

Reimagining the Mekong: Historical Continuities, Hydraulic Power and Geopolitical Reconfigurations

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Abstract

This article reconstructs the historical evolution of the Mekong River as a space of political authority, cultural articulation, and geopolitical reconfiguration from the first century CE to the contemporary Indo-Pacific framework. Rather than treating the Mekong as a passive geographical backdrop or a purely strategic resource, the study conceptualizes the river as a structuring axis through which different models of sovereignty, legitimacy, and connectivity have been historically articulated. The central argument is that the Mekong has functioned across successive historical periods as a relational continuum in which ecological mediation, spatial imagination, and political authority remain inseparable; and that understanding contemporary hydropolitical tensions requires tracing this layered trajectory rather than treating each period in isolation. From the early hydraulic civilizations of Funan, Chenla, and Angkor, where political authority was grounded in ecological mediation and cosmological order, to the epistemological reconfiguration introduced by European expansion, the Mekong has continuously functioned as more than a river. It has been a medium through which power was produced, contested, and symbolically legitimized. French colonial exploration in the nineteenth century institutionalized the river as a cartographic and administrative object, transforming relational spatiality into territorial abstraction. The twentieth century layered militarization and developmental technocracy upon this colonial framework, while the post-Cold War era has witnessed the emergence of hydropolitical asymmetries and infrastructural geopolitics, particularly in relation to Chinese dam construction and regional connectivity corridors. Drawing on a *longue durée* analytical framework and integrating historiographical, political-ecological, and geopolitical literatures, this study offers an original contribution by bridging premodern hydraulic sovereignty and contemporary Indo-Pacific strategic competition within a single interpretive arc: an integration that existing Mekong scholarship, often compartmentalized by period or discipline, has not yet fully achieved. By adopting a *longue durée* perspective, this article argues that connectivity in the Mekong basin is not a modern invention but a historically embedded condition. What distinguishes the contemporary period is not the existence of interdependence itself, but its

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intensification through technological mediation, environmental stress, and geopolitical competition. Reimagining the Mekong as a relational continuum enables a more historically grounded understanding of sovereignty, infrastructure, and ecological fragility in mainland Southeast Asia.

Keywords Mekong River, Hydraulic Civilizations, Colonial Cartography, French Indochina, Indo-Pacific Connectivity

1. Introduction

The Mekong River, which extends from the Tibetan Plateau to the South China Sea, has for centuries structured the political, economic, and cultural landscape of mainland Southeast Asia. Flowing through present-day China, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam, the river predates modern territorial divisions and long functioned as a connective axis rather than a boundary (Di Tommaso, 2006). Its seasonal rhythms shaped agricultural production, its tributaries linked upland and lowland zones, and its delta integrated inland societies into maritime networks. Despite its historical centrality, the Mekong is often analyzed through compartmentalized lenses. Historians have examined the rise and fall of Angkor, colonial scholars have focused on the French Mekong Exploration Commission, political scientists analyze hydropower development and upstream-downstream tensions, while contemporary strategic studies situate the basin within the framework of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (Polese, 2020). These approaches, although valuable, frequently isolate historical phases from one another, presenting the river as a stage upon which different actors operate rather than as an active structuring force. This study is guided by the following research question: how has the Mekong River functioned as a site of political authority and spatial imagination across successive historical regimes, and what structural continuities persist beneath its apparent epistemological ruptures? The central thesis is that the river has operated throughout its history as a relational continuum: a space in which ecological management, political legitimacy, and spatial representation are mutually constitutive rather than analytically separable. Two concepts are central to this analysis. Hydraulic sovereignty (Stark, 2015; Hirsch, 2016) refers to the form of political authority characteristic of premodern Mekong polities, in which legitimacy was derived not from territorial enclosure but from the capacity to mediate water flows, regulate agricultural cycles, and maintain equilibrium between human settlement and ecological rhythms. Relational continuum (Osborne, 2012; Middleton & Dore, 2015) designates the interpretive framework adopted here: the understanding of the Mekong not as a passive geographical object but as an active structuring axis through which successive regimes of power have been articulated, contested, and transformed.

This article proposes a different reading. It approaches the Mekong as a historical continuum in which ecological management, political authority, religious cosmology, colonial abstraction, and infrastructural geopolitics form successive yet interconnected layers. The objective is not to collapse historical difference, but to trace how the meaning and governance of the river have been repeatedly reconfigured while retaining structural continuities. In the premodern period, authority along the Mekong emerged through hydraulic regulation and cosmological mediation. Early polities such as Funan and Chenla consolidated power through the management of water systems and agricultural surplus. Under

the Khmer Empire, this relationship reached its most elaborate expression: sovereignty was inseparable from the capacity to maintain balance between ecological cycles and divine order (Stark, 2015). The river was both sacred and infrastructural.

The arrival of European explorers and missionaries from the sixteenth century onward introduced a gradual epistemological transformation. The Mekong began to be represented through maps, measurements, and navigational speculation. Although early European presence remained limited, the nineteenth-century French Mekong Exploration Commission institutionalized the river as a colonial object (Keay, 2005). Hydraulic sovereignty gave way to cartographic abstraction. The twentieth century further transformed the basin. Japanese occupation, decolonization, and Cold War conflict militarized the river, while development schemes attempted to rationalize it within technocratic frameworks. Yet everyday riverine life persisted, revealing a tension between geopolitical overlays and local continuity. Since the 1990s, hydropower expansion, particularly along the upper Mekong (Lancang) in China, has reconfigured the basin through infrastructural asymmetry (Figiaconi, 2020). At the same time, the Mekong has been incorporated into Indo-Pacific strategic discourse, becoming a site where environmental fragility intersects with great-power competition. Understanding these contemporary dynamics requires historical depth. Connectivity along the Mekong is not a recent geopolitical invention; it is a long-standing structural condition. What has changed is the scale, technological mediation, and political codification of that connectivity.

Methodologically, the study adopts a *longue durée* perspective, drawing on Braudel's concept of deep historical time to trace structural continuities beneath surface-level political change (Braudel, 1958). The analysis integrates primary historical accounts, cartographic records, and secondary scholarship across the fields of historical geography, political ecology, hydropolitics, and Southeast Asian studies. Rather than producing new empirical data, the article operates as a conceptual synthesis: its contribution lies in constructing an integrated interpretive arc that existing disciplinary literatures have addressed only partially and in isolation.

This article therefore proceeds chronologically, reconstructing the transformation of the Mekong from hydraulic civilization to colonial abstraction, from militarized corridor to infrastructural geopolitics. In doing so, it argues that the river remains a living historical process in which water, authority, and spatial imagination remain inseparable. Among these historical layers, the colonial period receives particular analytical attention, as it represents the structural pivot through which relational sovereignty was displaced by territorial modernity, a transformation whose consequences continue to shape contemporary hydropolitical dynamics.

2. Methodological Framework

This article adopts a *longue durée* analytical framework, drawing on Fernand Braudel's concept of deep historical time to examine structural continuities and transformations in the governance of the Mekong River across approximately two millennia. The *longue durée* perspective is operationalized here in a specific sense: rather than treating each historical period as a discrete episode defined by its dominant political actors, the analysis foregrounds the structural conditions, namely ecological rhythms, spatial imaginaries, and modes of sovereignty, that persist across and beneath surface-level political change. This approach enables the identification of what the article terms "layered transformation": the process through which successive regimes of power do not simply replace one another but deposit additional strata of meaning, governance, and abstraction upon pre-existing formations.

