CAMBODIAN INSTITUTE FOR COOPERATION AND PEACE

JOURNAL OF GREATER MEKONG STUDIES

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Cover Photo: *Boats steer past Phnom Penh at sunset and through the Tonle Sap River, near the waterway's confluence with the Mekong River. Photo: Anton L. Delgado for Southeast Asia Globe*

Source: *https://southeastasiaglobe.com/a-new-leader-addresses-the-state-of-the-mekong/*

Back Photo: *Drone footage collected in Vietnam captures numerous blue sand mining ships collecting sand from the Mekong River. Credit: Southern Institute of Water Resources Research*

Source: *https://eos.org/articles/satellites-spy-on-sand-mining-in-the-mekong*

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PHNOM PENH, CAMBODIA

FOREWORD

On behalf of our entire editorial team at CICP, it gives me great pleasure to introduce this sixth volume of the *Journal of Greater Mekong Studies* (JGMS). Over the last few years, we have had the opportunity to share the insights of leading scholars, diplomats, and analysts from across the globe exploring a wide range of topics related to the Mekong River itself and the Greater Mekong Subregion in general.

In that Cambodia has assumed the chairmanship of ASEAN in 2022, in this edition we cast a wider net – also examining many of the broader questions that will impact the Mekong Subregion in the short to medium term. Cambodia's chairmanship of ASEAN comes at a particularly challenging time for ASEAN as an institution and for Southeast Asia as a whole. How it develops and the decisions made this year will have a long-lasting impact on the efficacy of ASEAN and, ultimately, policies and programming impacting the future of the Mekong and the subregion.

Two of our authors examine the future of Sino-American relations, a bilateral relationship with continued, significant impacts for the subregion and ASEAN. Kavi Chongkittavorn explores the potential for US-China cooperation and the dynamics thereof in future. At the other end of the spectrum, Bradley J. Murg looks at the competition between the two and evaluates how that competition has evolved since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. Aries Arugay digs into the concept of ASEAN Centrality and the main issues confronting Southeast Asia's leading institution for cooperation, integration, and development. Raimund Weiss explores an oft-referenced but significantly under-studied topic: the question of neutrality in both Cambodian foreign policy and its meaning in the context of the Mekong states. Gwen Robinson provides an analysis of the new realities in Myanmar and its implications. Po Sovinda and Ek Bunly also look at the Myanmar question, however in this article through the distinct lens of Cambodia's ASEAN chairmanship.

Returning to JGMS' traditional remit, I provide a reflection on Asean's Journey toward a cohesive and responsive community by answering three questions what has Asean done right? What can ASEAN improve? And where is ASEAN is heading? Apichai Sunchindah asks whether and how ASEAN can play a role in the development of the subregion and the future of regional and subregional convergence. Deth Sok Udom explores the question of the development of tourism, a vital economic driver for the subregion in general and Cambodia in particular as the world emerges from pandemic-era border closures. Angela Min Yi Hou takes a deep dive into Chinese hydropower investment in Cambodia and the implications thereof – a question that continues to a myriad of policy areas in the kingdom.

Finally, please allow me to thank the Embassy of the United States of America in Phnom Penh for its generous financial support for the publication of the journal and its deep and abiding commitment to full independence for the editorial team in the publication of JGMS. CICP is extremely proud to have the opportunity to provide a designated space for a diversity of voices to explore the major issues impacting the region today and in the future.

Ambassador Pou Sothirak
Editor-in-Chief, Journal of the Greater Mekong Studies
Executive Director, Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace

CONTENTS

H.E. Ambassador Pou Sothirak
Editor-in-Chief, JGMS
Executive Director, CICP

In addition to being the Executive Director of the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace (CICP) since 2013, Ambassador Pou Sothirak also serves as Advisor to the Royal Government of Cambodia as of February 2014.

He was appointed as Secretary of State of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Cambodia from September 2013 to January 2014. He was a Visiting Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) in Singapore from January 2009 to December 2012. He also served as Cambodian Ambassador to Japan from April 2005 to November 2008. He was elected Cambodian Member of Parliaments twice during the national general election in 1993 and 2003. He was appointed as Minister of Industry Mines and Energy of the Royal Government of Cambodia from 1993 to 1998. He graduated from Oregon State University in the U.S. in March 1981 with a Bachelor Degree in Electrical and Computer Engineering and worked as an engineer at the Boeing Company in Seattle, Washington from 1981-1985.

Dr. Bradley Jensen Murg
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Distinguished Fellow & Senior Advisor, CICP

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Kavi Chongkittavorn is a senior fellow at Institute of Security and International Studies (ISIS) Thailand. He has been a journalist for more than three decades covering Thai and regional politics. He began his career as a reporter in 1983 and became the paper's foreign news editor in 1986. Then, he was asked to explore Indochina—first as Bureau Chief in Phnom Penh, Cambodia (1988- 1990) and later on in Hanoi, Vietnam (1990-1992). After a year in Oxford University as Reuter Fellow in 1994, he went to Jakarta and served as Special Assistant to the Secretary General of ASEAN in Jakarta in 1995 before returning to journalism. He was named the Human Rights Journalist of 1998 to commemorate the 50th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by Amnesty International.

From 1999-2000, he was the President of Thai Journalists Association. From 2000-2001, he went to Harvard University as Nieman Fellow. He served as a member of jury and from 2005-2008 as its chair of Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize organized by UNESCO.

Dr. Apichai Sunchindah
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Mr. Apichai Sunchindah, a native of Thailand, has been a development specialist spanning over four decades. He had held positions with the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT) situated in the outskirts of Bangkok as well as the Bangkok-based development cooperation agencies of Australia, the United States, Switzerland, Germany and the United Nations. He also spent a significant part of his professional career working for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Secretariat and the ASEAN Foundation, both located in Jakarta, Indonesia. Mr. Sunchindah is a specialist in environment and natural resources management but with broad interfaces related to economic, socio-cultural as well as political-security contexts of the places under consideration. He has been a keen and continuous observer of developments particularly in Thailand, the Mekong sub-region and the Southeast Asia region.

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Angela Min Yi Hou is a non-residential Lloyd and Lilian Vasey Fellow at Pacific Forum, a non-profit foreign policy research institute focused on political, security, economic and business issues in the Asia-Pacific region. She holds a Masters in International Affairs from the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies (IHEID) in Geneva, Switzerland, where she specialized in international trade and environmental sustainability. Prior to this, Angela graduated from the University of Toronto, Canada, in 2019 with a degree in International Relations and Contemporary Asian Studies.

Dr. Deth Sok Udom
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Dr. DETH Sok Udom is Associate Professor of International Relations and Rector of Paragon International University. Dr. DETH finished his Bachelor's degree with High Honors in Sociology at Bogaziçi University (Turkey), a Master's degree in Southeast Asian Studies at Ohio University (USA), and a Ph.D. in Southeast Asian Studies from Humboldt University of Berlin (Germany). He is also a Senior Research Fellow at the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace (CICP). Dr. Deth is credited with several academic publications and has been invited to give guest lectures at various institutions/ universities and has given a number of interviews to local and regional media on Cambodian and regional affairs.

Dr. Aries A. Aruguay

Research Fellow

Asia Pacific Pathways to Progress, Philippines

Dr. Aries A. Arugay is Associate Professor of Political Science and Co-convener of the Strategic Studies Program of the Center for Integrative and Development Studies at the University of the Philippines in Diliman (UP). He teaches undergraduate and graduate courses on comparative politics, international relations, research methodology, and political thought. He also regularly delivers lectures and handles modules on security and politics at the Philippine Public Safety College, National Defense College of the Philippines, Development Academy of the Philippines, and the Foreign Service Institute.

He was previously a visiting fellow at the Institute of Security and International Studies (Thailand), Department of Government and International Relations-University of Sydney, Jeju Peace Institute (South Korea), and the National Institute of Defense Studies (Japan). He currently serves as Senior Editor of *Asian Politics & Policy* and Associate Editor of the *Philippine Political Science Journal*. His current research projects are on political polarization, regional civil society, performative populism, and regime instability in democratic regimes. He has published in the *American Behavioral Scientist, Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, Journal of Peacebuilding & Development, Philippine Political Science Journal, Philippine Sociological Journal, and Thammasat Review* and wrote several book chapters published by international publishers such as Routledge and Palgrave.

He obtained his PhD in Political Science from Georgia State University in Atlanta in 2014 as a Fulbright scholar. He holds an MA and BA (*cum laude*) in Political Science from the University of the Philippines- Diliman. In 2015, the US-based Southeast Asia Research Group (SEAREG) named him as a Young Southeast Asia Fellow. He was recently awarded the 2019 Shett International Alumni Award for Exceptional Achievement by Georgia State University.

Po Sovinda

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PhD Candidate, Griffith University

Po Sovinda is a Senior Fellow at the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace and a PhD Candidate in International Relations at Griffith University, Australia. His journal articles and commentaries have appeared in Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs, Explorations, Issues & Insights (Pacific Forum), East Asia Forum, New Mandala, The Diplomat, Australian Outlook, The Interpreter, Khmer Times, etc. His comments about the Indo-Pacific issues have been quoted in Voice of America (Khmer service), Radio Free Asia (Khmer service), the Wire Radio (Australia), Thmey Thmey International, and the Phnom Penh Post. His research interest includes small states' foreign policy, and great power's grand strategy in the Indo-Pacific region.

Ek Bunly

Research Fellow, CICP

Ek Bunly is currently, one of the Global Korea Scholarship's (GKS) scholars in 2022, doing a Master's Degree in International Cooperation at Yonsei University, Republic of Korea. He is also a Research Fellow at the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace (CICP). He's also been a responsible person for the Career Center Unit at Paragon International University from 2019 - 2022.

He was awarded with a high honor Bachelor's Degree at Paragon International University majoring in International Relations and was the President of the Paragon International University Model United Nations Club (PIUMUN) from 2019 – 2020. He was also a runner-up in the CamDEBATE Public Speaking Competition in 2019 with an award to an exchange program in the United Kingdom in the same year.

His research focuses on Cambodia's foreign policy and the relations between Cambodia and the Republic of Korea (ROK).

Dr. Raimund Weiss
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Dr. Raimund Weiss is Dean of the Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences (EAS) and Assistant Professor of Political Science and International Relations at Paragon International University. Additionally, he is a Board Member of the Paragon International University Research Committee and Senior Research Fellow with CICP. He has been engaged in research on Cambodia since 2000 when he first visited the country and has been publishing articles, reports, and studies on varied-thematic issues. Dr. Weiss graduated from the University of Innsbruck/Austria with a M.A. and a Ph. D in Political Science. Before moving full-time into the education and research sector, he worked for election observer missions of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the EU in post-conflict and developing states of Europe, the Caribbean, Africa, South- and Southeast Asia.

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Gwen Robinson is editor-at-large of Nikkei Asian Review, the English-language journal and website of Japanese media group Nikkei Inc, and is a senior fellow at the Institute of Security and International Studies at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, where she specializes in Southeast Asian, contemporary politics and security issues. She was a Senior Fellow at Lowy Institute in 2004 and UK-based Legatum Institute in 2013-14. She was for 18 years a correspondent and editor with the Financial Times in Europe, Asia, and America (1995-2013), and was Tokyo-based correspondent for The Times of London 1993-95. In the 1980s, she was Manila-based correspondent for the National Times, an Australian weekly journal, covering Southeast Asia (1985-88) and Bangkok-based contributor to the London Observer, Asia-Pacific Defence Reporter and Economist Intelligence Unit. She was born in Japan and educated in Australia (BA, ANU).

THE POST-COVID 19 WORLD ORDER: THE DYNAMICS OF POTENTIAL SINO-AMERICAN COOPERATION

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The US-China rivalry has now permeated the global psyche to the point that their strategic competition, as time goes by, has the potential to turn into an all-out war. The Western media establishments have all predicted their relations over time will further deteriorate as each side is forging new friends and allies around the world. Some of them, mostly in the developing countries, have to make difficult decisions to choose a side. Some failed to do so at their own perils.

In the post-Covid-19 World Order, the US and China would be two main superpowers that can provide security and economic backup for developing countries, most of them are in the Southern atmosphere. The current Russia-Ukraine war has already worsened global human security, especially in terms of food and energy supply. If this situation continues to slump, the two superpowers will find themselves trapped in these unintended consequences having to do whatever they can to sustain both old and new friendship and cooperation.

In addition, more than ever before since the end of World War II, the US rules-based order has been challenged by China's dual diplomatic approaches—conventional and unconventional. Beijing has yet to establish any kind of effective international order as Washington has done since Brenton Woods. China has benefitted tremendously from the current rules-based order. Therefore, the middle kingdom still has a strong desire to continue this current constructive environment, especially since joining the World Trade Organization in 2000. This trend will continue in the foreseeable future despite plenty of Western analysis held contrary views concluding that China has the ambition to replace the liberal order. But none has spelled the detail.

As far as ASEAN is concerned, these circumstances provide a good opportunity for the two superpowers to reconcile and hold dialogue that would lead to some kind of rapprochement. Obviously, this is easier said than done, but with ASEAN as a bridge, it would encourage both of them to sit on the negotiation table and reduce the tensions. ASEAN is a neutral ground and also is a safe place for such meetings and dialogues. Today, ASEAN has no enemies and is not a military alliance. On the surface, critics often focus their attacks on the bloc's lack of common positions and action. They also have faulted the bloc as a "talk only no actions" organization. In fact, the bloc's role is to de-

escalate tension and through its presence, it is hopeful that enemies would become friends through ASEAN's facilitation.

At the recent G20 Foreign Ministers' Meeting, kudos must go to the host, Indonesia, that successfully managed to get all G20 foreign ministers to attend the Bali meeting. Despite members' walk-outs during the proceedings, no group pictures and other protocols, the essence of G20FMM has not been diluted. Most importantly, on the side lines, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken were able to meet for bilateral talks for the first time. Both of them would not be able to hold talks if they were in Europe or America. Although the meeting did not produce any breakthrough, it was considered an ice-breaker as both sides agreed that there should be more discussions at the higher level. Other G20 ministers also held bilateral talks with their counterparts which have positive outcomes, including the surprise meeting between Wang and his Australian counterpart, Penny Wong which could lead to normalization of their strained ties.

It is not an overstatement to say that the US and China, which are the bloc's comprehensive strategic partners, feel more comfortable shaking hands and talking peace in the ASEAN-led forums, especially at the East Asia Summit and the ASEAN Regional Forum. This has been the case throughout the long history of ASEAN, but especially in the past two decades since Washington has recalibrated its Asian policy. ASEAN must therefore be more creative in getting the two superpowers to cooperate and engage one another.

One outstanding idea proposed by Thai Deputy Prime Minister and Foreigner Don Pramudviwani last June in Chongqing needs to be explored. The ASEAN Plus Two forum calls for representatives of the US and China at any level to meet along with ASEAN side during the ASEAN-led meeting. The forum could serve as a stepping stone for both powers to get to know each other better, especially on sensitive issues with greater depth to increase common awareness and avoid any misunderstanding and misinterpretation. It can start at a working group level and gradually builds it up to a higher level. The forum is essentially a confidence-building measure that would follow the ASEAN tradition of engaging its dialogue partners.

In separate action plans and declarations, both the US and China have divergent and similar approaches toward the region focusing on security, economic and social issues. In the efforts to persuade the two to work together, the best way is to concentrate on the low-hanging fruits that are not sensitive but deliverable by utilizing the ASEAN-led mechanisms. For instance, on the issue of climate change, the US, China, and ASEAN are on the same page to make the region greener, lesser marine debris and reduction of carbon dioxide emissions. All sides realized that some radical steps must be taken now before the environment of the Southeast Asian region deteriorate which can impact on the regional economy and development and beyond.

On the sensitive South China Sea dispute, there are common areas the US and China can cooperate if ASEAN is able to convince them, especially capacity building in research and science. Such a tripartite arrangement can reduce mutual suspicion among them. Another area is in the early warning and prediction of natural hazards to make communities more resilient to the impact of climate change. ASEAN already held joint military exercise with the US and China to safeguard the seaplanes of communication in the Asia-Pacific

Finally, on the sustainable development of the Mekong sub-region, the US and China have extensive programs to protect and promote biodiversity and keep the sub-region's environment healthy. With these common goals in mind, the riparian countries must work together with both superpowers to ensure that some of their programs and activities can be synergized. It will not be easy as China has made much progress under its current Mekong's cooperative framework, Lancang-Mekong Cooperation, since 2015. But there could new areas that the riparian countries can initiative and involve the two superpowers.

For the US, the stakes in the Mekong sub-region are also very high. After a decade of trying to assist the riparian countries, Washington realized that it needed to change its approach to focus on issues of development and capacity building. The Lower Mekong Initiative of 2010 was given a new name, the Mekong-US Partnership, in 2020 to rejuvenate the US role in the Mekong sub-region.

Finally, the US and China, as the world's major producers of vaccines which are still urgently needed in developing countries, should be working together instead of against each other. Developing countries are still in need of vaccines. Through ASEAN-led post Covid-19 recovery programs, which includes health security both countries could further engage one another. ASEAN has been the recipient of vaccines produced by the two superpowers.

To harvest the potential of US-China cooperation, ASEAN must maintain its centrality as well as its middle-of-the-road diplomacy, without choosing a side. Some of its members might tilt toward certain superpowers as is the case may be but its overall impacts on the bloc's solidary are considered marginal. ASEAN often makes decisions based on consensus. Therefore, none of the members could overshadow collective decisions, even though sometimes these are based on the lowest denominators.

ASEAN AND MEKONG DEVELOPMENT: CHALLENGES AND DIVERGENCE, OPPORTUNITIES FOR CONVERGENCE AND THE NEED FOR FURTHER CONCERTED ACTION

Dr. Apichai Sunchindah
Independent Development Specialist

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Introduction

Should the ten-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) be active in subregional development programs? This question is crucial in determining a meaningful role for ASEAN to play in development cooperation activities in the future especially in a sub-regional context like the Mekong Sub-region (MS). Given the diverse range of conditions that exists among the countries of Southeast Asia, most development initiatives are either at the national or at the sub-regional with relatively fewer ones at the region-wide levels covering all 10 ASEAN member states. Other than the country-level ones, most schemes focus on a group of countries that share for example similar geography and development issues or challenges. The most common sub-regional groupings in the ASEAN region are those generally clustered by maritime and mainland countries[1] such as the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS), the Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS), the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT), the Singapore-Johor-Riau (SIJORI) Growth Triangle and the Brunei-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA).

If ASEAN is confined to only playing a prominent role in initiatives that cover all 10 member countries, then it will inevitably have an extremely narrow window of influence. While acknowledging the importance of full inclusion and consensus within ASEAN, but as mentioned above, since development imperatives are unlikely to precisely match ASEAN's entire geographic footprint and/or its overall priorities, provision should be made to allow ASEAN to play a more proactive role in subregional activities. These cooperation frameworks should also likewise deserve greater attention in terms of ASEAN's more active engagement to maintain its much cherished "unity and centrality" principles and ensuring responsiveness to its region-wide sustainable and equitable development mandates which cover the various sub-regions.

