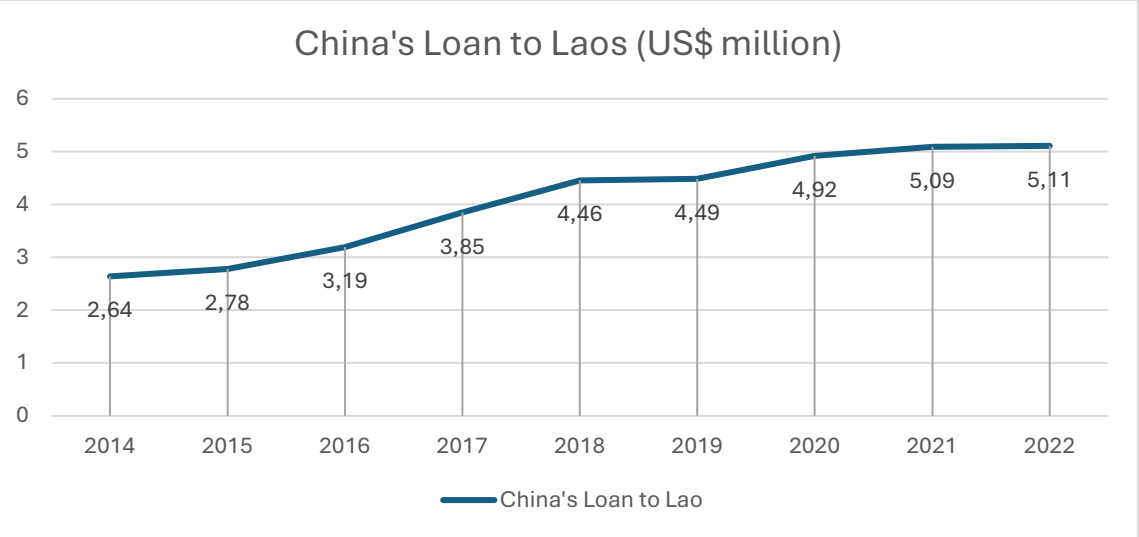
Through the LMC, however, China has sought to position itself as the leading actor in the Mekong Basin. Beyond being the LMC's original proponent, China is the leading power within the cooperation framework. It has provided the LMC Special Fund and successfully steered the LMC toward alignment with the Belt and Road Initiative, particularly in infrastructure development. China's designation as the permanent chair of the LMC—while other members rotate as co-chairs—further underscores Beijing's dominant role within the organization (Xinhua, 2017). In this context, China benefits from several structural advantages; it is both the source country of the Mekong River and the Mekong state with the most significant economic capacity. Leveraging its economic strength, China has advanced new norms through an instrumental rationality strategy.

Bo¨rzel and Risse (2012) define instrumental rationality as the understanding that actors behave rationally, seeking to maximize benefits and making cost–benefit calculations. Accordingly, this strategy emphasizes how China utilizes economic and material incentives to promote new norms and influence the governance of the Mekong River. In the Sanya Declaration alone, the Chinese government announced the establishment of LMC Funds, and its readiness to provide 18,000 scholarships, 5,000 training opportunities, and concessional loans for Mekong countries (LMC, 2016b). During the First Leaders' Meeting, Li Keqiang further affirmed his country's commitment to allocate US$200 million to address poverty in the Mekong Basin (LMC, 2016a).

Additionally, under the auspices of the LMC, China has provided bilateral assistance to lower Mekong countries, as illustrated by projects such as the Pilot Project for the Construction of Laos' National Water Resources Data and Information Center, the Comprehensive Planning of Major River Basins in Laos, Irrigation Development Planning for Major Grain-Producing Areas in Myanmar, and the provision of free heart surgeries for 100 Cambodian children. The synergy between the LMC and the Belt and Road Initiative have further enabled China to consolidate its influence in the Mekong region through financial and technical assistance. Reports indicate that Chinese investments and loans to individual

