

China's Transboundary River Governance: The Case of the Lancang-Mekong River

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to analyze how does China pursue its national interest in the governance of the Lancang- Mekong River in domestic and international terms. The analysis was done through the lens of the classical realism theoretical school. Drawing from this framework and adopting the concept of national interest, the study gave a deeper understanding of China's motives behind the Lancang- Mekong governance. The thesis elaborated on the China's position, functions and main goals in the trans-governmental river's organizations. By application of the qualitative content analysis method to the sampled texts, this research seeks to set a theoretical groundwork for understanding China's behaviour tendencies in the Lancang- Mekong river management. The main findings of the study are that China prioritizes its core interest in the Mekong river basin and pursues its national interest through the transboundary Lancang- Mekong river cooperation mechanism. China has been rather inconsistent uncooperative hegemon of the region trying to pursue its core interest of hydro-politics but at the same time avoiding major water disputes.

Key words: International Relations, Classical realism, Lancang – Mekong River, transboundary river, China, Great power, National Interest

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	4
Introduction	5
1.1 Background and Context.....	5
1.2 Purpose and Research Questions	8
1.3 Structure of the thesis.....	9
Chapter 2 Previous research on Mekong River governance in China	9
2.1 The significance of water in China	9
2.2 Significance of the Lancang- Mekong River in China	10
2.3 China’s role in regional institutions	12
2.3.1 China and Mekong River commission.....	12
2.3.2 Great Mekong Sub- region Economic Cooperation Program.....	13
2.3.3 Lancang- Mekong Cooperation Regime	14
2.3.3.1 Goals of the Lancang- Mekong cooperation.....	15
2.3.3.2 Changing horizons within LMC regime	17
Chapter 3 Theory of Realism as a Potential Analytical Tool	18
3.1 Classical Realism theory of International Relations and China.....	18
3.2 National interest	20
Chapter 4 Methodology and Research Design	21
4.1 Qualitative Content Analysis, Epistemological Approach, Theoretical Reasoning	22
4.2 Context.....	22
4.3 Data selection.....	23
4.4 Data Analysis	25
4.4.1 Thematic analysis.....	25
4.4.2 Secondary analysis.....	26
4.5 Ethical considerations	26
4.6 Limitations and self-criticism	26
Chapter 5 Analysis	27
5.1 National interest in the Lancang-Mekong river basin.....	28
5.2 China’s Domestic water governance	29
5.3. China’s international water management.....	31
5.3.1 Lancang- Mekong Cooperation mechanism	33
5.4. The pursuit of China’s National Interest.....	34
Chapter 6. Conclusion	35
Bibliography	37

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Introduction

1.1 Background and Context

Water is an essential substance to all human races and its existence. The rising water demand, vast usage, and climate change create water problems over the globe. Major transboundary rivers of the world are in Chinese territory which makes China the main player in the regional water games. China is a state that has borders with the most international rivers and lakes in the world and touches upon over nineteen international water basins, including Mekong River. There is no doubt that China benefits from a rich supply of these water resources in the Northern regions. Moreover, rivers that lie in South-western regions, such as Mekong-Lancang, Yuanjiang-Red River, Tarim River, Indus River etc., are the main water supplies for the country. It is important to note that these successive water resources are international rivers that flow through more than one riparian state which are countries situated on the river bank and have legal rights to the utilization of the water, for example for fishing and irrigation, and for the land by the shore. This fact makes China a “hegemon-of the upstream” and often makes it the main villain in the trans-boundary river issues or international river crisis management (Fry and Chong, 2016, pp. 228-229).

As a result of that, many of China’s neighbors are dependent on the water coming from China. This is especially significant to the countries that are sharing river basin with China because due to unilateral hydro-politics they have been experiencing steep declines in water availability over the last decades (Biba, 2014, p.21). China’s demand for energy resources causes a potential friction and conflict with other states (Kirshner, 2010p. p.58). For example, China has been building dams in the upper Lancang- Mekong River for the past years in order to be able to generate vast amount of electricity flow to China. The so called mega-dams have altered severely the seasonal flow of the river itself which has affected other Mekong riparian states, especially in terms of agriculture. Since the dams are located in China it makes other countries dependent on Chinese leaders’ decisions to share the information of water release in advance and puts China in the dominant position. Thus, China’s demand for energy directly affects its neighbors and could raise a potential conflict among them. Furthermore, due to the fact that domestic water resources are getting scarcer, China has launched several unilateral projects on dam construction over the past years. This has proven Chinese unwillingness to negotiate in the trans-governmental international river treaties (Biba, 2014, pp. 21-22). Nevertheless, at the same time China has kept peaceful relationship with its neighbours in

order to maintain its domestic stability and economic growth and did not let the water issue grow too much (Biba, 2014, p.22).

China's rise is not only having an impact of the structure of the world, but also affects global development in terms of economics, society, politics and strategy (Vu, 2014, p.157). China's global power and reach have been increasing, and this is particularly seen in its border regions, such as in the Great Mekong Sub-region (GMS). Since the beginning of 1990s, from the outset of dam building, domestic river rerouting plans, and other activities related to transboundary waters, China has not been acting in a consistent manner (Biba, 2014, p.42), regarding to the cooperation with the downstream Mekong riparian states. However, it could not be recklessly claimed that China took a hegemon position with no attempt to make a compromise with its neighbours. Accordingly, Chinese foreign policy has been trying to match its neighbor's expectations in order to avoid potential water disputes (Biba, 2014, p.42).

This study is concerned with how is the pursuit of China's national interest reflected in its governance of the Lancang- Mekong river. The Lancang- Mekong river carries a great significance for China's domestic economic and water sources development of the Southern provinces and for China's international politics regarding the transboundary river governance. Hence, the thesis elaborates on the involvement and role of China in the inter-governmental organizations in the Mekong river basin, mainly focusing on Mekong River Commission (MRC), Great Mekong Sub-region cooperation (GMS), Lancang- Mekong River cooperation (LMC). These governance mechanisms have had a remarkable impact on the joined cooperation in the Mekong river basin.

Nevertheless, China's demand for energy resources is a potential friction and conflict with other states (Kirshner, 2010p. p.58). For example, China has been building dams in the upper Lancang- Mekong River for the past years in order to be able to generate vast amount of electricity flow to China. The so called mega-dams have altered severely the seasonal flow of the river itself which has affected other Mekong riparian states, especially in terms of agriculture. Since the dams are located in China it makes other countries dependent on Chinese leaders' decisions to share the information of water release in advance and puts China in the dominant position. Thus, China's demand for energy directly affects its neighbours and could raise a potential conflict among them. China's rise is not only having an impact of the structure of the world, but also affects global development in terms of economics, society, politics and strategy (Vu, 2014, p.157). China's global power and reach have been increasing, and this is particularly seen in China's border regions, such as in the Great Mekong Sub-region (GMS). Since the beginning of 1990s, from the outset of dam building, domestic river rerouting plans, and other activities related to transboundary waters, China

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MRC is considered to be the earliest international institution for the river-basin management which is entitled to promote and coordinate management and development of Mekong river water and related resources. It was founded in 1995 and mainly promoted the cooperation among states rather than enforcement of the concrete development plans (Ratner, 2003, p.65). For this reason China has little incentive to become a full member of the institution and together with Myanmar and has kept the observer's status without the commitment or any international obligations which would have required reviewing dam development projects in the upstream (Ratner, 2003, pp. 65-67).

GMS development project was contrary and appeared in order to strengthen the economic ties among the countries situated in Mekong river-basin and became an important factor which improved political and economic relations in the region. In 1992, the six countries entered this project of the subregional economic cooperation which was created in order to enhance economic relations among these countries. GMS program has substituted MRC for several reasons: it included all six riparian countries (China, Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam, Thailand and Cambodia); opened multilateral cooperation; channelled economic development assistance projects; improved infrastructure corridors; created international trade projects (Ratner, 2003, p.67). Thus, mainly for the economic benefits China had a direct interest to cooperate with the downstream governments.

Additionally, the recent launch of LMC framework in 2015, which is a major transboundary initiative, shows China's willingness to cooperate with the downstream countries in broader terms. Being a foremost economic cooperation project coming from China it is potential tool for filling the gaps left by MRC and GMS (Middleton and Allouche, 2016, p.111). With the creation of LMC China has improved its multilateral relations compared to its previous lack of regional initiative. Nevertheless, it could be said that China is following its own national interest rather than the welfare of the downstream nations.

