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Transboundary cooperation vs. internal ambitions: The role of China and Cambodia in the Mekong region

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Introduction

The Mekong River Basin offers a fascinating example of regional cooperation – and non-cooperation – in the development and management of an international river basin. The riparian countries have in recent decades experienced several internal and international conflicts that have seriously impaired regional political relations. This has also had its impacts on regional cooperation on water management, including the functioning of the Mekong River Commission (MRC) and its two predecessors.

Despite difficult circumstances, the Mekong River organizations have made important contributions to transboundary water management;¹ the Mekong cooperation has even been cited to be the most successful in the developing world (Phillips et al. 2006; Jacobs 2002). However, the functioning of the MRC and other regional organizations dealing with water – most importantly the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) Program – is still far from perfect, and they are often seen to be non-transparent and too detached from local realities.

This chapter examines water-related cooperation in the Mekong region through a review of the Mekong cooperation and two country-specific case studies focusing on China and Cambodia. In this way, we aim to illustrate the challenges of transboundary water cooperation, and in particular the specific role that the riparian countries have in its functioning. We show the effect that the past and present policies and internal

developments of China and Cambodia have had on the management of the river and the regional cooperation in that context. Owing to the countries' different roles in the region, the China case study focuses on hydro-power development, whereas the Cambodia case study concentrates on that country's tumultuous history and its current political setting.

The focus on China and Cambodia is for various reasons. Taken as a whole, China and Cambodia both have had a particular role in the Mekong region as well as in Mekong cooperation. For example, they both had a specific role in the way the Mekong Agreement – which established the MRC – was formulated. The countries also make an interesting pair for comparison: whereas China is the most upstream country, a regional superpower, a non-party of the MRC and the only riparian with dams in the Mekong mainstream, Cambodia is a downstream country and a member of the MRC and has potentially the most to lose from uncontrolled development of the river as a result of potentially destructive impacts on the country's floodplain and aquatic production.

It is important to note, however, that the focus on riparian states inevitably leaves out other important aspects of the Mekong cooperation. As highlighted by Sneddon and Fox (2006), Mekong cooperation should not be considered just as interaction between monolithic states, since there actually exists a variety of actors and processes at different scales that simultaneously support and challenge the riparian states.² The Mekong countries are also not particularly democratic, and implementing balanced water management and addressing possible water-related conflicts through transnational cooperation alone are therefore not the most viable options (Öjendal 2000). However, because a number of recent studies have focused on the above-mentioned topics (see e.g. Backer 2006; Hirsch et al. 2006; Lebel et al. 2006; Phillips et al. 2006; Sneddon and Fox 2006; Dore 2003; Öjendal 2000; Bakker 1999), we concentrate in this chapter on Cambodia and China and their specific roles in the Mekong cooperation.

The Mekong River Basin

The Mekong River is one of the greatest rivers of the world: both its estimated length (4,909 km) and its mean annual volume (475 km³) make it the tenth-largest in the world (Shaochuang et al. 2007; MRC 2005). It is also among the world's most pristine large rivers, supporting an exceptionally diverse and productive freshwater ecosystem and providing a source of livelihoods for millions of people. Six riparian countries share the river basin: Cambodia, China, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Viet Nam (Figure 5.1).



Figure 5.1 Map of the Mekong River Basin.
 Source: Map by Matti Kumm.

The Mekong River Basin can be divided into the Upper and Lower Basins, with China and Myanmar forming the Upper Basin, which constitutes approximately 24 per cent of the total catchment area and 18 per cent of the total flow (MRC 2005, 2003). The river's runoff originates largely from the Lower Basin as less than one-fifth of the total flow is contributed by the Upper Mekong Basin (MRC 2003). The river's seasonal floods are vital for the basin's ecology and people's livelihoods because they support rice cultivation and diverse aquatic ecosystems and wetlands. Although the hydrology of the downstream Mekong is not that dependent on the Upper Basin, the latter contributes significantly to the river's dry season flow as well as to its sediments.

It is estimated that roughly half of the total sediment concentration of the river originates from the Upper Basin (Kummu and Varis 2007). Owing to sediment trapping by the dams, China's planned cascade of dams in the mainstream Mekong may therefore have a significant impact on the sediment balance and, consequently, on the aquatic productivity of the river system (Kummu and Varis 2007; Kummu et al. 2008). In addition, the dams' probable impact on raising dry season water levels poses a serious threat for the downstream floodplains, including the flooded forests of the Tonle Sap Lake.³

The role of the Mekong in the riparian countries

All the Mekong countries are changing rapidly: population is growing and urbanizing, economies are developing and trade is increasing. At the same time, disparities are rising and natural resources are under increasing pressure. Although many consider the ongoing and planned water development projects – most notably the construction of large hydropower dams and irrigation projects – important for the countries' economic development, the negative impacts that they are likely to have on ecosystems as well as on the livelihoods of millions of people are also estimated to be remarkable.

The Mekong River and its tributaries have different hydrological, economic and social roles in different riparian countries. In the primarily rural economies of Cambodia, Laos and the Mekong Delta of Viet Nam, the river is the lifeline of the local people as it provides livelihoods for millions of fishers and farmers. Although not accessible for large-scale navigation, the Mekong River is an important navigation route, particularly for landlocked Laos and the Yunnan province of China. The river and its tributaries are also important sources of hydropower and, consequently, of energy and income for the riparian countries. The development of hydropower in the Mekong Basin has, however, faced severe criticism owing to its significant environmental and social impacts, which

Table 5.1 Some of the main functions, impacts and threats related to the Mekong River in five riparian countries

Country	Main use/function	Major feared impacts caused by the country	Major threats to the country
China	Hydropower, transportation route	Levelling out of the floods, trapping of sediments and nutrients	Lack of energy and transportation routes
Thailand	Water diversion for irrigation and other uses	Environmental degradation, flow changes	Lack of water for irrigation
Laos	Hydropower, navigation, aquatic resources	Levelling out of the floods, trapping of sediments and nutrients	Impacts on agriculture and fishing, river bank erosion
Cambodia	Aquatic resources, irrigation, possibly hydropower	Potential negative impacts owing to unsustainable fisheries management	Changes in floodplains, particularly in the Tonle Sap flood pulse → impact on fishing and agriculture
Viet Nam	Irrigation (delta), hydropower (Central Highlands)	Increasing environmental degradation and water quality problems in the delta owing to intensive agriculture and dense population	Decreased dry season water flows; increasing salt water intrusion and negative impacts on irrigation

remain poorly analysed and recognized (see e.g. IUCN et al. 2007; Lamberts 2008). Moreover, the role of dams in shifting control of water resources from the local level towards provincial and central governments has been a serious concern, particularly when noting the existing governance challenges in practically all riparian countries (IUCN et al. 2007; Öjendal 2000; Bakker 1999).

