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SOUTHEAST ASIA?**

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## **CAN MEKONG-GANGA COOPERATION (MGC) ENHANCE INDIA'S INTERESTS IN MAINLAND SOUTHEAST ASIA?**

TITIPOL PHAKDEEWANICH<sup>#</sup>

### **Abstract**

Since the establishment of Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) in November 2000 in Vientiane, Lao PDR, after the signing of the Vientiane Declaration, the visibility of India as a regional donor remains a challenge. The Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) was established between India and the five ASEAN countries (Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam) to cooperate fundamentally in a non-politically sensitive issues, including tourism, culture, education, and transportation communication. In fact, India's strategic engagement with ASEAN-Mekong countries is similar to that of other global superpowers such as China and the United States as well as other donors.

Thailand is currently establishing itself as both an emerging donor and a gateway to Southeast Asia. China is a major regional donor, providing aid and loans as part of an ambitious infrastructure development strategy known as "Belt and Road Initiative" or "One Belt One Road". Political conflict and human rights violations remain challenges for the five ASEAN-Mekong countries. This has become a challenge for the implementation of the MGC. The question therefore arises as to the extent to which the Indian government will reassess its strategic commitment to MGC. To advance its own interests in mainland Southeast Asia, how can India engage constructively with other existing donors to promote socio-economic development in Mekong basin countries?

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## I. Introduction

The relations between India and Southeast Asia emerged around 200 BC. Then, during the 15th century, the growing influence of Hinduism and Buddhism on the socio-political systems of Southeast Asian countries greatly contributed to the strengthening of India's relations with this region (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2019, August 09). Consequently, trade, cultural, and political relations between India and the kingdoms of Southeast Asia, including Burma, Thailand, Indonesia, the Malay Peninsula, Cambodia, and Vietnam, strengthened. The shared cultural heritage between India and Southeast Asia allows for continued constructive engagement in the current relationship. It is expected that the common security and economic interests of both India and Southeast Asian nations will be strengthened through the strategic partnership.

With reference to India's current foreign policy since the launch of the Look East Policy (which became known as the Act East Policy) in the early 1990s, India is strengthening its presence and relationships in the Indo-Pacific region. In the 21st century, India implemented the Act East policy through various cooperative frameworks. In 2000, India initiated the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) to promote cooperation with the five ASEAN countries of Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam, promoting tourism, culture, education, transportation, and communication within the region. In 2002, India strengthened her ties with ASEAN and became a leadership-level partner. In 2004, the first summit of the Bay of Bengal Multi-sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation Initiative or BIMSTEC (Initially known as BIST-EC, Bangladesh-India-Sri Lanka-Thailand Economic Cooperation, established in 1997), was held to strengthen economic cooperation between Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Thailand (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-sectoral Technical and Economic, 2024).

Indeed, there are various economic and security cooperation frameworks within the Mekong. Since 1990s, Thailand and CLMV countries (Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Vietnam) have been benefiting from the flow of foreign aid, enabling them to promote their socio-economic development. One of the best known for over three decades of its collaboration is the Greater Mekong Subregion or GMS which includes Cambodia, the People's Republic of China (specifically Yunnan Province and Guangxi

Zhuang Autonomous Region), Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam. The GMS was established in 1992, with assistance from the Asian Development Bank (ADB) as part of the Regional Cooperation and Integration (RCI) strategic plan to promote cross-border infrastructure development, trade integration, and financial linkages (Asian Development Bank, 2021).

Amongst the five ASEAN countries on the lower Mekong basin, Thailand is now the only country that is considered as an “emerging donor”. Under the leadership of General Chatchai Choonhavan<sup>1</sup> Thailand increased the budget for technical assistance to neighboring countries increased from 25 million baht in 1991 to 175 million baht in 1992, and 203 million baht in 1993. Within the Mekong areas, Thailand's new role as a donor for Official Development Assistance or ODA has been well received by the Ayeyarwaddy-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS) member states, the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), and the Commonwealth of Independent States (Thailand International Cooperation Agency. 2022).

Japan and South Korea have been actively providing aid to support socio-economic development within this region, such as the constructions of economic corridors in order to improve infrastructure, prior to the introduction of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative in 2013. According to the “Establishment of a New Partnership for the Common Flourishing Future”, announced in the Tokyo Declaration of the first meeting of the Heads of the Governments of Japan, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Viet Nam, in 2009, they specify action plans in the Mekong-Japan Action Plan 63 as part of their determination to promote the Mekong-Japan cooperation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. 2009a). Japan committed to provide a financial support towards the construction of the East-West Economic Corridor or EWEC and the Southern Economic Corridor or SEC (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2010) as illustrated in Map 1. The EWEC and the

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<sup>1</sup> The former Prime Minister of Thailand from 4 August 1988 – 23 February 1991, who initiated the policy “Turning the Battlefield into Commercial Field” to promote economic growth in the northeastern region of Thailand or Isan, and ASEAN countries along the lower Mekong Basin.

Map 1: Economic corridors in the greater Mekong subregion



Source: Greatermekong.org

SEC can enhance infrastructure and economic connectivity between the Bay of Bengal and five mainland Southeast Asian countries in the lower Mekong basin, namely Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam, which can serve ASEAN-India economic interests.

Following the announcement of the 2011 Han River Declaration, South Korea launched the Mekong-Korea Partnership in 2011, and the Mekong-Korea Cooperation Fund (MKCF) was established in 2013. In 2023, the ROK demonstrated its determination to its constructive engagement and commitment to support development of the lower Mekong basin in accordance with the Han River Declaration. This is based on three pillars – People, Prosperity and Peace – and seven priority areas of cooperation, including culture and tourism, human resources development, agriculture and rural development, infrastructure, information and communication technology, environment, and non-traditional security challenges (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand, 2023).