Nevertheless, recent establishment of Lancang- Mekong cooperation (LMC) can raise a question whether this new phenomenon is seen as changing horizons in the future development of the relations among China and Mekong downstream states. Even though this new mechanism of the governance form of the Mekong river where China is the initiator should bring gains to the less developed states, the main motivator for China is the goals of national interest, such as to reduce

poverty in Yunnan province, development of the hydro-power and seeking for energy which can only be achieved through the trans-border development (Hensengerth, 2009, p.340). Moreover, China had set many dam construction plans in the upper Mekong without consulting other Mekong basin riparian countries, and Chinese leaders have engaged in the trans-governmental organizations but not established a full membership in some of them which shows that China does not want to be put in a delimited frame set by rules, such as avoiding to join MRC in order to bypass its regulations (Hensengerth, 2009, p.340).

Even though China is ensuring the execution of the GMS cooperation projects and initiating LMC, it follows its national interest and it is usually done following its own terms (Hesengerth, 2009, p.340). Subsequently it leads to a question: how and to what extent does China pursue its national interest in the governance of the Lancang-Mekong river. Thus, it is important to elaborate on the theoretical frame to China's hydro-political approach regarding to its shared rivers and river basin riparian states in order to understand how China is addressing this matter which could help to improve further trans-governmental cooperation processes and international relations among Mekong river-basin riparian states. This article specifically will discuss the case of China's approach towards Lancang- Mekong River to be able to understand in depth the political behaviour of China in the transboundary river management.

1.2 Purpose and Research Questions

In general it is considered difficult to analyze and resolve the management within hydro-hegemonic basins in which the powerful upstream riparian state has the incentive to unilaterally develop the river without any regard to the downstream countries and the consequences for them (Zawahri and Hesengerth, 2012, p. 270). In the case of China, the state is often depicted in a negative manner by its neighbors mainly because of the massive hydro- power dams' construction and lack of transparency in the sharing of the relative information (Minh-Vu, 2014, p.171). China's unwillingness to cooperate in the trans-governmental river organizations and international river treaties is worrying the international community, especially the downstream Mekong riparian states that are dependent on the water availability coming from China's territory. Subsequently it could lead to potential water disputes.

Analyzing the core national goals of China and in the way they are pursuit, this thesis aspires to provide a deeper understanding of China's position towards utilization of the Lancang-Mekong river and further the level of engagement in the trans-governmental cooperation mechanisms. In order to address the research question it requires to understand the processes of the

Lancang- Mekong River's governance in China and beyond its borders. It will signify the importance of the launch of the Lancang- Mekong River cooperation and will compare China's performance in the other inter-governmental Mekong river organizations with the former. Furthermore, it will examine how river is managed by China in comparison to international regulations for international waters.

Regarding the background of the problem and the case selection of this thesis, this work is raising an explanatory research question as follows: "How does China pursue its national interest in the governance of the Lancang- Mekong river?"

1.3 Structure of the thesis

The thesis is divided into six chapters; Chapter 1 gives some background on the research topic and significance of the study, raises the main problems of this particular research field; Chapter 2 provides a literature review. Chapter 3 explains and determines the theoretical framework and the main concept utilized in the data analysis; Chapter 4 clarifies the research methods and explains the data analysis process applied in this thesis work; in Chapter 5 the empirical data is analysed, and the theoretical reasoning together with the concepts are applied; Chapter 6 elaborates on and summarizes the research findings, concluding the main statements of the study.

Chapter 2 Previous research on Mekong River governance in China

This part reviews the current level of knowledge that already exists regarding the Lancang- Mekong River management and transboundary river governance in general within China. Moreover, this chapter identifies China's role in the international organizations that focuses on the Mekong basin's further development. As well, this part explores the previous research in this area and pinpoints the missing gaps in order for the thesis to fill them.

2.1 The significance of water in China

There are many intervening factors that result in a highly uneven distribution of water resources inside China. To illustrate, regional differences, climate variability, human manipulation of ecosystems, population growth, all these factors play a significant role for the unbalanced accessibility water. Most regions in the North of China are facing severe water scarcity and constant droughts which are leading to desertification, river pollution and dehydration (Menniken, 2007, p.100). Furthermore, water shortages are responsible for the annual harvest loss, which eventually

could result in the changes of Chinese economy regarding the need to import more grains or basic food supply and decreased exports of production such as rice or vegetables. Another issue is that China's lack of water supplies in the North can cause the possible migration waves to other regions or countries. This could subsequently result in "water stress" situations in other parts of the country (Menniken, 2007, p.100). Thus, all these reasons mentioned above prove that China has a strong incentive to be engaged in the river- management processes but mainly from domestic perspective.

2.2 Significance of the Lancang- Mekong River in China

The Mekong is considered to be 12th largest river in the world within approximate length of 4800 kilometres. The river rises in eastern Tibet and runs through Yunnan Province where it flows towards the tri-border region of Myanmar, Laos and Thailand finally reaching Vietnam. Nearly half of the Mekong's length is located in China which leaves no doubt about the great and vital significance that this river holds upon in China and beyond its borders (Osborne, 2000, p.429). The Mekong River's diverse and vigorous freshwater ecosystem provides a source of livelihood for millions of people in the region and that is why it is important to keep the aquatic productivity of the river system (Keskinen, Mehtonen and Varis, 2008, p.82). All of the riparian states of the Mekong are managing the water of the river differently and following their own national interests for the utilization. Evidently, China is not an exception and has several aspirations for the development of the basin, such as development of hydropower and navigation of the river which eventually will help to strengthen the economic situation in Yunnan province.

One of the main goals of China in the Lancang- Mekong is to build more hydropower dams in the upper part of the river which plays an important role for economic and water resource development. Since the early 1990s, the river has been altered from a free-flow type to one that is engineered and utilized for hydropower dams. To illustrate, the Manwan Dam was the first of the six large dams which was built unilaterally on the Lancang- Mekong in Yunnan province (Middleton and Allouche, 2016, p.100), after that hydropower construction and operation increased rapidly. By dam building China has been deepening its economic integration, where electricity has been traded with other countries, such as Laos or Thailand and from Yunnan province to southeast China which is known to be the core for the industrial eastern seaboard (Middleton and Allouche, 2016, p.100-101). Moreover, it is a way to follow China's 13th Five Year plan and move forward to more environmental way of economic growth. Hydropower and its industries are cleaner than the coal burning and it remains promising for economic development.

Large hydropower dam construction in Yunnan province was supposed to raise the economic situation in the region since it is still considered one of the poorest in China. Fundamentally this has been influenced by the China Western Region Development Strategy starting from 2000 (Middleton and Allouche, 2016, p.106). This particular strategy aimed to bring social and economic development to North-West and South-West regions, such as Yunnan province. Evidently the Western regions in China holds huge reserves of energy resources, such as: water reserves, minerals, non-ferrous metals which are significant for China's development process (Lahtinen, 2005, p.25). The main aims for the strategic plan are constructing the infrastructure, improving and protecting the environment, reducing water loss and soil erosion, developing agriculture, and rural poverty alleviation (Lahtinen, 2005, p.26). Thus, the hydropower and dam construction aims to benefit from the electricity and its trade domestically (mainly to the East coast China) which would reduce poverty level in Yunnan province and internationally by trading with the neighbour states (Middleton and Allouche, 2016, p.107).

Another national goal that China tries to encompass is improvement of the navigable systems of the Lancang- Mekong River in Yunnan province and in the lower Mekong in order to facilitate trade. However, the gains that come from the trade are most significant and lucrative for China. That is why China has funded most of the work for shoals, reefs and rapids removal along the river (Ho, 2014, p.7). Moreover, China is a signatory of the Lancang- Upper Mekong River Commercial Navigation Agreement, which aim is to broaden the use of the water to facilitate trade and tourism, and to transport various goods (Ho, 2014, p.7). Thus, it could be seen that China is highly engaged in developing the infrastructure of the river with the cooperation of lower Mekong riparian states under multilateral level but it is mainly done to increase the transport for China's exports and trade.

It is to note that besides national needs of China, Mekong dams should provide power to the markets in Southeast Asian region. It is mainly done not by export but by expanding China's power into the lower Mekong riparian countries. To illustrate, Chinese private and state-owned companies are the main financiers and developers for the largest dams in Cambodia, Myanmar and Laos (Middleton and Allouche, 2016, p.107). This eventually leads to improving China's job market and electricity trade.

