

# China's Cooperation on the Mekong River in the Realm of Complex Interdependence

Written by Max Neugebauer

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## China's Cooperation on the Mekong River in the Realm of Complex Interdependence

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### Introduction

China's tremendous economic rise in the last decades has turned it into a global player and a regional superpower in Asia. This remarkable development has largely eradicated poverty in China and made it the second-largest economy in the world. However, China's uncompromising focus on economic growth has not only had a positive impact on the country. Besides higher per capita income and higher standards of living, China's population has experienced a rapid widening of inequality and enormous environmental degradation in recent years. As China's position in the world has increased, so has its influence and impact on foreign countries. Thus, China's problems are no longer entirely nationally centered, but have become global in scale. Due to its tremendous environmental impact, China has become imperative to any environment agreement and essential to any global effort to mitigate environment problems and climate change. For that reason, it is vital to understand China's political motives for cooperation in order to successfully tackle environmental problems and potential obstacles in global environment governance.

One of the many environmental problems in Asia are water-related issues, which become increasingly important for sustainable development. Especially the multiple uses of water, and in particular dam building, impose further stress on the environment and on dependent downstream countries.<sup>[1]</sup> As the most important and powerful upstream country in Asia, China becomes imperative to any cooperation on water-related issues. However, China has traditionally opposed any multilateral commitments on the topic or information sharing. Nonetheless, this changed significantly in the case of the Mekong River, where China has not only increased the coordination of its projects and shared its data on the annual flows, but also proposed a multinational framework which includes, among other aspects, a strong component of water management. Based on this background, this research paper's endeavor is to analyze China's increased willingness to cooperate on transboundary rivers by applying Keohane's and Nye's concept of *complex interdependence* to the Mekong River. In doing so, this research paper answers the question: To what extent can China's increased willingness to cooperate on transboundary water issues in the Mekong Region be explained by the concept of complex interdependence?

The aim of understanding China's foreign policy in global environmental governance is not new to the field of International Relations (IR); however, the focus of this paper transcends previous realist assumptions which see China as a monolithic unitary actor, and focuses instead on domestic implications. More recent studies have demonstrated that domestic factors are important for the formation of foreign environmental policies.<sup>[2]</sup> Even though China's foreign policy is decisively influenced by domestic factors,<sup>[3]</sup> only little research has been done on this nexus thus far.

Therefore, after discussing the research question in the following chapter, the second chapter highlights the scientific and social significance of this research. Subsequently, the third chapter explains the method of this paper by focusing on interdependence. The fourth chapter clarifies the concept of complex interdependence, its three core characteristics and its impact on the political process. Then, after elaborating on the concept of complex interdependence, the final chapter determines whether or not complex interdependence exists by applying the three core characteristics to the Mekong Basin. Succeeding this application, the subsequent section emphasizes the

# China's Cooperation on the Mekong River in the Realm of Complex Interdependence

Written by Max Neugebauer

potential effect of the concept on China's decision-making to improve its cooperation with its riparian states. In doing so, the research paper concludes with the finding that Yunnan province's economic interdependence with its neighbor states and the economic potential of the whole Mekong Region is a core factor for more cooperation from China's side. Therefore, China and in particular Yunnan seek to maintain mutually beneficial relations by promoting benevolence towards its downstream countries.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Research Question

In the 21st century, one of the most challenging environmental crises in Asia is assumed to become water stress.<sup>[4]</sup> Not only does desertification advance in many Asian countries, but so does pollution. Furthermore, the available quantity of water will decrease. For example, in China alone, more than 70 percent of all water flows are so heavily polluted that they are unsafe for human consumption.<sup>[5]</sup> Thus, water resources are becoming one of the most politicized natural resources for many Asian countries.<sup>[6]</sup>

This negative development in water issues is not a new phenomenon, but already became important in the 1980s when the 'water war hypothesis' dominated in the media and in the scholarly debate.<sup>[7]</sup> According to the advocates of this hypothesis, water represents one of the most essential resources to countries, so important that it would even cause violent conflicts between states. However, many current academic researchers have abandoned this pessimistic perspective and often emphasize that water is not only a potential source of conflict but can also serve as a catalyst for cooperation.<sup>[8]</sup> One of their main arguments in favor of cooperation is regional integration and economic interdependence.<sup>[9]</sup> Nonetheless, in regard to transboundary rivers, cooperation still seems to be hampered by the complexity of different factors, such as historical and political constraints, but often also, to a large extent, by a powerful upstream country that is unwilling to cooperate. Powerful upstream countries can often act unilaterally without any cooperation from their downstream riparian states.

One of these countries, which enjoy considerable independence in respect to water-related policy, is China. Considering that it shares more than 110 transnational rivers and lakes with 18 nations, it represents the most eminent upstream country in Asia.<sup>[10]</sup> Hence, China's neighboring countries depend on its benevolent position to a high degree. This is also the case in the Mekong Basin where all five riparian states are dependent on China's will for cooperation. With the purpose of improving the coordination and management of water, downstream countries in 1957 created the Mekong Committee under the supervision of the United Nations Development Program.<sup>[11]</sup> This institution and its successor since 1995, the Mekong River Commission (MRC), aim to "promote, coordinate, supervise, and control water resource development projects in the lower Mekong Basin".<sup>[12]</sup> However, in contrast to four riparian states, China has not been a full member of the institution, which seeks to manage water-related concerns and has rejected any accession to this framework. Therefore, China only cooperated with its riparian neighbors on economic and security-related projects, but was never part of any framework linked to water resource management and vetoed the United Nations Watercourses Convention in 1997 as one of only three countries.<sup>[13]</sup> Furthermore, it also refused for a long time to share its information about annual flow variations of the Mekong River. This foreign policy strategy was similarly applied to other transboundary rivers such as the Brahmaputra River, where no real cooperation on various issues exist.<sup>[14]</sup>

Notably, this position changed with regard to the Mekong River in November 2015 when China, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam brought into being the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Mechanism (LMCM), which, besides economic cooperation, also explicitly includes the cooperation on water issues.<sup>[15]</sup> While the LMCM is still far away from a strong river basin organization, it is surprising that China was one of the strongest forces behind this new mechanism, which has a strong water management component.<sup>[16]</sup> Consequently, China's Foreign Ministry's spokesperson promised that "the Chinese side will enhance communication and coordination with relevant countries on water resources management and disaster response to carry out practical cooperation, which, we hope, will better