[1] *Most references to maritime countries of ASEAN include Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines and Singapore; while the mainland countries comprise of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand and Viet Nam.*

History of Mekong-related cooperation frameworks

The Mekong Sub-region (MS) comprises of the five countries in mainland Southeast Asia which also happen to be ASEAN Member States (AMS), namely, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand and Viet Nam. The MS has seen significant political and economic changes in recent decades: - the peaceful resolution of the conflict in Indochina in the early 1990s; the integration of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Viet Nam into ASEAN in the mid to late 1990s; the gradual opening of China (and especially Yunnan province and Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region) to its southern neighbors; and the inflow of development financing, most notably from the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and countries such as China, Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK).

ASEAN itself has also established several schemes which are related to the MS such as the ASEAN-Mekong Development Cooperation (AMBDC) initiated in 1996, the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) which begun in 2000, and lately the region-wide Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC) where Mekong connectivity activities are the most prominent. Both the IAI and MPAC are already addressing some of the crucial needs of the MS in some important ways, but they remain relatively small-scale in comparison with other initiatives and have mostly focused on capacity building rather than hard infrastructure and thus less likely to make any significant and visible impact on the ground.

There has been a plethora of MS cooperation frameworks emerging particularly since 2000 and many of these have a common set of above-stated five mainland Southeast Asian countries pairing up with an array of external partners such as China, India, Japan, ROK or US. By and large, these numerous schemes could be categorized as various configurations or subsets of ASEAN countries and including some of its external parties in a number of cases. The table below provides a snapshot of major inter-governmental development cooperation frameworks in the MS based on such a classification.

Major Inter-governmental Cooperation Frameworks in the Mekong Sub-region[2]

Framework	Year Established	Membership	Level of Interaction
Mekong River Commission (MRC)	1957 as Mekong Committee; became MRC in 1995	ASEAN4*; China & Myanmar are observers; plus	C/SO, Ministerial & Leaders

[2] *Adapted from Apichai Sunchindah, "Why the Lancang-Mekong River Basin matters immensely to Southeast Asia", in "Thinking ASEAN", Issue 37, ASEAN Studies Program, the Habibie Center, June 2018*

		numerous donor partners	
Greater Mekong Sub-Regional Economic Cooperation Program (GMS)	1992; initiated by the Asian Development Bank (ADB)	ASEAN5 + China	C/SO, Ministerial & Leaders
ASEAN-led initiatives with China such as the various ASEAN-China Plans of Action and ASEAN Mekong Basin Development Cooperation (AMBDC)	Since the 1990s	ASEAN10 + China	C/SO, Ministerial & Leaders (latter only for ASEAN-China Summit)
Cambodia, Lao PDR, Viet Nam (CLV) Development Triangle Area	1999	ASEAN3*	C/SO, Ministerial & Leaders
Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI)	2000	ASEAN10	C/SO
Agreement on Commercial Navigation on Lancang-Mekong River	2000	ASEAN3** + China	C/SO
Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC)	2000	ASEAN5 + India	C/SO & Ministerial
Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation	2003	ASEAN5	C/SO, Ministerial & Leaders

Strategy (ACMECS)			
Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Viet Nam (CLMV) Cooperation	2003	ASEAN4**	C/SO, Ministerial & Leaders
Mekong – Japan Cooperation	2007	ASEAN5 + Japan	C/SO, Ministerial & Leaders
Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI) & Friends of LMI (FLMI), renamed in 2020 as the Mekong-US Partnership (MUSP) and Friends of the Mekong (FOM), respectively	2009	ASEAN5 + US, and including several other external partners for FLMI	C/SO & Ministerial
Mekong – Republic of Korea (ROK) Cooperation	2011	ASEAN5 + ROK	C/SO, Ministerial & Leaders
Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC)	2015	ASEAN5 + China	C/SO, Ministerial & Leaders

Key:
ASEAN3*: Cambodia, Lao PDR, Viet Nam
ASEAN3**: Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand
ASEAN4*: Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand, Viet Nam
ASEAN4**: Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Viet Nam
ASEAN5: Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand, Viet Nam
ASEAN10: All ten ASEAN Member Countries
C/SO: Committee/Senior Officials

Evolution of ASEAN mechanisms related to Mekong Sub-region

A. ASEAN-Mekong Basin Development Cooperation (AMBDC)

It is worthwhile to note that AMBDC was established in 1996 when ASEAN comprised only seven member countries while Cambodia, Lao PDR and Myanmar had yet to join but the expectation back then was that it would be very soon and is therefore already an ASEAN-10 configuration plus China as the external partner that would have an important role to play in the Mekong context. It can therefore be considered as a rather forward-looking initiative at that time binding all Mekong and ASEAN countries, both existing and potential, in a joint cooperative endeavor with the following objectives (ASEAN 1996):-

(i) to enhance economically sound and sustainable development of the Mekong Basin;
(ii) to encourage a process of dialogue and common project identification which can result in firm economic partnerships for mutual benefit; and
(iii) to strengthen the interconnection and economic linkages between the ASEAN member countries and the Mekong riparian countries.

The AMBDC is governed by the principles of cooperation as follows:-

(i) is supportive of and complementary to national development plans of countries in the Mekong Basin;
(ii) results in direct benefits to people in the Mekong Basin in the form of employment, income generation, social upliftment and rising standards of living;
(iii) utilises resources fully and ensures stable and sustainable development leading to improved management of natural resources and protection of the environment;
(iv) complements cooperation initiatives currently undertaken by the Mekong River Commission, donor countries and other multilateral agencies;
(v) mobilises the participation of the private sector in the implementation of projects and activities identified collectively; and
(vi) is open for participation of all interested countries as well as regional and international development, financial aid agencies and institutions.

The priority sectors of cooperation having the greatest potential for development includes:

(i) development of infrastructure capacities in the areas of transport, telecommunications, irrigation and energy in order to provide services support for development programmes in general;
(ii) development of trade and investment-generating activities;

(iii) development of agricultural sector through the identification of programmes and projects to enhance agricultural production for domestic consumption and for export;
(iv) sustainable development of forestry resources and the development of mineral resources through the identification of programmes and projects based on value-added activities and processing for export;
(v) development of the industrial sector through the identification of programmes and projects to accelerate industrial development especially small and medium enterprises;
(vi) development of the tourism sector;
(vii) human resource development and support for training; and
(viii) science and technology cooperation.

Since the primary target of the AMBDC's priority areas is economic, the ASEAN economic ministers and officials were then tasked to oversee the implementation of the activities, and that eventually led to the focus on its flagship project which is the Singapore-Kunming Rail Link (SKRL). However, the latter is basically an infrastructure project requiring huge investments which ASEAN member countries were not in a position back then or perhaps even now to secure the necessary funds to implement it. So, in the end, by default China alone managed to construct the high-speed rail link from Boten on the Lao-PDR-Chinese border to Vientiane, the capital of Lao PDR which went into operation in 2021 as part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The Chinese government is also currently supporting the construction of the connecting rail link from Bangkok to Nongkhai which is on the Thai-Lao border across from Vientiane. What began two and half decades ago as an ASEAN-China collaborative flagship project finally ended up as just a Chinese-alone exercise and with rather limited input from ASEAN. The AMBDC itself had been dormant since 2014 without much concrete activity – a far cry from the initial stated aspirations.

B. Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI)

The admission of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Viet Nam, collectively known as CLMV, into ASEAN in the mid to late 1990s raised concerns over the possible creation of a "two-tier ASEAN". This further entailed a development gap situation which encompassed "not only the difference between the average per capita income of the six older ASEAN Member States (AMS) and that of the newer four member countries, but also in terms of state of human resources, institutional capacity, infrastructure and the level of competitiveness" (ASEAN n.d.).

In view of such considerations, the ASEAN Leaders, at their Summit meeting in November 2000 in Singapore, endorsed "a special programme for narrowing the development gap, calling it the Initiative for ASEAN Integration or IAI" (ASEAN n.d.). This scheme aims to provide a framework for regional cooperation through which the more developed AMS could help those that are less developed, with the view of closing

the divide and fostering ASEAN's competitiveness as a region. As a result, in July 2001, the ASEAN Foreign Ministers adopted the Ha Noi Declaration on Narrowing the Development Gap for Closer ASEAN Integration.

Since then, four successive action plans known as the IAI Work Plan I (2002-2008), IAI Work Plan II (2009-2015), IAI Work Plan III (2016-2020) and IAI Work Plan IV (2021-2025) have put in place "the measures and actions through which the more developed AMS – supported by ASEAN Development Partners and international organisations – provide the necessary support and technical assistance to CLMV to enhance their capacity in meeting regional commitments and obligations" (ASEAN n.d.).

During the first two phases of the IAI, the project activities were more of the generic across the board types while the last two phases were more focused towards specifically defined priority areas such as food and agriculture, trade facilitation, Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), education and health and well-being. By and large practically all the activities are of capacity building and development in nature.

However, the funding for the four phases of the IAI Work Plan has revealed a declining trend over the two decades (ASEAN n.d.) which can possibly be due to a decrease in interest and/or sense of value derived from such an initiative among the ASEAN member states and/or the various external parties that have been supporting it. Perhaps another related phenomenon is that several of the key external development partners of ASEAN have, since the inception of IAI, established their own Mekong-oriented cooperation frameworks or programs, most notably Australia, China, Germany, India, Japan, Republic of Korea, Switzerland and the United States. The Mid-Term Review of IAI WP II (Mekong Institute 2014) conducted during 2013-14 contained the following remarks: -

"*Another clear-cut observation is the plethora of activities and frameworks touching on the CLMV/Mekong geographic footprint – whether bilateral, trilateral, multilateral or otherwise – and undertaken both by ASEAN countries individually or collectively and in association with other partners and/or group of parties. It is obvious some form of rationalization and better coordination would be beneficial to ensure better targeting of programs with cost-effective outcomes and outputs. It might therefore be useful for IAI to consider taking on the function of a knowledge hub where information on all pertinent programs/projects implemented and planned by different entities are collected and put together into one common data repository, which can then be accessed by different interested parties. It should become quite evident that it is in the interest of all concerned if such common comprehensive database with a CLMV/Mekong geographic coverage is available and that the information is updated regularly to ensure its validity and usefulness. To carry out such functions would require a transformation or restructuring of the IAI (and NDG[3]) Division as elaborated in a separate section of this report.*"

[3] *Words in parentheses added to reflect the current full name of the said Division*

In fact, the ADB had developed a matrix compiling such information for project activities implemented by various development partners within the GMS back in 2014 (Asian Development Bank 2014). However, no subsequent developments or updates have apparently been undertaken thereafter.

C. Observations

The afore-mentioned description of the only two ASEAN-led initiatives with a focus on Mekong/CLMV countries indicates that both are in a state of declining prominence and in even one case dysfunction since 2014. Interestingly, the ASEAN Secretariat has of late been supporting the CLMV economic ministers and officials in the formulation of the Framework for CLMV Development with the key objective of the CLMV countries achieving Middle Income status by 2030 via the establishment of an Advance Global Business Hub and along with it the preparation of an Implementation Plan for the said Framework (ASEAN-AUSTRALIA DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION PROGRAM n.d.). The latter activity is being carried out by the Mekong Institute (MI), an inter-governmental organization based in Khon Kaen, Thailand with the objective of deepening "regional cooperation and integration through capacity development, dialogue, and advocacy for the acceleration of sustainable socioeconomic development and poverty alleviation in the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS)" (MEKONG INSTITUTE n.d.) The MI is governed by a Council and Steering Committee, comprising of representatives from the six member countries; namely Cambodia, China, Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam. MI was the recipient of the ASEAN Prize for 2021 in recognition of its long-standing contributions to promoting ASEAN awareness and strengthening regional cooperation towards sustainable development and economic growth, especially for the GMS (ASEAN 2021).

Challenges of Divergence – Cases and Issues

ASEAN's membership has consisted of the current ten countries for at least slightly over the past two decades and it has been ASEAN's standard position that for any activity, program or initiative to be considered as an ASEAN one, then it needs to involve all the ten AMS and anything less than that would not be considered or counted. As such activities, schemes or issues undertaken in the various sub-regional groupings of ASEAN such as IMT-GT, BIMP-EAGA or the GMS/Mekong/ACMECS would normally not be included under the ASEAN framework or umbrella and thus would not receive priority attention or engagement. It has been argued that the delineation of the Mekong or mainland countries versus the maritime or archipelagic countries of Southeast Asia would dilute or threaten the unity and centrality of ASEAN.

So far, the only major exception to this stance is the South China Sea (SCS) issue which although only directly involving four of the ten AMS as claimant states, has been on the agenda of ASEAN deliberations primarily vis-a-vis China for at least the last three

decades. The question is why? Is it due to primarily the political and security nature of the problem and thus deserves higher attention? It can be argued that the SCS had also been a divisive issue within ASEAN so much so that the ASEAN Foreign Ministers was reportedly not able to issue a Joint Communique at the conclusion of its annual meeting in 2012 which was unprecedented.

However, the problems and challenges facing the region and the world today are becoming more multi-faceted and invariably inter-twined. Even security threats or risks can be categorized as traditional or non-traditional and the latter are becoming increasingly prominent like infectious diseases, transnational and organized crime, transboundary management of environment and natural resources including food, energy, biodiversity and climate change, natural disasters, human and drug trafficking, mass migration, etc. Due to the rapidly changing nature of the various problems encountered and therefore the requirement to adjust and be more responsive to such challenges, ASEAN may need to consider re-calibrating itself to become more dynamic, agile and flexible in its *modus operandi*.

Opportunities for Convergence – Illustrative Examples

Notwithstanding the limitations and constraints posed within the ASEAN system to taking up and including under its overall umbrella more sub-regional types of considerations as mentioned in the previous section, there have been of late several cases whereby ASEAN joined hands with or included Mekong entities or frameworks in its own organized sectoral bodies and/or activities. One clear example is "considering the different circumstances and weather patterns in the southern ASEAN and Mekong regions, sub-regional institutional frameworks have been established to address the fire and haze situations in the respective regions, namely the Sub-regional Ministerial Steering Committee on Transboundary Haze Pollution (MSC), comprising Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand; and the Sub-regional Ministerial Steering Committee on Transboundary Haze Pollution in the Mekong Sub-region (MSC Mekong), comprising Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand and Viet Nam. Both Ministerial Steering Committees are supported by a technical working group (TWG and TWG Mekong)", the former since 2006 and the latter since 2011, respectively (ASEAN Socio Cultural Community n.d.).

In the field of water resources management, the ASEAN Secretariat and the Mekong River Commission Secretariat inked a Memorandum of Understanding in 2010 (Mekong River Commission n.d.) with the objective "to provide a framework for developing and maintaining cooperation between ASEAN Secretariat (ASEC) and the Mekong River Commission Secretariat (MRCS) in the field of their common interests and to ensure close collaboration, better utilization of resources so as to achieve effective outcomes on regional cooperation for the sustainable development of the Mekong River Basin". This subsequently evolved into a cooperation framework between ASEAN and

MRC (Mekong River Commision n.d.) which included activities such as a Joint Study/Assessment of drought & flood impact in ASEAN region in 2020 and the ASEAN-MRC Water Security Dialogue, the latter of which held its first activity in 2021 and is envisaged to be held biennially thereafter. In this regard, it is worth noting that a paragraph in the Chairman's Statement of the 23rd ASEAN Summit held on 9 October 2013 stated that "We recognized the importance of preserving, managing and sustaining use of water resources and call on ASEAN Member States to continue effectively implementing the ASEAN Strategic Action Plan on Water Resources Management, including assessing impacts that economic development has on the environment and people's livelihoods in major river basins including the Lower Mekong Basin (ASEAN 2013).

Another clear sign of closer Mekong-ASEAN cooperation is the recent power transmission agreement from Lao PDR via Thailand (representing ASEAN countries from within MS) and through Malaysia to Singapore (representing ASEAN countries that are outside of MS) which begun in June 2022 and exemplifying Mekong-ASEAN energy grid connectivity (Tan 2022).

Moreover, Viet Nam had initiated at least two fora during 2020-2021 to link ASEAN community building and integration efforts with sub-regional cooperation frameworks and in particular to help narrow the development gaps among and within AMS (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kingdom of Thailand 2022) which clearly signify the importance attached to the synergistic and complementary roles played by ASEAN and its various sub-regional mechanisms including the MS. In a related parallel exercise, also coordinated through Viet Nam, the Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia (ERIA) was commended by the ASEAN Leaders, as reflected in the Chairman's Statement of the 37th ASEAN Summit held on 12 November 2020, "for publishing the 'Sub-regional development strategy in ASEAN after COVID-19: inclusiveness and sustainability in the Mekong subregion (MEKONG 2030) report' which provides insights with regard to ASEAN's sub regional development and its role in ASEAN Community building"[4], thereby further cementing the connection between ASEAN and Mekong development trajectories.

As mentioned earlier, yet another growing indication of recognizing the clear inter-connectedness between ASEAN and Mekong development processes was the conferring of the ASEAN Prize 2021 award to the Mekong Institute "for its contributions in promoting ASEAN awareness and strengthening regional cooperation towards sustainable development". (ASEAN 2021)

[4] *See paragraph 32 of ASEAN Chairman's Statement of the 37th ASEAN Summit https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/43-Chairmans-Statement-of-37th-ASEAN-Summit-FINAL.pdf*

Need for Further Concerted Actions

As stated in the opening paragraphs of this piece, it would be in ASEAN's overall interest and benefit to take on a more proactive role in any of the sub-regional cooperation frameworks including in particular the ones in the MS. As in the case of the Indochina war period in the 1960s to 1970s, the MS is once again becoming an arena of intense rivalry between major global middle and superpowers. The increasing number of cooperation frameworks in the MS, many of which were initiated by one or more of these key countries, just goes to show that the MS is fast becoming a microcosm of great competition if not contestation in the Indo-Pacific context. It is worth noting that in the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) adopted in 2019, one of the areas of possible cooperation is Connectivity and under that there is the following reference: - "Exploring potential synergies with sub-regional frameworks, such as, IORA, BIMSTEC, BIMP-EAGA, Mekong subregional cooperation frameworks, including ACMECS, etc.". (ASEAN, ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific n.d.)

The case for ASEAN to become more actively engaged in the MS has been further elaborated in the Case Study: Sub-regional Development section within the report entitled "ASEAN as the Architect for Regional Development Cooperation – Advancing ASEAN Centrality & Catalyzing Action for Sustainable Development. (The Asia Foundation 2018) In terms of simple numerical logic, if the South China Sea which only directly pertains to four AMS claimant states could become a regular ASEAN agenda for the past thirty or so years, then why can't the MS issues which involves five AMS be even more likely to gain acceptance as another important agenda item for ASEAN's consideration? After all, these mainland Southeast Asian countries are the main rice-producing area for much of ASEAN and it is worthwhile noting that the logo of ASEAN symbolizes ten rice stalks bundled together. The Mekong delta of Viet Nam (Borton 2022) and the Tonle Sap Lake in Cambodia (Strangio 2022) are important rice bowl and fishing grounds for those two countries and there are already perceptible signs that these critical areas are now under serious threat due to sea/freshwater level fluctuations and/or other environmental changes and thereby creating serious repercussions affecting the livelihoods of millions of inhabitants in those areas and beyond. Food, environmental and livelihood security are thus emerging as potential time bombs that might explode in the foreseeable future if not appropriately managed.

