

Power Relations in the Mekong River Basin - A
look into the discourse of the Mekong River
Commission



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Kipras Bajorinas

Abstract

This study concerns itself with power asymmetries between states as well as cooperative arrangements within the Mekong River Basin. Transboundary frameworks for cooperation are often faced with challenges in harmonizing policy in the face of competing interests and unequal power relations between states and stakeholders. These challenges are especially evident in the context of the Mekong River Basin, where the river flows through the territories of six riparian nations with China holding the most power. The largest of these transboundary frameworks tasked with the role of a water diplomat in the region is a river basin organization known as the Mekong River Commission (MRC). Using the theories of critical geopolitics and hydro-hegemony, this paper employs a critical discourse analysis of MRC strategy documents to investigate the role of power asymmetries and relations in affecting the commission's strategy and role in the basin. The findings show that the MRC's strategy to strengthen itself as an international river basin organization is a geopolitical act to position itself to attain more influence as a counter-hegemonic actor to China in the basin, in order to reverse the power asymmetries towards its non-hegemonic member states. The strategy documents themselves are also interpreted to be a powerful discursive tool to boost donor confidence and secure itself as a leading river basin organization in the region. Finally, the analysis of MRC discourse in relation to China shows the limit in the MRC's ability to upend existing unequal power relations towards more non hydro-hegemonic influence due to its failure to harmonize policy among its member states, China's upstream geographic power as well as the addition of a new institutional arrangement known as the Lancang-Mekong cooperation, which is interpreted to be a challenge to MRC's claim to be a leading international river basin organization in the region.

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List of Abbreviations

CDA - Critical Discourse Analysis
IWRM - Integrated Water Resources Management
LMC - Lancang-Mekong Cooperation
MRC - The Mekong River Commission
RBO - River Basin Organization
SIDA - Swedish International Development Agency

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

With ever increasing population, economic development, urbanization and resource consumption pressures globally, the use of the very limited freshwater resources has continued to be a topic of great contention. These factors, coupled with the effects of socio-economic inequities and the absence of poverty alleviation efforts have resulted in significant pressures on the use of freshwater all across the world (Nilsson, 2006). Effective management of these resources is therefore a vital element for successful future sustainable development efforts. Naturally, with limited resources, comes a variety of conflicting interest groups with uneven power dynamics relating to the management of freshwater. This is especially the case when a body of freshwater such as aquifers, lakes or river basins exist across more than one political border. Without robust frameworks for transboundary water management in which countries or even sub-national bodies have aligned interests, those bodies of water are susceptible to overexploitation to the severe detriment to ecosystems, reliable and sustainable supplies of water as well as entire communities reliant on rivers and lakes for their survival, a lot of which tend to be poor (UN, 2016). Even in cases where projects take place in the name of sustainable development such as the building of hydropower dams for a cleaner source of energy can be harmful to the river downstream by either slowing down or significantly altering the path of water flow, trapping sediments crucial to healthy ecosystems. The consequences of this are often felt across the border from where the projects exist. Transboundary, supranational cooperation in these matters is therefore key to ensure that these problems can be solved in a way that communities are able to meet their energy, agricultural, industry and water supply needs sustainably.

This thesis will therefore explore the relations of power in the context of a transnational platform for water resources management known as the Mekong River Commission (MRC). One area in which a large part of these problems seem to be present is the transboundary Mekong river basin. The river basin is an extremely diverse region with roughly 70 million people living there spanning six countries - China, Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam. 85% of the basin's inhabitants live in rural areas, which are money poor, meaning that they heavily rely on the natural resources found in the basin (FAO, 2011). State services in those areas are lacking, meaning that healthy aquatic ecosystems need to be sustained to support millions of the poorest in Southeast Asia. Over 60% of the population in this basin engage in water related economic activities, meaning that they are vulnerable to any drastic changes and shocks to the environment (ibid.).

To facilitate transboundary cooperation concerning water related issues such as fishing, irrigation, water utilization and a number of other technical issues, the MRC was set up between the governments of Cambodia, Thailand, Vietnam and Laos. Furthermore, there are also issues concerning hydropower projects that have key transboundary implications. Some of their adverse impacts include : damage to ecosystems, negative impacts as a result of flow changes, potential social detriments like resettlement, land salinization due to irrigation and risk of

unexpected water release from dams. The case of the Mekong River Basin becomes further complicated when considering the influence of China - the biggest state player in the basin and one that holds the most upstream geographical area of the Basin. It is not part of the MRC, and some media has claimed that China has used its geographical advantage and autonomy over the upstream part of the Mekong (known as the Lancang river in China) to act in its own self interest by unilaterally building dams often to the detriment of the lower riparian states (Nijhuis, 2015). As of 2016 the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) was created to facilitate a higher level of transboundary cooperation with the states of the MRC. The effects of this rather new cooperation have been unclear, as some have pointed out that this is an extension of China's larger foreign policy goals, attempting to challenge the current structures of cooperation in the region (Wu, 2018). Others, however, have pointed out that the creation of the LMC is an improvement of the transboundary cooperation mechanism, as the extension of China in the water management framework in the Mekong can be a positive in terms of protecting and developing these waters (Grunwald, 2020).

In water diplomacy, there is a necessity for the existence of a framework that facilitates cooperation towards the same overarching goals across political boundaries. The general structures that emerge relating to promoting cooperation concerning transboundary rivers are International River Basin Organizations (RBOs). They provide institutional frameworks for member states to be able to work towards specific goals and also provide a pathway towards dispute resolution through the rules set up by member states (Schmeier and Shubber, 2018). The roles of RBOs, however, are not always clear-cut, as the institutional and legal gaps in their structure tend to be a source of dispute or lack of responsibilities toward achieving important goals towards more effective governance of rivers and their tributaries (ibid.).

The geopolitical considerations within the Mekong River Basin are crucial to the exploration of transboundary water management issues, as actors within the institutional frameworks of the MRC and the more recent addition of the LMC do not produce the same amount of influence towards the outcomes relating to the river. Issues of water access and its use are key in regards to critical discussions on governance structures and decisions in Southeast Asian countries. These debates tend to focus on the transformation of the Mekong River into an 'engine' of regional economic development (Sneddon, 2012). This process of transformation largely relates to the promotion of irrigated agriculture and generating hydropower by constructing dams. The plans to transform the river in the name of economic development have been around for a while, however the implementation of these plans were often stifled during the Cold War, when the region was faced with multiple violent conflicts. The rather recent trends towards the implementation of this transformation was therefore allowed by a period of stability and efforts to coordinate efforts in the name of cooperation. Hydropower projects, however, are controversial due to the potential negative social ecological impacts they can produce - altered water flows leading to floods or drought in local communities, negatively impacted fish migration patterns, trapping sediments and displacement of people in areas where the projects take place - reducing the use of locally generated knowledge about the surrounding ecological systems (Tilt and Gerkey, 2015). This process also involves the diffusion of power away from communal and private entities towards bodies that are extensions of the state, often

overlooking the importance of understanding local problems and contexts in favor of a broader strategy of a politically relevant region (Huitema and Meijerink, 2017). Some have also criticised this trend of dam building in the Mekong River Basin, as governments involved in making decisions that require careful deliberation whether economic benefits from hydropower outweigh the potential detrimental impacts on ecosystems as well as the livelihoods of rural communities. To implement such a process of careful and comprehensive deliberation on water management decisions, has shown to be an immense challenge, one that has not been overcome (Costanza et al. 2011). Despite the fact that the MRC was created for this very purpose - to facilitate transboundary cooperation and also to act as a water diplomat, working to resolve disputes among the riparian states, the process is clearly imperfect with relations between the countries remaining unequal in terms of their influence and power to affect decisions that best fit their interests (Zeitoun and Warner, 2006). It is therefore useful to further explore these unequal relations of power within this geopolitical context as their understanding will help in providing insight into the larger context of what processes lead to the river basin management outcomes in the Mekong and its basin.

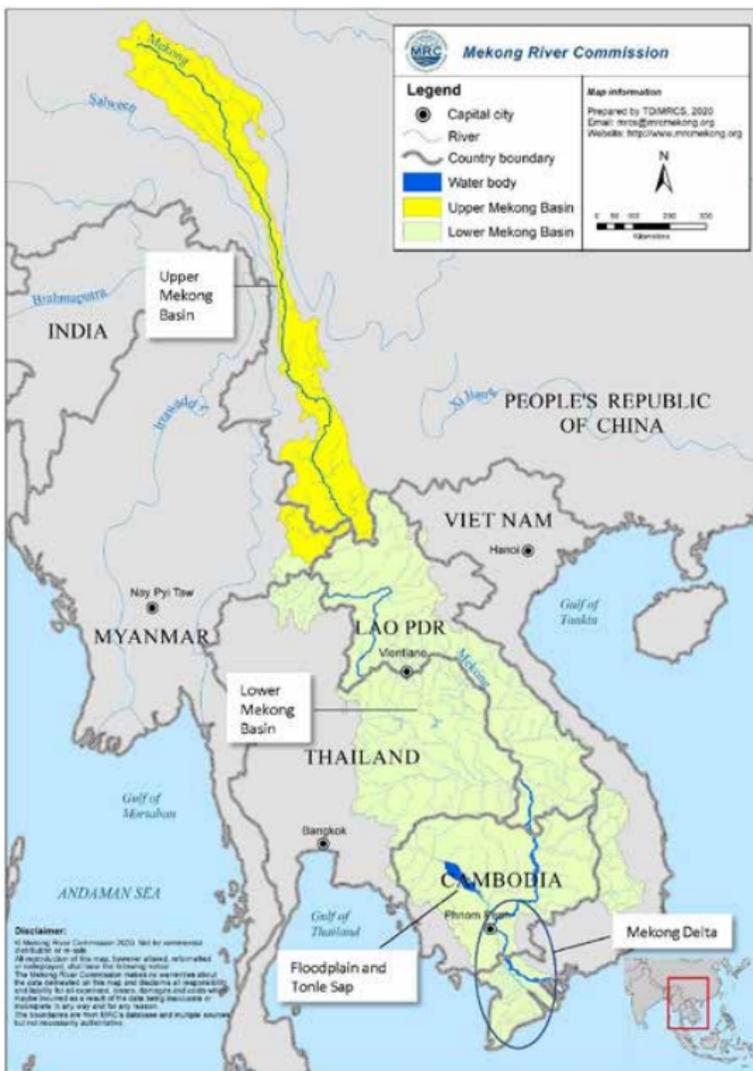


Figure 1. Map of the Mekong River Basin (MRC, 2021)

