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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### ASSESSING CHINA'S RISING INFLUENCE ON MEKONG SUBREGION: A VIETNAMESE PERSPECTIVE

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#### ABSTRACT

Mekong Subregion (consists of five countries: Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam) is geo-strategically important as China's southern "backyard" and a linchpin between South Asia and Northeast Asia, and this region may become a new "hot spot" for US-China competition after the South China Sea issues. Furthermore, this region as a "buffer zone" for China to develop its influence over the wider regions of Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean. China approached the Mekong Subregion countries with a proposal for an equivalent Beijing-led institution, binding these and China closer economically and politically. China has formed closer economic linkages with countries in the region through expanded trade and investment linkages. Given this situation, the paper elucidates China's objectives to the Mekong Subregion, and current situation of Beijing's rising influence on this region. Meanwhile, the paper **assesses** the response of the Mekong Subregion countries to China's influence.

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#### INTRODUCTION

Mekong River is the longest river in Southeast Asia and the 12th largest in the world (4,800 km) originating from the Tibetan Plateau flowing in north-south direction through six countries including China, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. This is the river with the second largest biodiversity in the world after the Amazon River (Brazil) with many rare and precious aquatic products and seafood. Regarding water resources, the Mekong River is the 10th largest river in the world in terms of total flow volume, with enormous hydroelectric potential. It can be said that Mekong River has natural resources that are really attractive to giant economies, including China and Japan. In addition, that the need to take advantage of the competitive advantages of human resources and the need to expand markets of major countries also met by the inherent conditions of the Mekong Subregion promote the presence of these countries in the region. The countries of the Mekong Subregion also welcome the presence of many major countries with interests in taking advantage of other competitive advantages in capital, advanced science and technology and management experience.. In addition, the Mekong Subregion is assessed to be not only an area having special strengths in agricultural production, being the largest granary in the world, but also in

the process of economic structure transition in the direction of industrialization and modernization, with a young, dynamic population structure, with great advantages in human resources and potential consumer market. With such advantages, the Mekong Subregion has the potential to become the center of production and consumption of ASEAN and an important link in the global value chain. The Mekong Subregion is an area with a very large in-working-age young population. This region has a total population of about 326 million in 2018. The population structure of the Mekong Subregion is generally at the stage of a golden population with a stable population pyramid. The abundant human resources of the Mekong Subregion will meet the increasing labor demand of major countries. In addition, the cheap labor cost is also an attractive advantage for enterprises. Downstream area of Mekong River is the "home" to more than 60 million people from over 100 different ethnic groups forming one of the most culturally diverse regions in the world. In terms of geostrategy, the Mekong Subregion also has a special geographic location, connecting with major Asian markets and dynamic economies such as China, India, as well as ASEAN countries. With the strategically important trading positions, the countries in Mekong Subregion used to be the places where major powerful countries established their institutions and outposts in the past. In the current period, the Mekong Subregion becomes the place where Japan and China dispute for leading influence in the region. This is also a "buffer zone" for China to develop its influence over the wider

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regions of Asia - Pacific and the Indian Ocean, where it wields its rise to the international community. This is the buffer zone for the US to implement Asia policy, exercise restraint on China. The US's Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI) and China's Greater Mekong Subregion Summit had overlapping components. On the other hand, the Mekong Subregion is also an area having potential for development and competition in the international economics. In the early 21st century, the Mekong Subregion has become a dynamic development area after a period of time with many changes and developments in many aspects. Regarding China, this country also has an ambition to create its belt of influence in the South. At the beginning of the 21st century, China has wisely implemented the strategy of "Dongwen Beiqiang Nanxia Xijin" that would "stabilize in the east, gather strength in the north, descend to the south, and to advance to the west" (Huanqiuwang, 2012), "is the doctrine that can be seen as China's long-term strategy for transport exits beyond its borders, which is being actively realized by Xi Jinping" (P. A. Minakir and D. V. Suslov, 2017), this creating a safe "buffer zone" around China. In which, "descend to the south" (*Nanxia*) focuses on tightening economic relations with neighboring ASEAN countries in the South, brings China's economy into integration with this market. Thus, the area where China can increase its influence more easily is the South, where a group of neighbors that are smaller and weaker than China lives. In which, the Mekong region is the region that China is most easily to increase in influence, and also the region where China had relatively good relations with the countries for long. In addition to the introduction, the paper is structured into the following sections: the first section mainly analyzes China's *objectives* to the Mekong Subregion, in which the article analyzes strategic *objective*, the economic influence increase *objective*, and soft power influence *objective*. The second section of the article analyzes the current situation of increasing China's influence in the Mekong Subregion, in which the paper focuses on increasing political-diplomatic influence, China promotes its increasing influence through cooperation mechanisms to connect with the region, China uses other economic tools such as trade, investment, and aid. Moreover, China also increases its soft power influence on this region. The third section of the article assesses the response of the countries in the Mekong Subregion to the increase in China's influence. And, the last section is the conclusion, in this section, the paper assesses the increase in China's influence in the region and presents some findings.

#### **China's Objectives to the Mekong Subregion: The**

Mekong Subregion is of great importance to China in almost all areas. This is a key area in China's connecting and "go out" strategy. China's objective of approaching the Mekong Subregion is shown in some aspects:

Firstly, *China would like to control its "traditional influence" area-Mekong Subregion*. The mainland Southeast Asian region or the Mekong Subregion bordered by China's Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region and Yunnan province – China's relatively low-developed region in the Southwest. However, this region has an extremely important position in China's regional strategy, including the "*Xibu Da Kaifa Zhanlüe*" (the Great Western Development - GWD) policy and the opening-up in the Southwest region of China, which is also the door to go down to Southeast Asia by road, and go into the Indian Ocean via Myanmar. In addition, the region is

mainly the countries with close trade relations with China, especially now that many countries in this region are increasingly tightening their relations with China. Therefore, for China, this area can be seen as Beijing's "backyard", so promoting a new, more efficient cooperation mechanism will be of great importance to the overall strategy of China in Southeast Asia.