In 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which initially focused on countries in Asia, Europe, and Africa, with the possibility of expanding to other countries. In 2023, more than 150 countries and more than 30 international organisations participated in the BRI. (China Economic Information Service and the State Information Center, 2024, January 3). In his keynote speech at the opening ceremony of the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in 2017, President Xi Jinping argued that

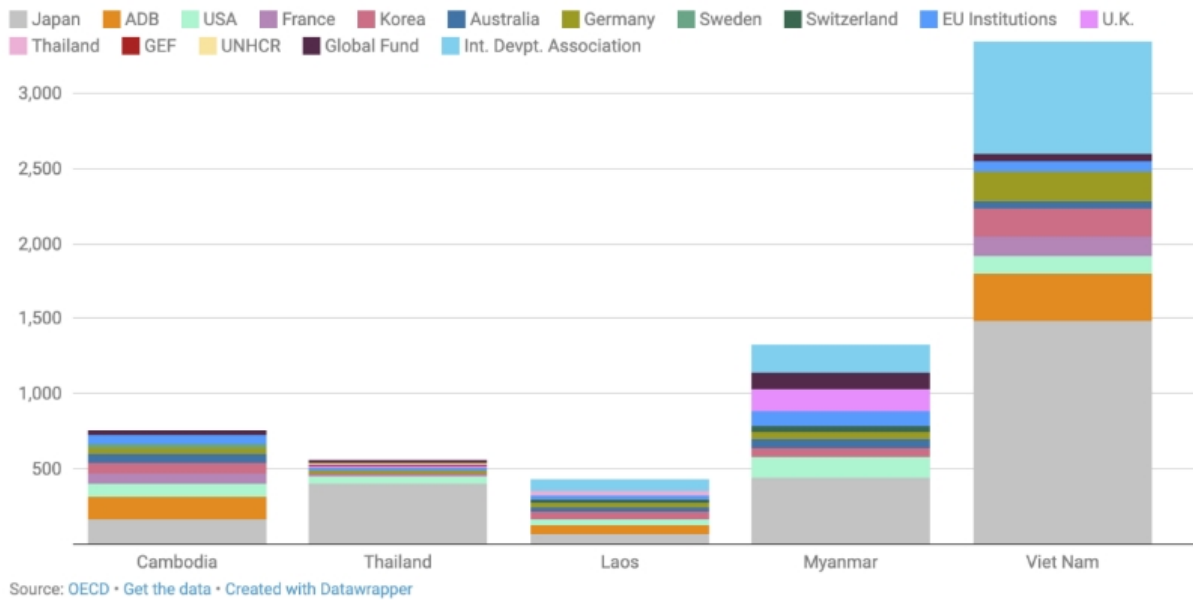
We should jointly create an environment that will facilitate opening up and development, establish a fair, equitable and transparent system of international trade and investment rules and boost the orderly flow of production factors, efficient resources allocation and full market integration... Together we can build a broad community of shared interests. (China Economic Information Service and the State Information Center, 2017, May 14)

Indeed, China's engagement in the Mekong is not only limited within the GMS and the BRI, but China also took a leading role in the establishment of the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC). The LMC is intended to strengthen the collaboration between its six member countries, including China, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam.

They highlighted the so-called “3+5” mechanism of cooperation, which includes the three cooperation pillars, namely political and security issues, economic and sustainable development, and cultural and people-to-people exchanges. This includes five key priority areas of cooperations which are connectivity, production capacity, cross-border economic cooperation, water resources, and agriculture and poverty reduction. (Lancang-Mekong Cooperation. 2017, November 27).

In 2020, the U.S. upgraded its engagement in the lower Mekong basin, by introducing the Mekong-U.S. Partnership to replace the Lower Mekong Initiative or LMI (introduced under the Obama Administration in 2009) to elevate and reenergise U.S. engagement within the region. The Mekong-U.S. Partnership comprises of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam, with support from the United States, whereas China is excluded from this partnership.

**Figure 1: Top Donors of Gross ODA, 2016-2017 Average, USD million**



Source: Open Development Mekong, 2024

According to Figure 1, there are a number of regional and non-regional donors within the lower Mekong basin, this figure reveals that Japan was the biggest provider of ODA between 2016-2017 in most 5 lower Mekong countries. However, China is the largest financial contributor towards developmental programmes in the lower Mekong basin, despite not being listed on the top list of donors. In 2017, the total ODA received in the Lower Mekong region was nearly US\$5.5 billion, which was US\$300 million less than the total ODA in 2016 (US\$5.8 billion). Indeed, all Lower Mekong countries received only 3.37% of the world's total ODA received in 2017 (Open Development Mekong, 2024).

This reflects the pluralistic nature of the geopolitical landscape in the lower Mekong region. Therefore, it is undeniable that there are both cooperative tendencies and tensions between involved actors within the lower Mekong basin. Despite a similarity of issues supported by ODA in the Mekong, the national interests of most actors cannot always be translated into a common interest within the region. In addition, ASEAN-countries on the lower Mekong basin have different political systems and different levels of socio-economic developments. Therefore, donor have to include this in their consideration when implementing developmental projects. This poses a challenge to the implementation of the MGC, which will be examined to what extent that the government of India can utilise the MGC to effectively enhance the common interest of India and its five Mekong countries.

## **II. The Evolution of Geopolitics and Its Implication on India Engagement**

In the 21st century, the interaction between state and non-state actors is not simply determined by their resources such as economic and military powers, but their ability to engage with a wide range of involved actors. The geopolitical narrative of the 21st century is arguably moving towards a multipolar system, which is different from the post-world war II (WW II) system. After WW II ended, the global system was described as a bipolar configuration from 1945 to 1989, between the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the United States (U.S.). Between 1989 to 2008, the global political system was characterised as to a unipolar configuration where the U.S. was described as a



dominant actor because of its hegemonic power as a result of the expansion of its economic and military power.

