

Obstacles and Countermeasures for China to Promote the Cooperative Management of Lancang-Mekong Water Resources

Keyin Ding *

School of Economics, Southwest University of Political Science & Law, Chongqing, China

*Corresponding author email: m18883101038_1@163.com

Abstract. Since its launch in 2016, the Lancang-Mekong cooperation has been steadily advancing through a range of projects, notably those concerning cooperative governance of water resources. In recent years, foreign actors have cast doubt on China's involvement in the Lancang-Mekong River Basin, fueling the propagation of the "China water threat theory" and exerting influence over water resource management in the region through various channels, including strategic partnership initiatives, organizational mechanisms, and technical communication. Meanwhile, China faces daunting challenges in managing water resources in the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation region, including intense market competition and hedging issues, which hamper its international image. This study analyzes the challenges and obstacles that China may confront in developing water resources cooperation between the Lancang and Mekong Rivers, and proposes recommendations for further advancing China's engagement in water resources management.

Keywords: China; Lanzhou-Meizhou Water Resources; Cooperative Governance; Resistance; Counter-measure.

1. Introduction

In March 2016, China and Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand and Viet Nam jointly established the Lancang-Mekong River Regional Cooperation (hereinafter referred to as Lancang-Mekong Cooperation or LMC).[1] Following the inaugural Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Leaders' Meeting, the six participating nations have established a multifaceted and comprehensive cooperation framework, which encompasses high-level summits, ministerial-level conferences, senior officials' dialogues, and working group meetings across diverse domains. Moreover, they have instituted a "3+5 cooperation framework" to facilitate deeper regional cooperation and development.[2] Water resources have been identified as one of the five "priority cooperation areas" among the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation countries. Given its crucial importance as a natural resource and valuable asset for the survival of people in the coastal countries, water resources cooperation has become a new chapter in the cooperation between the Lanzhou and Mekong regions. In January 2018, the Five-year Action Plan for Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (2018-2022) was released, providing guidance on the establishment of a Lancang-Mekong River water resources cooperation platform construction system in the next five years.[3] On December 7, 2022, the six countries formed "On the River Basin Development Strategy (2021-2030) and its New Requirements for River Basin Management", which further reached a consensus on jointly addressing the challenges of water resources management.[4] Water resources management, as defined by the World Bank, is the process of planning, developing, and managing water resources, which includes institutions, infrastructure, incentives, and information systems that support and guide water management. Water resource management must also manage water-related risks such as floods, droughts, and pollution, and must be comprehensive in order to reflect the synergistic effect and balance of a wide range of water uses and values.[5] Under the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation, the cooperative governance of water resources is the key to the long-term and effective promotion of the cooperation mechanism between Lanzhou and Mekong.

2. Research Status Quo

Table 1. Who will manage the Mekong River resources?

Year	Form of results	Name of outcome	Author
2007	Proceedings	Democratizing Water Management in the Mekong Region	Louis lebel , John Doreetc.eds
2009	Proceedings	Competing Waterfeatures in the Mekong Region : hydropower ,survival ,and governance	Francois Molle , Tiraforan , Mira kakonen.eds
2011	Proceedings	Water Rights and Social Equity in the Mekong Region	Kate Lazarus , Bernadete p. Resurreccion.eds
2015	Proceedings	Hydropower development in the Mekong region : political , socioeconomic , andenvironmental perspectives	Nathanial Mathhews. eds

