

## MRC MEDIA MONITOR BRIEF – JANUARY 2018<sup>1</sup>

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<a href="#">News Released by MRC</a> are news published in MRC website.	4 articles
<a href="#">MRC in the News</a> are news about MRC published by the media (international, regional, local newspapers)	8 articles
<a href="#">MRC mentioned/quoted in the news</a> are news that refers, mentions, or quotes the MRC.	17 articles
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### NEWS RELEASED BY MRC

[Press Release – 15 January](#): Mekong River Commission, Korea Development Institute discuss knowledge sharing programme

**Covered by:** Vientiane Times, January 18, Water experts discuss knowledge-sharing programme (*see clipped news attached*)

**Covered by:** Socio-economic Newspaper, January 19, MRC cooperate in two joint projects on the Lower Mekong basin (*see clipped news attached*)

[Press Release – 17 January](#): Mekong River Commission launches two joint projects to better manage the Mekong basin resources and address flood and drought issues

**Covered by:** [Vietnam News Agency](#), January 19, Germany supports resource management in Mekong River basin

**Covered by:** [Khmer Times](#), January 18, Mekong observation projects launched

**Covered by:** Vientiane Times, January 19, MRC launches joint projects to better manage Lower Mekong basin (*See clipped news attached*)

[Press Release – 24 January](#): Guidelines for mitigating environmental impacts and managing risks from hydropower projects consulted with stakeholders

**Covered by:** [Khmer Times](#), January 25, Bid to ease hydro dam threats on the Mekong

**Covered by:** Lao Patthana Newspaper, January 29, Mekong countries consult on environmental impact mitigation and risk management from hydropower projects (*see clipped news*)

[Press Release – 26 January](#): Mekong River Commission launches website for its 3<sup>rd</sup> Summit and international conference, calls for contribution and participation

**Covered by:** [KPL](#), January 31, Mekong River Commission launches website for its 3<sup>rs</sup> Summit

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<sup>1</sup> This brief covers period from 1 -31 January 2018.

## MRC IN THE NEWS

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## MRC MENTIONED/QUOTED IN THE NEWS

1. News leading to and after the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) Summit drew skepticism about its effectiveness, most often comparing it to the MRC as a complementary or competing mechanism. The LMC was also viewed as a strategic tool for China to control the river (and beyond) and potentially become the largest China-ASEAN conflict after the South-China Sea.



**Is Mekong set to become the new South China Sea for regional disputes?** (South China Morning Post, January 3)

The Beijing-led LMC mechanism was set up to help ease tensions over development projects, but environmental groups are yet to be convinced.

**(+/-) MRC mention:** “China was invited to join the **MRC** but opted instead to act as a ‘dialogue partner’ – as did Myanmar. That means Beijing can sidestep the commission’s rule that member nations’ dam-building project proposals must be presented for discussion...

*The poor, landlocked country of Laos, for instance, is pushing ahead with its plan for a third dam on the Mekong despite opposition from its downstream neighbor Vietnam and the **MRC** after setting itself the goal of becoming ‘the battery of Southeast Asia’ by exporting hydropower.*

*The hope for the LMC among some observers is that it can achieve important objectives that the **MRC** has been unable to, such as regulating the building of dams on the mainstream Mekong.*

*...**MRC**’s problems provided justification for the existence of the LMC...*

*The problem is that the **Mekong River Commission** has too many limitations, notably that it only has four out of the six riparian countries as signatories...*

*[Also] **its mandate** is limited to water resources, when rivers are about much more than water, and the economic and investment planners, and the private sector need to be much more involved.”*

*The LMC is a way of showing that China only plays by its own rules. It creates fait accompli by building dams upstream to the detriment of downstream countries and then sets up its own governing body as a rejection of the **MRC**.”*



**Multiple Mekong forums risk igniting rivalry** (The Nation, January 3)

Leaders from six riparian states along the Mekong River will be busy this year as meetings on many cooperation schemes in the region are scheduled in a situation that observers have said is overlapping in terms of membership, cooperation sectors and functions. Among the meetings are: the 2<sup>nd</sup> LMC (January 10), GMS (March 6) to look at cooperation plans, MRC Summit (April 5), 8<sup>th</sup> Summit of Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy which includes the five countries excluding China (date tbc).

**(+/-) MRC mention:** “Downstream countries in the **MRC** framework should work harder to influence China and Myanmar to sign the 1995 Mekong Agreement, enabling the **MRC** to effectively regulate water utilisation and environmental concerns in the Mekong River.

