

# Minilateralism and Great Power Competition during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Case Study of Mekong Region

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## Abstract

*Minilateral institutions such as Lancang-Mekong Cooperation and Lower Mekong Initiative have an indispensable role in channeling the influence of external powers to the Mekong region. This article analyzes the impact of US-China competition on minilateral institutions in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. By using institutional balancing theory, this article explains the geopolitical and geoeconomic imperative behind the minilateral cooperation in Mekong during the pandemic. As the external powers compete for influence, the range of minilateral cooperation has expanded to solve the issues brought by the pandemic, especially health security and economic recovery. However, notwithstanding the assistance, Mekong countries remain steadfast in maintaining their autonomy. Regional powers such as Vietnam and Thailand did this by harnessing the intra-regional institution and diversifying their partners.*

Institusi minilateral seperti *Lancang-Mekong Cooperation* dan *Lower Mekong Initiative* memiliki peran tak tergantikan dalam memfasilitasi pengaruh kekuatan luar di kawasan Mekong. Artikel ini menganalisis dampak kompetisi antara Amerika Serikat dan Cina terhadap institusi minilateral dalam konteks pandemi COVID-19. Dengan menggunakan *institutional balancing theory*, artikel ini menjelaskan kepentingan geopolitik dan geoekonomi di balik kerja sama minilateral di Mekong selama pandemi. Seiring dengan kompetisi yang berlangsung, lingkup kerja sama minilateral mengalami perluasan pada isu terkait pandemi, seperti kapasitas keamanan kesehatan dan pemulihan ekonomi. Namun, lepas dari bantuan yang ditawarkan oleh pihak eksternal, negara-negara Mekong tetap bersikeras untuk mempertahankan otonomi mereka. Kekuatan regional seperti Vietnam dan Thailand melakukannya dengan memperkuat institusi intrakawasan dan melakukan diversifikasi partner.

**Keywords:** Mekong region; COVID-19; minilateralism; great power competition

## Introduction

Mekong countries refer to five riparian states—Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam—where the Mekong River flows in mainland Southeast Asia. The countries comprise half of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states and has gained higher geostrategic importance during the past few years. Mekong has become a new flashpoint as external power seeks to dominate and counter the rivaling countries that expand their influence in this consequential region. Unlike the maritime Southeast Asia, power politics in Mekong is distinguished by the instrumentalization of multilateral institutions. Mekong region is characterized by the preponderance of cooperation networks initiated and backed by extra-regional powers, such as the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) that was initiated by China in 2016, Mekong-Japan Cooperation (MJC) by Japan in 2007, and Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI) by the United States in 2009. These cooperations serve a unique role as the channel through which external power projects their influences to the region.

Apart from regional connectivity and environmental issues that become the main area of cooperation, these institutions were also utilized as the medium to conduct diplomacy centered around the COVID-19 pandemic. Including, the so-called “vaccine diplomacy” and providing stimulus to kickstart the regional economic growth. The pandemic has driven external power, particularly China and the United States, to further institutionalize their multilateral cooperation in the region. This article attempts to analyze how the US-China rivalry shapes multilateral institutions in the Mekong region during the COVID-19 pandemic. Accordingly, the article also analyzes how Mekong countries respond and navigate such rivalry over their region.

Although the study on great power rivalry in Mekong is not a novel subject, analysis on its institutional aspect was often overlooked in the debate. The existing literatures highlight three features of external power competition in this region: the attempt to secure the geostrategic potential of the Mekong River<sup>1</sup>; deepening the relations between external powers and ASEAN at large<sup>2</sup>; and seizing the potential market in Mekong countries.<sup>3</sup> Without discounting the importance of the mentioned studies, this article contends that previous literatures have not elucidated the institutional aspect that is actually distinctive to the region.

For instance, the article by Po and Primiano on how China utilizes LMI to offset the influence of the US and Japan<sup>4</sup> was among the few studies that analyze the topic related to institutional competition. The study that focused on conceptualizing the strategies utilized by external power and the impact of further institutionalization have not been explored in detail. Even more so, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic that brought unprecedented impact and

dynamics to the region. Against this backdrop, this article provides novelty to the study of Mekong region by highlighting the institutional aspect and how external power shape it during throughout the course of the pandemic.