Since the 1990s, domestic and foreign experts and scholars have focused on several areas of inquiry, including the impact of Mekong River water resources development. The majority of scholars posit that the construction of the main stream in the Lancang-Mekong Basin would lead to the destruction of the hydrological and ecological environment and have a detrimental impact on the relations between countries in the basin, thus undermining regional stability. Richard Cronin of the Stimson Center in Washington, D.C. warned of a new threat looming over the six countries of the Mekong River basin, that of not ideology or territory, but the utilization of water resources.[6] Finnish scholar marko keskinen emphasized that various development projects are posing a huge potential threat to people's living environment and ecosystem.[7] Moreover, starting from the 1990s, China has spearheaded an extensive, large-scale cascade hydropower resource development project on the Yellow River, situated in the upper reaches of the Lancang-Mekong River Basin, attracting significant attention from both the industry and the international community. As a result, research on China's activities in the upper reaches, both domestically and abroad, has increased. (2) Approaches to exploiting water resources in the Mekong River. Research outcomes in this domain are evident in a series of large-scale initiatives in recent years, such as those launched by the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research and jointly completed by Chinese and Mekong scholars. As exemplified in Table 1, these accomplishments emphasize the necessity of examining Mekong River basin hydropower resources from political and economic perspectives, and promoting a virtuous cycle of water resource utilization. Li Xikun examined water resource management in the Lancang-Mekong River Basin, highlighting the importance of establishing an international legal framework. [8] Guo Yanjun advocated split-level governance under the Greater Mekong Subregion Economic Cooperation Mechanism.[9] (3) Water security of Mekong River. In recent years, with the deepening of water conservancy development in Mekong countries, the relationship between countries is also facing tension, and some scholars worry that over-exploitation will lead to a series of social and environmental problems. Indian scholar brahma chellaney pointed out in Water: New Battlefield in Asia that water resources may trigger the seeds of new conflicts in Asia.[10] Li Zhifei believes that the security of water resources is related to the relationship between China and Mekong countries, and the countries in the basin can jointly manage cross-border water resources through cooperation.[11] However, some scholars deny this view. scott w.d. pearse-smith, a New Zealand scholar, explains why it will not escalate into an armed conflict from the historical background, development goals and strategic feasibility of Mekong countries.[12] (4) Involvement of foreign actors. Scholars Zhang Li and Lu Guangsheng examined the objectives of water resources cooperation between the United States, Japan, South Korea, and other external actors. They argue that the participation of these external actors is not conducive to China's efforts to promote cross-

border water resources management with Mekong countries. Wang Xia (2018) contends that there are political motives behind the use and development of water resources in this region beyond its borders. Pan Yining (2014) posits that foreign countries may interfere in the comprehensive development and coordination of water resources in the Mekong region through various regional organizations and exert their influence in the area.

It is evident that the issues of water security governance, the impacts of water resources development, and the establishment of cooperative mechanisms are intricately linked. However, there is a dearth of literature on water resource governance under the Lancang-Mekong cooperation mechanism, particularly with regard to China. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the challenges and strategies for water resource management in China under the cooperation framework between Lanzhou and Mekong.

3. The Current Situation of Water Resources Management in Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Mechanism

Under the cooperation mechanism of Lancang-Mekong, cross-border water resources cooperation in the Lancang-Mekong Basin holds great strategic significance for the development of China and other countries in the region. The Indo-China Peninsula, being an essential region of the "Belt and Road Initiative," underscores the critical importance of water resources management in the cooperation between Lanzhou and Mekong countries. The level of cooperation is integral to China's relationship with lower Mekong countries and contributes to the overall peace and stability of the Indo-China Peninsula. In recent years, all countries in the Lancang-Mekong region have undergone rapid social and economic development, leading to an increase in demand for clean energy and drinking water. However, they also face many common challenges, such as climate change and frequent floods and droughts. These shared issues and common goals for future development provide the strategic foundation for cooperation in the field of water resources in the Lancang-Mekong River Basin and direct practical steps.

Since the beginning of the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation in 2016, the six countries have focused on concrete cooperation in the field of water resources, with the goal of promoting sustainable economic and social development and improving the quality of life for all ethnic groups in member countries through the sustainable utilization, management, and protection of water resources. The establishment of the Lancang-Mekong River Water Resources Cooperation Center (LMWRCC) in Beijing in June 2017 provides a comprehensive platform for technical exchange, capacity building, natural disaster response, data and information sharing, and water resources research and analysis. From 2018 to 2022, Lancang-Mekong River water resources cooperation will actively engage in "capacity cooperation in water sector" and "water resources and green development." In April 2022, the seventh meeting of foreign ministers of Lancang-Mekong Cooperation member countries announced the next stage of cooperation plans, which include the Lancang-Mekong Agricultural Cooperation Action Plan and the Lancang-Mekong Water Resources Benefit Plan. The meeting adopted the Five-year Action Plan for Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (2023-2027), issued a joint press release and joint statement, and set out the framework for continued and increased cooperation in the years to come.[13]

4. China Recommended the Resistance of Cooperative Management of Water Resources in Lancang-Mekong.

(A) the link of national interests in the region is complex and deep.