Table 5.1 seeks to summarize the different ways in which the Mekong countries make use of the river and its resources.⁴ The table also lists the major feared impacts that the national development plans may cause for the river as well as the foremost threats the countries face in relation to the river. Naturally, the majority of the impacts are caused by upstream countries, whereas the downstream countries are the ones threatened by them.

The diverse aspirations for the exploitation of the Mekong River's resources give rise to different, sometimes opposing, objectives in the

riparian countries. For Cambodia, maintaining the seasonality of the river is seen as crucial in order to protect the productivity of its floodplains and the exceptional ecosystem of the Tonle Sap Lake. Viet Nam too considers maintaining seasonality as important for the Mekong Delta, and sees the reduction of dry season flows as particularly unwanted. Thailand, by contrast, aspires to draw water from the river and its tributaries for irrigation, and has even planned to divert some of the Mekong's water to other rivers within its area (Phillips et al. 2006). Thailand is also eager to get more hydropower from the Mekong, mainly through electricity-buying agreements with Laos and China. The most upstream country, China, wishes to improve the navigability of the upper parts of the river and – above all – has already built hydropower dams in the mainstream Mekong and has plans for several more.

The differing national interests in and needs for the Mekong form a potential source of conflict – but also cooperation – between the riparian countries. Overall, the riparian countries' governments seem to have rather similar aspirations for the development of the basin, including the development of hydropower and large-scale irrigation.⁵ This is illustrated by the fact that there have recently emerged – or, rather, re-emerged – plans in Thailand, Laos and Cambodia to build dams in the mainstream Mekong.⁶ If these plans materialize, it will be the first time that mainstream dams are built in the lower Mekong River, having potentially significant impacts in terms of both environment and livelihoods (see e.g. Baran and Ratner 2007). The planning and decision-making process related to these plans can thus be seen to take regional cooperation, and particularly the functioning of the MRC, to a completely new level. Consequently, the success – or failure – of this cooperative process between the riparian countries will for its part show the way for the future of Mekong cooperation.

Regional cooperation

The Mekong region has changed a great deal during the past decade in terms of geopolitics. The riparian countries have developed rapidly, increased their cooperation, particularly in trade and economics, and re-oriented their policies towards more open international relations. Consequently, other modalities of regional cooperation increasingly determine Mekong cooperation and the role of the MRC in the region (Figure 5.2). The main institutions in this context are the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) Program and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), both of which are introduced briefly next. After that, the functioning of the MRC and its predecessors is discussed in more detail.

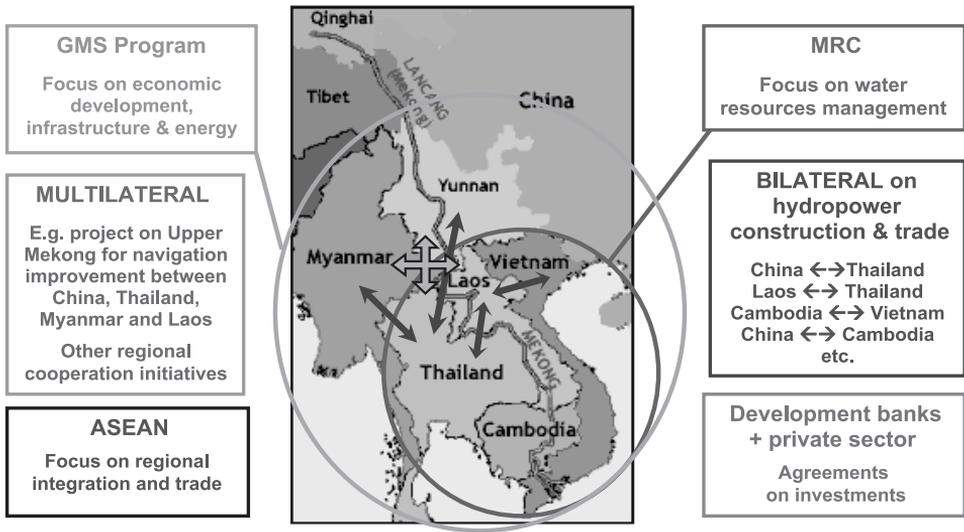


Figure 5.2 Different levels of cooperation in the Mekong region.

Together these two sections present the larger context of water-related cooperation in the Mekong region and discuss its possible future.

The GMS Program was initiated in 1992 with strong support from the Asian Development Bank and all six riparian countries are members.⁷ The GMS Program focuses on economic and infrastructure development, but environmental issues too are listed on its agenda. However, the GMS Program's environmental initiatives focus mainly on land ecosystems,⁸ and largely ignore the Mekong River and aquatic biodiversity aspects – undoubtedly the region's most important and controversial environmental issue. This would naturally offer a great opportunity for the GMS Program and the MRC to complement each other, but the interaction between the two remains limited. Part of the dilemma is that the MRC and the GMS Program are both dealing with somewhat similar issues but with a very different approach; it has even been indicated that the two organizations are in competition (Hirsch et al. 2006).

Another, geographically broader, economic cooperation organization in the region is ASEAN. Its 10 member countries include all the Mekong countries except China. However, ASEAN also has close connections with China through its dialogue processes. The development of the Mekong Basin is one of the five priority areas for ASEAN–China cooperation (ASEAN 2002), and the ASEAN–Mekong Basin Development Cooperation is one of the subregional cooperation frameworks in which ASEAN is involved. The framework was established in 1996, and its objective is to stimulate sustainable economic growth of the Mekong Basin

and to encourage a process of dialogue and identification of common projects (ASEAN 1996). Again, these objectives could be easily linked with those of the MRC, but there is still little cooperation between ASEAN and the MRC. Part of the dilemma seems to be the different valuations and views of the river: whereas the MRC sees the Mekong River chiefly as a natural resource, the GMS Program and ASEAN seem to consider the river more as a symbol that defines the region in which they are promoting economic growth and cooperation (Weatherbee 1997).

There exist several other regional institutions and initiatives that have water-related issues on their agenda. These include the United Nations' Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), the United Nations Development Programme's Regional Environmental Governance Programme for Asia-Pacific as well as the initiative by the World Conservation Union (IUCN) and its partners to make discussion about water development in the basin more transparent and participatory through a multi-stakeholder dialogue process (IUCN et al. 2007). Other multilateral cooperation processes include, for example, a navigation agreement for the upper Mekong River between China, Laos, Myanmar and Thailand and the Thai-initiated Ayeyawady–Chao Phraya–Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy. In addition, the major financial institutions in the region – the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) – are strongly involved in water issues through financing river development and related projects. The World Bank, together with the ADB, has also developed the Mekong Water Resources Assistance Strategy for the Mekong Basin.