1.2 Aim and Research Question

While the observable outcomes of the river are material in nature, the processes through which they are produced are highly political and a result of power relations, discourses and institutional customs of both domestic as well as transnational actors. By discursive constructions in strategy with geopolitical trends and power interests of riparian states in mind, new insights can be gained on the decision making processes and how state or donor interests may play a role in producing a kind of sanctioned discourse with the aim of it leading to material outcomes on the ground. One way to look at how different spheres of influence affect outcomes on the Mekong is to analyse discourse in the MRC context in terms of its strategic objectives to produce insights about power relations in the region. These factors can be observed and analysed by employing the use of a critical discourse analysis and elements of document analysis. The research question is therefore as follows:

How do power asymmetries in the Mekong River Basin help understand the Mekong River Commission's strategic objectives since the commission's inception?

What exactly constitutes power and the role of its imbalance is discussed in more depth in the theoretical framework section.

In order to answer this question, the thesis will analyse documentary sources for MRC strategy discourse and how it has been used since its founding. This will help understand how strategies have been affected by issues relating to power and how they contribute to the geopolitics of the Mekong. The analysis of power in the context of water resources management governance structures is relevant as critical perspectives on the topic can illuminate the presence of non-violent conflict within these cooperative structures (Zeitoun and Mirumachi, 2008).

1.3 Delimitations and scope

In order to be able to keep this paper focused, it is important to delimit the study according to its scope. This paper will focus on drawing out power relations within the discourse of the strategic objectives of the Mekong River Commission. The focus will remain on transboundary issues, meaning that domestic and internal water management platforms and their impact will not be taken into consideration in this study. Furthermore, bilateral relations and their impact are also outside of the scope of this study, although it must be acknowledged that these types of relations are deemed as crucial in the literature (Rein, 2016). The discussion will also remain focused on water-related issues therefore other issues such as drug trafficking, border security or labor issues outside of water will not be included despite holding transboundary significance.

1.4 Structure of Thesis

The sections that follow include a literature review, overlooking existing debates regarding the rise of RBOs and its relations to the Mekong context. It is followed by an overview of the theoretical frameworks adopted by this thesis and subsequently the description of the methodology that is used to analyze the selected data. Finally, the findings and analysis are

presented together in a narrative form, followed by concluding remarks and suggestions for further research.

2. Literature Review

The literature review is structured in a way to first give the context of broader paradigms and philosophies of bioregionalism and adaptive governance that led to the birth of the river basin organizations. This is followed by debates in literature relating to the widespread emergence of RBOs and subsequently the role they play in water diplomacy. Finally, the context is further narrowed down by examining literature concerning RBOs and water diplomacy in the geopolitical context of the Mekong.

2.1 Bioregionalism

When discussing issues of resource use, the choices that are made in terms of setting appropriate boundaries for their management tend to be entirely political, the most common example of this comes in the form of national borders or even more subsidiary state and county barriers. These borders very rarely tend to be controlled by a single entity unified in its goals to preserve overall healthy and sustainable functioning of a particular ecological setting. This therefore presents important challenges of creating effective governance systems across political borders with uneven power dynamics that have to work together to achieve sustainable management of natural resources (Howes, 2014).

One way this has been tackled is through the concept of bioregionalism. The bioregional philosophy has been proposed as an alternative to the perceived failures of state-centered approaches. It suggests that approaching issues of natural resource management at the bioregional scale is a way to improve connecting communities with governance of their local environment (McGinnis, 1999). McGinnis (1999:4) has defined it as “*a body of knowledge that has evolved to inform a process of transformative social change at two levels—as a conservation and sustainable strategy, and as a political movement which calls for devolution of power to ecologically and culturally defined bioregions.* By delegating powers to communities that live in the same ecological areas, local knowledge can be more effectively used to manage resources in an environmentally friendly and sustainable manner that is friendly to the customs of local communities.

Bioregionalism is often offered as a politically neutral alternative, but calling it so would be misleading. Huitema and Meijerink (2017) suggest that such neutrality does not exist, as by adopting the bioregional lens through which improvement and effectiveness is perceived, it will result in prioritizing a new set of goals at the expense of other objectives. Normative social-ecological arguments such as redefining boundaries to better fit cultural and ecological areas to more effectively and sustainably manage natural resources are adopted by virtue of the use of this theory.

Muller (2019) has suggested that the bioregional assumption of the basin scale as the most appropriate management unit should be challenged. His paper brings attention to the limits of the river basin as a geographic unit and suggests the importance of linking different scales at which water actors operate. Instead, Muller points out that the basin scale approach has been popularised as a single prescription of managing waters, with disregard to the complexities of the field of study and the benefits of the multiplicity of approaches. Instead, local allocation of water resources was recommended to take place at the level of individual tributary levels and environmental protection responsibilities should be devolved to the communities that are affected. Dombrowsky et al. (2010) also echo the notion that the basin scale as the most optimal management unit is not universal, as issues of political feasibility and the lack of trust of coordinated management and low willingness of national bodies to give up sovereignty to transnational frameworks shows that management at the river basin should not be considered to be universally applicable and instead the success of this approach is highly context dependent.

2.2 Adaptive Governance

Bioregional assumptions play a central role to the analytical approach of adaptive governance - a theory that is more directly relevant in examining the roles and functions of RBOs. Dodds, Nelson and Cook (2007:4) define adaptive governance as: *“the evolution of the rules and norms that promote the satisfaction of underlying human needs and preferences given changes in understanding, objectives, and the social, economic and environmental context.”*

It is presented as a theory to enable societies to adapt in the face of changing ecological circumstances where decisions have to be taken in times of uncertainty. A distinctive feature of this theory different from its past iterations is that it expands the focus from purely resource based management of ecosystems to addressing more social contexts where communities can be empowered to be more involved in the decision making processes concerning their local environments and ecosystems (Karpouzoglou, Dewulf and Clark, 2016). A literature review of the use of adaptive governance theory has identified its most prominent features:

- Adaptive capacity development - how flexibility can become integrated into existing institutional governance arrangements to deal with an ecologically deteriorating or changing environment. Emphasis placed on societal responses to uncertainties.
- Collaboration - Networks and partnerships' collective search for solutions to ecological problems and responsibility sharing.
- Scaling - Matching ecosystem management with the appropriate governance level. Authorities organized in a multi-centered manner. Principle of subsidiarity. This is also referred to as nesting of institutional arrangement, serving the purpose to avoid a central dominating authority.
- Knowledge and learning - emphasis on the process of learning and knowledge sharing between governance actors at different policy and management levels. Also integration of local and scientific knowledge to facilitate appropriate solutions. (Ibid.)

Akamani and Wilson (2011) have also stressed that in the context of transboundary water management, institutional variety in adaptive governance plays a key role in addressing the issue of capacity mismatch, while providing opportunity for local-level actors to play a more significant role in influencing decisions taken at a higher scale.

Karpouzoglou, Dewulf and Clark (2016) have also pointed out that using other complementing theoretical approaches with adaptive governance can address some of its shortcomings.

Adaptive governance can therefore provide a framework for a resilience based approach to the challenges that arise out of managing transboundary waters. The criticism of these theories, however, remain similar to those of bioregionalism. They are underpinned by normative claims of what constitutes effectiveness and good governance, usually aligned with social-ecological points of view. Such normative positions may therefore play a detrimental role, especially when it is done in the context of advocating for future regime change. It is therefore important to acknowledge this fact when deliberating on evaluating governance using criteria founded on normative ecological arguments. Therefore by adopting this theory as a base for research, the social-ecological arguments are also accepted (Karpouzoglou, Dewulf and Clark, 2016).

The debates and literature surrounding the concepts of bioregionalism and adaptive governance have therefore tended to focus on which types of management are appropriate, while underappreciating the role of power relations that exist within these frameworks. The subsequent sections therefore examine literature first by discussing the rise of RBOs and its typologies and secondly conceptualizations of power within these domains.

2.3 The emergence of River Basin Organizations

The theoretical foundations mentioned above involve the notion that the most appropriate way to manage ecosystems is at the bioregional level. More concretely, when applied to the water sector this is the philosophy behind the workings of River Basin Organizations (RBOs). There is however, significant levels of diversity in the set up and functions of RBOs across the globe. Huitema and Meijerink (2017) present a research gap that they seek to close by examining the different typologies and performance of RBOs. The first and arguably most obvious source of this diversity derives from the various ways that national governments have been set up - differences in levels of centralization and jurisdiction and democracy means that depending on the context, special purpose organizations such as RBOs will have different levels of autonomy and responsibilities in water management. Changing discourses on water governance have influenced the trend to devolve more autonomy to the level of the river basin and its corresponding organizations.

