

Remarks by Ambassador Pou Sothirak
***“Langcan Mekong Cooperation and the Future of the Mekong
River”***

Executive Director of the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation
and Peace

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I like to thank Tan Sri Rastam Mohd Isa, Executive Director of the Institute for Strategic and International Studies of Malaysia for inviting me to speak at the important roundtable.

I am delighted to speak about the Langcan Mekong Cooperation and the future of the Mekong River and share my view on how countries in the region manage challenges and expectation and offer some of thoughts on the way forward.

Introduction

Being the world’s 12th longest river and the 7th longest in Asia, the Mekong River has long been regarded as the foundation of economic growth and prosperity in mainland Southeast Asia and it is known to be the most productive fresh water fish in the world, providing constant supply of fish and other resources in the river system. The mighty River provides food, drinking water, irrigation, transport, and energy to more than 60 million people in China, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam who live on its basin.

But the River’s benefits are now at risk due to inappropriate development projects, such as hydropower plans, which have the potential to cause destructive damage. Some of this impact

includes: the reduction of sediments as they are trapped by dams, making the Mekong Basin more vulnerable to sea level rise; the decreases in fish diversity as damming the mainstream impedes the migration of fish, effecting livelihood of rural households in the Mekong Basin who livelihood depend on fisheries.

However, recently initiative announced by the People's Republic of China and the five Mekong countries to set up the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) Framework herald new impetus toward regional collaboration for sustainable development of the greater Mekong region.

Expectation

Prior to the adoption of the frameworks, six LMC Foreign Ministers met in November 2015 in Yunnan, China to endorse the concept paper which proclaim that the LMC will adhere to the spirit of openness and inclusiveness and complement and work in tandem with other sub-regional frameworks such as the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) Economic Cooperation Program, ASEAN Mekong Basin Development Cooperation (AMBDC) and the Mekong River Commission (MRC) to jointly promote regional integration process.

The adoption of the Sanya Declaration at the First Lancang Mekong Cooperation (LMC) Leaders' Meeting in Sanya, China on 23 March 2016 lists 26 concrete measures to be considered as the all-round cooperation and broad participation, based on government-guided direction with multiple-participation covering project-oriented model designed to build a community of shared future of peace and prosperity.

It could be said that the primary expectation in creating this initiative, was driven by the desire of the LMC members to institutionalized cooperation among the six countries to help maintain regional peace and stability, tap on each country's resources, industries and market, and provide more support to the region's social and economic development.

As such the LMC is expected to carry out its mission within three main pillars of cooperation, namely political and security issues, (2) economic and sustainable development, and (3) social, cultural and people-to-people exchanges by focusing on practical cooperation in five key priority areas, namely connectivity, production capacity, cross-border economic cooperation, water resources, agriculture and poverty reduction, as agreed upon at the First LMC Foreign Ministers' Meeting.

Now that this initiative is in place, it is widely expected that there will be greater willingness to discuss on areas of discords that have tainted relations in the region in the past. The LMC also highlight the importance of China's new model of diplomacy that could calm down the wave of criticism directed at China's decision to unilaterally construct several large-scale dams on the Mekong River's mainstream as downstream countries have been complaining about negative environmental impacts, as well as risks to food security and livelihoods of some 60 million people living in the Mekong basin.

Since there are visible supports and commitment from the leadership level, the LMC should be treated as a welcome sign that can set stage for a new type of international relations, featuring win-win cooperation that will bring about abundant benefits which will invigorate further the ASEAN Community and

enhance the level of regional cooperation. If and when all measures pertaining to the LMC Declaration are implemented in good faith, tangible and substantial welfare of all the people of the six countries will be up lifted.

Key trans-boundary challenges and environment impact

One of most crucial trans-boundary challenges related to the Mekong River is the irresponsible building of hydropower stations which could impose adverse effects on many critical issues such as flood and dry spell, environmental degradation, social relocation, diminishing of fish stock and food security, just to name a few.

Ill conceive dams exacerbate negatively and inflict severe pressures on the Mekong Basin and therefore affects all countries sharing the Mekong River.

There are scientific reports which disclaim that big dams are needed for development. In fact, the experts argue that more people are impoverished than benefit from the construction of dams. The value added of these projects is tiny by the social and environmental costs. They also disclaim that hydropower is not a clean source of energy nor the solution to future power need.