Despite some interaction between all these different regional organizations, their cooperation remains limited, and some of them are actually seen more as rivals than as collaborators (Hirsch et al. 2006; Sokhem and Sunada 2006). Considering the limited capacity of the Mekong countries, the rapid pace of regional development and the tremendous possibilities and threats included in water development, this non-cooperation is unquestionably a remarkable opportunity wasted.

The Mekong River Commission and its predecessors

In terms of water resources, the most central cooperation body for the Mekong countries is the Mekong River Commission (MRC). However, the functioning of the MRC and its predecessors (Figure 5.3) has often been limited for political reasons, particularly owing to differing national interests and domestic political challenges in the member countries. In addition, the organizations have operated in only the four Lower Me-



Figure 5.3 Three phases of the Mekong River organizations.

Note: The letters indicate the first letters of the names of the four member countries.

kong countries of Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Viet Nam, which has left China out of the actual cooperation. A review of the functioning of the Mekong River organizations – the MRC and its two predecessors – therefore provides an interesting framework for analysing the roles of riparian states in regional water cooperation.

The Mekong Committee and the Interim Mekong Committee

The Mekong Committee (MC), the first cooperative body between the four Lower Mekong countries, was established in 1957. The foundations of the MC were laid at the beginning of the 1950s, when the United Nations and the US Bureau of Reclamation carried out a series of studies that suggested great possibilities for irrigation and the development of hydropower, and aroused the interest of the four Lower Mekong countries (MRC 2002).

The Mekong Committee, headquartered in Bangkok, was set up only for the Lower Mekong Basin. China and Burma (now Myanmar) were not members: China was excluded mainly because it was not a UN member and was under a communist regime, and Burma was not interested in joining the cooperative body (Browder and Ortolano 2000). The formation of the Mekong Committee was also very much a product of the Cold War, because one of its objectives was to support the capitalist regimes in the region and in this way to prevent the spread of communism in the area (Phillips et al. 2006).

The mandate of the Mekong Committee was focused on planning, and throughout the 1960s the Committee was involved in a massive programme of water resources studies (Browder and Ortolano 2000). In 1970, the MC introduced the Indicative Basin Plan, which marked a shift from mere planning towards implementation. The plan presented a set of options for water resources projects, and included several large-scale dams to be constructed in the Mekong mainstream (MRC 1970).⁹ These massive plans were, however, put together with few doubts about their

actual desirability, guided by an optimistic view of the capitalist development of the basin (Phillips et al. 2006; Öjendal 2000).

The year 1975 proved to be one of the most important turning points for Mekong cooperation. During that year the MC issued a “Joint Declaration of Principles” in which the four member countries agreed that all mainstream, major tributary and inter-basin diversions require the unanimous approval of the Committee prior to implementation (Browder and Ortolano 2000). However, the Joint Declaration was not ratified nor were any of the projects defined in the Indicative Basin Plan implemented owing to the radical political changes emerging in the region in the very same year. Out of the four MC countries, Cambodia, Laos and Viet Nam acquired communist governments, and Thailand remained alone in the pro-Western, capitalist camp (Browder and Ortolano 2000).

In Cambodia, the extreme communist Khmer Rouge regime came to power in April 1975, and severed connections with the Mekong Committee. The absence of Cambodia forced the remaining three member countries to form the Interim Mekong Committee (IMC). The formation of the IMC was seen to be an important achievement in itself; after all, it brought socialist Viet Nam and Thailand to the same table, offering one of the very few opportunities for diplomatic negotiations between the countries during these turbulent years (Weatherbee 1997). However, the functions of the Interim Mekong Committee were much more limited than those of the Mekong Committee as the three remaining member countries concentrated on their internal water development projects. The region’s tense geopolitical situation, along with Cambodia’s continuing internal problems, transformed the IMC from a temporary cooperative body to a diplomatic battleground that was to operate for more than a decade. As a consequence, Mekong cooperation seemed to be slowly slipping into irrelevance during the 1980s (Browder and Ortolano 2000).

The formation of the Mekong River Commission

The beginning of the 1990s marked the revitalization of Mekong cooperation and eventually led to the formation of the Mekong River Commission (MRC). Soon after the signing of Cambodia’s peace agreement in 1991, Cambodia’s new government requested reactivation of the country’s membership in the former Mekong Committee. Although the IMC’s statute declared that the Mekong Committee would succeed the IMC once Cambodia was ready to rejoin, things had changed dramatically. Although all the IMC members were willing to readmit Cambodia, Thailand and Viet Nam in particular had serious disagreements over the constitutional structure of the new Mekong Committee. The idealistic

and even euphoric atmosphere of joint interest that prevailed in the 1950s and 1960s was now absent (Phillips et al. 2006).

The disagreements between the countries resulted from the changed global and regional political environment. The ending of the Cold War era altered the geopolitical situation in Southeast Asia as well, and forced the riparian countries to rethink their domestic and foreign policies. In the new regional order China appeared as the region's most important power, with growing economic significance (Makim 2002). At the beginning of the 1990s, China also initiated an enormous hydropower development project for the upper Mekong River that caused concern in the Lower Basin countries and resulted in further disagreements about the focus and structure of Mekong cooperation. In addition to geopolitical changes, the regional socio-economic situation had changed as well. Whereas other Lower Mekong countries had suffered from poor economic growth throughout the 1980s, Thailand had developed significantly and was now clearly more developed than the other riparian countries. This was seen to give Thailand more bargaining power in the negotiations about the future of Mekong cooperation (Nakayama 1999).

Although all four Lower Mekong countries were ready to continue their cooperation, they disagreed over whether they should carry on under the old Mekong Committee framework or negotiate a totally new framework. In addition, Thailand was eager to incorporate China in the new Mekong organization, while the others were more hesitant (Radosevich 1995).¹⁰ The impasse was solved in 1992 by the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding that returned Cambodia officially to Mekong cooperation and started negotiations for a new cooperation framework. After long and complex negotiations, the Mekong River Commission (MRC) was established in April 1995 by the four Lower Mekong countries with the signing of the "Agreement on the Cooperation for the Sustainable Development of the Mekong River Basin" (MRC 1995).