Another critical matter is the fact that there has been concerns that some of the Mekong countries are tilting more towards one or more external middle or superpowers rather than toeing the ASEAN "family" line. This just goes to show that ASEAN cannot afford to neglect the domestic concerns and priorities of each and every AMS or otherwise risk facing the consequences of even more division within Southeast Asia in the near future – a déjà vu of sorts harking back to the Cold War era. Recall that the primary motive for ASEAN in establishing the AMBDC and IAI some two or more decades ago was to avoid creating a two-tier or divided ASEAN in the first place. So, if ASEAN still wishes

to maintain its enshrined "unity and centrality" principles amidst its community building functions, then steps must be urgently taken to redress the current perception, development and other gaps between the various sub-regions and the central core of the entire region itself. These sentiments have been echoed clearly in the recent statements made especially by H.E. Prak Sokhonn (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Kingdom of Cambodia 2021), Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Cambodia as well as Mr. Suriyan Vichitlekarn (The ASEAN 2021-2022), Executive Director of the Mekong Institute (MI). The Cambodian Foreign Minister stated that "We have to ensure that our sub-regional cooperation does not turn into a political platform and the securitization of our Mekong sub-region should be avoided at all costs. For that we do have already ASEAN and its ASEAN led mechanisms, which are fully equipped to deal with this issue. No one wants to see the Mekong region becoming once again an arena of major power rivalries or proxy wars as it was, sadly, in the 1970s and 80s". The MI Executive Director also noted that "the Mekong sub-region is becoming a geopolitical minefield…While interest in the sub-region is good and investments from outside the region are growing, and welcome, he says that it is important that the sub-region does not becomes a battleground for superpower countries". He further stated that "It creates an environment not conducive to cooperation and pressure countries in the Mekong sub-region to deal with multiple directions of development" and went on to add that "the competition for influence may end up costing Mekong countries". MI winning the ASEAN Prize in 2021 is an "affirmation that implementing high-level policies (at the subregional level by institutions like MI for example) is just as important as setting these policies (by ASEAN at the regional level)" and serves as an "encouragement to other sub-regional cooperation progammes, such as BIMP-EAGA, IMT-GT to work towards ASEAN's (community building) aspirations as well".

The afore-mentioned exposition clearly spelled out the critical importance of recognizing the inter-connectedness of MS to the relevance, integrity and effective and timely function of ASEAN itself which is to demonstrate creating tangible benefit to its peoples and as John Donne, the English poet from the Elizabethan period, once wrote

> No man is an island entire of itself; every man
> is a piece of the continent, a part of the main;
> if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe
> is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as
> well as any manner of thy friends or of thine
> own were; any man's death diminishes me,
> because I am involved in mankind.
> And therefore never send to know for whom
> the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.
>
> *From MEDITATION XVII*
> *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions (1624)*

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ADDRESSING THE ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL EXTERNALITIES OF CHINESE STATE-OWNED ENTERPRISE INVESTMENT IN CAMBODIA'S HYDROPOWER

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Introduction: Chinese Hydropower Investments in Cambodia

To understand China in the 21st century, one must look beyond its geographic boundaries. As China's overseas economic presence expands, one dimension of its controversy relates to the impact of large-scale Chinese investment on the communities neighboring mega-infrastructure sites, whose livelihoods and environment are profoundly affected. This article discusses how Chinese-financed hydropower projects implicate the environment and Indigenous communities in Cambodia, and evaluate institutional channels through which policy responses can mitigate and address the negative externalities of infrastructure investment.

Due to the capital-intensive and prohibitive initial costs of investing in extractive and energy infrastructure, investments in this field and in Cambodia have been dominated by Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs). However, Chinese investors have gradually become poorly reputed for ignoring the concerns and interests of resident communities. In the context of Cambodia, Chinese projects are now associated with biodiversity loss, deforestation, water pollution, urban migration, and increased unrest – a reputation that has attracted criticism from other governments, international observers, and domestic Cambodian audiences (Sigfrido and Ear 2010, 615-39). In particular, environmental disasters often result from a failure to fulfill environmental impact assessments and transparency obligations (Alleged Abuses Linked to China's 'Belt and Road" Projects: Report 2021) (Wang and Zadek 2016).

In economic terms, the benefits of Chinese infrastructure projects in Cambodia are limited by minimal Chinese interaction with local firms and an export-oriented approach to the fruits of Chinese overseas projects. Studies show that the average local sourcing of Chinese projects in Cambodia is only 6%, reflecting little gains from the spillover effects of Chinese financing and loans (Wang and Zadek 2016). A substantial portion of the hydropower generated by Chinese-built dams is exported to China to support domestic markets and bolster energy security (Milne and Mahanty 2015). Simultaneously, the nature of hydroelectric dams are such that their construction often affects the "rural poor," who suffer from forced displacement and land expropriation

without adequate consultation and compensation. Thus, the unlevelled playing field in both environmental and economic terms vis-à-vis China's gains has brewed public discontent in implicated Cambodian communities, earning Chinese investment an impression of low environmental benchmarks and resource grabs.

The social and environmental consequences of infrastructure investment are not only shaped by the behavior of Chinese investors; rather, they are determined by an interplay of investor behavior and local regulatory conditions (Wang and Zadek 2016). A power imbalance between Chinese state-owned enterprises and the relatively weak role of domestic Cambodian authorities results in the sporadic enforcement of environmental and social rules (Siciliano and Urban 2017). The Business and Human Rights Resource Centre's findings in 2021 reaffirm that higher rates of alleged human rights abuse occur in countries with weaker governance and a dominant concentration of Chinese investments ("Going Out" Responsibly: The Human Rights Impact of China's Global Investments 2021). The report also acknowledged that renewable energy constituted a high-risk sector, due to frequent inadequacies in environmental and social impact assessment disclosure and land disputes. The following two case studies illustrate these shortfalls: the Lower Sesan 2 dam and the Kamchay hydroelectric dam.

Lower Sesan 2 Dam

Among Chinese hydroelectric projects in Cambodia, the Lower Sesan 2 dam completed in 2018 is the most (in)famous for its environmental and social controversies. The 400-megawatt, $800-million project in Northeastern Cambodia began construction in 2013, funded by Chinese state-owned banks, the China Huaneng Group (a state-owned electricity company), Cambodia's Royal Group and Vietnam Electricity (EVN, also a state-owned electricity company) (Cowan 2021). It is estimated that the dam's construction displaced nearly 5000 people along the Sesan and Srepok Rivers, most of which are Indigenous and ethnic minority communities with multi-generational ties to the land (Amat 2021). The dam also resulted in permanent flooding, disrupted aquatic ecosystems, and depleted fish stocks, thus threatening food, water and nutritional security for local Cambodians (Mahanty 2021). Irreparable ecological damages, in addition to immeasurable losses to Indigenous identity, are among the project costs not borne by the investors.

Investors claim that a feasibility study was conducted to ensure that the Lower Sesan 2 dam fulfilled environmental impact assessment (EIA) requirements (Vannarith 2021). However, other civil society sources found that corporate social responsibility (CSR) standards were not discussed at all (Cowan 2021). Most importantly, the Cambodian government and foreign investors failed to meaningfully consult affected residents and adequately compensate for damages (Underwater: Human rights Impacts of a China Belt and Road Project in Cambodia 2021). In fact, the Lower Sesan 2 was constructed at even lower standards than if the dam were to be built in China (Cowan 2021). In reaction

to the dam, communities mobilized in opposition. Approximately 30% of the affected population in Sre Kor and Kbal Romeas refused to accept the stipulated compensation (Young 2020). Protests extended from 2011 to 2018, appealing to the highest political level and directly to Prime Minister Hun Sen. Civil society organizations spoke out against biased policy implementation, accusing government officials and Chinese investors of embezzling the already meager resources originally earmarked for community resettlement (Young 2020).

Here, it is important to situate hydropower investments in broader national narratives in Cambodia. Chinese investment arrives in a landscape of high infrastructure risk and existing debates surrounding hydroelectricity. Prime Minister Hun Sen has emphasized dams as the future "battery of Cambodia", given their role in green energy generation drawing from water resources in remote areas of the country. In the view of Cambodian decision-makers, unstable and unaffordable electricity is an obstacle to economic competitiveness and investment attraction in other sectors (Milne and Mahanty 2015). Through both an environmental and economic lens, electricity occupies a decisive position in the minds of Cambodian leaders (Amat 2021). Thus, when Human Rights Watch published a scathing report in 2021 entitled "Underwater: Human Rights Impacts of a China Belt and Road Project in Cambodia," (Underwater: Human rights Impacts of a China Belt and Road Project in Cambodia 2021) the spokesperson of the Ministry of Environment of Cambodia critiqued the organization for its "destruction of human rights" aimed at hindering development in Cambodia (Cambodian Dam Project Ignored Econimic, Social, Cultural Rights, Report Says 2021).

The political gravity of hydropower development in Cambodia renders the concerns of minority groups all too easy to ignore, especially when weighed against the uniquely intimate bilateral ties between China and Cambodia. Cambodia is of key strategic importance to China, and vice versa. Cambodia has advocated for China's political positions within the Southeast Asian community and the Mekong region, including foreign policy priorities such as territorial claims in the South China Sea and Taiwan, as well as economic blueprints such as China's Go Southwest Strategy (Milne and Mahanty 2015). Cambodia is also a member of the China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor and ASEAN-China Free Trade Area, among other preferential arrangements (China's Belt and Road Initiative in the Global Trade, Investment and Finance Landscape 2018). Evidently, China is Cambodia's vital source of trade, aid, and investment, which also informs close geopolitical ties. Some would even characterize this relationship as one of Cambodian dependence. This tight-knit relationship has been reinforced in recent years, given that Cambodia's relations with Western governments have chilled due to human rights concerns (Cambodian Dam Project Ignored Economic, Social, Cultural Rights, Report Says 2021). Thus, the government's management of the opposition to infrastructure construction by affected communities is lukewarm, weighing their concerns against economic development and diplomatic priorities (Milne and Mahanty 2015). The scale is tilted, to say the least.

Kamchay Hydropower Dam

The $280 million Kamchay hydropower dam follows a similar fact pattern as the Lower Sesan 2 dam (Siciliano and Urban 2017). Also supported by the Prime Minister's campaign to alleviate energy poverty in Cambodia, the Kamchay dam was funded by China's Export-Import Bank and led by Sinohydro, a Chinese SOE (Tan-Mullins, Urban, and Mang 2017). The Kamchay dam was the first in a series of Build Operate Transfer (BOT) hydropower projects in Cambodia. As the term suggests, Chinese stakeholders provide financing and technical expertise to build the dam, then transfer its ownership to the host country after an agreed period of operation by the foreign investor, which some have argued allows Chinese investors to retain more influence while shying away from social and environmental mitigation responsibilities (Tan-Mullins, Urban, and Mang 2017). In the case of the Kamchay dam, the Cambodian government extended a risk guarantee to the project and a 44-year BOT to China (Grimsditch, 1-60). This almost doubles the typical 25-year allotment, granting China substantial control over water and energy resources in the Mekong region (Burgos and Ear 2010). Under BOT arrangements, obligations to affected communities are more likely to fall through the cracks, in the absence of a clear identification of responsibilities between dam-builders and local authorities, owing to the handover of operations (Siciliano and Urban 2017).

According to provincial environmental authorities in Cambodia, the Kamchay dam's capacity could meet up to 60% of national electricity demand at its peak, also allowing for energy exportation to neighboring countries (Urban, 747-770). Despite its promising projects, the project was carried out with a problematic, loosely implemented EIA that failed to evaluate and rectify harms to approximately 22,000 rural residents (Wang and Zadek 2016). In fact, the full EIA was not complete nor approved by the Ministry of Environment before the project was implemented (Grimsditch 2012). Approvals were obtained seven months after the project's inauguration in July 2012 (Tan-Mullins, Urban, and Mang 2017). As a result, severe environmental degradation plagued the project's legacy, ranging from deforestation to fish stock depletion to disrupted migration of endangered species (Tan-Mullins, Urban, and Mang 2017).

One may ask what factors enable such violations of rules. Often, Chinese projects are negotiated in opaque settings between government and state-owned enterprises (Milne and Mahanty 2015). The closed-door, inter-state nature of infrastructure deals is characteristic of Chinese ventures in developing contexts, fuelling downstream neglect of local communities and their subsequent resistance. One consequence of opacity and a state-centric mentality to Chinese infrastructure deals is a lack of affinity with civil society interaction, meaning that SOEs are ill-suited to participate in community-based environmental engagement and respond effectively to grassroots-level discontent (Tan-Mullins, Urban, and Mang 2017).

When deals are reached at the central leadership level, local governments and parliamentary institutions in the host society also have less scrutiny and agency (Siciliano and Urban 2017). The Kamchay dam was agreed to under a $600 million aid package pledged by China in 2006, followed by a $1 billion commitment for multiple dams across Cambodia and a $280 million loan for other infrastructure in 2008 (Siciliano and Urban 2017). The weight of ambitious financing created a power asymmetry vis-à-vis local regulators in Cambodia, who were not equipped to oversee the observance of environmental policies and social safeguards. As a result, environmental enforcement is not prioritized, but rather relegated to largely inconsistent, retroactive, and patchwork implementation.

The Environmental Socialization of Chinese State-Owned Enterprises

In the over two decades since the introduction of China's Going Out Policy, Chinese state-owned enterprises have been increasingly sensitized to investment norms in overseas operations, including the implementation of environmental, social, and governance (ESG) procedures (Vannarith 2021). Nonetheless, a *de jure* incorporation of ESG principles in official documents does not equate a *de facto* application in practice, as demonstrated by the two case studies. The environmental record of Chinese investors abroad remains inconsistent and inadequate. Many Chinese investors continue to engage in traditional CSR activities, involving donations for disaster relief or other reactive philanthropic activities, rather than implementing social and environmental best practices at all stages of a given project (Tan-Mullins, Urban, and Mang 2017). A principal-agent dilemma is also evident, given the disjointed approach between the stipulated environmental concern of SOE leaders and that of their subsidiaries and on-the-ground employees, who are often disincentivized and ill-equipped to uphold compliance with relevant standards (Tan-Mullins, Urban, and Mang 2017).

As a result, Chinese projects have been criticized for failing to realize international sustainability standards and guidelines, many of which were originally propagated by Western-led international financial institutions. In fact, Chinese investments have gained a reputation for doing what Western investors will not: loan unconditionally, launch high-risk projects, and offer larger lump sums of finance (Urban, Siciliano and Nordensward 2018). The economic land concessions granted to China by Cambodia for the Sesan 2 dam, for example, were turned down by Western multilateral corporations, given their wariness of practices that could violate their due diligence and compliance obligations, including the payment of informal transaction fees (Young 2020). This is not unique to the Sesan 2 dam; rather, it is an overall sentiment of caution on the part of Western financiers in supporting risky infrastructure schemes with insufficient socio-environmental safeguards (Yeophantang 2014). On the other hand, China considers the host state's environmental regulations a matter of domestic affairs, shying away from taking a critical stance on environmental rules when investing abroad.

One must recognize that regulatory systems in the source state, host state, and at the inter/transnational level, each have pathologies that collectively contribute to adverse environmental outcomes in foreign investment. Starting with the source state, to improve the social and environmental performance of Chinese SOEs, it is crucial to introduce enforceable and transparent auditing regulations for companies operating in other countries, incorporating human rights and ESG considerations (Vannarith 2021). Currently, official guidance for Chinese SOEs exists in the form of a plethora of non-binding guidelines and administrative documents that contain undefined concepts with limited practical application at the project-level. Domestic frameworks are especially important, given the diffused, normative, and soft law-based frameworks in this subject area at the international level, which consequently are routinely downplayed or overlooked. This governance gap works to the detriment of Chinese investors as well, who are well aware of reputational and economic risks associated with fermenting criticisms against a Chinese commercial presence. As demonstrated by the two case studies, systemically unaudited behavior by both Chinese and Cambodian actors harms their shared political interests (Cheung and Hong 2019). As such, policymakers in China have begun to acquiesce to international standards and take domestic regulatory action to tackle its sustainability deficit when operating overseas.

On the part of Cambodian regulators, domestic institutions must enforce rules surrounding environmental impact assessments and the cultural and land rights of Indigenous communities (Underwater: Human rights Impacts of a China Belt and Road Project in Cambodia 2021). Although Cambodian laws on EIAs cover basic pillars such as approval before construction, transparency obligations, community consultation and others, the reality on the ground may differ. As evidenced by the Kamchay dam project, EIAs are often not completed in a timely fashion before projects are planned, developed, and executed – betraying the very *raison d'être* of EIAs to mitigate risks and adverse effects in the early stages. From planning and management to monitoring and evaluation, it is crucial for Cambodia (or any host state of foreign-financed mega-infrastructure projects) to adopt firm practices on EIAs, including verification mechanisms (Wang and Zadek 2016). This is undoubtedly a challenge for lower-middle income countries. A lack of data access, human capital, and institutional capacity makes it difficult to carry out environmental mandates (Vannarith 2021). Added to this mix is the need to coordinate and communicate across government departments and political hierarchies, especially with regard to Cambodia's Ministry of Environment and the Ministry of Industry, Mines and Energy (Urban et al., 232-244).

In sum, the disproportionate scale of Chinese SOE capital vis-à-vis the regulatory capacity and will of developing host states gives rise to the urgent need to build institutional capacity in host states to better respond to the presence of commercial actors that enjoy state-affiliated privileges in China. Rather than engaging in retroactive charity contributions and reparations, Chinese SOEs and policymakers (as well as other international partners) can consider technical assistance and capacity-building

measures that support a robust regulatory regime in host societies. While this may appear economically unappealing at first glance, the contribution of improved legal and policy frameworks would be the most compelling long-term positive externality of foreign investment for Cambodia, drawing a link between investment projects and the institutional development of the host state. It would effectively mitigate the backlash against an influx of Chinese capital in developing contexts, and address incentive structures that challenge the implementation of existing SOE frameworks set by headquarters.

Conclusion

As per China's Going Out policy, increasingly ambitious overseas ventures – predominantly state-owned enterprises in the infrastructure sector – have served to expand China's global economic linkages and enhance domestic interests. To improve the social and environmental performance of Chinese infrastructure projects abroad, businesses, private sector associations, international organizations, and the governments of China and host countries have a collective, pivotal role to play in strengthening the regulatory environment and implementation of existing social and environmental rules. In the case of Cambodia, the astronomical scale of Chinese investment, unique bilateral ties, and national narratives of economic progress can put affected communities in a precarious position, foregoing their livelihoods for broader national economic returns (Milne and Mahanty 2015). Attracting foreign investment for economic development should attribute a well-deserved focus on sustainable outcomes in the long-term, an objective that necessitates a focus on environmental and social sustainability as well.