The argument this article advances is three-fold. *First*, minilateral cooperation in Mekong are getting further institutionalized as the external powers seek to counterbalance their rival during COVID-19 pandemic. Geopolitical and geoeconomics imperatives are evident behind the great power's "goodwill" to assist the pandemic recovery through those institutions in Mekong. *Second*, while the influence of external power increases, Mekong countries actively attempt to maintain their autonomy over the region. Despite varying degree of alignment, Mekong countries do not seek to exclusively side with either great power. *Third*, while maintaining neutrality remains the underlying principles, recovering from COVID-19 pandemic had become the utmost importance. Due to China's geographic proximity, amount of assistance, and earlier pandemic recovery, the country was getting more opening to influence Mekong countries throughout the course of the pandemic.

The article proceeds as following. After the introduction, *second* section discusses institutional balancing as the core concept used to analyze competition through minilateral institution. *Third* section discuss minilateralism and institutional competition in Mekong. Afterward, *fourth* section discusses the escalation of great power competition during COVID-19 pandemic. *Fifth* section discusses how Mekong countries maintain their autonomy and navigate the competition of external powers in their region. The *last* section offers a conclusion and outlook on the future of minilateralism in the Mekong region.

### **Institutional Balancing: A Conceptual Framework**

The geopolitical and geoeconomics landscape in Southeast Asia are characterized with the abundance of multilateral cooperation. While the vast body of literatures have conceptualized multilateralism in the region, only recently there has been an attempt to analyze it as the extension of balancing strategy.<sup>5</sup> Apart from hard balancing strategy—such as pursuing formal alliance and building military capacity—the state also employs a less-confrontational soft balancing policy. One way to employ it is by utilizing the multilateral institution as the balancing instrument. Utilizing multilateral institution is becoming more feasible in the post-Cold War Southeast Asia that is characterized by high economic interdependence, more symmetrical power distribution, and complex network of cooperation initiated by ASEAN states—conceptualized by Evelyn Goh as 'omni-enmeshment'.<sup>6</sup> Against this regional environment, a state carried an institutional balancing strategy.

Kei Koga defines institutional balancing as a “collective actions by members of a security institution that aim to neutralize, or at least minimize the current and expected power differences of a hegemon or rising power that is situated outside the institution.”<sup>7</sup> While Koga’s definition able to conceptualize the balancing strategy utilized by middle and small power states, such a conceptualization has not able to capture a similar strategy used by major powers outside of ASEAN. To capture minilateral institution as the extension of great power politics, this article uses another definition by Kai He. He defines institutional balancing broadly as a strategy to counter “pressures or threats through initiating, utilizing, and dominating multilateral institutions.”<sup>8</sup> Such can conceptualize not only correspond to ASEAN’s strategy, but also the US’s and China’s. Multilateral institutions are used as the instrument through which the two countries counterbalance their rival.

Kai He proposes three types of institutional balancing strategy: inclusive, exclusive, and inter-institutional. This article, however, analyzes institutional competition in Mekong with the first two strategies. Inclusive institutional balancing is a strategy when the target state is included into the institution that certain state aim to utilize; whereas exclusive institutional balancing took place when the state aim to keep the target state out from the institution it seeks to dominate.<sup>9</sup> Inclusive balancing is exemplified in China’s strategy to engage with ASEAN, in which the US become one of its dialogue partners. The example of exclusive balancing strategy is the US’s decision to reactivate the Quad, in which China is excluded, in order to offset its influence. To what extent a state will use institutional balancing depends on degree of economic interdependence and power distribution in the regional system.<sup>10</sup> Considering high degree of interdependence and power distribution in Mekong, pursuing institutional balancing is rational for great power to avoid the high cost from direct confrontation.

In this context, both China and the US carried out *exclusive* balancing strategy against each other. On the other hand, Mekong countries utilize the opposite strategy, namely the inclusive balancing through ‘omni-enmeshment’ strategy. Instead of avoiding external power, Mekong countries attract and enmesh their various partners surrounding the region through a dense network of bilateral and multilateral institution. Although the term “China’s southern backyard” are pervasive in defining Mekong countries’ dependence to China, Mekong countries do not exclusively side with its northern neighbor. Instead, it actively diversifies their linkage with other external partners and harnessing internally-initiated institution, also called “indigenous institution”, as one of their institutional balancing strategies.

