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**Chinese Dams and the Great Mekong Floods of 2008**

**Geoffrey Gunn and Brian McCartan**

*As major floods have coursed through the middle Mekong across Southeast Asia this August in what some describe the greatest flooding in one hundred years, governments have announced plans to step up flood control work. At the same time, many are asking whether China is responsible for the heavy damage, especially as its cascade of dams has in the past been blamed for holding back the natural flow of water and intensifying the historic patterns of flooding. Certainly greater transparency on China's part would make for increased understanding of the issues. Yet transparency is in short supply all round if we consider the way that decisions are made in the downstream riparian countries, namely the Lao PDR and the Kingdom of Cambodia, especially the way that NGOs are given short shrift and where even armies are deeply involved in illegal logging and other nefarious ventures. For that matter, the current political crisis in the Kingdom of Thailand in part turns upon the lack of financial transparency that bedeviled the ousted Thaksin Shinwatra regime.*

*What has changed in the last decade is the way that the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) has become a reified category in development thinking. Especially, one is struck by the way in which the Asian Development Bank, alongside the Mekong River Commission, and the ASEAN countries collectively, have imposed their institutional construct upon this zone with its "Corridors," "Backbones," and "Frameworks." Everywhere earth is being moved, new roads are being cut, new dams and lakes are being set in place, while people – mostly powerless ethnic minorities – are being relocated, not only from the lowlands but also from the highlands to the lowlands. Planning is often ad hoc and it is always top-down. This vast sub-tropical zone of endangered species and of myriad cultures and traditions is no less in the vortex of irremediable change – and pillage - than the Amazon basin or the island of Borneo.*

*But one statistic stands out. The average GDP per capita in the GMS zone, within which some 60 million people depend on the Mekong for their livelihood, is about one US dollar a day, with the weight of poverty falling most heavily upon the ethnic minorities. Alongside globalization and regionalism, however, nationalism still holds sway (the ongoing spat between Thailand and Cambodia over ownership of a border temple is just one example). It also appears in the way that ethnic labeling or "taxonomic" control over national minorities takes precedence, above all in the communist states (China, Laos and Vietnam), as do powerful official narratives of common history. In a word, the concerned nations seek to assimilate their respective minorities while harnessing their territories to new developmental logics, at the same time seeking increased economic interaction across frontiers, often at the expense of traditional cultures. To test these insights we have to examine the recent experience of the Hmong, Mien, and Dai minorities, in respectively Thailand, Laos and Vietnam (as well as in China). Still, even tourism can become a vehicle for maintaining identity as with the Dai in China or the Hmong in Thailand, just as Laos has opened to forms of ecotourism. Geoffrey Gunn*

CHIANG MAI - As Mekong River floodwaters in Laos and Thailand recede, indignation with China for its lack of transparency on upstream dam developments is on the rise. China has recently pursued a friendly policy of economic integration with Southeast Asian neighbors but in relation to Mekong River development it has taken what many see as a covetous and less than neighborly approach.

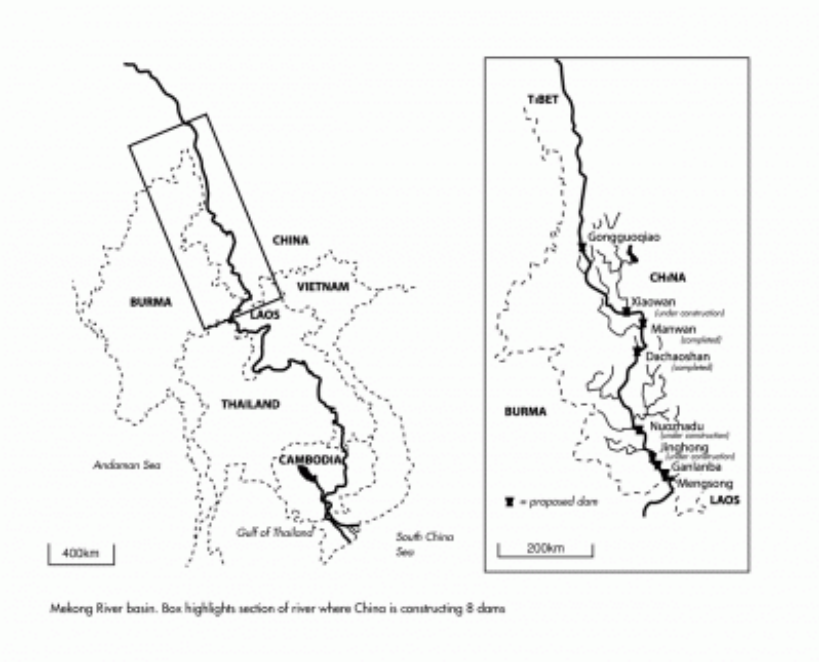
**The Mekong in Laos**

Flood waters in recent days inundated parts of Luang Prabang and Vientiane provinces in Laos and at least seven northern provinces in Thailand. The flooding was widely reportedly the worst in a century for some areas, with river levels reaching a high of 13.7 meters on August 14. Previous record high floods occurred in 1966, when river levels reached 12.4 meters.