- See more at:

<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/transboundary-environmental-security-the-mekong-river-basin#sthash.XvnA9PQb.dpuf>

Countries along the Mekong basin are keen to exploit the natural water resource to produce electricity for their development needs. However, the development of the Mekong River Basin is highly controversial and known to have been

major environmental concerns, yet these countries are becoming more determined to construct huge hydropower plans.

Due to their massive size and huge storage capacity, some of these dams have been considered by activist groups, academia, and media alike to be a real threat to the livelihoods and can seriously jeopardize the whole environment due to landslide, deforestation, and degradation of the overall ecosystem of the Mekong River as well as inflict serious and complex impacts on downstream areas with visible consequences affecting the river flows, biodiversity, and riparian livelihood.

Construction of dams for the purpose of hydropower stations can help one country to achieve its economic prosperity but it can also cause the region to feel insecure as friction between and among states along the Mekong River could breakout deriving from competition for the water resource. The uncontested exploitation of the free flow of the Mekong River by any single country can threaten food security for millions of people and inflict severe environmental damages.

Most of dams constructed on the mainstream of the Mekong River are assessed on the basis of narrow commercial cost-benefit analyses and revenue calculation and do not appear to meet environmental or socioeconomic criteria laid out by the World Commission on Dams, nor follow the guidelines of the World Bank or the Asian Development Bank and were proven to be damaging to the environment and fisheries (see Mekong Tipping Point

http://www.stimson.org/images/uploads/research-pdfs/Mekong_Tipping_Point-Complete.pdf)

The way forwards

For the LMC to inject new vigor into ASEAN-China Cooperation, serve as economic complementarity, stimulate internal development potential of all countries, and help to speed up the ASEAN community and regional integration process, there must be a well coordinate and effective mechanism to carry out what have been proclaimed by the LMC Declaration.

I understand that after the second LMC Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Siem Reap, Cambodia on 23rd December, 2016, there are efforts to establish joint working groups in the five priority areas, set up a secretariat or coordinating institutions, complete early harvest projects, drafting a five-year action plan of the LMC, and officially launch the application and use of the LMC Special Fund.

While these processes are the works in progress in ushering LMC into a new stage of full implementation from the initiation phase, I like to suggest some ways forward for proper attention and action toward an appropriate regime that can ensure the sustainable use and management of the Mekong River.

- 1- The Mekong riparian countries should consider the recommendations made by the Strategic Environmental Assessment of Hydropower on the Mekong Mainstream commissioned by the MRC on how to addresses the broader strategic issues within the mainstream hydroelectricity proposal and adopt the right approach to pursue in relation to regional distribution of costs and benefits with respect to economic development, social equity and environmental protection.

- 2- The LMC, being a new comer, should engage in mutual and transparent collaboration with the Mekong River Commission, Greater Mekong Sub-region, ASEAN and other initiatives in the development of the Mekong River Basin for the search of effective measures to mitigate the negative impact of dams and bring about greater prosperity to the region.
- 3- The six countries should adopt a regional and a basin-wide integrated approach, taking into the account fisheries, environmental management, irrigation, navigation of the river, flood control, tourism development, in order to take responsibility on the rights and risks and to properly assess each development project. Relating to dam building, they should develop a clear understanding to ensure that the benefit of one country will not dramatically affect nations and people who share the river and strike a balance between who benefit and who pays the cost associated with the negative impact of each dam project.
- 4- LMC can earn another strategic benefit if the six countries can shape the rule of cooperation and make sure other external actors are included by leveraging the LMC initiative to wield greater influence in the region amidst growing interests from other regional actors such as the US-led Lower Mekong Initiative. This way, LMC can look forward to playing a more active and positive role in water resources management and cooperation in the region, making other powers more receptive to China's growing role in regional affairs.

Conclusion

Although LMC brings new hope for greater cooperation to jointly manage the development for all Mekong riparian countries, greater openness and more inclusive approach as well as sincere willingness to working in partnership with other sub-regional frameworks are needed to overcome other persisting trans-boundary challenges facing the Mekong River.

The success of LMC is to transpire good aspiration into concrete cooperation with all stakeholders and to open up new opportunity in managing persisting vulnerabilities deriving from the ill perceived exploitations, which are still running high, of the Mekong Basin, putting sever stress on water resource security in the Mekong Region.