## **Minilateralism and Institutional Competition in Mekong**

Regionalism in Mekong is distinguished by the plethora of minilateral institution initiated by both intra-regional and extra-regional partners.<sup>11</sup> As of September 2020, there were at least 13 Mekong-related cooperation framework with many are overlapping in membership and area of cooperation. As illustrated in Table 1, five out of thirteen Mekong institutions were initiated by non-regional countries with all of them excluding each other.<sup>12</sup> This feature is rarely found in its counterpart in maritime Southeast Asia where most of the cooperation frameworks were initiated by intra-regional countries. Earliest engagement by the extra-regional countries was initiated by India through the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) in 2000; proceeded by Japan-initiated Mekong-Japan Cooperation in 2007; LMI by the US in 2009; Mekong-ROK Cooperation by South Korea in 2011; and most recently the LMI by China in 2016. Despite being the last country that initiate the cooperation, China’s LMI is considered as the most prolific minilateral cooperation compared to other frameworks initiated by extra-regional countries.<sup>13</sup>

**Table 1. Sub-Regional Cooperation in the Mekong Region**

Intra-Regional Institution	Extra-Regional Institution
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Cooperation Economic Strategy</li> <li>• Agreement on Commercial Navigation on Lancang-Mekong River</li> <li>• ASEAN-Mekong Basin Development Cooperation</li> <li>• Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam cooperation</li> <li>• Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam cooperation</li> <li>• Greater Mekong Subregion (economic cooperation chaperoned by ADB)</li> <li>• Initiative for ASEAN Integration</li> <li>• Mekong River Commission</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mekong-Japan Cooperation (led by Japan)</li> <li>• Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (led by India)</li> <li>• Mekong-Republic of Korea cooperation (led by South Korea)</li> <li>• Lower Mekong Initiative (led by the US)</li> <li>• Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (led by China)</li> </ul>

Source: *The Asia Foundation* by Benjamin Zawacki<sup>14</sup>

Unlike the maritime Southeast Asia, Mekong countries are considered as the “new-comers” to multilateralism in the region. Decades of wars and decolonization make the mainland countries devoid of experience in leading and governing multilateral institution. Half of ASEAN members are comprised of Mekong countries. Yet, excluding Thailand who became ASEAN’s founding member, countries from Mekong countries was not the part of the organization until the 1990s. Huge gap in development and lack of multilateral experience make Mekong countries in the mainland are more susceptible to external power compared to their counterpart.

Located at the confluence of China and various external power, Mekong multilateralism in consequence has become more susceptible to be shaped by external powers. While multilateralism in Southeast Asian littoral states were initiated by regional powers, nearly half of Mekong multilateral forum is externally-initiated. As illustrated in Table 2, only 8 of 13 Mekong initiatives are “indigenous” i.e. initiated by Mekong countries, whereas 5 were initiated by non-regional countries such as Japan, India, South Korea, China, and the US.<sup>15</sup> The condition not only lead to plurality of autonomous minilateral initiative, but also institutional competition that is pervasive across the region.

In contrast to the strategic equilibrium that is achieved in maritime Southeast Asia, power distribution in Mekong region is rather asymmetrical.<sup>16</sup> External powers often gain an upper-hand to shape the course of the region. Institutional competition is becoming further evident with the proliferation of new initiative such as Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that is closely incorporated with cooperation in the region, including the LMI and China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC).<sup>17</sup> Although the competition in Mekong was traditionally driven more by China-Japan rivalry rather than US-China, the latter is becoming more prevalent in the recent years. Japan demonstrated less confrontational approach against in the region in order to avoid high cost of competition. In contrast, the US is willing to forgo both political and economic cost ensued by the competition, indicated by strong anti-China rhetoric and its assertive stance against many of China projects along the Mekong river.<sup>18</sup> The escalation of the US-China rivalry gradually turned Mekong into a new space of great power concert. The COVID-19 pandemic just added fuels to the existing tension.

Analysis on Mekong minilateralism cannot be separated from the development of sub-regional architecture in ASEAN. Minilateralism can be understood as a “disaggregated” forms of multilateral institution. Compared to ASEAN that covers wide range of issue and involve virtually every country surrounding the region, minilateral cooperation comprised of a smaller-group and deal with more specific issues.<sup>19</sup> Small membership of minilateral institution, be it defined by regional-centered outfit like Mekong initiatives or functional coalition like Indonesia-Malaysia-Singapore’s Malacca Straits Patrol, offers flexibility that ASEAN is lacking of. Moises Naim postulated the logic behind minilateralism as a framework where “the smallest number of countries needed to have the largest possible impact on solving a particular problem.”<sup>20</sup> As the region saw the challenges facing ASEAN’s effectiveness, minilateralism gains a new spotlight as the touted alternative of multilateral cooperation in the region.

