

## **INWARD POLITICAL PROCESSES AND FOREIGN POLICY**

DOI: 10.54631/VS.2022.61-105007

### **THE MEKONG ISSUE ON ASEAN'S AGENDA AND VIETNAM'S MIDDLE-POWER DIPLOMACY**

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**Abstract.** Since Vietnam assumed ASEAN Rotational Chairmanship in 2020, for the first time, the Mekong issue has been put on the association's agenda. This can be considered a crucial milestone, not only for the Mekong riparian countries but for ASEAN as a ten-member regional community as well. The necessity of re-positioning the Mekong issue on ASEAN's agenda is not entirely new in both academic and policy-making communities, but perhaps has never been as pressing as it is today due to objective and subjective reasons. Vietnam's rotational chairmanship of ASEAN has increasingly spurred advocates of discussing the Mekong issue in ASEAN and ASEAN-led mechanisms. Espousing to a comprehensive approach rather than adopting a single International Relations (IR) theory, this paper attempts to shed light on ASEAN's strategic motivations to raise the Mekong issue on its agenda and concurrently, disentangle the puzzle "why Vietnam's ASEAN Chairmanship Year is the turning point for the Mekong's fate" from the perspectives that Hanoi is a key driver. Vietnam is particularly vulnerable to negative impacts of natural and artificial activities on the Mekong River, the country's furthest downstream. Both the association and Vietnam have legitimate interests to push for the inclusion of the Mekong issue on ASEAN's agenda. The article implies that Vietnam's middle-power proactivism is one of the most motivational catalysts for ASEAN's choice.

**Keywords:** the Mekong, ASEAN, Vietnam's middle-power diplomacy, IR theory.

**For citation:** Vu Thi Thu Ngan (2022). The Mekong Issue on ASEAN's Agenda and Vietnam's Middle-power Diplomacy. *Russian Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, 6 (1): 17–27.

Received: September 8, 2021

Received in revised form: January 25, 2022

Accepted: February 2, 2022

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## **Introduction**

The longest river in Southeast Asia, the 7th longest in Asia, and the 12th longest in the world, Mekong flows through six countries including China, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. The Mekong basin is one of the richest regions of biodiversity on the globe, sustaining approximately 66 million people, 10% of ASEAN's total population, including 'most of the population of Laos and Cambodia, one-third of Thailand's 65 million, and one-fifth of Vietnam's 90 million people' [Eyler 2019: 1–20]. The last few decades witnessed the sub-region's fast and dynamic economic growth. Currently, due to its strategic interests, the Mekong has been witnessing the intense engagement of middle-to-great powers including the United States, China, Japan, South Korea and India, to name a few, through cooperation mechanisms. The Mekong is now the convergence of more than 15 cooperation mechanisms including those between the countries of the Mekong sub-region and those between Mekong countries and external partners [To Minh Thu & Le Dinh Tinh 2019: 395–411], which are designed and implemented in a way highly dependent on the policies of external parties, especially major powers. Meanwhile, the Mekong issue seems to be 'the forgotten' within ASEAN as this association leaves the sub-region to be heavily controlled by external partners.

In both academia and policy-making, the Mekong issue has not received commensurate attention compared to the South China Sea issue, albeit the Mekong has also been assessed as a hotspot and a potential flashpoint in the region [Busbarat 2018; Pongsudhirak 2020; Kausikan 2020]. Existing research-works on the Mekong issue predominantly revolve around current Mekong cooperative mechanisms, great power rivalries, etc. without bringing ASEAN into the focus. In 2020, when Vietnam assumed ASEAN Chairmanship, this 'forgotten' issue was revitalized. The raising of the Mekong matter to regional forums, particularly ASEAN, has shown controversy in both decision-making and academic communities due to the sensitivity of water diplomacy and complexity in harmonizing all member states' interests. Both the Association and Vietnam have legitimate interests in the Mekong issue being put on ASEAN's agenda. It is noteworthy that recently the Mekong issue has been often addressed in ASEAN studies [Pongsudhirak 2020; Kliem 2020; Kausikan 2020; Marwaan Macan-Markar 2020; Le Hai Binh & To Minh Thu 2020; Phan Xuan Dung 2021]. Those academic efforts demonstrate the increasing attractiveness of the Mekong issue. The current literature facilitates the author's new approach to the Mekong and Vietnam's diplomatic studies.