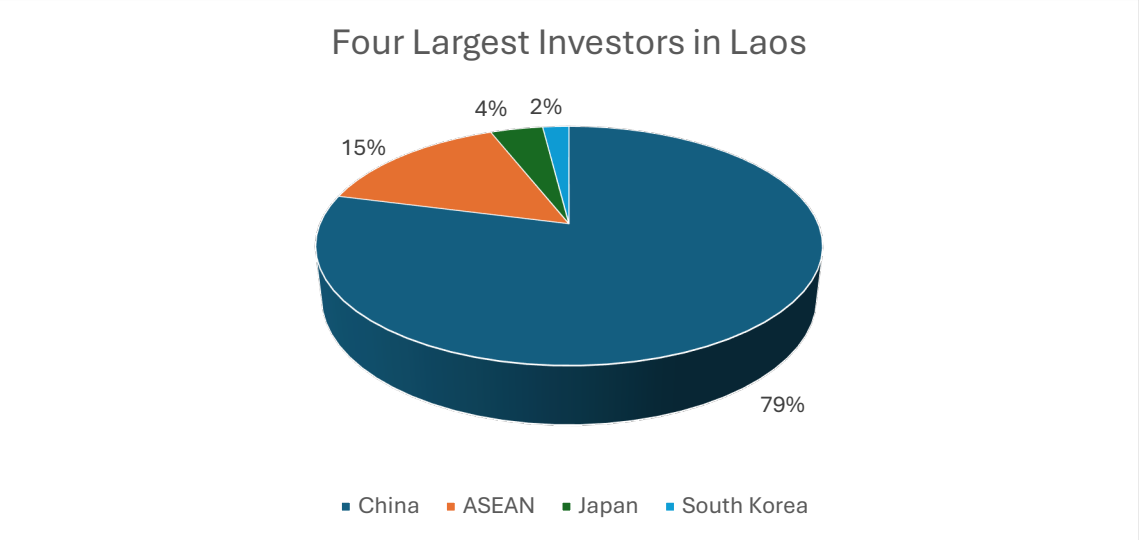
Mekong countries have increased significantly since the LMC's establishment. For instance, one report stated that in 2014 China extended loans amounting to US$2.64 billion to Laos, a figure that rose substantially during 2017–2018, as illustrated in Chart 1 (Barney et al., 2025). Meanwhile, according to the ASEAN Investment Report, China ranked first and second as the largest investor in Laos and Myanmar, respectively, in 2018 (ASEAN Secretariat, 2019).

Chart 1. China's Loan to Laos Before and After LMC



Source: Barney et al., 2025

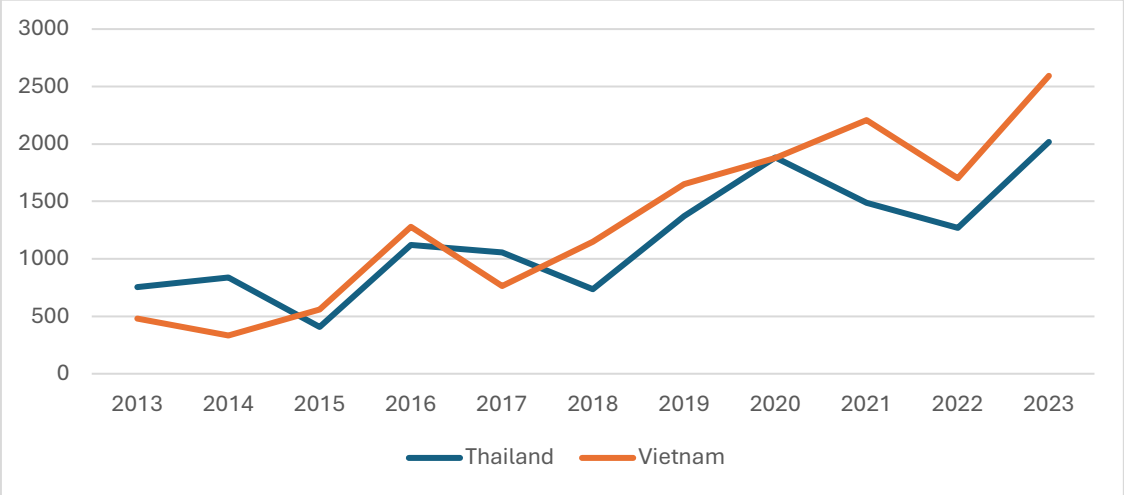
Chart 2. The four largest foreign investors in Laos in 2018



Source: ASEAN Secretariat, 2019

Thailand and Vietnam likewise experienced a two- to threefold surge in Chinese investment after 2016. Although investment levels declined notably in 2017 and 2018, the overall trend indicates that Chinese investment in both countries has expanded rapidly since the establishment of the LMC in 2016.