The study is interdisciplinary in design, integrating scholarship from historical geography, Southeast Asian history, political ecology, hydropolitics, and geopolitical studies. Rather than producing new empirical data through fieldwork or primary archival research, it operates as a conceptual synthesis: its contribution lies in constructing an integrated interpretive arc across literatures that have developed largely in disciplinary isolation. The analytical procedure involves three steps. First, identifying the dominant mode of sovereignty and spatial imagination operative in each historical period. Second, tracing the mechanisms through which transitions between modes occurred, whether through ecological disruption, epistemological reconfiguration, or geopolitical restructuring. Third, examining the structural continuities that persist across these transitions, particularly the inseparability of water management, political authority, and spatial legitimacy.

Source selection follows a principle of representativeness across temporal and disciplinary domains. Primary historical accounts, including missionary narratives, exploratory reports, and colonial cartographic records, are engaged as epistemological objects as well as empirical sources: they are analyzed not only for the information they contain but for the representational frameworks they impose upon the river. Secondary scholarship is drawn from established works in Mekong historiography (Osborne, 2012; Keay, 2005; Stark, 2014, 2015), political ecology and hydropolitics (Hirsch, 2016; Baird & Shoemaker, 2007; Middleton & Dore 2015; Figiaconi, 2020), and strategic studies (Polese, 2020; Eyler, 2020; Kang & Sridhar, 2024). Where possible, recent scholarship has been prioritized to ensure engagement with current debates. The interpretive framework remains explicitly constructivist: the article treats spatial categories such as "boundary", "corridor", and "continuum" not as natural features but as historically produced representations whose political effects are themselves subjects of analysis.

3. The Mekong as a cradle of hydraulic civilizations (1st–15th Century)

3.1 Funan and early maritime connectivity

In the pre-colonial period, hydraulic politics in the Mekong basin operated through ecological mediation and cosmological legitimacy rather than territorial control. Political authority was grounded in the capacity to regulate water flows, sustain agricultural cycles, and maintain equilibrium between human settlement and riverine rhythms. Sovereignty was relational and ecological: it derived from balance, not boundary.

The earliest political formation documented in the Mekong basin was the Kingdom of Funan (ca. 1st-6th century CE), whose core territory lay in the lower deltaic region corresponding largely to present-day southern Vietnam and Cambodia. Archaeological excavations at Óc Eo and Angkor Borei have revealed a complex urban-commercial network embedded in long-distance exchange circuits linking the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea (Hall, 1985). Roman coins, Indian religious artifacts, and evidence of maritime trade routes indicate that the Mekong delta functioned as an intermediary node in trans-Asian commercial flows. However, Funan's success cannot be explained solely by its participation in maritime exchange. The deltaic morphology of the Mekong provided both opportunity and constraint (Bunthorn, 2022). Seasonal flooding deposited fertile sediments, while distributary channels facilitated internal navigation. Control over river mouths and inland waterways allowed elites to mediate not only maritime trade but also agricultural production and regional redistribution (Osborne, 2012). Political authority during this period was articulated through nodal dominance rather than territorial sovereignty in the modern sense. The ruling elite controlled strategic points of exchange (ports, river junctions, and irrigation sites) without enforcing rigid borders. Sovereignty was exercised through access to flows: flows of goods, flows of water, and flows of ritual legitimacy. The process often described as “Indianization” further shaped Funan's political culture (Vickery, 2003). Rather than constituting a process of passive cultural diffusion, it involved a selective appropriation of Indian cosmology, administrative models, and ritual hierarchy. The concept of divine kingship was adapted to local ecological conditions. Water management and ritual performance became intertwined mechanisms of authority. In this configuration, the Mekong delta functioned as a liminal space, simultaneously maritime and fluvial, local and transregional (Beckwith, 2002). It was not merely a corridor but a zone of articulation between inland agricultural communities and wider Asian trade networks. Connectivity was ecological, commercial, and symbolic at once.

3.2 Chenla and the inland reorganization of power

By the sixth century, the political configuration of the lower Mekong underwent gradual transformation. Funan's prominence diminished as Chenla consolidated authority inland. This shift did not represent a collapse of regional

connectivity but rather its spatial reorientation (Higham, 2001). While Funan's strength had derived from deltaic trade mediation, Chenla anchored its power in the riverine hinterland. Under rulers such as Bhavavarman I and Jayavarman I, Chenla expanded along the Mekong and its tributaries, integrating previously semi-autonomous settlements into a more hierarchically structured polity (Stark, 2014). This consolidation was supported by increased emphasis on agrarian production. Irrigation systems expanded beyond deltaic zones into inland plains, stabilizing rice cultivation and generating surplus necessary for political centralization.

The Mekong's role shifted accordingly. It ceased to be primarily an external-facing commercial interface and became an internal integrative backbone. Tributary networks linked upland forested zones with lowland agricultural fields, facilitating demographic concentration and administrative coordination. Authority radiated along river corridors rather than across linear borders. Hydraulic regulation assumed both material and ideological importance. The capacity to manage water flows (seasonal flooding, irrigation distribution and agricultural cycles) became inseparable from the symbolic construction of kingship. Political authority was not territorial in the modern Westphalian sense; it was relational and ecological. It depended on maintaining equilibrium between human settlement and hydrological rhythms. Chenla thus represents a transitional phase (Beckwith, 2002). Connectivity was preserved, but its orientation shifted from maritime brokerage to inland consolidation. The foundations were laid for a more ambitious hydraulic-political synthesis that would emerge under the Khmer Empire.

3.3 Angkor and the monumentalization of hydraulic sovereignty

The Khmer Empire (802–1431) brought hydraulic governance to an unprecedented scale. Emerging from Chenla's inland consolidation (Stark, 2014), Angkor developed a vast and intricately engineered water management system centered around the Tonle Sap basin and connected indirectly to the broader Mekong system. Large reservoirs (*baray*) such as the East and West Baray, extensive canal networks, embankments, spillways, and feeder channels transformed seasonal variability into managed stability. The hydraulic system regulated monsoon water, stored surplus, and redistributed flows during dry seasons. This capacity enabled intensive rice cultivation capable of sustaining substantial population density and monumental urbanization (Osborne, 2012). Angkor's urban complex, stretching over hundreds of square kilometers, was not merely a political capital but an ecological system engineered to synchronize hydrology and habitation. Agricultural productivity supported temple construction, artisanal specialization, and imperial administration. The material basis of the empire rested on hydraulic coordination.

Yet water control was not solely technical. It was deeply embedded within cosmological narratives. Khmer rulers articulated divine kingship through the concept of *devaraja*, linking sovereignty to sacred order (Stark, 2015).

The Mekong–Tonle Sap hydrological cycle was interpreted as part of a cosmic rhythm. Naga symbolism reinforced the sacred dimension of water, presenting the river as a living entity under spiritual guardianship (Hongsuwan, 2011). Infrastructure and belief were mutually reinforcing. The capacity to regulate water symbolized the ruler's ability to maintain harmony between earthly society and divine forces. Sovereignty was expressed through balance, not boundary. This distinction between balance and boundary is not merely descriptive: it represents a fundamentally different political ontology from the one introduced by European cartography and later institutionalized by colonial administration. The Angkorian model suggests that sovereignty can be conceived as an ecological relationship rather than a territorial claim, a possibility that contemporary hydropolitical frameworks have largely marginalised, though the pressures of climate change and transboundary water stress may yet invite its reconsideration.

However, the scale of hydraulic integration also produced structural fragility. Climatic reconstructions indicate periods of severe drought followed by intense rainfall during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (Buckley et al., 2010). Sedimentation, infrastructural erosion, and hydraulic overload destabilized the system. Political fragmentation and pressure from Ayutthaya compounded ecological stress (Evans et al., 2023). When water management faltered, imperial legitimacy weakened. The Angkorian experience demonstrates that hydraulic sovereignty was powerful precisely because it was relational and therefore vulnerable to ecological disruption.