The discussion concerning the evolution of types of RBOs and their relation to different discourses of water governance continues in Jaspers and Gupta (2014). The term 'RBO' covers a wide variety of organizations with different objectives and responsibilities - from watershed based with less authority and capacity but more focus on local issues to larger organizations operating at national or even transboundary levels. The organizations operating at

larger geographic scales have more regional focus and legal authority derived from national law. The objectives of RBOs have also evolved from smaller community-level bodies to having more comprehensive and multi-purpose strategies to manage local waters. At the international level, these include the already mentioned efforts for increased coordination and harmony in policy across the board usually holding legal principles of equitable sharing, no-harm, environmental protection, sustainability, conflict resolution and subsidiarity.

The rise in quantity and popularity of RBOs has been attributed to three factors - the first through legitimizing existing informal organizations. Secondly, the development of RBOs can be considered to be a response to the necessity of a formal legal framework to deal with issues of transboundary upstream-downstream riparian relations for example construction of hydropower projects, water use, and river flows and flooding as well as environmental pollution - the Mekong River Commission was created mainly to address these underlying issues in the Basin's subregion. Thirdly, the development of scholarly schools of thought as well as water agents' discourses concerning water management has influenced RBOs to play a larger role in the attempt to solve the existing concerns, as well as contributed to the shaping of their designs. On top of the water management discourses, the evolution of governance, environmental, developmental and development-cooperations discourses combined with their attractiveness to scientific, financial, and political communities have shaped the design and structures of many modern RBOs (ibid.). Mukhtarov and Gerlak (2013) add on that the production and the shaping of discourses that promote RBOs is largely done by transnational policy entrepreneurs composed of intergovernmental organizations, international non-governmental organizations, global knowledge networks and actors in the private sector. They conclude that these parties continuously construct and reinterpret the meaning of RBOs so that they remain high on the agenda.

The paradigm of integrated water resources management (IWRM) has become a central guiding concept for how to go about managing the water sector among water players such as RBOs around the globe. It involves a greater participation of the private sector, a larger role to be given to independent experts to improve decision making processes, increased international collaboration for the purposes of data sharing as well as linking upstream and downstream parts of a river basin to ensure continuity in terms of water management strategy, all the while promoting more public participation and increasing the level of local control. More attention is also given to assessing the social-ecological impacts of water management projects and supports the introduction of mechanisms to ensure that such projects do not proceed to the detriment of the environment (GWP, 2020). This therefore denotes a shift from the national government approach to a supra-national framework in the water sector, recognizing the idea that political borders constrain effective management of such a fluid resource that is almost never confined to a single political territory. The widespread adoption of IWRM amongst players in the water sector has been criticised by Biswas (2008), for the concept being unusable in operational terms due to its all-encompassing, overarching nature. Water actors can therefore claim to be adopting an IWRM approach, when in reality they continue their operations without too much change under the guise of a new, more holistic method to managing water resources.

There is also the challenge of IWRM and water governance literature in general as being too water-centric, with a failure to include other sectors and external actors. Loe and Patterson (2017) have made this point, suggesting that IWRM is aimed at partly addressing these problems, however it still remains highly water-centric in its approach. This has led to the introduction of a 'nexus' approach. Benson et al. (2019) maintain that water issues have to be linked with other sectors such as agriculture, industry, energy and climate change in an attempt to broaden the lens through which problems are seen. Grigg (2014), on the other hand, adds to this debate by challenging the 'nexus' approach, defending the water-centricity of IWRM due to the unique role of water in all these sectors. He maintains that every water-dependent sector perceives water as only a part of its entire process. For example the energy sector may see cooling water for thermoelectric power as only a small part of the sector, the same way safe drinking water or a healthy aquatic ecosystem is only a single element of the approach towards public health or a healthy ecosystem. The issue for RBOs in this context becomes whether their mandates will allow for such a broadened approach, especially when it comes to their goal of harmonizing policy at the international level.

2.4 River Basin Organizations in water diplomacy

The mandate discussion concerning RBOs illustrates the presence of a disparity between the goals of optimizing governance in accordance to the interests of the entire catchment area at the transboundary level and the willingness of nations to give up some of its sovereignty to the basin-wide RBO or other authority (Jaspers and Gupta, 2014). States tend to be generally very unwilling to give up any sovereignty, meaning that they retain the final say, with RBOs being mostly technocratic. This therefore highlights the issue of struggle for water resources control, as transboundary RBOs will therefore be limited in their ability in controlling disputes over water, with power imbalances between states playing a larger role in this (Barrow, 1998). This therefore brings up the discussion of RBOs and their expected role in water-diplomacy. Schmeier (2018) defines water diplomacy as the "*diplomatic instruments to existing or emerging disagreements and conflicts over shared water resources with the aim to solve or mitigate those for the sake of cooperation, regional stability, and peace*", with diplomatic instruments being negotiations, dispute resolution mechanisms as well as platforms for consultation. Kittikhoun and Schmeier (2021) reject two ideas commonly present in water governance literature. First, the notion that there is a risk of physical conflict over shared water resources is challenged, as states prefer to solve their conflicts in a cooperative manner. The factors that contribute to the reluctance to engage in violent confrontation are power dynamics among riparians, the general regional political and cooperation frameworks, roles of external actors that have influence over the specific basin and the existing institutional frameworks. Secondly the notion that RBOs are merely technical organizations is also rejected, as they operate along coinciding mechanisms of water-diplomacy. Water diplomacy is conceptualized as the aim to prevent or mitigate emerging disputes over shared water resources. The role of RBOs in this process is highly context dependent, however four main factors that affect it are highlighted: the legal mandate, the institutional setup as well as the technical and strategic

mechanisms of a RBO. Strategic objectives address the struggle of competing interests and instead attempt to promote cooperation and produce joint basin-wide programmes in the attempt to reduce conflicts. The highlighted significance of strategic activities of RBOs in the context of water disputes and power relations by Kittikhoun and Schmeier makes the analysis of MRC's strategy particularly relevant.

2.5 The MRC and the Geopolitics of the Mekong

While the literature on the general structures and functions of RBOs is useful in gauging the typology of such organizations, a review of these structures in the specific context of the Mekong River Basin is also necessary. The discussions will focus on the MRC, as it is considered to be the leading RBO in the region, largely due to the legitimacy provided by the governments of the four lower Mekong states. Kittikhoun and Staubli (2021) present a discussion of the MRC's role as a water diplomat in the geostrategically significant region characterized by power rivalries, stuck in between conflicting influences of external powers. The largest threat to the basin is shown to be the re-emergence of national hydropower plans, potentially altering the flow, fish migration patterns and trapping sediments of the river. The MRC is therefore tasked with providing a diplomatic mechanism for optimizing these national plans for sharing of benefits and minimizing environmental impacts. A part of this is the production of basin-wide strategy that then trickles down to the national bodies of water management. The MRC's procedure for Notification, Prior Consultation and Agreement for water projects have led to some changes in the designs of the Xayaburi, Don Sahong and Pak Beng hydropower projects to mitigate environmental risks. The paper concludes by acknowledging that facilitating changes to suit basin-wide rather than national interests is more of a political challenge than a technical one, with some praise to the MRC's relative success in bringing a level of transboundary cooperation to the river. This debate therefore speaks to the importance to the relations of power and its asymmetries between member states, as these factors tend to play a significant role in how much concessions are to be granted as a result of the MRC's hydro-diplomatic structures (Rein, 2016).

While the literature suggests its relative success with notification and prior consultation mechanisms, on the other hand the MRC is limited in how much influence it can have basin-wide, as two of its riparians, China and Myanmar, are not members of the RBO. Xie and Daojiong (2021), discuss China and its engagement in the Mekong River Basin. Shared water issues have become central to China in the contention for geopolitical influence in the region. Generally, China's approach to shared waters tends to favour bilateral relations and prioritizing domestic law over transboundary instruments, although it is marked by an adherence to the principle of 'no significant harm'. China's engagement in the basin is split up into two types of activities - bilateral relations between individual states and interactions with regional organizations such as the MRC. China's bilateral relations have historically touched up on ecological protection and navigation and more recently the focus has turned towards mitigating effects of water-related disasters. China's relations with the MRC are even more limited, restricted mainly to sharing of hydrological data about water flows as part of its flood forecasting

system. The limit comes to the differences in principles, as it has reservations to participating in mechanisms such as the aforementioned prior consultation, as it is perceived to impede China's sovereign right to manage resources within its boundaries. Chinese scholars view international water law as favoring downstream riparians, potentially undermining planning of its water resources. The situation further evolved by China's recent launching of a multilateral platform for cooperation known as the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) in 2016. This is seen as China's attempt to secure national interests in Southeast Asia by taking control of the design and implementation of this new institutional arrangement composed only of riparian states in light of criticism of the MRC for being dependent on interests of donor states outside the basin. Some perceive that the addition of the LMC platform to the transboundary water management context will marginalize and replace the MRC, although officially, cooperation between the two bodies is welcome.