Espousing to a comprehensive analysis rather than adopting a single International Relations (IR) theory, this paper attempts to clarify the rationales of ASEAN's decision to raise the Mekong issue from a sub-regional level to a regional one being a topic of concern from both structural and agent perspectives. Using middle-power theory to decode Vietnam's foreign policy, the article contends that Vietnam has been pursuing a more proactive and high-profile foreign policy in ASEAN by putting the Mekong issue on ASEAN's agenda.

### **Rationales of ASEAN's Pivot to the Mekong Issue**

In addition to the first-ever launching of ASEAN Forum on Sub-Regional Development: Converging Mekong Sub-Regional Cooperation with ASEAN Goals and the Special Meeting of ASEAN Coordinating Council (ACC) on Sub-Regional Development, joint documents of the meetings on the sidelines of the 37th ASEAN Summit also mentioned the role of sub-regional cooperation [ASEAN 2020a, ASEAN 2020b, ASEAN 2020c]. It was for the first time that the Mekong issue has entered ASEAN's policy documents, evincing its importance, not only to the riparian countries, but also to Southeast Asia.

*Firstly*, from the realist and institutionalist perspectives, putting the Mekong issue on ASEAN's agenda helps the regional grouping both avoid becoming a bystander in solving its own problems and respond to external powers' pressure. The riparian countries need room for manoeuvre with neutral diplomatic, economic and informational tools to keep the region cohesive and interdependent. ASEAN with existing cooperation mechanisms is the most feasible institutional tool to help small and medium-sized countries ensure their interests as well as keep the regional equilibrium and 'say no' to a coercive power of the larger ones.

*Secondly*, ASEAN and its ASEAN-led mechanisms create strategic room for manoeuvre for member countries to cooperate on the Mekong-related issues. Currently, in terms of geo-security, the Mekong River Basin is facing several non-traditional security issues such as water security, environmental pollution, transnational crime, etc. As non-traditional security issues are borderless, there is the potential for unintended negative outcomes for other non-basin ASEAN countries. Therefore, a whole-of-region approach is required for a comprehensive solution. It should be emphasized that non-traditional security is one of the issues of concern in ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC). Therefore, the engagement of all stakeholders in the region to achieve a joint strategy for the sake of comprehensive security and cooperation is essential.

Next, in terms of geo-economics, the common concern of cooperation mechanisms in the sub-region as well as in ASEAN is to find solutions to narrow the development gap between mainland and island Southeast Asian blocs (Table 1). At the same time, it is to promote the integration of CLM countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar) into the development process of the entire region. Strengthening regional connectivity and supporting ASEAN Community building through the implementation of the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC 2025) is a top priority on ASEAN's agenda [Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2016].

*Table 1. Macro-economic indicators of ASEAN countries: compare mailand and maritime blocs (data of 2020)*

<b>Country</b>	<b>GDP (USD bil)</b>	<b>GDP per capita (USD)</b>	<b>GDP, PPP (USD bil)</b>	<b>GDP, PPP per capita (USD)</b>
Indonesia	1,060	3,920	3,300	12,220
<i>Thailand</i>	<i>501.89</i>	<i>7,190</i>	<i>1,270</i>	<i>18,240</i>
Philippines	362.24	3,330	919.37	8,450
<i>Vietnam</i>	<i>340.82</i>	<i>3,500</i>	<i>1,060</i>	<i>10,870</i>
Singapore	339.98	58,900	560.21	97,060
Malaysia	338.28	10,270	902.6	27,400
<i>Myanmar</i>	<i>81.26</i>	<i>1,530</i>	<i>278.85</i>	<i>5,240</i>
<i>Cambodia</i>	<i>25.95</i>	<i>1,660</i>	<i>73.61</i>	<i>4,700</i>
<i>Laos</i>	<i>19.08</i>	<i>2,630</i>	<i>58.94</i>	<i>8,110</i>
Brunei	12.02	26,090	28.73	62,370
Mainland ASEAN average	193.8	3,302	548.28	9,432
Maritime ASEAN average	422.504	20,502	1,142	41,500