Thailand has estimated damages at around 220 million baht (US$6.48 million), while the Vientiane Times, a state-controlled Lao newspaper, cited an unofficial government report that the floods would cost Luang Prabang province alone some 100 billion kip (US$11.6 million). Those figures may only be provisional, as flood waters in the Mekong Delta have already reached critical levels and Vietnamese forecasters have predicted more flooding before the end of the rainy season.

**A woman guides bulls to higher ground in the Mekong near Phnom Penh**

The larger cost has been diplomatic, as downstream neighbors suspect rightly or wrongly that Chinese dams were primarily responsible for the flooding. From the hard-hit Chiang Saen and Chiang Khong districts of Thailand's northern Chiang Rai province to its eastern Mukdahan province, many Thais believe waters released from the reservoirs of three upstream Chinese dams swelled the runoff from heavy rainfalls. They also blame China's recent blasting and dredging of upstream river rapids to make the river navigable for large cargo vessels for rising water levels.




**Map of Chinese dams on the Lancang (Mekong)**

That may or may not be the case, but China's lack of transparency is fueling suspicions. The Mekong River Commission (MRC), a multinational grouping made up of Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam responsible for sustainable development and water resource management of the Mekong, said in a statement that the high water levels were the result of above average rainfall and not the result of upstream Chinese dams opening sluice gates. The situation was compounded by tropical storm Kammuri, which hit the region between August 8 and 10, the statement said.

The MRC also noted that just half of the flood waters in Vientiane originated in China with the rest from Mekong tributaries, namely the Nam Ou and Nam Khan rivers. It concluded, "The current water levels are entirely the result of the meteorological and hydrological conditions and were not caused by water release from presently operating Chinese dams which have storage areas far too small to affect the flood hydrology of the Mekong," the statement said.

That view was supported by Thailand's Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej and the Thai Water Resources Department, which oversees Mekong water flows and Lao government officials also said Chinese dams are not at fault. Heavy rains had lashed Myanmar and Vietnam - lending credence to the nation's views - resulting in severe flooding that killed at least 130 in northern Vietnam and forced thousands from their homes in both countries. But the Thai People's Network on the Mekong, a grouping of several Thai environmental organizations, openly rejected the MRC's reasoning for the floods in an August 16 statement, calling for China to free up information on its dams. There also appears to be lingering doubts among some top government officials.

Thai Deputy Interior Minister Prasong Kositanond said on Wednesday that officials were studying the floods and that China may be asked to provide future warnings on the timings and volumes of water released by the dams. He noted that without the cooperation of China, Thailand's northeastern regions could face more severe flooding. Even the MRC in Thailand, in contradiction to the statement from the organization's headquarters, has said it will ask the Thai Foreign Ministry for help in requesting more information from China about its dams.

**No dam evidence**

China has remained reluctant to reveal information about its dams, including its own environmental and hydrological studies of their impact. This lack of transparency has continued despite heavy criticism from environmental groups and official pleas from Southeast Asian neighbors seeking more information.

Thai Water Resource Department deputy head, Thanade Dawasuwan, recently told the Bangkok Post that his department actually has scant information on the Chinese dams. Thailand's MRC coordinator, Burachat Buasuwan, told the same newspaper that Chinese officials only provide information on water discharges in the rainy season. The MRC, he claimed, had made requests for information from Chinese officials in the past, but had yet to receive replies.

China has so far completed three dams across the upper Mekong - the Manwan in 1993, the Dachaoshan in 2002 and the Jinghong in June of this year. The three dams have respective storage capacities of 920 million, 890 million and 1.2 billion cubic meters, meaning a total of over 3 billion cubic meters of reservoir. This is enough, environmentalists say, to significantly influence water flows on the upper Mekong. Chinese officials have countered that since only 18% of the Mekong's flow originates in its areas, the dams will not have an effect on the volume of water flowing downstream.

China's grand vision for the Mekong is to build up to fifteen power-generating dams on its upper reaches to fuel economic growth in its laggard southwestern territories. The Xiaowan dam, the world's tallest at 292 meters, is slated for completion on the upper Mekong in 2013. Scheduled to generate over 4,000 megawatts of electricity, that particular hydropower dam has downstream Southeast Asia concerned about the massive reservoir the dam is expected to create and its anticipated impact on river water levels. Chinese officials have said the 190 square kilometer reservoir will reduce the amount of water flowing downward by 17% during flood seasons and increase the flow by 40% in dry seasons.