3.4 Mobility, sacred geography and the fluidity of political space

The Mekong basin during the medieval period cannot be reduced to a landscape defined exclusively by Khmer imperial authority; rather, it functioned as a dynamic arena of mobility, contestation, and layered sovereignty. The Kingdom of Champa, strategically positioned along the central Vietnamese coast, leveraged tributary access and riverine corridors to extend commercial influence inland and contest control over deltaic zones (Hall, 1981). The Cham naval attack on Angkor in 1177 illustrates how mastery of river mobility enabled not only trade but also strategic penetration, revealing the Mekong as both connective artery and military conduit (Chandler, 2000). River systems facilitated circulation, but they also intensified rivalry, as control over waterways translated into political leverage.

Simultaneously, from the sixth century onward, Tai-speaking populations migrating from southern China followed river valleys into mainland Southeast Asia, reshaping the demographic and political configuration of the basin (Evans, 2016). These movements gradually contributed to the formation of polities such as Sukhothai and Lan Xang. Migration did not produce abrupt civilizational replacement; rather, it generated processes of hybridization in which Mon, Khmer, and Tai traditions interacted, overlapped, and reconfigured one another. Political space remained fluid, structured by negotiated tribute, ritual hierarchy, and access

to water resources rather than by rigid territorial demarcation (Montessoro, 2016). Authority radiated through networks of allegiance and ecological coordination, and frontiers were porous in both cultural and political terms.

By the thirteenth century, the Mekong had consolidated its role as one of the most significant arteries of exchange in mainland Southeast Asia, linking inland agrarian centers to maritime trade networks and facilitating the circulation of goods, religious ideas, and political models (Osborne, 2012). Yet beyond its economic and strategic functions, the river also occupied a central position in regional cosmologies. Folkloric traditions across Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand associated the Mekong with naga spirits, fertility, and sacred origin, embedding hydrological rhythms within mythic and ritual frameworks (Hongsuwan, 2011). Seasonal festivals tied agricultural cycles to flood patterns, reinforcing the integration of ecological variability with spiritual meaning. Temples constructed along riverbanks materialized sacred geography within the physical landscape, and pilgrimage routes frequently followed waterways, further consolidating the river's symbolic centrality. Within this cosmological framework, sovereignty was not defined through territorial enclosure but through mediation (Behrendt, 2007). The ruler's legitimacy derived from sustaining equilibrium between human society and riverine forces; political authority, ecological stability, and cosmological harmony formed an indivisible triad. Water was not conceived as a neutral resource to be exploited, but as a moral force requiring balance and ritual stewardship. The Mekong thus functioned simultaneously as corridor of mobility, arena of contestation, and sacred continuum structuring political imagination (Hongsuwan, 2011). This relational conception of space (fluid, layered and ecologically embedded) would eventually confront a radically different epistemological order introduced by European expansion, grounded in measurement, cartography, and strategic abstraction.

4. European encounters and epistemological transformation (16th–17th Century)

4.1 Maritime expansion and the strategic rediscovery of inland Asia

The early modern period marks the first major epistemological rupture in the history of Mekong governance. European expansion did not immediately transform the river's political reality, but it introduced a competing representational logic, one grounded in measurement, cartography, and navigational speculation, that would ultimately displace the relational sovereignty characteristic of premodern polities. This section traces that displacement as a gradual cognitive process preceding material conquest.

The incorporation of the Mekong into European strategic consciousness did not occur through immediate territorial penetration but through a gradual process of maritime expansion and speculative geography. Following the Portuguese conquest of Malacca in 1511, Southeast Asia became integrated into a rapidly expanding

network of oceanic exchange linking the Indian Ocean, the South China Sea, and European imperial circuits (Osborne, 2012). While early Portuguese priorities were coastal (focused on fortified ports, spice trade and naval control) the circulation of information among merchants, missionaries, and Asian intermediaries progressively redirected attention toward inland polities connected by major river systems (Raboni, 2023). Within Iberian geopolitical reasoning, shaped by prior encounters in Africa and the Americas, large rivers were understood as vectors of penetration and commercial projection. They suggested access without total conquest and continuity without immediate occupation. The Mekong entered European imagination through this anticipatory logic. Early cartographic representations, though imprecise and frequently based on second-hand accounts, began to outline the existence of a vast river system descending toward the South China Sea (Nalesini, 2000). These depictions were speculative, yet symbolically powerful: they inscribed the Mekong into European spatial consciousness.

At this stage, European knowledge remained fragmentary. Navigational obstacles, seasonal hydrological variation, and limited inland mobility prevented sustained exploration. However, epistemological change preceded material engagement. In premodern Southeast Asian political formations, the river functioned as a relational axis embedded in ritual practice, agrarian rhythms, and flexible spheres of authority. European observers increasingly framed it instead as a linear corridor whose value lay in its potential navigability. The conceptual shift was subtle but decisive. The Mekong was no longer understood primarily as a sacred and ecological continuum; it became an anticipated infrastructure of commerce and strategy. This transformation did not yet produce domination or systematic mapping. Yet it marked the beginning of a long-term reclassification of river space (Catz, 1991). The Mekong was repositioned within imperial imagination as a river awaiting verification, measurement, and eventual integration into transcontinental trade networks. The abstraction was incomplete, but structurally underway.

4.2 Missionary knowledge and the translation of sacred space

If maritime speculation introduced the Mekong into European strategic imagination, missionary activity played a decisive role in stabilizing and codifying that imagination within textual form. The presence of Catholic missionaries in mainland Southeast Asia during the sixteenth century did not immediately alter political structures, but it profoundly shaped the way the region and the river were represented within European intellectual circuits. Among the earliest accounts, the Dominican friar Gaspar da Cruz offered descriptions of Cambodia in the mid-1550s that would circulate widely in Iberian and later French contexts (Da Cruz, 1569; Loureiro, 2005). His observations documented political hierarchy, riverine commerce, and agrarian cycles structured by hydrological rhythms.

Yet the deeper transformation lay not in commercial reporting, but in epistemic translation. The Mekong basin's sacred geography (its association with naga spirits, fertility symbolism and cosmologically grounded kingship) was rendered legible through Christian interpretive frameworks (Hongsuwan, 2011). Ritual practices linked to water management, monastic authority, and royal ceremonies were described, classified, and compared rather than engaged as coequal ontological systems. Sacred space was not denied, but it was recontextualized. What functioned locally as a structuring cosmology became, within missionary discourse, a cultural attribute subject to evaluation and description. This process did not dismantle indigenous belief systems. Theravada Buddhist institutions remained deeply embedded within political authority, and monastic networks continued to structure education and social organization. However, the act of writing itself generated a shift. Through reports sent to Lisbon, Rome, and later Paris, the Mekong entered an expanding European archive. Riverine practices that had been experienced as lived cosmological order were gradually reclassified as ethnographic material. The significance of missionary knowledge, therefore, lies less in immediate conversion outcomes than in cumulative representation (Nalesini, 2000). The Mekong was progressively detached from exclusive local meaning and inserted into transcontinental discursive networks. It began to exist simultaneously as a sacred continuum within the basin and as a descriptive object within European textual geography. This dual register (ritually embedded yet epistemically externalized) constituted a crucial stage in the river's gradual abstraction. Conquest had not occurred, but cognitive displacement had begun.

4.3 Commercial ambition, hydrological reality and strategic frustration

If missionary writing stabilized the Mekong within European textual geography, commercial exploration tested these geographical assumptions against environmental reality. From the late sixteenth through the seventeenth century, Portuguese and later Dutch actors sought to evaluate whether the river could sustain sustained upstream navigation and thereby function as a viable commercial corridor toward the interior of mainland Southeast Asia and potentially southwestern China (Osborne, 2012). The encounter between expectation and morphology proved decisive. The Mekong's hydrological structure differed fundamentally from the linear river systems that had facilitated imperial penetration elsewhere. Seasonal monsoon variability altered water depth and current intensity; sandbanks shifted

unpredictably; rapids interrupted otherwise navigable stretches; and, most critically, the Khone Falls imposed a structural discontinuity that prevented continuous large-scale navigation (Nalesini, 2000). The river did not offer seamless inland access. Instead, it demanded local expertise, seasonal timing, and negotiated passage through politically layered environments.

