

Q: In the context of strategic culture, how has China avoided conflicts and wars with the lower countries, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam, over the impact of the upper Mekong River developments?

Introduction

For the past decade, China has been one of the most powerful countries in the world with a population of nearly 1.3 billion. According to world energy reports, China is already the second largest importer of oil after the US. One of the most important energy requirements is the growth of the economy not only in the coastal area but also in the remote areas. Consequently, there are many developments along the Mekong River in China to provide for its need for energy by developing the hydroelectric potential along the Mekong River for the Southwest. However, China is only one of the countries situated on the important international river-the Mekong river for 2,160 Kms, nearly half of the its length of 4,350 Kms, and China also is the most potential to develop along the Mekong River in order to provide an alternative source of energy.

These river developments have both advantages and disadvantages for lower countries. The Mekong River is one of the important international rivers, but the development of China on this river has not caused regional conflicts between China and the lower countries as have occurred on the others international rivers. Water as a cause of armed conflict can be found in case studies from the Middle East, South Asia and South America, but China has not use force to date.

I will argue that China's strategic culture in relation for security the most important reasons for avoiding conflicts. Firstly, China's military is stronger than the lower counties in the number of troops and modernized armed forces. It would be simple for China to use force in order to solve the water conflicts, so the lower countries are likely to fight against China. Secondly, China has cooperated with the lower countries and China has already played a major role as part of comprehensive strategic culture to provide aid for economic developments, so these countries currently depend on China economic supports. Thirdly, although China takes water from the lower countries, they provide cheap electricity instead.

I will briefly give backgrounds of the Mekong River and Chinese energy requirements, and then I will discuss Chinese strategic culture in general. Next, I will outline the relationship between China and ASEAN as an example of comprehensive aspect of strategic culture.

Background

The Mekong river is the longest river in Southeast Asia which is 4,350 Kms from eastern Tibet in China, through Yunnan province, forming the border between Burma/Myanmar and Laos, and then between Laos and Thailand. It goes through Cambodia, before finally flowing into the South China Sea in Vietnam. This river has many names along its length.ⁱ The best known is the Thai name for this river as “Mother of the Waters”. The Mekong River plays a role as a rich economic resource and water for irrigation throughout Southeast Asia. People use and depend on the river for their living in many ways; for fishing, irrigation, navigation, transportation, electricity, and for bathing.

The relationships between the Mekong River and China’s economy

It is well known China’s has become one of the world most powerful economies. China is now very large market for world economic. However, there is some structural weakness in the country’s economy, with a wide gap remaining between the rich and the poor and between the urban and rural populations. This is evident in high unemployment. One of the most concerns for the Chinese government is developments in China between its coastal areas and the remote areas of the southwestern region, which is an important issue and may cause instability as a whole.

In terms of China’s development strategy, Yunnan is to be promoted as the most important gateway for promoting economic development in the southwestern region, which includes four provinces, and two autonomous regions. As a result, China’s interests also involve the development of hydroelectric power on the upper Mekong River.

The development of the Western region is designed to bring this region as the same as the developed coastal East and Southeast China. The Chinese Government has declared the 10th Five Year Plan (2001-5) in order to focus especially on infrastructure – highways, railways, airports, pipelines, power grids, telecommunications facilities, and energy and water projects. (McCormack, 2000:8) Hence, the Chinese government has planned a series of 14 dams on the Mekong River to develop the hydroelectric potential, all of which are being planned in Yunnan province. The Mekong River directly affects the lives of more than 50 million people in six countries, who rely on it for agriculture, fish, water, tourism, and other social, economic and cultural activities.

It is still argue that the dams' construction in the upper Mekong River will affect the flow of water, damage the ecology of Cambodia's Tonle Sap, the main source of fish for Cambodian people and also rice farmers in the Mekong delta in Vietnam. On the other hand, there are conflicting interests for how the river basins resources are to be used since the Mekong River also holds the potential as a major source of hydropower as well as being a means of transportation of people and goods. The basin is also being targeted for tourism development. (UNDP's report, 2004) Meanwhile, positive features of hydropower development are: renewable energy, pollution-free, relatively low generating cost, flood reducing, navigation improving and increased irrigation opportunities.