# China's Cooperation on the Mekong River in the Realm of Complex Interdependence

Written by Max Neugebauer

benefit people living along the Lancang-Mekong River."<sup>[17]</sup> Already a few months after the LMCM's establishment, China started information sharing on the river and provided hydrological data to its riparian partners.<sup>[18]</sup> Most significantly, China decided to open its hydropower station in Yunnan with the intention to mitigate the current drought in Thailand.<sup>[19]</sup> This marked the first time that the central government announced in advance its intention to open the dams in Yunnan.<sup>[20]</sup>

This sudden shift from rejecting any multilateral agreements on water matters in the Mekong River towards being a driving force behind a multilateral agreement on water cooperation is surprising. As a consequence, the Mekong River represents an ideal case study for analyzing China's shift away from noncooperation on shared rivers to a more coordinated foreign policy on shared rivers. For that reason, this research paper seeks to show what factors explain China's increased willingness to cooperate on trans-boundary water issues in the Mekong Region. To shed light on this case, the concept of complex interdependence will be employed in order to live up to the complex reality of various actors and interests present in the Mekong Basin.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Scientific and Social Significance

The abovementioned research question does not only address China's increased willingness to cooperate on water-related issues but bears in mind domestic factors that might have stimulated increased cooperation. Furthermore, water scarcity is inextricably linked to one of the most dominant challenges of our days – climate change. Six out of the ten most affected countries by climate change, in terms of affected people, are Asia-Pacific countries.<sup>[21]</sup> Against this background, Asian countries will experience increased floods, water scarcity, desertification and stress on the ecological system. Climate change could additionally alter the quantity, timing of floods and droughts, as well as the distribution of water. Therefore, water becomes an important subject, on the one hand, for the environment and ecosystem of the Mekong Basin, and on the other hand, for the people depending on the river and its biodiversity.

According to the MRC, the "biodiversity is fundamental to the viability of natural resource-based rural livelihoods of a population of 66 million people living in the Lower Mekong Basin."<sup>[22]</sup> Therefore, any "environment management is a cornerstone of river basin management and development can bring benefits to all river uses and users".<sup>[23]</sup> Any uncoordinated measure and large-scale projects can threaten biodiversity conservation by reducing the river flow, sediment trapping and similarly reducing the productivity of aquatic animals.<sup>[24]</sup> Since every transboundary water has its own unique characteristics and implications for cooperation or conflict, the scope of this paper to contribute to the general debate on shared waters is limited. However, since the Mekong River is not the only river transcending China's territory, this analysis still can be valuable for other river basins.

As China's foreign policy is increasingly described as "unprecedentedly complex" and "diverse and contradictory" by academic scholars, it is valuable to understand this seemingly "contradictory and multidimensional behavior".<sup>[25]</sup> Therefore, a better insight into why China has decided to cooperate on water issues in the Mekong River could have a valuable impact on the general debate about China's foreign environment diplomacy and concrete explanatory value on China's river politics. Nonetheless, most of current IR research on China and its foreign policies is focused on the national level and focuses on China as a unitary state.<sup>[26]</sup> Consequently, China's foreign policy is often perceived as realistic in nature.<sup>[27]</sup> Most of the academic research on China's foreign policy relied on the nation-state as the primary unit of analysis. By upholding "the principle of state sovereignty above all else, and reject[ing] arguments that transnational issues penetrate across borders", potentially significant factors are neglected according to the neoliberal thinking which is applied in this research.<sup>[28]</sup> In contrast, this research paper focuses on the domestic implications that influence China's foreign environmental policy. To analyze China's shift towards more cooperation on water issues, this research utilizes the concept of complex interdependence. This concept takes various aspects into consideration, as well as the complexity of environmental interdependence. Moreover, this concept acknowledges states as the most important actors in world politics, while at the same time blurring the line between domestic and international politics. Consequently, it particularly suits the interest and research goal of this paper

# China's Cooperation on the Mekong River in the Realm of Complex Interdependence

Written by Max Neugebauer

because the concept removes the national domestic divide in international affairs.

## CHAPTER THREE

### A Qualitative Approach to Interdependence

Methodologically, this thesis employs a qualitative data collection of primary and secondary sources. By focusing on document-based research, this approach enables the research to reveal the important implications for this study. Moreover, in concentrating on official reports, academic journals or other relevant studies, this paper takes a qualitative approach in analyzing the collected data. This qualitative approach provides a better tool for understanding the underlying implications of the resources and enables the paper to expose the meaning behind the variables of qualitative data. In gathering this information, the research seeks to answer the research question by presenting empirical evidence for China's increased incentive to cooperate with its riparian neighbors on the Mekong River. The qualitative research design is conducted in form of a theory-guided case study. The specific focus on the case of the Mekong Basin enhances the ability to arrive at meaningful conclusions regarding this specific case by gaining an in-depth understanding of the concept of complex interdependence.

In taking this neoliberal approach, Keohane and Nye mainly focus on economic interdependence by defining it as a mutual dependence by which the actions of one actor can impose significant costs on himself and others.<sup>[29]</sup> In order to avoid the negative effects of adjustment, an internationally dependent actor will seek to avoid the costs of adjusting.<sup>[30]</sup> Therefore, the task for actors under the constraints of interdependence is to find political means to create or uphold mutually beneficial "cooperation in the face of competing efforts by governments (and nongovernmental actors) to manipulate the system for their own benefits".<sup>[31]</sup> Accordingly, Keohane and Nye seek to analyze specific "patterns of political processes" in order to understand how these patterns affect the behavior of actors instead of employing "a structural explanation to account for actions".<sup>[32]</sup> In particular, the focus on Yunnan province as the main unit of analysis and its relations to the downstream states in the Mekong Basin are enhancing the ability of the research to demonstrate China's increased interdependency. Furthermore, the gathered information on the case is also employed as a means to explain the underlying factors determining China's rethinking on the case, but also what it means for international environmental diplomacy in general.