Chart 3. China's FDI to Thailand and Vietnam 2013-2023

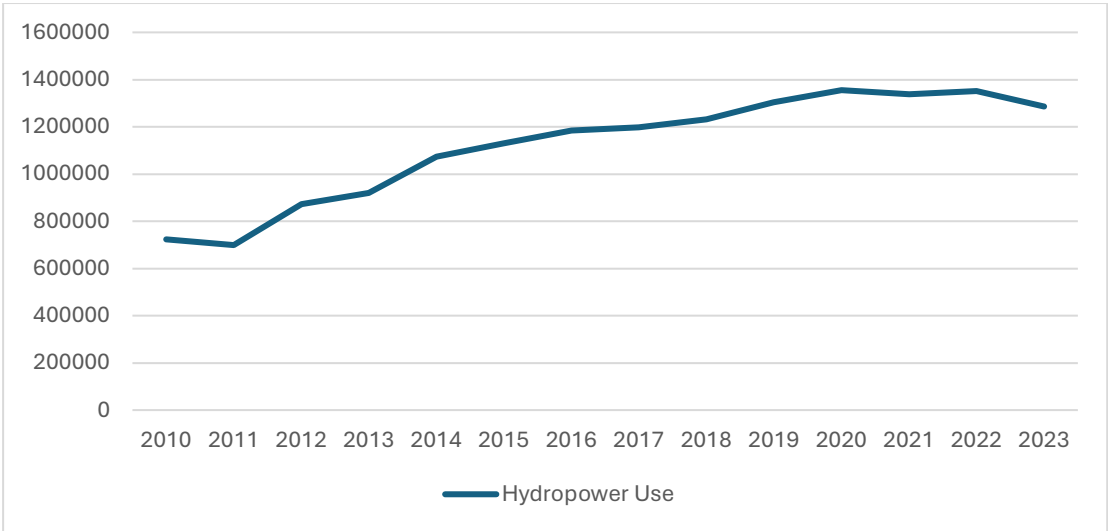


Source: Textor, 2025a, 2025b

Maintaining the Sustainability without Neglecting Development

Another characteristic of transboundary river management norms under the UNWC and the Mekong Agreement is the prioritization of river ecosystems. This is evident in provisions requiring states to notify and consult with other riparian countries and, if necessary, halt activities causing environmental harm (MRC, 2017). Beijing, in contrast, has introduced a different approach through the LMC. Among the projects most frequently undertaken by China on the Mekong River is the construction of hydropower dams. Hydropower has become an increasingly vital energy source for meeting China's growing electricity demand and supports the government's ambition to reduce reliance on fossil fuels. According to the International Energy Agency (IEA), hydropower for electricity generation has shown steady growth over the past decade.

Chart 4. The use of hydropower for electricity generation in China



Source: International Energy Agency, n.d.

Nevertheless, China is not the only Mekong country engaged in hydropower development. According to the MRC, Laos—a lower Mekong state—leads the region in hydropower construction, accounting for 64% of total installed capacity. Hydropower, indeed, is akin to a double-edged sword enabling countries to meet the clean energy demands necessary for sustaining development and industrialization. However, on the other hand, local communities residing in project areas often face adverse effects, including forced relocation and loss of livelihoods, as many residents are fishers and farmers who depend on the river ecosystems and the hydrological cycle for their subsistence (Kuenzer et al., 2013; Soukhaphon et al., 2021; Williams, 2020). Vietnam, as a downstream state of the river, has experienced significant impacts from the construction of numerous upstream hydropower dams, including reduced rice yields due to changes in salinity intrusion, diminished freshwater availability, and decreased food resources (Nhan & Cao, 2019).

Prior to the establishment of the LMC, China had already been a major supporter of hydropower development in mainland Southeast Asia—particularly in Laos and Cambodia—through projects such as the Nam Ou River Cascade and the Kamchay Dam, respectively (Fawthrop, 2021; Urban et al., 2018). The Laotian government has actively pursued hydropower expansion to advance its ambition of becoming the "Battery of Southeast Asia" (Sims, 2021). Through project-based cooperation under the LMC, China has continued to demonstrate its longstanding commitment by providing financial support for the construction of the Nam Theun 1 and Lower Sesan II hydroelectric projects in Laos and Cambodia (LMC, 2020a). In this context, Vietnam has grown increasingly concerned about the continuation of hydropower development along both the Mekong mainstream and its tributaries by upstream states. To mitigate these negative impacts, Hanoi has sought to balance China's influence by cooperating with external actors—including the United States, Australia, Japan, and South Korea—and by leveraging the MRC forum to exert some pressure on Laos and Cambodia (Xuan Dung, 2025).

