



ASEAN AMID MEKONG'S OVERLAP INSTITUTIONS: VISIBLE OR INVISIBLE?

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Abstrak

Mekong adalah kawasan yang strategis dalam hal ekonomi dan geopolitik. Kawasan tersebut menaungi negara-negara Indocina, aktor negara lainnya, seperti Amerika Serikat, Jepang, Korea, dan India juga hadir di kawasan. Negara-negara tersebut membentuk kerangka kerja sama untuk memaksimalkan potensi kawasan. Bertahun-tahun, ASEAN menjadi aktor sentral dalam kerja sama kawasan Asia Timur, namun adanya kerja sama lainnya di Mekong akan berimplikasi terhadap ASEAN. Artikel ini berupaya untuk mendeskripsikan dinamika institusi tumpang-tindih di kawasan Mekong, dengan memfokuskan posisi ASEAN dalam kerja sama tersebut. Artikel ini menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan data sekunder, serta the overlap institution sebagai kerangka konseptual. Temuan dari tulisan ini menunjukkan bahwa negara di kawasan Mekong tergabung dalam banyak keanggotaan, karena kepentingan mereka dan aktor eksternal yang berkaitan serta keinginan untuk membuka banyak peluang dengan membentuk kerja sama. Di samping itu, dinamika ini tentu akan berdampak pada integrasi kawasan di Asia Timur.

Kata Kunci: ASEAN, institusi, kerja sama, Mekong

Abstract

The Mekong region is strategic in terms of economics and geopolitics. Besides being home to mainland Southeast Asia countries, external state actors such as the United States, Japan, Korea, and India play around. They established institutions as a cooperation framework to maximize the region's potential. Over time, ASEAN will remain the central organization for cooperation in East Asia, but the numerous cooperations in the Mekong will have implications for ASEAN. This article aims to provide an overview of the dynamics of overlap institutions in the Mekong Region, focusing on ASEAN's position in these cooperative efforts. The overlap institution is used as a conceptual framework. This article applies a qualitative method with secondary data. The Mekong region has multi-membership because the interests of the principal actors and countries are intertwined to open up new opportunities by forming other institutions. In addition, the dynamic will shake East Asia's regional integration.

Keywords: ASEAN, cooperation, institution, Mekong

Introduction

The Mekong region is home to China, Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Thailand. Due to its location on the Indian Ocean, abundant natural resources for energy and manufacturing, and vast market opportunities, the region is a geopolitically strategic arena (Yoshimatsu, 2010). Although strategic, the region also has common problems. As two sides of the coin, environmental damage becomes a tangible challenge caused by economic development. According to Haefner (2013), the riparian state's activity related to energy development, urbanization, and industrialization affects the environment, for instance, decreasing the number of fish caught in Cambodia, then Vietnam as the granary of the region threatened by the irregular water flow of the Mekong River, flooding in China, and landslide in Thailand. These problems need to be solved together by forming cooperation under regional institutions. Mekong regions have complexity in terms of multiple memberships in multiple layers of institutions, leading to institutional overlapping. This article aims to provide an overview of those dynamics in the Mekong overlapping institutions, focusing on ASEAN as an institution centrality in the region.

As a complex regionalism, East Asia grows as a region open for prominent actors to play. Often, the significant actors encourage other countries in the region to form a cooperation institution. Many regional organizations have been established and often consist of the same member countries, for instance, ASEAN+3 and East Asia Summit. Besides these organizations, there are particular sub-regional organizations in the Mekong, namely the Mekong River Commission (MRC), influenced by Japan and Western donors (Chang, 2021), Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) sponsored by Asian Development Bank (ADB) (Backer Bruzelius, 2007), Lancang Mekong Cooperation (LMC) initiated and led by China (Middleton & Allouche, 2016), and not to mention ASEAN Mekong Basin Development Cooperation (AMBDC) initiated by ASEAN and China (Ha & Seth, 2021). Even though the literature above discusses cooperation in the Mekong region, they do not specifically address the overlapping institutions. Furthermore, Li and Li (2019) mention the existence of overlapping institutions in their work, but they focus solely on LMC and do not explore the interactions between them. This article fills the void left by the previous study, which focused more on the overlapping institutions in the Mekong. Based on the case of the Mekong region, this

study will contribute to regional studies that explain why and how overlapping institutions can occur and influence East Asia regionalism.