When Cambodia last chaired ASEAN a decade ago, President Hu Jintao of China pledged millions in aid and loans on a visit before the ASEAN summit. As Chair of ASEAN this year, Cambodia has a timely incentive to ensure that domestic human rights considerations do not impair its international engagements and meaningfully serve its population. In the lead-up to the ASEAN Summit in November 2022, one hopes that Cambodia will prioritize the interest of its domestic audiences, including politically marginalized communities, in navigating economic linkages with Chinese stakeholders.

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TOURISM RECOVERY IN THE MEKONG REGION UNDER CAMBODIA'S ASEAN CHAIRMANSHIP

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Introduction

Since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the global economy has been severely affected as the virus has wreaked havoc on virtually all sectors. Besides global supply chain disruptions, the aviation industry and tourism sector were hit particularly hard. As restrictions on travel were imposed, there were 1.1 billion fewer international arrivals in 2020 than in 2019, costing as many as 100–120 million direct tourism jobs worldwide and a revenue loss of approximately US$1 trillion (Pololikashvili, 2021).

After more than two years of strictly imposing travel measures to control the outbreak, several countries are subsequently reopening their borders with minimal travel hassles or are gradually easing restrictions to revive the economy. As of May 2022, some ASEAN member states have already allowed vaccinated tourists to enter their countries without the need for travelers' quarantine and PCR tests before or upon arrival. This is a good sign, but challenges certainly remain for the tourism sector before it can return to the pre-pandemic level. As Cambodia is the current chair of ASEAN and is spearheading the reopening of the country and the region, this article reviews the current challenges and prospect for tourism recovery in the Mekong region with a particular focus on Cambodia.

Covid Impacts on Regional Tourism and Responses

Prior to the global outbreak of Covid-19, the Asia-Pacific region was second only to Europe in terms of share of international arrivals and accounted for about 25% of the total number. For the Mekong countries, more than 70 million tourists visited the region in 2019. Thailand topped the list as it received almost 40 million visitors, followed by Vietnam: 18 million visitors; Cambodia: 6.6 million visitors; Laos: 4.8 million visitors and Myanmar: 4.3 million visitors (UNWTO, 2019).

As the virus spread throughout the world, supply chains and international travel became immediate victims among the global economic sectors. In Southeast Asia alone, a loss of approximately 80% of revenue from tourism (amounting to US$137 billion) was recorded in 2020 (Vu, 2022). Similarly, the aviation operators in the region also suffered a great loss of revenue. Thai Airways International, for instance, scored a net loss of

close to US$5 billion in that same year (Martinus, 2022). The impacts were severely felt among tourism-related micro, small, and medium Enterprises (MSMEs). A recent study conducted by the Asian Vision Institute (AVI) found that as many as 84% of businesses lost between 50 and 75% of their revenues and had to reduce working hours and the number of employees. These MSMEs also reported their challenges with "the limited capacity and capability to transform their business model, financial access due to the lack of collateral, high interest rate, and complicated procedures" (AVI, 2021, p. 2).

In the 24th Meeting of ASEAN Tourism Ministers held through video conference in early February 2021, concerns were expressed over the impact of Covid-19 in the region. Among other things, the Ministers emphasized the need for a special focus on supporting tourism Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), reskilling and upskilling employees in the tourism sector, as well as fostering sustainable, inclusive and resilient tourism development. The last aspect included: (i) upgrading local communities and public-private sector participation in the tourism value chain; (ii) ensuring safety and security, prioritizing protection and management of heritage sites; and (iii) increasing responsiveness to environmental protection and climate change (ASEAN, 2021).

In 2021, only a few well-known tourist designations were opened for international entry under the so-called "sandbox scheme," whereby fully vaccinated tourists were allowed to visit a destination and remain there for a designated time period before being permitted to travel to the rest of the country. Thailand spearheaded this initiative by allowing tourists to visit Phuket Island in July 2021, while Krabi, Phang-Nga, and Ko Samui were eventually added to the list of sandbox destinations as well. Subsequently, other Southeast Asian cities such as Bali Island in Indonesia; Langkawi in Malaysia; and Kien Giang, Khanh Hoa, Da Nang, Quang Nam, Quang Ninh and Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam, and Sihanoukville in Cambodia also followed suit (Vu, 2022).

In January 2022, the 25th Meeting of the ASEAN Tourism Ministers took place in person for the first time after two years in Sihanoukville, Cambodia. The meeting noted that 2021 continued to see a sharp decline in international arrivals by approximately 90 percent, with average hotel rate occupancy of 27.45 percent – in spite of the presence of domestic travelers (ASEAN, 2022). Nevertheless, Cambodia as Chair was congratulated for guiding the development of the Post-COVID-19 Recovery Plan for ASEAN Tourism and the ASEAN Guidelines on Hygiene and Safety for Professionals and Communities in the Tourism Industry (with the support from Australia). Intended to be a mechanism to raise the competitiveness and attractiveness of ASEAN as a preferred tourism destination, the Guidelines cover eight tourism and tourism-related sectors: accommodation, restaurants, facilities, spa and wellness, ecotourism/community-based tourism, travel and tour operation, theme parks and convention centers (ASEAN, 2022). As a national responsive measure, Cambodian Economy and Finance Minister Aun Pornmoniroth recently announced an intervention scheme worth US$150 million,

co-financed by the government and other financial institutions, to restore and improve tourism businesses' competitiveness and help Cambodia "become one of the main tourism destinations in the region and in the world" (Kang, 2022).

Owing to vigorous vaccination campaigns and the recent drop of infection cases in the region, an increasing number of countries are reopening to international tourists by minimizing travel requirement. Cambodia, for instance, has dropped all quarantine and test-taking requirements for fully vaccinated visitors to the country. As of May 2021, visitors could also enter Thailand without a need for quarantine and undertaking COVID test, although they are required to obtain a Thailand Pass and an insurance coverage package worth US$10,000. On May 9, 2022, Laos also fully reopened the country to vaccinated tourists as no quarantine and testing were required. According to the latest update, Vietnam still requires travelers to take a PCR test within 72 hours (or a rapid Antigen test within 24 hours) before entering the country and obtain a US$10,000 insurance coverage. Similarly, after two years of closure, Myanmar has also reopened and resumed e-visa services, although vaccinated tourists are still required to take a PCR test and purchase a local medical insurance coverage for up to US$25,000.

Prospects and Challenges for Recovery

Insofar as the Mekong region is concerned, there are signs for hope for a gradual recovery of the tourism sector. During the latest Khmer New Year holiday in April 2022, the Kingdom recorded nearly 4.6 million domestic tourists (including 4.5 million Cambodians and nearly 30,000 foreign residents), a number that is almost comparable to the pre-pandemic level (Hom, 2022). Similar trends can also be observed in Thailand (Taylor, 2022) and Vietnam (Tomoya, 2022), while Laos is only beginning to ease up local travel restrictions. Myanmar is an obvious exception due to the country's ongoing political crisis.

As the current chair of ASEAN, Cambodia adopted the theme "A.C.T: Addressing Challenges Together). Regional tourism recovery is in fact a prioritized agenda item for Cambodia's ASEAN chairmanship. In his interview with ASEAN*Focus*, Cambodian Tourism Minister Thong Khon noted that ASEAN Tourism Ministers "fully supported the recommendations of Prime Minister Hun Sen regarding the reopening of both intra and international ASEAN Tourism, the development of a standardized COVID-19 vaccination recognition system for ASEAN, and the relaxation of travel restrictions for travelers within and to ASEAN" (ASEANFocus, 2022, p. 28). In line with ASEAN's Tourism Recovery Plan, more than 150 tour companies are expected to co-organize a workshop on the opening of the Cambodia-Vietnam-Thailand Economic Corridor in Bangkok, focusing on the promotion of coastal tourism packages in the coastal provinces of the three countries (Reaksmey, 2022).

Another positive note for the gradual recovery of tourism in the Mekong countries would be the official launch of the China-Laos railway as operations began in December 2021. The railway, running from Laos's capital Vientiane to the border with China at Boten (which connects with the line that continues upward through Yunnan Province in China), had been reportedly carrying over 2.25 million passengers and more than 1.31 million tons of cargo as of April 2022 (TheStar, 2022). While China is still assertively pursuing its "Zero COVID" strategy and is essentially closed for international travel, it is expected that the railway will be able to boost tourist arrivals from China to Laos – and by extension – other Mekong countries such as Thailand as well in the future.

Despite these good prospects, the road to full recovery of the tourism sector remains bumpy and uneven among the GMS countries. For starters, the civil unrest in Myanmar means that the country will not be able to attract tourists for some time to come. As Tin Maw, General Manager of the elephant sanctuary Green Hill Valley grimly noted: "Tourism [in Myanmar] will not be able to rebound this year without stability, peace and tranquility – the current situation is even worse than we expected" (Carruthers, 2022). In fact, activist groups have even called on potential tourists to boycott traveling to Myanmar lest their dollars end up in the junta's coffers (Channel News Asia, 2022).

Secondly, even if the other Mekong countries have taken bold steps to reopen the borders, they will continue to face challenges posed by the pandemic beyond their control. As Daniel McDowell eloquently suggested: "Not dissimilar [to the lingering symptoms after recovery from COVID] are the pandemic's economic and financial impacts. The initial symptoms of the crisis were acutely painful—economic downturns, business closures and supply chain disruptions. But now, as governments reopen their societies, they are realizing that some of the pandemic's challenges may not soon abate. The global economy has come down with its own version of "Long COVID" (McDowell, 2022).

Furthermore, the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine and the ensuing war between the two states have culminated in economic uncertainty and pressures across the globe. As far as the tourism sector is concerned, the surging inflation is making accommodation and transport services more expensive, hence hurting businesses in general (UNWTO, 2022). On a regional level, as Minister Thong Khon also postulated, some challenges will arise due to the lack of trained tourism professionals (compounded by the fact that some of them have switched to other sectors to seek alternative opportunities during the pandemic) as well as the wait-and-see approach among tourism investors owing to the negative impacts experienced in the past two years (ASEAN*Focus*, 2022).

Notwithstanding all of the challenges ahead, however, the Mekong countries can and should turn the crisis into an opportunity in the longer run. Until international tourism numbers reach the pre-pandemic level in the forthcoming years, the governments

should utilize this moment to foster the multiplication of sustainable ecotourism products that take into account the preservation of the environment and cultural heritage, as well as improving local livelihoods and alleviating grassroot poverty. Similarly, the slow pace of tourist arrivals to previously popular destinations means that renovation in neglected areas hitherto can now be undertaken. The case of Siem Reap in Cambodia, which has now emerged as a more infrastructurally-developed, greener (with the addition of the Angkor Botanic Garden), and cyclist-friendly tourist city after taking a big hit during pandemic, is a laudable case worth considering for replication across the region.

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PATHWAYS TO LEGITIMACY: ASEAN CENTRALITY IN A TURBULENT INDO-PACIFIC

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Introduction

2022 remains a challenging year for ASEAN. The Russian invasion of Ukraine, the challenges of COVID-19, lingering issues in Myanmar, global economic slowdown, and tense great power rivalry in the region have brought so much stress to the regional organization. In the middle of these crises is the debate about the continued salience and potency of ASEAN's cherished norm: *ASEAN centrality*. ASEAN has diligently asserted and some observers say jealously guarded its centrality in the regional security architecture. A by-product of ASEAN's convening power in the region, centrality is the relatively newer articulation of ASEAN's set of norms. What used to be the ASEAN way, is now its centrality. But unlike the ASEAN way, centrality is asserted more toward external actors may they be neighboring states, dialogue partners, great powers, and even international organizations and institutions.

Over the past four decades, ASEAN has steadily asserted its centrality. As former Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa has observed.

> at critical junctures in ASEAN's journey … the association has seized the initiative; providing leadership and demonstrating resourcefulness at a time of uncertainties, with concrete and transformative policies. All throughout–in the final analysis–the countries outside ASEAN deferred to it because ASEAN has asserted and *earned* its position of centrality. (Natalegawa 2018).

Asserting centrality, however, is an assertion made more effective if there is pursuit of institutional reform within ASEAN. As enduring structures that regulate behavior and stabilize expectations, institutions are vital for the pursuit of mutual interests and shared goals. Institutions helped ASEAN - born in a regional milieu characterized by conflict, distrust, and uncertainty - successfully reshape its environment to create a modicum of stability, peace, and prosperity. By acting in concert in the midst of cross-cutting diversity and political tensions, ASEAN made itself an attractive institutional mechanism for powers big and small.

In the past decades, this regional organization's convening and agenda-setting powers grew at pace comfortable to its members – and at the same time unthreatening to its neighbors.

ASEAN's evolving institutional configuration is a by-product of both its evolution as well as flexibility to respond to the most pressing political, economic, and socio-cultural challenges that affect its members. Underpinning its institutions and multilateral processes such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN+3, the East Asia Summit (EAS) is ASEAN centrality, a collective principle of action of and a shared vision for the Asian regional security architecture.

It is said that one can become a victim of one's own achievements. Critics spared no punches against ASEAN when they reduced it to an ineffective, compromised, and paralyzed community (e.g., Desker 2017). While in the past criticisms emanated from its decision-making practices, palpable inaction on pressing issues, and lack of liberal and democratic credentials, current discontent over ASEAN focuses on the possible erosion of its cohesion and credibility as a community.

Bolstering ASEAN's relevance today requires a smart combination of institutional upgrading, calibration, and retooling guided by a strategic appreciation of Asia-Pacific's volatile environment. Domestic developments within member states, collective learning from past failures and mistakes, and leadership fueled by political will are all crucial to jointly undertaking institutional reform.

In the end, the long-overdue changes to ASEAN's institutions and regional architecture should contribute to the overlapping goals of credibility and cohesion, as key elements in reinforcing centrality. This is critical to overcoming the fear of increasing relevance and worsening polarization the regional organization currently suffers from.

A more cohesive ASEAN will make it more credible to manage regional security, and a viable platform for pursuing mutual interests. Similarly, a more credible ASEAN in the eyes of its citizens and dialogue partners will contribute to a more credible community that is truly people-centered and contributes to a region of peace, freedom, neutrality, and prosperity.

ASEAN institutions: A Community and A Driving Force

As a regional organization of small powers and developing economies, ASEAN's institutional evolution was guided by a sensitivity to its internal contexts as well as recognition of the prevalent Cold War realities. It was founded after three failed attempts because of external meddling, intense distrust, and domestic distractions. Lacking similarities in political regimes and societal composition, ASEAN's founding members realized that common aspirations are the ties that bind them. But learning from abortive regional experiments, they carefully embedded ASEAN in a flexible legal and institutional structure.

ASEAN's founding legal document, The Bangkok Declaration, was less a binding treaty than an expression of shared aspirations to simultaneously build national resilience while fostering solidarity. Defying the path treaded by other regional groupings, it did

not anchor itself at first on economic integration, nor possessing similar political systems. ASEAN's essential "region-ness" lied in the common perception of vulnerabilities that could only be addressed by an organization that enhances sovereignty and promotes security in the most comprehensive sense.

Over time, it was ASEAN's flexibility that dictated the gradual pace of its institutional growth. It took ASEAN four decades to formally establish itself a rules-based regime through a charter. But rather than impose limitation on the scope of action of its members, this formal document gave legal standing legitimacy to existing informal practices collectively known as the 'ASEAN Way'. Unfortunately, ASEAN is even unable to carry out a serious review of its charter. This could have been the opportunity to catalyze reform measures and new norms within the organization.

The 'ASEAN Way' is anchored in norms such as non-intervention, consensus, and face-saving that are likewise shared by other regional bodies – and arguably even more so (culturally) in Asia. However, it is the strict interpretation of these norms that has caused discontent. For example, consensus decision-making does not imply unanimity or veto powers for every member-state. Its history furthermore demonstrated that the ASEAN way has not been consistently used lending credence to the observation of the group's 'organized hypocrisy.'[1]

It is this emphasis on informality that enabled ASEAN to incrementally be comfortable in creating other noncommittal institutions, such as a human rights mechanism and other bodies that helped realize and further strengthen its community. In the same vein, ASEAN's forward-looking perspective encouraged it to set ambitious integration targets. While a common currency, passport, parliament, court, security policy, remain elusive, the organization has painted its integration goals in broad and bold strokes, as contained in the Bali Concords and ASEAN Visions.

Indeed, no serious ASEAN observer would think its vision of a people-centered development, a community of caring societies and dynamic development can be fully implemented within its target date for each. These goals are future directions of the region commonly shared by its ASEAN member states. In the end, they are as much roadmaps as they are by-products of meaningful community-building.

ASEAN's aspirations went beyond the geographic space it occupies. This stemmed from a strategic appreciation of its complex interdependence with big and middle powers in Asia, and beyond. Related to this is the acknowledgment that ASEAN member states' security and development are interlocked with these powerful states. The organization's ambition was less to be a regional hegemon than a safe venue where

[1] *An example was the ASEAN troika during the Cambodian conflict. See Robert Krasner, Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).*

erstwhile adversaries can sit together, discuss common issues, and possibly pursue cooperation.

Great, major and middle powers took notice of ASEAN's potential to be a defining element in the regional security architecture. ASEAN+3, ARF, and EAS were the tangible outcomes of an imaginative ASEAN that envisioned the possibilities of multilateralism despite inherent tensions and antagonisms. As a driving force of regional cooperation, ASEAN as a non-threatening convener was made possible precisely because of its perceived credibility to act in concert as one community, and its equidistance from superpowers.

Moving Forward

How can ASEAN surpass these traps and overcome these existential threats? Part of the solution lies within the current institutional infrastructure and toolkit. It requires less innovation, but more political will and decisive action. The way forward, however, is for ASEAN is also to tap into its flexibility by taking creative and bold action. What is at stake is the organization's credibility and cohesion. Unless maintained or restored, the exit costs for ASEAN member-states will be dangerously low.

For example, the ASEAN troika was celebrated as one historical moment in which the regional grouping exhibited the necessary resolve and flexibility required to take decisive action during a crisis. As one astute ASEAN observer stated, 'It is time that we give life to the agreed mechanisms and processes to take cognizance of crisis situations such as the High Council under the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and other mechanisms provided for under the ASEAN Charter' (Abad 2017). The more ASEAN institutions remain just on paper, the more its irrelevance and polarization traps become more paralyzing for itself.

Old thinking, false impressions, and strict formality cannot continue to dictate ASEAN's relationships with the region's various sectors. For example, its continued stubbornness and lack of sincerity in engaging civil society needs to be replaced with a tolerant and open attitude that extends to other actors such as business. A people-centered ASEAN does not only interface with its larger public at predetermined points with strict rules of engagement. A way forward is to give life and substance to the institutional mechanisms within ASEAN's community pillars to constantly engage the mélange o of actors and players that it now shares in the regional stage. Failure to result in possible disengagement of these sectors and ASEAN's own future irrelevance.