It becomes clear that the issues of transboundary water management are largely geopolitical, involving different interests competing for power in the Mekong River Basin. Hirsch (2016) outlines the shifting regional geopolitics to partially explain the rise of Mekong dam building. He denotes the emergence of the field of hydro-hegemony, bringing geopolitics to explain power asymmetries between countries as a basis for riparian relations, departing from conventional geopolitical theories of territorial and military relations between nations. Forces, ideological and economic, suppressed during the Cold War have been let loose to rearrange the geopolitical space to an increasingly integrated Mekong. Furthermore, the theory of critical geopolitics has rejected traditional, simplified explanations of superpower relations to bring more focus towards representation and discourses and their ability to affect outcomes and activities on the ground. One of the new representations is the conceptualization of the region as a contested arena of hydropower development. One part of this post-Cold War shift has been the regionalization of relations, with less importance given to national borders and more to the interactions of the bioregion, as mentioned above. The bioregional conception of the Mekong from a river to a basin holds an important implication. It is conceived as a territorial unit to be governed, meaning that it sets up a degree of "*competitive sovereignty*", presenting geopolitical tensions as the MRC is funded largely by external donors rather than by riparian states, therefore bringing expectations of a particular type of leadership from outside the basin. The re-emergence of mainstream dams being built on the Mekong is attributed to two geopolitical shifts - the precedent of Chinese unilateral dam-building upstream as well as the dawn of a neoliberal era of private financing where environmental concerns no longer have as strong of an impact as they did when the projects were funded publicly. Dean (2016) responds to Hirsch by adding that the narrative of hydropower development in the region involves a rescaling of control and access from local peoples to the state and large financiers of such projects. Sithirith and Gillen (2016) further add to Hirsch's ontological representations of the Mekong by encouraging the narratives of the local communities of the river to contribute to its geopolitics. Finally, Ptak (2016) urges to consider the multiple Chinas in this particular context. Viewing China as a monolith poses the risk of producing a reductionist account. Instead, the theory of hydro-hegemony is suggested to analyze China's approach to influence, rather than the orthodox conception of domination, to be able to produce a more nuanced account of its geopolitical role in the region.

Therefore, to understand the developments in the region, not only does there need to be a conventional account of shifting geopolitics in the region but also awareness of discursive formations of power with space in the Mekong.

3. Theoretical framework

3.1 Critical Geopolitics

To be able to interpret data in a way that accounts for the ways in which geography and discourse influences the balance of power, the theory of critical geopolitics is key. Geopolitics is one of the ways in which the analysis of statecraft takes into account how geographical elements such as land and water use, proximity shape the historical development paths in international politics (Sharp, 2009). The concept of security is one of the key concepts in the field - it refers to "*protection of the state from the threat of external powers*" (ibid.:358). Therefore having considerable influence in decision making structures outside of the national border is one way that perceived national security can be increased and the state's interests are furthered.

Geopolitics tended to revolve around state-centered approaches, considered to be effective at predicting in which areas states are strong and in which they are vulnerable. These notions of 'objective' accounts of based on unchanging laws of geography, however, began to be subject to criticism, as analyses of geopolitical ideas such as American exceptionalism and the Cold War 'domino effect' that posited that one state falling under the control of communism would be replicated in neighboring countries, have suggested that these geographical arguments are highly ideological in nature (ibid). The emerging perspective was that geopoliticians' observations were actually embedded and not outside the events that are being discussed. This emerging school of thought is known as Critical Geopolitics.

According to Sharp (2009:358), a critical geopolitics approach attempts to "*examine how it is that international politics is imagined spatially or geographically and in so doing to uncover the politics involved in writing the geography of global space.*" This rests on a claim that there is power in knowledge and that there is great power in those who construct the perceived legitimate explanations of the workings of global politics. Kuus (2010:687) has further pointed out that "*the discursive construction of social reality is shaped by specific political agents, including intellectuals of statecraft*". Rhetorical constructions of these political agents are therefore very worthwhile to explore. A critical geopolitics approach can therefore be applied to the analysis of policy papers, political speeches or accounts in popular culture to shed light on the processes related to the production of geopolitical knowledge. The examination of the MRC strategy discourse using this approach therefore helps to gain insights into the power relations and asymmetries in a geopolitical context in the Mekong River Basin.

Furthermore, Kuus (2010) also points out that it is important not to fall into the usual 'Us' and 'Them' trap of traditional geopolitical thinking, where intention is attributed to the actions of oversimplified and monolithic actors separated by strict territorial boundaries. Critical geopolitics attempts to address this by taking a problem-based approach to challenge those existing binaries and by acknowledging the very messy nature of spatiality within political processes where competing interests exist, a more productive analysis of the workings of space and power can emerge. Even when constructing a geopolitical narrative about a particular 'bordered' actor, it is important to recognize that there is a multiplicity of perspectives and interests within the discursive differentiation of space that constitutes a specific border. The MRC may therefore be conceptualized as a geopolitical actor that arises out of combined and agreed upon interests of its member states with the goal of influencing outcomes not only within its own boundaries of the Lower Mekong, but also outside them in the Upper Mekong Basin where states are not part of the RBO.

3.2 Hydro-hegemony

While critical geopolitics theory is helpful in providing a framework through which to analyze issues of statecraft at a higher level of abstraction, the use of a secondary theoretical approach that is more closely related to this specific context can be useful to supplement the perspectives of critical geopolitics. One theory that is highly focused on the geopolitical dynamics within the specific context of transboundary water issues is that of hydro-hegemony.

The concept arises from criticisms that traditional analyses of water conflicts usually downplay and portray the significance of power asymmetries as unproblematic as long as those disputes do not escalate to violent conflict. Hydro-hegemony as a framework for analysis was first introduced by Zeitoun and Warner (2006). Their first point of departure is that control over water resources is achieved mostly by engaging in power-related tactics and strategies and that conventional understanding of the issue does not take into account the different intensities in which conflict or disputes over water can occur. Detrimental social-ecological effects on the outcome of a river can occur within a framework set up for cooperation and investigating the role of power imbalances between riparian states in this context is an underappreciated area of study.

According to Warner (2004), power relations are the most important determinant of how much control over water resources a riparian gets, while geographical position is only secondary to this factor. This conceptual paradigm therefore examines the concept of hegemony at the river basin level. Investigation of these concepts allow for an identification of strategies of riparians to be categorized into either hegemonic or counter-hegemonic behaviours depending on their interests. However, before the discussion delves further, it is necessary to define the concepts of hegemony and power pertaining to issues of water.

There have been many considerations in what the term "hegemony" and "hydro-hegemony" entails. The discussion about hegemony in Zeitoun and Warner (2006) presents a few issues regarding the concept. It is defined as hegemony at the level of the river

basin, attained through strategies of water resource control. Hydro-hegemons are almost always considered to be nation-states (although not necessarily as they are broadly defined as 'groups with power'), largely due to their aforementioned reluctance to give up any sovereignty and therefore power to other non-state actors such as transnational organizations. First, there has been some confusion and overlap between the terms 'hegemony' and 'domination'. A clarification is offered, posing that hegemony is leadership under authority, while domination is leadership under coercion. This, however, also presents further factors to consider, as there are a few types of ways outside the threat of force to achieve compliance - utilitarian, normative agreements and ideological hegemony. This paper will focus mainly on the two latter mechanisms; a normative agreement is when there is a belief by the non-hegemon that it is in its best interest to participate in the existing framework, usually resulting in furthering the hegemon's legitimacy, and ideological hegemony - a set of beliefs set up by the hegemon that reinforce the idea in its area of influence that not complying with the status quo would be outrageous. According to this theory the hegemon is therefore not so inclined to use coercive tactics when it can use the existing frameworks for cooperation to get non-hegemons to comply, going against the traditional analyses that suggest the looming threat of "water wars". These theories of hegemony therefore engage to explain how powerful groups engage in strategies to maintain or consolidate control outside of forceful means.

There are, however, criticisms pertaining to the value-charged nature of the analysis using this theory - as those writing about these issues that support hegemonies are bound to take it for granted while those unhappy with the power imbalances can be quick to blame any of its perceived negative expressions within the water sector on hydro-hegemony. It is therefore important to focus on the benefits and detriments for all riparian states in a situation of hydro-hegemony, to get a holistic understanding of the transboundary water disputes in a region, as a hegemon's actions can either be beneficial for most in its sphere of influence or disadvantageous that manifests in continuous increase in inequities between riparians.

This discussion, however, remains incomplete without considering the concept of power. These conceptualizations are based on a refined perspective of the hydro-hegemony framework, as seen in Cascao and Zeitoun (2010). The contention that non-hegemonic basin stakeholders are powerless is heavily challenged, as these entities tend to still have power and use it to engage in counter-hegemonic strategies. These arise from four different types of power:

- *Geographical power*: Riparian position is a type of overt power that holds huge influence in what a state can do with the upstream part of a river, like building a dam or manipulating its flows. These actions hold tremendous consequence for downstream geographies and are therefore powerful.
- *Material power*: This is arguably the most obvious form of power - that is economic, military strength, technological aptitude as well as international political and financial influence. Asymmetries in such power have huge implications for control over water.
- *Bargaining power*: The ability for actors in a basin to set the rules and agendas of the 'game'. Also the ability to influence outcomes in negotiations and agreements

through incentives; legitimacy is key here as the actor with less material power will still be able to hold some influence over other parties, as long as it is perceived as legitimate by the actors involved. It therefore is usually expressed through official institutional channels.

- *Ideational power*: Represents the ability of a riparian state to impose legitimacy over a particular set of narratives and ideas not only domestically but also within the basin. This control of perceptions is done through knowledge structures through both official and unofficial channels resulting in a kind of sanctioned discourse.

This discussion is therefore especially relevant to the context of the Mekong River, as even without taking a closer look, one could assume that power asymmetries between the six riparian nations of different sizes and economic prowess play a significant role in the politics of water resource allocation processes, making it a very relevant and useful area to study further. However, it is useful to employ a study that has employed the theory of hydro-hegemony to this particular context as a point of departure. The analysis by Rein (2016) provides a holistic account of the distribution of power in the Mekong River Basin. It concludes that hydro-hegemony has contributed greatly in the process of water allocation, with China holding by far the most of all four types of power, making it the hydro-hegemon in the basin. The non-hegemonic riparians in the basin, however, hold relatively equal levels of power and participate in collaborative formations such as the Mekong River Commission aimed towards counter-hegemonic goals. The paper, however, deems these collaborative frameworks' counter-hegemonic goals to be significantly hampered by the states own differing self-interests, overlap of responsibility of different collaborative groups, as well as China's varied influence on the basin as the hydro-hegemon. Bilateral relations were also deemed to be of great importance when dealing with the power-asymmetries and resisting hydro-hegemony. This paper will therefore take the findings of Rein (2016) and consider China to be the hydro-hegemon in the Mekong River Basin.