China enjoys utilisation of the Mekong for hydropower and navigation projects but prefers the less binding status of dialogue partner in the **MRC** when it comes to commitments to jointly take responsibility of environmental and social impacts.

Under the **1995 pact**, the countries in the lower Mekong – Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam – need to go through a prior consultation process before projects to utilize water resources in the river begin.

China’s eight hydropower dams – and others in the pipeline – are not subject to the same process since Beijing is not a member of the **MRC**.

The 3rd **MRC Summit** in Siem Reap, one of the most significant political events, which takes place every four years, has the state theme of ‘joint efforts and partnerships towards achievement of the sustainable development goals in the Mekong’, according to an **MRC** statement.

This year, the **MRC** remained committed to continue building and strengthening new and existing partnerships, including with the LMC, Asean, and the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, it said.”



**Power stacked against Southeast Asia’s poor as China dams Mekong** (Channel NewsAsia, January 8)

Experts agree that China—the regional superpower—is now asserting its authority through the nascent LMC forum, while appeasing its Southeast Asian neighbors with investment and soft loans.

**(+/-) MRC mention:** “But environmentalists say the LMC aims to replace the long-standing **Mekong River Commission** - a regional body that has tried to manage development along the river - albeit without China.”



**Against the current on the Mekong** (The Nation – Opinion, January 4)

Author highlights the several overlaps and flaws of several regional bodies like the LMC, GMS, and MRC and the limitations for the MRC in governing the entire Mekong, given that China is only a dialogue partner and intends to remain as such.

**(+/-) MRC mention:** “Meanwhile the countries bordering the lower reaches of the Mekong – Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam – will meet in April in Siem Reap, Cambodia, as the **Mekong River Commission (MRC)**.

The **MRC’s** task is made difficult by the fact that China and Myanmar further upstream are building hydroelectric dams and modifying the river channel to facilitate navigation. Neither nation is obliged to adhere to formal agreements on such developments. It makes little sense, obviously, to have a single body attempting to regulate only the lower part of a 4,900-kilometre river. Whatever happens further upstream is bound to have an impact along the entire length.

China has built eight dams and plans several more, and its claim to enjoy “good cooperation” with the **MRC** tends to ring hollow. In particular it points out that water released from its reservoirs

helped ease a severe drought in Vietnam in 2016 and that its expertise has aided the Lower Mekong countries during annual flooding. Beijing is not interested in joining the **MRC**, which would require its signature on a restrictive 1995 treaty. It prefers instead to remain a “dialogue partner.”



### **China’s interest in riverine development evident at Mekong River Summit (VOA, January 10)**

Author exerts that the LMC is a mechanism for China to control the river and as a ‘model for multilateral institution’ or water diplomacy which LMC is China-led and MRC is western-led.

**(+/-) MRC mention:** *“The LMC is clearly a bid by China to take control of Mekong matters, after having refused to join the **Mekong River Commission**,’ said Milton Osborne, a Southeast Asia expert who wrote the 2000 book *The Mekong: Turbulent Past, Uncertain Future...**

*The LMC represents a sign of the limitations the **Mekong River Commission** faced in stopping dam projects that could potentially be harmful to the Mekong region...*

*A similar multilateral mechanism, the **MRC**, which is backed by the West, has been criticized for being unable to stop a number of controversial hydropower dams along the Mekong River.”*



### **Five things to know about the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Summit (South China Morning Post, January 9)**

**(+/-) MRC mention:** *“The Lancang-Mekong Cooperation forum was established by Beijing in 2015. The body was seen as a rival to the long-standing **Mekong River Commission**, which has been around for more than 60 years but whose membership does not include China or Myanmar.”*

## **2. The LMC approved a 5-year plan which some critics it as flawed and too general.**



### **China and Mekong countries adopt new river plan (VOA, January 11)**

China pushed through a five-year development plan with the countries along of one Asia’s most critical and embattled rivers – the Mekong.

The actual submitted plan is so broad - covering almost every area of governance - that it is hard to point to a specific objective and no concrete steps appear to have been taken to address the growing number of man-made threats to the river system.