Despite China's prominent role and its massive plans for the development of its part of the Mekong River, it did not join the MRC. However, the 1995 Mekong Agreement includes an article that allows "any other riparian State" to become a member of the MRC with the consent of the other members (MRC 1995). In 1996, China and Myanmar became so-called dialogue members of the Commission. The MRC's cooperation with China was further improved in 2002 when China signed an agreement on the provision of hydrological information on the Mekong River (MRCS 2002).

The new Mekong Agreement started a new era of cooperation in the Lower Mekong Basin. Instead of the former emphasis on planning and construction, the Mekong Agreement focused on sustainable and comprehensive management of the Mekong River. Because of the prominence it

gives to joint development, ecological protection and water allocation, the agreement has been praised as a milestone in international water resources management treaties (Radosevich and Olson 1999). However, the phrasing of the Mekong Agreement of 1995 emphasizes the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the signatory states, and rejects the enforcement power of the MRC. The Agreement is thus less binding than the 1975 Joint Declaration and leaves more freedom for national water utilization. The MRC can therefore be seen to be more a coordinator, rather than a controller, of the use of the Mekong's resources (Browder and Ortolano 2000). For this reason the Mekong Agreement has also been described as weak, allowing the member countries to interpret it as they like or even just to sideline it (Backer 2006).

Way forward for Mekong cooperation?

It is obvious that the MRC and its predecessors have played an important role as a cooperation platform between the Mekong countries; the organizations have collected and shared information between the countries, made common plans for the basin development, and provided a dialogue forum for the governments. However, with the increase in unilateral and bilateral plans for water development – most notably hydropower construction – in the basin, there is a real danger that the MRC will be sidelined from the planning and decision-making processes.¹¹

Despite the seemingly easy cooperation, the four member countries of the MRC seem not to be eager to carry out really comprehensive and coordinated development of the basin. We see two main reasons for this. First, the governments seem to be hesitant to give up even a small part of their national sovereignty. The different forms of regional cooperation – particularly those that involve agreements and limitations on countries' use of water and related resources – are subordinated to national interests, and the MRC therefore remains marginalized from the national decision-making processes (Dore 2003; Backer 2006; Hirsch et al. 2006).¹² The differing national interests are also related to the region's tumultuous history and the complex political relations between the riparian countries. Secondly, the member country governments seem to fear that cooperation in the MRC would considerably slow down and even prevent their plans for the utilization of the Mekong. Indeed, the countries seem to be reluctant to take steps towards a more regulatory role for the MRC, with greater emphasis on governance, as this would also mean compromising their national sovereignty and their plans for developing the river and its tributaries (Hirsch et al. 2006).

The MRC is also facing other, more general, challenges. The fairly weak institutional capacity of its member countries – Cambodia and

Laos in particular – is also reflected in the MRC, which still has plenty of room for improvement (Chenoweth et al. 2001). In addition, the very structure of the MRC as a cooperative body between the riparian states means that the MRC considers the entire basin mainly as a transnational space (Sneddon and Fox 2006). Many see that this state-centrism – particularly when combined with persisting governance challenges in the member countries – means that the MRC does not comprehensively address the different temporal and spatial scales of water use, does not involve the non-state actors properly in its work and fails to reflect the actual needs and concerns at the local level (IUCN et al. 2007; Sneddon and Fox 2006; Sokhem and Sunada 2006; Dore 2003; Öjendal 2000).

At the basin-wide level, the absence of two upstream countries – China and Myanmar – is perhaps the biggest deficiency of the MRC, seriously restricting comprehensive management of the entire basin. The fact that all three Mekong River organizations have had only Lower Mekong countries as members means that none of the organizations has complied with the most frequently highlighted prerequisite for basin-wide water management, i.e. that the river basin organization should coincide with the geographical extent of the watershed (Phillips et al. 2006). China thus has a very special role in Mekong cooperation and its actions – and non-actions – have a remarkable influence on the development and management of the entire basin; these are discussed more below, as well as in Chapter 10 on China.

A bit more than a decade after the Mekong Agreement was signed, the MRC is in many ways at a crossroads. Whereas the first 10 years of the MRC focused on building technical and management capacity, particularly for the MRC Secretariat, the long-formulated new strategic plan for 2006–2010 is moving towards an approach oriented more to development, investment and action (MRC 2006). This seems also to be what the member country governments and the CEO – unlike most of the donors – want (Backer 2006; Affeltranger 2005; Cogels 2005). This kind of approach is actually very close to that of the Greater Mekong Subregion Program and ASEAN, raising questions about overlaps. This approach has also attracted criticism owing to the lack of proper consideration of emerging conflict-prone issues, most importantly the ongoing construction of dams upstream and in the tributaries (Jensen 2005).

Case study 1: China

China is a regional superpower with a history of non-cooperation in the management of its transboundary river basins.¹³ This is also a reality in the Mekong Basin, where China is the uppermost riparian and has

Table 5.2 Proposed Mekong dam scheme in China

Site	Dam height (metres)	Installed capacity (MW)	Current status	Estimated completion
Gonguoqiao	130	750	n.a.	n.a.
Xiaowan	300	4,200	Under construction	2012
Manwan	126	1,500	Completed	1996
Dachaoshan	110	1,350	Completed	2003
Nuozhadu	254	5,850	Under preparation	2017
Jinghong	118	1,750	Under construction	2009
Ganlanba	n.a.	250	n.a.	n.a.
Mengsong	n.a.	600	n.a.	n.a.

Sources: Magee (2006), Dore and Yu (2004), Voigt (2004), IRN (2001), McCormack (2001), Plinston and He (1999).

expressed only limited interest in regional cooperation, at least when it comes to discussing its own plans for the exploitation of the river. This kind of self-centred approach has been easy for China: as the most upstream country it has control over the Upper Mekong Basin.

Development in the upper Mekong

Despite the strong efforts towards integrated management of water resources, the international dimension and transboundary impacts have traditionally been to a large extent left out of China's water-related plans and activities. Best known of these activities is the plan to build a cascade of several large hydropower dams into the Mekong mainstream in Yunnan province (Table 5.2). The first dam, Manwan, was completed in 1996 without prior consultation with the downstream countries. The second one, the Dachaoshan dam, went into operation in 2003, and construction of the massive 300 metres high Xiaowan hydroelectric project began in 2002. The Xiaowan dam is China's second-largest dam project, smaller only than the Three Gorges project on the Yangtze River. The Jinghong dam is also under construction and the Nuozhadu dam is in preparation; the remaining projects are at the planning stage (Magee 2006; Dore and Yu 2004; Voigt 2004).