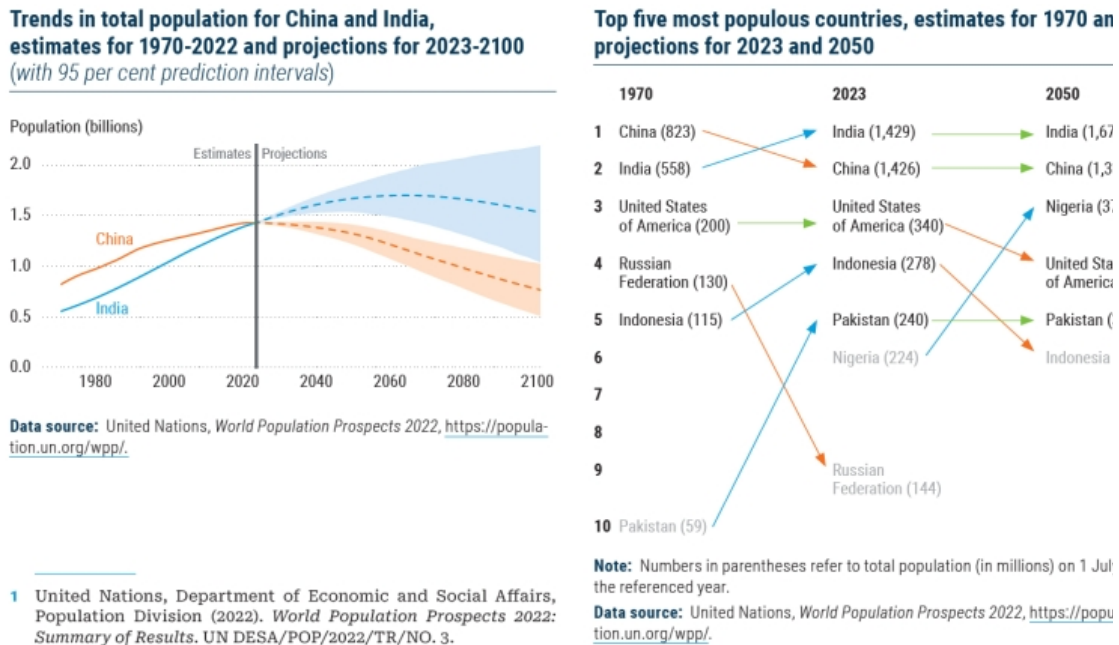
Indeed, since the 1990s, the world has witnessed rapid changes in the distribution of power across the globe, where power is no longer concentrated amongst superpowers. Instead, power has been redistributed amongst state and non-state actors. According to the World Bank report in 2022, China was listed as the world's second largest economy after the U.S., whilst India was the fifth largest economy, and the United Kingdom was the sixth largest economy (2022). This cannot simply be interpreted as the decline of the U.S., but it is the case of the rise of the rest. Although, the U.S. remains a leading economic, political, and military powers, it cannot deny the evolution of the global system toward the so-called multipolar world.

In a multipolar world, there is a diffusion of power. According to Nye, while "power transition", the transfer of power from one dominant state to another, is a well-known historical event, "power diffusion", the distribution of power to both state and non-state actors, is a newer process. The problem for all nations in today's global information age is that more and more things are happening that even the most powerful nations cannot control. The proliferation of information is as much a cause of depolarisation as the proliferation of weapons. To a certain extent, this will result in the decline of the sovereign state that has been the dominant global institutions. Therefore, it can be argued that the information revolution will flatten bureaucratic hierarchies and replace them with network organisations (Nye, 2011). Thus, a cooperative approach is important for state actors to promote and protect their national interests.

In the 21st century, regional and international cooperation is not necessarily led by superpowers or global hegemonies. The theory of hegemonic stability focuses on interests and power. Keohane argued that hegemony may facilitate some types of cooperation, there is little reason to believe that hegemony is a necessary or sufficient condition for the emergence of cooperation between nations. While the dominance of a single great power may contribute to world political order under certain circumstances, it is not a sufficient condition and there is little reason to believe that it is necessary. He emphasised that hegemonies play an important role by offering leadership to their partners in exchange for

respect. But unlike imperial powers, the superpowers cannot make or enforce rules without some degree of consent from other sovereign states. The hegemon can encourage cooperation, but the hegemon needs cooperation to formulate and enforce rules (Keohane, 1984).

**Figure 2: World Population Prospects**



Source: United Nations, 2023, April 24.

India’s population was expected to reach 1,425,775,850 people in April 2023, according to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, illustrated in Figure 2. Despite the size of the market and labour supply that has contributed to India’s attractiveness for foreign investors, especially the western based multinational cooperations or MNCs, India is not yet classified as a global super power. Srikanth Kondapalli, professor of China studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, highlighted that “You become a superpower based on GDP, based on technology, based on military power, based on soft power. No country becomes a superpower based on population” (Sullivan, 2023, May 1). India recognises the necessity for cooperation which can be a key for India’s leadership, especially in amongst the Global South. At the G20

Summit in 2023, under India's presidency of the G20, India successfully supported the African Union becoming a permanent member of the G20 (Government of India, 2023).

Since the 1960s, India's foreign policy has been characterised by Non-Alignment and pragmatism. Miller and Sullivan argued that a pragmatic India focuses on material interests, recognises the importance of power as the primary driving force in geopolitics and is willing to use force when necessary in international politics in order to achieve rapid economic growth and become a major power. Pragmatism meant that India prioritised its national interests and became less assertive about alliances. India expands its influence through international institutions and treaties and distances itself from moral claims in international relations (Miller, & Sullivan de Estrada, 2017).