Nonetheless, this paper does not dismiss states as the dominant actors, but considers the provincial level as a core unit of analysis. The reason for this is that previously much scholarly attention was dedicated to the nation-state level as its unit of analysis.<sup>[33]</sup> However, this research acknowledges the limits of realism to depict China's policies and recognizes that different actors on different levels have an increasing effect on China's foreign policy process.<sup>[34]</sup> Although the People's Republic of China (PRC) was founded in 1949 as a strong unitary state and has since demonstrated a high degree of "realist" behavior, China's provinces and autonomous regions acquired more and more autonomy through the 1980s decentralization efforts. In order to avoid this state-centric analysis and follow the academic advice of Chinese experts to take domestic factors into consideration, the paper seeks to embrace the multiple actors and the different levels of governance.<sup>[35]</sup> Because the concept of complex interdependence is mostly contrary to realists' state-centric assumptions and blurs the line between domestic and international politics, it is an adequate tool for our endeavors to concentrate on Yunnan province and how its relationship to riparian states in the Mekong Basin has potentially influenced China's foreign policy on transboundary waters.

Based on these assumptions, this paper seeks to analyze to what extent the concept of complex interdependence can account for China's increased willingness to cooperate on the Mekong River on water-related issues. In doing so, this research provides explanatory value on China's position in the Mekong Basin on the one hand and on the other hand contributes to a positive insight into China's management on trans-boundary waters. Before addressing the above mentioned issues and case study in the final chapter of this paper, the following chapter concentrates on the three core conditions of complex interdependence and its impact on the political process.

# China's Cooperation on the Mekong River in the Realm of Complex Interdependence

Written by Max Neugebauer

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Complex Interdependence

International politics have tremendously changed in the last few decades, and traditional theories, such as classical realism, have been harshly criticized in IR for no longer depicting and explaining international relations sufficiently. The realists' state-centric approach in particular increasingly failed to vindicate its position from the 1970s onwards.<sup>[36]</sup> Thus, classical realism scholars such as Morgenthau, Claude or Carr were confronted *inter alia* by liberal thoughts derived by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, who seemed to predict the effects of globalization and the increased interdependence between states. Consequently, both authors sought to revoke the three core assumptions, which are fundamental to realist ideas. First, the assumption that states are rational units which dominate world politics. Second, the idea that force is a suitable tool to influence policies. Third, realists' assumption of a hierarchy of issues divided between "high politics" and "low politics". Accordingly, in an ideal realist type of world, international relations would be characterized by latent conflict among states where "high politics" of military security dominate the political agenda. However, by challenging these three core assumptions, Keohane and Nye conceived the new concept of complex interdependence, in which international politics diverge greatly from classical realist assumptions. As a result, under complex interdependence, world politics are no longer dominated by states only, the hierarchy of issues is no longer applicable and the threat or use of force is an ineffective policy tool.<sup>[37]</sup> Based on these assumptions, this section clarifies the main characteristics and conditions of the concept of complex interdependence and lays out the consequences for the political processes.

### The Core Characteristics of Complex Interdependence

The concept of complex interdependence seeks to elucidate the increasing complexity of world politics and international relations by providing a more adequate foundation for examining the politics of interdependence. This assessment is based on the discussion of Keohane and Nye, who put forward three main characteristics of complex interdependence, namely the existence of *multiple channels* which connect societies, the *absence of hierarchy of issues* and the *minor role of military force*.<sup>[38]</sup> These characteristics give rise to distinct political processes.

#### *Multiple Channels*

In the international environment, where complex interdependence predominates international relations, interstate relations are no longer the sole channel of communication and interaction. Formal and informal relations between government officials, non-governmental elites and international organizations, are increasing the complexity of ties between states.<sup>[39]</sup> Correspondingly, the realist belief, that interstate relations only arise through official foreign arrangements and form the normal channel of interaction, is expanded by transnational and transgovernmental channels. Hence, the realist notion to see states as unitary actors on the world stage is enlarged by different channels of informal face-to-face meetings or other communications in which non-governmental organizations also can exert influence in international politics. These transnational relations among governmental and non-governmental bureaucrats and their direct interaction affect the domestic and international realm significantly. Both the increasing variety of actors and the multiple channels of interaction are important "because they act as transmission belts, making government policies in various countries more sensitive to one another."<sup>[40]</sup> Thus, these connections increase the transboundary effects of policy decisions which have an international scope, such as trade policies or environment regulations. Consequently, the multiple channels obscure the distinction of domestic and foreign policies and enlarge the issues on the foreign policy agenda.

#### *Absence of Hierarchy among Issues*

In addition to the increasing complexity of state interaction under the condition of complex interdependence, the hierarchy of issues, which exists in the realist perspective, is absent. Thus, in state interactions, military security is no longer the only and most dominant issue on a government's agenda. Multiple issues emerge in the foreign policy area

# China's Cooperation on the Mekong River in the Realm of Complex Interdependence

Written by Max Neugebauer

of governance such as economics, environment or social welfare, which traditionally were seen as mere "low politics" and mainly relating to domestic politics. Therefore, the dividing line between domestic and foreign policy issues becomes indistinct and more topics enter the foreign policy agenda of governments. Due to this proliferation of important topics, governments face a more complex process of formulating the national interest on the world stage, which can now change over time and issue area.<sup>[41]</sup>

## *Minor Role of Military Force*

In situations where complex interdependence prevails, the concept of safety has to be broadened beyond the concept of the security dilemma.<sup>[42]</sup> This stands in contrast to realism's key role of force and military might for the survival of states in an anarchic system of self-help. Even though force is still one of the most prominent resources to guarantee survival in the worst of situations, the general fear among industrial and more pluralist countries has declined. As more and more subjects appear on the foreign policy agenda and as military security is no longer the dominant tool, other more pressing issues, such as economic and ecological welfare, gain momentum. Hence, force becomes an ineffective policy tool for reaching national goals. Also, since an increasing number of countries experience severe relations of reciprocal influence, force remains inappropriate as a foreign policy tool for solving disagreements because according to Keohane and Nye, the costs and uncertainty are unpredictable.<sup>[43]</sup> While the use of force is precluded among alliances and other groups of countries, military force can still be employed as a political bargaining tool. For instance, the inherently deterring effect of military power and the protection role of more powerful states over other countries can still serve as a bargaining tool to increase one's political influence over other issues. Despite this trend in more industrialized countries, force often remains essential in the relations among Third World countries or in North-South relations.<sup>[44]</sup> Nonetheless, in these more intense relations, force appears to be less likely to be directly used in inter-state relations than before 1945.<sup>[45]</sup> Also, if one country can gain against a sovereign state on one particular issue through the employment of force, it would have an adverse effect on other subjects. Hence, in situations of multiple mutual relationships, the deployment of military force can have devastating negative consequences on the profitable relationship between countries. As a result, the direct use of force to pursue security goals will have high costs in areas not related to security. However, it goes without saying that the extent to which military force is becoming irrelevant depends greatly on the situation and on the political context at hand. Thus, the mentioned constraints vary unevenly from country to country and depend on the state of affairs.

