

Changing the Dynamics of the Regional Water Security in the Mekong River Basin: An Explorative Study Understanding the Cooperation and Conflict from Critical Hydropolitical Perspective

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Abstract : The presented paper explores the changing dynamics of regional water security in the Mekong River Basin and examines the contemporary water-related challenges from a critical hydropolitical perspective. By drawing on the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation and Conflict Database (LMCCD) recording more than 3000 water-related events within the basin in the last 30 years, we identified several trends changing the dynamics of the regional water security in the Mekong River Basin. Firstly, there is growing politicization of water that is no longer interpreted as abundant. While some scientists blame the rapid basin development, particularly in upstream countries, other researchers consider climate change and cumulative environmental impacts of various water projects as the main culprit for changing the water flow. Secondly, there is an increasing securitization of large-scale hydropower dams with questionable outcomes. Despite hydropower dams raise many controversies, many riparian states push the development at all cost. Such water security dilemma can be especially traced to Laos and Cambodia, which highly invest in the hydropower sector even at the expense of the local environment and good relations with neighbouring countries situated lower on the river. Thirdly, there is a lack of accountable transboundary water governance that will effectively face a looming water crisis. To date, most of the existing cooperation mechanisms are undermined by the geopolitical interests of foreign donors and increasing mistrust to scientific approaches dealing with water insecurity. Our findings are beneficial for the policy-makers and other water experts who want to grasp the broader hydropolitical context in the Mekong River Basin and better understand the new water security threats, including misinterpretation of the hydrological data and legitimization of the pro-development narratives.

Keywords : critical hydropolitics, mekong river, politicization of science, water governance, water security

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