Given the negative impacts of hydropower development on river ecosystems and local communities, the establishment of the LMC does not offer a more effective regime for managing the Mekong River. More importantly, China's LMC Special Fund also reflects a distinct governance approach to transboundary water development that contrasts sharply with that of the World Bank, which usually requires prior notification and consultation with all riparian states as part of their environmental and social safeguard policies, thereby embedding transboundary governance and risk management into project approval (Salman, 2013). Meanwhile, the LMC Special Fund omits such obligations, instead emphasizing state consent, demand-driven projects, and pragmatic cooperation, which illustrate a governance model that prioritizes state autonomy, pragmatism, and non-interference.

Respecting States' Sovereignty

The management of resources across territorial boundaries is inherently challenging, particularly under the principle of non-intervention that underpins the international system. States are likely to claim that the use of resources within their

borders is an exercise of sovereignty that external should not regulate. Nevertheless, both the UNWC and the Mekong Agreement emphasize the importance of mutual consultation to ensure the implementation of the equitable and reasonable utilization of the Mekong River. MRC remains the primary platform through which lower Mekong countries can exercise prior consultation and notification, as well as voice concerns regarding development projects that may accelerate environmental and social damage within the Mekong Basin. For instance, the construction of the Pak Beng Dam in Laos underwent the PNPCA process, and an initial the MRC conducted an initial investigation in 2017 (MRC, 2017). In some cases, such as efforts to mitigate the impacts of the Lower Sesan II project, Vietnam has engaged bilaterally with Cambodia through the establishment of a Joint Coordination Committee (Pdr & Nam, 2017).

By leveraging its upstream position and material advantages through development and financial assistance, China promotes a governance design that eschews binding rules and notification procedures, which induces dual effects. On one hand, it enlarges formal sovereign space for Mekong states to pursue development-oriented water use. Previously, MRC served as the primary institutional forum for Lower Mekong states, requiring notification and prior consultation for river development projects. This process generated prolonged disputes and delayed the project's implementation. The PNPCA process for the Xayaburi Dam, for instance, lasted nearly three years, from 2010 to 2013, and ultimately failed to produce consensus on the project's sustainability (Rieu-Clarke, 2014). Conversely, the LMC departs from these procedural constraints by privileging flexible and project-based cooperation. On the other hand, this situation simultaneously generates asymmetric dependencies that enable China to exert structural influence over downstream riparian, potentially undermining their long-term autonomy. Barnei and Souksakon (2021) note that the Lao government is currently burdened by substantial debt to China, mainly stemming from loans used to finance hydropower projects on the Nam Ou River, a major tributary of the Mekong. Other Mekong countries, such as Cambodia and Myanmar, have similarly developed dependencies on China, which have been argued to hinder political reform in both states (Po & Sims, 2022).

CONCLUSION

In the current decade, China has increasingly been perceived as an assertive power whose maneuvers often challenge the existing international order. Following the launch of its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, China, under Xi Jinping's leadership, initiated the establishment of the LMC, a subregional framework within the Mekong Basin. The creation of the LMC is viewed as a new approach by Beijing to managing the Mekong River, given that its government had previously acted largely unilaterally and declined participation in other multilateral mechanisms in the region. This move reflects not only China's material interests—such as economic gains, power, and influence—but also its effort to counter external influence and reshape the rules of engagement within the Mekong Basin. Drawing on the theory

of norm subsidiarity as an analytical framework, this study argues that China's negative sentiment toward Western influence is rooted in its historical experiences. This context has driven China to refrain from joining alternative cooperative frameworks, particularly those perceived as susceptible to Western influence. To further underscore its position, China has also refrained from ratifying the UNWC, an international convention that codifies principles and norms for managing transboundary rivers.

This study will seek to contribute by further examining the new norms that China has sought to advocate through the LMC, namely positioning the upstream state as a leader, pursuing sustainability without sidelining economic development, and emphasizing state sovereignty. These three elements stand in notable contrast to the norms advanced by the UNWC and the MRC, which underscore the obligation of riparian states to avoid causing harm when utilizing shared rivers. By foregrounding how upstream leadership and sovereignty are institutionalized through flexible cooperation rather than binding rules, this study extends constructivist accounts of norm diffusion beyond compliance-based models and suggests that norm entrepreneurship can operate through institutional substitution.

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