Water conflicts

It is very often that water related both conflict and violence, and this occurs on the local areas. In case of international rivers, it is generally related to geographically, economically and politically. Some conflicts have led to interstate tensions and significantly affect on developments and human security. A recent study (Mason, 2004:42) found that the conflict potential of international river basins varies considerably. It is identified by the following factors: "the importance of the water supply for the riparian states; the power of the riparian states, mainly military; and the upstream/downstream position of the riparian states."

A conflict exists when the upper/lower countries have great interest in the water supply, when they have a powerful military, and/or when the upstream countries also have a relatively strong interest in the water resource. Mason (2004:42) also compares the Jordan, Euphrates and the Nile and concludes that the conflict potential over water seems to be the greatest in the Euphrates/Tigris basin.

Therefore, it is unavoidable that impacts from these development projects in environments and human security on the lower countries have become the most important issues for China to consider in balancing of negative reaction and national interest without use of military strength against states. One of the most essential aspects to deal with such problems is strategic culture.

Chinese strategic culture

It is now commonly accepted that countries' strategy is based on their strategic culture, and strategic culture is always presented in terms of military aspects or the use of force; however, Chinese strategic culture will be involved in contexts of international

relationships. Scobell (2004:9) states that “Chinese strategic culture is the result of interplay between Confucian and Realpolitik strands.” He also maintains that;

“China’s dominant self-image (Confucian strategic culture) and its images of other states will be influential in how China fights and whom it prepares to confront. China’s civil and military elites perceive China’s strategic culture as pacific, anti-hegemonic, and purely defensive in nature.”

Significantly, he points out that “China possesses a pacifist strategic culture” (p.11) and has never been an aggressive or expansionist state. (p.13). He describes Chinese defensive strategic culture by this phrase “If someone doesn’t attack us, we won’t Attack them”. Therefore, it seems that China is unlikely to use force to solve conflicts if there is alternative way.

According to Zhang (2002:8), it is important to note that the ancient Chinese stratagem of “victory without war” has great relevance to China’s way of thinking. He says that “Victory without war” does not mean that there is no war at all. The wars one must fight are political, economic, scientific, technological, and diplomatic. In short, national powers involve comprehensive war.

Consequently, by 1996, China had formed the new security concept still use today. It is also clear that the economic security is a non-traditional security, which needs a great deal of attention. Therefore, China’s security concept has begun to extend to the other aspects of security such as economic and environmental security not only national security but also international and regional security. It can be said that the new security concept featuring cooperative and mutual security is the new thinking of the new-generation of China’s leaders. (Yaqing, 2002: 5)

Hence, in addition to the Five Principles (mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, nonaggression, noninterference in each other’s internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence), the core purpose of the China’s National Security Council is “to conduct dialogue, consultation, and negotiation on an equal footing... [and]... to solve disputes and safeguard peace. Only by developing a new security concept and establishing a fair and reasonable new international order can world peace and security be fundamentally guaranteed.”(China’s National Defense, 2000:8) It can be assumed that China’s modernization needs extensive cooperation with the outside world, both with its neighbors and the Westerns countries. Importantly, the use of force would certainly damage this cooperation in all security levels.

Zhang (2002:75) argues that comprehensive security has play at a significant role in China security. In his article, he states that Deng Xiaoping believed that “economic power is the most important” while “military power is the basic means for ensuring that economic power will rise, serves for protecting the nation’s general interests, and carrying out global strategic goals. Therefore, while we [China] on the one hand emphasize economic power as being the basis of CNP, we [China] must on the other hand devote ourselves to the development of military power, the element with the most direct role in CNP.” Zhang also states that pursuit of CNP is an important element of China’s policies in the present China as the core in its nation building, and it can be regarded as the most significant feature in the current strategic culture. It can be argued that China may resort its forces as the final mean to solve problems.

Relationship between China and ASEAN

It is important to note that China approaches the lower counties, not only bilaterally but also multilaterally at the same time. Although China has negotiated individually with the lower counties in order to strengthen those counties, China cooperates with ASEAN as the first priority.

