

FORUM: SECURITY COUNCIL

ISSUE: THE CONTROL OF THE MEKONG RIVER

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Introduction:

Life is no longer a long, quiet river for the Mekong. In the nearest future and due to several plans of **hydropower** in mainstream and tributaries, water abstractions for agriculture, and **climate change** as well as poor collaboration between countries that are recovering from years of bitter conflict, the **Mekong river** is at risk. Water wars, water pollution and the extinction of unique species are feared, and both the environment and the life of 65 millions people depending directly on the river's flows are endangered.



¹The Mekong river

[to really get into the atmosphere as well as having the people's thoughts on the changes occurring on the river; delegates can check out this website made by freelance journalists and 8 photographers: <http://www.disputedwaters.com/> Select the Mekong River and click on one of the images and then go along the river watching pictures and videos]

¹ <http://www.chiangraitimes.com>

Geographical Situation:



Definition of Key terms:

- **The Mekong River** runs for more than 2.700 miles through six countries (China, Myanmar, Lao, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam) from the Tibetan Plateau to the South China Sea. It is one of the least modified large rivers and the second most bio-diverse river in the world after the Amazon. The river supports the world's largest freshwater fishery and the livelihood of 65 million people.
- **Control:** The power to influence or direct people's behaviour or the course of events.
- **Climate change:** A change in global or regional climate patterns, in particular a change apparent from the mid to late 20th century onwards and attributed largely to the increased levels of atmospheric carbon dioxide produced by the use of fossil fuels.
- **Dams:** A barrier that is built across a river in order to stop the water from flowing, especially used to make a reservoir or to produce electricity.
- **Hydropower** is the power that derives from the force of energy of the moving water. It is a renewable energy source and has a very good efficiency. It does not contribute to climate change as the burning of fossil fuels does. Large dams can sometimes

lead to disruption of the natural flow of rivers, stream levels, temperature of the water, all of which can hurt ecosystems.

- **Renewable energy:** Any naturally occurring, theoretically inexhaustible source of energy, such as biomass, solar, wind, tidal, wave, and hydroelectric power, that is not derived from fossil or nuclear fuel. Also called soft energy.

Background Information and Overview:

“The Mekong River needs immediate action from the decision and action from all leaders. It is very important for member countries to recognize this is really an international river – an international issue.” said the International Rivers activist Deetes.



The Mekong river is no longer used by the millions of people living along the river as a source of livelihood, food and cultural identity alone. The high hydropower potential of the river can fulfill part of the growing energy demand due to the economic growth of countries such as China, Vietnam and Laos. The seven dams that have already been built and the 20 planned in Yunnan, Tibet and Qinghai have consequences on countries downstream. China's constructions have been made without consulting its neighbours or an assessment of the dam's impact on the environment and the people.

The project of building a series of dams on the Upper and Lower Mekong to supply the countries in electricity would be devastating for the river ecosystem and the people depending on fish caught in the Mekong for food.

The Mekong is a gigantic fish factory and crop irrigator, people in these countries eat around 46 kg of fish a year, nearly double the global average. Half of Vietnam's rice crop comes from the Mekong Delta, therefore the river acts as an economic lifeline for the millions of people living along it. The proteins lost cannot be counterbalanced by crop growing.



Scientists have already recorded a 300.000 tonnes drop in fish catches due to operationalise dams on the Upper Mekong. Furthermore they expect that dams will block critical fish migration routes for between 23 to 100 species, including the iconic Mekong Giant Catfish and the Irrawaddy dolphin. The river's complex ecosystems that serve as important fish habitats will also be destroyed. Dams would block the flow of sediments and nutrients, affecting agriculture as far downstream as the Mekong Delta in Vietnam.

The inhabitant noticed that floods and droughts have already become more devastating because of the six Chinese dams upstream. They fear that the Xayaburi and the other planned dams will not only worsen flooding, but also disrupt fish spawning and ultimately force them off their land.

Protests against dam building is growing stronger, for example Northern Thailand has a well-established network of grassroots environmental and social groups. Activists there have protested against the Xayaburi dam and other dams by holding long-distance protest marches along the river, organizing demonstrations in Bangkok, and appealing to domestic and foreign policymakers.



The effects of Climate Change on the Mekong:

As you all may know climate change can have a potential impact on sea levels, the frequency of rainfalls, the water temperature etc... which is a major concern for the Mekong river. Recent studies from the Mekong River Commission predicted that climate change will in the next 20 years:

- Increase the water temperature by 0.79°C.
- increase the annual precipitation increase of 200 mm, equivalent to a 13.5% change.
- cause an increase in water events such as typhoons

- The rising sea level will provoke an intrusion of saltwater which could result to the displacement of millions of people throughout the Delta and it will also have very negative effects on agriculture, aquaculture and capture fisheries.
- Pockets of high levels of water stress (Water stress is primarily caused by a water deficit, such as a drought or high soil salinity. Four criterias are taken in account; the water quality, the volumetric availability, the accessibility and the flows) are expected during the dry season areas such as northeast Thailand and Tonle Sap Great Lake
- cause an increase in flooding in all parts of the basin, with the greatest impact in downstream catchments on the mainstream of the Mekong River

The Lower Mekong is unfortunately already experiencing some of these effects. Furthermore, people in these countries have a heavy dependence on ecosystems and natural resources, many communities won't be able to adapt; for example droughts due to the unsustainable management of water resources may reduce agricultural productivity, which will lead to food scarcity, unemployment and poverty. Climate change will therefore act as an amplifier to current environmental threats which will have undeniable consequences on humans.