**(-) MRC mention:** *“Born in 2015 under the stewardship of Beijing, the LMC rivals the much older **Mekong River Commission** - to which China is only a dialogue partner and thus exempt from a requirement to present its dam proposals for discussion.*

*While the **MRC** has been criticized by some as a largely toothless institution that has failed to safeguard the river and its dependents from harmful projects, there is nothing yet to suggest the LMC will fare any better.”*



### **Vietnam to focus on stronger collaboration for effective use of Mekong water resources (The Nation, January 12)**

Conservationists expressed their disappointment as the six leaders at the LMC Summit did not address transboundary environmental impacts of development projects in the region. The six leaders reaffirmed the goal of building a Mekong-Lancang region of peace, stability, sustainable development and prosperity.

**(+/-) MRC mention:** *“Only four countries in the lower part of the Mekong – Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam – signed the 1995 Mekong Agreement, the pact for river regulation and establishment of the **Mekong River Commission**. ”*



**Environmental concerns as Mekong nations vow to promote river development** (VOA, January 11)

Pianporn Deetes, Thailand Campaign Coordinator for the NGO International Rivers expressed concerns of the LMC’s approved action plan to only focus on infrastructure development while overlooking the projects’ environmental impacts.

**(+/-) MRC mention:** *“The China-led forum, set up in 2016, is seen by many in the region as a rival to the **Mekong River Commission**, which was formed in the 1950s but excludes China and Myanmar. It also competes with a 2009 U.S. program called the Lower Mekong Initiative, involving Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam.”*



**China is stealthily waging a water war** (The Globe and Mail, Opinion, January 12)

With the world's most resource-hungry economy, China has gone into overdrive to appropriate natural resources. On the most essential resource, freshwater, it is seeking to become the upstream controller by manipulating transboundary flows through dams and other structures.

**(+/-) MRC mention:** *“For example, China has erected eight mega-dams on the Mekong just before the river leaves its territory, and is building or planning another 20. The dams give China control over the flow of water and nutrient-rich sediment essential to the livelihoods of 60 million people in Southeast Asia. With its clout, Beijing has rejected the treaty-linked **Mekong River Commission** and instead co-opted the vulnerable downstream nations in its own Lancang-Mekong Cooperation initiative, which lacks binding rules.”*



**China-led group wants more development on Mekong River** (VOA, January 14)

China and five Southeast Asian countries have set goals for developing the Mekong River area, which Chinese premier said that his country would supply benefits to all the group’s members. Meanwhile, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen told reporters about plans to create centers for improving water supply and environmental cooperation. He did not provide additional details of the five-year development plan, however.

**(+/-) MRC mention:** *“**The Mekong River Commission (MRC)** was formed to guide development on the river. The older group describes itself as an ‘inter-governmental organization’ that works directly with Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam ‘to jointly manage the shared water resources and the sustainable development of the Mekong River.’*

*The **MRC** has been criticized for not doing enough to stop harmful projects on the river. But it is unclear if the Lancang-Mekong Cooperative, or LMC, will do better.*

Laos is building two dams and preparing a third, although **MRC** members have protested.”

3. **Just a day after Vientiane Times reported about the first dialogue on Pakbeng Hydropower Project (between NMCs, developers, and other related stakeholders) as ‘Mekong’s historic moment’, opposing news fired back in Thai media pointing to the dialogue as not addressing concerns of local people living along the Mekong River in Thailand. Similarly a week later, International Rivers issued a statement on the flaws of the dialogue.**



**The first dialogue on Pakbaeng Hydropower project open up the “Mekong’s historic moment”** (Vientiane Times, January 16, clipped news attached)

Article highlights the dialogue as a first meeting on the project after the PNPCA, involving the LNMCs, TNMCs, developers, line agencies, independent consultants, and NGOs namely Thai Rak Chiang Khong conservation group who previously lodged a complaint in June 2017 to the Thai Central Administrative Court without success. Its head Niwat Roykaew was quoted in the news article that *“the dialogue would make a great contribution to the rational development and utilization of Mekong resources.”*

**(+/-) MRC mention:** *“The first dialogue meeting of the Pakbaeng Hydropower project....took place to further react with the recommendations raised by the **Mekong River Commission** in regard to the **PNPCA** process of the project.*

*On June 27, 2017 it [Pakbaeng HPP] became the first hydropower project for which all Mekong member countries signed the Joint Statement in accordance with the Prior Consultation for a 6-month period under the **PNPCA**.”*



**Chiang Rai locals still oppose Lao hydropower dam after meet with Laos officials** (The Nation, January 16). Similar story in the [Bangkok Post](#), January 17, “Laos assures riverside Thais on dam impact”

Lao authorities and the developer of the Pak Beng hydropower dam project failed to relieve concerns of local people living along the Mekong River in Thailand about the impacts of a dam now under construction on the river. The local people were unconvinced and said that their assurances were not credible and that the mitigation measures would fail to prevent problems.