Although more authoritarian states might be more inclined to use direct force to achieve instant economic goals, owing to fewer restrictions by domestic opposition, they will still consider the great costs of disrupting other relationships and the potential ineffectiveness of the use of force. In the case that an issue receives minor attention or passion, the employment of force becomes highly unlikely. While the uneven processes of this change in international politics might reduce the strength of this argument, Keohane and Nye explicitly emphasize this increasing complexity for the appropriate use of their concept of complex interdependence.<sup>[46]</sup> According to both authors, in cases where force becomes unthinkable to be used, complex interdependence might be a beneficial model in analyzing political processes. However, their concept should in no way be understood to replace realist oversimplification with just another oversimplification, but should only be used when applicable.

Based on this line of argument, the three main characteristics, multiple channels, absence of hierarchy among issues, and the minor role of military force have a decisive impact on a states' policy process which diverges greatly from traditional realists' assumptions of state behavior. Therefore, the following section will further emphasize the potential impacts of complex interdependence on the policy process.

## **Complex Interdependence and its Impact on the Political Process**

Based on the above mentioned three main characteristics of complex interdependence, Keohane and Nye sought to illuminate the political process "which translates power resources into power as control of outcomes".<sup>[47]</sup> Accordingly, their concept seeks to provide a more valuable analytical instrument than the realist tradition, which they describe as simplistic. Thus, they employ the three main characteristics for assessing and explaining the translation of power into outcomes.<sup>[48]</sup> The authors understand power as no longer observable as a predominantly stable phenomenon, but rather as a complex and variable tool.<sup>[49]</sup> Derived from the three central characteristics, the following section analyzes

# China's Cooperation on the Mekong River in the Realm of Complex Interdependence

Written by Max Neugebauer

the impact on the political process. This is pursued in a joint manner due to their strong correlation.

In a solely realist world, non-military subjects such as environmental or economic problems, are not only subsidiary to security issues, but if they receive attention by governments and scholars, they are mostly examined for their "politico-military implications".<sup>[50]</sup> However, in an environment where complex interdependence exists, officials at the various state levels, in particular at lower levels, will stress the importance to pursue a variety of national goals. As a consequence of the absence of an apparent hierarchy of issues, each state organ and bureaucracy will put its own matter onto the foreign policy agenda.

Whereas traditional models emphasize the dominating role of military and economically strong states to prevail over weaker state's issues, under complex interdependence, this supremacy is less likely to happen. In the absence of military security as the overriding national goal, states that possess military and economic power can no longer link their military might to issues where they lack dominance. Thus, powerful states are confronted by a more difficult international environment to use their general dominance to make up for areas where they are weaker.<sup>[51]</sup> Strong states might still seek to use their overall economic power to obtain positive outcomes on other issues. However, according to Keohane and Nye, this is only likely to succeed where solely economic issues are at stake.<sup>[52]</sup> Yet, since economic goals are often strongly politicized issues, it is possible that "domestic, transnational, and transgovernmental actors who resist having their interest traded off" will use their power to limit the impact of the strong state.<sup>[53]</sup>

Another effect of the assumption of no clear hierarchy among various issues is that the government agenda becomes more diverse and more open to both international and domestic problems. Therefore, increasing interdependence will affect the agenda because different interest groups will politicize their concerns and push previously domestic issues onto the foreign policy agenda. This involvement with interstate issues can, according to Keohane and Nye, lead to interference of lower government levels in the bargaining process of higher levels.<sup>[54]</sup> Accordingly, state's foreign policy is not only developed by a unitary government but rather by the conjunction of interest from different levels of government. By blurring the lines between the division of domestic and international politics and the increasing influence of transnational actors, a uniform foreign policy becomes more complex to sustain.

Furthermore, the multiple channels of interaction and the coalition building process are not limited by national borders. Hence, transnational relations are affected by multinational corporations which can have a significant impact on governments and influence the position and policy preference of their counterparts abroad and other social groups. Along these lines, organizations or governmental bureaucrats will directly work together with other bodies in other societies in order to profit from the network of relations. Thus, political patterns will be influenced by certain groups who are less receptive of changes than other actors.

Based on the aforementioned effects of complex interdependence, the perception of the national interest will be altered and it becomes more difficult to differentiate which entity or interest is responsible for a certain set of national goals. By frequent informal interactions and the formation of transnational allies on certain issues, the national interest can be decisively altered.<sup>[55]</sup> For that reason, it becomes problematic for a government to form a cohesive position on certain issues during negotiations or interactions with foreigners. Therefore, under complex interdependence, "[n]ational interest will be defined differently on issues, at different times, and by different government units".<sup>[56]</sup>

In the same manner as realism portrays an ideal world type, Keohane and Nye understand their contribution of complex interdependence as nothing more than another ideal type. Nonetheless, they emphasize that in the realm of globalization, complex interdependence is better fitted to depict and explain the real world.<sup>[57]</sup> Especially where economic and ecological interdependence exist, complex interdependence will prevail in explanatory value over purely realist concepts. With regard to this assumption, the following chapter will seek to determine whether complex interdependence exists in the case of the Mekong Basin by applying all three characteristics of the concept to the provincial level of Yunnan. Additionally, the subsequent chapter examines whether or not complex interdependence can reveal the underlining motives of China to cooperate on environmental issues on the Mekong River.