The dams in the upper Mekong – or Lancang as it is known in China – are mainly planned to provide energy. The dam cascade, concentrated close to China's southern borders, will have a maximum installed capacity of 15,000 MW. Yunnan province is one of the poorest in the country, and income from the power trade is therefore considered important for its economic development. At the national level, power shortages are

becoming increasingly serious, and energy production is therefore high on the government's agenda. Hydropower is also considered to be a clean form of energy, particularly compared with the dominant coal-based energy production.

Besides national needs, the upper Mekong dams are expected to supply power to the growing markets in Southeast Asia, particularly to Thailand. The Chinese part of the Mekong has a remarkable total exploitable capacity of an estimated 23,480 MW (Chincold 2003). Nonetheless, the river forms only a minor part of the country's total hydropower potential, and is also situated far from the main industrial centres. However, considering the low level of development in Yunnan province as well as the energy needs of the other Mekong countries, there seems to be a growing demand for both local consumption and cross-border electricity trade.

The Mekong River also offers China access to the Southeast Asian markets. In order to improve the navigability of the river, China has initiated a navigation improvement project on the river together with Thailand, Laos and Myanmar. The plan included removal of several rapids and reefs in the upper reaches of the Mekong by dredging and blasting (Finlayson 2002). The navigation project has been criticized for poor impact assessments that did not properly assess the potential environmental impacts (Lazarus et al. 2006). Additionally, Cambodia and Viet Nam claim that they were not consulted or even properly informed about the agreement, although they are the two countries in many ways most dependent on the river and most affected by upstream development (Makkonen 2005).¹⁴

According to the official Chinese view, development in the upper Mekong will not have severe impacts. In fact, the Chinese view the impacts of dam construction as being mainly positive, because during the dry season the amount of water in the river could be increased and during the rainy season flood protection improved. With careful operation of the dams, the adverse effects could be minimized (Chapman and He 2000). China's statements have nevertheless been criticized for badly underestimating – and even neglecting – the negative downstream impacts. Many regional and international specialists maintain that the consequences of the Chinese dams will be considerable, and will have environmental and social impacts because the quality and quantity of the river flow will change remarkably (see e.g. IUCN et al. 2007; Lamberts 2008; Kumm and Varis 2007; Keskinen et al. 2007). In particular, the immense aquatic production, which is a major source of income and food in the basin, is likely to be endangered.

One of the main challenges in discussing the impacts of upstream dams is that there has not been a proper cumulative environmental assessment covering the entire river basin and the different development plans, at

least not one that is publicly available. This is related to the problems with the availability of information; China has been hesitant to share detailed information on its plans or even on the hydrological measurements in its part of the Mekong River. On the other hand, comprehensive information about the different development plans and their impact assessments is usually very difficult to get in other riparian countries too.

China's reluctance to cooperate regionally?

China's cooperation – or non-cooperation – in the Mekong Basin looks different depending on the viewpoint. The official Chinese version wants to give an impression of high-level cooperation as well as of mutual benefits from the Chinese projects. However, the alternative view reveals that the importance of the water projects, particularly those involving hydropower production, is so great that the possible negative impacts on downstream countries may simply not be taken seriously into account.

There are several reasons for China's relatively low cooperation in the management of the Mekong River, including:

- the structure of Chinese society and politics – a strong central administration;
- historical factors – turbulent relationships with the neighbouring countries;
- strong economic development, pressure to develop further and the need for energy – the necessity of the projects targeted at water resources development;
- challenges inside the country and the resources required to solve them – shortage of capacity and the low priority of international issues;
- lack of adequate benefits – what China would really achieve through increased Mekong cooperation.

All these factors should be taken into account when considering future actions to improve Mekong cooperation and in particular China's role in it. As can be seen, most of the factors are closely related to China's domestic issues. The structure of Chinese society remains highly centralized and relies on the one-party system. The process of maintaining this political system while aiming at a market economy and increased participation in the international community is a very special one. Adding the huge size of the country and the domestic challenges faced in many sectors, it is practically impossible to compare China with any other nation.

Based on the structures of Chinese society and politics, there is a tendency to keep internal matters – including the development of water resources – as the nation's own business. In addition, some of the working methods in the water sector clearly hamper the implementation of an integrated approach. Water-related responsibilities are divided among

different ministries and bureaus, and there is hardly any information-sharing among them. To fulfil the aims set for them, the different agencies also compete with each other, which further reduces the motivation for information-sharing (Makkonen 2005). At the middle and lower levels of governance, contradictions exist in the position of the bureaus as they need to respond both to the next level in their own sector and to the general local governance. All these very basic governance challenges have their implications for international cooperation.

At the same time, China faces some substantial, high-level domestic challenges that demand priority over other issues. Environmental degradation, which has reached an alarming level, is one such challenge and is very difficult to curb. The same problems as are faced in many sectors – an inoperative management structure and a lack of funding – also occur in the environmental field. Owing to the scope of China's internal environmental problems, there may be little capacity for solving international matters related to the environment. China's national economy is another major challenge. The drive towards a Western idea of a developed country, a strong national economy and both economic and social balance are major factors in all decision-making. The importance of projects that support domestic development, such as energy and transportation sectors, must not be underestimated. Water resources have significant potential from both of these viewpoints. This provides strong justification too for the projects on transboundary rivers, even if the impacts on the other riparian countries are likely to be largely negative.

However, positive signs of China's willingness to cooperate more actively in the Mekong do exist. Local administrations and the non-governmental organizations seem to consider increased cooperation important, but rarely have real opportunities to work towards these aims because of bureaucratic challenges, problems with resources and lack of experience in real public participation (Makkonen 2005). At a higher level, China's economic opening, its drive for more transparency and its increasingly important position as a member of the international community encourage international cooperation. China is also becoming more and more dependent on the outside world, which seems to be giving increasing weight to relationships with its neighbouring countries as well.

Future prospects for China's Mekong cooperation

Despite its history of weak regional cooperation, China is a major player in the Mekong region and has shown increasing interest in the region. China is keenly interested in more economically focused cooperation within the GMS Program and ASEAN, and it has substantially increased its bilateral cooperation with the other Mekong countries. Furthermore,

even though China is not a member of the MRC, it meets regularly with the MRC because of its dialogue membership, and since 2002 it has also shared some hydrological information with the Commission (MRCS 2006, 2002).

As noted by Hirsch et al. (2006), the official Chinese position seems also to have shifted to be more favourable towards MRC membership. Although many see China's membership in the MRC as an important step forward in Mekong cooperation, there are fundamental challenges to China's membership from both sides. For the Chinese, the possible restrictions that membership would entail – particularly on the building and operation of its dams – are difficult to accept. It also seems that China wants the Commission to cover more economic and trade issues in addition to environmental and water-related questions (Makkonen 2005). On the other hand, it is not clear if the MRC countries would actually accept China's membership, as the country could have a too dominant role in the Commission.