Laos authorities and Datang were urged to comprehensively study the impacts of their project and reconsider the plan to build this dam.

**(+/-) MRC mention:** *“Jansawaeng Bunnong, the deputy director-general of the Laos Energy Policy and Planning Department assured the local citizens that Pak Beng Dam had gone through all required procedures. They include procedures for notification, **a prior consultation and agreement (PNPCA) process**, and audits by international academics and experts in related fields. The feedback has been used to hone the project plan, improving it to reduce the possible impacts by, for example, incorporating fish ladders and sediment gates.”*



**Statement by Thai Mekong People’s Network from 1<sup>st</sup> Dialogue with Datang Hydropower Company on Pak Beng Dam** (International Rivers, January 23)

The statement signed by grassroots communities of the Mekong called for the right to meaningfully take part in the decision making process of the Mekong and its regional resources: *“Our voices must be heard. We conclude from the Dialogue that the existing information regarding the impacts of the Pak Beng Dam remains limited and inadequate for making important decisions about whether the project should proceed.”*

The statement points to the fact that the dialogue lacked sound evidence; implied a not-so transparent and inclusive process *“just 30 minutes prior to the meeting, we were informed that representatives from the Government of Lao PDR would join the dialogue and play lead role in providing information...; vague and pointless to look only at a single project as opposed to the whole cascade.*

#### 4. The environmental concerns of the Mekong river continues to be covered and debated in the news including impacts of dams in the Mekong and that felt in the Mekong Delta.



**Laos pushes ahead with Mekong dams despite environmental risks** (Asian Correspondent, January 24)

Despite facing opposition and pressure from within the region, Laos appears determined to push ahead with its large-scale dam-building projects on the Lower Mekong river. Article points to MRC's research and inability/non-influence to these developments.

**(+/-) MRC mention:** *“Statistics from the **Mekong River Commission** show that the river delivered up to 160 million tonnes of sediment to the delta in 1994...In 2014, this fell half to only about 75 million tonnes.’*

*Yet the construction of multiple dams on the Lower Mekong also poses serious risks to the natural environment. These risks were outlined by the multi-national **Mekong River Commission (MRC)** as far back as 2010, before any of the three projects currently underway in Laos were given the go-ahead by the government in Vientiane. The **MRC** published an in-depth *Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA)* report outlining the ecological dangers of damming the Mekong.*

*The **MRC** has warned of “permanent and irreversible” damage to the environment if multiple dam projects on the Lower Mekong proceed, stating that the associated risks cannot be fully mitigated. After releasing its SEA report in 2010 the **MRC** called for a ten-year deferral on damming the Lower Mekong’s main channel; yet eight years later with three dams under construction, it is clear that the **MRC** has been unable to exert any form of meaningful influence.*

*A major problem is that the **MRC** –an *inter-governmental forum which includes Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam* – lacks any real power on the issues it is concerned with, serving in a purely advisory rather than regulatory capacity. Whilst the **MRC** does have discussion and consultation mechanisms in place, it lacks the authority to force any one of its member states to delay or halt construction on any given project.”*



**World view: China’s Mekong river dams criticised for affecting other countries’ livelihoods** (Breitbart, January 24)

The dams give China control over the Mekong River, which means that China can use them as leverage to control much of the economy of Southeast Asia.

The dispute over the Mekong River is similar to the dispute over the South China Sea. In the South China Sea, China is using its massive military power to threaten its neighbors, to annex regions belonging to other nations, and to build military bases that were declared illegal by the United Nations Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague, which eviscerated [all of China's claims in the South China Sea](#).

**(+/-) MRC mention:** *"In 1995, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam formed the **Mekong River Commission (MRC)** as a forum for managing changes to the river. China refused to join the **MRC**, to avoid being bound by its requirement that developments require consultations with the other members. Instead, China in 2015 formed a new organization of the four **MRC** nations plus Myanmar, the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC), which it controls."*



**Provinces fail to meet Paris agreement** (Viet Nam News, January 19)

The Mekong Delta province of An Giang is being helped to produce a detailed and workable draft plan to implement the Paris Agreement on Climate Change because it lacked detailed targets.