2.3 China's role in regional institutions

2.3.1 China and Mekong River commission

Mekong river cooperation process has started in the lower river basin in 1957 and was called "Mekong Committee" at the time. It emerged due to the involvement of United Nations and encouragement of the United States. It is worth mentioning that China was not even considered as a potential participant back then because it was not a member of UN and was under communist regime (Menniken, 2007, p.105). In 1995 Cambodia, Lao, Thailand and Vietnam set up a Mekong River Commission MRC and at this time China together with Myanmar was invited to participate in the legal arrangements related to the cooperation processes (Menniken, 2007, p.105). To illustrate, it was expected from Chinese government to consult the downstream riparian countries before the storing and releasing water of their constructed dams and it was thought that China's membership will provide more opportunities to the lower Mekong states for the cooperation process and trade with China (Menniken, 2007, p.105).

The consultation processes in the structure of MRC, China and Myanmar have been given only observer status. MRC is governed by the Joint Committee which meets twice a year and every second meeting is followed by Dialogue Meeting in which China and Myanmar can be involved more actively where they inform other riparian countries about their plans and exchange hydrological data (Menniken, 2007, p.109). For example, it has been arranged that China has to report the water level to the MRC all the time during the wet season via its water measurement stations to avoid the floods in the downstream riparian countries and control the river flow.

However, there are several reasons of why China is not a full participant of MRC. One of the main arguments of why Chinese government does not try to be a member of MRC is that the committee does not solve the disputes cooperatively and new regulations do not mean that they will be followed accordingly. Rather, Chinese government chooses a bargaining and observers position. Being a not full- member of the commission allows China to use its political influence to hinder the enthusiasm of other riparian states in the Greater Mekong Sub region during the multilateral negotiations and allows discussions where they can relate to China's development projects (Carles, 2011, p.13). Moreover, joining MRC in the nearly future would mean that China would be restricted on the building and operating of its dams and also it would entail shifting economic and trade issues to environmental and water- related to the whole region (Keskinen, Mehtonen and Varis, 2008, p.96). On the other hand, acceptance of China's entry could mean that China would have a dominant position in the Mekong Commission which is concerning the current members of the organization. From all of this it could be seen that China keeps the cooperation in MRC if it touches upon the

boosting of Chinese economy but the social or environmental considerations are not the matters they put a focus on during the meetings of the downstream Mekong states.

2.3.2 Great Mekong Sub- region Economic Cooperation Program

The Greater Mekong Sub-region takes around 2.3 million square kilometres and has a population of approximately 245 million. This area is significant not only geographically but also because it encompasses different cultures. It contains six countries: Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar, Vietnam and China. The GMS economic cooperation program was founded with the assistance of Asian Development Bank (ADB) in 1992 and aims at promoting development in the Mekong River Basin including both regional and market integration. It was a program which goals are aimed at integrating Mekong region through building of power, transportation and communication networks (Ho, 2014, p.7). The GMS has a strategic plan which is sometimes called “Three C’s” in regards to competitiveness, connectivity and community. So far, the GMS have conducted projects in various fields, such as transportation (road building and river commuting), telecommunication, energy grids, environment, tourism, trade and investment (Vu, 2014, p.160). Generally, all of the projects for the development in the region of infrastructure, both transportation and hydropower constructions, have contributed to poverty reduction and boost of economies in the region (Vu, 2014, p.163). Nonetheless, it has contributed to the negative impact on the environment and forced many people to resettle their homes and has affected countries, particularly in downstream Mekong, contributing to increased political tension.

However, it could be noticed that some countries have more advantages and power in GMS cooperation due to better financial situation. In the recent years, capitals have been flowing from China and Thailand to lower income countries in order to complete the projects made by GMS which thus means that big players tend to have financial control over development plans and policies of smaller players (Asian Development Bank, 2016). Moreover, this gives evidence that Chinese government is nonetheless highly engaged in the Mekong river management and cannot be seen as ignorant to the matter.

The development of Great Mekong Sub-region poses significant challenges in coping with the different interests and needs of each country in the region. It is important to highlight that China owes almost a half of the Mekong’s length and has an advantage position upstream. China is mainly self-interested in the development of the GMS in its south-western provinces such as Yunnan which is connecting China with the other Southeast Asian states (Vu, 2014, p.160). This connection

of transportation, investment and trade brings economic development to this region. Chinese main focus is on the transport infrastructure projects. Especially important are the North- South Economic Corridor (NSEC), the East- West Economic Corridor (EWEC), and the Southern Economic Corridor (SEC). The other important reason why China seeks to utilize the Mekong river is by means of promotion of hydropower not only in China itself but for export to the other South- East Asian states (Vu, 2014, p.161).

The GMS is another mechanism that shows Chinese willingness to cooperate multilaterally because it matches with its national interests. Thus, one of the reasons why China joined the GMS program was the fact that it focuses on economic and infrastructure development or land ecosystems rather than aquatic environmental issues (Ho, 2014, p.7). According to Chinese Press Release on China's Participation in Greater Mekong Sub-region Cooperation, China is willing to work with other GMS states to deepen the collaboration which should fasten the constructions of the infrastructure, move towards liberation of trade and foreign investment, strengthen competitiveness, fight the regional poverty, keep the peaceful environment by regional stability and mutual trust, promote win- win cooperation (National Development and Reform Commission NDRC People's Republic of China, 2008). From this it seems evident, that Chinese government is more likely to be willing to participate in the international cooperation program if it matches countries priorities, such as economic development rather than engagement in sensitive environmental questions.

2.3.3 Lancang- Mekong Cooperation Regime

Although we live in different parts of the River, our friendship will only be enhanced by the River (China News, 2016)

China has noticed a weak link in the international governance structure of Mekong River, such as Mekong River Commission work which did not experience much success even by engaging venues like ASEAN to related matters (Son, 2016). The Lancang Mekong Cooperation framework was suggested by Chinese Premier Li Keqiang in 2014 which was encouraged by the initiative of Thailand to create a better functioning mechanism among the Mekong region states (Mekong River Commission, 2016). Following this in 2015, China has introduced the new Mekong block – the Lancang- Mekong Cooperation (LMC from now on) mechanism. LMC includes six members which are: China, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam.

Apparently, until 2009 China was lacking regional initiative thus LMC was launched for complementing and working together with other international frameworks, such as the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) Economic Cooperation Program, ASEAN Mekong Basin Development Cooperation (AMBDC) and the Mekong River Commission (MRC), within a purpose of developing the regional integration (Middleton and Allouche, 2016, p.111).

There are several differences that distinguish LMC from the other trans-governmental initiatives. To begin with from the geopolitical point of view, LMC is seeking to fulfil the gaps left out by other international organizations. To illustrate, in MRC Myanmar and China are just partners for cooperation but are not full or equal members whereas LMC would include all of the six countries in the decision making processes (Son, 2016). Secondly, Mekong sub-regional cooperations are mainly focused on economic field but social and political aspects have made little progress over the years and it has been difficult to cope with raising non- traditional threats such as drug trafficking, smuggling, human trafficking etc., which eventually can hinder the sub-regional integration and cooperation (Guangsheng, 2016, pp .4-5). That is why with LMC China is trying to extend the previous economic cooperation to political, social and security fields by promoting law enforcement in the Mekong river-basin (Guangsheng, 2016, p.12). Unlike the MRC which is codified by rules and procedures coming from UN Water Courses Convention of 1997, LMC takes a project based initiative instead and is focused on broader platform of economic, technical cooperations and transparency for information sharing (Middleton and Allouche, 2016, p.113). It mainly emphasizes river engineering and navigation, continuity of hydropower construction and water management during the flood and drought periods (Middleton and Allouche, 2016, p.114). Thirdly, LMC is a new practice that demonstrates joint commitment to the agenda of sustainable development and the fact that China is planning to create a dialogue for solving the environmental issues makes this cooperation different from the previous ones (Yi, 2016). Furthermore, LMC is thought to address the development gaps and issues in the Southeast Asian region even though this is ASEAN's programme and China is not a member of it (Son, 2016). Thus, LMC has a strategic value to create a dialogue for all six Mekong countries to communicate with each other better (Son, 2016).

2.3.3.1 Goals of the Lancang- Mekong cooperation

Lancang- Mekong Cooperation has several priority areas and the framework “3+5” is based on three pillars based on political and security issues, economic and sustainable development, and social or cultural exchanges. There are five priority areas that LMC focuses on: production capacity, transborder economic cooperation, water resources management, agriculture and region

poverty reduction, connectivity. All the leaders of LMC have expressed that this framework should be based upon the ASEAN priority areas. All of these matters will be further discussed in this following section.

