

Topic and Research Question

Environmental issues have gained relevance in the studies of international relations in recent decades, but there seems to be no consensus among the scholars whether environmental problems improve or deteriorate relations between states. One increasingly important topic in this area is the allocation of transboundary water. The Mekong River Basin is thereby a good example, as it is shared by six riparian states with many contrasting needs, interests and possibilities, i.e. Cambodia, China, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam. The Mekong River Basin offers also a good opportunity to investigate the role of power in the water allocation process. Although China has a strong position in the region and is often regarded as the leader of the basin, it is fascinating to investigate whether China has the most powerful position in all types of power under consideration.

The main research question of the thesis is following: *How does hydro-hegemony influence transboundary water allocation in the Mekong River Basin?*

The latter, together with six more specific sub-questions, enables to study the role of power asymmetry and hydro-hegemonic order in the water allocation between the riparian states of the Mekong River Basin.

State of the Art

There are mainly two contrasting viewpoints explaining the relationship between water sharing and violent conflicts. On the one hand, Homer-Dixon (2010), Cooley et al. (2009), Elhance (1999), Hauge and Ellingsen (1998) suggest that environmental issues, including the transboundary water allocation, could lead to a conflictive stance. In contrast, many scholars highlight the linkage between water sharing and enhancement of cooperation, e.g. Brochmann and Gleditsch (2012), Wolf et al. (2006) and Deudney (1990). Interestingly, the London Water Research Group (Tony Allan, Dave Phillips, Mark Zeitoun, Jeroen Warner, Ana Cascão, Naho Mirumachi and Mark Mulligan) has offered an alternative way of studying the transboundary water allocation, including the concepts of power and hegemony.

The research on the Mekong River Basin is similarly diverse containing several pessimistic (Haacke (2013), Li (2012), Kirby et al. (2010), Collins (2003), Hinton (2000)) and also optimistic outlooks (Schmeier (2009), Dinar et al. (2007), Onishi (2007)).

Methodology and Approach

The thesis uses a three-level analytical framework (Figure 1) derived from the London Water Research Group. The first two sub-questions require analysing the countries according to the concept of hydro-hegemony by assessing the power relations between six riparian states via four different sorts of power. Each of these types of power includes a number of subcategories that enable to make balanced conclusions and determine the hydro-hegemon and non-hegemons of the river basin and their differences in terms of these forms of power. As the bargaining and ideational power are less visible, the content analysis of speeches and media articles contributes to understand the bargaining techniques or power over ideas used by the riparian countries better.

As a next step, there is investigated whether the non-hegemonic states have cooperated for resisting the hydro-hegemon and influencing the power asymmetry. Finally, the case is analysed according to the Transboundary Water Interaction Nexus (TWINS) by locating the countries in the conflict-cooperation matrix.

1. Hydro-hegemony

- Geographical power
- Material power
- Bargaining power
- Ideational power

2. Cooperative counter-hegemonic tactics

- Collaborative agreements of non-hegemons (main activities, interest areas, goals, weak and strong points)

3. TWINS model

- Hydro-hegemon versus non-hegemons separately
- Hydro-hegemon versus non-hegemons as a bloc

Figure 1. Three-level analytical framework

Main Facts

The first section of the analysis indicates that China can be regarded as the hydro-hegemon of the Mekong River Basin (Figure 2), because it has the strongest position as a sum of all types of power. Nevertheless, also China has in some subcategories difficulties, e.g. in the human capital, water resources and international support of the material power and in the content analysis of the ideational power.

China is followed by Laos and Thailand that have compensated the low indicators on the geographical and material power with their bargaining and ideational power. On the other hand, Myanmar has lost its good position mainly due to poor indicators on the ideational and bargaining power. Vietnam and Cambodia as the most downstream states have also as a sum of all types of power the most vulnerable and weakest positions in the river basin.

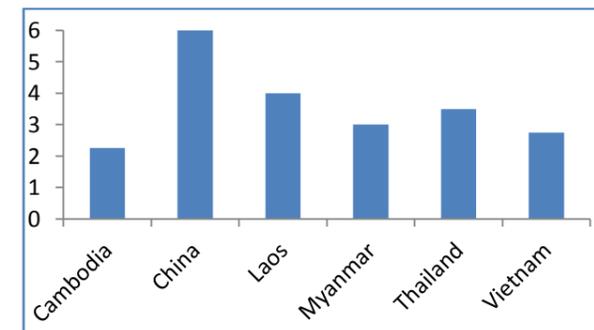


Figure 2. Distribution of total power in the Mekong River Basin

There are established quite a few collaborative groups in the Mekong River Basin, but the cooperation has not been strong enough in resisting the hydro-hegemony of China. Some main reasons for the weakness of the cooperation are following: a scattered network of many different groups, infrequent meetings, the lack of strict regulations, refusal of China and Myanmar to cooperate equally with other riparian states in the Mekong River Commission, contrasting interests and necessities among the non-hegemons.

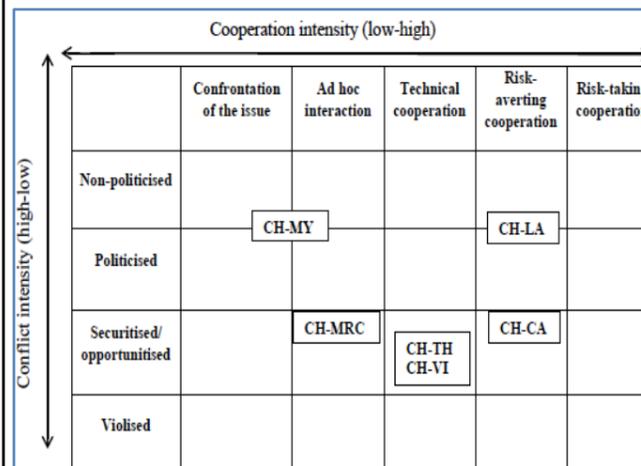


Figure 3. Relations in the Mekong River Basin according to the TWINS approach (CA – Cambodia, CH – China, LA – Laos, MY – Myanmar, TH – Thailand, VI – Vietnam, MRC – Mekong River Commission)

The TWINS model (Figure 3) shows that the most positive interactions are between China and Laos, and China and Cambodia. The bilateral interaction of China with Thailand and Vietnam is the most negative and the relationship between China and Myanmar is the most neutral. The interaction between the hydro-hegemonic China and the bloc of non-hegemons, i.e. the Mekong River Commission, is also relatively negative.

Results

The three-level analysis indicates that the phenomenon of hydro-hegemony influences transboundary water sharing in the Mekong River Basin substantially. Firstly, the power asymmetry gives some riparian states more dominant positions and determines the hydro-hegemonic order of the river basin. Moreover, the difference in terms of power influences the countries' activities and behaviour pattern. For instance, the non-hegemons often try to find a balance between establishing numerous collaborative agreements and approaching individually to China. Hence, it is also possible to see a relatively strong connection between the hydro-hegemonic order, water management and interactions between the riparian states.

In a nutshell, the thesis demonstrates that the hydro-hegemony is an essential aspect that cannot be neglected and should be included into the research of transboundary water allocation, because it helps to explain and understand the pattern of relationships between the riparian states better.

References

All references can be found in the full version of the MA thesis available at <http://othes.univie.ac.at/>

About the Author

Marlen Rein holds a Bachelor degree in Political Sciences from the Tallinn University, Estonia. In the course of her Bachelor studies, she spent a semester as an exchange student in Spain. This thesis is part of the Master's program East Asian Economy and Society at the University of Vienna, Austria.



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