THE MEKONG DROUGHT AND A REGIONAL RULES BASED REGIME

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The Current Drought Reveals Many Things

- The extent (or not!) to which large dams now increasingly control river water levels
- The limits (or not!) to cooperation between the countries sharing precious water in times of scarcity
- The likelihood (for sure!) of an increasingly uncertain future under the conditions of climate change

- What must be done in the short and long term?
From watershed to powershed

Cumulative hydropower generation capacity in the Lancang-Mekong Basin

Ecological change and social impacts

Bann Pak Mon, Laos (before construction of Xayaburi Dam)

Hydrodiplomacy in 2016

Water diplomacy by China offers drought relief

Mekong

Water diplomacy by China offers drought relief

Announces for the first time release of huge amounts of Mekong water

China has embarked on an unprecedented "water diplomacy" mission to alleviate the ongoing drought in Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam by discharging massive quantities of fresh water downstream from one of its dams in its southern region.
Hydrodiplomacy in 2019

False report undermines Mekong cooperation

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China must be sincere on Mekong

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Writer: NAWAT ROTKAEW

A Lao boat negotiates a curve in the Mekong River between Chiang Saen and Chiang Khong districts, Chiang Rai. Pattarapong Chatpattarasill

Photo of the Mekong River on the Thai-Lao border in Chiang Rai in July 2019. (Photo by Sommai Jarcudeetha)
Hydrodiplomacy in 2019

“The reservoirs on Lancang mainstream stored part of the water during the wet season of 2018, and released supplementary water to the Mekong River during January to June 2019, and the water level of reservoirs gradually dropped to the dead storage level in early July. Considering running out of the “supplementary” capacity, the Jinghong reservoir decided to implement routine overhaul from 5th to 19th July....”
Those dams collectively could store more than 47 billion cubic meters of water. Now we’re in a period of drought, so they’re not storing that much, they’re storing something less than that, but regardless, they’re storing a lot of water that could be contributing to the downstream.”
Momentum of Lancang Mekong Cooperation

• Two summits with two declarations: Sanya (March 2014) and Phnom Penh (January 2018)

• Cooperation around water stated to be through:
  • policy dialogue,
  • improved water quality monitoring and information and data sharing,
  • technical cooperation and exchanges,
  • joint research,
  • capacity building

• Significant new organizations on water
  • the Lancang-Mekong Water Resources Cooperation Center
  • the Lancang-Mekong Environmental Cooperation Center
The Mekong River Commission and the LMC

- Mekong River Commission (MRC) established in 1995 by international treaty
- Until recently China maintained a “dialogue” relationship, now deepening
  - Wet-season data sharing and occasional dry season sharing
  - Invitations to each others meetings, staff exchanges, and field visits
  - Annual dialogue meetings
  - Some collaboration on joint assessment research (including on drought)
- There is clearly some overlap of claimed mandates of MRC and LMC
What could/ should be done?

Immediate term:

- Support to impacted rural communities (material and financial)
- Once rains arrive, priority should be to farmers and river ecology, not hydropower dam replenishment

Longer term

- Recognize the fallacy of depending *too much* on large infrastructure
- Focus on other forms of preparedness: better predictive capacity; well-resourced plans; and small-scale/soft infrastructure solutions
- Fairer sharing of the Lancang-Mekong based on rules-based approach:
  - More comprehensive data sharing, including with the public
  - Clear rules and procedures on emergency water release
  - Hydropower cascade operation that mimics, to the extent possible, the natural river flow
  - Improved procedures for genuine public participation
Thank you for listening

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