European actors remained dependent on indigenous intermediaries and existing Asian commercial networks, which continued to dominate regional exchange circuits (Reid, 2000). Inland trade was not an empty space awaiting European integration; it was already embedded in established transregional systems linking upland forest products, agricultural surplus, and maritime markets. The Mekong facilitated mobility, but it did not yield autonomous control. This confrontation with hydrological limits produced strategic frustration rather than abandonment. The river appeared simultaneously promising and resistant. Its scale suggested opportunity; its fragmentation undermined integration. Importantly, this tension reinforced rather than diminished the drive toward systematic knowledge production. Environmental constraints strengthened the perception that the Mekong required more precise measurement, improved cartography, and technological intervention (Wheeler, 2004).

Thus, the seventeenth century did not transform the Mekong into an imperial artery. Instead, it consolidated its status within European imagination as a deferred possibility, known in outline yet imperfectly accessible. The river occupied an intermediate condition: strategically imagined but materially unmastered. In this gap between anticipation and feasibility, the groundwork was laid for the later nineteenth-century impulse toward institutionalized exploration and scientific survey.

4.4 Epistemic consolidation before colonial rule

By the eighteenth century, European territorial presence along the Mekong remained limited, episodic, and structurally fragile. No sustained inland occupation had materialized, and no durable administrative apparatus had been imposed upon the river basin. Yet despite the absence of formal control, the conceptual transformation initiated in the sixteenth century had consolidated. The Mekong had been progressively repositioned within European intellectual geography. Cartographic representations became increasingly confident, depicting the river as a continuous linear system descending from vaguely defined northern highlands toward the South China Sea. Even where empirical knowledge remained incomplete, visual coherence was imposed upon hydrological complexity. Mapping did not simply record space; it standardized and stabilized it. The river, experienced locally as seasonally variable, ritually embedded, and politically layered, was rendered as a singular measurable entity (Osborne, 2012).

Simultaneously, missionary accounts, commercial correspondence, and exploratory reports accumulated within European archives. The Mekong was no longer a rumor at the margins of speculative geography. It was discussed, debated, and positioned within broader imperial calculations. Crucially, this conceptual consolidation preceded material conquest. The river was conceptually internalized before it was territorially administered. This distinction is

fundamental for understanding the nineteenth-century transition. When French imperial strategy turned decisively toward mainland Southeast Asia, it did not approach an unknown river. It sought to operationalize a space already abstracted within metropolitan expectation. The Mekong Exploration Commission of 1866–1868 would therefore not “discover” the river in any absolute sense; it would verify, measure, and institutionalize a river long imagined as a navigable corridor and strategic artery (Garnier, 1885). The early modern period should thus be understood not as marginal prelude but as epistemological groundwork. The sacred continuum had not disappeared within the basin; ritual and agrarian rhythms remained structurally central to local societies. Yet within European discourse, the Mekong had already undergone cognitive displacement. It existed as territory-to-be-mapped, route-to-be-evaluated, and space-to-be-integrated. The abstraction was complete in principle before it became administrative reality.

5. Colonial cartography and the French Mekong Project (19th Century)

5.1 Imperial rivalry and the French turn toward the Mekong Basin

In the colonial period, hydraulic politics underwent a fundamental epistemological transformation. The relational and cosmologically embedded governance of water was displaced by cartographic abstraction and administrative territorialization. The Mekong ceased to be governed through ecological mediation and became instead a measurable, bounded, and extractable hydrological infrastructure within a modern imperial state.

While the pre-colonial, Cold War, and post-Cold War periods are examined as path dependencies that shaped and were shaped by this pivotal transformation, the colonial period constitutes the analytical core of this study, as it is here that the political vocabulary governing the Mekong basin was definitively recast.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the geopolitical landscape of Asia had been profoundly reshaped by industrialization, naval expansion, and intensified imperial rivalry. The French turn toward the Mekong basin cannot be understood in isolation; it must be situated within the broader competition between European powers (particularly Britain and France) for influence over continental trade routes and access to China. British expansion in India during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries had already established a formidable imperial presence on the subcontinent. By the 1820s and 1830s, British influence extended into Burma, gradually approaching mainland Southeast Asia. Following the First and Second Opium Wars (1839–1842; 1856–1860), Britain secured treaty ports in China, reinforcing its dominance in East Asian trade (Keay, 2005). This expansion created both economic opportunity and strategic anxiety in Paris. French policymakers feared exclusion from continental Asian markets and sought compensatory spaces for influence.

The seizure of Saigon in 1859 and the formal establishment of Cochinchina as a French colony in 1862 marked the beginning of sustained French involvement in the lower Mekong region. Cambodia was placed under French protection in 1863, consolidating Paris's presence along significant stretches of the river's lower basin. Yet these early colonial acquisitions were controversial within France itself. Critics in the National Assembly questioned their economic viability and strategic necessity. The colonies appeared distant, administratively burdensome, and lacking clear commercial return. Within this context of uncertainty emerged the idea that the Mekong could provide a solution. If the river proved navigable to southwestern China, it might serve as a continental trade corridor rivaling British access through the Yangtze basin. Such a route would not only enhance French commercial prospects but also elevate France's prestige as a global power capable of penetrating the Asian interior (Osborne, 2012). This strategic revaluation of the Mekong represented a decisive break from earlier European engagement. Unlike the speculative and episodic explorations of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the French approach was institutional, state-sponsored, and technologically equipped. The river was no longer an object of rumor or missionary description; it was to be systematically surveyed, measured, and integrated into imperial planning.

At the same time, French expansion in mainland Southeast Asia was shaped by ideological currents. The so-called "mission civilisatrice" framed colonial intervention as both economic opportunity and civilizational duty. The rediscovery of Angkor by Henri Mouhot in the 1860s fueled metropolitan fascination with Khmer monumental heritage, reinforcing narratives that presented France as the heir and protector of a "lost civilization." Such rhetoric obscured the continuity of living Khmer society but provided cultural justification for territorial expansion (Burrows, 1986). Thus, by the 1860s, the Mekong stood at the intersection of strategic anxiety, economic speculation, and ideological ambition. It was no longer merely a river within Southeast Asia; it had become a projected solution to French imperial insecurity. The stage was set for systematic exploration.

5.2 The Mekong Exploration Commission and the institutionalization of river knowledge

The Mekong Exploration Commission (1866–1868) represented the decisive moment in which speculative geography was transformed into institutionalized imperial knowledge. Unlike earlier missionary or commercial encounters, the expedition was explicitly state-sponsored and strategically motivated. Its formal objective was to determine whether the Mekong could serve as a navigable artery linking French Cochinchina to southwestern China, thereby counterbalancing British commercial dominance in East Asia (Keay, 2005). Led by Ernest Doudart de Lagrée and Francis Garnier, the mission combined naval officers, engineers, surveyors, and naturalists, reflecting the nineteenth-century fusion of

scientific inquiry and imperial ambition. The expedition departed from Saigon in 1866 and proceeded upstream through Cambodia and Laos, conducting hydrographic measurements, mapping river segments, and documenting topographical features. Rather than merely traversing the river, the commission dissected it into quantifiable data: depth, current velocity, gradient and navigational barriers. The results quickly challenged metropolitan expectations. The structural discontinuity posed by the Khone Falls made uninterrupted navigation toward China unfeasible. Seasonal variability and complex rapids further limited commercial viability. The Mekong did not conform to the linear infrastructural model anticipated in Paris. Its morphology resisted seamless integration into imperial trade networks (Osborne, 2012).