*Source:*[World Economic Outlook Database 2021]

Also, from a development perspective, liberals are interested in, solving the Mekong problem within ASEAN's cooperation frameworks is associated with the inclusive and sustainable development goal. The 'inclusiveness' aspect implies that a dynamically developing ASEAN region, currently equivalent in size to the world's fifth economy, cannot let mainland ASEAN countries lag behind. Meanwhile, the aspect of 'sustainability' and more recently 'resilience' has been increasingly emphasized in the context of post-COVID-19 recovery.

*Thirdly*, ASEAN, putting the Mekong issue on the agenda is linked to maintaining its community identity. ASEAN has long been considered to be bifurcated into the maritime and mainland blocs [Hoang Thi Ha & Seth 2021]. Thus, by raising its stake in tackling a sub-regional challenge, ASEAN consolidates its cohesiveness of the community.

### **Hanoi's Motivations to Raise the Mekong Issue from a Sub-Regional Level to a Regional One**

While the discipline of IR leans towards a structure-oriented approach, foreign policy analysis (FPA) chiefly focuses on agent-centered levels, favoring a micro-scopic scale of analysis. This theoretical argument implies that to disentangle the reason for 2020 to be a pivot for the Mekong's destiny, it should be viewed at both systemic and agent levels, of which the latter, under this circumstance, plays a game-changing role. It is evident that before Vietnam's endeavours, ASEAN had only stood on the sidelines of the Mekong story [Ibid.] as it had assumed the role of a convener of various middle-to-great powers' meetings related to the Mekong issue rather than an agenda-setter.

In the regional panorama, recent years have been witnessing the increasing interest of middle-to-great powers in the region. The upgrading of cooperation mechanisms related to the Mekong sub-region that is part of grand strategies such as the Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision (FOIP), Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Act East, New Southern Policy, etc. and other countries' support for ASEAN centrality show that ASEAN needs to take advantage of this so-called megatrend to promote this urgent issue.

For Vietnam, the Mekong region is of geo-strategic importance, directly related to the country's security and development. Jointly with the South China Sea, the Mekong plays the role of Vietnam's survival and development space associated with legitimate national interests in sovereignty protection, economic development, and social and security stability. Traditional and non-traditional security issues in this area are directly and deeply impacting the livelihoods of tens of millions of people in the Mekong Delta in particular and the country in general. Under the impact of unsustainable and uncoordinated water use activities in the upper Mekong, the lower Mekong, especially the Mekong Delta, has witnessed the most severe drought ever. So far, water and alluvial shortages have contributed to increased saltwater intrusion and serious landslides.

Like the South China Sea, the Mekong has been witnessing increasing major powers' engagement. The Mekong has become an area of cooperation and competition between dozens of powerhouses which contribute to the expansion of the countries' influence into Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific. Vietnam, effectively handling the Mekong issue is not only solving the problem among the six countries in the sub-region, but also has harmonious relationships with three crucial neighbors, with broader regional countries and with major powers.

There are several motivations for Vietnam to proactively push the Mekong issue on ASEAN's agenda. It should be explained through the lens of middle-power diplomacy theory. Middle power is a sovereign state falling in the middle of the scale measuring a country's international strength and influence, having a diplomatic conduct which is neither extremely drastic and ambitious nor negatively defensive, and simultaneously representing a certain identity [Le Dinh Tinh 2018: 6]. From a behavior-based approach, middle powers give prominence to multilateralism, international laws and the network of diplomatic relations in foreign policy [Ungerer & Smith 2010; Emmers & Teo 2014].