There is also another reflection to be had, this one concerning both hidden and public transcripts and the visibility of power relations. Little (1995) provides a discussion concerning the distinction between 'open interaction' between those who hold power and the existence of a hidden discourse that takes place away from those in power. The existence of these imposes a methodological barrier in how to expose the hidden power politics. Greenhouse (2005) provides an account of James Scott's seminal work on the discourses and visibility of power relations suggesting that the hidden transcripts are not secret but disguised in the discourse of the powerful. SIDA's (2013) guide on power analysis shows the attempt to marry the aforementioned methodological barrier with the three 'faces' of power - visible, hidden and invisible. Visible power includes the observable decision-making processes and how those in positions of power use formal rules and procedures to achieve an outcome. These are the ones studied in this paper, as strategy is the explicit formulations of observable decision making. Hidden power is used through ways such as setting the agenda and deciding what are considered 'problems' that need to be solved and what is left out, oftenly the less powerful groups' interests are not addressed by way of not being on the agenda. Thirdly, invisible power is conceptualized by the shaping of meaning and what is acceptable. Ideological beliefs keep

problems not only from the decision making agendas, but also from the minds of those affected. While this thesis analyzes official formulations of observable decision making discourse it is important to keep both hidden and invisible forms of power in mind during the analysis as well, as ignoring them would lead to a misreading of how power is distributed in the MRC context. This is especially important when considering the close relation of the concepts of invisible power and ideational power, as they both deal with the same notions of legitimizing a particular set of narratives and the power that comes from producing and reinforcing discourse. On top of that, the links between SIDA's conceptions of power and the theories of hydro-hegemony are also closely related when considering the similarities between bargaining power and hidden power as both concepts deal with the ability to set rules and agendas in decision making processes. The takeaway here is that the aforementioned conceptions of hydro-hegemonic power are not always obvious, they are often unseen and deliberately hidden away by the powerful, meaning that it is important to be attentive and diligent when looking to draw out relations of power during the analysis.

While not all of the aforementioned conceptions of power will be able to be tackled equally, it is important not to exclude one in favor of another during the analysis due to the largely interrelated nature of these various dimensions of power.

4. Methodology

To analyze the discursive constructions of power in the geopolitical arena of the Mekong River Commission's framework, a methodological framework has to be set up. As this case is inherently regional and holds specific socio-economic, cultural, political and ecological contexts, the paper will have to take form as an organizational case study, with the intention of generating an intensive and detailed examination of the produced discourses of the organization specifically in the context of the Mekong River Basin (Bryman, 2012). Discourse is defined as language use in writing as a form of 'social practice' - it has social consequences and points to the importance of issues of power, meaning that it can produce and reproduce unequal power relations through particular representations (Wodak and Meyer, 2015). The study will attempt to analyse the discourses of the strategy documents published by the established RBO called the Mekong River Commission (MRC). Due to the legitimacy provided by the governments of the riparian states to these institutional arrangements, as well as the significance of the organization as seen in scholarly literature, the focus will remain on the work done by the MRC. The case study design is particularly relevant when conducting research of organizations in the effort to investigate programs and systems of a particular organization. Yin (2003:13) defines the case study as "*an empirical inquiry investigating a phenomenon within its real-life context*". This particular case is bounded through the use of theory, in this case critical geopolitics and hydro-hegemony while also being embedded in a larger geopolitical arena characterized by both bilateral and multilateral interactions between states and actors in the Mekong River Basin (Ellinger, Watkins and Marsick, 2005). The motivation for this case study is considered to be

instrumental as it is used to gain insight into a particular issue - the power relations in the context of the MRC (ibid.)

This chapter therefore firstly presents the case of the MRC and its operational set up, followed by discussion of the adoption of critical discourse analysis as a method for this study. Issues of sampling and the methodological limitations are subsequently considered.

4.1 The Case: Mekong River Commission (MRC)

Before the discussion delves further into methodological considerations of this paper, it is important to set the context of what the MRC is and what role it plays in the context of transboundary relations in the Mekong River Basin. The MRC is an intergovernmental river basin organization founded in 1995 with the aim of coordinating policy among the member states to produce “*an economically prosperous, socially just and environmentally sound Mekong River Basin.*” (MRC, 2021:6). The four member states include Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos. While historically, platforms for regional cooperation such as the Mekong Committee and the Interim Mekong Committee existed, the more stable conditions in a region previously plagued by conflict and war as well as further promotion of international dialogue and cooperation resulted in the MRC’s inception (Jacobs, 2003). The structure consists of three bodies, the council, the joint committee and the Secretariat. The council includes high ranking government officials making decisions on policy matters as well as approving the strategic plans. The joint committee is responsible for implementation of the strategic plans, while the secretariat holds the technical and administrative functions of the organization (MRC, 2021). The two remaining riparian states, China and Myanmar, are not part of the MRC, they act as non-binding dialogue partners, who tend to cooperate with the MRC only in issues of data sharing. This is especially relevant to explaining the existence of geopolitical tensions as these two upstream riparians do not have to be part of the MRC framework in issues of dam building, providing challenges to the lower Mekong basin riparians and in turn the institutional set up of the MRC in dealing with environmental changes such as the change in natural flow of the river (Hirsch, 2016).

Mekong River Commission Governance Structure

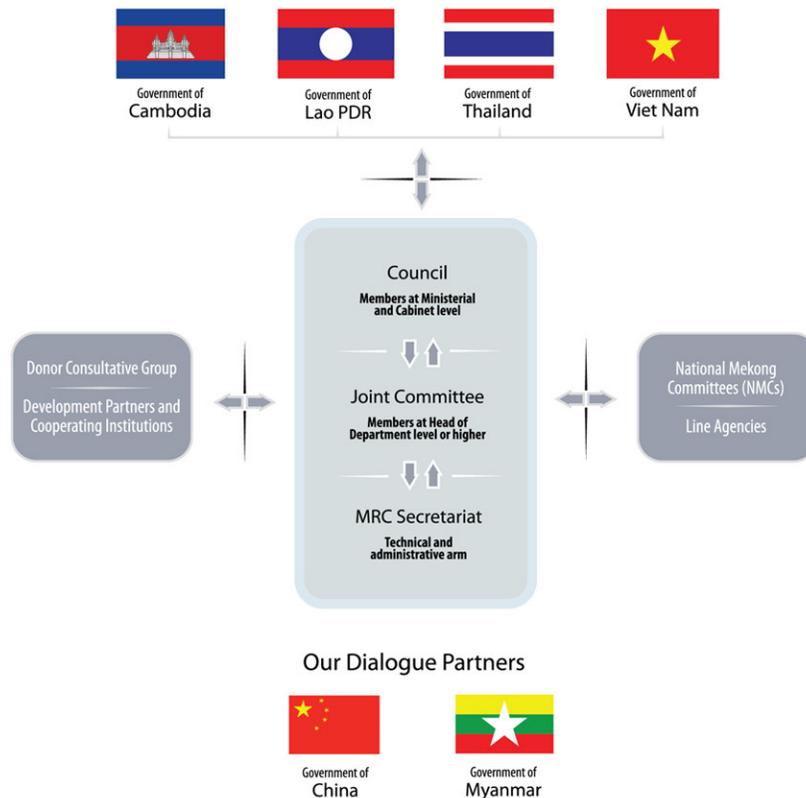


Figure 2. MRC's Governance Structure (MRC, 2021)

4.2 Documentary Critical Discourse Analysis

This study is conducted through a qualitative analysis of documents released by this RBO. These documents include strategy documents over the years, which are useful in helping illustrate the power dynamics within the discursive formulations of MRC's strategy of the aims and approaches to the management of the Mekong River Basin's water resources and relations between riparian state interests. As this is an organizational qualitative case study, one appropriate method to conduct the analysis for this paper would be in the form of a document analysis, as it allows for the synthesis of rich analysis. The framework by Bowen (2009) provides a relevant justification for the use of document analysis, as documents help the researcher to uncover meaning, understanding and insights that concern the research problem. However, because the aim and research question deal with the importance of construction of

discourse and the relations of language to conceptions of power, this paper will therefore employ a Critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach. Bryman (2012:536) has pointed out that CDA seeks to “*uncover the representational properties of discourse as a vehicle for the exercise of power through the construction of disciplinary practices.*” Language and in turn those who use it to construct narratives therefore possess a great amount of power not only by the attempt to represent reality in text but also by playing a part in shaping it through text.

It is also important to remember that during this process, the researcher should be critical when engaging with official documents. They should not be treated as precise and completely open accounts of how things are done (Bowen, 2009). This is especially the case when considering the importance of narrative when presenting an official position on something that is inherently part of a political process. The original purpose and target audience of the document therefore always has to be in the back of the mind of a researcher. The balance of what is included and what is absent in a document is also an aspect of importance, referring back to the discussion of hidden and invisible power. The reasons for why a document gives attention to one aspect but not another have to be explored carefully, does it suggest that certain perspectives are overlooked by an organisation or are those perspectives addressed elsewhere? Further studies on the topic to broaden insights into the field of study can therefore be suggested. The researcher should therefore be ready to engage in an attempt to find additional data that would help fill these gaps (ibid.). This, however, is the basis of CDA and is precisely the point of this research.