Method

This article applied a qualitative method by using secondary data. The data was collected from journals, reports, books, and news. Information is chosen and limited according to specific keywords, such as regionalism, the Mekong region, great power influence, and challenges faced by the Mekong region. After the data had been compiled, Yeo's institutional overlap conceptual framework was utilized to analyze the data (Yeo, 2016). The framework aims to describe the driving factors and effects of the overlapping institutions. Yeo defined institutional overlap as two dimensions: membership and mandate overlap. The membership here is like a situation suggesting a multilayer nested relationship, while the overlap mandate situated member states are subject to the same commitment.

Further, Yeo also described the overlapping regionalism that happened because of the material and normative factors like (1) the functional needs of member states; (2) regional balance of power underpins geopolitical tension; (3) parochial institutional interest; (4) bargaining failures; (5) competing visions promote different institutions. These five factors can lead member states to create a new institution or join the other institution. Besides, the factors helped identify why overlapping institutions existed in the Mekong region. In addition, Yeo also explained the effects are (1) states have options for choosing something to gain and little to lose; (2) by signing onto multiple institutions, small states can have greater strategic flexibility for voicing their interest; (3) for middle power, multiple institutions will create more network and serve as a critical bridge to other actors; (4) a caveat, lack of binding mechanism limit credible commitment and rules-based outcomes through institutions. Based on this framework, this article can conclude why and how overlapping institutions in the Mekong region affect East Asia regionalism.

Cooperations in the Mekong

East Asia is an area that comprises two subregions, namely North-East Asia, which consists of Japan, Korea, and China, while South-East Asia refers to the members of

ASEAN (Dent, 2013). According to Gilson (2007), naturally, East Asia became an area for rivalry of significant actors such as the US, Japan, and China. In addition, she noted that ASEAN had the potential to act as a balancer for the activity of major powers. Besides, He (2021), using the network affiliation framework, also highlights how ASEAN became a center node in the cooperation network mechanism. She discussed that although many major actor players are involved in the region, the ASEAN position is still at the center. Her research result also echoes the Gilson argument about ASEAN in East Asia Regionalism.

Furthermore, Yates (2019) in his article discussed the dynamic of ASEAN and China in the Indo-China conflict. Yates explained that ASEAN tried to limit China's role in the region and showed that ASEAN is still the primary manager. In this case, Yates argued that ASEAN performed diplomatic leadership action in the region. Besides China, the United States is also actively involved in the Mekong region. According to Yoshimatsu (2015), the United States realized its interest in the region by organizing the Lower Mekong Initiative in 2009 and providing some incentives to the Mekong countries. Even so, Yoshimatsu described that the United States initially did not involve ASEAN in their policy because they did not consider ASEAN as the critical actor in the Mekong. It differed from China incorporating ASEAN in their regional policy because China could maximize its economic interest and maintain its presence in the Mekong. At the same time, the United States needed help to strengthen its political influence and economic relations in the region. These articles show that ASEAN is important in Southeast Asia and as a hub to improve connectivity with the other state actors.

Regarding cooperation, Chheang (2010) argued that external actors and domestic factors have driven the formation of environmental and economic cooperation. They got financial and technical support from the UN, ADB, ASEAN, China, India, Japan, the United States, and the European Union. According to Leng (2019), since the 1990s, many connectivity projects have been built in the Mekong region. Leng explained that the reason is related to ASEAN's fast economic growth and its connection with significant regional player activity. Leng argued that it would benefit the Mekong countries to boost their economic development. Verbiest (2013) also argued over a decade that cooperation in the Mekong region has been conducted to dissolve the development gap among the countries. According to Schmeier (2009), issues in the Mekong region intertwined with

conflict and cooperative behavior. The focused issue related to the exploitation of natural resources, the protection of the river basin, and the promotion of economic integration somehow led to interdependence. Schmeier also mentions that the organizations in the Mekong, namely the Mekong River Commission (MRC) and Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS), contributed to regionalization in the region. In addition, Junlin et al. (2021) explained that the Mekong region has much regional cooperation. Moreover, they point out that the leading regional institutions, such as GMS, AMBDC, and MRC, before LMC was established. The authors also described the focus of institutions, for instance, GMS, the members are China, Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, Myanmar, and Cambodia, did not focus on environmental issues, then MRC, which consists of Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, has main agenda related to the basin development and environment politics, while the AMBDC, of which the members are ASEAN countries and China, is part of the ASEAN framework. It focuses on the sustainable development of the greater Mekong basin. It has a vision to create connectivity in transportation and energy, and LMC's members are Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Myanmar, and China. The authors also explain that the focus of LMC is related to non-traditional security threats and the regional economy issue.