At the same time, China has become an increasingly important bilateral partner for the other Mekong countries. In Cambodia and Laos, China has become one of the largest foreign investors and trade partners, and it has also given significant donations and loans, particularly for infrastructure development, including hydropower (Sokha 2007; China Development Brief 2006).¹⁵ This kind of increased bilateral cooperation could potentially lead also to increased multilateral cooperation. This requires, however, strong political will in the riparian countries for coordinated action; without this it seems likely that these kinds of bilateral partnerships will not strengthen more multilateral processes, but might even increasingly replace them.

Case study 2: Cambodia

Cambodia is a centrally located downstream country that falls almost completely within the Mekong Basin. Tonle Sap Lake, which is the heart of the Mekong's aquatic production, an invaluable flood-leveller and an essential source of income for the region, is also situated in the country. Cambodia is hence deeply dependent on the Mekong River and concerned about the possible negative impacts of upstream development. Because of its central location and the vital role of the Tonle Sap for the entire Mekong system, Cambodia is also an important partner for the other Mekong countries.

The civil war and political unrest that have characterized Cambodia for much of recent decades have resulted in severe poverty, relatively poor infrastructure, a lack of technical, financial and human capacity and con-

tinuing governance challenges. Cambodia is one of the world's most aid-dependent countries, and donors and development banks are heavily involved in the country's development. Mekong cooperation is seen as important for bringing much-needed financial and technical assistance to the country. Although water resources management is high on the government's agenda (Chamroeun 2006), the governmental line agencies' weak capacity and a lack of coordination between the different ministries mean that Cambodia still lacks the means comprehensively to address the different aspects of the 1995 Mekong Agreement (Keskinen and Varis 2005; Sokhem and Sunada 2006).

At the same time, Cambodia has a history of exceptional internal problems and conflicts that have profoundly affected the regional geopolitics and have also seriously hindered Mekong cooperation. However, Cambodia's problems have by no means had only internal causes but have been greatly affected by the power struggles of both regional and global superpowers. Cambodia's strategic location between the two regional powers, Thailand and Viet Nam, means that it easily gets caught up in regional power battles. This situation has forced Cambodia either to favour one of the regional powers or to attempt to remain neutral by appealing to an outside power such as China or the United States (Chandler 1996).

Internal turmoil in the 1970s and 1980s – Mekong cooperation ends

Cambodia was, like Laos and Viet Nam, a French colony until it gained its independence and became a constitutional monarchy in 1953 under King Norodom Sihanouk. With the escalation of the Cold War in Southeast Asia, Sihanouk adopted a policy of neutrality that aimed to maintain Cambodia's internal stability and to keep the country out of the intensifying conflicts in neighbouring countries, particularly in Viet Nam (Kiernan 2007). The formation of the Mekong Committee in 1957 increased Cambodia's cooperation with its neighbours and provided possibilities and resources for the development of its water resources; it was also hoped that it would impede the spread of communism in Cambodia and in the region as a whole. However, towards the end of the 1960s the country was increasingly affected by the Viet Nam war, and Sihanouk's regime was unable to handle its increasing effects.

In 1970, Sihanouk was replaced by General Lon Nol in a bloodless coup d'état. Soon after that, the Cambodian communists, the Khmer Rouge, launched a civil war against the new right-wing and pro-US government (Chandler 1996). The civil war came to an end in 1975 with the takeover by the Khmer Rouge, which plunged the country into chaos and misrule that no one was able to predict. The Khmer Rouge regime, led by

the infamous Pol Pot, adopted a policy of self-reliance, cutting practically all connections to the outside world (Browder and Ortolano 2000). The Khmer Rouge era also seriously affected Mekong cooperation because the Khmer Rouge regime had neither the capacity nor the will to be involved in regional cooperation. As a result, the regime ended Cambodia's participation in the Mekong Committee. As discussed earlier, this forced the remaining three member countries of Viet Nam, Laos and Thailand to form the Interim Mekong Committee (IMC).

The three-and-a-half-year misrule of the Khmer Rouge ended in 1979, when the Vietnamese Army occupied Cambodia and helped to form a new regime. Although the end of the Khmer Rouge regime was a positive step forward, the following decade involved foreign occupation, civil unrest and international isolation for the country (Kiernan 2007). In terms of Mekong cooperation, the Vietnamese presence in Cambodia weakened the relationship between Viet Nam and Thailand and made the operation of the IMC more troublesome. Although the Vietnamese-backed Cambodian government indicated its willingness to participate in the IMC, Thailand refused to recognize the government as legitimate because of the lack of international recognition (Phillips et al. 2006). Thus, Cambodia remained out of official Mekong cooperation for two decades.

Stabilization in the 1990s – rejoining Mekong cooperation

The 1990s brought considerable stabilization in Cambodia's political situation and also the reactivation of Cambodia's role in regional cooperation. The Vietnamese troops withdrew from Cambodia in 1989, and in 1991 the parties in the Cambodian civil war signed the Paris Peace Agreement, which calmed the hostilities in the country. Cambodia regarded the revitalization of Mekong cooperation as a key to breaking its long international isolation (Phillips et al. 2006), and the Mekong Committee was also seen as an important source of financial and technical assistance.

Accordingly, the newly formed coalition government requested re-admission to and reactivation of the Mekong Committee as soon as 1991. However, as was illustrated above, the region's political and economic situation had changed fundamentally, and the four Lower Mekong countries entered into long negotiations about the future of Mekong cooperation. The negotiations came to an end in 1995 with the establishment of the Mekong River Commission (MRC), which again had Cambodia as a member. Three years earlier, in 1992, Cambodia had already joined the other riparian countries and the Asian Development Bank to form the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) Program. The GMS Program was considered important in Cambodia to develop its poor infrastructure

and promote its economic development (Krongkaew 2004). The formation of these major regional organizations meant that Cambodia was, after two decades, again an active and fully acknowledged member in Mekong cooperation.

The 1990s saw several remarkable changes in Cambodia's domestic politics too, many of which had impacts – both positive and negative – on its role in regional cooperation. The first notable step on Cambodia's path towards stability was the UN-led parliamentary elections of 1993, won by the royalist FUNCINPEC party. The party was, however, forced to form a coalition government with the Cambodian People's Party (CPP), which represented the earlier communist regime and had better connections at the provincial and commune levels (Roberts 2001). This coalition was characterized by mistrust, and ended in July 1997 when the tensions between the two parties led to an armed conflict. The CPP emerged as the winner, and the head of the party, Hun Sen, assumed the sole leadership of Cambodia as Prime Minister, a position he still holds today. The political crisis of 1997 – like most of the subsequent ones – negatively affected Cambodia's international relations. Cambodia's admittance to ASEAN was postponed and the majority of donors and foreign investors suspended their projects in the country.