If ASEAN refuses to reform and upgrade its institutions based on demands from above and below, its collective stand on issues will be defined less by geostrategic realities. ASEAN's first 50 years has been defined by sweeping divisive issues under the rug, a stop-gap strategy that will no longer work in the future. It also needs to decrease the uncertainty induced by leadership changes within its member-states.

Finally, ASEAN's institutions need to evolve into entities that structure incentives, prolong time horizons, and reshape expectations, particularly on the imperatives of acting in concert. The secret of ASEAN's success in fostering peace and prosperity was its ability to mutually pursue national resilience and regional resilience. Under polarizing conditions, ASEAN must have the necessary mechanisms to facilitate a common stance that is mutually beneficial. A cohesive community that is unable to do so loses its credibility to be a collective entity, with a single voice.

ASEAN's institutions will be critical in its path in the next 50 years. It can continue to cling to old habits and become trapped in a downward spiral leading to its irrelevance and marginalization in the regional order, or it can defy current cynicism and take bold but pragmatic steps to activate, substantiate, and transform its institutional infrastructure in order to revitalize its centrality among its members.

ASEAN within Great Power Rivalry

The stress toward ASEAN is clearly seen as it is in the center for great power competition that is increasingly becoming a fierce rivalry between hostile countries. Russia's invasion of Ukraine showed that it is not completely out of the great power competition that seems to have centered on the United States and China. Russia's ability to spoil regional and global stability through its revisionist pursuits have repercussions to all states including Southeast Asia.

There is little doubt that Southeast Asia will be the theater of great power rivalry between the US and China. But more beyond the space where these two great powers compete, this rivalry can drag ASEAN into their bitter competition. The different regional flashpoints – South China Sea, East China Sea, North Korea, and Taiwan – could all spark a direct confrontation that could lead to devastating consequences. This is a wakeup call for ASEAN. If China invades Taiwan, it will severely disrupt the region economically and politically. It will activate the US-led alliance in the region, it will paralyze the global economy, and might cause a huge humanitarian crisis that will affect its proximate neighbors such as the Philippines and perhaps Vietnam.

At present, ASEAN's own practices and actions so far makes it ill-equipped to respond to the pressures and tensions from great power competition. This has led to the proliferation of "minilateralism" projects that many observers assume directly undermine multilateralist projects such as ASEAN. This is a debatable matter as ASEAN has historically allowed minilateral initiatives among its members but with ASEAN remaining at the core of these endeavors. Unfortunately, these "minilaterals" feature considerable power asymmetry if ASEAN member-states opt to join. They don't enjoy the political equality they possess under the ASEAN multilateral framework.

It is in this regard that ASEAN must renew its legitimacy within itself and in the larger Indo-Pacific region. Legitimacy is often a by-product of procedure and performance. ASEAN should find a way to renew the legitimacy it previously enjoyed from great, middle, and small powers in the region. It must do so by rethinking its procedures but also generating concrete results through palpable good and active performance. If not, it will just realize what ASEAN observers have feared for years, that it will be bypassed in all security-related matters in the Indo-Pacific. And equally worst, is that it will simply be an entity that arranged chairs and meetings for all powers that can use ASEAN in the pursuit of their own interests. ASEAN won't be central to the region, it won't be a driving force, and it will not be the determining influence in the regional security architecture.

By filling the gaps in its integration process, ASEAN can regain some of its credibility, and present itself as a cohesive actor that can once again shape the regional security architecture in the Asia-Pacific. By being truthful to one another and having a perspective grounded on realities, ASEAN can become the regional organization that could once again attract powers big and small. To be taken seriously by its people and external actors, ASEAN must take institution-building seriously.

ASEAN centrality does not mean complete neutrality in superpower competition/rivalry in the region. One thing that ASEAN needs to assert is to undermine the hegemonic narrative that "right makes might". Next year should not be 2012 once again. As what a political philosopher said "'history repeats itself', 'first as tragedy, then as farce'. If 2012 happened again, it will further delegitimize ASEAN centrality not only in the eyes of its external partners and actors but more significantly to its members.

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CAMBODIA'S APPROACH TOWARDS THE MYANMAR CRISIS DURING THE 2022 ASEAN CHAIRMANSHIP

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On the morning of the first of February 2021, Myanmar experienced a military coup led by the country's military commander-in-chief Min Aung Hlaing. The coup came after the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), an entity backed by the Myanmar military's army, failed to secure enough seats in parliament to form a government following the 2020 general election against the National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Aung San Suu Kyi.

The coup immediately brought attention from the international community - especially from ASEAN. Sanctions were imposed on the military regime while the coup and concomitant violence were heavily condemned together with calls for the reinstatement of the democratically elected government of Myanmar. ASEAN, under the chairmanship of Brunei Darussalam in 2021, made many attempts to try to resolve and to meditate the Myanmar issue through the appointment of an ASEAN Special Envoy to diplomatically engage with the junta and the establishment of the ASEAN Five Point Consensus.

However, the Myanmar crisis is not an issue that can be solved via a single ASEAN mandate. Cambodia, as the 2022 chair of ASEAN, placed many issues as priorities such as the post-COVID-19 economic recovery, climate change, Timor-Leste's membership application in ASEAN, the UK – ASEAN full dialogue partnership, the Code of Conduct (COC) of the South China Sea, and most vibrantly, the Myanmar crisis (Suy, 2021). Despite the challenges, Cambodia has made two important diplomatic approaches to mediate the crisis, at the time of this writing.

First Approach by Prime Minister Hun Sen

Just a week after assuming the ASEAN chairmanship, Cambodia's Prime Minister Hun Sen paid an official visit to Myanmar to meet with General Min Aung Hlaing, who is viewed by many as an illegitimate leader in light of the means by which he has risen to power (Yee, 2022). The visit was intended to strengthen bilateral relations between Cambodia and Myanmar while also finding a way to restore peace and distribute humanitarian aid to the affected population as part of ASEAN's Five Point Consensus (Bala, 2022).

The visit by Prime Minister Hun Sen appeared to elicit positive steps toward the resolution of the crisis in Myanmar. For instance, the junta appeared to be more open up to dialogue and cooperation with the current ASEAN chair compared to earlier engagement. Prime Minister Hun Sen was able to conduct a high-official visit to Myanmar during the first week of Cambodia's ASEAN chairmanship, making the prime minister the first foreign leader to successfully conduct a bilateral visit to Myanmar after the coup (Thanthong-Knight, 2022).

In addition, General Min Aung Hlaing, during the visit by the prime minister, declared a five-month ceasefire with all Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) until the end of 2022 (Phnom Penh Post. 2022). Furthermore, the junta agreed to enable ASEAN to deliver humanitarian assistance to the people of Myanmar without discrimination and alienation while the current ASEAN Special Envoy – Cambodia's Foreign Minister Prak Sokhonn – received support from the junta to fulfill his duties in the implementation of the five-point consensus (Chheang, 2022).

However, despite reiterations from the Royal Government of Cambodia that the visit was not intended to legitimize the junta but to push for a ceasefire and end violence (Bala, S. 2022), there have been opponents of the visit. It was heavily criticized by some ASEAN member states – such as Malaysia's top diplomat; Myanmarese and Cambodians who oppose the military regime; the National Unity Government of Myanmar's Ambassador to ASEAN, etc. – as partially recognizing the military regime (Phnom Penh Post. 2022). Although the junta committed to a ceasefire during the visit, there are still questions about its effectiveness as the regime continued to conduct airstrikes in Kayah state (e.g., on the 9th and 12th January 2022, respectively) sparking fierce clashes between the junta's forces and the people's defense force (The Irrawaddy. 2022).

What immediately followed from the prime minister's visit to Myanmar was the postponement of the ASEAN Foreign Minister Retreat, initially planned from 18 – 19 January 2022, to a month later on 16 – 17 February 2022. The rescheduling of this annual ASEAN Foreign Minister Retreat revealed concerns over ASEAN unity among the member states that the "disunity" in ASEAN was clearly proven and revealed with the postponement, which also led some observers to believe that it was a signal of the "unchangeable" disapproval from the majority of ASEAN members towards the Myanmar military regime (Jaipragas, 2022).

After some criticism from the regional grouping regarding the visit, Cambodia reevaluated its bold initiative. The non-invitation of the junta to the ASEAN Foreign Ministers Retreat in mid-February signified that Cambodia has focused on collaborative engagement and the importance of keeping ASEAN unity intact. Cambodia chose to request Myanmar to send a non-political representative to join the annual retreat. Although the junta's representative was excluded from the meeting, Myanmar was allowed to participate in the meeting as an observer (Cheang, 2022).

Second Approach by the ASEAN Special Envoy

Minor progress toward the five-point consensus showed some, preliminary momentum when Foreign Minister Prak Sokhonn, conducted a three-day visit to Myanmar, from 21 – 23 March 2022. The purposes of the visit were to revisit the outcome of Prime Minister Hun Sen's trip to Myanmar in early January, to facilitate the implementation of the five-point consensus,and to deliver humanitarian assistance to the vulnerable in Myanmar (Khmer Times, 2022). However, this visit met with both controversial progress and significant challenges.

The ASEAN Special Envoy was able to meet with the junta's leader General Min Aung Hlaing and three Myanmar junta-appointed ministers: Wunna Maung Lwin, chairman of the Task Force on ASEAN Humanitarian; Ko Ko Hlaing; and chairman of the National Solidarity and Peacemaking Committee Lieutenant General Yar Pyae. In these meetings, the ASEAN envoy was able to discuss the situation in Myanmar to create frameworks and conditions that could end the ongoing violence, push for the promotion of the five-point consensus implementation, deliver humanitarian assistance, and encourage diplomatic dialogue among the parties involved (MOFAIC. 2022).

Moreover, foreign minister Prak Sokhonn was able to meet with the UN Specialized Agencies and the ASEAN Ambassadors/representatives in Myanmar to discuss the situation on the ground, assess the possibility of humanitarian relief, and carry-on effective coordination effort to end violence and deliver necessary medical and humanitarian supplies to communities in Myanmar (MOFAIC, 2022). This signaled – at the time - an initial breakthrough that the junta had perhaps chosen to open up its door to Cambodia to mediate the prolonged issue and to make progress toward the success of the peace plan implementation.

However, the visit also entailed some challenges. First, although the ASEAN Special Envoy was able to donate the humanitarian supplies to Myanmar, the aid was stockpiled under the control of the junta which was yet to be distributed to the vulnerable, as planned, due to continuous conflicts among different parties (Cheang, 2022). This yielded questions as to the effectiveness of the -point consensus as its realization was still minimal after one year (Seah & Lin, 2022).

Second, the foreign minister was able to meet with junta-appointed officials but was not able to meet with all parties involved, as stated in the five-point consensus, most notably the ousted democratic leader Aung San Suu Kyi. At the time of writing, the Tatmadaw blocked Aung San Suu Kyi from meeting with any international officials due to ongoing legal proceedings brought against her by the junta (Cheang, 2022). During the press conference after his visit to Myanmar, the ASEAN envoy stated that the direct request to meet with Aung San Suu Kyi would result in failure to the plan to visit Myanmar, as a whole, based on the experience of the previous ASEAN envoy (The Irrawaddy, 2022).

Although many depicted the visit more as a performance than reality due to too many unaccomplished tasks, the ASEAN envoy was able to establish an engaging atmosphere for the Tatmadaw to open and allow room for diplomatic peaceful conflict settlement of this conflict. It is without doubt that challenges still remain for future visits.

Challenges for Future Engagement

Even though ASEAN should be complimented for getting the junta to accept the five-point consensus in 2021, the implementation of the peace plan remains stalled due to the non-cooperative manner of the junta. Without cooperation from the junta, ASEAN engagement with Myanmar for a peaceful conflict settlement is not be possible. Although the junta is the problem, it is also part of the solution for peace in Myanmar; hence, getting the junta to view resolution of the problem as in its best interests is still a challenge.

The previous two visits by the Cambodian officials illustrated that the junta would create rooms for engagement only if it is in line with its political agenda, and obviously not with all actors. Therefore, if ASEAN is willing to go with the junta's demands, it would appear as if the junta dictates to ASEAN. This could undermine the legitimacy of the association as a whole while strengthening Min Aung Hlaing's voice in ASEAN.

Future visits by the ASEAN envoy are inherently undermined by the limitations set by Myanmar's military regime. The second visit by the ASEAN envoy proved that even though ASEAN is able to deliver humanitarian assistance to Myanmar, getting these supplies to the vulnerable remains a problem.

Recommendations and Conclusion

To date there have been neither international bodies nor regional organizations that have come up with a significantly better approach to solve the Myanmar issue than ASEAN. Thus, ASEAN and its five-point consensus are still the most suitable actors in the Myanmar crisis. That being said, there are some areas for review as ASEAN moves forward.

First, the other ASEAN member states need to support and empower the ASEAN special envoy with constructive and implementable strategies that are backed up with equitable and appropriate human resources to ensure flexible approaches when engaging with the Tatmadaw. ASEAN's peer pressure against its own special envoy will only undermine the trust of the member states; rather, ASEAN needs to deliver a frank message to the junta that it needs to proceed with what has been agreed in the five-point consensus or risk its own sustainability within ASEAN.

Second, on the topic of future visits, the ASEAN envoy needs to have a proactive strategy with a firm and fixed stance to pressure the junta to comply with the agreed five-point consensus. The bloc should also give a clear signal to the Tatmadaw that it will not hesitate to take appropriate action should there be no action from the junta on the five-point consensus.

Third, ASEAN should cooperate and consult closely with relevant actors that can influence the Tatmadaw to work cooperatively with the ASEAN five-point consensus. Those actors are mainly the United States, China, Russia, Japan, and Australia - while also consulting with other international bodies such as the United Nations and the European Union as well.

Fourth, ASEAN must stress and reiterate that it will not support the junta's call for re-election in the near future. By supporting the re-election call in Myanmar, it will give a message to the international community that ASEAN rejected the previous election result that was done based on the voice of the Myanmar people.

Fifth, the ASEAN envoy needs a wider mandate to ensure the progress of its mission in creating a diplomatic dialogue with Myanmar. One year for each ASEAN special envoy would be too short to operationalize the strategy of engaging with the junta.

Sixth, the ASEAN envoy should explore the possibility with other ASEAN member states of engaging not only with Myanmar's military regime but also with the other parties and actors including the NUG, the Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs), China, the United States, and India who have the influence and leverage to place greater pressure on the junta.

The success in the implementation of the ASEAN peace plan turns on how effective ASEAN can encourage the Tatmadaw to implement the five-point consensus while taking into account all other concerns expressed by domestic and international stakeholders. Based on the abovementioned, it will not be easy, but the five-point consensus is all that ASEAN has. If Cambodia fails, ASEAN will fail and Myanmar will lapse back to isolation under military rule for the foreseeable future.

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REFLECTIONS ON ASEAN'S JOURNEY TOWARD A COHESIVE AND RESPONSIVE COMMUNITY

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I am indeed privileged to share my reflections on ASEAN's journey toward a cohesive and responsive Community. Doing so, I would like to answer three key questions: (i) What has ASEAN done right? (ii) What can ASEAN improve? And (iii) Where is ASEAN is heading?

Fifty-five years ago, on 8 August 1967, the founding fathers of ASEAN signed the Bangkok Declaration (ASEAN, THE ASEAN DECLARATION (BANGKOK DECLARATION) 1967) forming the coalition of the original five members – Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand – with an aim to keep outside powers from interfering in the internal affairs of ASEAN and to lead the region of Southeast Asia toward peace and sustainable cooperation. By 1999, ASEAN succeeded in grouping ten member countries, thereby reinforcing its aims and purposes through cooperation in the economic, social, cultural, technical, educational and other fields, and in the promotion of regional peace and stability through abiding respect for justice and the rule of law and adherence to the principles of the United Nations Charter.

From the time of its inception in 1967 until now, ASEAN has evolved in stages on the basis of consensus, non-interference, and at a pace comfortable to every member state. The hallmark "ASEAN Charter"[1] was adopted only in 2008, the "ASEAN Community came into being in 2016" (Letchumanan 2015) with the adoption of the new " Community Vision 2025"[2], all of which are designed to pick up more steam for the sake of navigating through a period of strategic and political hazards and economic stagnation as well as concerns and uncertainty stemming from the relentless major power competitions and the unyielding outbreak of the pandemic.

Moving forward the realization of ASEAN Community, ASEAN must redouble its efforts to realize all of the commitments prescribed in the ASEAN Community Vision 2025. Furthermore, ASEAN must see to it that the soon-to-be-adopted ASEAN Community's Post-2025 Vision (ASEAN 2020) maintains necessary foresight to take on the megatrends and the dire geopolitical and socio-economic landscape faced by the region of Southeast Asia and the wider region of the Indo-Pacific so as to put in place

[1] *See The ASEAN Charter: https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/images/archive/publications/ASEAN-Charter.pdf*
[2] *See ASEAN Community Vision 2025: https://www.asean.org/wp-content/uploads/images/2015/November/aec-page/ASEAN-Community-Vision-2025.pdf*

effective mechanisms that would allow the core elements of the ASEAN Community's Post-2025 Vision be properly implemented, adequately monitored, and effectively followed up to strengthen ASEAN's capacity and institutional effectiveness.

As ASEAN enters into a new era of building an interconnected community with pride and accomplishments, ASEAN must make even greater strides and command greater respect among both its member states as well as its dialogue partners to maintain its rightful place as an effective driver for peace, stability, and prosperity in Southeast Asia and beyond. ASEAN has to overcome remaining, overwhelming challenges at the global and regional levels that stubbornly test ASEAN's principles, cohesion, institutions, and relevance.

This year, in particular, ASEAN has been confronted with a set of hard-pressing issues that could potentially be a path-altering moment in the institution's history as the regional bloc seeks to address the extremely diverse and significant set of challenges confronting contemporary Southeast Asia and thereby testing ASEAN's relevance.

The evolving regional and global order as well as the geostrategic landscape in the Indo-Pacific region require ASEAN not to take its future for granted. In the foreseeable future, ASEAN needs to capitalize on its strengths to do more to enhance its ability to address long-standing issues internally and externally that threaten its relevance in the safeguarding of peace, stability, and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific region.

What Has ASEAN Done Right?

Regarding the right things ASEAN has done, over the last 55 years ASEAN has created numerous opportunities to fix many shortcomings and strengthen hopes for a better future for a Southeast Asia and beyond that is truly peaceful, stable, and prosperous. Most notably among the opportunities created has been the manifestation of the development of various instruments and mechanisms to enable regional cooperation and strengthen ASEAN's institutional presence in engaging the world.