One of the major goals of LMC framework is to fight regional poverty and to promote social development. Water resources here are the key priority area because all of the Mekong River states produce 15 percent of the whole world's rice production per year (Yi, 2016). Not to forget the high intensity of fishing on which depends a vast amount of local people's lives. That is why all of the members of LMC are highly initiating the development of the infrastructure along the river. Accordingly, LMC are providing the basic information, especially for the downstream riparian countries, which can be a starting point for the progress and understanding of the river governance (Yi, 2016). For example, China's leaders has promised to open the environmental and water resources scientific centres which could guide the downstream countries to adapt advanced technologies which would lead to the faster development. Nevertheless, it could be seen not only as a positive aspect from the other five LMC member states but rather as a way for China to keep its position as a hegemon in the region.

Another aspect that LMC is trying to pursue is non- governmental exchanges. There can be several ways to promote the latter. For instance through various cultural exchanges, youth carry out activities, competitions of sports or organization of traditional festivals. Furthermore, cultivation and exchange of young and educated professionals would provide such an interchange and tighten the bonds among the Mekong riparian countries (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of People's Republic of China, 2016). Apart from that it seems clear that most developed states in the region, such as China and Thailand would get an advantage by sending their educated workers abroad or by providing financial aid.

Apart from mutual assistance, joined contributions and shared benefits LMC seeks to play a significant role in keeping the regional peace and stability in the near future (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of People's Republic of China, 2016). This is expected to be done through the transparency in the dialogue and equal treatment of all the LMC members. During the 2nd LMC meeting in 2016 foreign ministers, representing all of the participants, came into conclusion that LMC should follow the MRC principles and respect the United Nations Charter and international water laws including ASEAN and ASEAN- China cooperation priorities (Chinese Diplomatic News, 2016). Thus, through the openness and inclusiveness regional peace could be kept.

2.3.3.2 Changing horizons within LMC regime

To sum up, there are several significant differences that LMC has brought into the management of transboundary Mekong River in China and beyond its borders. For instance, in comparison to international river organizations MRC or GMS, LMC framework is the only one that includes all of the six Mekong River riparian states where all countries or their voices are stated to be equal. Nevertheless, LMC is officially initiated by China which automatically gives more political or economical advantage in the debate process, also to a lesser extent Thailand has a greater say too mainly due to its economic advantage and closer ties within China over the dam construction and infrastructure development projects along the Mekong river in the Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in the Northern Thailand Chiang Khong area (Middleton and Allouche 2016, p.113). Another point worth mentioning is the fact that LMC was launched without the intention of becoming the international river basin organization, such as MRC because the latter is restricted by rules and regulations but it is rather a project based platform of international cooperation (Middleton and Allouche, 2016, p.114).

There are several challenges that LMC might bring on the horizon in the near future. Regarding the great economic agenda beyond the LMC, the existing institutions like MRC might be challenged because of the high emphasis on the development of the economic infrastructures (Middleton and Allouche, 2016, p.114). In that case, the value of the water resources including environmental issues or local livelihoods might be put aside and it causes a lot of debates among ASEAN leaders.

These long-standing issues which are highly contested and related to economic development in the Mekong region appear when one is considering the real power of the decision making in LMC. The main argument here is that China and Thailand stand in the advantageous position of their economic self- reliance which makes the neighbouring states dependant and makes them follow Thai and Chinese domestic demands (Middleton and Allouche, 2016, p.113). It could be argued that through the LMC regime China is strengthening its economic and political influence on ASEAN (Tivasuradej, 2016).

Chapter 3 Theory of Realism as a Potential Analytical Tool

Area studies tend to emphasize field research and some sort of devotion to a certain nation or even a region; meanwhile a disciplinary approach such as international relations usually seeks to apply theoretical approaches, which cannot be delimited by one particular region (Littlefield, 2012, p.50). This study has adopted the disciplinary approach for the reason that it helps to analyse not only governance in China, but also the trans-governmental issue and China's relation with the Mekong river-basin riparian states.

Classical realism has been chosen for the theoretical analysis in the study in order to examine these actions of China's pursuit of the national interest. Realists tend to see states as pursuing their national interest; being static; concerned with the sovereignty issue; seeking to maximize their power and China shares all these features (Kirshner, 2010, p. 57).

As it was discussed in the literature review above, China has been pursuing its self interest in the participation in the transboundary river management organizations of the Lancang – Mekong river. To illustrate, China has not yet become a full member of MRC in order to be able to make independent decisions regarding the usage of Lancang- Mekong river water without the agreement of the other member states. Moreover, GMS economic cooperation program shows China's engagement because this project improves economic situation and infrastructure development in the South of China. Finally, the recent launch of LMC which was initiated by Chinese leaders makes China the main player in the decision making process of the economic and political matters of the transboundary river governance. For this reason author has chosen to examine these actions of pursuing the national interest from the classical realism perspective. This chapter examines, explains and develops the theoretical and conceptual analytical framework of classical realism which was applied to the analysis of this thesis. Accordingly, the focus is appointed to the concept of national interest. Hence, this chapter also aims to set the key concept which is significant for this particular work, to determine the functions of this particular concept, and to form theoretical recommendation for the rest of the composition.

3.1 Classical Realism theory of International Relations and China

Realism has been a dominant school of thought in the domain of international relations for decades and has been highly used to explain world politics. In general, realism as a theory is based on several assumptions. To start with, the international system is defined as anarchic; hence, sovereign states are the main actors and agents in world politics; secondly, they are motivated by

their national interest, and a drive for power; there is a lack of central authority which could manage the behaviour of states; cooperation among countries often fail; consequently struggles for power occur in order to survive in a self-help system (Liu 2010, p.78). Like liberal scholars, realists tend to look at the roots of human nature as described by Thucydides as a general rule, which always tends to drive states to an endless struggle for power (Lamy, 2016, p.79). Notwithstanding, in contrast to liberal and constructivist approaches which admit the potentiality of improvement in state's attitude, due to involvement of the international institutions, realism denies the positive aspects of cooperation. This is mainly explained by realism statement that states can never be certain about the intentions of the other states (Baylis, Smith and Owens, 2014, p.98), and that the participation in the inter-governmental groups decreases state's space of action since the former would have to stick to the international regulations and laws.

By adopting the classical realism school of thought to the study of the governance of Lancang- Mekong River, the thesis aims to build a theoretical framework for explaining the political agenda of the China's position as well as its ambitions and strategies in the management of the trans-boundary river. The work will evaluate China's performance as an actor in international water politics based on the theory of realism. For this reason China's peculiarities reflect the definition of state given by classical realism theory and is often seen as an actor driven by the categories of power alignment, national interest, relative gains and mutuality (Menniken, 2007, p.99).

The classical realism approach adopted by the author is a potential theoretical tool applicable for the area on which this particular study is done. To illustrate, realism puts focus on national interests rather than ideological matters and recognizes that great powers can coexist even if they follow different values or beliefs (Baylis, Smith and Owens 2014, p.92), this is applied to the contexts of the relationship among China and its neighbours in the Southeast Asian region. These states, despite of the different political systems or national goals, manages to create an economic cooperation.

In the case of China's governance of Lancang- Mekong river-basin, China has been holding its position as a hegemon of the upstream Mekong and has been making domestic decisions that mainly bring benefits to China, such as massive construction of dams which are supplying energy to the country. Realists tend to put a focus on the concepts of national interest and security which in the case of China is the main national goal no matter if it touches upon state's territory or common goods as it could be seen in the transboundary Mekong river context. In classical realism, cooperation is hardly feasible among countries due to the fact that self- reliance is seen as the only possibility for them as each state will eventually seek to maximize its own gains. In the case of China, the country did not show high level of engagement in the joint river management processes

such as MRC, except for those cases that could lead to economic benefit, for example the launch of LMC or engagement in GMS.

3.2 National interest

Hans Morgenthau (1951, pp. 241-242) has asserted that national interest is a protection of physical, political and cultural identity against invasion by other states and, above all, that it is a duty for a nation to always follow this one guiding and standard. Moreover, national interests are representing the collective interests of various groups within the nation state and it takes the leading position in the pursuit of the foreign policy (Gupta, 2002, p. 806). National interests are usually classified into various types according to the content, such as political, economic security, and particularly cultural interests. Pursuit of states' national interests, whether they are goals of economic or military growth, ambitions of political achievements or promotion of culture, are important aspects of international relations realm. Essentially, power interests of states shape their identity and influence their behaviour (Littlefield, 2012, p.55). As an example, the interest or desire to have a greater influence and control is defined by Pham (2008, p.258) as the main force that determines state's political activity. The latter have specific characteristics, unlike the other interests which usually are not compromised upon (Gupta, 2002, p. 809). In the case of China the primary objectives are related to maintaining national security and keeping the economic and social development balanced. These primary objectives have remained stable over the past decades but the methods and policies in China to maintain them appear to be obscure due to the lack of transparency.