Yet the expedition's strategic disappointment did not equate to failure. On the contrary, its most enduring impact lay in knowledge production. The surveys generated detailed cartographic materials that standardized the river within colonial archives. Published accounts, particularly Garnier's subsequent reports, circulated widely in France and repositioned the Mekong as a mapped and measurable entity rather than a speculative corridor (Garnier, 1885). Crucially, the commission shifted the axis of imperial engagement. When the Mekong proved unsuitable as a direct route to China, French attention turned

toward the Red River in Tonkin. Thus, even in its limitations, the expedition catalyzed territorial expansion elsewhere in Indochina. The Mekong ceased to be imagined primarily as a commercial gateway and became instead a strategic spine within a broader colonial federation. The commission therefore marks a decisive transition: from anticipation to institutional abstraction. The river was not conquered through military force at this stage; it was stabilized through measurement, mapping, and bureaucratic inscription. The Mekong entered colonial modernity not first as a battlefield or plantation zone, but as a surveyed hydrological system embedded within imperial administrative rationality.

5.3 Cartography, knowledge production and the colonial reordering of space

Although the Mekong Exploration Commission failed to demonstrate the river's viability as a continuous commercial artery to China, it succeeded in something arguably more consequential: the systematic transformation of the Mekong into a cartographically stabilized object of imperial knowledge. The reports published after the expedition (particularly Garnier's *Voyage d'exploration en Indo-Chine*, 1885) circulated widely in metropolitan scientific and political circles. They did not merely describe the river; they fixed it within a coherent geographic narrative (Garnier, 1885).

Cartography played a decisive role in this process. The expedition's surveys divided the river into measurable segments, recording depths, gradients, seasonal variations, and obstacles. What had previously been experienced as a fluctuating

hydrological environment (embedded in agrarian cycles and ritual temporality) was rendered as a linear and segmented form. Rapids were converted into technical data; waterfalls into navigational barriers quantified in meters; tributaries into mapped coordinates. This shift from lived river to measured river had profound implications. Maps do not simply reflect space; they reorder it. By imposing visual continuity and standardized scale, colonial cartography abstracted the Mekong from its local relational context. It transformed a river historically embedded in overlapping spheres of authority into a legible entity suitable for administrative planning (Nalesini, 2000).

The production of geographic knowledge was closely tied to metropolitan institutions. French geographical societies, naval academies and colonial ministries treated the expedition's findings as strategic assets. Hydrographic charts circulated among military planners and commercial interests. The Mekong became a subject of debate not in terms of cosmological significance or agrarian stability, but in terms of transport feasibility, customs regulation, and territorial delimitation. This knowledge production also carried a temporal narrative. Colonial discourse often framed the Mekong basin as a space of past grandeur and present stagnation. Angkor's monumental ruins were juxtaposed with contemporary political fragmentation, reinforcing the notion that European intervention represented progress and rationalization (Stark, 2014). The river, once central to hydraulic sovereignty, was reinterpreted as underutilized potential awaiting scientific management.

Cartography thus did more than measure. It created preconditions for governance. By stabilizing the river on paper, the colonial state could imagine it as divisible, taxable, and defensible. The Mekong began to appear not only as a route but as a boundary. Lines drawn across maps preceded lines enforced on the ground. Importantly, this transformation did not immediately erase preexisting practices. Riverine communities continued to fish, cultivate, and navigate according to seasonal rhythms. Local political hierarchies persisted. Yet above these lived continuities emerged a superimposed administrative logic grounded in territorial modernity. The river's meaning was therefore layered. For local populations, it remained an ecological lifeline; for colonial authorities, it became a measurable infrastructure. These two understandings coexisted, but they operated within increasingly asymmetrical power relations. By the late nineteenth century, the Mekong had been integrated into a broader colonial spatial order. It was no longer simply a natural feature traversing loosely bounded polities. It was a mapped axis within an expanding imperial federation.

5.4 Boundary-making, administrative integration and the territorialization of the Mekong Basin

If the Mekong Exploration Commission transformed the river into a cartographic object, the final decades of the nineteenth century converted that

abstraction into territorial reality. The gradual consolidation of French Indochina institutionalized the river within a modern administrative and geopolitical framework that fundamentally altered its historical function. A decisive moment occurred during the Franco-Siamese crisis of 1893. Tensions between France and the Kingdom of Siam (present-day Thailand) escalated over control of territories east of the Mekong. French gunboats advanced toward Bangkok, and diplomatic pressure forced Siam to cede lands on the eastern bank of the river (Malitz, 2021). The Mekong was thus formalized as an international boundary between Siam and French-controlled Laos. This transformation was historically profound. For centuries, the river had functioned as a connective axis linking communities across its banks. Political authority in mainland Southeast Asia had operated through overlapping mandala-like spheres of influence rather than rigid territorial demarcation. By redefining the Mekong as a boundary, colonial diplomacy imposed a linear conception of sovereignty onto a previously fluid spatial order. The river, once a medium of integration, became an instrument of separation.

Boundary-making required more than cartographic inscription. It necessitated administrative infrastructure. French authorities reorganized the Mekong basin into provinces, customs districts, and fiscal jurisdictions. Tax collection, policing, and bureaucratic oversight were extended into riverine regions that had previously been governed through negotiated hierarchies and ritual allegiance. River crossings that had long facilitated trade and kinship networks were subjected to new regulatory regimes. Mobility, once structured by seasonal rhythms and local authority, became contingent upon colonial permission. The Mekong's banks were no longer simply agricultural or ritual landscapes; they became borderlands.

At the same time, the lower Mekong delta underwent intensified economic transformation. Under French administration, rice cultivation expanded dramatically, integrating the region into global export markets (Osborne, 2012). Irrigation and canal construction projects were pursued not to reinforce cosmological legitimacy (as under Angkor) but to maximize extraction and commercial yield. Hydraulic management was reframed within capitalist logic. This economic reconfiguration reinforced territorialization. The delta became an engine of colonial revenue, while upland and inland zones, particularly in Laos, remained comparatively marginal within the federation. Spatial inequality deepened within Indochina, structured in part by the differential integration of river segments into global markets.

The Mekong thus acquired multiple colonial functions: it was a boundary, an administrative spine, and a channel of economic extraction. Yet this territorial modernity coexisted uneasily with enduring riverine practices. Fishing communities, seasonal flood adaptation, and informal cross-border trade persisted beneath the surface of formal governance. Colonial borders were often porous in practice, even when rigid on maps. By the turn of the twentieth century, however,

the epistemological rupture initiated in the sixteenth century had reached institutional consolidation. The Mekong was no longer conceptualized primarily as sacred geography or relational sovereignty. It had been transformed into: a measurable hydrological system, a legally defined international boundary and an infrastructural component of a modern colonial state. This transformation did not erase the river's ecological centrality, but it profoundly altered the political vocabulary through which it was governed. The Mekong had entered the age of territorial modernity.

6. War, decolonization and the militarization of the Mekong (20th Century)

6.1 *Japanese occupation and the fracturing of colonial authority (1940–1945)*

During the Cold War period, hydraulic politics was restructured along two parallel axes: militarization and developmental technocracy. The river became simultaneously a strategic frontier subject to armed control and a programmable hydrological system to be rationalized through engineering and basin-wide planning. Both axes reinforced the territorial logic established by colonial cartography while intensifying the abstraction of the river from its ecological and relational foundations.