ASEAN's hallmarks include the creation of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TCA)[3] that was signed in 1976 and serves as an essential code of conduct in the management of the behavior of interstate relations; the ASEAN Charter that entered into force in 2008, setting out the governing principles on how ASEAN intends to conduct its affairs; and the ASEAN Community Blueprints (the ASEAN Economic Community 2025, ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint 2025, and ASEAN Political-Security Community) describing broad goals, objectives, strategies, and targets which are intended to make ASEAN politically cohesive, economically integrated, socially responsible and a truly people-oriented, people-centered rules-

[3] *See The Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) https://asean.org/our-communities/asean-political-security-community/outward-looking-community/treaty-of-amity-and-cooperation-in-southeast-asia-tac/*

based ASEAN. Realized at the end of December 2015, this groundbreaking endeavor was complemented by the adoption of the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) Blueprint 2025 that will further boost the efforts in building a more cohesive ASEAN Community.

What Can ASEAN Improve?

Notwithstanding the resounding successes noted above, there is still need for improvements for ASEAN in the next 50 years. The glass is still half empty and unless the grouping can successfully resolve ongoing and persisting challenges, internally and externally, then ASEAN's preeminent status still will remain elusive.

Internally, ASEAN needs to accelerate its integration process to mitigate economic disparities and inequality among member states; there remains much to accomplish in narrowing the development gaps for the lesser developed ASEAN nations. The development gap between the ASEAN-6 (Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines) and Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam (collectively known as the CLMV countries) remains significant. The idea of a cohesive ASEAN community will be a hollow dream if the implementation of the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) third phase (ASEAN-Korea Cooperation Fund 2021) launch at the ASEAN Summit in 2016 is not able to narrow the development gaps within ASEAN. This means that challenges identified in the Review of IAI Work Plan IV and the Review of IAI Work Plan III and the Monitoring Reporting, and Evaluation (MRE) System ASEAN commissioned by the Australia Development Cooperation Program (Australia Development Cooperation Program 2020) must be addressed squarely, if the bloc is to succeed in furthering its own regional integration.

There are observers who agree that democracy has been in decline in recent years across Asia (Banyan 2021). ASEAN should proactively pay attention to the deteriorating condition of civil liberty and political rights throughout many of its member states. ASEAN must ensure that the exercise of power at the national level promotes democracy and uplifts human rights instead of dogmatically handling societal grievances. Each individual ASEAN member state should avoid the abuse of power and ensure its journey towards liberal democracy does not regress and that political freedom is assured and that freedom of expression and free media are observed to promote the spirit of caring and tolerance to maintain the bloc's liberal agenda intact.

Although ASEAN Community Building programs are designed for a better future for more than 650 million ASEAN citizens, the region is not there yet in terms of making ASEAN politically cohesive, economically integrated, and socially responsible. ASEAN citizens have no clear understanding of what ASEAN does, nor its implications to their lives. There is a need to foster greater awareness to all segments of society throughout the ASEAN region such that all its citizens may be better informed and more involved in the community-building process. Improvement must be forthcoming to ensure full

implementation of the three pillars of ASEAN Community Vision 2025 – Political Security, Economic, and Social Cultural communities which call for a community with enhanced institutional capacity through improved ASEAN work processes and coordination, increased effectiveness and efficiency in the work of all ASEAN organs and bodies, and a strengthened ASEAN Secretariat and enhance ASEAN institutional presence at the national, regional, and international levels.

The regional bloc needs to gradually move away from the informal, consensual style of cooperation toward an increased formalization or legalization of regional institutions. ASEAN must ensure that the scope of its regionalism is moving forward steadfastly to overcome internal strains and structural changes in Asia's international relations, particularly to enhance its ability to facilitate cooperation (however limited) in diverse areas of common regional interest by observing rules-based approaches while concomitantly reconciling conflicting national interests. By doing so, ASEAN will remain a crucial component of Asia's international relations: both as a core constituent for its members' external relations and as a model for the conduct of a broader multilateral system.

ASEAN should re-double its efforts toward improvement as to how to encourage ASEAN member-states to invest more heavily in the Association's institutional strength so as to instill common positions on critical questions of foreign and security policy. The ASEAN Way in creating norms that have been embedded in an open, inclusive regional architecture thereby establishing a multi-layered structure of institutional frameworks with ASEAN at the center, must not constrain ASEAN's space for action to achieve desirable results.

Externally, ASEAN should feel comfortable in discussing hard security issues that infringe upon 'ASEAN Centrality', holding back the image and credibility of the Association which skeptics note when referencing ASEAN as a forum for 'only talk and not enough action'. ASEAN needs move beyond the consensus model and non-substantive reactions in dealing with today's pressing challenges, including: the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, the South China Sea issue, the humanitarian crisis and the military coup in Myanmar, the war in Ukraine and non-traditional threats such as the effects of climate change or post-Covid-19 recovery.

The effectiveness of ASEAN Centrality over the differences between and among major powers in the region, especially between the complex rivalry between US and China is now needed more than ever to prove its relevance as a credible mechanism to maintain peace, security and progress for the region of Southeast Asia and beyond.

As Covid-19 is somewhat manageable in recent months, optimism has emerged that life can slowly return to normalcy again. However, we witness the continued deterioration of U.S.-China relations. Anxiety is now scaling up in light of recent flashpoint flare ups and saber-rattling.

Therefore, ASEAN needs not only to withstand the competition between US and China, which will most likely be fiercer and more intense as the world exits Covid-19, but more importantly ASEAN needs to be able to manage bilateral relations between Washington and Beijing preventing them from getting out of control. ASEAN should continue its attempts to engage the US and China through existing frameworks, even if there are limitations in terms of what can be accomplished. Washington and Beijing are keen to court ASEAN and to pay some consideration to its wishes when framing their respective policies toward Southeast Asia. How much clout ASEAN has in this regard will depend on its ability to forge unity and centrality - hence there is a need to seriously push forward for a more effective ARF, the ADMM Plus processes, and the East Asia Summit (EAS).

The U.S.-led Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)[4] and the China-led Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Chatzky and McBride 2022) are powerful tools that can draw this world into a long-term conflict between two blocks: 'Pro-U.S.' and 'Pro-China'.

In addition, ASEAN's credibility is now being challenged, i.e., whether the grouping can respond effectively to the Myanmar crisis. Whatever the response, the crisis in Myanmar will invariably have long term impacts not just for Myanmar itself but for future potential trajectories of ASEAN as well as global and regional governance and the role of the military national governments.

Where Is ASEAN Going?

The future of ASEAN is challenged internally by how ASEAN intends to conduct its internal affairs to uphold its relevance, raison d'être, and the ASEAN Way handy in settling domestic grievances and other transboundary issues between and among member states; and externally by the bloc's ability to cope with the shifting of the world in the post Covid-19 effectively.

The most crucial existential threat for the ASEAN's future is how to manage the disturbing bilateral relationship between the US and China that arguably is the world's most consequential relationship impacting the global world and ASEAN included.

As ASEAN charts its course in the Indo-Pacific, there are a broad range of regional and global challenges that must be addressed resolutely by showing exceptional leadership, if ASEAN wants to maintain its image and prove its ability as a credible driver for peace, stability, and prosperity for the region. Specifically, ASEAN has to prove it leadership at a time when the outlook on issues like the South China Sea remains uncertain and when there are doubts about ASEAN's own centrality and unity amid wider regional and global trends.

[4] *See The Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States; https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf*

This means that ASEAN needs to enhance its style of open regionalism by doing more than instilling mutual respect, campaigning for non-coercion in setting disputes, promoting dialogue and practical cooperation, and calling for the adhering to internal laws to address glaring regional issues. ASEAN-led security community needs to inspire new capability of taking proactive and operational steps on security issues while maintaining the bloc's strategic autonomy. ASEAN must maintain its strategic autonomy by proclaiming that Southeast Asia is not an arena for any external power to impose anything that is harmful to the common regional interest. Otherwise, ASEAN ultimately over-dependent on a single power that inherently limits ASEAN potential.

In next half century, ASEAN needs to exhibit its own ability to manage economic, social and political issues rather than overly rely on any major power. Over-dependence on any external power will restrict ASEAN's capacity to stand up on the important issues that matter most in the region. ASEAN should do its utmost to encourage all of its dialogue partners to engage honestly with one another so as to reduce mutual suspicion and to contain their rival ambitions in our region and act in unison to discourage them from dividing the Association.

Stronger leadership is needed as ASEAN charts its course in the next half century. Collective stewardship of ASEAN is required to promote better intra-ASEAN state relations in managing properly issues of a transboundary nature such as crisis in Myanmar, development issues related to the Mekong River, as well as a gamut of other non-traditional security issues such as environment, climate change, food security, irregular migrations, drug, human trafficking - just to name a few - that have threatened the peace and stability of the region, and prevent the spillover of domestic politics into foreign policy. Moreover, ASEAN should endeavor to showcase its resolve towards democratic principles, placing more attention on development of the rule of law and good governance with full respect for human rights and freedom of expression by the easing of political restrictions and ensuring social justice.

ASEAN must endeavor to bring to the table a strategic agenda that can boost its foreign policy and reassure the bloc's credibility. ASEAN's principle of neutrality, non-interference, and the ASEAN Way must not constrain ASEAN space for action to workout suitable security arrangement that can lead to the reduction of tensions caused by big power competition. ASEAN needs to continue to engage external powers faithfully and constructively, be it the United States, China, Japan, India, Europe, or Australia in projecting ASEAN's continued aspirations for peace and prosperity. Most importantly ASEAN should not choose sides.

ASEAN in the next fifty years should not adopt its usual tendency to complacency and the belief that increasing economic interdependence alone can acts as the sole guarantor of security. Going forward into the next half century, ASEAN needs to firmly state its view with regard to the region's rules-based order by proclaiming that such an order is the cornerstone of equity, stability, and transparent decision-making, protecting every

country, big and small, from actions that could destabilize regional security and prosperity.

Conclusion

This year marks the 55th anniversary of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Since its inception, the bloc has been able to successfully weather hardships and regional threats by various frameworks and initiatives deriving from the ASEAN Ways and applying ASEAN Centrality. Along this remarkable growth journey, ASEAN has managed to lift millions of people out of poverty across the entire region and balance economic growth with human development while preventing inter-state pressure and extra regional tensions from flaring up into full-blown conflicts.

However, a number of challenges, including a slowdown in economic growth due to the outbreak of Covid-19, regression in commitment to liberal democratic principles, the degradation of the environment and human security, as well as the intensification of great power rivalry raise questions about the sustainability of ASEAN's growth story. Unless these challenges that hamper the aspirations of ASEAN be fulfilled, the bloc's relevance can slide into that of an insignificant regional grouping.

To progress well from an era of stagnation and to fulfill the true potential of all ASEAN member nations in the post-Covid-19, as well as to keep Southeast Asia a region of peace and prosperity, ASEAN needs to take more proactive measures, rethink its raison d'être, and recalibrate its modus operandi in order to continue to narrow the development gap, attract greater investment, facilitate human development through upgrading technological capabilities, and develop appropriate institutions or mechanisms that can manage *Realpolitik*.

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REVERSAL OF FORTUNE? CONTEMPORARY DEVELOPMENTS IN SINO-AMERICAN COMPETITION AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

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Introduction

What a difference a pandemic makes. It's a staple of political economy analysis that exogenous and endogenous shocks can and do alter even the most seemingly stable equilibria of institutions and relationships. Whether one adheres to an analytical framework highlighting long-term casual processes of change; gradual, constant evolution; or a punctuated equilibrium model marked by critical junctures and renegotiation - even the most casual glance through the ever-growing litany of articles, studies, and analyses exploring what a post-Covid world will look like and how it has already evolved and will continue to evolve demonstrates that the impacts of Covid-19 in Southeast Asia in general and the Greater Mekong Subregion in particular have been and will continue to be significant.

In mid-September of this year, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, director of the World Health Organization (WHO), noted at a virtual press conference that: "We are not there yet. But the end is in sight" (Mishra 2022). Subsequently, U.S. President Joe Biden went even further declaring: "We still have a problem with COVID. We're still doing a lot of work on it. But the pandemic is over" (Seibt 2022). Whether or not one concurs with these optimistic and long-awaited pronouncements, they demonstrate that the present moment is an ideal time for some much-needed stock-taking and to examine where things stand as we exit the seemingly interminable and unlikely to be lamented Covid-19 era.

This is particularly true as regards the state of US-China relations in light of the enormous shadow that they cast and will, inevitably, continue to cast over Southeast Asia. This brief article questions several of the assumptions made regarding the relationship and the two states' relative regional hegemony as it has developed since the start of the pandemic and sets out a different perspective as to the state of play in terms of aid, investment, and engagement, and concludes by raising a new question for Southeast Asia and its governments as to their own roles in Sino-American competition.[1]

[1] *The author does not discount the importance or weight of developments in terms of hard power – particularly new realities in the Taiwan Strait, naval competition in the South China Sea/South Pacific*

An Early Victory Lap

In early 2020, as the pandemic began to spread globally – Washington was run by an administration that was both historically polarizing and globally unpopular. Ambassadorships and other key roles in the U.S. foreign policy system remained unfulfilled or had begun to look like a revolving door. Domestic instability and a once-in-a-generation re-alignment of U.S. partisan politics, demonstrated by seismic shifts in the coalitions backing the Democratic and Republican parties, together with perceptions of a Neo-Isolationist Washington adhering to an inconsistent Trumpian foreign policy resulted in eulogies (some praise-filled, many others not so) for the demise of the US-led post-Cold War geopolitical equilibrium. The story was a simple one: a rapidly rising China had outpaced the United States in Asia in a wide range of areas – particularly in aid and investment through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with concerns raised as to its reach and impacts extending into Eastern and Southern Europe. The age of American decline was speeding up exponentially due to the country's internal challenges that appeared to be unsolvable. While Washington had launched its Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy and re-vivified its Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI) with the freshly established, well-funded Mekong-US Partnership (MUSP) – the roll out of fresh aid and investment was slow, yielding questions in some quarters as to whether these could possibly compete with China or were simply window-dressing for a great power in decline.

The era of Chinese hegemony or at least Chinese parity with the U.S. in Southeast Asia had – for many - arrived and this *fait accompli* was to be adjusted to and accepted. The phrase "Cold War 2" became yet another throw-away line as track 1.5 and track 2 diplomacy moved into its "Zoom-era" of conferencing and engagement.

As the pandemic developed, the aforementioned pre-Covid predictions as to the future roles of the U.S. and China appeared to be quite correct. The rapid spread of Covid-19 in the United States and the high death rate relative to China with the latter's zero-tolerance lockdown policies provided significant support to the "China's Inevitable Rise" hypothesis. In 2020, the United States went through one of the most contentious elections in its history, culminating in the victory of Joe Biden and Washington suffering a further national trauma and international black eye with the events of 6 January 2021 and the storming of the U.S. Capitol building by insurrectionist protestors challenging the legitimacy of the election. Questions changed. More often, commenters would inquire "if" the U.S. had the capacity to maintain its commitments and historic role in Southeast Asia rather than "whether" it would use that capacity.

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and naval modernization. The implications of AUKUS, the deepening of the minilateral Quad grouping, a rising India looking at next steps beyond its Act East policy, and a newly emboldened and growing NATO are all highly significant; however, due to constraints of space, this article focuses on aid, investment, and engagement.

Subsequently, vaccine diplomacy became a new focal point. Beijing began to rapidly roll out Sinovac and Sinopharm vaccines in 2021 and shipped them throughout the region and the globe to states desperate for mitigation measures as the world remained shut down, masked up, and sheltering in place. A new front had opened in Sino-American competition and it appeared to be a walk over for President Xi Jinping as Beijing's state media reveled in broadcasting fresh, daily images of Chinese-flagged vaccine shipments arriving at airports and hundreds of millions of people being issued with vaccination paperwork noting "Sinovac" or "Sinopharm" – a regular, daily reminder in one's wallet of assumed new geopolitical realities and what looked to be a rare and substantial soft power "win" for China.

China also appeared to have begun to address some of its own, long-standing weaknesses. In January 2021, Beijing issued a white paper setting out the future of its aid policy – highlighting again and again its commitment to "high quality" projects and definitively setting out the total number of BRI investments (although not listing them, resulting in analysts in 2022 still debating what exactly "counts" as a BRI project) while re-assuring developing economies that it had taken their concerns on board and was ready to move ahead into a new era of BRI: one more consistent with best practices in global development. Moreover, Beijing publicly committed itself to greater transparency in the sharing of hydrological data as regards the flow of the Mekong/Lancang river – a seemingly remarkable step towards transparency and effective management of the river that is the lifeblood of mainland Southeast Asia. To many – it was game, set, and match to Beijing with China growing into and returning to its historic role of Asia's regional hegemon.

"The Reports of My Death are Greatly Exaggerated"

However, as time elapsed and as the world approaches the end of 2022 – what once appeared to be significant and permanent, now appears to have been over-hyped, over-promoted, and significantly over-weighted. It is impossible to deny that in the area of vaccine diplomacy, China has had success in the distribution of its products. But as the world has moved into third, fourth, and even fifth shots, it's Pfizer and Moderna rather than Sinovac that individuals are turning to. Like the parable of the tortoise and the hare, "slow and steady" – or at least slow – has won the race.

Beijing's commitments in the area of development continue – with China continuing to provide financial support to less developed countries. However, no substantive progress has been observed in terms of Beijing's commitments to improve the quality of its funding and programming, raising questions as to whether Beijing's white paper was more of a public relations exercise than a serious statement regarding aid policy. China's approach to aid remains outside of OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) best practice guidelines. At the same time, hydrological data sharing and cooperation in the Mekong subregion remains stagnant from China's side. Data sharing has not expanded. Engagement of Beijing's Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Mechanism

(LMC) with non-state entities remains weak and transparency is still a challenge. Although it remains important to recognize that among Mekong governments LMC popular in light of its predictability and largesse. At the same time, Beijing's preference for government-to-government relations has left the LMC – as it completes its consolidation phase – with minimal public awareness among the population of the Greater Mekong Subregion.

Washington's commitment to aid provision and investment has, conversely, turned something of a corner. In the third quarter of 2022 alone, the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) approved a further $1.6 billion in funding to support initiatives such as the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment, the U.S. Global Food Security Strategy, in addition to the DFC's Global Health and Prosperity Initiative, 2X Women's Initiative, Portfolio for Impact and Innovation (PI2), and Roadmap for Impact. The 2023 federal budget request to Congress included $800 million in support for ASEAN states alone. These are indeed positive developments on the U.S. side, although it must be noted that valid concerns exist as to when the U.S. will articulate a clear, overarching ASEAN strategy and move forward with deeper ASEAN engagement with the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF).

Funds from the Mekong-US Partnership are also flowing to the region through the MUSP Plan of Action, with significant engagement at the Track 1.5 level, demonstrating both U.S. commitment as well as a truly "ground-up" approach to development policy in the Mekong region. MUSP continues to expand its engagement at both the bilateral and multilateral levels (particularly with ASEAN) while working with governments, civil society, academia, and others to ensure its programming fits with what the region requires – "Win, Win" as defined by those for whom aid programming is intended to support rather than those self-appointed to define the outcome. The path-breaking Mekong Dam Monitor (a project of The Stimson Center and Eyes on Earth supported by Washington) has rapidly become the "go to" site for stakeholders in need of Mekong-related water data.