# China's Cooperation on the Mekong River in the Realm of Complex Interdependence

Written by Max Neugebauer

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Complex Interdependence and the Mekong River

International rivers are under increasing pressure to satisfy the needs of growing economies and their population. Therefore, it is important to manage shared rivers to facilitate their most efficient use and to safeguard their finely tuned ecosystem. Understanding why and under what circumstances more powerful upstream countries cooperate is essential. After a brief outline, more emphasis is laid on the application of the previously developed concept of complex interdependence and its explanatory value for the study

### Geography and Hydropolitics of the Mekong River

The Mekong River starts its 4500 km long journey through six countries on the Tibetan Plateau.<sup>[58]</sup> Before the Mekong Delta flows into the South China Sea in Vietnam, the river traverses China, Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia and Thailand. The Mekong River crosses a region that is characterized by great biological and cultural diversity and depends on a sustainable and environmentally-friendly management of the river.<sup>[59]</sup> Moreover, the river serves not only as an important biological habitat, but increasingly as a catalyst for economic development in the region. Thus, the river is a multi-dimensional biological and economic system essential to sustain the life surrounding it.

In considering that water is essential to all life, it represents the most important natural resource in the region. More than 66 million people directly depend on the Mekong River for farming, fishery, and industrial uses.<sup>[60]</sup> Since fish and other aquatic animals are the main source of protein for the habitants in the Mekong Basin, it becomes important to safeguard its ecology.<sup>[61]</sup> In other words, the Mekong River represents the "world's most productive inland fishery".<sup>[62]</sup> In the downstream-countries, aquatic animals account for 47 percent to 80 percent of their total animal protein intake.<sup>[63]</sup> Moreover, the economic significance for the riparian states is essential since around 67 percent of the population in the lower Mekong Basin have an occupation relating to a water source.<sup>[64]</sup> However many citizens already had to change their occupation "because of declining productivity and services of the aquatic ecosystems."<sup>[65]</sup> This high reliance of the population on the river as a main food and income provider, creates a vulnerable situation for the lower riparian states. Any decline in quantity and quality of water will put further stress on the rural population. As a consequence, cooperation on the Mekong River does not only benefit the environment and the ecosystem of the river, but also the population living in the Mekong Basin.

Considering the growing population and advancing industrialization of the six riparian states, the balanced ecosystem is increasingly threatened by the erosion of water quality, overfished fish stocks and reduced river flows.<sup>[66]</sup> Other main threats to a sustainable development in the Mekong region are large-scale hydropower projects carried out in the region.<sup>[67]</sup> Due to its geographical characteristics, the river provides the region with a great possibility to use hydropower energy as a source for improving the economies of the riparian states.<sup>[68]</sup> Since the Mekong River is one of the largest least modified rivers in the world, it represents a great economic potential for the regional development of all actors involved.<sup>[69]</sup> As a consequence, in the next several decades, the river will experience increasing modification. More than 100 additional dams are already planned to be built in the Mekong River Basin which could decisively alter the river's natural flow, threaten biodiversity, and limit the river's ecosystem productivity.<sup>[70]</sup> Most importantly, as the ecosystem and the wetland surrounding the Mekong Basin "revolve around the seasonal ebb and flow of the monsoon rains and floodwater", any major change will have a severe impact on the balanced ecosystem.<sup>[71]</sup> Therefore, any improvement to the management on the river implies a win-win situation, in which all riparian states and the river would benefit from it in the long run.<sup>[72]</sup>

However, the people sharing the Mekong River are divided by ethnicity, religion, language and greatly diverging socioeconomic developments.<sup>[73]</sup> The colonial legacy of almost all riparian states, and the retrospection of the various conflicts endured prior to and during the Cold War, have created a sensitive relationship between the states, especially in regard to their territorial integrity. Only in the 1990s, after the end of the Cold War, the region started to recover from the unstable political and security environment in the region.<sup>[74]</sup>



# China's Cooperation on the Mekong River in the Realm of Complex Interdependence

Written by Max Neugebauer

In addition to the difficult historical background, any successful cooperation on the Mekong River is complicated by China's geographical position and its economic power. These provide China with the advantage of not having to rely on other countries making China the most powerful upstream guardian of the Mekong Basin for the downstream countries.<sup>[75]</sup>

Due to its absolute domination of the Mekong River, China is often portrayed as a *hydro-hegemony* or *hydro-superpower*.<sup>[76]</sup> Even though China only accounts for around 25 percent of the overall water flows in Mekong Delta, it contributes most of the water flows to the upper level of the Mekong River.<sup>[77]</sup> Therefore, any dams in Yunnan province will have a significant effect on the ecosystem and productivity of the ecological system.<sup>[78]</sup> Due to the great seasonal variation of the water quantity supplied by the river, China's cooperation becomes essential during dry and flood season. Thus, China's actions or inactions have a significant impact on riparian states and on the quantity and quality of the river flow. Similarly, successful cooperation in various fields could boost the Mekong region and turn it into one of the fast growing economic regions in the world.

## Complex Interdependence Applied

Every river has its unique characteristics which influence the relationship among its riparian states decisively. However, the complexity and the multiple uses of water make a good case for complex interdependence. Not only do Keohane and Nye explicitly state the usefulness of their concept for economic and ecological interdependence, but they also criticize that their concept has "remained a relatively underdeveloped and undervalued concept".<sup>[79]</sup>

Over the years, the central government in Beijing has given more and more leeway to its provinces in pursuing their own policies. In economic terms in particular, the provinces enjoy certain autonomy in reaching their revenue goals.<sup>[80]</sup> For that purpose, the central government encourages its provinces to engage in foreign trade by setting provincial targets which have to be met.<sup>[81]</sup> Thus, China's provinces, especially provinces in economically strategic positions, can be assumed to have strong trade linkages to foreign countries, to some extent autonomously from the central government. Since Yunnan province is seen as a 'gateway' to Southeast Asian countries, it has a strong motivation to boost border trade with the riparian states in the Mekong Basin. Accordingly, Yunnan has guided and implemented its own border trade provision since 1985, and consequently boosted trade with its neighbors.<sup>[82]</sup> As a consequence of this economic leeway for provincial governments and based on the assumption that complex interdependence blurs the line between domestic and foreign policy, the subsequent sections will primarily concentrate on Yunnan province as a unit of analysis.