By the early twentieth century, the Mekong had been firmly incorporated into the administrative and territorial framework of French Indochina. Yet this apparent stability concealed structural fragilities that would be exposed during the Second World War. The Japanese occupation of Indochina between 1940 and 1945 did not immediately dismantle French administration; instead, it layered military control over a weakened colonial state (Osborne, 2012). This dual authority introduced new forms of strategic instrumentalization of the Mekong basin. Following the fall of France in 1940, the Vichy regime retained nominal administrative authority in Indochina, but Japanese forces exercised effective military dominance. The Mekong corridor, particularly in its lower stretches through Cambodia and Cochinchina, acquired logistical significance. River routes were utilized for troop movement, resource extraction, and the maintenance of supply lines within Japan's broader "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere" (Kiernan, 2017). Unlike earlier colonial rationalization, Japanese occupation intensified militarization without fully replacing administrative structures. The river became a corridor of surveillance and coercion. Control over transport nodes, river crossings, and ports acquired immediate military relevance. Yet the occupation did not fundamentally reconfigure the epistemological status of the Mekong; rather, it accelerated its transformation into strategic infrastructure.

At the same time, riverine life persisted beneath occupation. Agricultural production along the Mekong delta remained essential for regional food supply. Fishing communities continued seasonal patterns, even as requisitions and wartime

shortages increased hardship. The river's ecological rhythms endured despite geopolitical rupture. The Japanese coup against French authority in March 1945 abruptly dismantled the fragile Vichy arrangement (Thi Tham, 2024). When Japan surrendered later that year, a power vacuum emerged across Indochina. The Mekong basin, long subordinated to colonial governance, entered a period of political uncertainty in which sovereignty itself became contested.

6.2 *The first Indochina War and the reconfiguration of sovereignty (1946–1954)*

The collapse of Japanese rule did not restore the prewar colonial order. Instead, anti-colonial movements surged across Indochina. In Vietnam, the Viet Minh declared independence in September 1945. French attempts to reassert authority led to the outbreak of the First Indochina War in 1946. Although major battles unfolded primarily in northern Vietnam, the Mekong basin was not peripheral to the conflict (Kiernan, 2017). The river served as a logistical artery, facilitating troop movement, supply transport, and communication between colonial administrative centers. In the delta, dense networks of canals and distributaries created complex environments that favored irregular warfare. The war revealed a crucial transformation: The Mekong was no longer simply a colonial administrative axis; it had become a contested strategic landscape. Competing forces sought to control river crossings, ports, and supply routes. Mobility along waterways became militarized. The Geneva Accords of 1954 formally ended French rule in Indochina, partitioning Vietnam and recognizing the independence of Laos and Cambodia (Thi Tham, 2024). Yet independence did not restore precolonial relational sovereignty. Instead, it entrenched modern territorial nationalism. The Mekong now traversed internationally recognized states with rigid borders, each asserting exclusive jurisdiction over its segment of the river. This transition marked a further consolidation of territorial modernity. The river remained a connective ecological system, but politically it was fragmented among sovereign states.

6.3 *Cold War geopolitics and the river as militarized frontier*

During the Cold War, the Mekong basin was drawn into a global ideological confrontation that transformed the river into a strategic frontier. In Laos and Vietnam, riverine geography became inseparable from military planning. Control over waterways, crossings, and adjacent urban centers acquired tactical significance, embedding the Mekong within broader containment strategies. In Laos, internal conflict between the Royal Lao Government and the Pathet Lao unfolded within a landscape structured by river valleys and tributary corridors (Fall, 1957). Although the principal combat zones lay east of the Mekong, the basin as a whole was affected by aerial bombardment, displacement, and infrastructural disruption (Office of the Historian, n.d.). Hydrological space became entangled with counterinsurgency logistics and regional instability. In Vietnam, the Mekong Delta

emerged as one of the most complex theaters of the war. Its dense network of distributaries, canals, and floodplains facilitated guerrilla mobility while complicating conventional military control. Riverine patrol operations sought to regulate movement and interdict supply routes, effectively transforming sections of the delta into zones of continuous surveillance and armed engagement. The environmental consequences were significant. Military operations disrupted agrarian rhythms and damaged ecological systems already dependent on seasonal balance (Citino, 2017). Yet even under conditions of militarization, the river remained indispensable to civilian life. Fishing, rice cultivation, and informal exchange persisted within and alongside conflict zones. The Cold War thus introduced a new layer to the Mekong's historical trajectory. The river was no longer solely a colonial boundary or developmental resource; it became a militarized landscape embedded in global geopolitical rivalry. However, this transformation did not erase earlier abstractions. Rather, it reinforced the perception of the river as strategic infrastructure: territory to be secured, monitored, and managed within national security frameworks.

6.4 Developmental technocracy and the Mekong Committee: modernization as river engineering

Parallel to the militarization of the Mekong basin during the Cold War, a second and less overt transformation unfolded: the rise of developmental technocracy. Even before large-scale escalation in Vietnam, the river had become the object of modernization schemes framed within postwar development discourse. In 1957, under the auspices of the United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE), the Mekong Committee was established by Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and South Vietnam. Its mandate focused on basin-wide cooperation in hydropower, irrigation, flood control, and navigation. China and Myanmar were excluded, reflecting Cold War divisions and upstream geopolitical constraints. The creation of the Mekong Committee marked a conceptual shift. Whereas colonial cartography had measured and divided the river, postwar technocracy sought to optimize and engineer it (Figiaconi, 2020). The vocabulary moved from territorial consolidation to modernization, from boundary-making to infrastructure planning. American influence was central: within containment strategy, development was framed as political stabilization. The Tennessee Valley Authority provided a model for basin-wide coordination, and the Mekong was imagined as a system to be rationalized through dams and reservoirs (Polese, 2020). Extensive surveys and master plans were produced, including ambitious proposals such as the Pa Mong dam in Laos (Woodward, 1969).

Yet many projects remained unrealized. Escalating conflict, funding limitations, and political fragmentation stalled implementation. The Mekong Committee functioned more as a planning forum than as an engineering authority.

Nevertheless, its intellectual impact was enduring. The river was redefined as an integrated basin subject to scientific coordination.

Hydrological variability came to be treated as inefficiency to be managed rather than seasonal rhythm to be accommodated. This phase represented a second institutionalization of abstraction. If colonialism had territorialized the Mekong, developmental technocracy systematized it as an infrastructure network. Sovereignty remained fragmented, cooperation conditional, and upstream participation absent. By the late 1970s the Committee entered dormancy, yet the paradigm it established endured. The Mekong was no longer primarily a sacred continuum or colonial boundary; it had become a programmable hydrological system. An understanding that would decisively shape post-Cold War hydropolitics and Indo-Pacific strategic integration (ESCAP, 1978).

7. Post-Cold War hydropolitics and the Indo-Pacific reframing of the Mekong

7.1 The 1995 Mekong Agreement and the reconfiguration of basin governance

In the post-Cold War period, hydraulic politics in the Mekong basin entered a new phase characterized by what this article terms engineered interdependence. Upstream dam construction, particularly along China's Lancang cascade, has introduced structural asymmetry into basin governance, enabling the modulation of ecological rhythms through infrastructural control. Simultaneously, the Indo-Pacific strategic framework has embedded hydraulic politics within great-power competition, transforming water governance into a site of normative contestation and geopolitical rivalry.

The end of the Cold War and the gradual normalization of diplomatic relations in mainland Southeast Asia opened a new chapter in the governance of the Mekong basin. The ideological polarization that had previously constrained regional cooperation gave way to cautious institutional rebuilding. In this context, the signing of the 1995 Agreement on the Cooperation for the Sustainable Development of the Mekong River Basin marked a pivotal moment. The agreement, signed by Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, established the Mekong River Commission (MRC) as the successor to earlier cooperative frameworks. Unlike the Cold War-era Mekong Committee, the new institutional architecture emphasized principles of sustainable development, equitable utilization, and basin-wide consultation (Mekong River Commission, 1995). The language shifted noticeably: where earlier planning documents had focused on modernization and engineering ambition, the 1995 agreement incorporated environmental awareness and transboundary coordination.

