

## A Chinese perspective on the damned Mekong

Another [Mekong River Commission meeting](#) has just been convened on the future of the Mekong River, this one to discuss the environmental and social impact of the 12 (yes 12) hydropower dams proposed for construction on the mainstream lower Mekong (a very long draft report is [here](#)). While there will no doubt be plenty of argy bargy over who wins and loses from these dams, at least the four MRC member countries - Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam - have collective control over them and stand to reap any benefits (and, of course, costs) they deliver.

The outlook is less promising further upstream in China. While I agree that [only time will tell](#) how the Chinese dams affect downstream flows, it is pretty clear that China acts unilaterally and with little regard for its southern neighbours in these matters. It's very big so it can - even as its bilateral relations in mainland Southeast Asia go from strength to strength.

Having said this, there is more to the issue than such hard-headed realism would suggest. [LaoFAB](#) (a Google group, Lao Food and Agribusiness) recently posted a translation of a Chinese article: "[Responsibility of Upstream States: Environmental Impacts of China's hydropower development on the Upstream Mekong](#)", written by a "prominent Chinese scholar on Mekong River issues", Qin Hui. Here is a key excerpt from the conclusion:

### ***There Should be More Negotiations at home as well as Abroad***

*The impacts of the drought along the Mekong River have generated many criticisms of China, including that it is "hegemonic." On many occasions I have replied to such criticisms to argue that China is not behaving in such a way. Nevertheless, the Chinese hydropower authorities do seem to deserve their reputation as being "domineering." What many probably do not realize though is that they are much more domineering back in China than they are overseas. Although foreign countries cry out that China is a hegemon in the Mekong River region, honestly speaking, China treats criticisms from abroad, especially those from foreign governments much more seriously than domestic criticisms. Though opinions from foreign NGO organizations are thought to be ignored, they tend to attract more attention than the opinions of the Chinese people. There are many conflicts in China: conflict among different stakeholder over floods, relocation and changes in upstream hydrology; conflict between social needs (flood control and drought relief) and the interests of hydropower station operators; and conflict between environmental protection and development. There are heated debates over Sanmenxia, Pubugou, and Yangliuhu Reservoirs in China. There are also controversies over whether we should build some hydropower stations at all, and for others over how we should build and operate them. All these conflicts and controversies need mechanisms through which they can be resolved - currently China has absolutely no such mechanisms.*

I'm not sure the difference between "hegemonic" and "domineering" is clear - it may be clearer in the Chinese original. But the domestic Chinese context of overbearing authorities and heated

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debates helps to break down the simplistic China-versus-Southeast Asia view that often seems to dominate discussions.

For anyone interested in reading more, I suggest you go to [LaoFAB](#) (you have to join - but if you're interested in Lao development issues I recommend it highly). The original article was in Chinese (try [here](#) and [here](#)) and apparently translated on-line, but, unfortunately, I cannot track it down.