Secondly, *China is implementing its intention to turn this region into a "pilot" region for China's strategy of building a "Community of Shared Future for mankind" (Renlei mingyun gongtongti) in Asia*. Currently, China is promoting the strategy of building a "Community of Shared Future for Mankind" in the region, so mainland Southeast Asia (namely countries in the Mekong Subregion) is considered a "pilot" region for China to implement the "Asia Community of Shared Future for Mankind" strategy. In the speech of China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi, it is also emphasized that: "Lancang - Mekong Cooperation (LMC) becomes a model of subregional cooperation in the process of building "Belt and Road" Initiative (BRI) together, "LMC will become a vivid reality in building a new style of international relations (*Xinxing guoji guanxi*)", and "LMC is the first implementation version of the building Community of Shared Future for Mankind" (Cpc.people, 2018) China also emphasizes the cooperation in resolving the competition of water resources for the river flowing across borders in the spirit of community with shared future for mankind and regional cooperation of "enjoying the water of the same river, future linked closely". LMC, and more broadly "Belt and Road", is an important tool to promote building Community of Shared Future for Mankind. China also assessed that the LMC is an innovative new model of regional cooperation, this cooperation model aims to inherit the spirit of building an "Asian Community of Shared Future for Mankind", and this mechanism will not replace existing regional cooperation mechanisms, but is a new addition. This can be considered as an important cooperation mechanism in China's neighboring diplomatic strategy (Liu Junsheng, 2016).

Thirdly, *promoting the BRI's connectivity strategy*. Mekong Subregion is considered an important link in China's "Belt and Road" strategy. In order to realize this strategy, China has promoted the mechanism of LMC. According to media responses on December 15, 2017, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated that: "LMC is more closely linked with the BRI" and the six countries' national development strategy, together with ASEAN, promotes better interaction in the implementation of ASEAN-China cooperation, complements other subregional cooperation mechanisms, and jointly promotes regional development prosperity for this region." (Waijiaobu, 2017). Fourthly, *the Mekong Subregion is an important gateway for China to implement China's "go out" strategy, as well as consolidating the regional infrastructure network connecting China with Southeast Asia region and South Asia region*. According to the evaluation of the Chinese experts Li Wei and Luo Yifu: "LMC establishment, on the one hand, is a way that can provide a guarantee mechanism and incentive policies to create the driving force for the "go out" strategy of China's enterprises; on the other hand, China can, through its abundant capital and excess of domestic production and relatively advanced engineering and management experience, to expand China's economic influence on the mainland Southeast Asia and even whole

Southeast Asia.” (Li Wei Luo Yifu, 2019) At the same time, China promotes the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM). As part of the BCIM subproject, China is believed to be developing Three Railway Routes and Three Highway Routes in the Southwest of Yunnan province in China. The railway route linking China - Myanmar (the Western route of the Trans-Asia Railway). In addition, another economic corridor belonging to BRI connecting to Southeast Asia is the Intergovernmental Council of Copper Exporting Countries (CIPEC), which is built on the basis of the earlier Nanning-Singapore Economic Corridor. CIPEC is one of the important economic corridors of China to the region connecting the cities of Southern China with the main cities in mainland Southeast Asia up to the island world such as Hanoi, Vientiane, Phnom Penh, Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore. Besides, the LMC mechanism is an important cooperation mechanism to contribute to the realization of the BRI... These are all ways to serve the process of expanding connectivity of China, and Southeast Asia in general, mainland Southeast Asia in particular that are becoming one of the important gateways for China to further extend to other regions. In addition, China is also promoting the economic corridor of Kunming - Lao Cai - Hanoi - Hai Phong - Quang Ninh, the economic corridor of Bangladesh - China - India - Myanmar (although no real progress has been achieved yet). The construction of China's trans-Asia railway route, starting from Kunming to Singapore, this route is seen as a key route in Beijing's regional connecting strategy. In addition, the promotion of the BRI will help China accelerate the expansion and formation of a transport infrastructure network in the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) in the past 5 years and China is a motivation. The appearance of “International Hubs” linked and motivated by China is not only changing the “geoeconomics”, but also shaping the geostrategic and geopolitical visualization in the region. Infrastructure structure de-bottleneck is forming other economic and strategic bottlenecks, of which Beijing is the coordinator.

Fifthly, *Mekong Subregion will promote China's strategy of expanding its influence in Southeast Asia.* In Chinese view, this country is a “continental power” and is on the way to building a sea power, so to be able to dominate Southeast Asia and remove the influence of other outside factors such as the United States, Japan, India, Australia, EU, etc., China's advantage in the region is its relations with mainland Southeast Asian countries, while maritime Southeast Asian countries are mainly those that are either allies or having traditional relations closely to the Western, especially since the Cold War era. Therefore, in the neighboring diplomacy strategy, as well as the Southeast Asia strategy of China, the Mekong Subregion is considered to be the most favorable, according to the Chinese assessment, it consists of all three factors: Clement weather, favourable terrain and concord among the people, to be able to advance its regional strategy. Therefore, Mekong Subregion will contribute to help Beijing realize the strategy of increasing its influence on Southeast Asia. Sixthly, *competition with other cooperation mechanisms between the Mekong Subregion countries and external factors such as the US, Japan, Korea, India, etc.* In the recent period, the Mekong Subregion's potential for development has attracted the attention of many investors and development partners. As the trend of regional and international integration is caught, up to now, in the Mekong Subregion, many cooperation mechanisms have been formed