### *Multiple Channels*

Besides China's formal diplomatic relations to the riparian states, lower levels of government increasingly seek to pursue their local interests externally. Due to Yunnan's strong degree of autonomy towards its neighbor states, it is predominantly engaging in informal cooperation with bordering countries. These range from local government officials, who represent the provincial interests, to corporations, who seek to increase their access to the foreign market. Even though subnational governments are not sovereign actors and have no autonomy in acting as an independent entity with foreign countries, some provinces in China have established a provincial "bureaucratic system of external relations".<sup>[83]</sup> In spite of the formal constraint to act internationally as a province, Yunnan's Foreign Affairs Office, for instance sends its representative to serve in China's embassy in Laos regularly.<sup>[84]</sup> Moreover, Yunnan's leaders regularly visit its neighbor states and by that reinforce their relationship on the lower level of government.<sup>[85]</sup> For example, as part of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), Yunnan seeks to foster water pollution prevention and control by "people-to-people exchange visits, joint seminars and professional training, [and] joint research" with Laos.<sup>[86]</sup>

Additionally, China's participation in the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) Cooperation and as an observer state in the MRC is increasingly determined and influenced by the interest of Yunnan Province.<sup>[87]</sup> For instance, Yunnan's official leaders represent China in the GMS summits. Consequently, they actively push for the GMS development and thereby place their provincial interest onto the agenda.<sup>[88]</sup> Hence, in regard to economic and commercial cooperation, Yunnan increasingly becomes a decisive driver for further integration between China and the five riparian states.<sup>[89]</sup>

# China's Cooperation on the Mekong River in the Realm of Complex Interdependence

Written by Max Neugebauer

Not only does the Yunnan provincial government itself engage in cross-border relations, but it also encourages local governments on the county level to improve their cross-border cooperation, for example on transboundary environmental issues.<sup>[90]</sup> Evidently, local and provincial governments play a major role in maintaining and improving cross-border relations.<sup>[91]</sup>

Notwithstanding the strong relations on the official provincial and county level, individuals, businesses and particularly state-owned businesses serve as an additional channel of interaction, too. Due to a shared historical background and cultural and ethnical commonalities, Yunnan province has always had a particular relationship with its neighbors and is often seen to be "even closer to mainland Southeast Asia than [to] China's coastal region".<sup>[92]</sup> These historically embedded ties also facilitate economic opportunities for border trade and social interactions.<sup>[93]</sup>

For example, Yunnan's Universities and think-tanks do not only devote essential parts of their research to the border region but also engage in substantial interactions and scholarly exchanges with their neighbors.<sup>[94]</sup> Inter alia, several hundreds of new scholarships for Mekong countries to study in Yunnan and other close provinces are made available by the central government every year.<sup>[95]</sup>

Based on the line of reasoning above, China's central power and authority are increasingly fragmented. Even though Yunnan province is not directly challenging the central government, it is evident that it exercises a significant degree of autonomy in pursuing relations with its neighbor states. Consequently, it is hard to ignore its influence in particular in the GMS and MRC which started to advance Yunnan's international interactions.<sup>[96]</sup> In accordance with the predictions of Keohane and Nye, where multiple channels of interactions exist, the line of foreign and domestic policy becomes blurred. As a result, Yunnan province exerts a high degree of influence on the foreign policy towards the Mekong riparian states through the various channels of interaction.

## *Absence of Hierarchy among Issues*

Alongside strong interests in security issues, economic development became essential to all six riparian states in the Mekong Basin, especially since there is still great potential for economic development to boost the rather undeveloped region. One explanation for this focus on economic development in Yunnan is the pressing low level of welfare. According to the United Nations Human Development Index of 2010, Yunnan has the third lowest Human Development Index in China.<sup>[97]</sup> As an effort of the national government to enhance economic development in China, provinces increasingly obtain a considerable degree of autonomy for improving their regional economy. Thus, as a result of China's geographical size and different regional conditions and needs, most of its domestic issues are dealt with at lower governmental levels.

As a consequence, provincial governments are drivers of domestic politics and, therefore, focus on 'low politics' whereas national governments are more concerned with 'high politics'.<sup>[98]</sup> Thus, on our level of analysis, Yunnan is mainly concerned with low politics rather than with high politics and security issues. Even though Yunnan is dedicated to maintain stable and secure borders, their main emphasis is on the economy, particularly on trade. Especially state-owned enterprises provide local officials with a specific interest in promoting their business because they often have a personal stake in the respective enterprise. This emphasis has a strong influence on the national foreign policy, as provincial interests tend to have a spillover effect due to their strong formal and informal ties to riparian states. As a consequence, most cooperation and multilateral projects take place in the field of economic development and infrastructure. Accordingly, economic development is not only an essential goal for Yunnan province but also for all riparian countries.<sup>[99]</sup> In particular, the trade in natural resources<sup>[99]</sup> is an important component of their trade in general, and all five Mekong Basin states "have the closest economic ties with Yunnan province."<sup>[100]</sup>

Due to Yunnan's geographical position and its proximity to the Mekong River Basin Countries (MRBCs), it does not only share similar interests with its neighbor states, but also a variety of similar problems. For instance, in the last decades, drug trade and human trafficking were pressing incentives for cooperation in the Mekong Basin.<sup>[101]</sup> The 'Golden Triangle' between Myanmar, Vietnam, and Thailand is the second largest opium poppy cultivation area in the world.<sup>[102]</sup> Therefore, border states increasingly cooperate to tackle these cross-border problems.<sup>[103]</sup> Another important matter on Yunnan's agenda is the monitoring of diseases in the Mekong region.<sup>[104]</sup> Not only does Yunnan

# China's Cooperation on the Mekong River in the Realm of Complex Interdependence

Written by Max Neugebauer

have one of the highest numbers of AIDS infections of all Chinese's provinces, but is also struggling to solve this problem on its own.<sup>[105]</sup>

Next to Yunnan's strong interest in boosting its comparably undeveloped economy and trade, and solving cross-border problems, it also shows a high concern for environmental issues. For instance, at the 7<sup>th</sup> Provincial Party Congress, Yunnan's provincial leaders declared that a particular awareness will be directed towards environment issues in order to make Yunnan a 'green province'.<sup>[106]</sup> Consequently, the region strives to improve its environment conditions on the provincial and local level and even seeks to encourage environmental projects with its neighbor states.<sup>[107]</sup> As part of this initiative, Yunnan's Environmental Protection Department, in September 2015, signed a MoU with its counterpart in Laos which focuses strongly on transboundary water pollution prevention and control.<sup>[108]</sup>

It is complicated to ascertain the specific position of the various issues on Yunnan's agenda, but it is evident that not a single topic dominates China's foreign policy agenda. Instead, a variety of issues exist. Consequently, it becomes clear that non-traditional security matters are increasingly dominating on the government's agenda. Thus, by focusing on trade and welfare improvement, Yunnan removes the policy divide between 'low' and 'high' politics in order to develop "Yunnan as China's clean energy base and marshalling hub [and] a power trade center among the MRBCs".<sup>[109]</sup>

## *Minor Role of Military Force*

As mentioned above, Yunnan province is in charge of 'low politics' issues whereas the central government in Beijing concentrates on the high politics such as security and military matters. This precludes this research from analyzing Yunnan province as a unit of analysis and thus focuses on the central government when analyzing the role of military force.