New parliamentary elections were organized in July 1998. The CPP won the elections, although there were accusations of voter intimidation and vote buying, a lack of opposition access to the media and overall electoral fraud in favour of the ruling CPP (ICG 2000). After a four-month political deadlock, the CPP managed to form a coalition government with FUNCINPEC. Despite their unpromising history, the new coalition government proved to be relatively stable and it was able to initiate some economic reforms as well as to enhance international cooperation. The year 1998 was an important landmark for Cambodia in the newly started Mekong cooperation, as the MRC Secretariat was transferred from Bangkok to Phnom Penh during that year. This move marked considerable recognition of the fact that, throughout the 1990s, Cambodia had fought its way towards stability and an increased role in regional cooperation.

Cambodia in the new millennium – progress with political problems

Since the parliamentary elections of 1998, Cambodia has made progress towards stability and strengthened its links with its neighbours and the international community. Cambodia became a member of ASEAN in 1999 and of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2004, being only the second least developed country to be admitted to the organization through

the full negotiation process. At the same time, however, the disparities between different parts of the country and particularly between urban and rural areas increased dramatically. Additionally, problems of corruption, mismanagement of the country's natural resources and continuous violations of human rights remain largely to be solved (Keskinen et al. 2007; ECOSOC 2006; Heder 2005; World Bank 2004).

Although the ruling CPP won the parliamentary elections of 2003, it failed to secure the majority to govern alone. Consequently, the political situation after the elections was again extremely difficult and was solved only a year later when a CPP–FUNCINPEC coalition government was formed. Because of the political stalemate, the functioning of the government was in practice paralysed for a full year, and most international donors postponed their funding for the country. In a country as deeply aid dependent as Cambodia, the postponement hampered the functioning of all ministries, including those in the water sector. Owing to the political stalemate, foreign investments were also deterred and the country's membership in the WTO was delayed. However, neither the strong financial incentives nor repeated requests from the international community for the formation of a new government had any noticeable effect on the political parties towards solving the political deadlock (Ten Kate 2004).

The anti-Thai riots that took place in Phnom Penh in January 2003 were another, unfortunate, example of how flammable Cambodia's political situation remains and how easily it affects regional cooperation. Although it remains unclear who the actual mastermind behind the riots was, it seems obvious that anti-Thai feelings were used only as a medium for the domestic political battle (Hinton 2006). Accordingly, the underlying reason for the riots had more to do with the upcoming parliamentary elections than with the troubles between Thailand and Cambodia as such.

Consequently, although Mekong cooperation is still highly regarded by the Cambodian government (Sen 2003a), the country's domestic political battles continue to hinder regional cooperation. Power struggles between the different parties and politicians also leave their mark on the country's foreign policy and, when necessary, regional cooperation is subordinated to domestic political purposes. In addition, the challenges to the sustainable management of the country's natural resources – fish in particular – have an impact on other Mekong countries owing to the enormous aquatic production in the Cambodian floodplains and particularly in the Tonle Sap Lake.

At the same time, ironically, the increasing economic dependence on other Mekong countries, particularly China, is a potential threat to the balanced management of Cambodia's water resources. Owing to fear of the political and economic consequences, Cambodia's politicians seem to be tempted to pay only limited attention to the possible negative impacts

of the upstream development on the country's water resources.¹⁶ There is therefore a danger that the melding of political and economic powers and Cambodia's increasing economic dependence on its neighbours will mean that the country will not use its position in the Mekong River Commission and other regional cooperation mechanisms to discuss openly the critical transboundary impacts on its water resources (Keskinen et al. 2007). Because of the crucial role of the country's floodplains and in particular of the Tonle Sap Lake in the entire Mekong River system, this would have unwanted consequences not only for Cambodia but also for the other riparian countries.

Conclusion

Challenges to regional cooperation

Mekong cooperation has existed in the Lower Mekong Basin for over five decades with the notable support and involvement of the United Nations, development banks and donors. Still, the Mekong River Commission and its predecessors have not been too successful in the comprehensive development and management of the water resources. The reasons for the weak performance of the MRC and its predecessors include the organizations' overambitious development plans with little connection to local-level realities, the lack of real commitment by the member countries to the Commission's work, and challenges to institutional capacity and transparency within the organizations as well as in the riparian countries. However, various internal governance problems and domestic political battles in the MRC member countries – including Cambodia – are at least as important. Finally, the absence of China and Myanmar seriously hinders the comprehensive and coordinated development of the basin.

Despite these challenges, the MRC offers an important platform for cooperation between the Mekong countries. After all, it is the only regional organization focused specifically on water resources management, a role that is increasingly important now that plans for water development are mushrooming in practically all parts of the basin. However, as discussed above, the growing number of bilateral and unilateral agreements – often including the private sector – in the riparian countries puts the MRC in a difficult position, and may potentially lead it to be sidelined from the actual planning processes on the development of the Mekong's water resources.

When considering the future of the MRC, it is important to note that both the Mekong Agreement and the internationally agreed principle

of integrated water resources management (IWRM) require reasonable compromises between environmental sustainability, social equity and economic well-being. In addition, the MRC has set poverty reduction as its main goal. Because a significant proportion of the Mekong Basin's population gain their livelihood from the resources that the Mekong River and its tributaries offer, the health of the river ecosystems feeds directly back to the welfare of those people. The conflict is therefore not so much between the environment and wealth as between the modern and the more traditional sectors of society. As noted by Phillips et al. (2006): "The key development paradox of the region is that economic growth is necessary to bring many of the populations out of poverty, but the 'classical' route involving the subsidised construction of massive infrastructure is most unlikely to provide the optimal result in this respect for the poorer sections of the populations." Indeed, the existing decentralized utilization of the Mekong's resources – based on small-scale fishing, farming, the use of wetland and floodplain resources, etc. – is likely to form a more sustainable basis for poverty reduction than is the development of large-scale irrigation and hydropower.

Consequently, the MRC should get more actively and transparently involved in the discussion about development in the basin, including the potential impacts and trade-offs following development. Related to this, the MRC should acknowledge more clearly that coordinated water management between riparian countries is particularly conflict prone, and should increase its capacity for resolving disputes between its member states – and potentially with the other riparian countries.¹⁷ Ultimately, the future of the MRC depends on the will for cooperation of member countries and their governments. Extended partnership with China, increased collaboration with other regional organizations and a more focused agenda would enable the MRC to concentrate on its original purpose – to serve the people of its member countries by recognizing the most sustainable ways to use the basin's water resources and by facilitating dialogue on the best possible paths for future development.