within the Mekong countries as well as between the Mekong countries and major partners such as the US, Japan, Korea, India, and the EU. Cooperation mechanisms such as the Mekong - Japan cooperation, the Mekong - Korea cooperation mechanisms, Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC), Mekong-US by LMI, etc. These cooperation mechanisms are strongly competing with China's cooperation with the region. Therefore, the strengthening of bilateral and multilateral cooperation mechanisms under the BRI framework is hoped by China to create a new space for China to increase regional influence, to compete with the increasing influence of other external powerful countries, especially the US and Japan. Seventh, *aim to the Taiwan factor in mainland Southeast Asia?* Although Taiwan has no formal diplomatic relations with mainland Southeast Asian countries, Taiwan's influence on this region is enormous, especially in the economic and human exchange fields. Taiwan is still an important economic partner of many mainland Southeast Asian countries, such as Vietnam, Thailand and Myanmar. Even Taiwan is trying to sign a free trade agreement with Thailand, especially in the context where Thailand has set out the national development strategic target “Thailand 4.0”, which can create a lot of cooperation space between Taiwan and Thailand. (*Thailand Business News*, 2010) As a result, Taiwan will increase its strongly increasing presence to Southeast Asia area as well as mainland Southeast Asia by “New Southbound Policy” (*Nation Thailand*, 2017; Tu Lai, 2019; Lin Tinghui, 2020). This makes China feel anxious, so China's stepping up its regional strategy may also mean increasing pressure on Taiwan's economic cooperation space and calling the countries for supporting the China's “one China” policy.

### **The Current Situation of China's Rising Influence on the Mekong Subregion**

In the *political field*, political influence is considered the most important target of China for the Greater Mekong Subregion. China has close relations with the government and leaders of many countries in the region. In which Cambodia is considered a country as a “quasi-alliance” of China in the region. At the same time, China has good political relations with Thailand, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam. China builds Cambodia into the “political center” of China not only in the Mekong Subregion but also in Southeast Asia. Political relations of China and Cambodia have developed strongly, the two parties have continuously upgraded their diplomatic and political relations in recent years. China is increasingly involved in Cambodian politics. So far, analysts rate Cambodia as one of China's “closest allies” (HENG, Pheakdey, 2012), or in other words, that the two countries have a “quasi-alliance” (BBC, 2016). Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen commented that “China is Cambodia's most trusted friend” (*Atimes*, 2017), the two parties have considered each other's best friend. Accordingly, the two parties fully support each other in bilateral and multilateral relations. The two countries are even aiming to build a “new type of strategic partnership” (*Xinxing Zhanlüe Huoban Guanxi*) model. The term “new type of strategic partnership for China - Cambodia” (*Renminwang*, 2017). At the same time, the two countries also aim to build a “Community of Shared future for China - Cambodia”. (*Xinhua*, January 2018a). For Laos, the two countries' political relations have been increasingly tightened

and rapidly developed in recent years, the two parties have striven to promote healthy and stable development of the China - Laos comprehensive strategic cooperation partnership relations, and efforts to develop the socialism career. At the same time, Laos also believed that the achievements and experiences of China also encouraged and initiated Laos to continue building a “unique Lao socialism” (*La.china-embassy*, June 2013). Even more, China is trying to promote its political-diplomatic relations with Laos as a polity with shared destiny, shared interests and especially the phrase “special relations” (*Teshu Guanxi*) was used. In response, Laos also stated that, “*Laos attaches great importance to the relationship of 'to share joys and sorrows' ('Tong gan ku, gong huan nan' de guanxi) with China.*” (*La.china-embassy*, November 2013) In addition, China and Laos committed to connect “Belt and Road” with Lao national strategy that transform the country “from a landlocked to a land-linked one” . The two parties also worked together to promote the building of a “Community of Shared Future”, and to propose a cooperation planning outline to promote the construction of BRI. (*Meiritoutiao*, 2016).

In addition, China actively promotes political and diplomatic relations with Thailand, Myanmar and Vietnam to obtain supports from these countries to China, especially for the cooperation mechanisms of China in the region. For Myanmar, during the official visit to Myanmar of China's President Xi Jinping from January 17-18, 2020, the two parties officially announced the joint building of “Community of Shared Future for China-Myanmar”. Therefore, what is the Community of Shared Future for China-Myanmar? According to the China's interpretation: First of all, the Community of Shared Future for China-Myanmar is a special relationship “As the twig is bent, so is the tree inclined”; they act as brothers and help each other when necessary. Next, the Community of Shared Future for China-Myanmar is a new plan for the future of developing bilateral relations. It together with the two countries, accelerate the joint building of high quality “Belt and Road”, the “golden and silver road” in the China-Myanmar friendship cooperation in the new era to be increasingly expanding and brighter. The two countries have strengthened connectivity, successfully built an economic corridor; focused on top projects, strengthened connectivity; expanded commercial investment and close cooperation between localities; performed deep people-to-people exchanges, promoted people of the two countries to be unanimous... (*Xinhua*, January 2020) Finally, the two countries create a model for exchanges between the two countries.

In the *economic field*, China promotes the use of the LMC as a multilateral mechanism to promote regional cooperation, deepen the practical cooperation and friendly neighbor relationship of the six countries entering LMC, promote the socio-economic development of the Lancang-Mekong countries, create an economic development region in the basin of these rivers, increase welfare for people in those countries, and support the building of the ASEAN Community and the process of regional integration, and contribute to the promotion of the South-South cooperation program and the implementation of the 2030 agenda for sustainable development of United Nations (UN). Member states of LMC:

China, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam. Main mechanisms such as: Summit, Foreign Ministers Meeting, Senior Officials Meeting, Diplomacy and Joint Working Groups for priority field. China promotes investment, aid and trade activities in the Mekong Subregion. In which, the economic factor is considered as a “gift” for China to use in exchange for the political support of the countries in the region. China has actively built a economic network which is relatively close to this region. Infrastructure is an important mean which support strongly the increase in trade and investment cooperation and cooperation in other fields between countries and the region. Realizing this, since the early years of the 21st century, after the comprehensive strength was increased comprehensively, China has accelerated its infrastructure connection with the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) countries, in order to realize its strategy of connecting comprehensively with the region.