The rising great powers are seen as the potential sources of instability for the reason that their national interests are going to expand together with the increasing capabilities (Kirshner, 2010, p.58). There are very few cases where a strong state has stopped expanding its territory or influence and has set modest limits to its power aims without external pressure. Instead, as the power of the country increases, the latter seeks to enhance its political and economic influence as well (Kirshner, 2010, p.58). For this exact reason, China's increasing power in the region could start to worry its neighbour states in the lower Mekong basin because they could see China's current growth and position as a potential threat for the future due to its economic and military power which is preventing all of the downstream river states from seizing its headwaters and that means that they have to depend on Chinese leader's good will and eagerness to cooperate (Liebman, 2005, p.290).

In the case of China, the focus is put on the domestic environment, within which development and stability have been prioritized. There are three core national interests in China: safeguarding its national security; keeping its territorial security, and maintaining sustained and stable economic and social development of China (Gupta, 2002, p. 809). Moreover, China's 2011

White Papers claims that the former state is firm in upholding its national interests which consists of: state sovereignty, territorial integrity, keeping political and social stability and ensuring sustainable economic and social development (FMPRC 2011). Thus, China's governance of the transboundary Lancang- Mekong river reflects upon the safeguarding of the formerly mentioned principles. To specify, fresh water inside China's territory is being protected so that the river is currently a strategic source for the country's development of hydropower dams and navigable systems which aims to improve the economic situation of Yunnan province.

Hence, the framework of classical realism with a focus on the national interest will be used to understand the stimulus that motivates Chinese leaders to build particular type of governance and apply it to Lancang- Mekong river. The application of the concept national interest as mentioned above is aimed to answer the research question of this thesis. For instance, in the explanation of the China's motives behind and the engagement level of participation in the international river management organizations, this work will explain how does China pursue its national interest.

Chapter 4 Methodology and Research Design

This chapter describes, elaborates and justifies on the selected methods which are used in this work aiming to show the applicability of the chosen methods in the thesis and provide applicability and transparency for the readers. The author has adopted a qualitative content analysis (QCA from now on) thus it is necessary to give explanatory and clear comment on how this method is suitable for this precise analysis and how the task was conducted. To begin with, content analysis could be briefly defined as the systematic, objective, quantitative analysis of message characteristics (Neuendorf, 2016, p.1). According to Klaus Krippendorff (2014, p.3) content analysis gives new insights to the research phenomena and includes a systematic reading of various texts, images or even symbolic matter which does not precisely have to be from author's point of view. For this work the main source of empirical data are texts, thus it is rational way to obtain answers to raised research questions. The choice for qualitative analysis was made due to the fact that it involves reading of textual matter, interpretation of those narratives that are accepted by various scholarly communities and social or cultural acknowledgement and understanding by the author (Krippendorff, 2014, p.17). Hence, such chosen approach upholds and assists to untangle meanings of the texts.

4.1 Qualitative Content Analysis, Epistemological Approach, Theoretical Reasoning

Analytical purposes of this work while adopting qualitative content analysis (QCA) interpretations do justice on the text holistically (Krippendorff, 2014, p.88). Written texts cannot be perceived only as a collection of words but rather as sequenced discourse or a structure of narratives which can be understood in different ways (Krippendorff, 2014, p.63). On the contrary, quantitative content analysis frames the research process into numerical counting and is criticized by its lack of critical measurement in theories of natural sciences (Krippendorff, 2014, p.87). In the case of this thesis applying quantitative approach would have reduced the ability to explain official documents in depth and narrowing the analysis to numerical sequences.

Qualitative type of research is often closely linked with constructivist epistemology and uses theoretical reasoning. It mainly allows researchers to create various considerations in their work. To illustrate, it is significant to note the researcher's reflexive involvement. The author must acknowledge the world of the others in pursuance of her or his own research questions while adapting various analytical constructions that are based on prior knowledge or accessible literature about the contexts of given texts (Krippendorff, 2014, p.89). In the case of this thesis the author invokes her own academic background and previous academic literature on the matter to be able to investigate the texts and answer the research questions.

Therefore, in the thesis the research questions will be answered both empirically and throughout theoretical framework. The theory of classical realism is going to focus on and answer the underlying reasons for the particular political discourse in the governance of the Lancang-Mekong River governance. Fox and Bayat (2007, p.29) describe theory as a network of concepts and definitions that present a systematic perspective of relationship between the variables within a view of foreseeing and explaining particular phenomena. Moreover, theory defines observations and raises predictions about the results of the future observations (Imenda, 2014, p.187). Hence, the theoretical reasoning in this work is used in order to explain particular findings moved by the data analysis.

4.2 Context

A context could be perceived as a system, a conceptual environment of a text depending on the situation in which it plays a role (Krippendorff, 2004, p.33). In the same way it could be seen as the correlations that are connecting texts to the possible answers for the raised research questions (Krippendorff, 2004, p.33). The selection of the sources was done according to the context, to keep the sequence and linkage, as well as to be able to compare them. To illustrate,

official documents produced in English language were selected related to the matter of Lancang-Mekong river governance in China and to management of international Mekong river organizations and China's participation in the latter. These particular documents represent heterogeneous set of data, which include various official documents from both state and private sources, and the ones published the mass media (Bryman, 2014, p.562). Hence, all these sources present evidence described in the thesis work which is significant for this study.

4.3 Data selection

The collection of data in this study entails observation of various texts. To clarify, it could be official documents deriving from the state, such as public inquires or private sources, such as produced by organizations, media releases and virtual outputs like internet resources (Bryman, 2014, p.543). In this thesis texts take a form of written documents which were selected via iterative sampling that was eventually revised according to the results of preliminary data collection where the later selection of the data was following the newly discovered information (Drisko and Marschi, 2015, p.100). The data includes both primary and secondary sources and has different roles in the analysis process.

The primary data derives from the official state documents which were published or released by concerning actor – People Republic of China. That material is available as online sources for the general public throughout the government owned websites. However, in China's case for most of the data resources, the focal point is Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Commerce of People Republic of China. Other texts were taken from the official organization, such as MRC. These official websites were chosen by the author mainly because it can reflect the official view of the Chinese leaders and present the national interest and goals of China. The dataset encompasses various foreign policy statements, official annual reports, speeches, mass-media press releases and even public lectures done by the official representatives. Such documents can be seen as authentic and comprehensible for the researcher but it often raise an issue that document could be biased and trying to propagate particular ideas (Bryman, 2012, p.550). To put it in other words, such sources can be interesting because of being biased but the researcher should always be cautious in a sense of portraying reality (Bryman, 2012, p.550).). Thus, it is important for the researches that choose to use such material deriving from the official sources to understand the perspective that in this particular case - China is trying to pursue, and by doing so support the arguments with the resources that come from another domain, such as private data or mass- media releases.

Considering the nature of China’s secrecy in political decision making, limited access to various diplomatic negotiation processes, secondary data sources, such as press release reports and different academic studies composed by scholars allow to see other perspectives on the matter of analysis. Reading and analysing primary sources provide a precise view over the context and the analysed issue but it does not give a critical opinion. Nevertheless, secondary resources, especially ones that come from academia enrich the thesis work. It could be used to check with the information which has derived from the primary sources and to provide the in-depth analysis on the topic. However, most of the academic literature is based on the specific hypotheses or theoretical frameworks which do not precisely fit ones’ research and does not carry key variables, thus researcher must be cautious about the quality and relation to his or hers own study (Bryman, 2012, p.551).