In terms of capacity, in the group of mainland ASEAN countries, along with Thailand, Vietnam is currently the most powerful economy (see Table 1). Vietnam also has a demand to narrow the development gap between CLMV countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam) and more developed countries in the region. It is this geo-economic feature that enables Vietnam to perform the role of a bridge. Notably, Vietnam has also played this role in efforts to integrate Cambodia and Laos into the regional security and economic architecture [Emmers & Le Thu Huong 2020: 12].

With regard to diplomatic behavior and identity, Vietnam has been emerging as an active middle power regionally and internationally. Vietnam has recently been seen as an increasingly important member bringing strong and positive energy to ASEAN [Le Thu Huong 2016]. Such typical roles of a middle power as an initiator, a bridge, a coalition coordinator and a normative spreader have been also more clearly demonstrated and recognized worldwide [Le Dinh Tinh & Vu Thi Thu Ngan 2020: 127]. Since Vietnam has assumed the Chair of ASEAN, it has been trusted by the regional and international community to revive and refresh the Mekong issue in ASEAN [Pongsudhirak 2020].

*The Pursuit of Multilateralism*

Officially placing the Mekong issue on ASEAN's agenda is the realization of Vietnam's multilateral foreign policy course. The 12th Communist Party Congress marked for the first time that multilateral diplomacy has become a strategic orientation rather than a tool for policy implementation [Communist Party of Vietnam 2016]. Then, Directive 25 of the Secretariat on promoting and enhancing multilateral diplomacy by 2030 continued to emphasize the need to renew multilateral diplomacy [Party Central Committee's Secretariat 2018]. Hence, Vietnam's foreign affairs at regional and international organizations not only aims to act as a passive observer but a proactive participant, 'striving to play a pivotal role, leading or mediating at forums, multilateral organizations of strategic importance to the country that is suitable to the specific capabilities and conditions of the country' [Party Central Committee's Secretariat 2018]. This spirit continues to be reflected in the process of developing the draft document of the 13th Communist Party Congress, especially in the pivotal year 2020 when Vietnam assumed the Chair of ASEAN [Communist Party of Vietnam 2021]. The grand question for policymakers is how to realize this course to make Vietnam lead ASEAN's agenda. Vietnam has been regarded as a rules-based order advocate for its persistent and resolute efforts to promote the South China Sea issue in ASEAN (e.g. putting the South China Sea issue in the Association's declarations and promoting the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea) [Le Hong Hiep 2017]. Continuing to uphold this spirit in the Mekong issue, one of Vietnam's top security and development interests, not only helps protect crucial interests but also expands Vietnam's influence in the region as a rule-maker instead of a rule-taker.

By placing the Mekong issue on the official agenda of ASEAN, Vietnam has partially demonstrated the pivotal, leading and conciliatory role as stated in Directive 25 [Party Central Committee's Secretariat 2018].

*Firstly*, Vietnam's core membership and leadership are evinced by the fact that jointly with Thailand, who revived the Ayeyarwady – Chao Phraya – Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS) in the ASEAN Chairmanship 2019, Vietnam is a country with the highest political determination to make the Mekong a common concern of ASEAN [Pongsudhirak 2020]. Having assumed ASEAN Chairmanship 2020, Vietnam integrated the content of sub-regional cooperation into the general cooperation of the ASEAN region. In addition to the successful organization of the ASEAN Forum on Sub-Regional Development: Converging Mekong Sub-Regional Cooperation with ASEAN Goals and the Special Meeting of the ASEAN Coordinating Council (ACC) on Sub-Regional Development, policy documents of the meetings during the 37th ASEAN Summit week also mentioned the role of sub-regional cooperation [ASEAN 2020a, ASEAN 2020b, ASEAN 2020c].