India played an active role in the creation of the Non-Alignment Movement (NAM) between 1955 and 1960. India's foreign policy of non-alignment is often interpreted as anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism, whilst protecting national interests (Miller, & Sullivan de Estrada, 2017). Since 2014, after Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India, started his first term, non-aligned policy was replaced by "strategic autonomy" (Smith, 2020). India's strategic autonomy refers to "the capability to make decisions independent from external pressure, especially from great powers, in the main policy areas." (Droin, Basrur, Blarel, & Mehra, 2023, July 13) This may synchronise with foreign policies of most Mekong countries, including Thailand's foreign policy—in which the country claims to be flexible and prioritise national interests, regardless of Western geopolitical narrative.

The establishment of the Non-Aligned Movement in Belgrade in 1961 might also be a contributing factor for the strengthening of the collaboration between India and the five ASEAN countries on the lower Mekong basin. Nevertheless, India's engagement with the lower Mekong countries remains a challenge because of the existing cooperating and competing political landscape in the region, between regional and non-regional actor since the Vietnam War when the U.S. was a dominant actor, and the challenge against the escalation of the Chinese involvement, especially through the BRI and the LMC, the Chinese ambition to replicate the historic silk road in the 21st century.

Despite a long history of engagement, both the U.S. and China are experiencing credibility problems and a suspicion of the motivation behind their engagements. Multiple programmes have been implemented by the U.S., such as Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI), that are intended to enhance the regional reputation, leaving behind the scars of the infamous Vietnam War. The Confucius Institutes of the Chinese Government has been the main mechanism to promote Chinese culture, education, language, and reputation across the world, and is located in the capital and across the countries of all 5 lower Mekong countries.

India is amongst many other countries, engaging in the lower Mekong region, including Japan, ROK, and Australia, who have less credibility problems and are not typically questioned over the motivation of their engagements. Nevertheless, the question remains whether India can effectively implement its MGC after more than two decades of its establishment.

Despite a significant potential for mutual interests between India and the Lower Mekong Basin countries through the implementation of the MGC, they may encounter several challenges and obstacles, including regional rivalries, geopolitical and strategic tensions—especially concerning the territorial disputes in the South China Sea, region political instability—specifically the deterioration of the situation in Myanmar since the 2021 Myanmar coup d'état

As indicated, the geopolitical landscape in the lower Mekong Basin area is not monopolised by a single power. Instead it is influenced by various geopolitical dynamics including major players such as Australia, China, Japan, ROK, and the U.S. India's efforts through the MGC could be perceived as a counterbalance to prevent the concentration of power amongst existing involved state and non-state actors, which might lead to regional tensions or resistance from countries aligned with certain major players.

### **III. Geopolitical Narratives For India's MGC in the Lower Mekong Region**

Shri Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India, mentioned in his address to the Joint Session of the US Congress that

We live by the motto of वसुधैव कुटुम्बकम् or The World is One Family. Our engagement with the world is for everyone's benefit. The "One Sun, One World, One Grid" seeks to join us all in connecting the world with clean energy. "One Earth, One Health" is a vision for global action to bring quality healthcare to everyone, including animals and plants... We reach out to others during disasters as first responders, as we do for our own. We share our modest resources with those who need them the most. We build capabilities, not dependencies. (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India 2023, June 23).

In the competing and cooperative geopolitical environment within the lower Mekong basin, how effectively can India translate the motto of वसुधैव कुटुम्बकम् (Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam) or "The World is One Family", highlighted by Shri Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India, into practice remains a challenge not only for India, but also the 5 lower Mekong countries, as well as other regional and international donors. Indeed, both China and the U.S. have demonstrated constructive engagement approach through the BRI and the U.S. Mekong partnership, respectively. The complexity of geopolitical rivalry between India and China, and China and the U.S. has made collaboration for the implementation of ODA and aid to the lower Mekong more challenging.

Whilst most Western countries define their financial support to socioeconomic development in the Mekong as 'Foreign Aid', Japan refers to its contribution as 'Official Development Assistance or ODA', whereas the term 'Development Partnership' is preferred by India. Indeed, India's 'Development Partnership' is inspired by Mahatma Gandhi who said

I do want to think in terms of the whole world. My patriotism includes the good of mankind in general. Therefore, my service to India includes the service of humanity" (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2023, August 29).

Strategically, India's 'Development Partnership' model is intended to convey a constructive engagement and equal partnership, especially amongst countries in the Global South, which can complement India's ambition it to be the voice of global south, as announced by Prime Minister Modi, in 2023. Nevertheless, the Neighbourhood First policy has been a crucial element of development partnership in India's foreign policy. According to Figure 3, most of India's country-wise funds allocated and country-wise

funds disbursed are concentrated amongst India's neighbouring countries, whilst Myanmar is the only ASEAN country that is on the top list.

Nevertheless, ASEAN remains India's important strategic partner as indicated by Indian External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar at the Opening Session of the ASEAN-India Foreign Ministers Meeting, "For India, ASEAN is the cornerstone of its Act East Policy and the Indo-Pacific vision that was thereafter built on it. For us, political, economic and security cooperation with ASEAN is of the utmost priority." (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2024, July 26)

In the wake of the Asian Financial Crises in the late 1990s, the U.S. hegemonic power was examined whether it was a necessary contributing factor towards ASEAN regional cooperation. The crisis may have prompted countries to reconsider how best to build a regional order that can prevent financial crises, or at least deal with them effectively when they occur (Breslin, Hughes, Phillips, & Rosamond, 2002). In addition, the 2008 Global financial crisis raised the question of the necessity for U.S. contribution toward regional economic development in Southeast Asia. In 2009, China was the largest foreign creditor of U.S. debt. They hold billions of dollars' worth of U.S. Treasuries. As its economic influence grows, it is increasingly buying up assets on every continent. (Cable News Network, August 23, 2009)

Southeast Asia became more concerned about building regional economic strength to mitigate potential risks. For example, before the completion of the Boten - Vientiane high-speed train project (officially opened in 2021), financially supported by Chinese BRI, Laos experienced connectivity problems because it is the only landlocked country in Southeast Asia. The report by ADB, entitled "Infrastructure for a Seamless Asia", published in 2009, highlighted the benefit of connectivity from its subregion framework, the GMS. The report emphasised the contribution of regional infrastructure connectivity toward socio-economic development in Asia (Asian Development Bank, 2009).