Table 1 summarizes the sources of data used in this study, the purpose of the usage and the characteristics

Sources of Data	Title of the Documents	Purpose of Usage	Characteristics
Primary sources of the official documents including speeches of politicians, official reports	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Water Law of the People’s Republic of China of 1988 (revised in 2002). 2. Sanya Declaration of the first Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) Leaders’ Meeting of 2016. 3. “Five Features of Lancang-Mekong River Cooperation” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of People Republic of China, 17th March 2016 	To understand China’s position and reflect upon national interests of state actors	Provides the primary data from the official sources; covers and reflects only the opinion of the government.
Secondary sources, such as government media reports and private media reports	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. “China on the Lancang/Mekong: ‘We Share the Water, We Share the River’ Asean news, 28th April 2016. 2. “China Should Join Mekong Commission: US Official” Radio Free Asia, 1st September 2014. 3. “Chinese dams a threat to Lower Mekong River”VN Express Internataional, 21st August 2016. 	To understand China’s position and core interests of the transboundary river management cooperation context	Accessibility to interviews, non- official comments
Secondary sources, such as academic research and publications	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. “The new development of water law in China”, University of Denver, vol 7, no. 2, pp. 243-308. 2. “International Water Law and China’s Management of Its International Rivers”. <i>Boston College International and</i> 	To provide in-depth analysis	Critical evaluation on the primary sources and validation of the official documents; in depth analysis of the specific study

	<p><i>Comparative Law Review</i>, 39(2), pp.227-26.</p> <p>3. Exploring China's transboundary watertreaty practice through the prism of the UN Watercourses Convention. <i>Water International</i>, 38(2), pp.217-30</p> <p>4. Desecuritization in China's Behavior towards Its Transboundary Rivers: the Mekong River, the Brahmaputra River, and the Irtysh and Ili Rivers. <i>Journal of Contemporary China</i>, 23(85), pp.21-43</p> <p>5. "River Politics: China's policies in the Mekong and the Brahmaputra in comparative perspective". <i>Journal of Contemporary China</i>, 23(85), pp.1-20</p>		
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To understand, how the national interest of China is pursuit in the governance of Lancang- Mekong river, this thesis will use official documents, such as Water Law of China of 2002, Sanya Declaration of the first Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) Leaders' Meeting of 2016, and the regular press statements published by relative Chinese government organs and departments. These particular documents serve to be a representation of the view of the Chinese government, in which it indicates to the policy-making and the pursuit of national interest as an actor that influence this process. The documents are available online in the Chinese government websites.

Furthermore, in order to understand China's position in the governance of the Lancang-Mekong river, this thesis will look into the news reports from state-owned media which covers and reflects the Chinese governments views, moreover it will look into official organizational websites that will reflect upon China's participation in transgovernmental Mekong river organizations. Lastly, this work will use publications that are published by researchers and these academic documents will discuss China's national interest pursuit and intentions in the management of the Lancang- Mekong river basin region.

4.4 Data Analysis

4.4.1 Thematic analysis

As in many traditional research studies, method is understood as something that can be codified by the specific guidelines (Silverman, 2004, p.204). This thesis has adopted the thematic

analysis for the study of the empirical data. Bryman (2014, p.580) argues that analysing themes involve several matters, such as categories which were identified by the author through the data; relation to the research questions; building codes identified in the texts.

It is also significant to include theoretical contribution in relation to research focus while doing the thematic analysis (Bryman, 2014, p.580). It is important that data would be treated as the indicators of concepts which could be adjusted to the theory and compared. Moreover, most often it can be identified together with most of the other approaches of qualitative data analysis, such as a narrative analysis or grounded theory (Bryman, 2014, p.278).

4.4.2 Secondary analysis

Another technique applied to the data analysis of this research is secondary data analysis. Especially in the context of qualitative data, secondary data analysis lets the researcher to get new insights or interpretations that was not extracted from the primary sources (Bryman, 2014, p.586). It allows researcher to access to more information that it would be available by only analysing primary data sets. Thus, it is clear that secondary analysis can enrich the study if the researcher is capable of understanding the material and dissociate from the other author's opinion.

4.5 Ethical considerations

This thesis work is written according to the ethical guidelines and research practices formulated by Swedish Research Council and described by Alan Bryman (2014, p.133-134). Nevertheless, the present thesis does not raise any ethical issue. Data collection does not include interviews nor field study which assists in avoiding the typical ethical issues that scholars are facing during their research. Instead, the study process is limited by sampling texts which are related to the research questions and in order to answer them, the content of the sources is supported by relevant theory.

4.6 Limitations and self-criticism

While conducting any academic research it is important to acknowledge limitations and to be self- critical. To begin with, the thesis has a disadvantage of the size of the data collection. Bryman (2014, p.198) suggests that sample selection is not always open for the researcher and in the case of the present thesis work it is evident that limited accessibility on official Chinese documents

has narrowed down the dataset. According to Klipendorff (2014, p.42), the volume of the texts is often restrained by what a researcher can read reliably and without skipping the relevant details or without losing track. However, the effort to overcome the issue of accessibility of official texts was done through inclusion of various media reports and previous work of other academic scholars.

Generalization is an important matter for a researcher to take precautions on while doing content analysis. Even though the latter relies on hypothetical generalizations it can substitute the actual results of the implications in the analysis. However, generalization remains one of the limitations of this study. To illustrate, the behaviour of particular phenomena is different depending from one research field to another area thus China's behaviour in various international river management organizations differed due to domestic and international factors.

Another limitation that was encountered while doing this research is language barrier. Lack of access to primary sources in Chinese, was due to the fact that author is not fluent in Chinese language which had limited this research to gathering texts that were translated to or written in English language. This particular preference has given the allowance to understand and interpret texts to the author.

Furthermore, the focus of this thesis work is based mainly on the domestic dimension of the China's management of Lancang- Mekong and China's participation in the international Mekong river basin's organizations. This work does not give any comparison with other transboundary water management in China, such as Yangtze River nor provides comparison with other international water organizations overseas. This dimension is not discussed but its relevance is recognized. However, at the same time it could give a stimulus for further analytical research for other scholars.

Despite all the limitations mentioned above, the present thesis contributes to the field of research to the extent that it presents the governance of Lancang- Mekong River in China and beyond its borders in relation to international organizations, such as LMC or GMS cooperation. It sheds a light upon the positive and negative sides of such matters and gives a brief insight on the political and economical agenda that lies behind the river management. Likewise, it gives forecast and suggestions for the upcoming years. Hence, it is evident that research on this issue should be further developed.

Chapter 5 Analysis

This chapter defines the core interests of China's state and analyzes how does China pursue its national interest in the management of the transboundary Lancang- Mekong river? It will

describe and examine how China's involvement in the international river organizations reflects its pursuit of those interests. To be more specific, this thesis part will identify what is China's national interest and how is it carried out in the contexts of Water law of 2002 in China, international conventions and trans-governmental organizations of Lancang- Mekong river.

5.1 National interest in the Lancang-Mekong river basin

As the upstream superpower in the Mekong river basin, China is in a position to act unilaterally. It is also in an advantageous position to receive benefits of its international rivers. Therefore, China has little interest while considering the effects of its actions on the lower riparian states. China's authorities are more concerned about domestic and provincial disputes, institutionalization of the water governance management organs because these have direct consequences for China's inner stability and economic growth. Despite of that China has a list of other priorities regarding the Lancang- Mekong river basin which could eventually affect other riparian states. This section will further discuss those interests.

The national interests of China in the Mekong river basin are complex and concern all of the downstream riparian states. First, water storage reservoirs in the dams are essential for Yunnan province during the dry season due to the lack of rainfall. Having these reservoirs helps to have a more effective drought and flood control which could guarantee agriculture cultivation. In addition, if the water level could be kept high enough, the Lancang- Mekong river would provide an excellent navigation in the Yunnan province, allowing China to do trading with Thailand, Laos and Myanmar (Ogden, 2011, p. 32).

Second, China puts a focus on the poverty alleviation in Yunnan province while adopting "develop the West" strategy and always puts a priority to its own interests rather than looking into the development in the broader region of the whole Mekong river basin. For instance, the Water law of China of 2002 discusses only domestic development pattern and how to improve the utilization of the river water in China. This signals that China puts its own benefits first.

Third, one of the national goals of China is to switch to a more sustainable growth and by 2020 China has committed to reduce hydrocarbon emissions by 40 percent which requires China to focus more on hydropower (Ogden, 2011, p. 33). This drive for hydropower expansion and the search for cleaner sources of energy, reforms the whole energy sector. Yunnan produces about 10 percent of China's hydropower but its exploitable reserves are thought to be larger than that: Yunnan is expected to supply around 20 percent of the national hydropower production within a potential Lancang- Mekong river (Ho, 2014, pp. 8-9). Hence, the fact that the river basin has unexploited full

potential for energy sector signals that China will be continuing to build hydropower dams in the Yunnan province to fulfill the national need for the economic growth.

