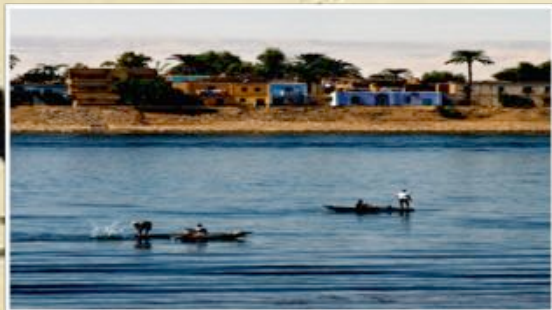


Soft Power, Hard Danger: China Damming The Mekong River, Southeast Asia

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This research argues that the success of China's soft power in ASEAN effectively reduces the contestation of downstream Mekong countries on its upstream dam-building projects because such success allows China to paint a desirable image of itself in the minds of these leaders; and, consequently, this can lead to a situation in which the downstream countries may experience detrimental social and ecological impacts.



The Nile River. Retrieved April 25, 2013, from http://www.google.com/img/en&client=psy-ab&q=the+nile+river+images&oeq=The+Nile+River+images&gs_l=hp.3

Transboundary rivers often present difficult challenges for effective and peaceful managements because countries who share these rivers usually tend to use them in ways that pertain mainly to their own interest. Because of the nature of transboundary rivers, one's country action of using the rivers to pursue its own interest can potentially create social and ecological costs on others. Conflicts between countries producing these social and ecological impacts and countries that are forced to absorb such impacts more often than not tend to arise.



The Sekong Bridge, a \$20 million project financed with Chinese aid money. Retrieved April 25, 2013, from http://www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2006/09/17/world/20060918_CHINA_SLIDESHOW_2.html



The analysis of the sources above reveals that China's success in constructing its soft power in the downstream Mekong countries directly corresponds to its success in laying its soft power on the larger region of ASEAN. This success is governed by three primary factors:

- China's ability to produce foreign policies that match with those of the ASEAN
- Its consistent effort to tighten its economic cooperation with the region through its soaring investments (refer to table. 1)
- Its relentless pronouncement as a strong promoter of regional peace and stability

The Mekong River seems to tell a different story in which conflicts among upstream and downstream countries have yet to occur. The rise of the several large dams built by China, the river's upstream country, has been viewed with great concerns as they pose potential threats on countries in the lower region (see image. 1). Yet downstream countries have been largely reluctant to contest China's dam projects upstream. To understand the reluctance of these countries to confront China's action, this research employs the concept "soft power." China's success in wielding its "soft power" in ASEAN, of which these countries are officially apart, effectively serves to deter their willingness in contesting China's action.



Xiaowan Dam, one of the world tallest dam (292m) constructed by China on the Upper Mekong River. Retrieved April 24, 2013, from http://www.meltindontibet.com/r/river_mekong.htm



Image 1: Showing all the dams that have been built, planned, and proposed on the Mekong River. Note the image is from 2011, and thus does not fully show the current situation. The Xiaowan, China's most recent completed dam, is currently open for full operation. Retrieved March 21, 2013, from <http://www.sciencemag.org/oa/lookup/doi/10.1126/science.1220000>

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Brunei	1.5	0	1.18	1.82	5.81
Cambodia	5.15	9	64.45	204.64	215.83
Laos	20.58	48	154.35	87	203.24
Malaysia	56.72	7	-32.82	34.43	53.78
Myanmar	11.54	12	92.31	232.53	367.7
Philippines	4.51	9	4.5	33.69	40.24
Singapore	20.33	152	397.73	1550.95	1414.25
Thailand	4.77	15	76.41	45.47	49.77
Vietnam	20.77	43	110.88	119.84	112.39
Indonesia	11.84	56	99.09	173.98	226.09

Table 1: Showing China's Growing Investments in the ASEAN countries (in U.S. \$ millions), 2005-2009. Retrieved March 10, 2013, from <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/special/invest/Pu.D.html>

Coined by Joseph S. Nye, "soft power" is defined as the ability to get "others to want the outcomes you want" through the use of cooperation rather than sanction or coercion. Soft power relies on three primary factors: a country's culture, political values, and foreign policy.

The evidence used to examine China's success in wielding its soft power in ASEAN building and, therefore, in the four downstream countries, stems from three sources:

- The ASEAN-China Dialogue Relations
- China's 2012 Energy Policy; and,
- China's 12th Five-Year Plan (2011-2015)

A critical analysis is performed in order to study the success of China's soft power on ASEAN and, thus, the four downstream countries, and the implications of such success regarding the willingness of the downstream countries to contest China's dam activities upstream the Mekong River.



Fishing activities on the Mekong River. Retrieved April 28, 2013, from <http://www.internationalrivers.org/resources/our-rivers-feed-millions-7498>



The dams will likely affect the river's already extinct species, such as the giant Mekong catfish and the freshwater dolphin.

The downstream Mekong region has some of the most productive wetland ecosystem in the world. The Tonle Sap Lake in Cambodia is the largest fresh water lake in Southeast Asia and home to hundreds of fish and bird species.

The dams will lead to the modification of natural flow patters, affecting the water and sediment flows of the river. This, in turn, will have significant impacts on agriculture and fishery production in which tens of millions of people in the downstream region depend for their livelihoods.

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