



## ***THE WORLD NEEDS TO CARE MORE ABOUT THE MEKONG***

BY TRUSTON YU

*Truston Yu (trustonyuofficial@gmail.com) is a visiting student at the National University of Laos and holds a bachelor's degree with first-class honors from the University of Hong Kong. They have written over 30 commentaries featured by outlets including the Diplomat, the Jakarta Post, and the Straits Times.*



*Photo: View of the Mekong in Luang Prabang, Laos.  
Source: Truston Yu*

At the 37th Asia-Pacific Roundtable: *Crisis in an Interregnum* held in Kuala Lumpur June 4-6, 2024, scholars and practitioners from across the world covered a range of conflicts and disputes in the region. There have been heated debates on Gaza, Ukraine, and the South China Sea. As an increasingly influential global power, China's stance and behaviors in these international security issues were scrutinized at the Roundtable. Yet a salient issue that has been overlooked is the Mekong River, where the livelihoods of over 50 million inhabitants are on the line.

Since last year, escalating [tensions](#) and standoffs between China and the Philippines in the South China Sea have once again made the headlines. This issue prompted ASEAN to release an "unprecedented" [joint](#)

[statement](#) on the matter before the end of 2023. Though the *Atlantic* characterizes the South China Sea dispute as "the most dangerous [conflict no one is talking about](#)," there is another body of water that has received far less attention than it should. Conspicuously absent from the Roundtable's discussions, however, is the issue of the Mekong River's transboundary governance.

The Mekong River, also known as the Lancang River within China, flows through five Southeast Asian mainland states: Myanmar, Lao PDR, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam. The river has been subject to numerous controversies in recent years, many of which involve China. While the South China Sea territorial disputes have facets of economic benefits, freedom of navigation, and security, the major rhetoric has to do with asserting national sovereignty. On the contrary, what happens to the Mekong may directly impact the lives of many more. The Mekong River Commission (MRC) estimated that out of nearly 65 million people who live in the Lower Mekong River Basin, [80 percent](#) of them depend on the river for their livelihoods.

For a river spanning multiple states like the Mekong, there is an added complexity of politics between upstream and downstream countries. As the river originates from the Tibetan Plateau and flows into the Indochina peninsula, China could potentially pose a much greater threat (intentionally or unintentionally) to its southern neighbors than to rival claimants in the South China Sea. Despite the above reasons for concern, the Mekong remains far less salient compared to the South China Sea. What might be the reasons behind this?

Whereas the South China Sea dispute is mainly between China and Southeast Asian claimants with a common interest of standing up against Beijing, the Mekong River is a much more nuanced issue where Southeast Asian states may have diverging interests. Laos has a vision of becoming the "Battery of Asia" using numerous hydropower dams invested by China and Thailand, with the electricity being sold to Vietnam in addition to the two countries. The highly controversial [Xayaburi Dam project](#) in Laos has been criticized for its adverse impacts, especially on

downstream Mekong countries including Cambodia. Yet at the same time, perhaps somewhat ironically, Cambodia has also been building multiple dams with [Chinese support](#) within its own territory. The intricacies of the Mekong lead to a less clear-cut picture where Southeast Asian countries are not aligned against China - instead, there is an enmeshment of different economic and security interests among different countries.

A rather speculative factor has to do with the institutional structure of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). In a previous exchange between myself and Philippine political commentator Richard Javad Heydarian, we discussed why the Mekong River has garnered far less attention from ASEAN and beyond - and this was even before the recent clashes between China and the Philippines which brought the dispute into the forefront. Heydarian remarked that even though ASEAN has been around for more than five decades - with all mainland Southeast Asia countries joining before the turn of the century - ASEAN continues to place a greater emphasis on maritime Southeast Asia. It also happens to be the case that member states that are more concerned with the South China Sea issue, such as the Philippines, Vietnam, and Indonesia, which is not a claimant but remain involved due to its interests in the [North Natuna Sea](#). The Philippines, Vietnam, and Indonesia are more prominent diplomatically and therefore, can be more vocal in their concerns.

There exist other lesser-known forums where more focused discussions on the Mekong may take place. In addition to the MRC, there are the [Asian Development Bank's Greater Mekong Subregion](#) (GMS) framework and the [Lancang-Mekong Cooperation](#) (LMC) initiated by China. Understandably, discussions taking place on these platforms may have received less attention in comparison. The most affected countries in the Mekong issues, namely Cambodia and Laos, are highly economically dependent on China and therefore would be less vocal on this issue, compared to the Philippines on the South China Sea.

Perhaps the most significant yet unfortunate reason for our ignorance towards the Mekong is that this

simply does not affect most people in the world. The South China Sea is a major trading lane that serves many of the world's leading economies; the Philippines, a vocal claimant in the dispute, is a long-term treaty ally of the United States. Mekong, on the other hand, barely affects anyone outside the region apart from concerned ecologists. Naturally, there would be less global attention on this matter - even though the Mekong affects a larger amount of Southeast Asian livelihoods than the South China Sea.

Regardless of the reason for the global lack of interest, it is apparent that the Mekong has great geopolitical significance in the contemporary world, especially in understanding China's foreign relations. China has 11 dams on the Upper Mekong, which have been accused of exacerbating the drought downstream in 2019 by [holding back](#) "vast volumes of vital water from flowing down." China grasps the lifeline of many living downstream - and the world should be aware. Indeed, the Mekong issue is only becoming more acute against the backdrop of climate change, which is already [adversely impacting mainland Southeast Asia](#).

Although the South China Sea dispute is an important issue that deserves all the attention it is receiving, it remains crucial to prioritize the Mekong because it is equally significant in Southeast Asia's development and the region's relations with China for the years to come. Hopefully, in future international conferences, there will be a greater sense of awareness and prioritization of this topic in the agenda-setting.

*Disclaimer: The views contained in this article are the author's own.*