

Vietnam's role in Mekong Regional Cooperation

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Mekong region is called the rice bowl of Asia and Mekong river is its lifeline.. Many countries have been interested in developing this region, and it is also critical for the riverine communities which are dependent on Mekong river for their livelihood. Countries such as Vietnam and Thailand have been working to bring about consensus among Mekong countries and also involve ASEAN dialogue partners in the development of this region. Vietnam has been instrumental in raising the issue of sustainable development and addressing climate change challenges in this region. Many sub regional organisations such as Mekong Ganga cooperation, Greater Mekong subregion have all been created to develop this region through economic operation, development of infrastructure, and also promote tourism in this region.

The United states have also contributed through the comprehensive plan under the Mekong-US Partnership. It has been undertaking initiatives for promoting autonomy, good governance, and sustainable growth of Mekong countries which will contribute to the strengthening of the economic structures and political stability across the ASEAN region. Under this initiative which is also known as Lower Mekong Initiative the USAID has provided more than US \$3.5 billion aid and assistance for Mekong partner countries under which budgetary allocations have been made under different heads such as health programs, economic growth, peace and security, human rights and governance, education and social services as well as humanitarian assistance.

This initiative is for the lower Mekong region, and is primarily for improving economic connectivity, human resource development, management of transboundary water and natural resources, energy security and building consensus on non traditional security issues within the mainland Southeast Asia. In fact right since 2020 when Vietnam was the chairman of ASEAN, there has been stress on addressing emerging threats such as health security, working on capacity building, and countering transnational crime, addressing challenges such as human trafficking and drugs trade. One of the major reasons for this Mekong US partnership is primarily to sync with ASEAN outlook on the Indo Pacific and US Indo Pacific strategy. This partnership synchronises itself with ASEAN objectives, along with Mekong River Commission(MRC), as well as building complementarities with other institutions.

One of the major achievements under this partnership has been allocation of \$52 million on emergency health and humanitarian services so that the countries in the Mekong region can combat COVID-19 in future. Further, there is a sisters river exchange program which has been for providing best practices between the Mekong River Commission and the Mississippi River Commission related to dam safety, humanitarian assistance, disaster response, and better comprehensive planning.

In fact one of the initiatives which have been undertaken by Vietnam has been related to developing better understanding among the Mekong countries and engaging the developmental partners including United States, China, Japan, India, and the European Union. Vietnam has also been instrumental under the promotion of next generation leaders initiative with the support of United States. Right since the institutionalising of Mekong River Commission in 1995 ,there has been efforts for addressing critical vulnerabilities that countries like Vietnam face as the downstream riparian countries. As it is well known Mekong river provides millions of Vietnamese with food, livelihood and fisheries, therefore any changes in water flow or extensive silting on dams would impact the river flow and the aquatic species which are very unique to Mekong ecosystem.

Mekong river supports more than 18 million people and the agricultural produce from this region accounts for nearly 1/3 of the Vietnam's economy. Vietnam slowly is emerging as a middle power and has been interacting with its neighbouring countries and has been promoting its interest while at the same time raising issues with upstream countries such as China on extensive dam construction and the unsustainable hydro power generation. It has also been seen that the construction of dams have impacted the migration of the fisheries and reduced the nutritious supplements required for better yield of rice varieties. The changes in the river flow pattern creates challenges related to climate change, extreme weather conditions, and unsustainable rice cultivation because of paucity of water. Therefore, Vietnam has always raised the issue of resource management particularly in the context of aquatic species and ecological balance in and around the Mekong river delta.

During the current Mekong river Commission meeting held in first week of April in Laos, Vietnam has been vocal with regard to development of the trilateral area between Vietnam, Laos ,and Cambodia as well as looking for new avenues under the greater

Mekong subregional cooperation. Special attention need to be given with regard to information and data sharing, water flow governance, and undertaking serious studies related to flood and drought management. Under the Mekong- Lancang Cooperation mechanism there is need to address environmental changes related to extensive human activities and exploitation of riverine resources. Vietnam is comfortably poised because of its better relationship with Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia and has been engaging developmental partners as well. Further, Vietnam has been promoting the renewable and alternate energy sources by stressing on solar and wind power generation capacities within mainland Southeast Asia.

Under the 4th Mekong river Commission summit the stress was on exploring innovation and cooperation for building sustainable Mekong region. For a country like Vietnam where more than 3/5 of Vietnam's water resources are from transboundary rivers, it has always stressed on more nature based approach and building understanding on programs and projects related to the river and its catchment area.

In the recent meeting of MRC, Vietnam deputy minister of natural resources and environment Le Cong Thanh stressed on the needs for undertaking practical measures while protecting legitimate rights and interest of riverine communities. He also stated that the judicious use of water should be related to both mainstream river and the tributaries of Mekong river. He talked about data centre for knowledge and consultations among the stakeholders on a timely basis. He stressed on the need for activation of the larger agenda of Mekong river Commission and China should also affirm its commitment to the working of the MRC. Vietnam has always acknowledged that Mekong is the only lifeline for communities living on the river and there must be sustainable development of the region without undermining ecological concerns .