Road connectivity and infrastructure construction on the North-South Economic Corridor are urgently promoted by the China's government. Up to now, the North-South corridor system has been put into operation, connecting traffic between China and Mekong Subregion countries. The North-South corridor in the West (Kunming-Laos-Bangkok highway) was officially put into use in 2008. The China's government and the Thailand's government have provided half of the cost for building the third largest bridge crossing the Mekong River connecting the border between Thailand and Laos, this work was officially started in February 2010 and completed at the end of 2012. The medium route (Kunming-Hanoi-Hai Phong) of North-South Economic Corridor. Roads on the South route (Kunming-Dali-Ruili-Myanmar) of North-South Economic Corridor with the route total length of 820 km, from September 2010 up to now, China and Myanmar have established the Joint Work Group to cooperate to initiate the master planning for this route.

In connecting railway, China actively participates in trans-Asia railway cooperation. The plan to build three railway routes including East route, Mid route and West route in the master plan of trans-Asia railway, particularly in the section inside Chinese territory was included in the “Mid-to-Long-Term Railway Network Plan” (*Zhongchangqi tieluwang Guihua*) by China's government, at the same time, it is being urgently deployed. Thus, a multinational traffic network with the focal point of Kunming-China has been and will be spread across Southeast Asian countries, from the road system in the North-South Economic Corridor project connecting China with Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, to the trans-Asia railway stretching from Kunming to Singapore by China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor

Besides, China is also actively promoting connection in terms of national development strategy. China promotes development strategic connections with mainland Southeast Asian countries. For *Myanmar*, China increases in connecting the BRI with Myanmar's national development plans, including that the two parties promote the construction of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor. This is considered as an important part of the two countries promoting the construction of BRI. In May 2017, China and Myanmar also signed a cooperation agreement on BRI. In August 2017, the two parties also established the Myanmar's BRI Development Association (*Miandian "Yidaiyilu"*

*Fazhan Xiehui*). (*Beijingreview*, 2017) At the same time, China also strengthened cooperation in building a high-quality BRI, in which the focus was on promoting the realization of the China - Myanmar Economic Corridor. The two parties promoted the 5-year plan for bilateral economic and trade cooperation, effective connection development strategy, good implementation of economic and trade cooperation and production capacity. Construction of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor is the top priority of the two parties in building the BRI together. The two countries have also started to significantly build the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor quickly so that the people of the two countries feel that they are getting achievements, especially people of Myanmar. (*Xinhua*, January 2020) Moreover, China and Myanmar focus on leading projects, strengthen connectivity. Accordingly, the two countries agree to promote the leading and typical role of the Kyaukpyu project for the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, while increase the China-Myanmar Border Economic Cooperation Area and building up the New Yangon City, thereby forming an overall situation with three supporting ends that are North, East and West of the economic corridor. The two countries are also preparing to promote connectivity projects such as roads, railways, electricity networks, and are rapidly forming an inter-corridor frame network. (*Xinhua*, January 2020) China also increases the advantages of the north end of the China - Myanmar Economic Corridor from Yunnan to Myanmar, promotes exchanges and cooperation between Yunnan, China and Myanmar's localities, in order to serve the common development of both countries. (*Xinhua*, January 2020)

For *Thailand*, this country promotes a national development strategy, such as the "Thailand 4.0" vision with China's BRI. In 2016, Thailand officially launched a new value-added-creating economic model that is the "Thailand 4.0" (*Pugnatorius*, 2018) economic strategy. Thailand and China have made a strategic connection between "Thailand 4.0" and BRI together. In the "Thailand 4.0" strategy, linking Thailand's East Economic Corridor and China's BRI is the central task of connecting development policy. Thailand proposed this strategy to develop this East economic corridor development strategy to utilize and develop economic connectivity with China through the BRI. (*Xinhua*, January 2018)

For *Vietnam*, China and Vietnam have also committed to connect the BRI with "Two Corridors One Belt". The "Two Corridors One Belt" development strategy is the idea of jointly building an economic development region between Vietnam and China. This idea from 2004 has been proposed to China by former Prime Minister of Vietnam, Mr. Phan Van Khai. The "Two Corridors" here are Guangxi - Quang Ninh - Hai Phong and Yunnan - Lao Cai - Hanoi - Hai Phong. And "One Belt" includes a number of border provinces in southern China and some northern provinces of Vietnam, extending up to Quang Binh province. Infrastructure interconnection between Vietnam and China have been strongly promoted. Currently, the deployment of infrastructure connection between Vietnam and China has also achieved certain development steps, especially the connection between the two parties through "Two Corridors One Belt". The trade between Vietnam and China is going to be more favorable. In which, there are routes related to economic corridor of Kunming - Lao Cai - Hanoi - Hai

Phong - Quang Ninh and the route of Nanning - Lang Son - Hanoi - Hai Phong - Quang Ninh. Currently, China has also completed the deployment of a number of routes connecting with Vietnam such as in Dongxing (Guangxi, China), China connecting with the Mong Cai-Van Don highway route of Vietnam. In addition, the strengthening of air route connections between the two countries has also been promoted recently. At the same time, China's contractors are flooding into Vietnam for bidding for infrastructure projects such as road traffic and electricity.

