

*Water Diplomacy and China's Bid for Soft Power in the Mekong**

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Abstract

This article investigates how China's new policies and practices toward water issues in the Mekong subregion are reshaping hydropolitics and geopolitics. Despite its unmatched hard powers in the region, China suffers from a lack of soft powers in regional geopolitics generally and the transboundary hydropolitics particularly. As the Mekong water conflict emerges as a major source of regional concerns toward its rise, China has been adopting water diplomacy in the Mekong subregion under the auspices of the newly established Lancang Mekong Cooperation (LMC) to consolidate its position as both the hydro-hegemon and regional power. On the one hand, China's water diplomacy aims to increase the country's persuasive and ideational powers to consolidate its status as the hydro-hegemon in the Mekong River Basin. On the other hand, China is also interested in exporting its development

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approach and promoting the common identity among regional countries through water diplomacy. Although these efforts have boosted its geopolitical cloud in the Mekong to some degree, China's regional expansion has triggered counterefforts from both the Mekong countries and other major powers.

While there is little historical precedence for major "water wars," the growing competition over water resources between countries in their shared transboundary river basins is likely to increase because of overextraction, water pollution, and climate change. One of the most water-conflict-prone areas is the Mekong River Basin, which contains the world's largest inland fishery and provides food security and livelihoods to millions of people. For years, China has long been criticized for not joining the Mekong River Commission (MRC) and for unilaterally building dams upstream of the Mekong River.¹ Indeed, China has a poor reputation as an uncooperative hydro-hegemon, and its hydro-projects have become one of the primary sources of conflicts between China and the Lower Mekong countries.² Nevertheless, in recent years, there has been a paradigm shift in China's Mekong River policy: active water diplomacy replaces the previous approach of unilateral development with limited multilateral cooperation.³

Meanwhile, coming to the realization that soft power is just as important as hard power, Chinese leaders understand that the country needs soft power both to increase its status abroad and to possess a more balanced power profile to compete with the West.⁴ Over the past two decades, although China has achieved some notable success in its soft-power-building efforts in regions such as Africa and South America, its soft power push in the Mekong subregion, the country's immediate neighborhood, has experienced some twists and turns. At first, China launched a major charm offense, such as high-level visits to the region by senior Chinese officials, development assistances, signing the China ASEAN Free Trade Agreement, and active participation in multilateral organizations in the region in the last decade. China succeeded in downplaying many conflicting interests while working collaboratively with neighboring countries on issues such as territorial disputes and regional economic integration.⁵ During this period, China largely allayed Lower Mekong countries' concerns that it poses a military or economic threat to the region.⁶ However, since 2010, with rising tensions in the South China