According to Yaqing (2002:4), there are two categories of Chinese strategic culture: conflictual strategic culture and cooperative strategic culture. He states that Jiang Zemin, who was the China’s third generation leader, showed more obvious awareness of cooperation saying that “...It has become the mainstream of the times to desire peace, seek cooperation and promote development...” Nowadays, it is more likely that China has chosen cooperative strategic culture to deal with the Southeast Asia.

It is commonly accepted that China has relatively high growth rate on political and cultural influences in Southeast Asia. Although the relationship between china and lower countries has fluctuated over past decades, it has become positive between each others because of economic factors. In the 1950s to the 1970s, the PRC supported North Vietnamese efforts to reunify with the South. It led to non-communist Southeast Asia feeling that the Chinese was likely their major threat. By the early 1980s, following Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia in 1978, China was cooperating with ASEAN by cutting its support to the communist insurgencies in those countries in an effort to demonstrate its desire for friendly cooperation with its non-communist neighbors. (Champbers, 2005:16)

Moreover in the Vietnam case, Even though Vietnamese culture is based on Chinese cultural characteristics because of the long domination by China, after the Vietnamese troops entered Phnom Penh, China attacked Vietnam on the northern border during a month-long war in 1979. This led to distrust between them for decades. Nowadays, however, because of Vietnam's economic goals, China has become an important market for the Vietnamese economy.

The recently relationship between China and ASEAN has become more and more strengthen over past decades. A recent study, Shambaugh (2004:67) found that there are several evident that ASEAN and China have close relationships. Firstly, many Asian countries did not decided to do with sanctions or isolation against the Chinese military's killing of civilians on June 4, 1989. Importantly, the Asian financial crisis in 1997, The Chinese government acted responsibly by not devaluing its currency and by offering aids and low-interest loans to some Southeast Asian states. These actions were appreciated in the region, and it seemed that China played as a responsible power. The third event is that China has highly participated in the ARF, which the Chinese government states as a potential way for establishing a regional cooperative security community. Significantly, President Hu Jintao's speech at opening ceremony of the Boao Forum for Asia 2004 annual conference in 2004 that "...China will give full play to existing multilateral security mechanisms and is ready to set up a security dialogue mechanism with other Asian countries to actively promote confidence-building cooperation in the military field..."

Shambaugh (2004:75) also shows that relationship between China and ASEAN is more impressive. Over the last few years, they have agreed many steps to expand and strengthen their engagement, which have been considerable significance for the international relations in the Asian region.

Similarly, the patterns of border defense and control in Chinese history are closely associated in present time with the basically non-violent approach to external offence. This was mostly a reflection of Confucianism and came along with the views of major aspects of traditional Chinese strategic thinking. (Zhang, 2002:78)

In short, many of the Southeast Asian countries seem to adapt China's rise, and seek to profit from their relationships. It can be argued that China has a prudent policy to seek and reassure these neighbors in the benefits from China's rise as a good neighbor rather than provoke balancing of power from the west.

Chinese strategic culture in solutions for the Mekong's project impacts

In some circumstances, China has balanced impacts on the lower countries by using its strategic culture. Chinese strategic culture may rely on win-win solution in many areas such as negotiation and political conflicts. There were many conflicts in the past caused over the international rivers, For example, the conflict between countries in the Nile River in 1963-1964 (Wolf, 1998:15) and the armed conflict between Syria and Turkey in 1990. (Homer-Dixon, 1998:351) The Conflict has not occurred among nations in the Mekong River area to use military means fight against each others for the water supply. Although there some evidence showing dispute between China and the lower counties, China has never used force in order to solve the water conflicts. As Lai (2004:37) argues;

“Sun Tzu suggests use of force is only diplomacy by other means;
if we only focus on the use of force, we miss a big part of diplomacy.”

China has dealt with the lower countries by making both direct and indirect influence without use of force. Chinese business ways are also considered as “win-win” solution. The relationship between China and the lower countries is very interesting; it is like a relative relationship between an older brother and a younger brother. Also Chinese ancient game of “GO” as a model for the Chinese approach to strategy in the Mekong case will be considered in this section.