Washington's lack of prioritization of ASEAN during the Trump administration is also a thing of the past. President Biden's hosting of the ASEAN-US Summit in May of this year made much more concrete American commitments to the region. The appointment of a U.S. ambassador to ASEAN in late September 2022 (after a five-year vacancy in that position) was also a move, albeit belated, in the right direction. As noted above, continued expansion in US activities in the region is needed but the days where the term "benign neglect" could be legitimately applied to American policy towards Southeast Asia in general and the Greater Mekong Subregion in particular are over and this reality requires recognition.

Conclusion: Gains, Losses, Opportunities, and the South Pacific's Warning

Collectively, many of China's "wins" that analysts have pointed to over the last two years – vaccines, aid reform, and Mekong cooperation – have shown themselves to have been tentative at best and non-existent at worst. Washington's record since the start of Covid-19 has areas where improvement is needed (particularly in the area of investment and a clearer framing of a coherent U.S. strategy towards the region); however, US-China competition in Southeast Asia is now in a different place than many analysts predicted over the last two years and Washington has both made gains and stands to potentially reap significant larger gains in the next year as it becomes clearer how a range of uncertain variables could play out and as American initiatives towards the region continue to gain momentum, visibility, popular buy-in, and, most importantly, funding.

Beijing, conversely, has placed itself in a straight-jacket of its own design, i.e., President Xi's Zero Covid Policy. China cannot fulfill its commitments regarding investment, tourism, etc. while its doors remain closed. "Show me the money" is a regular refrain (albeit phrased rather more diplomatically) from many Southeast Asian governments in their relations with both Washington and Beijing. It remains a challenge for Beijing to fulfill its promises of a seemingly never-ending flow of cash with its business community (for the most part) unable to travel and complete deals; its tourists grounded at home; and growing signs of a hard landing in China's massive real estate (with painful knock-on effects for many Southeast Asian states). Washington would do well to continue to ramp up its engagement with the region as its "strategic competitor" remains in self-imposed isolation. Southeast Asian governments – grounded in the concept of ASEAN Centrality – also have time and space to look inwards and clarify precisely what ASEAN Centrality means and what it does not mean and how to better secure its own position through a clearer articulation of the practical implications of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP).

The most common lament among Southeast Asia analysts (and officials) is the region's unfortunate, geographically-determined challenge of being the main locus of US-China competition. There are certainly myriad downsides to this geographic position, but – there have also been indisputable gains. Southeast Asia's regular attempts to play Washington off Beijing (and vice versa) in pursuit of more aid, more investment, more meetings, more summits, more recognition, etc. does garner significant attention and financial support; but it also inherently (if unintentionally) reinforces the intensity of Sino-American competition in the region. Just as Washington and Beijing need to continue to examine their own policies in Southeast Asia, the states of ASEAN need to do the same and consider how their own actions can exacerbate the realities on the ground that they so often lament; while claiming a lack of agency due to the seemingly overwhelming structural factors they confront. There is value to the lack of agency view – but at times, decisions grounded in a particular contention can turn that claim into a

self-fulfilling prophecy and ultimately the discursive construction of a sub-optimal, dangerous, and insecure regional field for Great Power competition.

Earlier this year, Beijing attempted to achieve the signing of a new "Common Development Vision" with ten states in the South Pacific. The agreement ultimately fell apart and was not signed – a significant blow to China's attempts to expand its role in the Pacific. A running theme in discussions among many South Pacific leaders was looking to ASEAN as both a model and a warning – a model in the sense of its integration and deepening ties and a warning as to the importance of not exacerbating Great Power rivalry in own's own home. ASEAN leaders might want to consider the wisdom of some of their South Pacific counterparts as they determine their own next steps.

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CAMBODIA: PROMOTING NEUTRALITY IN ASEAN AND THE GREATER MEKONG SUBREGION

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Introduction

Cambodia and other ASEAN member states are challenged to adjust their foreign policies to a new geopolitical context prescribed by the Russia-Ukraine war and a new era of Great Power competition between China and the USA. The weaknesses of the UN collective security system that could not prevent the Russia-Ukraine war and the new multipolar system indicate that Realist foreign policies of power balancing are likely to dominate over the next decades. Neutral policies have come under scrutiny in Europe because of the Russia-Ukraine war. Sweden and Finland, known for their long history of neutral policies, have disbanded neutrality and joined the collective defense alliance NATO. The neutral states Switzerland and Austria are challenged to redefine their foreign policies despite having strong popular support for a foreign policy of neutrality. This raises for Cambodia and ASEAN the question what meaning they can attribute to a foreign policy of neutrality in a renewed geopolitical rivalry of great powers in the Mekong subregion and ASEAN region?

The study utilizes Realist and Constructivist perspectives as to the meanings of neutrality. It further explores how foreign policies of neutrality and non-alignment developed in the historical and contemporary context of Cambodia and ASEAN. The study argues that Cambodia's foreign policy of neutrality is strongly related to ASEAN foreign policies and institutional mechanisms and is a viable regional foreign policy option to cope with the new geopolitical context. The study further argues that Cambodia, as the only permanent neutral state of ASEAN, is well positioned to promote a regional foreign policy of neutrality in the Mekong subregion and ASEAN region. Assuming that China and the United States recognize the strategic value of neutral regional zones, ASEAN can become a role model for other regions to develop institutional mechanisms and neutral foreign policy frameworks for peaceful conflict resolution.

Conceptualizing Neutrality in the International Context

Neutrality can be explained by Realist and Constructivist theories of international relations. From a Realist perspective, neutrality is a security strategy of small states to survive and correlates with the Realist concepts of national interest, security dilemmas, and the balance of power. Neutrality can increase the chance of small states that

territorial integrity is protected and sovereignty respected, and that they can continue peaceful relations with more powerful belligerents. Neutrality might also be understood as a rational choice for small, middle, or great powers serving their respective national interests (e.g., India in the case of the Russia-Ukraine war and USA in the early stage of WWI and WWII).

Neutrality knows two practices. A state might declare situational neutrality in war among other states but at other times engage in a war. Situational neutrality can only be applied in an ongoing war and is driven by national interests. Permanent neutral states practice neutrality not only during war but also in peace times independently from the situational context. Permanent neutrals refuse the use of force except in a war of defense. Permanent neutrals do not project power, do not join military alliances, and commit not to prepare or engage in future wars. Permanent neutral states might pursue a policy of neutrality that is shielded by a strong military to deter potential aggressors. Permanent neutrality is practiced overwhelmingly by small states with the aim to secure state survival as an alternative to joining military alliances or to bandwagon with great powers (Hopmann 2020, 40).

From a Realist perspective it can be further explained that there is a systemic dimension to the concept of neutrality. Neutrality can be perceived by states as a function of the balance of power for great powers that recognize neutral states because of their strategic value. The Classical Realist scholar Hans J. Morgenthau developed this Realist concept of neutrality in the European context: "the political condition of neutrality … is the system of balance of power, that is, the opposition of various almost equally strong groups of Powers, which either have no interest at all in including the neutral state in the Power combination or whose interest cannot prevail against the fear of the risk that might result from this inclusion" (Morgenthau 1939, 478). Neutralized zones also allow belligerent states to create buffer zones and, in this way, limit the scope of warfare (Lottaz 2020, 63).

Different from Realist theories of neutrality, Constructivist theories explain that neutral states are norm entrepreneurs in international relations - actively promoting peaceful conflict resolution because of their neutral status (Goetschel 2011, 316). Neutral states provide good offices, mediate in conflicts, utilize preventive diplomacy and develop institutional mechanisms to promote dialogue and cooperation among states. Neutral states refrain from the use of force and do renounce to project military power. Neutral states might also be perceived to be more credible in promoting the prohibition of the use of non-conventional weapons (biological, chemical and nuclear weapons) and conventional weapons that do not discriminate (e.g., landmines). Likewise, neutral states might promote humanitarian norms and human rights more credible because they are less likely to be suspected of instrumentalizing them for other foreign policy objectives (Goetschel 2011, 321).

Critics of neutrality would argue that these presumably positive attributes of neutrality are just means to pursue opportunistic and amoral foreign policies that are self-serving, i.e., maintaining economic relations with belligerents, and do not contribute to the promotion of international peace and stability (Neff 2020, 16). Others would argue that the collective security system under the UN Charter has made a foreign policy of neutrality obsolete because a war of aggression is no longer considered legitimate, different to the time before WWI and WWII when a war of aggression was a legitimate last resort of politics.

Under the UN Charter only a war of defense is legitimate and in other situations the use of force needs unanimous approval of the UN Security Council (Neff 2020, 21). Just War theorists would argue that in most wars the aggressors and victims can be determined. Neutral states would then not stay on the side of the victim state and leave the aggressor state without bearing the responsibility for the aggression providing no contributions to uphold international order and justice. Opponents would counter that not every war is just, sometimes it cannot be determined who is the aggressor and victim state. Sometimes states at war might be all at fault which justifies declaring neutrality for non-belligerents (Upcher 2020, 292). This has led some to define a new concept of "neo-neutrality" that argues in cases when aggressor and victim state can be determined, neutral states have a duty to intervene instead of abstention and should sanction the aggressor state, even providing arms support to the victim state. This line of argumentation has been made by the US and others in the current Russia-Ukraine war (Goetschel 2011, 315; CRS 2022, 1-5).

The controversy over the attributes of neutrality directs us to legal conceptualizations of neutrality. Whereas laws of neutrality might be unilaterally declared or negotiated by states during war and in peace times, neutral foreign policy might also be directed by binding and/or customary international law. States might comply with the "Hague Convention (V) respecting the Rights and Duties of Neutral Powers and Persons in Case of War on Land" and the "Hague Convention (XIII) concerning the Rights and Duties of Neutral Powers in Naval War" that were ratified in 1907. However, only 38 states have ratified the Hague Convention V and 35 states have ratified the Hague Convention XIII. In Southeast Asia, only Thailand ratified both conventions (ICRC Database). The conventions govern the legal relations between neutral and belligerent states. Controversially discussed is if the Hague Conventions still can be applied under the UN Charter as a war of aggression is no longer legitimate and UN member states are required to implement decisions of the UN Security Council (Upcher 2020). In cases where the UN Security Council requires the use of force or trade sanctions against an UN member state, the UN Charter prevails over the Hague Conventions (CRS 2022).

Despite these weaknesses of the international neutrality law, the UN does acknowledge that neutrality is a legitimate and viable foreign policy option to promote and maintain international peace. In 2017, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution without a vote declaring December 12 as International Day of Neutrality. The UN resolution

stipulates "that the national policies of neutrality of some States can contribute to the strengthening of international peace and security in relevant regions and at the global level and can play an important role in developing peaceful, friendly and mutually beneficial relations between the countries of the world …, and that such national policies of neutrality are aimed at promoting the use of preventive diplomacy, including through the prevention of conflict, mediation, good offices, fact-finding missions, negotiation, the use of special envoys, informal consultations, peacebuilding and targeted development activities …"

Cambodia's Conceptualization of Neutrality

Cambodia had pursued an active foreign policy of neutrality aiming to protect its sovereignty and territorial integrity after gaining independence from France. In 1957, the National Assembly adopted a Law of Neutrality. Article 1 declared that "Cambodia is a neutral country that abstained from any military or ideological alliance with foreign countries. It undertook no aggression against any foreign country. If it suffered a foreign aggression, Article 2 declared, it reserved the right to defend itself, to appeal to the UN, and to appeal to a friendly power (Tarling 2017, p. 122). Late King Norodom Sihanouk explained in an article of Foreign Affairs: "Our neutrality has been imposed on us by necessity. A glance at a map of our part of the world will show that we are wedged in between two-medium sized nations of the Western bloc and only thinly screened by Laos from the scrutiny of two countries of the Eastern bloc, North Vietnam and the vast People's Republic of China. What choice have we but to try to maintain an equal balance between the "blocs"?" (Sihanouk 1958, 583).

Cambodia sought international guarantees for its neutral status as it lacked as a small post-colonial state the means to build a military force to deter any potential aggressor. However, no international agreement was reached to guarantee Cambodia's neutral status despite numerous attempts (Tarling 2017, 131). Negotiations about Cambodia's neutralization were complicated by the Cold War and territorial disputes with Thailand and South Vietnam. The Vietnam War further aggravated the situation. Cambodian elites split over the question of neutrality. In 1970, late King Norodom Sihanouk was overthrown by General Lon Nol. Cambodia subsequently aligned with the USA. It followed two decades of war and the Pol Pot regime. Different Cambodian civil war factions aligned with the USA, China, and Vietnam/Soviet Union. Neutrality had been disbanded until the Cold War ended.

The Paris Peace Agreements (PPA 1991) opened for Cambodia a venue to return to a foreign policy of neutrality. This time Cambodia's neutral status received full international support from all five permanent members of the UN Security Council and ASEAN members among other signatories of the Paris Peace Agreements. Article 2 requires all signatories "to recognize and respect in every way the sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity and inviolability, neutrality and national unity of Cambodia". The rights and duties of Cambodia as a neutral state were stipulated in the

Paris Peace Agreements and included in the new Cambodian constitution (1993). Article 1 and 53 of Cambodia's constitution declares that "the Kingdom of Cambodia is a permanently neutral and non-aligned country." Article 53 prohibits Cambodia to "join any military alliances or military pact that is incompatible with its policy of neutrality, and prohibits any foreign military base on its territory and its own military bases abroad, except within the framework of a United Nations' request." In addition, Article 54 requires that "the manufacturing, use and storage of nuclear, chemical or biological weapons are absolutely prohibited" and Article 55 states: "Any treaty and agreement incompatible with … neutrality … of the Kingdom of Cambodia, shall be annulled."

Cambodia's Foreign Policy of Neutrality with ASEAN

Despite being the only permanent neutral state in Southeast Asia, Cambodia has maintained its neutral status and pursues a pro-active foreign policy of neutrality with ASEAN, including being a main contributor of military personnel and UN training for UN peacekeeping missions (Ry 2022). ASEAN member states share with Cambodia a long experience of destructive wars. After gaining independence from colonial powers, ASEAN member states pursued along with Cambodia a foreign policy of non-alignment aiming to protect their sovereignty and territorial integrity. They attended with Cambodia the Bandung Conference, which founded the Non-Alignment Movement (NAM). At this first ever conference of post-colonial African and Asian states the principle of a foreign policy of non-alignment was proclaimed: "all members are abstaining from the use of arrangements of collective defense to serve the particular interests of any of the big powers" (Tarling, 2017, 67). Non-alignment complemented Cambodia's foreign policy of neutrality. Both require a state to not align with great powers and/or military alliances and stay neutral in military conflicts among them sharing the neutral idea to be "friends with enemies" (Lottaz 2020, 57). However, they differ when it comes to military conflict with other states. Non-aligned states might engage in warfare, neutral states, especially permanent neutral states do not, except in a war of defense (Hoppmann 2020, 40).

Unlike Cambodia, a policy of neutrality and non-alignment did not preclude other ASEAN member states from joining bi- or multilateral security alliances or hosting foreign military bases in their territory with third parties. The Bangkok Declaration founding ASEAN in 1967 declared in this regard: "... all foreign bases are temporary and remain only with the expressed concurrence of the countries concerned and are not intended to be used directly or indirectly to subvert the national independence and freedom of States in the ares (sic) or prejudice the orderly processes of their national development." Thailand and the Philippines joined the US-led Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), which also included Pakistan, New Zealand, Australia, France and the UK. Although SEATO was disbanded in 1977, the USA maintains a military alliance with the Philippines and also has military bases there (CNN 2021). The Commonwealth members Malaysia and Singapore joined a set of bi- and multilateral

defense arrangements (named the Five Powers Defense Arrangements) with the UK, New Zealand and Australia (Thayer 2012, 61).

Despite the ambiguity of some ASEAN foreign policies in regard to non-alignment, ASEAN proclaimed in with the Kuala Lumpur Declaration (1971) that Southeast Asia is a "Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality" and "that the neutralization of Southeast Asia is a desirable objective and that we should explore ways and means of bringing about its realization." After the civil wars in Vietnam and Cambodia, ASEAN adopted the ZOPFAN Blueprint requiring members "to follow a policy of impartiality in the rivalry and conflicts among the major powers; not to enter into any agreements with external actors that would be inconsistent with the objectives of the zone; to refrain from inviting or giving consent for external powers to interfere in domestic/regional affairs; to deny military bases to foreign powers; and to prevent the use, storage, passage or testing of nuclear weapons in the region" (Alagappa 1991, 276). ASEAN defines neutrality in terms of autonomy and impartiality. Neutrality should enhance ASEAN members' autonomy in economic and political development and impartiality should protect them from great power conflicts (Emmers 2018, 351).

To underline ASEAN's commitment to neutrality an institutional mechanism and policy framework for peaceful conflict resolution was adopted with the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC 1976). As of 2021, 43 state parties have acceded to TAC including all great-, middle and small powers involved in the ASEAN region (ASEAN n. d.). ASEAN followed also through on the objective to stay a nuclear weapon free region, adopting the Treaty on the Southeast Asian Nuclear Weapon Free Zone (SEANWFZ 1997), and for pursuing an inclusive foreign policy in the Mekong subregion and ASEAN region enlarging ASEAN to Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia. In 2020, the Foreign Ministers of ASEAN member states reaffirmed on the occasion of the 53th anniversary of ASEAN's foundation their commitment "to maintain Southeast Asia as a region of peace, security, neutrality and stability" (ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Statement 2020).

Cambodia has an important intermediary role for ASEAN in the Mekong subregion because of close political and economic relations with China and Vietnam. Other ASEAN member states are on guard regarding these relations because of the South China Sea dispute. Any deterioration in Vietnam-China relations would have destructive impacts on peace and security in the Mekong subregion and the ASEAN region as a whole. The Vietnam-Cambodia war and the following Cambodian civil war are not forgotten. Vietnam and China fought a proxy war in Cambodia. The current government of Cambodia was backed by Vietnam against China. However, after the war, Cambodia's government has developed remarkably close economic and political relations with both (Murg 2022, 134).

Cambodia as a permanent neutral state has also been contributing to the development of ASEAN's institutional mechanisms and foreign policy frameworks to promote

neutrality and peaceful conflict resolution in the Mekong subregion and ASEAN region. ASEAN's institutional mechanisms engage all great, middle and small powers involved in both regions with regular summits and ministerial meetings to foster dialogue and cooperation in various policy fields. They include among others, the East Asia Summit (EAS), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and the ASEAN Defense Minister Meetings Plus (ADMM- PLUS). The EAS serves as a forum for strategic dialogue between ASEAN members and India, Russia, China, Japan, the USA, Australia, New Zealand and South Korea. The ARF meets for political and security issues, confidence building, and preventive diplomacy engaging beside EAS members also Bangladesh, Canada, North Korea, Mongolia, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Sri Lanka, Timor-Leste, and the European Union. ADMM-Plus facilitates cooperation and dialogue of Defense Ministers of states that are members of EAS and ARF (Emmers 2018, 363)

Conclusion

Cambodia's well-respected international status of permanent neutrality provides Cambodia together with ASEAN a central position to pursue a foreign policy of neutrality in the Mekong subregion and ASEAN region. Cambodia's permanent neutrality does not contradict with ASEAN principles. To the contrary, ASEAN is on a long journey to realize the vision of becoming a neutral region. Cambodia and ASEAN share the idea that foreign policies of neutrality are central to enhance security in the region. However, the development of a regional foreign policy of neutrality has its limitations because some ASEAN member states are in military alliances and defense arrangements.