In the field of *trade*, along with increasing investment and connecting in infrastructure with the Mekong Subregion, China has also strengthened trade relations, and Beijing is now rapidly overtaking other competitors in becoming important trade partner of countries in this region. By the end of 2017, China was the leading trade partner for most of the countries in the region. China is the largest trade partner of Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam, and the second largest trading partner of Laos. China is the largest importer of Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam, and the third largest importer of Laos. At the same time, China is largest export market of Myanmar, the second largest export market of Laos and Thailand, third largest export market of Vietnam, and the sixth export market of Cambodia. From China perspective, Vietnam is China's eighth trade partner, Thailand is China's tenth largest trade partner, and Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar are increasingly important trade partners of China. If taking a look at the Mekong region as a whole, this region is the 5th largest trade partner of China. (*Sohu.com*, 2017) During the period from 2017 to 2019, trade turnover between China and 5 countries in the Mekong Subregion was constantly increasing. In 2017, the bilateral turnover reached 223.96 billion \$US, in 2019 reached 285.8 billion \$US, increased by 9.3%, an average annual increase of 13%. (*Investgo*, 2020)

In the field of *investment*, China accelerates investment in infrastructure in the Mekong Subregion countries within the BRI framework. China direct investment to the Mekong countries by cumulative value reached 42 billion \$US in 2017 (Yu Hongyuan, Wang Wanfa, 2019), by the end of 2019, China's direct investment in the Mekong Subregion reached 45 billion \$US, increased by 12 billion \$US within 3 years, investment sector covered fields such as energy, electricity, in infrastructure, real estate, agriculture. (*Investgo*, 2020) In which, a number of key investment projects can be mentioned such as the China-Laos railway, this is the first route of the Asian railway network, the Kyaukpyu deep-water port project, located at the West end of the Rakhine state of Myanmar, and high-speed rail project in Thailand. At the same time, China invests in a series of transportation infrastructure projects in Cambodia such as roads, airports, ports, and real estate in Cambodia. China's strategy to increase influence on the Mekong Subregion has made China quickly overtake other competitors, including Japan, to become a major investor in this region. Since 2017, China has become the largest foreign investor in Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar. The number and size of China's investment projects has increased rapidly in recent years as the tables below:

Among China's investment fields in the Mekong region, they are mainly in the energy field with 38 projects with a capital of 17,647 million \$US; followed by the railway, automobile,

aviation, and shipbuilding fields with 9 projects with a capital of 7,980 million \$US, mining, metal and chemicals with 7 projects worth 5,005.08 million \$US; real estate with 15 projects worth 2,467.3 million \$US; electricity, supply and production of thermal power, hydroelectricity with 6 projects worth 1,890 million \$US; manufacture with 8 projects worth 1,600.41 million \$US; science and technology, communication and information with 4 projects worth 1,320 million \$US; metallurgical with 7 projects worth 1,166.19 million \$US; agriculture with 3 projects worth 900 million \$US, transportation, postage and logistics with 4 projects of 730 million \$US. (*Waterinfo*, 2019).

Besides, China basically controls the main water source of the Mekong River from upstream. That the China's construction of 11 hydroelectric dams on the Mekong River changes the flow of water threatening tens of millions of people living in the downstream area is the cause of the water source consequences for the Mekong River downstream countries. In addition, Laos has continuously built Dong Sahong, Xayaburi and Pak Beng hydroelectricity dams. Many other dams are also planned to be built on the Mekong mainstream despite opposition from other countries. The China's construction of hydroelectric dams in the upstream by China, plus a series of hydroelectric dams to be built by Laos, seriously threatens the environment and the livelihoods of millions of people living based on this river. Negative forecasts for the downstream Mekong region are gradually coming true. The water level in the Mekong River drops to its lowest level in 100 years. Many sections of the Mekong River flowing through Thailand and Cambodia... are dried up at very low level, although the rainy season has not ended. Meanwhile, in the middle of the dry season of 2019-2020, drought and salinity in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam is expected to be even more severe in the "historic" dry season 2015-2016 right after Xayabouri hydroelectric dam comes into operation.

Increasing aid to the Mekong Subregion countries, China has funded many Mekong Subregion countries since the 1970s, but due to the constant wars and conflicts, up to the 1990s, economic aid for Mekong Subregion countries was restored and strengthened. The economic crisis in 1997 is considered an important milestone marking the transformation of China in actively participating in international affairs, increasing aid to developing countries is one of the central directions. In 2009, China announced a plan to establish a China-ASEAN Investment Fund worth 10 billion \$US to support development of infrastructure, energy and resources, information and communication in the region. (*Baochinphu*, 2009) In addition, China also provided many loans, non-refundable aid or concessional loans to less developed subregion countries such as Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar. To Cambodia, China granted many credit loans, concessional loans and financed Cambodia to build transport infrastructure works.

*China promotes the increase in economic factors, especially investment in infrastructure, commercial activities and the internationalization of the Renminbi (RMB) in the region.* In the term of President Xi Jinping, Southeast Asia occupies a special place in China's foreign policy. In term of politics, strengthening good relations with countries there is an essential component of China's peripheral foreign policy. Under China's ambitious BRI framework, Southeast Asia

lies at the intersection of the Silk Road Economic Belt (via mainland Southeast Asia) and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (via maritime Southeast Asia). China is one of the largest investors and plays a significant role in financing infrastructure projects in Southeast Asia, especially mainland Southeast Asian countries including Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia. In the BRI framework, connectivity, especially "hard connectivity" through the development of transport infrastructure, occupies a central position in China's strategic plan. Transportation networks, especially in mainland Southeast Asia, will enhance access to the Indochina Peninsula and the Indian Ocean, as well as further strengthen China's political and economic influence in the region. The new projects are also expected to provide much-needed business opportunities for China's infrastructure industry, which is burdened with overproduction capacity inside the country. China also expects these networks to reduce barriers and facilitate trade and investment with Southeast Asian countries.