Yet this reconfiguration did not resolve fundamental underlying tensions. China and Myanmar (both upstream states) remained outside the formal framework, participating only as dialogue partners. This exclusion was not merely procedural;

it reflected deeper geopolitical realities. The upper Mekong, known in China as the Lancang River, was already entering a phase of accelerated dam construction that would profoundly reshape downstream hydrology. The post-1995 governance model thus emerged within asymmetrical conditions. Downstream states institutionalized cooperative mechanisms precisely as upstream infrastructural transformation intensified. The MRC promoted data sharing, impact assessments, and prior consultation for major projects. However, its authority remained limited by the principle of national sovereignty. Compliance depended on political will rather than binding enforcement (Polese, 2020). This institutional moment illustrates a crucial historical continuity. Just as colonial cartography had produced territorial abstraction and Cold War technocracy had framed the river as programmable infrastructure, the post-Cold War era recorded the Mekong as a transboundary governance challenge. The vocabulary changed, from extraction to sustainability, but the underlying abstraction persisted. The river was treated as a basin to be managed, optimized, and negotiated within state-centric frameworks.

At the same time, regional economic integration accelerated. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) expanded its internal connectivity initiatives, and cross-border trade intensified. The Mekong basin became central to subregional cooperation schemes such as the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) program, launched with support from the Asian Development Bank in 1992 (Stuart-Fox, 2009). Roads, bridges, and special economic zones proliferated along river corridors. The Mekong was once again being reframed, not merely as a water system, but as an infrastructure spine for economic integration. Yet beneath these institutional innovations lay a deeper transformation: the rise of China as the dominant upstream hydrological actor.

7.2 China's Lancang cascade and the structural production of upstream power

If the 1995 Mekong Agreement symbolized institutional optimism in downstream Southeast Asia, the parallel trajectory unfolding in China fundamentally altered the hydrological balance of the basin. Beginning in the 1990s and accelerating in the 2000s, the People's Republic of China initiated large-scale hydropower development along the upper Mekong (Lancang Jiang) transforming the river into a cascade of dams designed to maximize energy production and regulate seasonal flows. The first major installation, the Manwan Dam in 1995, marked the beginning of systematic upstream regulation. It was followed by progressively larger projects such as Dachaoshan in 2003, Xiaowan in 2010, and Nuozhadu in 2014, among others (Eyler, 2020). These structures created vast reservoirs capable of storing billions of cubic meters of water. The scale of hydraulic control represented a qualitative shift in basin governance. For the first time in history, the seasonal rhythm of the Mekong (long defined by monsoon cycles and ecological variability) could be partially modulated through engineered release

schedules. Dry-season flows could be augmented; wet-season peaks could be attenuated. From a Chinese perspective, such regulation enhanced flood control, energy security, and regional development in Yunnan Province (Eyler & Kwam, 2024).

However, the downstream implications were profound. The Mekong's ecological system is tightly calibrated to seasonal fluctuation. Flood pulses replenish sediment in the delta, sustain fisheries, and support floodplain agriculture. Alterations in sediment transport (caused by reservoir retention) affect delta stability, erosion patterns, and agricultural productivity. Fisheries, particularly in Cambodia and Laos, depend on predictable hydrological cycles. Irregular releases or flow suppression can disrupt spawning patterns and migration routes. Sediment trapping behind upstream dams reduces nutrient distribution downstream, weakening ecological resilience. In the Mekong Delta, already vulnerable to sea-level rise and saltwater intrusion, sediment decline compounds environmental stress (Grumbine & Xu, 2011). These hydrological changes generated what may be described as structural upstream asymmetry. Control over water storage may function as a form of strategic leverage, even where this is not explicitly intended. Even without overt politicization, the capacity to modulate flows confers influence. Downstream states, lacking comparable upstream reservoirs, operate within hydrological conditions shaped beyond their jurisdiction. China's position outside the Mekong River Commission reinforces this asymmetry. Although Beijing participates as a dialogue partner and has, in recent years, increased seasonal data sharing, it is not bound by the 1995 consultation procedures. Decision-making over dam construction and release schedules remains under sovereign national control (Ogden, 2023; Soukhaphon, Baird & Hogan, 2021).

The emergence of this asymmetry does not necessarily imply coercive intent. Chinese authorities frame dam construction primarily in developmental and energy-security terms, and some studies suggest that regulated dry-season releases can mitigate extreme drought impacts in certain downstream contexts. However, this framing has itself been contested. Hirsch (2016) and Eyler (2020) have argued that the distinction between developmental and strategic intent is analytically difficult to sustain when infrastructural capacity generates infrastructural leverage regardless of the motivation behind its construction. Baird and Shoemaker (2007) have further demonstrated that the communities most affected by hydrological alteration, namely riparian and fishing populations in Laos and Cambodia, have had minimal voice in either Chinese dam planning or the multilateral governance frameworks nominally designed to protect their interests (Haefner & Po, 2025). Intent may thus be less analytically decisive than structure in accounting for the political effects of upstream infrastructural capacity: the upper basin now possesses infrastructural capacity capable of influencing downstream hydrology at scale, and this capacity operates as a form of power whether or not it is explicitly wielded as such.

This structural condition has deeper historical roots. The Mekong has entered an era in which water is not merely a shared resource but an engineered variable. This transformation must be understood within longer historical continuity. The colonial period territorialized the river; the Cold War technocratic era systematized it; the contemporary upstream cascade centralizes control over its most fundamental ecological function: flow timing. In doing so, it redefines sovereignty in hydrological terms (United Nations Development Programme, 2021).

7.3 The Mekong in the Indo-Pacific Framework: connectivity, strategic overlay and competitive multilateralism

In the twenty-first century, the Mekong basin has been increasingly reframed within the broader geopolitical architecture of the Indo-Pacific. What was once understood primarily as a regional river system or subregional development corridor is now embedded in narratives of strategic competition, infrastructural connectivity, and normative order-building. The emergence of the Indo-Pacific concept (first articulated by Japanese policymakers and later institutionalized in U.S. strategic doctrine) repositioned mainland Southeast Asia within a maritime-continental continuum linking the Indian Ocean to the western Pacific. Within this framework, the Mekong occupies a pivotal intermediary space, connecting continental Southeast Asia to maritime trade routes and intersecting with both Chinese and Western connectivity initiatives.

The United States formalized its engagement through the Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI) in 2009, emphasizing environmental sustainability, water governance, and capacity-building. Although framed as technical cooperation, the initiative reflected growing concern over upstream dam construction and the strategic implications of Chinese expansion (U.S. Agency for International Development, n.d.). In 2020, it evolved into the Mekong-U.S. Partnership, broadening its scope to include economic connectivity and governance standards. The river thus became part of a wider strategic landscape in which infrastructure financing and data transparency carried geopolitical significance. China, meanwhile, institutionalized its Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) mechanism in 2016, placing itself at the center of basin-wide dialogue. Linked to the Belt and Road Initiative, the LMC integrates hydropower, rail corridors, highways, and economic zones into a broader transcontinental logistics network. The Mekong is thereby embedded within a multi-modal connectivity matrix extending beyond water management (Eyler, 2020). This phase is marked by the overlay of strategic competition onto environmental governance. Water data sharing, dam coordination, and drought mitigation function not only as technical concerns but as indicators of transparency and influence. Drought episodes in 2019-2020 intensified debates over upstream retention and downstream impact, while satellite monitoring initiatives introduced new forms of data politics. Yet beneath strategic rhetoric, pragmatic

balancing persists. Downstream states navigate between infrastructure dependence and multilateral engagement, reflecting both vulnerability and agency. The Indo-Pacific reframing does not replace earlier paradigms; it overlays them (Kang & Sridhar, 2024). The Mekong remains a river of agriculture and fisheries, yet it has also become a geopolitical hinge within a contested regional order. Connectivity, once ecological and organic, is now infrastructural and strategic.