Furthermore, they also point out the other partnerships in the Mekong, for instance, the Mekong-Japan Cooperation Framework, the Mekong-Republic of Korea, the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation Initiative, and the Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI). It shows that cooperation in the Mekong has flourished in terms of numbers and focus. This phenomenon can be called an overlap, according to Weiffen et al. (2013), the overlap has two different forms, called intersection and subset. The former form is in the condition that one group belongs to one organization only and the other to a second organization, but they intersect with both organizations. In contrast, the latter form involves the smaller organization being part of a larger organization, which is still independent. Based on these articles above, many scholars have discussed the ASEAN position in the Mekong, the external actors in the region, the issues focused on regional cooperation, and the regional institutions that existed in the region. If we bring this situation to the Mekong region, an overlap institution has existed regarding the intersection and subset forms. The intersection and subset in the Mekong region will be discussed in the next section.

Overlap Regionalism Driving Factors in The Mekong

At a glance, the overlap could be seen in the membership of those regionalism organizations, such as China, Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, Myanmar, and Cambodia. Even in 1997, six different frameworks and coordination in the Mekong River reflected Mekong riparian states' political and economic interests (Weatherbee, 1997). The first Mekong initiative and framework cooperation was created in 1957 in the name of the Mekong Committee with original member nations of Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and South Vietnam. However, this committee did include China or Burma (Myanmar) in the international planning effort (Jacobs, 1995). In 1977, following the unification of Vietnam and the Khmer victory in Cambodia, the Mekong Committee was reorganized, and Cambodia was excluded. However, Cambodia returned to the table in 1993 to set guidelines for new Mekong institutions, superseding the Mekong Committee (Weatherbee, 1997). This then became what is known as MRC, which does not include Myanmar and China. Besides the other institutions, all the riparian countries, including China, participate in GMS. This initiative was established in 1992 to facilitate economic and political development (Hensengerth, 2009).

Nevertheless, one of the interesting Mekong initiatives is the Quadripartite Economic Cooperation (QEC), created when Thailand, Laos, China, and Myanmar started cooperating to improve navigation in Mekong. Weatherbee argued that the creation of QEC was “The Thai response to the failure to include China and Myanmar in the deliberations leading up to the creation of the Mekong River Commission” (Weatherbee, 1997). Besides, ASEAN also initiated cooperation with China, the AMBDC, established with Vietnam, joined the ASEAN in 1995 and aimed to create connectivity from Singapore to Kunming Rail Link (SKRL) (Hew, 2009). This idea was innovative then because it would boost economic benefits among them. Then, the Mekong overlapping regional organizations became more complicated in 2015 when China pushed for establishing Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC). This also marked the first time that China proactively led the initiation of regional institutions' activities in the Mekong Region (Busbarat et al., 2021). Based on the explanations, it can be understood that the Mekong countries encourage cooperation in the economic and environmental aspects. In addition, regional development in the Mekong region shows up

and down according to the state actor's behavior. It is related to Yeo's framework that the emergence and establishment of regional cooperation addressing state actor's needs.

In general, the economic performance of the countries in the region is not the same. As shown on the IMF dataset about GDP in 2022, Thailand is the top-ranked country, followed by Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar (IMF, 2022). This performance implies that Mainland Southeast Asian countries need to boost their economic development to catch up with the other Southeast Asian. Therefore, economic cooperation is preferable for the countries. It can be understood why not all riparian states join the MRC and are members of GMS, AMBDC, and LMC. Besides, as the top GDP in the region, as mentioned earlier, Thailand also tried to maximize its interest gain by initiating QEC, which focused on economic cooperation to open the shipping route from Northeast Thailand to Yunnan, China, via Laos. However, Thailand also withdrew from the institutions not so long after this. Domestic factors such as security and environmental issues influenced Thailand's decision (Hensengerth, 2009). In 2003, Thailand also initiated another institution called the Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS). The members of ACMECS are Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam. ACMECS focuses on economic and development issues in the region (Feng et al., 2019). What Thailand did was an example of the Mekong state's behavior toward the regionalism institution based on their interests and needs at the time.

In addition, although China has participated in the GMS and the AMBDC, China still created the LMC. These three foci are similar in economic aspects, but on the LMC, the members can also discuss the environmental issues related to water governance. In addition, in the LMC, China can maximize its interest by playing a significant role in setting up the agenda that benefits them. LMC was created during the Xi Jinping era when China's motivation could be traced to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) program. The BRI is China's grand plan to revive the ancient Silk Road for land and sea (Gong, 2019). Southeast Asia is one of the major regions where this project will take place because of the strategic location between the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, part of the Maritime Silk Road Initiative (Blanchard, 2018). Moreover, many Chinese BRI projects are built in the Mekong countries, especially hydropower plants. It is the reason why the Mekong countries are also actively participating in the LMC because BRI policy also benefits them in terms of economic development.