Furthermore, it is argued that discourses should be analysed with great concern to the social contexts and structures and the relations of power that have caused them to arise. Due to this self-reinforcing phenomenon of discourse being both a result of as well as a source of social practices, discursive constructions can therefore produce ideological effects by reinforcing and highlighting unequal power relationships between a variety of actors (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997). Another point relevant to the discussion of power is that text, especially in this case of dealing with an organization’s officially published documents, is never the result of a single person’s work. The construction of discourses is negotiated and itself a result of negotiations of power play, making the texts themselves a site of power struggles (Wodak, 2003). These assumptions about the nature of discourse construction are very closely related to the notions that make up the theory of critical geopolitics, as the idea of being embedded and involved and not outside the processes that are examined by both discourse producers as well as discourse analysts, is fundamental to both approaches.

The paper by Muller (2010) “Doing Discourse Analysis in Critical Geopolitics” can therefore provide a much needed framework to choose the most appropriate approach to doing a discourse analysis for this case. The paper suggests an organization of discourse analysis on three main dimensions : context of analysis, analytic form of analysis and the political stance of analysis. While Muller (2010) describes the different methodologies and approaches within these three dimensions, their varieties for this particular study of the MRC are selected by the researcher. In the case of this study, the most appropriate context of analysis is distal context rather than proximate context, as the distal context’s conceptions of geopolitical identities sit

outside the immediate influence of the text being analysed. Practically, this means that doing discourse analysis in a distal context includes the exploration of the influence of a variety of factors not limited to history, institutions, networks of power within a society, collective notions of national identities, whereas proximate context holds aspects more directly relevant to a piece of text.

The analytic form of analysis for this paper will be interpretive-explanatory. This approach considers the actor (in this case the MRC, albeit a complicated one, being composed of four other actors) as the producer of meaning, while acknowledging that discourses are subjective structures. The researcher therefore is interested in interpreting such productions of meaning, as opposed to the structuralist and post-structuralist approach which is more interested in the processes and mechanisms by which meaning is constructed and reinforced. The analysis is presented in narrative form with quotes as evidence for analytical claims.

Finally, there is also a discussion to be had about the political stance of the analysis. A politically detached stance avoids analysis with perspectives on power, hegemony and its political implications, meaning that this paper will be adopting a politically attached stance. The attempt of this type of discourse analysis is therefore to get a critical understanding of hegemony and unequal power relationships and the power elites that sustain and legitimize them (van Dijk, 1993). Any geopolitical or discourse analyst that attempts to say anything about these concepts is therefore by nature an active force in politics.

It is also important to address the more specific method of analysis that was employed in this paper to conduct the critical discourse analysis. The first step involves skimming or a superficial examination of the sample to engage with it at surface level. This helps the researcher evaluate whether the sample is appropriate enough to be able to answer the research question (Bowen, 2009). The second step involves a thorough examination and coding. This involves thorough reading of each document of the sample and organising information that can potentially be relevant to the aims and questions the research aims to answer, while disregarding other irrelevant material such as technical specifics and issues outside of inter-member and basin-wide relevance. Through this coding process, themes begin to emerge under which the researcher can organize material to be presented in the findings. Discursive statements can therefore begin to be connected to the analytical claims of the researcher that arise out of examining the texts. At this stage, a second reading of the sample documents is useful in the hope of improving categorization of themes as well as finding insights the researcher may have missed during the first reading. Once the coding of themes is refined and the researcher cannot find any new claims to make that arise out of the discourse, the findings and analysis are then presented together in a narrative form.

4.3 Sampling method

The sampling method for this thesis is a type of purposive sampling that rests on the assumption that examining the discourse in the strategy documents of the MRC will yield insight

into the power dynamics and geopolitics of the water resources management arena in the Mekong River Basin. The reason why strategic documents were deemed to be appropriate for this research is because it allows for an overview of the MRC's goals, objectives and perceptions of the state of the basin in their own words. Using all strategy documents since the MRC was founded in 1995 provides a broad range of MRC strategic approaches and also gives insight into how the perception of the state of the basin according to the commission has changed over time, perhaps allowing the researcher to attribute some of the evolution to changes in power dynamics.

There are a number of advantages of using documents for the analysis - as documents tend to be in the public domain, they can be easily accessible to anyone. The documents are not affected by the research data collection methods meaning that issues of participant reactivity are not important in this case. Documents also cover a large time span, meaning that an evolution of priorities and the shifts in aims and focus can easily be gauged (Bowen, 2009).

One limitation in using such a sampling technique is that it is very theory driven, decided by previous work and the analytical framework - while this is not necessarily a downside, if another researcher would reject the normative theoretical assumptions that are adopted by this thesis, the sample and in turn the findings would be entirely different. Reflexivity and the awareness of potential biases and assumptions by the researcher is a helpful way in which this limitation can be mitigated. On the other hand, this sampling method is still appropriate as this paper is not meant for purposes of generalizability but rather to investigate a very specific case (Battaglia, 2008), although insights from the findings may open up pertinent issues and questions about the larger context of the Mekong River Basin or water governance in general. The sample was found on the MRC's official website's "Strategy and Work Programmes" section. There is a document relating to MRC's strategy released in 1999, however due to it being inaccessible and the fact that it focused on specific technical projects and was replaced by the 2001 strategy (MRC, 2001), it is not used in this analysis.

The list of the sampled documents is as follows:

| Title | Published by | Year Published | Page Count |
|--|---------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|
| Strategic Plan: 2001 to 2005 | MRC | 2001 | 37 |
| Strategic Plan: 2006-2010 | MRC | 2005 | 88 |
| Strategic Plan: 2011-2015 | MRC | 2011 | 133 |
| Strategic Plan: 2016-2020 | MRC | 2016 | 183 |
| Basin Development Strategy 2021-2030 and MRC Strategic Plan 2021-2025 | MRC | 2021 | 252 |
| Agreement on the Cooperation for the Sustainable Development of the Mekong River Basin | MRC | 1995 | 15 |

The document released in 1995 was added during the course of analysis, as a result of their frequent referencing in the strategy due it being frequently cited in the strategy.

4.4 Limitations

There are also limitations associated with this methodology - documents are not created with the purpose of serving a research agenda, and they may therefore not be enough to provide an answer to a research question. Documents of interest such as the publications by the National Mekong Committees, may also be not available to the public. There is also a language issue for the researcher here, as some documents may only be available in the languages of the riparian states within the Mekong River, providing a further obstacle to the researcher. The language is also part of the reason for selection of MRC documents, as they are available in English. If this happens and certain documents have to be left out of the analysis, the selectivity of documents becomes biased (Yin, 1994:80).

Furthermore, the issue of the researcher's own positionality and potential biases have to be discussed. As the discussions above have already mentioned, the theories of critical geopolitics and CDA both admit the idea that research of discourses, especially when concerning the concepts of power dynamics and ideology are by nature politically attached to the researcher's predispositions. By analysing discourse in geopolitics, the researcher is engaging in a geopolitical act also (Kuus, 2010). It is important to note that the analysis may be tainted by the biases that come with being from a 'Western' background in which China tends to be portrayed as a hegemonic actor in world politics attempting to show its dominance in a variety of ways. On the other hand, positionality may also be useful in the effort to find counter-hegemonic expressions of power in the MRC's discourse. Using self-reflexivity and being aware of the existence of these biased perspectives is an important part of negating some of the potential negative impact on the research, but ultimately no social research can be fully value-free (Gary and Holmes, 2020).

The issue of generalizability also has to be addressed. It is certainly not the goal of this paper to produce a generalizable account of things but merely to illustrate the issues of power and geopolitics relating to the MRC. However, the scope of this study may still be too small to provide holistic insight into the Mekong River Basin as significant data may have been overlooked by not putting emphasis on the processes of domestic water resource management bodies such as the National Mekong Commissions as well as the importance of bilateral agreements in the region. There is also the point to consider made by Cascao and Zeitoun (2017:29) that "*analysts examining a nonviolent international conflict over water issues may similarly wish to look deeper than the statements from officials of all sides as evidence of 'cooperation'*", suggesting that there is a lot of room for further research that examines other planes of decision making outside official documents. On the other hand, insights that pose new questions relevant for the entire basin will still be able to be produced.

5. Findings and Analysis

This section involves analysis split up in sub-sections separated not by the different types of power as posed by the theory of hydro-hegemony, but by three different categories of MRC's aims that hold geopolitical relevance. The reason for this is due to the largely interrelated and interactive nature of the notions of power, although some are more pronounced and visible depending on the sub-section. The analysis therefore examines issues of power the MRC's goals to strengthen itself as an RBO, its discourse regarding its financing and finally its relation with upstream water players.

5.1 MRC's efforts to strengthen itself as an international river basin organization

The first strategy document released by the MRC, acknowledges right at the very beginning and states the fact that the issues it concerns itself with "*are often highly political*" (MRC, 2001:6¹), suggesting the importance and added complexity of politics to the challenges the commission is trying to solve as well as the existence of multiple interest groups competing for desired outcomes in the basin. The key role of both "*quiet and public diplomacy to promote opportunities among senior officials and ensure the wider public are well-informed*" (MRC, 2016: 41) With quiet diplomacy reinforcing the importance that the role of politics and power play away from the public's line of sight in achieving this cooperation in an asymmetric environment. It also speaks to the idea of publicly released documents such as these strategic objectives, as a type of sanctioned discursive tool to increase the MRC's ideational power and legitimacy as an institutional platform in the basin. More evidence of this is seen by the MRC's secretariat's communication team's intention to "*turn technical information into targeted messages for high level policy makers and the public*" (ibid.). The critical geopolitics perspective of the importance of the power of discursive constructions of social reality shaped political agents is evident here, as the MRC is quite straight forward in its use of strategic discourse to 'target' key actors in the basin with carefully crafted messaging.

