

FEAR OF RIVERS DRIVES CHINA TO TAME EVEN MEKONG RIVER

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

BANGKOK : As China perceives rivers as dangerous and wild natural systems that need to be tamed to be productive for mankind, the Beijing government constructed a dam on the Mekong river, thus, impacting the food and economic security of Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam and Thailand.

According to an article published in the Bangkok Post, "Across the long sweep of China's history, rivers are perceived as dangerous and wild natural systems that need to be suppressed or tamed in order to be productive for mankind. This is a dangerous discourse for a river system in which natural flow cycle underpins the food and economic security of Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam and Thailand."

The construction was done despite the Mekong basin not having any historical records of severe flooding which killed thousands of people.

Citing recent research by prominent Chinese academic and research institutions, including Tsinghua University, the article said that the study claimed that during the wet season, China's upstream dam restrictions have a positive impact on the Mekong.

The Tsinghua study was in response to the Eyes on Earth (EoE) study published in April, which was supported by the Sustainable Infrastructure Partnership, implemented by Pact as part of the US Department of State's Lower Mekong Initiative.

According to the EoE study, China's upstream dam regulation had severely altered the natural flow of the Mekong river. "Under natural flow conditions, a Mekong flood pulse would have been observed at Chiang Saen; however, restrictions from upstream dams neutered that pulse. The study concluded that China's operations of 11 upstream dams exacerbated drought conditions in the lower basin by restricting the natural flow from China during the wet season. Our follow-up investigation has determined that the two largest dams in China, Xiaowan and Nuozhadu, restricted around 20 billion cubic metres of water between July and November of 2019. Satellite images show those dams are today poised for a repeat performance of last year's restrictions," the Bangkok Post quoted the EoE study.

The Tsinghua study's concluded that "the regulation of reservoirs in the Mekong Basin could play an active role in dealing with droughts."

Contrasting the Tsinghua study, Bangkok Post reported that "the productivity of the Mekong Delta, one of the world's major production zones of rice and agricultural products, depends on Mekong floods. Extreme flooding does occur as it did in August of 2019 in northeast Thailand and southern Laos but by and large communities in the Mekong are adapted to benefit from these floods. A 2017 study by the Mekong River Commission estimated that wet season flooding provides \$8 billion to \$10 billion in annual economic benefits while causing less than \$70 million in damages. Benefits of natural flow outweigh costs by more than 100 times!"

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