

## Forward the Mekong-U.S. Partnership

By **Brian Eyler and Courtney Weatherby**

On September 11, 2020 the United States, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, and the ASEAN Secretariat launched the Mekong-US Partnership, a regional cooperation framework which upgrades the Obama-era Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI). The U.S. Department of State says the Partnership will expand on the success of the LMI “by strengthening the autonomy, economic independence, and sustainable development of the Mekong partner countries and promote a transparent, rules-based approach to transboundary challenges.” The new Partnership comes with an initial pledge of more than \$150 million of U.S. funded programming to support COVID-19 recovery, counter transnational crimes, develop efficient energy markets, and counter trafficking in persons.

**Brian Eyler and Courtney Weatherby**, Program Director for Southeast Asia and Research Analyst, respectively, at the Stimson Center in Washington, DC, explain that: “In consultation with Mekong countries and other development partners, the United States should articulate a solution-oriented vision for transboundary river governance.”

A revitalization and upscaling of U.S. engagement in the Mekong is long overdue, particularly given China’s increasing engagement in the region and the economic challenges that Mekong countries will struggle with as a result of the coronavirus pandemic and chronic drought conditions. While the Partnership is still in its formative stages, there are several actions that would go a long way towards bolstering its effectiveness.

First, in consultation with Mekong countries and other development partners, the United States should articulate a solution-oriented vision for transboundary river governance. U.S. Government (USG) officials have repeatedly voiced concerns over the operations of 11 Mekong mainstream dams in China, which an Eyes on Earth report in April 2020 found had restricted tens of billions of cubic meters of water in the 2019 wet season at a time when downstream countries were suffering extreme drought. In response, Chinese officials and academics have doubled down on their justification for regulating the Mekong’s natural flow by issuing unsubstantiated claims that China’s dams provide flood control and drought relief for the benefit of downstream countries. China has launched a charm offensive to find downstream supporters who agree.

Many stakeholders active in the region, including the Stimson Center, have long demonstrated why maintaining the Mekong’s natural flow is critically important for fisheries and agriculture. The Mekong produces 20% of the world’s annual freshwater fish catch, a phenomenon driven by flooding in the wet season and a subsequent transition to low river levels in the dry season. It is precisely the Mekong’s extreme variation in water and sediment flow that drives its extraordinary natural productivity. A regulated river threatens regional food security and political stability.

Criticism of Chinese manipulation of the Mekong’s flow must be accompanied by proposed solutions, but USG officials have yet to articulate a compelling, solution-oriented vision for how transboundary river governance can address this challenge. The maintenance of natural flow should therefore be central to a U.S. vision for transboundary river governance. Best practices related to data sharing and scientific analysis, remote sensing, and integrated water resource management should buttress this vision. Conceptual frameworks and legal guidance from U.S. transboundary agreements like the Columbia River Treaty and the Boundary Waters Treaty, and historic protocols that define US-Canada relations, could be adapted to the Mekong region.

Given the U.S. emphasis on quality infrastructure, the Partnership should explicitly link the renewable energy transition, freshwater conservation, and food security by connecting energy-focused initiatives like AsiaEDGE and Clean Power Asia with water-related projects like the Sustainable Infrastructure Partnership, Wonders of the Mekong, and the Mekong Water Data Initiative. More solar and wind power and improved transmission can obviate the need for further large dams, but only if the link is clearly articulated.

Second, through effective messaging and programming measures, the United States should assure stakeholders that the Partnership does not seek a zero-sum game of U.S.-China competition in the Mekong. Supporters of both the LMI and the new Partnership have noted the omission of direct cooperation with China. Critics claim this intensifies the US-China rivalry, exacerbating risks and vulnerabilities. Without a doubt, China's troubling actions in the region generate numerous opportunities for the United States to respond to the region's needs for timely, high quality assistance. But as China's dams and other activities have posed problems, inducing changes in Chinese behavior could contribute to solutions; when conditions are met, the United States should find avenues for collaboration with China. If this involves water collaboration, then the Mekong River Commission, which China has tried to marginalize, should play a central role in the dialogue.

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Finally, the Partnership should energize and build a broad coalition of partners. The LMI was a vehicle of the Department of State and as such it often under-emphasized programming in the Mekong led by other USG agencies such as USAID. This was a missed opportunity to strengthen the LMI and demonstrate broad USG goodwill toward the region. Since 2009, USAID's Mekong funding has far exceeded LMI's. Taken together, these provide a much more accurate picture of U.S. foreign assistance. The Partnership should be packaged and publicized to show a family of USG agencies hard at work in the Mekong. It should also capitalize on the work of effective NGOs active in the region, as well as key U.S. academic institutions like the University of Wisconsin, Arizona State University, University of Washington, and scores of others which do research and promote cooperation on issues relevant to the Partnership.

To reinforce multilateralism, the United States should further strengthen programming with development partners like Australia, Japan, the EU, Korea, and India. Australia and the EU have a long history on water resources management in the Mekong that the United States should build on and complement. Finally, the Mekong countries wait in anticipation for the first U.S. flagship quality infrastructure project in the region. The Japan-U.S. Mekong Power Partnership (JUMPP) launched in 2019 could achieve this milestone and assist the new U.S. Development Finance Corporation to rapidly expand its infrastructure portfolio in the Mekong.

The announcement of the Mekong-U.S. Partnership is a welcome first step. The next steps require a solution-oriented vision for transboundary river governance to maintain natural flow and reduce the need for large dams, cooperate multilaterally with partners and other stakeholders including where possible China, and real progress on a flagship quality infrastructure project.

*Brian Eyler and Courtney Weatherby* are Program Director and Research Analyst, respectively, for the Southeast Asia program at the Stimson Center in Washington, D.C. They can be contacted at [beyler@stimson.org](mailto:beyler@stimson.org) and [cweatherby@stimson.org](mailto:cweatherby@stimson.org).

APB Series Founding Editor: Dr. Satu Limaye | APB Series Coordinator: Peter Valente

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