However, as Anuar and Hussain observed, minilateralism is a double-edged sword; the new regional grouping could give complementary or detrimental effect to the existing regional architecture.<sup>21</sup> Vannarith dichotomizes minilateralism in two types: the first is multilateral cooperation that is centered

in economic cooperation and the second in centered in political-security area. While the former gives complementary effect, the latter's impact is rather substitutive to the existing institution built by ASEAN.<sup>22</sup> However, this article argues that either type of minilateral cooperation have potentially detrimental effect to the regional autonomy of Mekong countries. In Mekong context, minilateral frameworks that were initiated by external countries can be perceived as the extension of great power politics through which they expand their influence and shape the course of the region. Asymmetrical power distribution resulted in limited agency of Mekong countries in directing the externally-initiated institution, despite their complementary effect for advancing regional development.<sup>23</sup>

### **COVID-19 Pandemic and Great Power Rivalry**

The outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic has stoked the tension of the US-China rivalry in many areas. The pandemic has fueled the preexisting where external powers compete through minilateral institution in the Mekong region. Compared to maritime Southeast Asia, Mekong in the mainland demonstrated a much better and timely response to the pandemic.<sup>24</sup> Apart from a better crisis management, Mekong's early recovery was also attributed to the networks they have carefully maintained with the external powers. Through the existing minilateral institution, both the US and China were able to incorporate their diplomacy in solving COVID-19 pandemic to ratchet their influence in the region. Using the institutional balancing theory, the competitive element is evident in the US and China assistance in Mekong region.

Both the US and China utilize their respective Mekong cooperation to expand their influence during the momentum given by the pandemic. During the third Lancang-Mekong Summit in August 2020, for instance, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang pledged that the country will provide Mekong countries a priority access to COVID-19 vaccine and other assistances.<sup>25</sup> Cambodia, which alongside Laos have been China's top supporter in Mekong, became the first country that received China's assistance. As early as March 2020, Cambodia has received medical team assistance from China and became the first country that took direct assistance during the height of pandemic.<sup>26</sup> However, China's diplomacy elicited ambivalent responses from Mekong's regional powers such as Vietnam and Thailand. Although the latter finally had received its first batch of Sinovac vaccine as early as February 2021, Vietnam preferred to diversify its supply from other sources such as AstraZeneca and Pfizer.<sup>27</sup>

Driven by the existing path of institutional competition, the US counterbalanced China by harnessing its Mekong institution. In September 2020, the US upgraded its LMI to US-Mekong Partnership (USMP) with the ensuing \$153 million of fund for various collaborative projects with Mekong

countries. USMP expanded the existing cooperation that was built upon LMI to cover broader area of cooperation such as economic connectivity, sustainable development and environment, non-traditional security, and human resource development.<sup>28</sup> The US' assistance came as the direct response to China's diplomatic moves, highlighting the "balancing" nature of the regional policies. The utilization of USMP does not only aim to provide tangible assistance to the region, but also clear goal to offset the attempts of other external power in cementing their footprints, as indicated in the various speech and prevalent narrative during the period.

Further institutionalization of minilateral cooperation during the pandemic was not driven by humanitarian assistance alone. By incorporating the Free and Open Indo-Pacific discourse into the USMP, it's evident that the US's expressed its motive to offset China's influence in the region through exclusive institutional balancing. The Indo-Pacific discourse constituted competitive element of the US's initiative. Compared to the conventional "Asia-Pacific" which is widely used by China and the region, the "Indo-Pacific" term is perceived in a rather competitive direction.<sup>29</sup> This adoption of the Indo-Pacific concept parallels other initiatives from the US' that aimed to contain China's influence including the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, informally known as the Quad, and Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy introduced by Trump in 2017.

Furthermore, compared to the other Mekong frameworks, the US's LMI express their critical response to China's presence in the region. During the opening remarks of the 2019 LMI Ministerial Meeting, US-then Secretary of State Mike Pompeo delivered harsh criticism to China's dam construction on the upstream of Mekong River. He claimed that the dam construction is responsible to the drought occurred in Mekong River that lasted from 2019-2021.