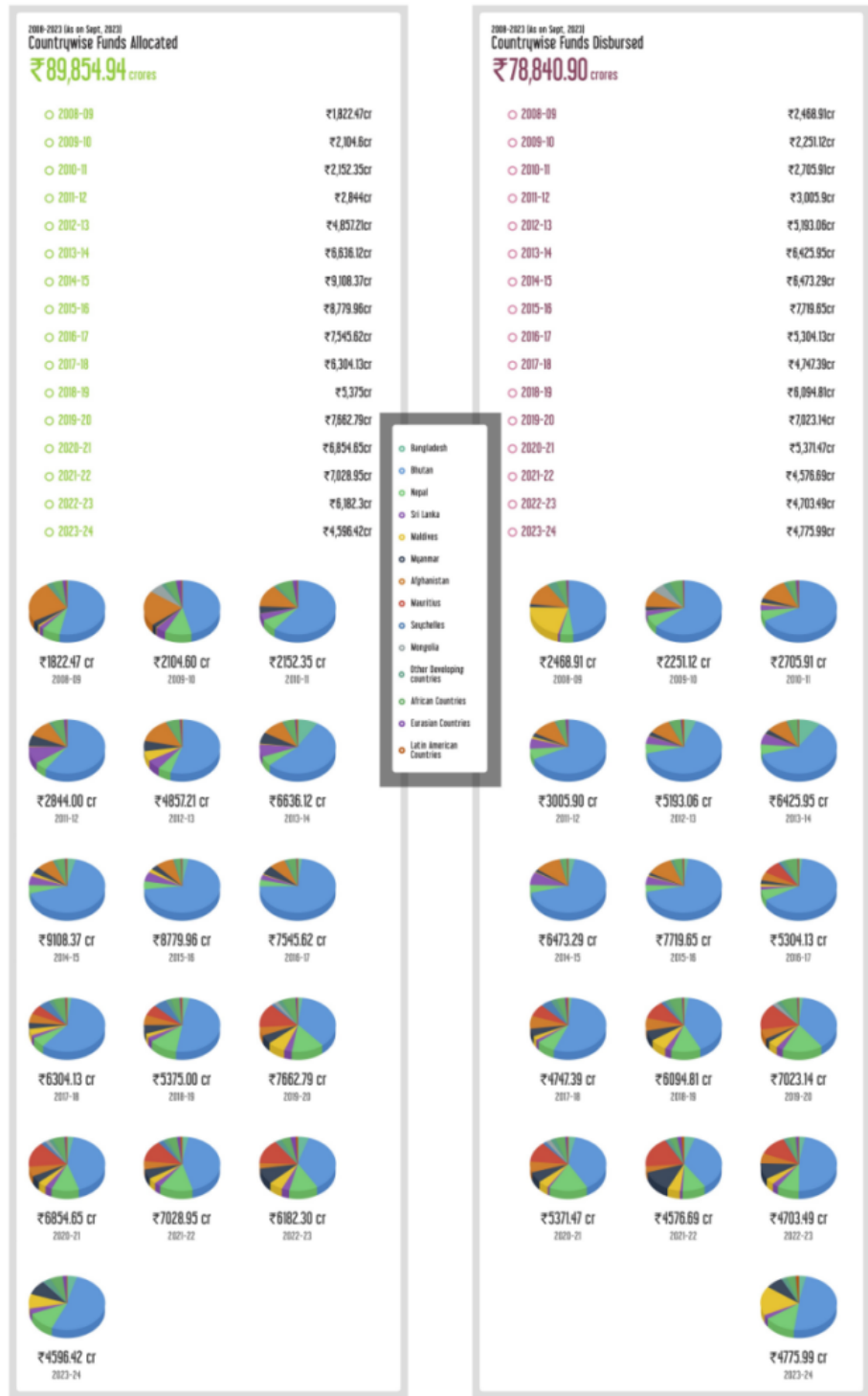
Insufficient financial resource was the main obstacle in this plan. The initiation of the Chinese BRI in 2013, by President Xi Jinping, greatly benefitted ADB's ambition for regional development of mainland southwest Asia. The BRI is perceived as an unsettling

extension of China's rising power by some analysts, especially with the extreme high costs of many infrastructure project, exceeding the possibility of making an economic return. McBride, Berman, and Chatzky argued that "...the United States shares the concern of some in Asia that the BRI could be a Trojan horse for China-led regional development and military expansion." (McBride, Berman, & Chatzky, 2019)

In 2021, the State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China published "China's International Development Cooperation in the New Era", revealing its vision to improve Chinese foreign assistance to support international development cooperation and the implementation of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2021) Historically, China has characterised its foreign policy as "Non-interference in each other's internal affairs" and "Peaceful co-existence". Breslin argued that Hu Jintao, President of the People's Republic of China (PRC) between 2003 and 2013, and Premier Wen Jiabao, China's head of government between 2003 and 2013, succeeded in pushing the concept of "peaceful development" further than originally intended, translating it into "harmony and diversity", "win-win solutions" and "democratisation of international relations" and China's soft power (Breslin (Ed.), 2010). However, China's "peaceful development" and "win-win solutions" have been scrutinised with the escalation of debt trap amongst developing countries, who have participated in the BRI.