In terms of *security - defense*, due to China's geographical position of having a land border with some countries in the Mekong Subregion such as Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam, China also promotes defense and national security relations with the region. China's protection of economic interests and investment is growing in the Mekong Subregion area. At the same time, the increase in defense and national security cooperation with the region, although this factor is weaker than other fields, helps China actively build a defense and national security posture in southwest China area, build a defense line from outside the territory to contribute to the prevention of separatists, terrorists of Tibet and the H'Mong group, reactionary forces in exile, and heresy organizations (such as Falun Gong/Dharma Wheel Practice) through Laos to enter into China from the South; prevent transnational criminal activities such as drug trafficking (from the Golden Triangle area to the South of China), criminal groups on trafficking in women and children, and organizing to bring people to the country to foreign countries illegally... On the other hand, through cooperation projects, especially the "information control" project, China has the ability to obtain information, master the security situation and defense posture in countries neighboring the South of China such as Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, especially Vietnam, from which China can stand strongly and step by step implement defense and national security policies to Southeast Asia region.

For Laos, China increases investment and military aid activities, focusing on projects towards the control of the defense and national security of Laos. In addition to enhancing the visits of national defense and security officials of the two countries, China also promotes information exchange, military technical cooperation and experiences in developing national defense and security; strengthens security cooperation along the border security and boat management in the Mekong River, combat to prevent non-traditional security crimes... In recent years, China has continuously lent Ministry of Defense of Laos to buy China's weapons and equipment, provided military aid to the Lao army, helped Laos build police barracks, the army, actively promoted security cooperation along the border... (*Meiritoutiao*, 2019) Besides China has also strengthened border security cooperation with Myanmar. At the same time, China has also strengthened military cooperation with Cambodia and Thailand.

The increase in soft influence helps China improve and enhance its image in the Greater Mekong Subregion, that field is the one which China is inferior to Japan in cooperation with this area. China has taken many measures to promote Chinese cultural attraction in the region such as: establishing Confucius Institutes (*Kongzi Xueyuan*), increasing mass media towards Mekong Subregion countries, providing scholarships for students from Mekong Subregion countries coming to China to study. Due to the geographical and historical proximity and many cultural similarities, Chinese cultural soft power has been naturally absorbed by Mekong Subregion countries and tended to increase sharply in the early 21st century. This is reflected in the trend of learning Chinese language spreading in most of the Mekong Subregion countries. In Thailand and Cambodia, the trend of learning Chinese language has developed rapidly. Cambodia claims to have compiled the best Chinese language textbooks in Southeast Asia and the schools are equipped with hundreds of teachers from China. (*Renminwang*, 2016) In Thailand, Chinese has got over English language to become the second foreign language after Thai. It is worth noting that cultural exchange and education projects with this region are often accompanied by large grants from China to Mekong Subregion countries. As a result, China not only builds an economic influence in the Mekong Subregion countries, but also expands and makes Chinese culture permeated, reinforces both “hard” and “soft” influences on the region. (*Xinhua*, May 2018).

In addition, human exchanges through tourism and education are also strengthened. China is an important source of tourists for the Mekong countries. At the same time, it also provides many scholarships so that citizens of the Mekong countries can come to China to study. In 2018, human exchanges between the two parties reached 4,500 people, each week, the average number of batch of people reached 2,614. (*Qingianwang*, 2019)

**The Response of the Mekong Subregion Countries to China's Influence:** In the face of increasing international cooperation and competition, especially the influence increase of Japan and China as well as the emergence of security challenges and the need to expand cooperation and development, the Mekong Subregion countries has responded flexibly and quickly by continuing to pursue the strategy of balancing the powers, creating multilateral cooperation institutions such as GMS, Mekong River Commission (MRC), Mekong-Japan, Mekong-Korea, LMI, LMC, MGC, etc. For China, the reaction of the Mekong Subregion countries to China occurs in two situations, the government expresses support for development cooperation with China, but the people express concern. This also reflects China's approach to the region – “*top-down approach*”, China mainly focuses on seeking the support of the local authorities in the countries, sometimes not pays attention to the attitude of people. People in some countries such as Cambodia, Myanmar, Vietnam, and Laos expresses concern over the rise of China's influence, and the “anti-China” sentiment takes place more and more strongly among the population classes of these countries.

According to Li Wei and Luo Yifu: “today ‘China threat’ theory (*Zhongguo Weixielun*) still has a great influence in this region, mainly because China has still not been possible to establish a real large country reputation in this region, i

the countries in mainland Southeast Asia have not yet trusted China's capacity and actions enough to voluntarily support China.” (Li Wei Luo Yifu, 2019). Among mainland Southeast Asian countries, Cambodia, Laos and Thailand actively responded to the BRI in a strong manner. Meanwhile, Myanmar, although supported orally, in fact still had a certain skepticism. It can be seen that three countries including Thailand, Cambodia and Laos strongly supported the BRI because these countries were looking for huge investment projects from China in investing in improving and building new infrastructure.

These countries have borne less security risks from China, especially the absence of disputes in territorial sovereignty or contradictions in terms of development strategy. Therefore, these three countries have received great investment from China. For example, for Thailand, on September 6, 2017, the State Railway of Thailand signed with China two high-speed railway cooperation projects worth 5.2 billion THB (equivalent to 160 million \$US). For Laos, China's initiatives to concretize the “Chinese Dream” were also actively supported by Laos, such as the BRI. To Cambodia, this country showed strong support and was ready to become part of China's BRI initiative. Mr. Hun Sen and Prince Norodom Sirivudh affirmed that Cambodia was ready to cooperate with China under this initiative of Beijing.