Timeline of events:

1995: Creation of the Mekong River Commission which includes Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam.

1995: Opening date of the Manwan dam in China, the construction began in 1986.

1997: The UN watercourses Agreement (explanation lower)

2003: Opening date of Dachaoshan dam in China. The construction began in 1937

2005: The Water Utilization Programme

mid-2006: The Governments of Cambodia, Laos and Thailand granted approval to Thai, Malaysian, Vietnamese, Russian and Chinese companies to investigate eleven mainstream hydropower dams

2009: Opening date of the Jinghong dam in China.

2010: The Lao and Thai governments began building the massive 1,285 megawatt Xayaburi Dam on the Mekong River.

2010: Opening date of the Xiaowan dam in China.

2012: Opening date of the Nuozhadu dam in China. The construction began in 2004

2012: Beginning of the construction of the Xayaburi dam in Laos. The opening date is expected for 2019.

Major Countries and Organizations Involved :

The Mekong River Commission (MRC) based on the Mekong Agreement (1995):

Provides effective support for sustainable management and development of water and related resources. This treaty has large powers in terms of exchange of information and notification, compliance monitoring and dispute settlement. However there are many disparities within the Mekong agreement such as the fact that the treaty does not cover the entirety of the Greater Mekong Sub-Region.

Additionally, **China** is a country that shares a considerable number of international watercourses, some of which are rivers of global significance but it has not yet signed the Mekong Agreement.

The World Commission on Dams (WCD): Establishes the most comprehensive guidelines for dam building.

International rivers: A US based non governmental group. International rivers, Thai's people network and the Save the Mekong Coalition are calling on regional governments to seek better energy solutions to protect the Mekong River, which is a lifeline for millions in the region.

Relevant UN Treaties and Events:

- **The UN watercourses Convention (UNWC):** A global treaty adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1997. It is a framework convention governing international watercourses. The Mekong river Commission as well as the Mekong river Agreement are a reflection of this treaty. The Mekong countries should consider adopting the 1997 UNWC as it may facilitate the work of the MRC; provided that the 1997 UNWC can help the countries in agreeing on key substantive and procedural rules without spending too much time and efforts on negotiation. They may also enjoy economic benefits even though the key benefits of 1997 UNWC may be seen more as environmental. It is important for the countries to see that the benefit will also be economic, sociopolitical and administrative.

Efforts Taken To Resolve The Issue:

The MA and the MRC are the only effort taken to improve cooperation between states, and to attempt to sustainably manage the Mekong River. For this reason, all delegates are urged to take actions today before it is too late. We need to improve inter-state cooperation, to find compromises between economic growth which includes the need for energy and the life of millions of people depending on the Mekong as well as the preservation of its unique ecosystem vital for so many species.

Possible Solutions:

Solutions can be found for a sustainable development of the Mekong River on a short term as well as on a long term scale. First of all, projects for the construction of dams on the Mekong should be postponed until the risks for the environment and for the people living along the river have fully been assessed. The publication of the MRC's Strategic

Environmental Assessment report has already provided a critical appraisal of the dam plans and recommended that decisions on whether to proceed with the mainstream dams be deferred for a period of ten years until further studies can be conducted to ensure that decision-makers are fully informed of the risks.

Secondly, countries could invest in the development of wind, solar or fission atomic energy. These are all kind of **renewable sources** of energy that could be used to reduce the number of hydropower plans on mainstream and tributaries.

Finally China and Myanmar should strongly be encouraged to join the Mekong River Commission in order to increase cooperation between states and open discussions on the possible impacts of dams on its downstream neighbours.

Appendices:

- <http://mekongriver.info/home>
- <http://www.chiangraitimes.com/misery-on-the-mekong.html>
- <http://www.mrcmekong.org/>
- <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/special-features/2014/07/140711-mekong-river-laos-thailand-dams-environment/>
- <http://icem.com.au/>; <http://icem.com.au/what-we-do/climate-change/>

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<http://www.chiangraitimes.com/mekong-river-faces-development-challenges-cambodia-voice-s-opposition.html>

<http://mekongriver.info/hydropower>

<http://www.mrcmekong.org/about-mrc/>

<http://www.internationalrivers.org/campaigns/mekong-mainstream-dams>

<http://hydro-logic.blogspot.fr/2012/03/chinese-dam-building-tests-southeast.html>

<http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/special-features/2014/07/140711-mekong-river-lao-s-thailand-dams-environment/>

<http://www.unwatercoursesconvention.org/global-relevance/south-and-east-asia/>

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/1add7210-0d3d-11e4-bcb2-00144feabdc0.html>

(The Irrawaddy
dolphin, living in the
Mekong River.)

SEE YOU SOON