The river has been at its lowest levels in a decade – a problem linked to China's decision to shut off water upstream. China also has plans to blast and dredge riverbeds. China operates extra-territorial river patrols. And we see a push to craft new Beijing-directed rules to govern the river, thereby weakening the Mekong River Commission.<sup>30</sup>

Mike Pompeo attributed the drought and decline on river level to eleven China's mega dams erected along the upstream of Mekong River in Yunnan Province. Further, the utilization of LMI as a balancing instrument can be observed back when the US announced the plan to expand the initiative by involving Japan, establishing the US-Japan Mekong Power Partnership during the joint-statement in September 2020. The initiative was then followed by initial US commitment amounted to \$29.5 million. Although the overall US's recommitment in Mekong is still eclipsed by China,<sup>31</sup> the steps can be perceived as the continuous act of exclusive balancing against the country. This move parallels carried out by the same countries to decouple the infrastructure and trade dependency from China, including the US-Japan-Australia Trilateral

Partnership for Indo-Pacific Infrastructure Investment and other supply chain resilience initiatives by the Quad members.

The US attempted to exclude China from the existing Mekong regional cooperation by harnessing the institution in which China is not becoming the involving party. The strategy that the US employed went under the trajectory of institutional competition that has taken even place even before the pandemic swept the region. Similar approach was also taken by the US under Trump administration when the Quad initiated a partnership to create alternative source for vaccine distribution in the region. To maintain its autonomy in the Mekong region, Vietnam alongside South Korea and New Zealand joined the Quad's flagship Vaccine Partnership, labelled the Quad Plus, in April 2021.

Further institutionalization of minilateral cooperation in Mekong was also evident during the first USMP Ministerial Meeting in September 2020. Prompted by the pandemic, Washington expanded its cooperation by establishing the new regional office of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Hanoi.<sup>32</sup> Apart from health-related assistance, USMP also addressed the river issue and transboundary crime. Washington's decision to renew the funding for the region primarily driven by China's steps to build a new river management system. Apart from the US, Japan also stepped up its support during the 12<sup>th</sup> Mekong-Japan Summit in November 2020 by providing medical supply, equipment, as well as technical assistance.

Despite the abrupt stagnation during the initial months of the pandemic, China managed to continue its major projects in Mekong countries. In this context, the pandemic also opened a momentum for the two partners to advance their cooperation. The continuation of the infrastructure projects was often portrayed using the narrative of "boosting development" and "accelerating pandemic recovery" to the region. On the continuation of BRI flagship project between China and Laos, for instance, the Vice President of the Lao National Chamber of Commerce and Industry Valy Vetsaphong,<sup>33</sup> stated that "The [Laos-China] railway will result in the growth of many industries like tourism, trade and investment, especially in the processing industry, and it's going to help a lot for Laos' post-pandemic recovery."

Similar trends also took place in other Mekong countries. In October 2020, China and Thailand resumed the construction agreement of China-Thailand high speed railway, connecting the city's capital Bangkok to Nakhon Ratchasima. China also took similar step to resume the China-Myanmar Railway in Mandalay which become major flagship project under the CMEC. The continuation of Boten-Vientiane railway with Laos also took place during this period. Other major projects including the Kyaukpyu deep-water port in Myanmar and Thailand's Kra Canal are also worth mentioning. Overall trend shows that China manages to proceed its integration and connectivity project despite of the

COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>34</sup> In hindsight, the pandemic also brought the momentum to further incentivize the cooperation between the two partners in recovering economic impact brought by the pandemic.

In contrast, the US's engagement was coming up short in Mekong countries; the US's funding through the LMI (later USMP) was mainly focused in river management and sustainable development—cooperation area which are less prolific compared to LMC. For comparison, the US reserved \$153 million for the newly established USMP in 2020. In stark contrast, China offered a whopping \$1.1 billion for LMI in 2018 as a special fund.<sup>35</sup> Although the US had established its minilateral cooperation earlier than China, its commitment in Mekong is still farfetched compared to the latter. The widespread presence of infrastructure projects, including CMEC, and flow of trade between the countries further widen this gap.

