



The shifting regional geopolitics of Mekong dams

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ABSTRACT

The Mekong is a region whose geopolitics are shifting in complex ways. They are shifting with the post-Cold War reconfiguration of ideological as well as strategic power deployments. They are also shifting with rapid economic development and associated regional integration. This paper employs these various dimensions of shifting geopolitics to explore and partially explain the (re)emergence of hydropower development in the Mekong. It does so by outlining both the shifting geopolitics of river and region, and showing how the Mekong as metaphor extends to much more than the materiality of the river from which the multiply constructed region derives its name. It suggests that the regional geopolitics produced by these shifts is key to the re-emergence of mainstream hydropower.

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Introduction

The revival and implementation of longstanding plans to dam the Mekong is well underway. This is occurring despite concern from many quarters that the environmental and social impacts of the mainstream dams outweigh their benefits (Barrington, Dobbs, & Loden, 2012; Cronin, 2013; International Rivers, 2013; Kummur & Sarkkula, 2008; Lee & Scurrah, 2009; Middleton, 2014; Vaidyanathan, 2011), and that they also make little economic sense (Costanza et al., 2011). Damming this international waterway also comes at a time when security concerns around water have firmly entered the realm of geopolitics as popularly understood (Hirsch, 2010; Pearse-Smith, 2012; Stone, 2011).

In this paper I seek to situate a transboundary river and its basin within the political geography of constructed regions, as a means to explore and partially explain the logics and path dependencies that shape development outcomes. I do so with reference to the substantial literature on the geopolitics of river basins. Much of the writing on this subject within political geography has tended to focus more on the river and rather less on the multiple constructions of the region in which it is situated. Yet such constructions are associated with, and sometime generated by, specific geopolitical, geo-economic, socio-natural and socio-legal agendas and ideology that all have a bearing on river basin development decisions and eventualities.

Shared rivers have been featured prominently in the study of geopolitics, both within the conventional Cold War geopolitical

framework and within the framework of critical geopolitics. In some cases, Cold War hydrogeopolitics have been studied retro-actively through critical lenses that deconstruct the state-centric analysis that dominated Cold War geopolitics (Akhter, 2015). More often, though, the Cold War geopolitics of river basins has focused on competition between superpowers, even in recent scholarship on the development of international river basins employed as a technical fix in a hegemonic project to win hearts and minds through prosperity and technological prowess (Sneddon & Fox, 2011).

Questions of inter-state conflict and cooperation have been examined extensively in the context of shared waters. The most frequently addressed issue is whether sharing of rivers *per se*, or growing problems of water scarcity in such rivers, exacerbates conflict or enhances cooperation (Beck et al., 2014; Brochmann & Gleditsch, 2012; Gizelis & Wooden, 2010; Uitto & Wolf, 2002; Wolf, 1997, 1998). Meanwhile, the subfield of hydro-hegemony brings geopolitics to the explanation of unequal riparian relations as a basis for relations between nation-states that share a river. These relations are based on combinations of unequal military, political and economic power along with geographical position in shared river basins (Zeitoun & Warner, 2006). Elsewhere, employing examples from Turkey and Israel, state formation has been linked to sovereign claims over the waters of transboundary rivers, and hydrological scale is employed in a performative way both to legitimize national claims over headwaters and as part of nation-building projects that consolidate territory (Harris & Alatout, 2010).

In one respect, the growing attention to hegemonic relations framed in terms of power to control water resources along a shared river course represents a departure from conventional geopolitics of territorial and military relations between nation states. At another level, however, it maintains the inter-state – and hence state-centric – concern with armed conflict as the principal issue of

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concern. There is relatively little interplay between the post-Cold War emergence of critical geopolitics and the place of transboundary river basin issues within geopolitical scholarship.

This brings us to the question of rivers as the geopolitical basis of regions. Saul Cohen's work on the geopolitics of regions provides an initial entry into the oscillation between regional volatility and stabilization, and hence the shift from "shatterbelt" towards convergence in the construction of world regions. His work shows how economic and ideological forces suppressed during the Cold War superpower divide have been unleashed to re-order geopolitical space regionally (Cohen, 2003). Furthermore, he does so in ways that are highly relevant to mainland Southeast Asia as a former front-line zone of Cold War conflict that is now increasingly integrated through overlapping regional projects (Cohen, 2009). Yet despite its post-Cold War provenance, Cohen's work is hardly in the realm of critical geopolitics. The ontology and epistemology of regions remains one defined by power plays independent of the ways in which regions are discursively constructed.

Critical geopolitics turns our attention away from the simplifications and generalizations of superpower relations and an overly state-centric framing of geopolitics towards representation and the ability of such representation to affect actions and outcomes with differential consequences for those with greater or lesser geospatial power. For Dalby (2010, p. 280), the core of critical geopolitics is, "...challenging the geographical reasoning used in the legitimizations of contemporary warfare". In the realm of hydrogeopolitics, this challenge is well articulated in the questioning of the "water wars" rhetoric, but it is also evident in the general consensus that if violence is to break out over water, it is more likely to be at the social than the geopolitical state-versus-state level, expressed in the form of "water riots" rather than water wars (Boesen & Ravnborg, 2003).