Fourth, China tries to keep a neutral position and does not want its development of the Lancang-Mekong river to become an obstacle to good relationships within other riparian countries nor that China's sovereignty would be challenged. Nevertheless, at the same time Chinese leaders expects Yunnan province to take the leading role in developing trade and infrastructure hand in hand with the other downstream states (Ogden, 2011, p. 33). For example, China has launched Lancang Mekong Cooperation mechanism LMC in order to initiate regional planning. The LMC summit was held in order to naturalize the relationship between China and the other riparian states. According to Ho (2014, p. 6), water flows and various political boundaries can eventually lead to conflicts because of the territorial sovereignty of states and common resource issues of ownership so also called common pool resources. Downstream states are more vulnerable to the activities of the upper riparian state and it can cause a conflict. However, China's commitment to the LMC mechanism has suggested an easier way to govern the transboundary Lancang– Mekong river and reduced the chances of potential future conflict.

5.2 China's Domestic water governance

Water is playing a pivotal role in a number of areas of China's modernisation, such as hydroelectric power, irrigation for food production, water supply for industrial and domestic usage and inland navigation for trade. Currently, China has been facing water shortages in the North; high level of pollution in rivers, lakes and ground waters; large scale of floods in the South China. Thus, there are three major water management challenges for the Chinese government: water pollution, flood control and water scarcity and for the reason that water is an important issue related to economic development it seems that Chinese leaders are addressing this challenge actively.

In general, China is considered to have a good set of modern key legal instruments accommodating general principles of how to manage water resources domestically. The main established set of laws and regulations are Water Law of 2002, Environmental Protection Law 1989, 11th Five Year Plan 2006-2010, and the Environmental Impact Assessment. Nevertheless, these systems have suffered from fragmented policy- making and implementation which creates even more obstacles in the efficient China's water management (Lee, 2006, p.3). Hence, Chinese leaders set the priority on the domestic institutional changes and the policies that concern core interests which could solve the national challenges rather than focusing on the international sphere. In the following section the author will look into the Water Law of 2002 in order to detect the river management

policies that reflect the pursuit of China's national interest. This particular example of Water Law of 2002 is chosen, as it is the main legislative vehicle that China uses to govern its international rivers.

On 29th of August, 2002, the 29th Standing committee of the Ninth National People's Congress has revised the Water Law of the People's Republic of China. This was a revision of Water Law of 1988 (MOFCOM 1988). As noted in the Article 1 and of this law, the main purpose of it is the rational development and sustainable utilization of water resources, avoiding water disasters and most importantly meeting the need of national economic and social development (MOFCOM 1988).

In terms of territory, as stated in the Article 2 the Water Law of 2002 only covers China's borders, although it addresses all of the international river basins that run through China (MOFCOM 1988). Additionally, in the cases where other international treaties related to river management contain different conditions from those provided in the Water Law of China of 2002, China can apply exception but it is not a rule (Fry& Chong, 2016, p. 239). In this case, the Water Law precisely determines the area where the legislation can be implemented, including the transboundary Lancang- Mekong river, moreover it means that Chinese government does not need to receive permission for it from the international community.

In the Articles 12 to 13 of Water Law of 2002, it is claimed that unified supervision and management of water resources is set, including the unified plan to develop, utilize, and protect water resources throughout the country (MOFCOM 1988). "Unified management" in this particular context means not the cooperation among the regions in China but rather cooperation with the central government (Fry& Chong, 2016, p. 240). In addition, it could be noticed that China does not adopt joint-management mechanism in the international level for the unified management throughout the Water Law of China 2002. For this reason it could be said that the water Law of China of 2002 does not commit to joint cooperation above county level and shows China's dissociation from the latter.

Development, utilization, conservation and protection of water resources are subjects to conditions and regulations under the Water Law of China of 2002. For example, Article 14 provides the exact plans that must be made for the purpose of development, utilization, conservation and protection of the river basins and all of the other water resources (MOFCOM 1988). Continuously, Article 15 argues that river basin plans, including the Lancang-Mekong river, as well as comprehensive regional plans and other general plans, such as related to urban plans, land use and environmental protection, should be coordinated with the plans for national economic and social development (MOFCOM 1988). These particular articles reflect that the Water Law of China of 2002 would be focused not only on how to ensure that water resources are reasonably utilized, protected and sustainably used but also that these economic and social developments would coincide with China's national economic and social interests.

The 2002 China Water Law is significant for several reasons. First, this law shows the improvements of the institutional framework, such as basin administration of water resources and regional administration in the supervision of the national waters. Second, the law emphasizes the integrated basin water resources management. This means that the regional plan within river basin is required to correspond with the local or regional plan as well as with the national development plan (Wouters et al., 2004, pp. 303-304). Despite of that, the 2002 Water Law fails to define joint-mechanisms for river basin management and instead focus is put only on the domestic administrative water governance and in what ways the ground water should be utilized regarding the national economic and social development, sustainability and water resources protection. Hence, as it can be seen in Water Law of China of 2002, the domestic institutional concerns are raised as one of the means to improve the management of the domestic water sources; it defines the effective utilization of the domestic waters in order to improve the degree of national economic and social development; however it does not emphasize or distinguish the transboundary river basin management.

5.3. China's international water management

Within its borders China has the most international rivers in the world, which mainly are located in the northeast, north western and south western regions and the presence of these international rivers in China makes the latter the upstream riparian state. Accordingly, it would be logical to expect that China would play a leading role in the cooperation processes with its riparian neighbours that follow the existing international legal order which serves in managing China's international waters. Nevertheless, it has appeared to be quite the opposite since China plays a passive role and stands apart from the international legal framework, especially when it takes into consideration the management of transboundary rivers (Fry & Chong, 2016, p. 229). This following section will explore China's position in the international water law governance and how it reflects upon the pursuit of China's national interest.

China has been supporting various environmental-related treaties through the ratification process. Most of them are based on domestic treaties or international alliances which do not touch upon Mekong River directly. However, the only conventions that were neither signed nor ratified by China in the trans-governmental context are the 1992 Helsinki Convention and the 1997 Watercourses Convention. According to Gao Feng, a Chinese representative: a watercourse state has incontestable territorial sovereignty over those parts that flows through its territory, and the convention does not affirm this particular principle (Fry & Chong, 2016, p.219). This claim shows

that China is concerned over its sovereignty and rights over its natural resources which are one of the national interests of the state.

Even though China does not sign the 1997 Watercourses Convention or neither joint Mekong river basin commission nor other international river commissions, it would be incorrect to claim that China does not engage in international water law concerns. For instance, China has been involved in four agreements in the Lancang- Mekong river basin, which are related to freight and passenger transportation: China-Laos Agreement 1994; China-Myanmar Agreement 1994); on commercial navigation China-Laos-Myanmar-Thailand Agreement 2000; on law enforcement cooperation China-Lao-Myanmar-Thailand Joint Statement 2011 (Chen, Rieu-Clarke and Wouters, 2013, p.218). Moreover, in order to utilize a shared river China cannot act unilaterally while using aquifer or aquifer system without respect to other state's sovereign rights over the same shared water resources, and has to make sure not to cause damage to their environment (James and Fry, 2016, p.255). These previously mentioned agreements oblige both parties to participate, when in comparison China is not a member of MRC and has only a dialogue partner role.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that China's transboundary water treaties are mainly bilateral. Similarly to other hegemonies of hydro-politics, such as India, China's foreign policy in this field has been "one country, one treaty" rather than approaching on a full river basin (Chen, Rieu- Clarke and Wouters, 2013, p.219). The reason for this could be the urge to maintain its political influence and political stability in the region and keep the mutual gains (James and Fry, 2016, p.262).

However, in the past, in the beginning of the Mekong basin development, China has been negotiating unwillingly for the international river treaties and instead often launched unilateral projects for dam constructions (Biba, 2014, p.22). As being concerned with its hegemonic position and the domestic as well as international stability, China has accepted friendly periphery in order to avoid conflicts over the water resources. Even though China has been accepting unilateral decisions towards the management of Lancang- Mekong river and other international river basins, the country tries to maintain peaceful approach with its neighbours. According to China's secretary general Yang Yi (2016), the common interest of Chinese nation is upholding peace and stability in the region. Thus, it could be seen that apart from economic benefits China prioritises core priorities peace and stability which proves that China is not seeking for any political conflict and at the same time is trying to pursue one of its national interests.

5.3.1 Lancang- Mekong Cooperation mechanism

On 23rd of March 2016 a joint declaration (or so-called Sanya declaration) has been issued during the first LMC Leaders' Meeting in Sanya, China. Here the foreign ministers of all of the six Mekong riparian countries announced the establishment of LMC. China was the initiating country of such transboundary river management mechanism that raises a question whether China has moved forward to a more engaging political approach towards its neighbours or rather the launch of LMC will help China to pursue its national interest and take the leading role in the region. This section will further discuss this matter while analysing Sanya declaration of 2016.