Based on the historical experience of the Mekong countries, any threat or employment of military force would agitate the riparian states to a large extent. Therefore, the usage of military force by China towards its riparian states is no longer suitable. That is why China increasingly seeks to influence states through soft power tools, such as side-payments and financial aid, in order to create incentives for states to accept China's actions and dam projects. With this intention, China is open to handout financial aid with the aim of increasing its influence in the Mekong area and in particular in Cambodia and Laos.<sup>[110]</sup> This benevolent approach is particularly apparent in the Mekong Basin, where China's attempts to reassure its Southeast Asian neighbors of its 'peaceful rise'.<sup>[111]</sup> All this emphasizes China's political intent to counterbalance other controversial policies such as the island dispute in the South China Sea.

In seeking stability, non-traditional security threats are becoming increasingly important in China's internal and external affairs.<sup>[112]</sup> As a consequence, it follows a variety of foreign policies which seek to reassure its neighbors of the peaceful rise of China. Already in 1997, China introduced a 'New Security Concept' which focuses on dialogue and beneficial relations by increasing diplomatic and economic ties.<sup>[113]</sup> In doing so, China seeks to improve "mutual trust and common interests among its closest neighbor countries."<sup>[114]</sup>

During the 16<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2002, Chinese officials placed the principle of "good neighborhood" at the top of their foreign policy agenda.<sup>[115]</sup> This allegedly friendly foreign policy goal is only subsequent to China's overarching goal of upholding great power relations.<sup>[116]</sup> The PRC embarked on this foreign policy strategy to reassure its neighbors that its rising power is not a threat, but rather benign, or even a beneficial opportunity for their national interest.<sup>[117]</sup> In pursuing this policy approach, Beijing seeks to sustain a conducive and stable atmosphere with its neighbors.<sup>[118]</sup>

China's 'charm offensive' diplomacy in East Asia is a clear indication that only in the worst scenario, military force would be employed against the riparian states.<sup>[119]</sup> Meanwhile, China is dedicated to build trust and mutual understanding. Any employment or the mere threat of the use of force would have a devastating impact on the country's external relations in the region. Especially on the background of the historical legacy, any potential misconduct would upset the delicate relationship. For that reason, "China has regarded its foreign policy of friendship and partnership with its neighboring countries as the most important task in its foreign work."<sup>[120]</sup> Accordingly, force is

# China's Cooperation on the Mekong River in the Realm of Complex Interdependence

Written by Max Neugebauer

no longer an appropriate tool to attain non-security goals because the costs and outcomes would be too high, uncertain and contradictory to China's foreign policy in the Mekong region.

## Implications for China's Foreign Policy

The existence of complex interdependence between Yunnan and its riparian states of the Mekong illustrate their high degree of interdependence. In particular, due to the existence of a variety of issues, and due to the strong relations between the various levels among the six riparian states, there is clear evidence for their complex interdependent relations. Any threat or use of force would have a devastating impact on their relations and would run contrary to the central Chinese foreign policy goal of maintaining its 'good neighbor' approach. Nevertheless, it still raises the question to what extent complex interdependence in the Mekong region accounts for China's growing political will to cooperate on water issues.

In order to answer this question, one first has to understand the high capacity of the region for regional development and Yunnan's central position in this process. Above all, Yunnan's and the riparian states' low level of economic development present a high potential of growing their economies through border trade and infrastructure projects. In order to benefit from the market abroad and from the outstanding promise of the hydropower capacity of the Mekong River, it is obligatory for China to react to the riparian states' interests to maintain the mutually beneficial relations. Thus, any potential short-term gains which would disregard the needs of riparian states would be outweighed by possible long-term gains of cooperation in a broad range of fields.

In accordance with the foregoing analysis, it becomes undeniable that Yunnan Province has the strongest motivation to safeguard mutually beneficial relations with its riparian states. Since Yunnan is a landlocked province, it has a special interest in developing the Mekong River by improving the navigation capacity and the infrastructure of the river.<sup>[121]</sup> However, this goal can only be reached in cooperation with all Mekong states. Therefore, any sustainable development in the region can only work if China cooperates or at least coordinates its projects with all downstream countries. Any improvement and international navigation cooperation is an appealing opportunity for Yunnan to facilitate its uninterrupted access to the South China Sea.<sup>[122]</sup>

Despite Beijing's preference to abstain from any multilateral organization on transboundary water management, Yunnan has already showed interest in joining the MRC in the wake of its creation.<sup>[123]</sup> Thus, it can be anticipated that Yunnan might be willing to reach out to the concerns of downstream countries, having possibly already acknowledged its mutual interdependence with them.

Even though Yunnan's task is to represent China's interest in the key regional institutions, it would be difficult for Yunnan's state officials to ignore their provincial and personal interests.<sup>[124]</sup> As a consequence, the existence of complex interdependence, and in particular the increasing number of channels, makes the domestic national divide in regard to China's interest in the Mekong region obsolete. As a result, on most issues, Yunnan's provincial interest merges with China's foreign policy interests in the Mekong Basin. Furthermore, a high share of provincial officials are part of the national legislative, and provinces such as Yunnan, which are becoming progressively more integrated into cross-border trade, will have a significant impact on the policy-making of the central government.<sup>[125]</sup>

Besides the interest of Yunnan's officials to foster cross-border cooperation, local people also have strong cultural and ethnical relations with their neighbor countries. Based on this foundation of mutual understanding and cross-border trade, many Yunnan citizens are approachable for each other's concerns.<sup>[126]</sup> In spite of their difficulties to form coherent movements, popular initiatives sometimes still override economic projects such as various dams in Yunnan Province.<sup>[127]</sup> For example, more recent events in Yunnan on other transboundary rivers, such as the Nu River, one of the last unmodified rivers in the world, have proven to underline Yunnan's interest in environmental issues. Not only did the Governor and Communist Party Chief of Yunnan ban all small hydro-projects on the Nu River, but he also dedicated large areas to a new national park.<sup>[128]</sup> These examples demonstrate Yunnan's strong civic society which shows increasing concerns for transboundary environmental issues and the official's willingness to respond to these demands. Such examples could have comparable effects on similar projects in the Mekong Basin.