However, the governments of several countries in the area have also expressed concern about the growing influence of China. Among them is Myanmar, which still has a certain suspicion of China's BRI. One of the main concerns of Myanmar officials is that the too large scale of China's investment projects in this country may increase the risk of debt traps, especially for projects that China invests in Myanmar, the Kyaukpyu Port Complex Area and the Special Economic Zone (SEZ) and the three associated projects under the Kunming Initiative that are the projects playing a key role in the construction of the BRI through Myanmar. Kyaukpyu deep-sea port was announced to be built in June 2007, on Madaya Island, in Rakhine state. At the same time, Myanmar is now also concerned about whether Kyaukpyu will become a China's naval base or not. If China really contributes 85% of capital to the deep-sea port and lend the rest to Myanmar, critics will be more worry about China's growing autonomy in deciding how to develop and use this port-even believe that China can turn Kyaukpyu into a naval facility, or at least a dual-purpose facility, in the Bay of Bengal as part of its Indian Ocean strategy. Therefore, in recent times, Myanmar as well as a number of other countries such as Malaysia, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sierra Leone have canceled or reversed commitments under BRI frame previously negotiated, due to the reason of being afraid of the high project costs and their impact on national debt and the economy. At the same time, in 2018, Myanmar decided to reduce the scale of the project cooperating with China which is developing Kyaukpyu deep-water port because of fear that the country might be in debt. Specifically, Myanmar reduced the value of the Kyaukpyu deep-water port investment project in the Rakhine state in the West by 80%, reduced the original price of 7.2 billion \$US to 1.3 billion \$US due to concerns about the excessive debt.



**Table 1. Number of Projects and Total Turnover Investment of China in Mekong Subregion Countries in the Framework of BRI from 2013-2017**

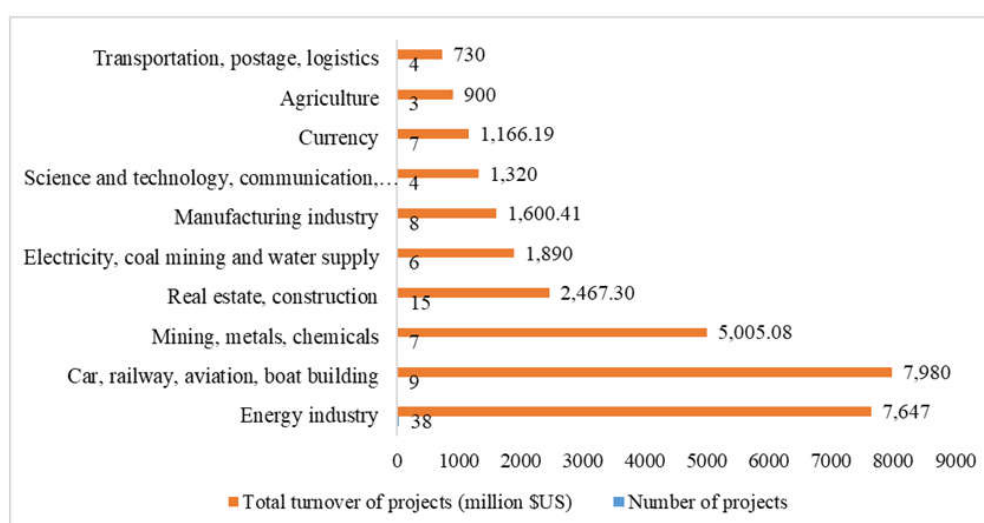
	(million \$US)				
	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Number of projects	15	7	31	36	26
Total Turnover	7,000	2,023.44	11,616.54	11,149.26	10,451.74

Source: Author's calculation using: (Waterinfo, 2019)

**Table 2. Distribution of BRI Projects in the Mekong Subregion by Country**

	(million \$US)				
	Laos	Thailand	Vietnam	Cambodia	Myanmar
Number of projects	31	32	22	18	12
Total turnover	15,044.05	8,574.55	7,065.79	6,815	4,741.59

Source: Author's calculation using: (Waterinfo, 2019)



Source: Author's calculation using: (Waterinfo, 2019)

**Figure 1. Distribution of BRI Projects by Industry in the Mekong Subregion from 2013 to 2017**

Myanmar decided to negotiate this deal again after considering the status of Sri Lanka, which recently had to give the management right of a port to China for 99 years after it had difficulty in repaying loans. (Yuichi Nitta, 2018) In addition, China's construction of a series of hydroelectric projects in the upstream area of Mekong river is also causing concern for downstream countries. In fact, local people do not share the same positive outlook as Beijing does, they even assume that China is taking advantage of small countries. China's development projects, from copper mines in Myanmar or paper mills and hydroelectric centers in Vietnam or banana farms in Thailand, have all caused environmental concerns. Others see China's massive investment 'threat' to their country. They are becoming too dependent on China. There is even an opinion in Thailand that, China will put Thailand at risk. (Mark O'Neill, 2020) Therefore, the underground wave against the China's influence is taking place strongly in the hearts of the people of the countries in the Mekong Subregion. In addition, Vietnam's response to the increase of China's influence is somewhat different from that of the other countries in the Mekong region. Vietnam and China have similar political institutions, both countries are pursuing the path to socialism. However, Vietnam's attitude towards China is somewhat more complicated than that of other countries in the region. Officially, Vietnam has always shown strong support in cooperation with China as well as the cooperation mechanisms that China introduced in the Mekong region, but

the concerns on the influence of China in the region are shown clearly in the elite division and people of Vietnam. This is also related to the sovereignty dispute in the South China Sea between China and Vietnam, as well as the conflict on the use of water between the downstream

Mekong countries, especially Vietnam - the country bearing the biggest impact from the change in Mekong flows in relation to upstream hydroelectric dams, as well as China makes Vietnam express more anxiety on the rise of China's influence in the Mekong region. According to the assessment of Chinese experts Li Wei and Luo Yifu, it is also emphasized: "In the relations between the Mekong countries, there is an existence of potential concerns about historical resentment, territorial disputes and interests conflicting that make LMC an instably element which is difficult to be predicted in relations between countries.