All in all, the institutionalization process of minilateral cooperation on this area has continued with the preexisting trend. China's cooperation mainly focused in "pragmatic" issues such as infrastructure, investment, and trade; whereas the US tends to deal with "ideal" and "value-oriented" issues such as good governance and sustainable development—which gain less traction to the countries in the region, given the existing political systems.<sup>36</sup> Of consequential importance, China's approach through the LMC resulted in closer economic and political ties with Mekong countries that prioritize development as the goal of maintaining their relationship with external country, overlooking the ideological values that the US often touted.

In contrast, the low level of engagement between the US and ASEAN during Trump's administration makes its influence wane in the region. ASEAN-centered multilateralism was traditionally becoming the main characteristic of Mekong. When China was able to incorporate the organization to its broader regional strategy, the US was not paying sufficient attention to the organization.<sup>37</sup> The underwhelming economic statecraft of the US was going in the downward trend since its withdrawal from Trans-Pacific Partnership in which Vietnam became a member.

### **Maintaining Autonomy and Regional Ownership**

The discussion above has demonstrated the institutional balancing strategies used by great power during the pandemic in Mekong region. While externally-initiated cooperation was getting further institutionalized, the agency of indigenous institution also took place. The attempt by external power to engage deeper with regional affairs is perceived as a threat due the long history of intervention and colonization underwent by the Mekong countries and ASEAN.<sup>38</sup> Despite the varying degree of alignment, Mekong as well as ASEAN

countries generally aim to avoid a binary option between the US and China. In order to avoid the disruption caused by great power competition, Mekong countries also seek to counterbalance their influence.

To maintain their autonomy, Mekong's institutional balancing were conducted mainly through three avenues: consolidating indigenous Mekong institution (i.e. minilateral forum that were initiated by the regional countries), addressing the Mekong issue beyond the sub-regional forum in ASEAN, and continuing the existing strategy of omni-enmeshment against foreign powers. In contrast to the US and China, Mekong's overall strategy can be framed as inclusive balancing, although some countries' strategies are more inclined to exclusive balancing in the country level.

Mekong countries have strengthened their own internal minilateral institution, also called "indigenous" institution. For instance, the Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS) in which neither the US nor China participate as the member. ACMECS was initiated by Thailand in 2003 but underwent stagnation due to political turmoil in Thailand since 2014.<sup>39</sup> The institution could be analyzed both as Mekong and Thailand's strategy to secure the ownership of the region. At the 9<sup>th</sup> ACMECS Summit in November 2020, member countries had significantly advanced the institution by establishing a secretariat and new common fund.

Although the institution is comprised exclusively by Mekong countries, throughout its development ACMECS also involved external partners such as the US and Japan, reflecting its 'balancing' nature against external institutions.<sup>40</sup> Thailand's attempt to "revive" the ACMECS also reflects its long ingrained foreign policy strategy to hedge and find space of maneuver in the midst of foreign power influence.

The approach of regional countries in responding to the institutional competition give important implications for their alignment of great power in Mekong. Although the majority of respondents acknowledged China as the top contributor that help the region recover from the pandemic, the region still favor the US' presence. Given a binary choice between the two countries, 61.5% of the respondents still opted for the US, while only 38.5% prefers China.<sup>41</sup> The growing negative perception towards China also consistent with similar survey on the previous year by ISEAS, where 54% opted for the US and 46% opted for China.<sup>42</sup> In short, regardless of China's "vaccine diplomacy" or other assistance to Mekong countries, overall perception of regional countries is still leaning towards the US.

However, it's important to note that their perception might differ, given the different time and issue that occupy the region. For an additional caveat, this survey does not include the option to remain neutral between the two competing powers—which historically has been preferable for Southeast Asian

countries. The survey's finding shows more nuance when it's compared in national level. While Laos views China favorably with 80%, other Mekong countries like Cambodia, Thailand, and Myanmar, overall, remain neutral, indicated by a small margin that define their preference. On the other polar, country like Vietnam expressed a clear support toward the US with 84% of favorability.