8. Literature review: historiography, hydropolitics and geopolitical reframing

The Mekong basin has generated a substantial multidisciplinary body of scholarship, yet this literature often develops along parallel trajectories that rarely converge within a fully integrated historical framework. Three broad analytical traditions can be identified, each offering partial illumination of the river's historical trajectory while leaving significant interpretive gaps that this article seeks to address.

The first tradition encompasses historical and archaeological scholarship. Studies have traditionally concentrated on Angkor and the sophistication of Khmer hydraulic engineering, emphasizing the centrality of water management to imperial consolidation (Stark, 2014). Subsequent research has connected hydraulic infrastructure to cosmological legitimacy and ritual sovereignty, situating political authority within ecological mediation (Stark, 2015), while climatic reconstructions have highlighted the vulnerability of complex hydraulic systems to environmental stress (Buckley et al., 2010). Although this body of work demonstrates the deep entanglement of ecology and power, it frequently treats Angkor as temporally self-contained rather than as part of a longer continuum of riverine governance. The transition from premodern hydraulic sovereignty to colonial territorial abstraction remains undertheorized within this tradition, creating a historiographical gap between ancient and modern that this article directly addresses (Keay, 2005).

The second tradition encompasses political ecology and hydropolitics. Since the 1990s, research has expanded in response to hydropower development along the Lancang, examining upstream and downstream asymmetry as well as alterations in sediment transport, fisheries, and seasonal flows (Figiaconi, 2020; Polese, 2020). Within this tradition, scholars such as Philip Hirsch (2016) and Kanokwan Manomom (2018) have made foundational contributions by demonstrating how large-scale infrastructure projects restructure not only ecological systems but also local livelihoods, governance arrangements, and power relations along the river. Ian Baird and Bruce Shoemaker (2007) have similarly foregrounded the social dimensions of hydropower development, documenting the displacement of riparian communities and the erosion of customary resource rights in ways that challenge purely technocratic framings of river management. Carl Middleton and John Dore (2015) have extended this analysis into the institutional domain, critically assessing

the limits of transboundary governance mechanisms such as the Mekong River Commission. While these contributions are indispensable for understanding contemporary hydropolitics, they tend to situate their analyses within relatively short time horizons, rarely tracing the deeper historical roots of the power asymmetries they identify. This article engages directly with their findings while arguing that a *longue durée* perspective is necessary to understand why such asymmetries are structurally reproduced rather than contingent.

The third tradition encompasses strategic and geopolitical studies. Institutional analyses assess the limits of the Mekong River Commission, while strategic studies situate the basin within the Indo-Pacific framework and interpret initiatives such as the Lower Mekong Initiative and Lancang-Mekong Cooperation as arenas of strategic competition (Kang & Sridhar, 2024). This literature offers important insights into contemporary great-power dynamics but tends to abstract the river from its ecological and historical context, treating it primarily as a site of infrastructure competition rather than as a space with deep relational histories. The result is an analytical presentism that this article seeks to overcome.

Parallel historiography has examined early modern European engagement through exploratory accounts, missionary narratives, and the cartographic incorporation of the Mekong into imperial strategy (Nalesini, 2000; Osborne, 2012). Colonial studies have focused on the Mekong Exploration Commission and its role in shaping French Indochina (Keay, 2005). However, the deeper epistemological shift from relational sovereignty to territorial abstraction, namely the transformation through which a cosmologically embedded river became a mapped and measurable colonial object, remains comparatively underexplored as a theoretical problem. This article addresses precisely this gap, treating the colonial cognitive rupture not merely as historical context but as a structurally decisive moment in the river's long-term governance trajectory.

Despite its richness, the scholarship remains fragmented. Historical analyses seldom extend into contemporary hydropolitics, strategic assessments often lack *longue durée* grounding, and environmental research can abstract ecological change from deeper political transformation. Cold War scholarship introduced a further strand centred on modernization theory and river basin planning, particularly the Mekong Committee as an experiment in technocratic coordination. Political ecology has since reassessed these initiatives, demonstrating how development projects restructured livelihoods and ecological systems, thereby reframing the Mekong as a contested socio-environmental space. Yet this reassessment has rarely been integrated with premodern hydraulic history or with contemporary geopolitical analysis.

This article bridges these literatures by arguing that the Mekong has historically functioned as a structuring axis in which sovereignty was embedded in ecological mediation, that European expansion introduced a structural epistemological shift toward territorial abstraction, and that Indo-Pacific geopolitics

represents an additional layer in the evolving governance of the river. In doing so, it responds to the call within political ecology and historical geography for more temporally grounded analyses of river governance, while offering historians and geopolitical analysts a conceptual framework capable of connecting premodern, colonial, and contemporary dynamics within a single interpretive arc. It should be noted that while broad historical surveys of the Mekong, such as Osborne (2012) and Diokno and Van Chinh (2006), have addressed aspects of the river's long-term trajectory, they do so primarily as narrative history rather than as conceptual analysis of governance transformation. The present article's contribution is not empirical novelty but analytical reframing: the explicit theorization of hydraulic sovereignty, relational continuum and "layered transformation" as interpretive categories capable of connecting premodern, colonial, and contemporary dynamics within a single explanatory framework.

9. Conclusion: reimagining the Mekong across temporal layers

This article has argued that the Mekong River cannot be adequately understood through the analytical frameworks of any single discipline or historical period. The central argument is that the river has functioned throughout its history as a historical continuum: a structuring axis through which successive regimes of political authority have been articulated, contested, and transformed. Three analytical categories have been developed to support this argument: hydraulic sovereignty, designating the premodern mode of authority grounded in ecological mediation rather than territorial enclosure; layered transformation, describing the process through which successive political regimes deposit additional strata of governance upon pre-existing formations without fully erasing them; and engineered interdependence, capturing the contemporary condition in which the river's ecological rhythms are actively modulated through upstream infrastructural control. The historical trajectory traced across the preceding sections reveals a pattern of cumulative reconfiguration rather than episodic rupture. In the precolonial era, sovereignty was relational and ecological, grounded in the mediation of seasonal rhythms and cosmological legitimacy. European expansion introduced a competing epistemology through missionary writing and cartographic representation, institutionalized by colonial governance into territorial modernity. The twentieth century layered militarization and developmental technocracy onto this foundation, while the post-Cold War era has generated structural asymmetry through upstream hydropower development and embedded the river within Indo-Pacific strategic competition. Yet across these transformations, a fundamental continuity persists: the river's ecological rhythms remain indispensable to the livelihoods of millions, and the tension between ecological continuity and institutional control continues to define the basin's present condition. The Mekong is not merely shaped by successive regimes of

power: it is a living archive of shifting sovereignties in which legitimacy remains inseparable from the management of water itself.

These findings carry implications for both scholarship and governance. Analytically, the conceptual vocabulary developed here (hydraulic sovereignty, layered transformation, and engineered interdependence) offers a framework for analyzing rivers not as passive geographical features but as active sites of political production across historical time, a framework that could also be productively applied to other major Asian river systems such as the Irrawaddy, the Salween or the Brahmaputra. In terms of governance, if the river's present condition is understood as the product of layered historical transformation rather than a contingent geopolitical conjuncture, then responses focused exclusively on technical coordination or diplomatic negotiation may prove insufficient. The structural asymmetry generated by upstream dam construction is not merely a hydrological problem but the latest expression of a centuries-long process of abstraction from the river's ecological and relational foundations. Effective governance would therefore require a broader renegotiation of the political vocabulary through which the Mekong is governed, one that reintroduces ecological relationality alongside territorial sovereignty as a legitimate basis for transboundary authority, and that recognizes infrastructure competition and environmental governance as expressions of the same underlying contest over the meaning and control of water.

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