What is certain is that there have been ecological and hydrological changes in the Mekong River since the construction of the Chinese dams, and more recently with the dynamiting of river rapids. Locals in Chiang Khong, Thailand, the closest major town of the MRC member countries to China, say that there is a noticeable rise in the river level when the water gates are opened on China's dams. Environmentalists say the dams have also affected the river's seasonal flows and caused the destruction of river islets. They also blame water blockages due to dam construction for unexpected and dangerous rapid rises and falls in downstream flows.

Until recently the main concern about the dams centered more on the lack of water flowing down the river. For example, the dams were

criticized for exacerbating a drought in 2004 that left ships stranded mid-river and damaged crops and fishing in downstream nations. Halts in river flows for up to five days at a time due to Chinese dam construction inhibited trade, with angry cargo ship owners claiming journeys that used to take days instead took weeks.

**China-first policy**

The MRC said in 2004 that the Chinese dams had exacerbated the drought and sent an official letter to Beijing demanding information on the Chinese dams. In a seeming about turn, then-MRC chief executive officer Oliver Cogels wrote a letter to the Bangkok Post on January 9, 2007, claiming the impact of the Chinese dams was exaggerated in public opinion and not a factor in the drought affecting downstream countries.

He also noted, echoing Beijing's line, that because the Chinese dams are for power generation and not for irrigation, they do not hold water, but instead regulate flows, increasing them in the dry season and reducing them in the rainy season. Indeed, China's dams may not be directly culpable for either the flooding or drought, but the lack of transparency has stoked downstream fears and anger among its southern neighbors and environmental groups.

China's unwillingness to allow independent scientific studies on its dams' impacts makes it difficult to conclusively determine what impact they have had on water levels. Even within China there is very little public discourse on the dams, in part because the issue is treated as a matter of national security.

Beijing has made clear its stance that, since it is developing the Mekong on Chinese soil, it is not responsible for downstream impacts. Appeals to China by non-governmental organizations to compensate people living downstream whose farming or fishing livelihoods have allegedly been impacted by the recent changes in the river have been scornfully rebuffed.

China's lack of cooperation and responsibility is seemingly at odds with its broader soft power policy of forging greater economic integration with Southeast Asia, including through preferential free trade agreements and generous infrastructure loans. Seen from Beijing's point of view, its participation in the Greater Mekong Subregion is less about an altruistic desire to see its southern neighbors develop and more about gaining access to export markets for its industrial and agricultural goods and securing a strategic, alternative passage for fuel and other imports for its inland industries.

China is not a member of the MRC and critics say that without Beijing's participation the grouping is powerless to accomplish organizational goals related to sustainable development on the Mekong. If China were to join, it would have to conform to various mandatory standards and come under pressure to accept water management norms that are less harmful to downstream communities, a prospect it clearly wants to avoid.

The MRC has however recently incorporated China and Myanmar to some extent, as non-member, dialogue partners. While the MRC's most northerly monitoring station is in Chiang Saen, Thailand, in 2002 it convinced China to commit to exchanging some information from two of its monitoring stations, including the Jinghong station located below its three standing dams. Flood forecasting first became an issue after floods in 2000 killed some 800 people in the Mekong Delta. In 2005, China agreed to hold technical discussions with the MRC, including flood management and alleviation.

Last year, Beijing also agreed to begin supplying the MRC with 24-hour water level and 12-hour rainfall data for flood forecasts in return for monthly flow data from MRC stations on the lower Mekong. However the incentives for China to become a full-fledged member of the MRC are still few and far between. As the Mekong's most upstream nation, it is geographically in a position of power. And with its growing hunger for new and alternative energy sources to imported oil, it will likely remain loathe to enter into a multilateral mechanism which may attempt to put a brake on its ambitious dam building program.

For China, the Mekong is now viewed more as a potential source of energy rather than a trade artery as the river has been quickly supplanted by a more efficient network of roads leading south from China's Yunnan province into Southeast Asia. The newly completed Route 3 in Laos that connects Yunnan with northern Thailand through Laos means trucks can complete a trade journey in hours which used to take days by river.

Once a bridge is completed across the Mekong between the northern Thai town of Chiang Khong and Laos' Huay Xai, where Route 3 currently terminates, Yunnan's goods will have direct access to Southeast Asian markets, and perhaps more importantly, to seaports on the Gulf of Thailand and the Andaman Sea. Close relations with military-ruled Myanmar have already provided China with another southern trade route, with a soon to be upgraded port at Sittwe on the Indian Ocean.

Of course cross-border river issues pose diplomatic problems and challenges in many regions of the world. Although a Law of the Sea treaty exists to govern disputes on the world's oceans, there is no comparable global law for rivers to mediate disputes over water resources. Until such a mechanism exists, and more importantly until China agrees to a more multilateral approach to managing the Mekong, the issue will remain a contentious one with its Southeast Asian neighbors while life for people living along the river's shifting banks will remain highly uncertain.

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