**Table 2. ASEAN Preference between China and the US in 2020**

Opted for China	ASEAN Countries	Opted for the United States
69.7%	Brunei	30.3%
34.2%	Singapore	65. *%
47.0%	Malaysia	63.0%
13.4%	Philippines	86.6%
35.7%	Indonesia	64.3%
43.5%	<i>Thailand</i>	56.5%
16.0%	<i>Vietnam</i>	84.0%
51.9%	<i>Myanmar</i>	48.1%
46.2%	<i>Cambodia</i>	53.8%
80.0%	<i>Laos</i>	20.0%
<b>38.5%</b>	<b>Overall Perception</b>	<b>61.5%</b>

\*Note: Mekong countries are italicized

Source: *The State of Southeast Asia Survey 2021* by ISEAS<sup>43</sup>

Aside from minilateral institution, regional countries also bring the issue related to Mekong in ASEAN. Vietnam as the chair of ASEAN (2019-2020) actively addressed the Mekong issues in various ASEAN meetings. The issue of Mekong has traditionally been sidelined by the other regional issues such as the South China Sea dispute. The step taken by Vietnam and other Mekong countries to avoid delineation of Mekong captured the growing trend to response foreign powers influence. Similar Thailand, Vietnam's institutional strategy could be perceived both as Mekong and Vietnam strategy that traditionally did not led multilateralism in the region. The strategy to "enmesh" ASEAN into a more localized Mekong politics reflected the broader trend in the region. During Vietnam's chairmanship, ASEAN favorability to further add the Mekong issues into ASEAN agenda rose to 72.5%.<sup>44</sup> The survey result signifies geostrategic importance of Mekong for the upcoming periods.

Lastly, Mekong uses the omni-enmeshment strategy which can be framed as an inclusive institutional balancing towards the surrounding countries. Omni-enmeshment strategy, as coined by Evelyn Goh,<sup>45</sup> is the strategy to involve all major power in the region as such the security environment bounded into stability created by dense linkages with every actor.

Instead of hedging exclusively against China or the US, Mekong countries have adopted a rather *impartial* approach to foreign assistances.<sup>46</sup> Throughout the pandemic, Mekong countries did not show explicit preference to whose assistance should be accepted or rejected. In this regards, Mekong countries' approach reflected the broader ASEAN's omni-enmeshment strategy. Yet, due to their geographic proximity, the events following the COVID-19 had increased overall Mekong's health security reliance to China. It's only natural; not because Mekong's preference, but rather because of China's commitment to deliver assistance to the country earlier and in a bigger number than its Western counterparts.

### **Conclusion: Outlook on Mekong Minilateralism**

As discussed in the above paragraph, the outbreak of COVID-19 has not ceased the tension between the US and China. Instead, the global pandemic has stoked the tension between two countries and further exacerbate the institutional competition that took place in the Mekong region. To ratchet their influence, the pandemic has accelerated the institutionalization of LMC and LMI, most notably in the area of health and economic security. The strategies employed during the crisis exemplify the exclusive institutional balancing that become the characteristic of minilateral forum initiated by extra-regional countries in Mekong.

Instead of aligning themselves with the competing parties, the tension has become a driving force for regional countries to better maintain their autonomy. This direction was evident in the policies taken by Thailand and Vietnam that seek to maintain their influence and regional ownership in Mekong.<sup>47</sup> The regions took impartial approach in responding to the assistance provided through minilateral cooperation framework by external parties. In many cases, country like Vietnam actively diversify its source of vaccine and economic stimulus to maintain its autonomy, even by participating in external partnership such as the Quad Plus.

As the "indigenous" institutions, strengthening ACMECS and ASEAN have become a natural response to maneuver the tug-of-war between the US and China. Mekong countries have demonstrated their resilience on maintaining regional autonomy and ownership. By showing its impartiality to foreign assistance, Mekong countries harness omni-enmeshment strategy that has long the feature of regionalism in Southeast Asia. Employing institutional balancing becomes more viable due to the overarching nature of great power competition in the region. Although the 2021's State of Southeast Asia survey from ISEAS revealed that Mekong countries still prefer the US compared to China, if given binary option, China's early recovery and practically commitment to Mekong left the region with limited option, especially during the pandemic.

With great power rivalry remains a bipartisan issue between the US and China, institutional competition will likely remain a feature of Mekong region in the near future. The above analysis has demonstrated that an externally-initiated unilateralism could bring detrimental effect to Mekong's regional ownership, in contrast to the early claim that only security-focused unilateralism will harm the existing institution.<sup>48</sup> Both LMC and USMP have proven instrumental to serve as stepping stone for foreign powers to exert their influence. Against this backdrop, future research can analyze how Mekong countries attempt to preserve their autonomy.

## Endnotes

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