Under the U.S. Pivot to Asia of President Barack Obama, he launched the policy titled "Advancing the Rebalance to Asia and the Pacific". The U.S. advanced people-to-people relations, through programmes such as the Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI). Furthermore, the U.S. claimed to be strengthening the U.S. treaty alliances with Australia, Japan, ROK (White House, 2015, November 16). As illustrated in Figure 1. Australia, Japan, and ROK are listed as top donors in the lower Mekong basin. Meanwhile, economic relations between Japan and India have been steadily expanding and deepening. The volume of trade between the two countries increased. As of 2021, India is Japan's 18th largest trading partner, and Japan is India's 13th largest trading partner. Therefore, if India can elevate its collaboration with these donors, it can greatly benefit people living along the lower Mekong basin.

Figure 3: Country-wise Funds Allocated and Country-wise Funds Disbursed



Source: Government of India, 2024



Hillary Clinton, U.S. Secretary of State between 2009-2013, argued that Cambodia should be friends with many countries in order to look for balance, and not become too dependent on any one country. Cambodia is one of the Southeast Asian nations that could be significantly influenced by China, because China is among Phnom Penh's largest single aid donors, and Chinese firms dominate Cambodia's infrastructure sector. Prime Minister Hun Sen has often sided with Beijing on key regional security issues (Solomon, 2010) The rise of China has raised a significant concerns for the U.S. to re-establish its relations with Asia. In 2010, Clinton indicated an adjustment in U.S foreign policy, and emphasised that: "America's future is linked to the future of the Asia-Pacific region; and the future of this region depends on America."(United States Department of State, 2010, January 12)

Indeed, the U.S was directly involved in Laos between 1954 and 1975-between the withdrawal of the French and their own withdrawal from the region at the ending of the U.S. war in Vietnam. Although this involvement was less overarching than the colonial administrative control exhibited by France, the involvement with its military focus had a very great impact on areas of Laos where there was a particular U.S. military strategic imperative. There was a rapid increase in U.S. military and economic assistance in 1955, and the Royal Lao Army was entirely financed by the U.S. that year onwards (Stuart-Fox, 1997, pp. 90-91). Through their involvement, both France and the U.S. had a significant influence on Laos bureaucratic system. Indeed, the U.S. had offered training and educational opportunities leading to employment within U.S. agencies. (Zasloff, 1991)

The implementation of U.S. soft-power within Laos since the 1950s has moderated the perceptions of people in Laos towards U.S. engagement. Nevertheless, how people perceive the U.S. depends on their experience, the societal context, the generational timeframe, and the geographical location. When it comes to discussing the perceptions of the people of Laos towards the U.S., different generations have different perceptions. People from different locations have different perception; those in the more southern provinces, like Savannaket, have generally less negative perceptions in this regard than do those from the north, because they did not experience first-hand the most negative effects of the U.S. operation during the so-called Vietnam War.

Those from the north, areas that experienced the impacts directly, including those physically damaged by bombing and all those who lived through the war, attitudes are inevitably much more negative. To the people of Laos, it did not seem like the ‘Vietnam War’ as such, but rather as the U.S. initiating a war against Laos, as for the people of places such as Xiangkhouang Province, who still retain their anti-American sentiment today, reinforced by how this period in Laos history has been written by Laos’ historians. Xiangkhouang is a province of Laos, located in the north-east of the country. It is about 200 kilometres from the Capital of Vientiane. It was heavily bombed during the Vietnam War period. A road network in Xiangkhouang province was one of the prime targets of the U.S. Air Force's attempts to stem the flow of Vietnamese troops and war supplies into Laos. It is believed that the U.S. B52s and other aircraft dropped more bombs in that area than fell on all of Europe during World War II. Up to 30 percent of those bombs failed to detonate (Ingram, 2001). In addition to this, the province of Xiangkhouang in Laos was used as a ‘dumping ground’ for the bombs being carried back by the U.S. bombers, which had not been able for what ever reason, to release all of their cargo over either Vietnam or targeted area within Laos. This was for the simple logistical reason that bombers could not safely land with their cargo, and yet whether or not the U.S. military had any concern or consideration for where these bombs would land, there was nevertheless, a great deal of ‘collateral damage’ inflicted on the people of Laos. A principal of a school was reported to have said the following.

We haven't had any accidents here for quite a while, because the children have been taught about the danger of handling the bombs. But no-one could ever feel entirely safe knowing they were scattered all around here. (Ingram, 2001)

The historic engagement of the U.S. has left a political scar and the unsolved ongoing damages from the U.S. bombs, which requires assistance from international donors, including the U.K., Australia, and the U.S., to provide financial assistance to clear unexploded ordnance (UXO). To a certain extent, this raises the question of whether ODA and aid from the U.S. can be considered as “generosity” or “responsibility”. Meanwhile, many people in Laos and Cambodia have been skeptical about the Chinese developmental projects as part of the BRI and Chinese private investors. Although the contribution of Chinese investments to Cambodia’s economic growth is impressive, only

some privileged sections of Cambodian society have been able to share this, not the local population. Chinese businesses tend to import workers from China. According to the report of the Interior Ministry of Cambodia, there are more than 250,000 Chinese nationals currently reside in Cambodia in 2019, which is over 60% of all foreign residents in the country. (Tann, 2019) This Chinese business pattern is observed in most participated countries of the BRI, including Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand, which foments resentment among local people.