To begin with making direct influence, it is well-known that mutual benefit is one of the most powerful means. China has to deal with significant problems. Firstly, to maintain its economic growth, China promotes ASEAN's stability as a part of its much-desired peaceful regional environment. The Chinese strategy is to combine this part of China and the Mekong Region as an integral unit. As Khien (2004:17) states that the essential element of success in this attempt is that all members share mutual benefits. It is in China's interest to give aid to develop infrastructure in the upper part of the Mekong Region – Myanmar and Laos.

It is obvious that the economic factor is the most important issue for China to cope with the lower countries. Clearly, China prefers ASEAN to directly benefit from its economic growth by pushing for co-prosperity with its southern neighbors. China hopes that win-win economy is a strategy to reduce ASEAN's anxiety (Cheng-Chwee Kuik, 2003:17) The lower countries along the river, like Laos ,Vietnam and Cambodia, have indicated their concerns about the impact on water flow and agriculture, of China's

hydro-electric plans in the upper of the Mekong. These will impact especially on the dry season flow of the Mekong between November and May (Jane's defence, 2004) , but it is difficult to raise this issue as they do not want to make objections to China directly as economic aid is still one of the most important factors for these countries.

China, which is the upstream country, has the second largest economy, the largest surface area and population in the world, Therefore, China per se has the upper hand in regional politics, and it is also by far the dominant military power. Nevertheless some commentators have argued that is likely to seek cooperation rather than conflict. First of all China has demonstrated increasing interest in regional river management (Horowitz, 2000:40 and Elhance, 1999:213). Secondly, China's growing need for hydropower, export markets for the Yunnan Province, and access to the South China Sea, all of which its downstream neighbours can provide, place China in a less hegemonic position than could be expected. (Elhance, 1999:213)

China has solved negative impacts on the lower countries with indirect support by giving other benefits such as economic aid and support to them as it provided to Laos and Thailand. In 2002, China provided the same type hydropower dam to Cambodia in order to balance benefit of energy needs along the Mekong River. The Chinese Government through the Chinese Electric Power Technology Import and Export Council built a \$30 million power station, which produces 12 megawatts of power, which is distributed throughout Kompong Speu province in Cambodia.(Asia Times,2005) Also, China has made a significant investment in regional economic cooperation by improving rail and road transportation links to ports in Vietnam, Myanmar, and Thailand that will help goods and product move from China's southwest to Southeast Asia. Khien (2004:10) says that Because of economic interests in river basin from China, downstream governments may consider accepting this influence.

As McCormack (2000:13) states that it can be seen that China offers an alternative energy plan, which is a series of dams, for the downstream Mekong as well. The hydropower on the upper Mekong River has great implications not only for China's economic and environmental benefits, but also for China-Southeast Asia relationship. It provides an alternative source of energy, a potential source of irrigation water, a guaranteed dry-season river flow, and water sources for the forests, fields and villages along Mekong riparian countries in Southeast Asia.

There is the way of win-win solution in term of Chinese business, which may base on Chinese strategic culture. There is a notable aspect of Chinese business ways; “Win-Win” It seems that the prospect of solution in the lower Mekong Basin, changed the nature of the negotiations from a “zero-sum” game into a possible “win-win” situation by informing that water could be shared among the riparian during dry season. Osborne (2004:29) points out that Yunnan spokesman has also insisted that there will be no change to water quality as a result of the dams on the river.

Perhaps, the way of Sun Tzu may be applied to a negotiation. To reduce the negative impacts from the lower states, China has made options more desirable to the others. Kesten and Tse (2004:1) say that “If you understand the other party's need, then you will be in a better position to convince them to accept your solution, especially if your offer takes into account the other side's needs. When presenting your offer, you should emphasize the attractive qualities of it and minimize the negatives.” as Sun Tzu wrote:

“If you know the enemy and know yourself,
you need not fear the result of a hundred battles.”

Similarly, China offered benefits such as power supply and economic aid to the lower countries, so it seems that China knew how to deal and gave what they wanted before they started negotiating.