**(+/-) MRC mention:** *"Statistics from the **Mekong River Commission** show that the river delivered up to 160 million tonnes of sediment to the delta in 1994...In 2014, this fell half to only about 75 million tonnes."*

## MEKONG NEWS

**5. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Summit (January 10-11 in Cambodia) dominated the news this month (See 1 and 2 above). Major mainstream media (i.e Chinese) applauded results of the LMC, and highlighted China's proactive diplomacy forging stronger support and ties between China and other member countries most notably with Cambodia.**



**China, Laos sign agreement on Lancang-Mekong cooperation fund** (Xinhua, January 3)

Chinese Ambassador to Laos Wang Wentian and Lao Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Khamphao Ernthavanh have signed an agreement on Lancang-Mekong cooperation funding for 13 Lao projects.



**Cambodia to host 2<sup>nd</sup> Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Leader' Meeting on Jan.10** (Xinhua, January 5)

The LMC summit themed "Our River of Peace and Sustainable Development" will adopt four documents, namely the Phnom Penh Declaration, a five-year action plan of the LMC (2018-2022), a joint list of 2<sup>nd</sup> batch of cooperation projects, and reports of the Six Joint Working Groups of Priority Areas. The Chairmanship will be handed over from Cambodia to Laos.



**Building bridges of friendship and cooperation in the Lancang-Mekong region and between China and Cambodia** (Khmer Times, Opinion, January 9)



HE Li Keqiang, Premier of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, authored a Op'ed one day ahead of the 2<sup>nd</sup> LMC Summit. The Op'ed highlights how the LMC has been strongly received by all members and the speed/effectiveness/results achieved over the 2 years since its inception.



**Eyeing Mekong dams, China lavishes cash on ally Cambodia** (The Japan Times, January 12)

Beijing has pledged billions of dollars to build new infrastructure in Cambodia as Chinese Premier Li Keqiang ended a two-day charm offensive currying favor for its mega-dams across the Mekong.

Observers say China often uses cash and soft loans for high-profile infrastructure projects to butter up its poorer neighbors.



**Is Chinese investment taking over the Mekong?** (Deutsche Welle, January 15)

Author highlights China's influence and ties on Cambodia and other Southeast Asian nations.



**China pledges \$1 million for environment** (Khmer Times, January 9)

An example of China using its influential power (*and stirring news coverage leading to the LMC summit*)

The Chinese government has pledged to assist Cambodia's Environment Ministry with improving water quality control, providing the nation's first equipment for water quality control of about \$1 million in funding.



**Mekong countries eye bold new future** (Bangkok Post, Opinion, January 9)

Article gives a positive view of China's LMC as: (i) a flagship for South-South Cooperation; (ii) to use Beijing's technical know-how to come up with good cross-border rivers model for the LMC countries; (iii) drive tangible outcomes for Mekong-sub region plan and development which has been on Asean's dialogue agenda and international organizations for decades but implementation remains sluggish. The LMC mechanism has been truly project-centred with most of its 45 early harvest projects and 13 initiatives having already been completed or made substantive progress ([Xinhua](#), January 10, 'Spotlight: Lancang-Mekong Cooperation boosts development of China-ASEAN community of shared future').



**Mekong countries pledge more cooperation as demands on river grow** (Business Insider UK, January 10)

Author reports on the LMC summit outcomes, and the views of environmental activists on the backdrops of China's upstream dams, and its significant influence on Cambodia through aid the country receives.



### **Proactive diplomacy' in Mekong River dispute only way to resolve brewing conflict**

(South China Morning Post, Opinion, January 14)

The establishment of the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation mechanism, which involves China and Southeast Asian littoral states, is a step in the right direction. It provides a much-needed platform for all parties to arrest the brewing conflict and adopt necessary mitigation and adaptation measures for affected communities. Proactive diplomacy is the only way forward.

A similar view was shared in Xinhua referring to the latest LMC meetings proven to be a summit not paying lip service, but yielding tangible results, bringing the countries closer to a community of shared future. Read more at [Xinhua](#), January 19, 'Commentary: Forging stronger ties among Lancang-Mekong nations'

- 6. A recent study by Stimson Center suggests Mekong countries explore solar energy or alternative energy to secure energy security. Alternatives can be cheaper to invest and is more competitive given that China can supply power at a cheaper cost compared to Laos, and also balance out the environmental impacts that are already felt.**



**China's supply of cheap energy to Southeast Asia could stall hydropower development: Analysts** (VOA, January 17)



**Enhancing water cooperation through clean energy transition** (VietnamNet Bridge, January 17)



**Enhancing regional water cooperation** (*The Phnom Penh Post*, January 18)