From a Constructivist perspective, ASEAN and Cambodia are norm entrepreneurs of neutrality. Neutrality is a means for ASEAN and Cambodia to facilitate peaceful conflict resolution in the Mekong subregion and ASEAN region, and to enhance the autonomy and impartiality of foreign policies of ASEAN members. ASEAN's vision of a neutral regional zone might be promoted with a genuine regional foreign policy of neutrality that can serve as a role model for other regions.

From a Realist perspective, permanent neutrality is potentially a viable foreign policy option. China and the USA might consider both regions' status as neutral zones of being of strategic value because they recognise that neutrality can be a function of balance of power maintaining peace between them. A permanent neutral Mekong subregion and ASEAN region can under these circumstances create an effective mechanism for China and the USA to mitigate their disputes and future conflicts.

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MEKONG REGION AND THE MYANMAR FACTOR

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With its strategic geographic location and limited reliance on the Mekong River compared with neighboring countries, Myanmar has maintained a relatively low profile in Mekong-related forums, apart from those convened by its crucial patron, China, and to an extent, initiatives by Japan and other donor countries. All five countries in the Mekong region, host to the world's 12th-longest river and home to about 350 million people, live under the shadows of China's preoccupations with hydropower dams, connective infrastructure and regional access from its landlocked south-western regions particularly Yunnan and Guanxi.

Unlike neighboring Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam, Myanmar is not a full member of the intergovernmental Mekong River Commission -- and along with China, maintains observer status at MRC meetings.

But fallout from Myanmar's military takeover of February 1 2021, including international criticism and Western sanctions against the junta, known as the State Administration Council, has heightened differences between the Mekong region countries and more acutely, within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. It has also highlighted regional concerns about spillover effects of Myanmar's slide into quasi-civil war and economic dysfunction, after the economy contracted by 18 percent in 2021 (Kurtenbach 2022).

The 10 ASEAN member states, encompassing both mainland and maritime Southeast Asia, have been unable to agree on possible responses to the disruptive effect of Myanmar's coup and policies of the military regime, but have signaled growing alarm at the impact on the region as a whole (Kurlantzick 2022).

Concerns range from the country's deepening internal crisis, with more than 1.2 million people internally displaced due to conflict between the military and resistance forces, to the flailing economy and sliding trade and industrial production (OHCHR 2022).

Some economic forecasts including the World Bank's July 2022 estimate, suggest the economy could level out with 3% annual growth in 2022 (Work Bank 2022). But amid continuing violence, displacement and deepening economic chaos, the consensus by late 2022 suggested strong likelihood that Myanmar will continue on its downward trajectory.

The effects of Myanmar's internal malaise on the Greater Mekong Sub-region could be multi-fold -- on one hand, disrupting tentative unity, with Laos and Vietnam supportive of the military regime, Thailand trying to balance opposing positions taken by the US and China, and Cambodia – as ASEAN chair in 2022 – taking an uncharacteristically sterner line against the SAC in regional forums. On the other hand, moves by Western governments and aligned donor organizations to cut off funding and state involvement with Myanmar's regime could ultimately benefit other members of regional forums. At the same time, indications that Myanmar's junta is abandoning efforts by the ousted National League for Democracy administration to improve environmental standards, climate change initiatives and sustainability efforts will have a knock-on effect on broader regional efforts (Son 2022).

The concerns were summed up by a leading environmental campaigner Win Myo Thu who warned in August 2022 of a post-coup upsurge of illegal logging and mining and the regime's growing disregard for environmental standards. He cited Myanmar's growing inability to "carry out any serious action relating to the environment or climate crisis," echoing alarm voiced by other environmentalists that China was gearing up to restart suspended hydropower dam projects in the country.

In moves that upturn Myanmar's Nationally Determined Contribution targets (plans for climate action submitted by Myanmar's ousted NLD administration to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change), the junta has indicated its ambition to grant more land concessions for rubber, banana and palm oil plantations to business investors. The main drivers of deforestation, he noted, are forest exploitation and commercial agriculture expansion, "so [it would be] totally impossible to meet the NDC targets by any means." (Son 2022)

Divergent external dynamics have sharpened the likely effect of such backsliding, particularly moves by the US and other Western stakeholders to disengage with Myanmar's administration, and by Tokyo to take a more cautious approach toward Naypyidaw. The US-led Mekong-US Partnership, for example, moved to exclude Myanmar state involvement in regional initiatives shortly after the coup (Asia and Pacific Seed Association 2022).

China meanwhile has stepped up its embrace of Naypyidaw's military regime, on both a bilateral and multilateral basis, particularly via its Lancang Mekong Cooperation programs and also through its Belt & Road Initiatives. Russia and India, too, have shown greater interest in the Mekong region. Despite Moscow's war in Ukraine, Russia has built on earlier policies to increase involvement in the region, particularly in Myanmar which has seen a sharp rise in Russian aid, investment and military cooperation As International Crisis Group noted in an August 2022 report, "Russia has thrown Naypyitaw a lifeline as it struggles to quash domestic resistance and secure international legitimacy, thus further antagonizing countries pushing for Myanmar's return to democracy." (International Crisis Group 2022).

Mekong Region Cooperation

Water management issues focused on the Mekong River provided vital impetus to internal and external moves to increase cooperation and assistance to the region (Cambodia Ministry of Foreign Affairs & International Cooperation 2022).

Efforts by organizations including the Asian Development Bank as well as regional powers such as China and Japan – and intermittently the US – to increase engagement in the Mekong region gained momentum in the mid-1990s amid growing rivalry between the US, China and Japan. The Greater Mekong Sub-region as it was broadly known, became the geographic arena for various regional governance agreements and frameworks, primarily the Mekong Agreement (MA), the Mekong River Commission (MRC), the Mekong Institute (MI) as well as those led by India, Japan, South Korea, China and the US (Pongsudhirak 2020).

Japan was initially a key driver of enhanced Mekong region cooperation with the Mekong-Japan Cooperation forum and generous funding for programs (Ministry of Foreign Affairs & International Cooperation 2022). But it was China's concerted push from 2015 as well as heightened US interest in the region from the early 2000s that fueled more recent rivalry in the region. Since the 2021 coup, China has become the dominant player in Mekong dynamics – reinforced by the visit of China's foreign minister Wang Yi to Myanmar in July 2022 to preside over a meeting of Mekong region foreign ministers (Tower 2022).

The divergent diplomatic dynamics have highlighted Myanmar's unique position in the Mekong context. The country belongs to some Mekong regional organizations including the ADB's Greater Mekong Subregion Economic Cooperation Program (Asian Development Bank 2022). But its status is reflected in the fact that both Myanmar and China, as upstream neighbors, have remained as "dialogue partners" of the Mekong River Commission, whose full members are Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam, since 1996.

The two "odd couple" countries have regularly attended annual MRC dialogue meetings and joined cooperation projects including agreeing with MRC members on data sharing, notably China's agreement to share both wet and dry season hydrological data about water levels in the Mekong River. Such cooperation has continued since Myanmar's coup, for example on June 29, 2022, all MRC stakeholders including Myanmar and China launched what they hailed as a landmark joint study involving the four MRC member countries – Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam – and the LMC Water Resource Cooperation (including Myanmar and China), focusing on cascade dams at 11 hydropower projects along the Mekong River (MRC Mekong News 2022).

This underlines a potential role for the MRC in the post-coup Myanmar. In the broader constellation of Mekong-related organizations, condemnation by western governments

of the coup has further driven Myanmar away from Western-sponsored Mekong initiatives, particularly the US-led Mekong-US Partnership Program, which is an expansion of the earlier Lower Mekong Initiative established in 2011, and multilateral programs under institutions such as the ADB and the World Bank (Mekong-US Partnership 2022).

Big power focus on their own initiatives has also taken momentum out of regionally-driven organizations including the Thai-led ACMECS (Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy) initiative. At the same time, Naypyidaw has shown unbridled enthusiasm for China's Lancang-Mekong Initiative and related forums and projects.

China's Lancang-Mekong Initiative

One of the main drivers of the shifting dynamics of the Greater Mekong Sub-region is China's Lancang Mekong Initiative. Inaugurated in 2015 at the first LMC foreign ministers meeting involving all five countries along the Mekong together with China, the LMC was portrayed as a vehicle to deepen Chinese involvement in the Mekong region (LMC China 2021). Ostensibly focused on water resources development, the initiative appears more like a sub-set of China's Belt & Road Initiative, offering financing for projects and direct channels of communication with China. (China's segment is referred to as the Lancang.)

Since Myanmar's coup, Beijing has further shored up the grouping, in recognition that none of the Mekong nations show any hesitance about strengthening ties with Myanmar's military regime. China's strengthened position was summed up by Jason Tower of USIP: While Beijing alongside Russia is the key international patron of Myanmar's junta, Beijing prefers not to be seen as acting bilaterally or without the backing of regional institutions. China's initial strategy was to lean on ASEAN, arguing that the principle of ASEAN centrality made it the proper multilateral space to address the crisis. This helped keep the issue out of the United Nations Security Council and required that states pushing for more robust responses worked within the confines of ASEAN's consensus-based framework (Tower 2022).

Encountering opposition within ASEAN to Myanmar's high-level involvement in regional initiatives, China focused on the LMC for regional institutional backing. With the Ukraine conflict largely preoccupying the West, China and Myanmar's junta leaders quietly organized the seventh LMC Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Bagan, in Myanmar, in July 2022, featuring Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi with Myanmar's SAC as co-host (Tower 2022).

Building further on momentum, Myanmar in September inaugurated the Lancang Mekong Project's Data Center in Naypyidaw (Xinhua 2022). Since seizing power in February 1, 2021 and ousting the elected National League for Democracy

administration, Myanmar's SAC has embraced international contacts that offer even a modicum of legitimacy – foremost has been China and Russia, with concerted moves by Naypyidaw to strengthen the Russia relationship on every front, particularly economic and security.

Wither Mekong Region Cooperation?

Unlike the broader Southeast Asian region, the Mekong region has been dominated by big power rivalry between China and Japan, with intermittent interest from the US and even more selectively from India, South Korea and to an extent Australia and New Zealand.

The dynamics were neatly summed up by Thitinan Pongsudhirak in 2020: "The main difference between the South China Sea and the Mekong is that all major and middle powers near and far have put down stakes in the former, whereas the latter is mostly left to China and its smaller mainland Southeast Asian neighbors to sort out in an asymmetric fashion," he noted. The only major external power in the Mekong mix is Japan, which was the first donor and investor in the Greater Mekong Subregion cooperation program in the early 1990s (Pongsudhirak 2020).

Japan, having cultivated Mekong development since the early 1990s, is alarmed to see China assert its role in the region. Tokyo has stepped up its engagement by providing more aid and capacity building. However, unlike China, Japan lacks the next-door road and rail connectivity that comes with geographical proximity. Japan is also in no position to offer a regional governance scheme to match the LMC. Even with a multibillion Japan-Mekong cooperation framework through ventures such as connectivity and quality infrastructure, the most Japan and the Mekong mainland countries can bargain for is to synchronize and promote cooperation between the LMC and the MRC. However, China is likely to go along only if the MRC is subservient to the LMC (Pongsudhirak 2020).

Despite Myanmar's recent economic and political slide, the key attractions for China remain the country's energy resources – particularly through hydropower -- and access to the Indian Ocean through Myanmar. Added to the mix in recent times has been Myanmar's growing pariah status, which leaves the country more open to influences and preferential deal-making.

Most of these schemes boil down two opposing sides, and all converge in their top line aims – to woo the region, add pressure on smaller countries to choose sides and expand big power influence in the region.

They also converge in their efforts to utilize both sticks and carrots – in China's case there is a variety of economic incentives such as largesse under both BRI and LMC mechanisms and market access through the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership trade pact between most Asian countries, enhanced investment and in some

cases financial assistance including funding of infrastructure and development projects (RCEP 2022).

The US meanwhile is pushing the benefits of its evolving Indo-Pacific Economic Framework initiative with its implied promises of security and investment (Office of the United States Trade Representative 2022).

China typically is promising – and can deliver – speedy projects. But both the US and China suggest that countries must ultimately choose one system, with the US heightening pressure with its recently launched IPEF offering a range of cooperation that carry with it digital and regulatory standards

So why would countries sign up to IPEF? One aspect not directly trade related is implied security guarantees, amid growing unease particularly among smaller regional countries over the shifts concerning Russia's war in Ukraine and overall US-China tensions. This highlights both growing mistrust of big powers but also a sense that they need to be kept onside. As one senior Thai official said in June: "We want China for investment, and the US to guarantee security – we need to keep them both on side."

In this light, in May 2022, 13 countries, including seven of the 10 ASEAN member states (ASEAN minus Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar) signed up to negotiations on the establishment of the Indo-Pacific Economic Cooperation Framework (IPEF) at the invitation of the US. Fiji later became the 14th country. Of those countries, 10 count China as their top trading partner. Most of the 14 countries had already signed on to the longer established trade agreements RCEP and CPTPP (11 are part of the RCEP trade pact with China, which has been predicted to give intra-regional trade a US$42 billion boost (Martin 2021).

Fueling new rivalry, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi criticized the initiative as an effort to accelerate economic decoupling from China. He argued that the initiative, and the US Indo-Pacific strategy as a whole created divisions and "incited confrontation" – and would "ultimately be a failure." (Trevor Hunnicutt 2022)

A short while later, China-led LMC launched its second Five Year Plan of Action, from 2023 to 2027, dubbing it the latest "Golden Five-Year" plan at the seventh LMC Foreign Ministers' Meeting in mid-July 2022.

In launching the new round of LMC, Wang Yi said that as a reflection of China's improving economy it was accelerating the establishment of a "new development paradigm" to promote high-quality development, focused on expanding markets and opportunities for Mekong countries. He cited booming regional cooperation that he said was driving new measures to consolidate foundations and introduce more long-term plans, "to push the LMC to a new level."

He outlined plans to promote cooperation in six areas, featuring more focus on big infrastructure projects including specifically extension of the new China-funded Laos-China railway link to encompass Thailand. He also highlighted new digital projects including 5G rollout and smart cities, expanding agricultural cooperation, promoting environmental initiatives including water resource management, and a new Lancang-Mekong disaster management cooperation mechanism.

With its infrastructure-heavy agenda and its welcoming embrace to Mekong region countries, nowhere is China's LMC strategy likely to be more eagerly accepted than in Myanmar where two key projects are development of the Kyaukphyu port on the Indian Ocean and the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor project – an ambitious scheme for a transport corridor and infrastructure including roads, rail and bridges. In China's view, the time is right to reinforce Myanmar as a core member of its LMC. For Myanmar, increasingly isolated from the West, China alongside Russia are the perfect Mekong patrons.

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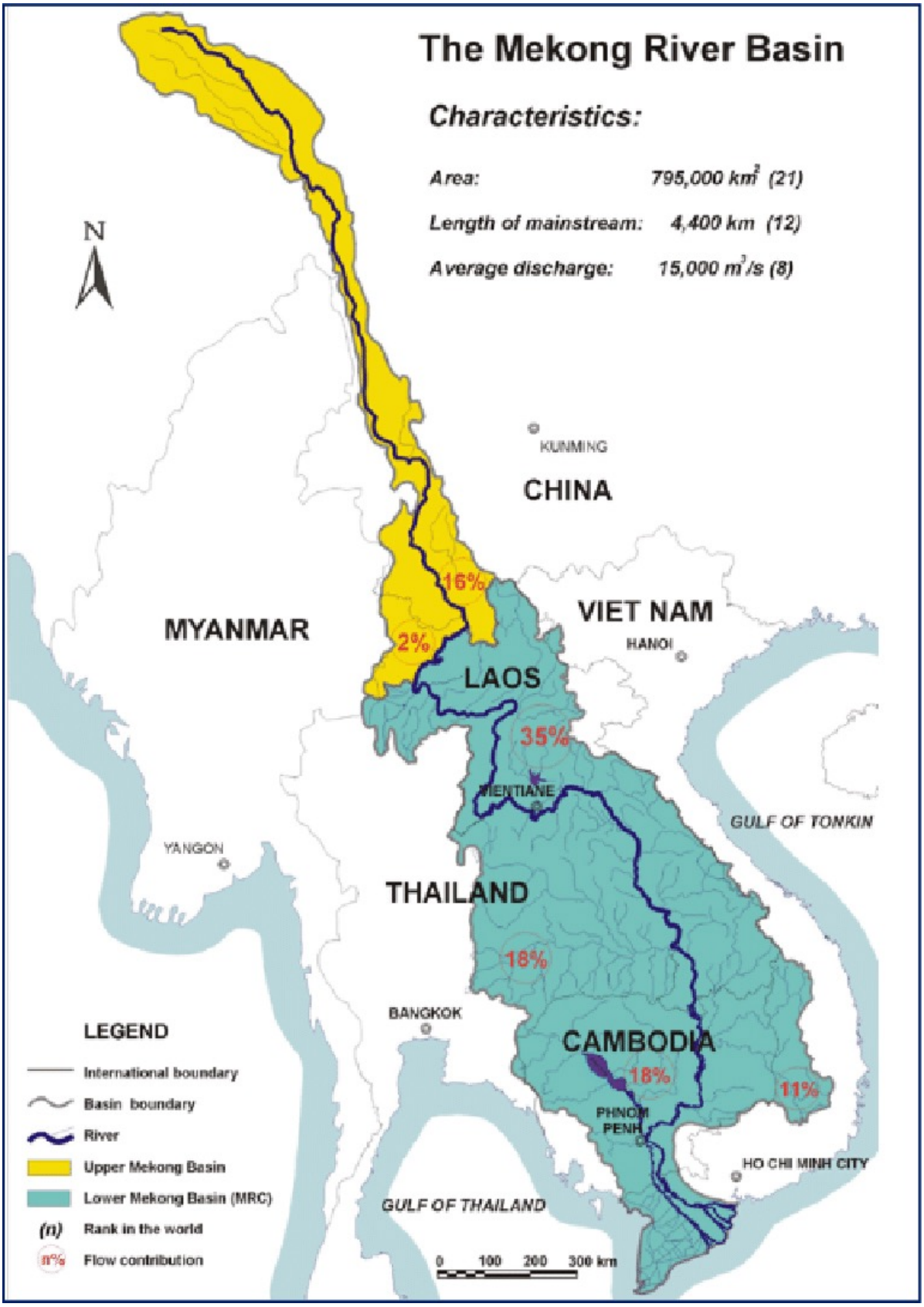

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