The critical geopolitics approach also seeks to "reconceptualise geopolitics as a complex and problematic set of discourses, representations and practices" (Power & Campbell, 2010, p. 243), which in this paper is largely applied to the regional constructions around a river motif. Context-specific analyses by Sneddon and Fox (2006) and Harris and Alatout (2010) demonstrate the "performative" role of scalar representation as the basis for critical hydrogeopolitics. More recently, and particularly in the context of climate change, there has been a recent shift away from territory as two-dimensional space towards "volumetric" issues (Dalby, 2013). Whereas climate questions take this approach to critical geopolitics to a global level, Grundy-Warr, Sithirith, and Li (2015, p. 95) scale the analysis to that of the river basin and to particular locales within it where "(m)nyriad fragile socio-ecological processes criss-cross political space". In many ways, this uses the river system as a means to follow Ó Tuathail's call for "a more geographical geopolitics" (Ó Tuathail, 2010, p. 263) that goes beyond the gross scale generalizations of the Cold War variety.

It is widely recognized that water issues have linkages with other dimensions of development and political relations. The political geography literature includes recognition of the embedding of transboundary interactions over water in wider sets of geopolitical relations, and of the tradeoffs that take negotiation well beyond the hydrological domain (Katz & Fischhendler, 2011). Yet missing in the application of critical geopolitics applied to transboundary rivers is the way in which different representations of regions associated with, but not spatially coterminous or even materially related to water and rivers, affect outcomes. It is to this application that I now turn, specifically in the context of the revival of Mekong mainstream dams.

The geopolitics of Mekong dams

There is a geopolitical narrative of dams on the Mekong that goes something like this. During the 1950s and 1960s, at the height of

the Cold War and at the apogee of the confident modernization era, the United States and its allies sought to contain communism through a grand design of hydropower projects along the Mekong River that would bring prosperity to the region and pre-empt the rural unrest behind the insurgency. The Mekong Committee's plans, however, remained just that – plans on paper. By the time peace came to the region in the early 1990s it was too late. Environmental concerns over large dams now stood in the way of fulfilling the engineers' dreams (Hirsch, 2010; Ojendal, 2000).

This backdrop informs current debates and struggles over the future of the Mekong, its tributaries, the river basin from which they drain, and indeed wider questions over the most appropriate paths towards sustainable development of the wider region associated with the countries through which the river flows. It also shows how specific dimensions of geopolitics become enmeshed in ecopolitics and other regional and global concerns. However, it does not serve to explain the shifting geopolitics of the Mekong a quarter century after the narrative peters out. Most immediately, it certainly does not explain why dams on the lower Mekong mainstream are now very much back on the agenda. More generally, it neglects the multidimensionality of a regional geopolitics that has tended to be enacted, understood and written about in a rather segmented fashion.

Shifting geopolitics of river and region in the Mekong

Geopolitics conventionally refers to the way in which power is exercised in the field of international relations, primarily between nation-states and by dominant global centres of power. During the Cold War era, the global dimension of geopolitics was dominated by spheres of influence of the main superpowers and by the associated ideological allegiances of nation states to those powers. These spheres of influence translated into lines of division within specific world regions, notably Europe and Southeast Asia. A fundamental shift post-1989 has been the breakdown of a mainly bi-polar, but sometimes tri-polar, configuration of global geopolitics into a more complex set of inter-state relations and manifestations of hegemony. The Mekong Region has been at the epicentre of such tensions and shifts.

In the Mekong, a conventional reading of geopolitics periodizes the regional geopolitical history quite neatly. Prior to the defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, the region had been dominated by the divisions of the colonial era, with the interlude of Japanese occupation during the Second World War. From 1954 until 1975, the Cold War and Second Indochina War set the ideological, geographical and military lines of division to mirror the global geopolitical schisms associated with the US, Soviet and Chinese interests and influence. Following the 1975 Communist victories in the former French Indochina protectorates of Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos, the division hardened and remained a "hot" conflict in Cambodia's civil war. From the late 1980s onwards, and coinciding with the coming down of the Berlin Wall, rapprochement and market-oriented regional integration has defined the geopolitical configuration. These eras have been used to understand a range of phenomena, for example the changes and continuities in the ways aid has shaped some countries' paths of development (Phraxayavong, 2009), as well as more specific issues associated with the Mekong River itself (Nguyen Thi Dieu, 1999). Most recently, the rise of China has shaped the ever-shifting regional geopolitics, driven in significant part by China's economic prowess and its "going out" policy (Rutherford, Lazarus, & Kelley, 2008).

Beyond this conventional reading, the post-Cold War geopolitical shift has been accompanied by, and to some extent driven, an expanded notion of the scope of what is subsumed in the study and practice of "geopolitics" (Ó Tuathail, 1997). New dimensions of the geopolitical include the geo-economic drivers of globalization in a neoliberal world of market triumphalism (Peet & Watts, 1993) that

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