Lessons learned from the China and Cambodia case studies

Besides an overall analysis of the Mekong River and its riparian countries, this chapter has analysed Mekong cooperation through two country-specific case studies. The first case study on China concentrated on the country's plans for hydropower and navigation development in the basin, and discussed the reasons for China's relatively low interest in regional cooperation. The Cambodia case study focused on the country's internal politics, and analysed their impact on Mekong cooperation during different periods.

The major differences between the two countries include their geographical location, geopolitical and economic might and development objectives for the river. Because China is the most upstream country in the basin, its decisions on the development of its part of the basin have significant impacts on the other riparian countries. In particular, the ongoing construction of a cascade of dams in the mainstream Mekong has raised concerns in the downstream countries. However, the benefits of Mekong cooperation in terms of economics, politics or water management do not currently seem to be strong enough to persuade China to join the MRC, because joining would simultaneously limit its plans for the upper Mekong. Although increasing regional cooperation through ASEAN and the GMS Program could potentially make multilateral water cooperation more attractive for China, it seems that it prefers, at least for the time being, to be more involved in bilateral arrangements with the downstream countries.

Whereas China seems to have more to lose than to gain from cooperation within the MRC, the situation for Cambodia is the opposite. Mekong cooperation gives Cambodia access to technical and financial assistance and offers a convenient forum in which to raise critical issues related to the development of the river basin and its impacts on Cambodia. However, Cambodia's internal political rivalries regularly override the needs of regional cooperation, and the country's government also appears to lack the capacity – and possibly the political will – to address comprehensively the potential transboundary impacts on its water resources.

As the case studies on China and Cambodia reveal, countries' internal problems can be so challenging that it may be unrealistic to expect international cooperation on water issues to be given a high priority. In addition, the development of water and related resources is both economically and socially so important for the riparian countries that national interests often override the need for closer regional coordination. The analysis of the domestic situation in China and Cambodia shows how significantly and differently the countries' internal problems and national interests have affected Mekong cooperation, in particular the functioning of the MRC and its predecessors. The analysis also illustrates that just having a regional cooperation institute in place is not enough; strong political commitment from the riparian countries is required for regional water cooperation to be really successful.

Despite the challenges, the different forms of regional cooperation still have a significant role in the development and management of the Mekong River Basin. Sustainable management of the basin's water resources requires that all these different forms of cooperation function transparently and take equal account of the different scales of water use. To achieve this, a truly open dialogue about future development plans,

their impacts and their consequent trade-offs must be encouraged between the different actors and levels. In this, the riparian countries' governments have a key role to play.

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Notes

1. The MRC and its predecessors, the Mekong Committee (MC) and the Interim Mekong Committee (IMC), are also referred to as the "Mekong River organizations" in this chapter.
2. For example, the private sector has played a remarkable role in the development of the basin's water resources – particularly in the construction of hydropower dams and large-scale irrigation projects – and its role seems to be only strengthening.
3. It has been estimated that a 30 cm increase in the dry season water level would permanently submerge – in essence destroy – around one-third of the remaining large canopy forests in the Tonle Sap floodplain (Keskinen et al. 2007; Kummu 2007).
4. Myanmar is excluded from the table owing to the lack of reliable information and the relatively small significance of the Mekong River for the country.
5. Consequently, it has been suggested that it is more probable that serious conflicts over water development will occur *within* the countries rather than *between* them (Keskinen et al. 2007).
6. Interestingly, the feasibility study for Cambodia's planned dam on the mainstream Mekong will be carried out by a Chinese company (Sisovann 2007).
7. China as a whole is not in fact a member of GMS, but the Yunnan province is. The Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region also has been involved in the programme (Qin 2005).
8. Environmental issues are addressed particularly through the GMS Program's Sub-regional Working Group on the Environment as well as through the Core Environment Programme and the Biodiversity Conservation Corridors Initiative.
9. The Mekong is thus relatively unique for a river of its size, because a regional master plan for its development was completed – although not applied – before any major projects were initiated (Bakker 1999).
10. China and Myanmar actually took part in a planning meeting on Mekong cooperation organized by Thailand – and boycotted by Viet Nam – in March 1992. The two upstream countries, however, did not attend the subsequent meetings (Browder 2000).
11. It could even be claimed that this has already happened, and that as a result the MRC has been turned from a regional cooperation body into a kind of smokescreen: in theory the MRC coordinates the sustainable and balanced development of the basin, but in reality it has practically no influence in the planning of water projects that will have trans-

- boundary impacts. This has led to a situation where the development of the basin looks to be relatively well coordinated, when in reality it is not. This, in turn, can mislead researchers, non-governmental organizations and even donors to “over-focus” on the MRC and other regional cooperation mechanisms, instead of on more relevant planning processes within national governments and – increasingly – within the private sector.
12. Indeed, it has been suggested that the member countries actually prefer the MRC to be a toothless organization focusing on planning, capacity-building and attracting external funding, while control of the development of the basin remains with the countries themselves (Backer 2006).
 13. The only known significant transboundary river treaty that China has signed is the Tumen River Agreement, which concerns mostly economic aspects.
 14. Related to this it is interesting to note that neither Thailand nor Laos – despite being MRC member countries – involved the MRC in the actual negotiation of the project (Dore 2003).
 15. China is even considered to be “the main engine for Cambodia’s hydropower development” (Sokha 2007). Unlike Western donors, China does not impose conditions on its aid – at least publicly. As stated by the Cambodian Minister of Commerce: “Others say, ‘You have to do this with human rights, you have to do that with democratic reforms.’ China doesn’t do that” (Lee 2006).
 16. Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen said in a speech in 2003 that “the Upstream countries’ projects in the Mekong River, namely the continued dam constructions and commercial navigation plan, have become a major concern for the downstream countries including Cambodia”, being particularly concerned about the impacts on the Tonle Sap Lake (Sen 2003b). Two years later, just before leaving for the second GMS Summit organized in China, Hun Sen was quoted in a Chinese newspaper as saying that he believed hydropower dams built by the Mekong’s upstream countries would pose “no problems” to Cambodia, and he also criticized people wanting to undermine the unity among the riparian countries by claiming otherwise (*People’s Daily Online* 2005).
 17. Although the MRC’s role as a commonly agreed cooperation framework, together with its ability to provide scientific information on possible development impacts, naturally facilitates discussion and prevents some misunderstandings between the member countries, the capacity for actual resolution of disputes and conflicts is still predominantly lacking within the Commission.

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