Decentralized decision making in the management of common water resources is generally less efficient than centralised mechanisms, thus LMC should help to maximise the governance of the Lancang- Mekong river. China and the other Mekong riparian states agreed upon the three pillars of cooperation: political and security issues, economic and sustainable development, and social, cultural and people-to-people exchanges (FMPRC 2016). The major goals raised in the Sanya declaration of 2016 by China and all of the Lancang- Mekong states reflect upon China's core national interest.

To begin with, this particular commitment should reaffirm peace and stability in the region. According to Guangsheng (2016, p. 12), within the launch of LMC China is extending economic cooperation to political in terms of social and security fields by promoting law enforcement in the Mekong-river basin. For example, in the sub-regional level it can help to fight the non-traditional threats such as drug trafficking, smuggling or human trafficking.

Another important goal is sustainable development and prosperity of the whole region which meets the UN agenda of 2030 for Sustainable Development (FMPRC 2016). China also takes a step up towards the improvement of the Lancang-Mekong river, roads, railway network, various infrastructure projects to build a better connectivity in the region which would eventually help to promote trade (FMPRC 2016). In order to strengthen its political position China had to shift this cooperation among its Mekong neighbours towards the economic and security demands of the region. It has a strategic importance for China because the LMC is clearly orientated towards China's national interests and besides giving the mutual benefits to all of the LMC members it gives China a better position and decision power. This means that being the upstream state and the hegemon in this sub-region, China has more advantage of political and economic power.

5.4. The pursuit of China's National Interest

To begin with, there is a popular concern about the stability and peace keeping in the region. Since China is the super- power of the Mekong river basin and it is an upstream state, it makes downstream countries dependent on China and its leaders could easily make advantage of that. Also, there exists a raising fear about China's dominant position in the GMS cooperation or LMC regime. Furthermore, some leaders and diplomats are concerned that Mekong basin one day could become "a second South China Sea" (Anh, 2016). Due to the fact that China has the strongest economic capacity, it might expand this economic influence into political influence in order to propagate China's national interest or goals. It is evident that China's economic growth leads to its enormous appetite for energy, which is exhausting water supplies and causing environmental damage (James and Fry, 2016, p.237).

It debates on China's dominant and exploitive role in LMC, which brings other Mekong river basin's countries related to acceptance with China's national interest pursuit mainly through the financial support, economical and infrastructure developments. Third negative aspect that is commonly noticed among the Southeast Asian countries in the downstream Mekong River is that China prioritizes economic projects which most of the times bring benefit to their own. China seeks to pursue its national interests and goals which most of the time are related to economic growth but Chinese leaders do not put emphasises on environmental protection and about local people livelihood (Ho, 2014, p.7).

There are several reasons why Chinese leaders did not join various trans-governmental organizations, such as MRC. One of those reasons is characterized by China's preference on doing negotiations on the bilateral basis which could resolve the problems more efficiently (Lipes, 2014). However, Aaron Salzberg has identified another reason for refusing to be tied up by the regional regulatory framework which is a fear that China will lose its strategic position on transboundary river (Lipes, 2014). For example, by joining MRC, China would be obliged to follow all of the international regulation regarding the environmental issues, as well as all of the constrains on the dam construction which would result in not effective implementation of its economic development plans. Chinese leaders are also criticizing the MRC for being only a research organization that follows the recommendations rather than having an actual power of implementing particular laws and projects (Räsänen, 2017).

As Chinese economy is growing, so does China's political power. If one looks at the newly launched LMC regime, which was mainly initiated by China, there are several views on the fact that this mechanism was created only to fulfil China's national goals. It could be claimed that by

establishing a close cooperation with other Mekong river states, such as LMC, China has an intention to play a more active role in the common water sources management. One of the goals that China is promoting within the launch of LMC is an economic corridor belt and road initiative, which is supposed to link rails between Singapore and Kunming, help to facilitate the transportation ways from Yunnan province, develop infrastructure which would improve trading systems (Foreign Ministry of People Republic of China, 2016). This would undoubtedly result in economic and political gains for China and the other Lancang-Mekong river basin riparian countries.

According to Yang Yi, China has been always engaged in the trans-governmental cooperations and LMC is just another mechanism which would fill the gaps in the Mekong basin. China is willing to cooperate with all the downstream countries and resolve the water scarcity problem facing all of the Lancang- Mekong riparian states (Yi, 2016). For example, it is true that after the creation of LMC China's actions became more transparent towards the downstream riparian states. Due to the request China has released water from the Jinghong dam in order to avoid drought. This has showed goodwill and willingness to assist in regulating the natural events, such as droughts (Stratfor, 2016). Nevertheless, Chinese were not completely selfless because their own country in the South needs to maintain the water levels in Yunnan province to be able to utilize ports and to be able to trade in the downstream (Stratfor, 2016).

In short, China is engaged in bilateral agreements among with the countries that it has international waters. It does not participate in international river basin organizations in order to avoid multilateralism and to keep its decision or negotiation power. Although with the establishment of LMC there could be some alteration in the approach towards the trans-governmental organisms. Furthermore, China's foreign policy is clearly orientated to its national interest and economic gains. Moreover, it is eager to improve the new joint management platform in terms of inclusion of social and security cooperation which has been put aside in MRC and GMS projects. Nevertheless, LMC is initiated by China which gives the advantage of final decision making process which China would not have as a member of MRC.

Chapter 6. Conclusion

This thesis has focused on the research question, how does China pursue its national interest in the governance of the Lancang- Mekong river. This study has also elaborated on China's involvement in the inter-governmental organizations in the Mekong river basin and the management domestically and in transborder context.

The author has identified what are the national interests of China. First, it is poverty alleviation in Yunnan province. Second, sustainable growth as new means of China's economic growth. Third, peace and stability in the region over sovereignty rights to international waters. Lastly, China wants to take a leading role in the LMC mechanisms in order to be able to pursue all of those previously mentioned interest. All of these core interests are the driving force for Chinese leaders in the policy-making regarding the Lancang- Mekong river and all of the other international river basins.

This study has shown that China is engaged into several cooperation mechanisms that work upon the river management. In the past China has been rather uncooperative great power and instead tried to reconcile its own hydro-politics and tried to pursue its national goals through unilateralism, as it could be seen with the weak involvement in the MRC. However, being a full member of GMS and the launch of LMC has proven that China could be engaged in the multilateral organization mechanisms but it is mainly seen as a way to accommodate its neighbours in the downstream in order to avoid major water disputes. Nevertheless, China still tends to target its own benefit and national goals, such as sustained focus on the domestic problems and economic growth.

Also, China is seen as a raising threat in the Mekong basin management, especially after the initiation of LMC regime, which makes it the main driving force on the decision making process. Even though positively China is the main financial supporter for the development in the Mekong basin and has contributed largely to the development of infrastructure and building dams in downstream, it has been blamed for not paying attention to the environmental protection.

By using framework of the classical realist school, thesis has attempted to give a better understanding on China's pursuit of its national interest in the management of Lancang- Mekong river. Through the concept of national interest it could be noticed that China has been acting in the consistent manner in order to maximise its own benefits. It has been seen as engaged in its own domestic hydro-politics and keeping the hegemonic stability. However, with the launch of the LMC regime China's altered openness could be noticed, which leads to the cooperation and seeking mutual gains. The sovereignty issue in this particular case is identified as water security, which is equal to a national security. Thus, it has been evident that China is prioritising the latter and other national interests, such as economic growth before the needs of the downstream states.

China's national interest pursuit could be seen in the Water Law of China which encompasses the main policies regarding the international water management in China. Moreover, within the launch of the LMC and the joint-declaration, China commits to the cooperation among all of the river basin riparian countries. It should be noted that being an initiator of such organization China gets a decision power which would help to implement the national goals in the near future.

This thesis could be a starting point for a future research of the evolvement of the Lancang-Mekong cooperation regime and its effectiveness in the Mekong River basin. The future researchers could analyse and include several case studies of the other transboundary river management in China, such as Yangtze river in comparinon to Lancang- Mekong river. In the future it could also be possible to look into China's political behaviour applying another theoretical framework, such as desecuritization, in order to fulfil the gaps left by the classical realism approach due to the fact that China's governance way towards the issue is slightly shifting.

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