Over the years, certain countries have disseminated unfavorable information regarding the cooperation between Lancang-Mekong, thereby impeding China's advancement in this collaboration. These obstructions are characterized as follows: (1) Geopolitical interests are being considered. Downstream Mekong nations frequently exaggerate water resource issues and raise objections

because they are apprehensive that their foreign policies will conflict with the political interests of other nations. Following the "Mekong River Tragedy" in October 2011, countries in the lower Mekong River region generally assumed that China would use water power in managing water resources. Therefore, certain downstream Mekong nations will seize any opportunity to advance the notion of China's water hegemony to safeguard their own political interests. Moreover, member countries of Lancang-Mekong cooperation have divergent views on the establishment of the Lancang-Mekong cooperation mechanism. [14] (2) Consideration of economic development benefits. Other countries situated downstream of the Lancang-Mekong River Basin heavily rely on the river for agricultural, fishery, and power development purposes, leading to significant differences in promoting cross-border water resources management cooperation. In recent years, countries such as Vietnam and Cambodia have voiced strong opposition to the construction of water conservancy dams on the main stream in Laos, resulting in tensions between Laos and other Mekong countries. (3) Consideration of their own international status. Due to the tendency of international rivers to create asymmetric upstream and downstream relationships, countries downstream of the river are often vulnerable to the decisions of upstream countries, which may lead to concerns over their own international status. [15] The downstream Mekong countries commonly hold the view that China's preponderance in comprehensive capabilities overshadows the collaborative endeavors concerning water resources, hence they resort to leveraging their weak cooperative posture to instigate international public opinion, solicit empathy from other powerful countries, and constrain China's policy initiatives pertaining to cross-border water resource management. In recent years, the downstream Mekong countries have actively pursued enhanced partnerships with the United States, Japan, South Korea, and Australia, with the aim of curbing China's water rights. It is evident that the intricate interconnections of vested interests among the Lancang-Mekong nations pose a formidable challenge to China's efforts in promoting water resources cooperation in the region.

(B) The power of foreign countries to intervene should not be underestimated

As stated previously, the Lancang-Mekong Basin serves as a vital conduit linking Southeast Asia and the Greater Mekong Subregion Economic Cooperation Area. Given its strategic position and abundant natural resources, including water resources, fisheries, and agriculture, the region has garnered considerable international attention. In order to support the construction of water conservancy projects in the Mekong River countries and participate in regional governance efforts of the Lancang-Mekong region, foreign countries such as the United States, Japan, and Australia have invested substantial sums of money. Their involvement in the region reflects three main objectives. First, they aim to balance China's current development in Southeast Asia by addressing water resource concerns in the Mekong River region. By exploiting the Lancang-Mekong Basin's water resources, these countries often use arguments such as China's "dam threat theory" to weaken China's influence in Southeast Asia and to break down the strong ties between China and the downstream Mekong countries.[16] Secondly, motivated by their own economic development pursuits, external countries often engage in the region under the pretext of environmental protection and water resource security concerns, aligning themselves with the interests of Mekong countries to gain support from local governments and achieve their economic objectives. Thirdly, cooperation between China and downstream Mekong countries is being strengthened. External countries enhance their influence and establish water resource cooperation with Mekong countries through technical support, direct financial aid, and partnerships. Some even engage in concerted efforts to denigrate China, baselessly accusing it of water rights abuse in Lancang-Mekong water resource cooperation, all to promote and protect their own political, economic, and international interests.

(C) The existing water cooperation mechanism faces challenges in its follow-up efforts.

Due to the enduring core interests of the countries in the region, water resources governance in the cooperation mechanism between Lanzhou and Mekong is exceedingly intricate. Consequently, the current water resources cooperation mechanism faces significant impediments to its continuity, posing difficulties for China's efforts to advance water resources cooperation in the Lanzhou-Mekong region. The main challenges are as follows: Firstly, due to different geographic locations and varying

reliance on the Mekong River, countries in the region attach differing importance to cross-border water resources cooperation and governance, resulting in the difficulty of reaching a unified interest integration on related issues. As cooperation deepens, all countries are aware of the favorable trend of cooperative governance. Nevertheless, sovereign countries will compete more intensely for rights concerning their own interests, such as the "water resources management right" and "water resources development right." Secondly, the existing construction of the water resources cooperation mechanism in Lancang-Mekong lacks apriority in terms of the coordination and cooperative management project of water resources in the entire basin between the six countries. Therefore, the future coordination and cooperative management of water resources in Lancang-Mekong must consider the demands of all six countries. Furthermore, given the long-standing history of water resources problems in Lancang-Mekong and the nascent state of water resources coordination and cooperation in the region, future challenges are immense. Thirdly, the international community remains highly "concerned" about water resources cooperation between Lanzhou and Mekong. Thus, even slight errors in the implementation of the water resources cooperation mechanism may amplify complications and entail risks of pan-politicization and pan-security.