Additionally, Lai (2004:9) points out that the Chinese game called ‘GO’ has resemblance to the Chinese way of war and diplomacy. Its concepts and tactics reflect Chinese philosophy, stratagems, tactical and strategic thinking. This can be demonstrated by the famous and historical Chinese game in context of win-win solution as well. Interestingly, he compares Chinese strategic culture in context of making good relationships with neighbours with the GO game. He states that in the last 10 years, China has gradually built a “ring of friends” around its borders. Perhaps, ‘GO’ is considered as part of comprehensive security of the Mekong river solution.

In addition, Shambaugh (2003:78) says that “China’s new diplomatic position has created meetings and exchanges among Chinese officials and their counterparts both civilian and military in neighboring countries.” Chinese heads of state makes summits with neighboring heads of states annually. He also states that “China is assigning many of its diplomats to ambassadorships in key areas, so it is likely that they are becoming well known in local communities.”

Likewise, it is obvious in Asian culture history, China and the lower countries had the close culture as they lived in the same family. Clearly, China is 'big brother' as it has a great history over past centuries. It has led to having sense of same family up to now. China's policies in the lower countries reward to good behaviors and punish for bad behaviors. Importantly, as big brother, China, need to get respect from its brother as well. As smaller and weaker nations (both in terms of military power, economy, and geographical extent) Laos and Cambodia have a common interest in seeking consensus in decision-making in order for them to stay at good terms with their 'bigger brothers'. (Jannik and Ravnborg, 2004:59)

In short, China, on the one hand, seeks to use common interests in this area to strengthen its relationship without use its military strength as traditional "big brother" to the lower countries. On the other hand, China still retains its national interests while maintaining good relationships with them. These days, China has been successful in its relations and has achieved strategic and diplomatic goals. Also, China's priority in indo-china is to maintain security along its borders, so that it can prevent the entry of unexpected elements that would challenge China's internal security.

Conclusions

China is the most important actor on the Mekong River; the impact of developments on the upper river may lead to transboundary problems. It may affect not only water utilization and ecological security but also regional security between China and the lower countries. At a time when China is faced with power shortages and rapid economic growth, the hydropower from the Mekong is one part of a projected program of dam building to modify the economic imbalance between China's coastal area and the remote areas in terms of economic developments (Osborne, 2004:26) Therefore, to increase Yunnan's economic growth, the developments on this river are needed to continue to solve China energy requirements. However, China already plays many key roles in Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam, which needs friendly relations among riparian nations, must be maintained by using all China means both direct and indirect. This is also because of China having strengthened relationships with Thai, Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia and Vietnam in terms of politics, economy and cooperation. Chinese mostly helps their neighbors rather than getting benefits from them.

One of Chinese means may be based on strategic culture. It does not have to be considered only in term of use of force, but it also can be applied to conflict management. China has dealt with the lower countries by giving and taking which has provided mutual benefits particularly in term of economic support. This solution also relies on developing friendly co-operative relations with neighbouring countries, which is an important external condition of China's strategy. Because the lower nations are connected with China geographically and economically, this sub-region is an ideal to use a win-win solution for all nations in order to balance impacts on those countries.

Lai (2004: 12) states that China understands the negative impact of the US dominance in this area, so they develop China's comprehensive national power to be a major role in term of cooperation with the lower countries. The Chinese new security concept has also enhanced China's image in the region, particularly approaches to cooperative security. One feature of present Chinese strategic culture seems to be that China prefers to be a strong 'good neighbor', so this will be more effective than military threat. Economic and trade agreements, development of transport links, diplomatic and political, military and security cooperation are essential.

To sum up, China's comprehensive strategy has been effective and successful because China has used its strategic culture appropriately to play a major role in order to solve the impacts of the upper Mekong River developments on the lower countries. Eventually, China and the lower countries will have an interest in regional stability and mutually beneficial cooperation in which to materially improve the lives of their citizens.

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ⁱ It is called "Lancing Jiang" or the Turbulent River by most of the people in China. Due to its great feature and as a main source of the livelihood, it is called by the Cambodian as the "Tonle Thom" or the Great River, and in Vietnam as the "Cuu Long" or the Nine Dragon Rivers. In Lao and Thailand, it is known as "Mae Nam Khong" or the Khong Mother of Water. See SOKHEM PECH, 2004, Regional Characteristics and water issues: from Mekong River basin perspective, Japan