As an emerging donor, Thailand, through Thailand International Cooperation Agency (TICA), has given THB 499.10 million worth of ODA (US\$ 14.30 million) to countries around the world in 2018. It is reported that 52.23 per cent or the equivalent amount of THB 270.66 million from the total amount of THB 499.10 million was provided to the lower Mekong basin countries, namely Cambodia, Laos PDR, Myanmar and Vietnam (Thailand International Cooperation Agency, 2018). In term of financial contribution, the contribution of Thailand's bilateral ODA toward development in the lower Mekong areas is not tremendous. However, Thailand's regional engagement can assist in facilitating the implementation of ODA from outside the region. Thailand has implemented multiple programs to maintain its Mekong neighbours, for example, the technical assistant to promote agricultural development in Laos through the implementation of the Thai Royal Projects in Laos. On the 12th of January 2024, Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn of Thailand visited Laos to mark the 30th anniversary of the Houayson-Houaysua Agriculture Service and Development Centre in Vientiane. The Princess's visit is believed to advance the longstanding friendship and cooperation between Laos and Thailand, meanwhile consolidating the cooperative relations and bilateral relations between Laos and Thailand, in order to promote a "Strategic Partnership for Growth and Sustainable Development" (Vientiane Times, 2024, January 15).

Currently, Thailand is a member of most frameworks for Mekong cooperation, including Mekong-Ganga Cooperation or MGC (India), Mekong-Japan Cooperation, Mekong-Republic of Korea Cooperation, Mekong-U.S. Partnership (an expansion of the Lower Mekong Initiative or LMI, initiated in 2009) and the Friends of the Lower Mekong (FLM), Lancang-Mekong Cooperation or LMC (People's Republic of China), and the

Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) and Mekong River Commission (MRC). Thus, as a regional actor, Thailand can play a role to promote cooperation between India's MGC and other frameworks in the lower Mekong region, which can assist India to achieve its global vision- "The World is One Family".

The geopolitical dynamics in the Lower Mekong Basin area, which includes countries like Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar, are significantly influenced by the power struggles between China, the United States, and regional actors. As indicated earlier, China's influence is elevated by its heavy investments in infrastructure projects in the Mekong region through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), including building roads, railways, and hydropower projects. These investments intend to enhance connectivity and trade which can significantly increase China's economic leverage across the region. In addition, China highlighted that Lancang-Mekong Cooperation can complement international and regional initiatives and cooperations, including the BRI. Therefore, it can be argued that China's economic and diplomatic engagements can increase its influence over Mekong countries, and enable it to gain a more dominant role in Southeast Asia. The U.S.' involvement is primarily perceived as a strategic intervention to counterbalance China's influence by strengthening partnerships with Mekong countries, through diplomatic and security engagements and development assistance, the Mekong-U.S. Partnership, aiming at improving economic development, environmental protection, and regional stability, being one such intervention. Between 2009 and 2021, the U.S. government provided more than US\$4.3 billion in both bilateral and regional grant assistance to the five Mekong partner countries, including nearly \$4 billion from the State Department and USAID (United States Department of State. 2021, August 3).

Although, the geopolitical rivalry in the Lower Mekong Basin area is dominated by assertion of the economic and political influence of China and the U.S., the pluralistic nature of the geopolitical landscape can counterbalance the influence of both superpower and allow the five Mekong countries to be able to prioritise their own national interests and relationships with external powers. A complex and evolving geopolitical landscape can facilitate India to advance the interest of its Act East Policy and its foreign policy of वसुधैव कुटुम्बकम् (Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam) or "The World is One Family".

#### **IV. Conclusion**

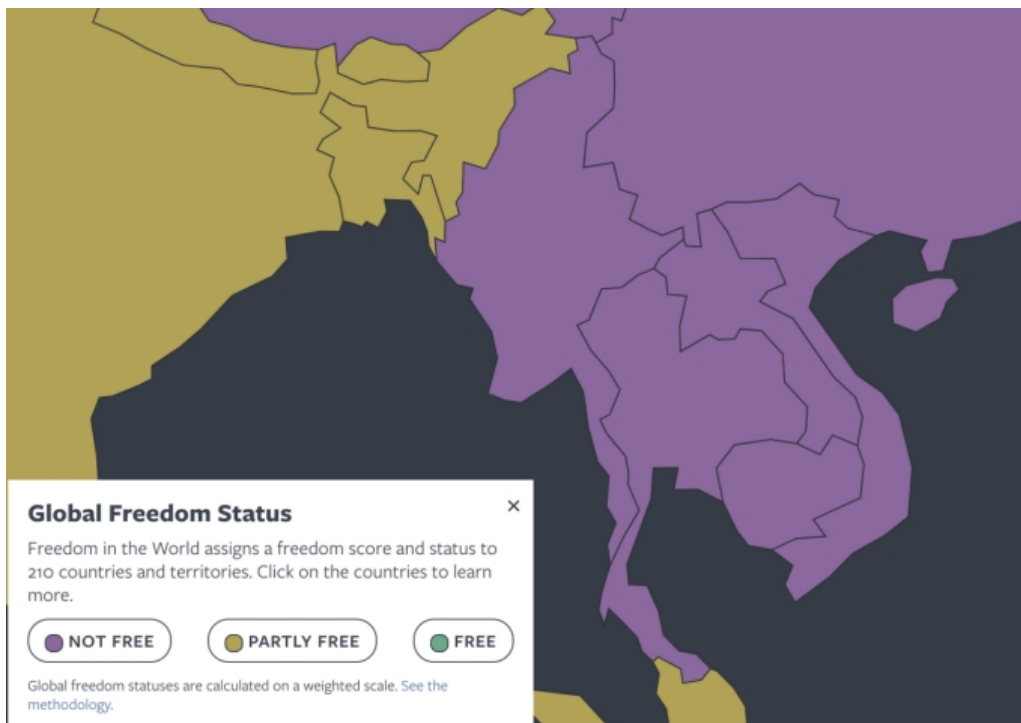
According to the Vientiane Declaration announced in 2000, following the 1st Ministerial Meeting of the MGC, the focus was on four traditional areas, namely tourism, culture, education, and transport and communication, which has now expanded to include health and traditional medicine, agriculture and allied sectors, small and medium enterprises, water resources management, science and technology, skill development, and capacity building. To a certain extent, the absence of a regional office undermines the efforts of the MGC to achieve its objectives, especially the engagement with local stakeholders in the lower Mekong countries outside their capitals. It is observed that the Mekong Institute, established by the Governments of Thailand and New Zealand and Khon Kaen University, is now serving as the driving mechanism for the implementation of ODA from South Korea.