5. China to Further Promote the Countermeasures of Water Resources Management in Lancang-Mekong.

The cooperative governance of Lancang-Mekong water resources is a novel collaboration model that reshapes the cooperative governance pattern and accommodates the interests of both the local community and the local government. This model is not merely a single mechanism aimed at resolving water resource issues. To further enhance Lancang-Mekong water resource governance, China can initiate efforts centered on the concepts, contents, and actions of this cooperation.

(A) Concept: deepen the awareness of cross-border water resources cooperation and governance.

The concept of "cooperative governance" originated in the west with the rise of "governance", and its original intention was to solve a cross-disciplinary and multi-sectoral public governance problem ("Governance" is "the sum of many ways for various public and private institutions to manage their common affairs activities", focusing on the coordination and cooperation among the subjects and the participation of multiple subjects. See mandela, commission on global governance: our global neighborhood, oxford university press, 1995, p. 23.) Specifically, issues that may involve personal interests are collectively managed and committed to solving target problems by forming a cooperative partnership between local governments and other social subjects. The principles of equal treatment and mutual consultation, as well as the concept of win-win cooperation and sharing, are highly consistent with the concept of "cooperative governance" in the Lancang-Mekong water resource cooperation mechanism; however, the cooperative governance of water resources in Lancang-Mekong is still in its early stages and needs to be strengthened further. All countries should accept the cooperation mechanism as the core mechanism and platform for resolving current regional water resource problems, discuss the solution path together, and take into account all countries' water resource interests. As a result, China must continue to play the role of a big country by taking the initiative to call on all countries to clarify the urgency of cooperative governance, emphasizing the close ties of the six countries' destiny community of "sharing one river," and urging all countries to actively promote under the existing water resources cooperation mechanism, clarify their respective rights and boundaries as soon as possible, and ensure scientific and smooth water redevelopment. Countries that demand harm to other countries' interests or deliberately shirk their governance responsibilities should be stopped immediately, and the consensus of cooperation should be further condensed to create a good foundation and atmosphere for the cooperative management of water resources in Lancang and Mekong.

(B) Connotation: expand the content of cross-border water resources cooperation and governance.

Extraterritorial factors are always unavoidable interference factors in the process of cooperative management of water resources in Lancang-Mekong. The mechanism's openness and transparency

will not only help to reduce contradictions and frictions among countries in the region, but will also assist countries outside the region in reducing the opportunities for creating contradictions and providing an open platform for strengthening water cooperation with countries outside the region. In this regard, the six countries should fully utilize the Lancang-Mekong water resources cooperation information sharing platform, as well as further integrate the cooperating Lancang-Mekong water resources sharing platform into international exchanges. We can specifically enter via the following routes: First, strengthen water resources cooperation projects with countries other than the United States, Japan, South Korea, and others, broaden the meaning of water resources cooperation, leverage their respective comparative advantages to achieve complementary interests, and avoid excessive investment and resource waste. Second, establish in-depth cooperative relationships with other regional governance mechanisms, absorb their successful experience in development and governance, and fully utilize their respective advantages, thus broadening the scope of cooperation in water resource governance. For example, in some basic construction projects, the Chinese government can further promote cooperation between the two sides through the support of science and technology and social funds, so that countries can exchange and discuss problems in related fields together. In other emerging areas of cooperation, we can use the water resources cooperation mechanism as a model, conduct scientific research exchanges with the outside world on a regular basis, and invite scholars and experts from other countries to collaborate on research and exchanges to promote the scientific and rational use of water resources.

(C) Action: Accelerate the pace of cross-border water resources cooperation.

Countries affected by the COVID-19 epidemic have made slow progress in promoting cooperation over the last two years. As a result, it is necessary to further refine and improve the specific scheme of water resources cooperation mechanism on the basis of the existing water resources cooperation mechanism in order to promote the progress of water resources cooperation and governance. China must rely on the existing water resources cooperation center, join forces with other countries as soon as possible to clarify the principles of water resource development and utilization, as well as the authority of development and management in various countries, and improve the solution plan or response mechanism for disputes such as water resource security and water resource disasters. At the same time, China can advocate that countries should strengthen project cooperation and promote the in-depth development of cooperation, as well as call on countries to increase public awareness of the Lancang-Mekong consensus on water resources cooperation, in order to boost mutual trust in a broader cooperation space. In the field of water resources cooperation between Lancang and Mekong, China must actively expand foreign communication and exchange channels with other member countries, strengthen its own public opinion dominance, and ask the six countries to form a unified voice on the basis of ensuring solutions to some common problems, in order to eliminate foreign countries' misunderstandings.