The issue of sovereignty disputes in the South China Sea is like a 'timeless bomb' between China and Southeast Asian countries, in the relationship between China and mainland Southeast Asian countries, the China - Vietnam relation is the most strongly affected... As this dispute has not been resolved in a fundamental way, it is difficult for China-Vietnam relation to stabilize in the long term (Li Wei Luo Yifu, 2019)



## Conclusion

The countries of the Mekong Subregion are currently receiving a lot of China's investment in the framework of the BRI of President Xi Jinping. Meanwhile, in the approach to the Mekong Subregion, China focuses on increasing its comprehensive engagement with the region, in which it focuses on implementing the model of "top-down approach", using relationships in terms of politics and using economic tools as the main spearheads. China is the region's largest power and also the country where the Mekong originates from the Tibetan Plateau, China is constantly using its economic influence to achieve larger objectives. Greater controlling right from the Mekong River up to the South of Vietnam gives Beijing a decisive voice in using the river's key resources and has the advantage to force countries to follow its political intentions. With China, to achieve the goal of turning the Mekong Subregion into its "backyard", it uses political and economic channels to entice countries in the region. Politically, China promotes close political diplomatic relations with the governments, individual leaders, and political forces in the countries of the region. Personal relations with host countries' leaders are of great significance for increasing regional influence. China uses its "traditional" approach to increase influence on the Mekong Subregion by "using economic gifts", mainly in infrastructure investment and aid, in exchange for political support from these countries.

Currently, China can be considered to be in a dominant position in the Mekong Subregion compared to Japan. In the Mekong region, in face of the deeper involvement in the region of major countries such as the US, Japan, China is looking for ways to remove these countries' influence out of the region and establish a leadership role in the Mekong region. To Japan, in the context where Japan's involvement in the Mekong Subregion is "seriously challenging China's leadership position in the GMS" (Wang Qingzhong, 2011: 40-49), China "on the one hand, uses Japan's non-refundable development aid to the Mekong Subregion, however, is also very wary of Japan's enticing the Mekong Subregion countries" (Wang Qingzhong, 2011: 40-49). For the US, China implements the strategy through actively participating in the Mekong Subregion regional cooperation mechanisms, building good relations and mutual trust with the five Mekong Subregion countries, in order to "eliminate the possibility of the US's enticing the Mekong Subregion countries, building a strategic encirclement against China". (Chen Zhi, 2009: 33-39). Therefore, in the Mekong Subregion as well as the South China Sea, China is implementing a strategy of "carrot" (economics) and a "stick" (military and diplomatic pressure). While domestic companies are arranging capital to expand the network of hydroelectric dams built along the river, China seeks to maximize its decisive voice about the water management of the Mekong river in the entire direction of 4,350km long.

That China continues to refuse to participate as a full member of the MRC whose goal to monitor the development of hydroelectric dams in this river's downstream has caused conflicts over water resources between China and the downstream Mekong countries increased and adversely affected China's efforts to take a leading role in the LMC. Established in 1995, the MRC has served as the Mekong River management mechanism between Laos, Cambodia,

Thailand and Vietnam for the past 20 years. However, that changed in 2016, with China's officially launching the LMC. Instead of cooperating with the MRC, which China is not a member of, Beijing focuses on building the LMC into an institution that helps promote the development of the West of China and supplements and supports the BRI with the target of widening the road and sea routes reaching Europe. On the other hand, China is taking advantage of its geographical advantage to increase pressure on small countries in the subregion. A prominent feature of the Mekong river is that its geographical flow reflects the geopolitical hierarchy of the region: A powerful China in the upstream area, while the smaller, less developed countries lie in the downstream area. This can be clearly seen in the reluctance or unwillingness of downstream countries to criticize any China's exploitation policies in the upstream area. From the above analysis, the article gives some new findings as follows:

Firstly, China is rapidly increasing its influence on the Mekong Subregion and viewing this area as its *backyard*. China also sees the Mekong Subregion as its traditional influence area. In recent years, China has used the BRI, including the LMC as a tool to increase its influence strongly in this area.

Secondly, the Mekong Subregion is seen as a *pilot site for China's initiatives*, including the BRI, to build a Community of Shared Future for Mankind, so China is strongly focusing on increasing its influence on this area. In particular, China signed a bilateral agreement on Community of Shared Future with each of Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar such as Community of Shared Future for China-Cambodia, Community of Shared Future for China-Laos, Community of Shared Future for China-Myanmar.

Thirdly, the increase of China's influence on the Mekong Subregion to compete against influence from other external powers, especially the US, Japan, even India and South Korea. This helps China break the siege and restraint of the US and its allies over China.

Forthly, China uses its advantage of being the upstream Mekong country and the asymmetry in its relations with the countries of the Mekong Subregion that make it easier for Beijing to *deeply interfere* this area. The political and economic influence on this area is very strong. Although the countries of this Subregion are concerned about the rise of China's influence, due to the overwhelming dependence on China, it is difficult for those countries to have strong voices of opposition to Beijing. Although the countries in this area also practice preventive diplomacy with China, they face many challenges in promoting this diplomatic policy.

Fifthly, at present, China has the support from government of countries in the Mekong Subregion, but generally their people are very concerned about the increase of China's influence. The anti-Chinese psychology also tends to increase in these countries regarding ineffective China's investment projects as well as water resource cooperation in the Mekong.

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