The MRC also maintains that it should "*avoid competing with others in being a general funding source for development projects.*" (MRC, 2001:8) as promoting its role as facilitator of cooperation and knowledge sharing in the region was deemed more important than competing with other RBOs and institutional arrangements in funding. This is for two explicitly stated reasons: for the MRC to become a more "*respected knowledge center*" so that "*MRC can engage in dialogue, and help strengthen where needed, the many institutions - government and non-government that are involved in implementation.*" (ibid.:8). When looking at these statements through the lens of hydro-hegemony, a few insights can be gained. Firstly, this move towards attaining more legitimacy in the region as a body promoting collaborative efforts increases the MRC's bargaining power as a counter-hegemon to China in the form of more

¹ Due to the differing ways in which the MRC strategy documents number their pages, the page numbers in the citations throughout the analysis refer to the page number of the PDF files downloaded from the MRC's official website.

dialogue engagement at the expense of its already limited material economic power to compete as a general development agency to fund projects. At the same time, this move also shows intent to increase its ideational power, as imposing legitimacy through the construction of the perception of the MRC, as part of a sanctioned discourse as a trustworthy knowledge center will allow it to gain more influence in the region. These strategic objectives therefore can be representative of the MRC's values that favor these two types of power over material power in its efforts to position itself as the main international river basin organization in the region. Also their explicit statement that their strategies "*need to have basin wide significance*" reinforces the points made above (ibid.:8).

When taking a perspective of critical geopolitics, it can be argued that the MRC's goals to strengthen itself as an organization, can be viewed not only to improve transboundary water resources management, but also as a way for the member states to improve their power within the basin to have more of a say in influencing decisions in the wider basin. The institutional capacity of the MRC is therefore directly related to the transboundary geopolitics and its effort to swing the power asymmetries of its member states as opposed to China more in their favor. Evidence for this can be seen in the section concerning the status of the MRC, as the organization states in its 2001-2005 strategy that "*in order to be able to perform its functions effectively, MRC needs to be well known and well respected, in the riparian countries as well as internationally*" (ibid.:16). The same sentiment is shared in the subsequent strategic plan in 2006, as the "*need for the MRC to maintain its independent status as an impartial International River Basin Organisation*" (MRC, 2005:13) is highlighted. This elicits a level of confusion in light of its previous statement to "*reflect the expressed interest of the Member States*" (ibid.:12), as it indicates the necessity for a level of partiality.

Here it can be interpreted that the MRC aims to act as an impartial mediator within the organisation, taking the role to facilitate dispute-resolution among member states, while remaining partial to the combined interests of its member states in the wider context of the entire basin. Such a distinction regarding partiality to clear up this confusion was not made in the strategy, as doing so could affect the readers' perception of the MRC's impartiality and in turn weaken its legitimacy and ideational power. Perception and "*being recognized as an internationally renowned river basin*" (MRC, 2011:93), are therefore highlighted as key factors that the MRC works to influence. To add to this, the MRC has also stated that its role as an RBO is enhanced by the "*strong sense of regional cooperation*" (ibid.:26). These intangible concepts of sense, perception and recognition indicate that they hold a great amount of ideational power in deciding how influential the MRC is allowed to be in the region. This therefore supports the ideas of critical geopolitics and CDA that discursive constructions of reality are shaped by political agents in that these strategy texts were produced and approved by an elite (in this case the MRC's council, composed of high ranking politicians in each of the four member countries) to facilitate a desired outcome in the organization's sphere of influence through discourse. Similarly, the 2006-10 strategy hoped that by the end of its period, the MRC would have made major progress towards "*being acknowledged as a leading International River Basin Organisation*" (MRC, 2005:16). The question here becomes - acknowledged by who? It is possible to deduce a level of acknowledgement by examining the stakeholders within the basin.

The membership of the four member riparians, approved by the highest levels of government, can be considered to be full acknowledgement of MRC's legitimacy. Having donors and development partners such as AusAID, Denmark, Finland, SIDA suggests that these stakeholders outside of the basin also acknowledge the MRC as a legitimate RBO. This then leaves Myanmar and China - perhaps they aim for those riparians to join the commission as a way to position itself as the main RBO in the region. Or is acknowledgement by virtue of being a dialogue partner not enough to be considered a 'leading' organisation? The lack of clarity in terms of who's acknowledgement the MRC is seeking, is evidence of them withholding which stakeholder has the power to acknowledge it.

5.2 Path towards ownership

The issues relating to the financing of MRC and the theme of the goal for member states to have more ownership of the MRC was a consistent thread throughout the strategy documents. The goal towards financial security and more and more of the commission's funding coming from member states has been brought up in every strategy document. This section speaks more to the material power of the organization, as being reliant on other actors outside the member states for funding and having to answer to the interests of donors can be interpreted as a weakness in the MRC's structure. Furthermore, the idea that these strategy texts have been created as a powerful tool to facilitate outcomes on the basin can be reinforced by interpreting the release of these documents as a method to instill confidence in donors to inform how their funds are being used to implement the MRC's vision. The desired effect of this can be stability and financial security, something that is important for the long term goal of being a respected and recognized international RBO. Evidence for this is explicitly stated in the 2001-2005 strategy stating that implementation of strategy is "*the catalyst for renewed donor confidence*" (MRC, 2001:23). The 2006-2010 strategy also maintained that the change from a project based approach to a programme based to focus on its development as an international RBO was welcomed by donors (MRC, 2005). This therefore suggests that the donors hold their own interests in the region, suggesting that MRC having more geopolitical influence over the basin better aligns with their interests. A large part of the funding comes from Nordic democracies including Denmark, Finland and Sweden and also other Western Democracies (MRC,2021:2), suggesting that it is likely in their geopolitical interest to use some of their economic power to influence outcomes on the basin to perhaps counter some of China's powerful presence in the region. It is useful to refer back to the discussion concerning acknowledgement, as continued acknowledgement by donors seems to play a more important role in giving the MRC economic power and keeping it functioning. This therefore makes the external development donors significant geopolitical actors in the region in the attempt to use funding as a way to enact counter-hegemonic outcomes in the Mekong Basin.

Plans for financial independence were extended to 2030, suggesting that the goal of full member state autonomy over MRC activities has not yet been achieved (MRC, 2016:28). It is also interesting to note that there are two different approaches to funding of the MRC. The two types of support orient themselves around support for sustainable development of water

resources managed by the technical cooperation budget and support to strengthen the MRC as an international RBO, managed by the regular budget (MRC, 2005:53). This suggests that there is a split interest in the types of activities MRC should engage with 60% of the funding of the MRC's regular budget in 2004 coming from donors with the goal of the commission to become a stronger actor in the wider Mekong River Basin. This therefore suggests the presence of an asymmetry of power between the interests of external donors and independence of MRC's member states in being able to be fully independent in setting the agenda solely between themselves.

Another potential limitation in the MRC's structure also relates to its investment promotion efforts, maintaining that it "*should be directed towards member governments [...] promotion shall be the responsibility of Council members at the political level*" (MRC, 2005:35). This suggests a lack of strength in the MRC's ability to act as a single body; the interests and politics of individual member state governments take priority in the decision making process before the MRC can act in a coordinated manner, thereby lowering its basin-wide bargaining power.

Additionally, there is also something to be said about the prevalence of Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) promotion from the 2006-2010 strategy and onwards. The MRC strategies after 2006 have relentlessly promoted IWRM and from 2011 onwards, they have described their basin development strategy as being "*IWRM based*" (MRC, 2011:10). Biswas' (2008) criticism of IWRM as a concept is applicable to this situation, as the concept is too broad with few specifically agreed criteria for what it entails. Furthermore it is criticised for having become an attractive concept for water actors, as it allows for a newfound framing of operations while continuing 'business as usual'. In this case, the promotion of IWRM can be seen as another discursive tool to instill confidence in their donors, securing financial security and stability for the MRC.

5.3 Relations with upstream states

This section speaks in part to the importance of geographical power in hydro-hegemonic relations, especially when the hydro-hegemon holds the advantageous upstream position. The strategy documents consistently acknowledge the significance of activity in the upstream parts of the river, especially in the context of both potential and existing detrimental environmental effects. One example of this is in the discussion about land and water resources suggesting "*reduction in flow resulting from upstream activity is likely to affect salinity levels of land and water*" (MRC, 2005: 62). These concerns of 'upstream activity' tend to relate to the expansion of hydropower projects in China that hold downstream consequences for MRC states. The 2016-2020 strategy has a particularly relevant quote: "*Development of hydropower cascade in the Upper Mekong in China has largely completed bringing both benefits and risks to the Lower Mekong*". The use of the word 'cascade' is interesting, as its connotation suggests a kind of unchecked proliferation of dam building. These same concerns are reiterated in the latest strategy although with much more urgent language than those of the earlier strategic

approaches. The “*sense of urgency*” (MRC, 2021:5) is also explicitly stated. The emergence of urgent language can be characterized by the change from earlier discursive formulations of potential or “*likely*” (MRC, 2006:80) risks as demonstrated above to more matter of fact statements regarding environmental changes as a result of hydropower projects in the upstream: “*Construction and uncoordinated operation of hydropower facilities [...] are changing the flow environments in sections of the river with implications for water quality and suitable habitat for aquatic organisms*” (MRC, 2021:18). The language is therefore much more critical of China’s hydro-hegemonic tendencies (although the negative impacts of lower mekong basin hydropower projects are also addressed) suggesting that the MRC does not possess enough bargaining power to limit the negative environmental effects that come with unilateral hydropower projects.