Raising the Mekong issue on the agenda manifests Hanoi's efforts to maintain ASEAN centrality at the heart of the regional security architecture. Virtually, before the Mekong issue was brought to the fore of ASEAN, there had been a proliferation of cooperation mechanisms. Meanwhile, ASEAN consisting of five mainland countries with direct interests in the Mekong River has given almost no commensurate attention to this region, thereby leaving the sub-region to be heavily controlled by external partners. ASEAN Mekong Basin Development Cooperation (AMBDC), established as early as 1996 with the aim of enhancing economic integration among member countries and building ASEAN



Economic Community by 2015, by comparison, is not as progressive as other dynamic external powers-led mechanisms in the sub-region [Ho & Pitakdumrongkit 2019]. The long apathy toward the Mekong issue, especially on the part of maritime ASEAN countries, betokens “a narrow transactional approach” that fails to perceive “Southeast Asia holistically as one strategic theater”, according to a Singaporean senior diplomat [Kausikan 2020]. The traditional multilateral architecture of the Asia-Pacific consists of ASEAN-led mechanisms. This is the essence of ASEAN centrality, helping it keep the region cohesive despite conflict and tension. Meanwhile, multilateralism in the Mekong sub-region is currently being led by major powers. Existing Mekong governance mechanisms are not multipolar multilateralism, but monopolistic institutional arrangements that will be paving the way for the expansion of US-China rivalry by other means [Kliem 2020: 5]. In the long run this will threaten the strategic autonomy of small and medium-sized countries in the sub-region.

*Secondly*, the conciliatory role here implies an effort to harmonize the interests between the mainland and island ASEAN countries that Vietnam has interests in both groups and act as a bridge to balance ASEAN’s agenda. Elevating the Mekong matter to one of the leading battlegrounds in ASEAN is obviously a progressive process, but this initial step serves to shape ASEAN’s overarching approach to a flashpoint in the region and associate the Mekong’s fate with the Community-building process. Narrowing the development gap between ASEAN countries and regions, linking and harmonizing sub-regional development efforts, such as the Mekong, with the development process of the whole association have been highlighted on ASEAN’s agenda by Vietnamese leaders [Chairman’s Statement 2020].

With high capacity and political will, Vietnam has succeeded in bringing the Mekong into discussion in ASEAN, an important step in raising awareness of the Mekong issue within ASEAN as well as a pivotal stepping stone for this association to strengthen its voice and role in handling issues related to sub-regional cooperation in the forthcoming time.

#### *The Advocate of International Laws and Norms*

With respect to the Mekong issue, Vietnam has anchored its rules-based stance to ensure water security and the implementation of sustainable development goals in conformity with international practices and laws, including the 1995 Agreement on the Cooperation for the Sustainable Development of the Mekong River Basin, and in the spirit of respecting other parties’ legitimate interests [Le Dinh Tinh & Vu Thi Thu Ngan 2021: 10]. From the rule-based perspectives, Vietnam is the only sub-regional signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses (UN Watercourses Convention). Besides, Vietnam is also expected to lead a code of conduct on the utilization and protection of the Mekong River [Phan Xuan Dung 2021] due to its quite comprehensive network diplomacy with neighbors and middle-to-great powers.

### Prospects and Policy Implications

The Mekong sub-region in particular, the Indo-Pacific region and the world in general has been undergoing unprecedented profound movements under the impact of COVID-19. In the Mekong sub-region, security-development challenges are still a hardship for national governance of the riparian countries. Now, with the resonance of the pandemic, new problems have arisen. Unilaterally, countries cannot overcome these challenges. Multilateralism remains an approach more relevant than ever for small and medium-sized countries. But in the face of the overlapping of sub-regional cooperation mechanisms (the “spaghetti” phenomenon), countries need to reshape cooperation in a self-centered structure, rather than being led by external actors. ASEAN and ASEAN-led mechanisms will be an appropriate forum to exchange information, build trust and seek common solutions to solve security-development problems as well as contribute in building a cohesive and responsive Community to adapt to new political megatrends.

