



**MEKONG WATER USAGE TESTS
CHINA'S CLAIMED GOOD-
NEIGHBORLINESS**

BY DENNY ROY

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China claims to be a uniquely benevolent international actor—a great power that, unlike other great powers past and present, does not practice “power politics” (self-interested bullying of smaller states) and is not “selfish” or warlike. The PRC government [styles itself](#) as the custodian of principles that, if implemented, would excise international relations of conflict and injustice.

Smaller neighbors to China’s south particularly fear domination by a strong China. To assuage their concerns, Beijing proclaims that it “[opposes](#) the strong bullying the weak” and supports “[building](#) a world of shared prosperity and promoting common development of all countries through every country’s development.”

The issue of managing fresh water resources provides a rigorous practical test of these sweet-sounding PRC assurances. Three major Southeast Asian rivers—the Mekong, the Salween, and the Ayeyarwady (Irrawaddy)—originate in the PRC-controlled Tibetan plateau. Even with this geographic advantage, China has insufficient water. Chinese make up 20% of the world’s population, but their country contains only 6 or 7% of the world’s fresh water supply. The good-neighborliness promised by Beijing’s official diplomatic rhetoric collides with the permanent scarcity of a vital resource. Not surprisingly, the latter wins out in actual PRC policy practice. But while unswervingly serving its own self-interest, Beijing

also employs familiar methods to limit damage to the PRC’s desired international image.

Underneath the ceremonial public statements, the [actual Chinese belief](#) is that China owns the Lancang and that Chinese people have the right to take or use the water as they wish. They don’t think of it as a regional resource to be shared equitably with their neighbors.

China’s official [position](#), repeated by PRC officials such as Ke Yousheng, China’s permanent representative to the United Nations’ Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, is that “we should also respect the legitimate rights and interests of riparian countries in the rational development and utilization of water resources, and take care of each others’ interests and concerns.” The reality is that Beijing prioritizes taking care of Beijing’s interests, with little “respect” for the interests and concerns of downstream neighbors.

Before arriving in Southeast Asia as the Mekong, the river flows through PRC territory as the Lancang. China operates 11 hydropower dams along the Lancang, with another 95 dams on tributaries that feed into the river. The Chinese dams harm the livelihoods of millions of people in the downstream Southeast Asian countries in two ways. First, the dams remove sediment, which includes nutrients that helps plants grow, from the waters flowing through them. As a consequence, rice fields that use Mekong water for irrigation are becoming less productive. Second, by impounding or releasing large amounts of water, the dams can cause or worsen droughts or floods downstream. In 2019, Chinese dams held back such an immense amount of water that downstream countries suffered a severe drought while the Lancang section of the river enjoyed unusually large water levels. Conversely, the Chinese dam operators sometimes open the floodgates during dry seasons without warning, making the river level downstream rise by several meters overnight and causing massively damaging floods. China is also compounding these negative effects by building dams in the downstream countries that will supply electricity to China.

Chulalongkorn University Prof. Thitinan Pongsudhirak argued in 2021 that Chinese officials adjust the flow of water into the Mekong as a diplomatic tactic—for example, releasing more water as a gift before an important meeting between Chinese and Southeast Asian officials. “It’s very clear that the Chinese are using the dams for political leverage,” he [said](#).

Reminiscent of its engagement with ASEAN to advance Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea, Beijing uses its influence over a regional organization to manage the political problem of Chinese dams disrupting the Mekong.

In 1995, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos signed an Agreement on the Cooperation and Sustainable Development of the Mekong River and founded the Mekong River Commission (MRC). China declined to join, thus avoiding the agreement’s obligations. Since then the MRC has criticized Chinese dam-building and demanded more information about the operations of dams in China that affect the flow of the river.

Beijing countered by establishing an alternative organization, the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) forum, in 2016. As Hoang Thi Ha, an analyst at ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, [notes](#), “The LMC is a prime example of Sino-centric multilateralism, in which China is the one who sets the rules and frameworks.” For instance, the LMC sponsors research projects that highlight the negative impacts of climate change, but not the problems caused by dams, helping Beijing divert criticism away from its own behavior.

The other important aspect of PRC damage control is the creation of alternative narratives that fight back against accusations that the PRC has acted dishonorably. The issue of the Lancang dams has given rise to several examples.

Beijing [offers up](#) the typical colonialist argument that its increased influence and economic penetration result in blessings for the region rather than exploitation: “China is solidly promoting Chinese-style modernization, which will bring new benefits to

the development of the countries along Mekong River.”

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, China faced outside [criticism](#) for its reluctance to share key data, presumably out of fear it would make the PRC government look bad. Beijing has responded by [insisting](#) that China has been extraordinarily transparent. Similarly, answering complaints that China does not publicize information about Lancang River water storage and release by Chinese dams (which the Chinese government considers a national security secret), government functionaries have retorted that China “provided hydrological data of Lancang River free of charge during flood season to MRC for 15 consecutive years [since 2002].” That data was wholly inadequate; it included only rainfall and water level information from two Chinese-operated hydrological stations, and only for part of the year. China agreed to release additional information starting in 2020 only under outside pressure. PRC media opportunistically [called it](#) “a major step taken by China that fully demonstrates the country’s goodwill and sincerity as a responsible upstream neighbor.” Outside analysts continue to [question](#) the accuracy and timeliness of the data provided by the PRC government.

The “major step” of releasing additional data resulted from an April 2020 report in which a US-based environmental watchdog organization used satellite data to [expose](#) the extent of downstream damage caused by China’s dams.

The PRC government responded to this embarrassing revelation with a three-headed alternative narrative. The first point of this narrative was that the study defaming Chinese dams was scientifically flawed. Secondly, PRC commentators argued that Chinese dams actually help the downstream countries by evening out the flow of water. In particular, these commentators said, the dams made the drought of 2018-2019 less severe for Southeast Asia. Finally, Chinese media and officials attributed criticism of the dams to a US anti-China agenda. A PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson [called](#) the 2020 report a “malicious move to drive a wedge between” China and its neighbors. Chinese vice foreign minister Luo

Zhaohui [claimed that](#) “For political purposes, some countries outside the region have repeatedly used the Mekong water resources issue to spread rumors and stir up trouble, alienating all parties and undermining sub-regional cooperation.”

This allegation is consistent with PRC strategic communication about the South China Sea dispute. In that case, Beijing argues there would be no disharmony between China and its Southeast Asian neighbors if the United States was not “[stirring up trouble](#).”

Beijing might be able to have it both ways with the Chinese domestic audience, persuading them that their government can provide water and electricity while simultaneously being a “good neighbor.” But for China’s actual neighbors, this is increasingly non-credible, as is the notion of PRC exceptionalism.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.