Most of ODA in the lower Mekong region have been actively providing both technical and financial supports to Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam, to support human rights, agriculture, energy, environment, health and human resource development, tourism, transport and trade facilitation, and urban development. Indeed, these areas of development are similar to the areas supported by India's MGC. It is over two decades since the establishment of the MGC. The question arises whether MGC remains relevant to the promotion of development in the lower Mekong areas. There are both internal and external challenges for India to examine when implementing the projects within the region.

Within the lower Mekong areas, there are two main categories for consideration, namely the political system and the level of economic development. Laos and Vietnam are communist countries. Cambodia, Myanmar, and Thailand are classified as democratic countries. However, with one party in control in Cambodia, democratic suspension in Myanmar since the 2021 Myanmar coup d'état, and the continuity of military influence in the post-2023 election in Thailand, these countries can hardly be described as full-fledged democracies. According to the Freedom House, International NGO, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam are classified as "Not Free" countries, as illustrated in Map 2.

I am delighted to see you come together today, to celebrate the bond between the world's two great democracies - India and the United States. I am happy to help out whenever you need a strong bipartisan consensus...The foundation of America was inspired by the vision of a nation of equal people...Democracy is one of our sacred and shared values...Democracy is the spirit that supports equality and dignity. Democracy is the idea that welcomes debate and discourse. Democracy is the culture that gives wings to thought and expression. India is blessed to have such values from times immemorial.

### Map 2: Global Freedom Status 2023



Source: Freedom House. 2023

In the evolution of the democratic spirit, India is the Mother of Democracy. Millennia ago, our oldest scriptures said, 'एकम् सत् विप्रा बहुधा वदन्ति'. It means - the truth is one but the wise express it in different ways. Now, the US is the oldest and India the largest democracy. Our partnership augurs well for the future of democracy. Together, we shall give a better future to the world, and a better world to the future.(Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2023)

According to Modi's speech, addressed to the Joint Session of the U.S. Congress in June 2023, he emphasised that democracy is regarded as "sacred and shared values" between India and the U. S. A question arises whether India's South-South cooperation and the implementation of India's MGC can be disrupted by the implementation of the U.S. foreign policy which always include the promotion of human rights or this shared values can enhance their cooperation when implementing ODA in the lower Mekong countries.

With respect to the level of economic development amongst the five lower Mekong countries, Thailand is the only country that was upgraded to be an upper-middle income economy<sup>2</sup> since 2011, by the World Bank (World Bank, 2024c). Therefore, Thailand does not now normally qualify as a recipient country of ODA, but Thailand can significantly play a constructive role, especially providing technical assistance. Meanwhile, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam are classified as "Lower middle income" countries<sup>3</sup> (World Bank, 2024c), which is in the same category as India. With shared experiences and socio-economic challenges in India and these countries, the promotion of development on India's MGC four traditional areas can be effectively implemented. For example, the microcredit system, promoted by the recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize 2006, (Muhammad Yunus, the founder of Grameen Bank. He and his bank were awarded for their efforts to create economic and social development from below, "Grameen Bank's objective since its establishment in 1983 has been to grant poor people small loans on easy terms- so-called micro-credit." (Nobel Foundation, 2024)

In a competitive and cooperative geopolitical environment of the lower Mekong areas, the evolution of India's foreign policy can assist its engagement with regional actor and donors to promote socio-economic development in Southeast Asia, which can benefit both India and countries within the region. As Dr. Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, External Affairs Minister of India highlighted

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<sup>2</sup> Upper-middle-income economies are those in which 2022 GNI per capita was between \$4,466 and \$13,845).

<sup>3</sup> Lower-middle-income economies are those in which 2022 GNI per capita was between \$1,136 and \$4,465.

India also seeks to promote cooperation with diverse partners. From the era of non-alignment, we have now evolved that of Vishwa Mitra (a friend to the world). This is reflected in our ability and willingness to engage with a broad range of nations. And, where necessary, harmonise interests. (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. 2023, September 26)

It is predicted that India could become the world third largest economy in the world by 2023 and the fastest growing economies of the world, as described by the World Bank, with its 1.4 billion population and the world's largest democracy (World Bank, 2024a). It is undeniable that India's global status is significantly different from the year 2000 when the MGC was established. In addition, there is now a faster pace of international collaboration that can facilitate and complement India's engagement in the Mekong through the MGC, such as the Quad, a diplomatic partnership between Australia, India, Japan, and the United States —focusing the promotion of different areas of security such as health and technology, not just the traditional one. All of the current Quad countries are important and active actors in the lower Mekong area. This can significantly enhance India's security and economic interests in the lower Mekong area which intersects with the Bay of Bengal through the BIMSTEC.

India's Act East Policy is turning 10 years in 2024 along with its technological advancement, rising power and global status. Therefore, India can significantly increase the level of engagement of the MGC in the lower Mekong area, through providing technological cooperation in agricultural development and environmental protection, which can enhance economic and security interests of five ASEAN countries (Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam) who are members of the MGC. As the primary focus of India's developmental approach is human-centric to promote respect and diversity within a society and across the world, which can mitigate confrontation with other regional actors. This will assist regional actors to balance their own national interests with the pressures and opportunities presented by regional and global powers and create economic and political stability in the lower Mekong area that enhance the implementation of MGC and India's Act East Policy.



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