The way the MRC has attempted to address the failures in facilitating desired outcomes is by criticising nationally focused approaches both within and outside the MRC and promoting increased cooperation with China. While goals of cooperation and “*intensified and improved*” (MRC, 2001:20) relations with the upstream dialogue partners has been a consistent thread in strategy documents since the beginning, the two most recent strategies are much more focused on delivering “*basin-wide needs*” (MRC, 2016:48). “*Unlike previous editions, greater emphasis of the Strategy is on the actions needed for the entire Mekong River Basin, since the current water security issues can be addressed effectively only at the basin scale through cooperation between all six basin countries and their cooperative bodies*” (MRC, 2021:37) This approach was based on the notion that “*national plans are sub-optimal as they do not take into account opportunities to enhance benefits beyond national borders and minimise adverse transboundary impacts*” (MRC, 2016:78). This implies the importance of the role of geographical power in the basin as well as the rather limited bargaining power of the MRC as a harmonized unit in acting as a facilitator for transboundary solutions in the region, as ultimately the national decision-making structures tend to play a much bigger role in influencing the hydro-hegemonic outcomes in the Mekong River Basin. The findings of Rein (2016) are therefore reinforced, as ultimately the framework in which to upset China’s hydro-hegemony and make the balance of power less asymmetrical has been shown to be limited due to the MRC’s members’ failure among themselves to produce a more unified policy.

Proactive planning was therefore proposed as a solution to issues of “*reactive regional planning that assesses the impact of existing national plans and recommends not implementing certain projects, rather than proactively offering a broader range of possible tributary and mainstream projects, [that] is unlikely to be accepted by national governments.*” (MRC, 2021:45). This statement illuminates the limit of the power and mandate the MRC really has in successfully mitigating the negatively assessed impacts of nationally proposed plans of its member states let alone its upstream dialogue partners. The issue of less power awarded to the transboundary framework is further emphasized in the risk assessment section deemed that one critical risk is “*Differences of view between some or all Member Countries are always likely to exist. In some cases, these differences can be deeply held. Resolving differences by mutually satisfactory solutions remains an ongoing challenge for MRC. Failure to manage this risk will jeopardize Member Country commitment to the MRC.*” (ibid.:230). This therefore suggests that

the MRC's geopolitical role as a counter-hegemon to China is limited as a result of the failure to harmonize water management policy and in turn even out the power asymmetries among member states, further supporting Rein (2016). The geographical power that comes with being in control of the upstream position of the river is therefore reflected in MRC's frustrations in having to be a reactive rather than a proactive platform, which contributes to its rather limited mandate.

The proposed solution to the limitations of national plans is to promote cooperation with China. This has been a goal that has intensified as time went on, with the MRC's plans to focus on *"projects and programmes, initially including the four riparian states of the LMB, later, hopefully, also the two upper riparian countries China and Myanmar."* (MRC,2005:11). The word 'hopefully' is worthy of note here, as it implies the rather powerless position of MRC to bring the two upper riparians into its own framework, leaving the choice of the level of participation with the MRC entirely up to China and Myanmar, making the MRC merely hopeful of such an outcome. More evidence of this can be seen from MRC's reflections on the first MRC summit in 2010: *"The Heads of MRC Governments reiterated the long-held view that China and Myanmar become Members of the MRC"* (MRC, 2011:5). These statements of intent from government officials at the highest level suggest that these decisions are a result of convoluted and hidden geopolitical processes. This is further highlighted when considering the emergence of the China-led platform known as the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) (Xie and Daojiong, 2021). The MRC acknowledges that *"[t]here are new regional actors, including the Mekong-Lancang Cooperation [...] with a mandate for water resources development and management"* (MRC, 2021:39) and therefore *"deeper institutionalisation or evolution of the relationship between MRC and MLC water should be explored"* (ibid.:63). A particularly interesting discursive formulation is highlighted by the referral of the officially named Lancang-Mekong Cooperation abbreviated as LMC as the 'Mekong-Lancang Cooperation' or 'MLC water' in MRC's strategy. It illustrates the use of a discursive tactic to prioritize and put first the Mekong river and the Lancang after. Such a framing of the LMC as 'MLC water' has not been evident in any of the reviewed scholarly literature. While it is not possible to decipher the real intention of framing the LMC in this way, it could be argued that it is a discursive tactic to slightly delegitimize the LMC or at least make sure that the readers of MRC's strategy are aware that the 'Mekong' comes first.

The perceived risk in the addition of new regional actors is that *"higher level of practical cooperation that is required may not be achieved in the near term because sufficient trust and confidence may yet not materialize among all parties"* (ibid.:95). These statements therefore suggest that there is risk of overlap of roles and therefore pose risk of diluting the responsibilities and influence of the MRC in the basin. Frameworks for cooperation and integrating responsibilities can therefore be interpreted as MRC's attempt to mitigate these risks to retain its position as a leading RBO in the basin. On the other hand, integrating the two platforms according to their own *"comparative advantage"* (ibid.:30) would mean that both of these organisations would have to be willing to give up parts of its mechanisms to the other. The addition of the LMC to this framework of non-hegemon institutional bodies for cooperation like the MRC can in itself be considered as an act of power by China to challenge the legitimacy or perceived effectiveness of the MRC as an international RBO, a possibility mentioned in Xie and

Daojiong (2021). This can be seen as an act of hydro-hegemonic self interest in the geopolitical arena of the Mekong River Basin arising out of a variety of political decisions and regional interests. While the document analysis cannot show evidence further than this claim, it is a fascinating area for further research as looking into the power dynamics and their outcomes in the basin as the situation unfolds with these institutional arrangements maturing can provide further insight into which interest groups and for what reasons desire particular outcomes.

6. Concluding Remarks and Suggestions for Further Research

This thesis uses the theories of Critical Geopolitics and hydro-hegemony to understand power relations and asymmetries in the Mekong River Basin within the context of MRC's strategy discourse. As this paper methodology focuses solely on strategy documents released by the MRC, it is therefore classified as a case study, as the findings are only applicable to the context of this RBO. In order to answer the research question, a documentary critical discourse analysis is used due to its relevance in drawing out issues of power from discourse.

This analysis has therefore led to a number of conclusions concerning the power asymmetries and relations in the Mekong context. Due to the explicit acknowledgement and evidence for the existence of shaping strategic and other discourse to attain a particular outcome on the river, the strategies of the MRC are themselves used as a discursive tool to attain more ideational power in the basin through the legitimizing of MRC's intentions in the region. This is in line with the theory of critical geopolitics as it speaks to the power that is held within the discourses crafted by political agents at the highest level in ability to legitimize their actions. In the same light, the goal towards further ideational and bargaining power can be seen through the MRC's goals of becoming a stronger, more widely respected international river basin organization with their intention of having more basin wide influence as well as harmonize policy so that the member states can have combined power to challenge the asymmetrical nature of Chinese hydro-hegemonic policies. The evidence of the MRC's move towards stronger ideational power in the basin is further presented by its explicit emphasis on advancing concepts such as sense of cooperation, perception and acknowledgement. The MRC's weaknesses in the power it holds can be seen in their discourse concerning its financing, as reliance on donors from outside the Mekong river Basin and being beholden to their interests is seen as a weakness to the institutional framework and an avenue for criticism from Chinese scholars as mentioned in Xie and Daojiong (2021). The idea that the strategy documents themselves serve a role of exerting its influence towards higher ideational power and material power is further supported by the strategy's mention of it serving the goal to renew donor confidence. The widespread adoption of the IWRM approach by the MRC further strengthens these claims as it allows for a new framing of its operations, therefore securing financial stability for the organization's foreseeable future. Further research can be needed to verify whether the MRC's adoption of IWRM has fundamentally changed its approach and outcomes on the basin

.In terms of the MRC's relation with upstream states that hold higher levels of geographic power, the organization's approach has been to increase collaboration. The need for increasingly intensified collaboration has been a result of detrimental ecological effects due to upstream activity, largely the unilateral 'cascade' of dam building. Over time such environmental detriments had become more pronounced, increasing the sense of urgency to be able for the MRC to influence China's approach to the basin and its awareness of downstream impacts. MRC's criticisms of nationally focused projects and their changing approach to being more proactive by offering alternatives to national plans illustrates the weakness of the MRC in terms of mandate and its ability to mitigate the negative environmental effects of national projects even within this framework. These 'in-group' issues therefore present a limit on the MRC's ability and power to achieve its goal of harmonizing policy among its own members, therefore failing to mitigate the power asymmetries in the wider geopolitical context of being able to challenge the hydro-hegemon. The MRC has been hopeful to increase cooperation with China, although the discourse implies that it is largely up to China to decide. Furthermore, the addition of China led LMC has changed the approach of the MRC, acknowledging that there needs to be an adaptation to this new regional actor and a deeper institutionalisation of their relationship. The statements regarding MRC-LMC relations suggest a risk of overlap and dilution of responsibilities, therefore minimizing the MRC's role as an international RBO, providing evidence for Xie and Daojiong's (2021) claim of the possibility for the LMC supplanting the MRC in the future. The addition of LMC in this sense can be interpreted as a geopolitical act by the hydro-hegemonic China. However, the dynamic between MRC and LMC is still very new, meaning that further research on its evolving relationship can be useful to gauge which platform will be considered to be the main transnational paradigm.

Furthermore, there is also literature to suggest that bilateral relations between states in the context of water sharing are more important in gauging the balance of power, meaning that investigating discourse of interaction between states themselves in the Mekong River Basin can provide further insight into how power contributes or opposes hydro-hegemonic power imbalances in the region.

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