# China's Cooperation on the Mekong River in the Realm of Complex Interdependence

Written by Max Neugebauer

Furthermore, due to Yunnan's development as a gateway to China's southeast border countries, its provincial policy priority is economic development. This is increasingly reflected in many national priorities of the central government.<sup>[129]</sup> For instance, Beijing and the local government have stated their interest to develop Yunnan's hydropower capacity to reach an estimated 470,000 million kilowatt-hours, which would then account for around 25 percent of the national generation capacity".<sup>[130]</sup> Even though these large dams have been a central policy of Yunnan's provincial government, the local government shows an increasing acceptance of local social activism.<sup>[131]</sup> Especially on the backdrop of China's cooling economy and energy demand, Yunnan has a comparably low incentive for new dams, due to the current oversupply in the energy market.<sup>[132]</sup> Thus, Yunnan's higher level of autonomy for commencing new policy experiments, with the intention of reaching the full economic capacity and encouraging the "local entrepreneurial culture", can probably be seen as a new leeway for more cooperation on Mekong's water management.<sup>[133]</sup> The national government's willingness to let Yunnan innovate in regard to their nearest international neighbors makes Yunnan more independent from national policies.<sup>[134]</sup>

Moreover, the central government in Beijing does not only seek to reassure its neighbors that China's rise is not a threat to their security, but it is also increasingly aware that water-related problems in the Mekong Basin can have a "mounting potential to derail China's 'good-neighbor diplomacy'".<sup>[135]</sup> Accordingly, Yunnan is also fostering friendship and cooperation with MRBCs.<sup>[136]</sup> Notably, Yunnan officials have often expressed sympathy for downstream countries and reassured that they seek to "avoid harm to downstream countries in front of the friendship tie with neighboring Southeast Asian countries".<sup>[137]</sup>

Additionally, domestic economic actors have an interest in maintaining beneficial relations to their neighbors. Such is the case as most of Yunnan's economy depends on its neighbor countries and the individual cost for better water cooperation is modest.<sup>[138]</sup> Therefore, Yunnan depends on the riparian states for cooperation in areas of investment and trade with them, and on other non-security issues. Albeit most regional frameworks include mostly economic cooperation, Yunnan already actively joined cooperation on different environmental issues with its neighbors.<sup>[139]</sup>

Moreover, since China has a strong interest in the Mekong cooperation and also on water issues, Beijing's concern is that a commitment should follow its own terms.<sup>[140]</sup> Therefore, one can conclude that the concession to include water resource management into the LMCM was acceptable because China could set the framework, instead of adapting to an already existing framework with strong and binding commitments by joining the MRC. Even though China's cooperation might be rather strategic rather than normative in nature, it still resembles a new approach of actively cooperating on water resources in the Mekong Basin.

Despite the concentration of this research on the provincial and local level, it does not mean that Yunnan is in some way an autonomous actor. Instead, it reveals that despite China's unitary-state system, Beijing's links to its peripheral provinces are important because they "reflect the national context within which [policies] are produced."<sup>[141]</sup> Therefore, in the light of complex interdependence, lower levels of government, such as Yunnan province, become more central to the analysis. Similarly, the application of complex interdependence can shed light on the province's increased role in China's foreign policy towards its MRBCs. Therefore, building on Yunnan's incentive, and their relative autonomy in fostering relations towards its neighbor states, the improvement of transnational environment cooperation in the Mekong River can be explained.

As China's policy making process is extremely secretive and complex, it is very difficult to pin down any assumptions by tracing the explicit factor determining China's policy-making process. However, the concept of complex interdependence provides a useful tool for analyzing the potential impacts of different actors by taking their different interests into account. Thus, in the case of the Mekong River, the existence of complex interdependence makes China's foreign policy more complex and difficult to analyze. Consequently, applying the concept of complex interdependence provides an explanatory value which would have been lost if a realist approach were applied to the Mekong River.

## Conclusion

The creation of the LMCM and China's increasing eagerness to improve its information sharing and cooperation on

# China's Cooperation on the Mekong River in the Realm of Complex Interdependence

Written by Max Neugebauer

water resource management with its riparian neighbors only resembles a first step towards more environmental cooperation on the Mekong River. Nevertheless, it is still important to understand this shift towards more cooperation to facilitate further improvements. Consequently, the concept put forward by Keohane and Nye provides a promising insight to understand ecological interdependence, in particular for transboundary waters.

Thus, the case study reveals that the existence of complex interdependence explains cooperation of China in the Mekong case. In particular, economic interdependence among all riparian states is strong. Therefore, China, and in particular Yunnan, have a strong interest in developing their economic ties and infrastructure projects with their neighbor countries. Thus, in order to exploit the immense economic potential in Yunnan, its provincial government has to maintain mutually beneficial relations with its downstream countries. As a consequence, where complex interdependence and strong engagement at the lower levels exist, transboundary water cooperation can have promising outcomes for smaller downstream countries. Although this single case study is not sufficiently broad in scope to contribute to the debate of water wars and conflicts in general terms, it still provides a noteworthy contribution in this particular case.

While China maintains its unilateral approach towards shared water issues in many cases, this research paper has demonstrated that domestic factors are increasingly important when evaluating China's willingness to cooperate on the world stage. Especially the downstream countries of China's many transboundary rivers could seek to improve transboundary cooperation by seeking higher interdependence with the purpose of embracing China and its lower levels of government in mutually beneficial relations.

While every shared river has its unique characteristics and historical and political legacies, this research could still serve as a valuable contribution or departure for further research. Consequently, the existence or absence of complex interdependence does not only have an explanatory value for the Mekong Basin, but it could also have similar elucidatory outcomes in another of the 245 shared river basins which account for 40 percent of the world population's water supply in the world.<sup>[142]</sup>

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