6. Conclusion

In general, the mechanism and platform for cooperative water resource management in Lancang-Mekong have been established. Despite possible omissions, the overall framework has been formed and gradually refined. Under this mechanism, China faces three challenges in promoting cooperative management of water resources: first, the regional links of national interests are complex; second, the intervention power of foreign countries should not be underestimated; and third, the follow-up efforts of the existing water cooperation mechanism face challenges. China's countermeasures to further promote water resources management in Lancang-Mekong can begin with ideas, connotations, and actions: first, ideas: deepen awareness of cross-border water resources cooperation and governance; second, connotation: expand the content of cross-border water resources cooperation and governance; and third, action: accelerate the pace of cross-border water resources cooperation. In a nutshell, China, as a large country, must be more proactive in leading and connecting other member countries to jointly face and discuss the problems encountered during the process of cooperation and water

resource management in Lancang-Meizhou. It also needs all member countries to "share the same spirit", win-win cooperation and make joint efforts with the vision of "community of neighboring countries".

References

- [1] Richard grünwald, lancang mekong cooperation: present and future of the mekong river basin, in politické vedy. [online]. vol. 23, no. 2, 2020. issn 1335 – 2741, pp. 69-97.
- [2] Mcchina. 3+5 cooperation framework. [Http://www.lmccchina.org/eng/2017-12/14/content _ 41449855.html](http://www.lmccchina.org/eng/2017-12/14/content_41449855.html), accessed on February 26th, 2023.
- [3] Lancang-meikong water resources cooperation information sharingslan form. Five-year action plan on Lancang-meikong water resources cooperation, visit time: August 17th, 2021. [http:// www. lmcwater. org. cn/ cooperative _ achievements/ important _ documents/ files/ 202008/ t20200825 _ 162726.html](http://www.lmcwater.org.cn/cooperative_achievements/important_documents/files/202008/t20200825_162726.html).
- [4] The Second Lancang-Mekong Water Resources Cooperation Forum: Join hands to meet the challenges of water resources and push cooperation into the "fast lane". Visit time: February 25th, 2023, [http:// finance. people. com. cn/ n1/ 2021/ 1207/ c1004-32301980.html](http://finance.people.com.cn/n1/2021/1207/c1004-32301980.html).
- [5] The worldbank. water resources management. [Https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/waterresources management # 2](https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/waterresourcesmanagement#2), access time: 2021. August 15th, 2008.
- [6] Richard cronin, "mekong dams and the perils of peace", survival: global politics and strategy, vol.51, no.6, 2009, pp.147-160.
- [7] Marko keskinen, "water resources development and impact assessment in the mekong basin: which way to go", ambio, vol.37, no.3, may, 2008, pp.193-198.
- [8] See: Daming He and Feng Yan, Rational Utilization and Coordinated Management of Cross-border Water Resources in International Rivers --Lancang-Mekong River as an Example, Beijing: Science and Technology Press, 2006.
- [9] Guo Yanjun, Water Security of Greater Mekong River: Policy Choice for China with Multi-level Governance, foreign affairs review, No.2, 2011, pp. 84-97.
- [10] brahma chellaney, "water: asia's new battleground", contemporary southeast asia vol. 34, no. 2 (2012), pp. 307-08.
- [11] Li Zhifei; Analysis on the Security Relationship of Water Resources around China, International Security Research, No.3, 2015, pp. 114-135.
- [12] scott w. d. pearse-smith. "'water war' in the mekong basin?", asia pacific viewpoint, vol. 53, no. 2, august 2012 issn 1360-7456, pp147–162.
- [13] xinhua. lancang-mekong cooperation turned into "golden model" of regional cooperation: Chinese fm, visited on February 26th, 2023. Lancang-Mekong Cooperation turned into "golden model" of regional cooperation: Chinese FM-Xinhua (news.cn).
- [14] Pongphisoot Busbarat, Poowin Bunyavejchewin, Thapiporn Supor. China and Mekong regionalism: A reappraisal of the formation of Lancang- Mekong Cooperation, Asian Politics & Policy. 2021; 13:193–211.
- [15] Bo Yan: Environmental Issues and International Relations, Shanghai People's Publishing House, 79-81, 2007.
- [16] Emma V. Broomfield. Perceptions of Danger: The China threat theory, Journal of Contemporary China, 12:35, 265-284.