

Hydropolitics of Powerful Upstream Country and Downstream Country

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A Classical hydropolitics of upstream and downstream countries has been paid much attention by statesmen or researchers, as a crucial problem of distribution of water. Especially, it is very decisive if an upstream country is a superpower in the region. A case of China in the Mekong River Basin is a typical one for that problem. China is the most upstream country and a political and economic superpower in the region. China has often been considered to exhibit unilateral behavior towards the lower Mekong River Basin (i.e. Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam). China has been said to eschew multilateral negotiations with these downstream countries for the cooperative management of the Mekong River. The following facts are exemplified as evidence for the above: (a) non-signatory of "The Agreement on the Cooperation for the Sustainable Development of the Mekong River Basin" and being a non-member state of the Mekong River Commission (MRC); (b) the vote against the 1997 UN Convention on the Law of Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses; and (c) dam development in the upper Mekong River without notification to the downstream countries. These facts as to China's behavior should be considered seriously. However, previous analyses solely focused on a river basin organization and water-related issue. It may lead us to a misconception about the dynamics of water politics. China's behavior in the basin should be analyzed not only through a framework of river basin organization and water-related issues, but also through much broader economic issues in this region. It is because (a) the MRC, which mostly dealing with water resources, is no longer the only institutional mechanism in the region to promote economic development and political stability in the basin. Many other mechanisms such as the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), which include China as a major partner, have emerged. This has made the problem of China's absence from the MRC less salient. (b) Many regional frameworks such as GMS are highly focusing on the regional development, which deals not only with water sector per se, but also with energy (e.g. thermal power generation) or transportation (e.g. Navigation) sector, which the downstream countries have a bargaining power. (c) As a result, China is turning to have a communication channel with the downstream countries through these frameworks, and also within the MRC itself. To conclude, although China seems to give up on the multilateral negotiations with the downstream countries, China has developed a communication channel with them through various mechanisms. This, consequently, leads the downstream countries to have a bargaining power over broader issues besides the water-related issues, and gradually causes China to compromise with those countries. China therefore cannot unilaterally exploit the Mekong River at its own will, because of the downstream countries bargaining power over the much broader issues.