Theory and practice show that Vietnam’s promotion of the Mekong issue in ASEAN can help, *firstly*, create a common stance of ASEAN countries to respond to external partners (similar to the AOIP). *Secondly*, it increases institutional power for sub-regional countries. *Thirdly*, it contributes to strengthening the feasibility of building a rules-based order in the sub-region with the promotion of a Code of Conduct (COC) in the Mekong (similar to the COC in the South China Sea). *Fourthly*, it helps narrow the development gap between the groups of ASEAN islands and mainland countries (focusing on intra-regional trade, connectivity, digital economy, etc.). *Last but not least*, from development issues, applying a progressive approach to include water security on the table that can be discussed at ASEAN meetings from working to senior levels, forums such as ADMM+, ARF, EAS, etc. Of course, it is of significance to govern expectations as ASEAN is an intergovernmental organization rather than a super-government in which countries pursue their self-interests and values. Nonetheless, all efforts to raise the Mekong issue to ASEAN’s concern are entirely in line with Vietnam’s interests and the joint interests of other countries. ASEAN Forum on Sub-Regional Cooperation for Sustainable Development and Inclusive Growth organized in November 2021 under the Brunei’s Chairmanship continues this approach. Vietnam collaborates with Brunei placing sub-regional cooperation on the ASEAN’s agenda.

In the upcoming time, Vietnam and ASEAN countries need to, *firstly*, continue to maintain discussion mechanisms on the Mekong in ASEAN, make sub-regional development a regular meeting of the organization, and bring this topic in other relevant meetings. *Secondly*, they should promote the development of a regional legal framework and negotiate to sign a new regional legal document on the governance of the Mekong River. Thorough study of the 1995 Agreement and its accompanying implementing documents to make recommendations to strengthen these legal documents and the construction of arguments proving the existence of principles of international law that are legally binding on countries sharing international water resources is of particular importance to such downstream countries like Vietnam. In the future, it is necessary to develop a Code of Conduct on the Mekong River [To Minh Thu & Vu Thi Thu Ngan 2020: 232]. *Thirdly*, in channel II diplomacy, building a joint research network of ASEAN countries on the Mekong able to take advantage of the network of ASEAN International and Strategic Research Institutes (ASEAN-ISIS) to exchange research and policy



consultation useful for more effective policies and strategies for cooperation. Cambodia, ASEAN's Chairman in 2022 and also a riparian country, is expected to remain the association's pathway to the Mekong issue as it is a stakeholder in the sub-region.

### **Conclusion**

Applying a comprehensive approach to analyze several theoretical perspectives on the importance of the Mekong issue on ASEAN's agenda, the paper argues that elevating the Mekong issue helps ASEAN maintain its centrality in the regional economic-security architecture by tackling non-traditional security issues and promoting equal and sustainable development, as well as building a collective identity, towards a vision of ASEAN Community.

From Hanoi's perspectives, the placing of the Mekong issue onto ASEAN's agenda is linked with its strategic interests. *Firstly*, the Mekong is of geo-political and geo-economic importance that is placed on the national security and development agenda. *Secondly*, raising the stakes over the Mekong, especially in ASEAN's Chairmanship Year, helps the country demonstrate the rising role of a middle power and a sectoral leader in ASEAN. Vietnam's middle-power diplomacy over the Mekong issue is denoted by its concentration on promoting ASEAN-led mechanisms and international laws and norms. As a proactive and responsible member in ASEAN, Vietnam's efforts are expected to be continued in the next years. The first bricks in 2020 will be the basis for Vietnam, sub-regional countries and ASEAN to strive for a more peaceful, stable, prosperous and connected Mekong in the future.

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