Moreover, China created the LMC shows that China has shifted its unilateral development with limited multilateral development in Mekong into prioritizing water cooperation, even pushing the commitment to transform water resources cooperation into a flagship cooperation under the LMC (Zhang & Zhang, 2021). The LMC origin could be tracked when Thailand proposed the establishment of a Mekong-China ministerial-level dialogue. LMC then became a Mekong Regional organization championed by China and strongly backed by Thailand. Middleton & Allouche (2016) argue that the LMC is considered an initiative to deepen economic and geopolitical partnership between China and mainland Southeast Asia and counterbalance other regional initiatives from other major powers such as Japan and the United States. It is reasonable because major powers have flourished and influenced regional cooperation institutions. The GMS, for instance, was initiated by ADB, of which the most significant donor is Japan, followed by the United States, Australia, Canada, and Germany (ADB, 2022). Indeed, the presence of China will be challenged by all of these donors in the region. However, to attract the Mekong countries, all of the institutions supported by the major powers above offer funding to the Mekong countries under their cooperation frameworks (Po & Primiano, 2021). It shows that tension between major powers also leads to overlapping multi-memberships in the Mekong region. Besides, this situation is also caused by competing visions promoted by the major power institutions, which are more Sinocentric or Western-centric.

According to Yeo, another institutional overlap also happened in East Asia because it may stem from parochial institutional interest. Yeo also explained that ASEAN had placed itself at the center of every debate on region-wide institution building (Yeo, 2016). In the Mekong, it can be found that the AMBDC has existed as part of the ASEAN branch with China as the partner, since 1996. Certainly, this institution is part of ASEAN's strategy to preserve its position in the region. However, because of its limited role, the AMBDC does not seem to develop in the region as a cooperation (Grünwald, 2020). In addition, establishing the LMC in the region has also pushed AMBDC aside from the Mekong countries. However, on China's side, Premier Li Keqiang stated that China would still support ASEAN centrality in the East Asia Cooperation. By promoting LMC, China hopes to contribute to ASEAN's community building and deepen the China-ASEAN

strategic partnership (FMPRC, 2020). This situation, however, illustrates that overlapping institutions determine the durability of an institution.

Furthermore, Yeo argued that bargaining failure also triggers overlapping institutions. Water governance and economic relations become critical issues in the region. As mentioned earlier, MRC was established initially to enhance economic relations but was later shifted to focus on the environmental impact of economic development. Like Hensengerth argues that MRC has failed in achieving its goal because it cannot persuade China to be a member of the upstream country in the region (Hensengerth, 2009). Certainly, it is difficult for the downstream Mekong countries to negotiate with China about water governance problems. However, the Mekong countries can use LMC to discuss regional concerns with China, such as water level and rainfall data. As noted by MRC, since 2003, China has shared the information with the MRC only during the flood season. In November 2020, under the LMC, China and the other members established the Lancang Mekong Water Resources Cooperation Information Sharing Platform (LMWRC) to share water information (MRC, 2020). It means that the dynamic of the Mekong countries seeking their interest encourages another institution to be established and will impact East Asia's regionalism development.

Effects on East Asia Regionalism

The Mainland Southeast Asian countries consist of middle and small-power countries eager to develop their economies. Based on the Asia Power Index released by Lowy Institute (2023), Thailand and Vietnam are categorized as middle power countries, meanwhile Cambodia, Myanmar, and Laos are categorized as small power countries. This resulted in the findings of Wang et al. (2020), those middle and small power countries struggle to survive amid significant power activity. In addition, as discussed in the previous section, the state actors involved in the Mekong region pursue various national interests. They are like game changers because of their dynamic behavior in the region. More institutions in the region mean that the state actors have the alternative to choose according to their interests. The MRC, GMS, AMBDC, and LMC have become active in the Mekong region, which has many institutions. The difference in the focus is utilized as an opportunity for the countries to choose which institutions will serve them at the minimum cost that they have to pay, as elaborated in the previous discussion, how

Thailand or China is trying to maximize their interest by participating or withdrawing from one institution to another. Besides, in the Mekong region, most of them are middle and small powers, and it is understood that the regional institutions are utilized as a channel to voice their interest. For instance, Laos is almost part of all regional institutions in the Mekong, such as the MRC, the GMS, the AMBDC, the ACMECS, and the LMC. It is convenient for Laos to practice its policy because Laos is one of the countries building numerous hydropower plants this decade. Laos' decision will undoubtedly impact the Mekong environment and must be criticized by the MRC. To overcome this situation, Laos found another cooperation, like LMC or other institutions focused on environmental and economic development, to untangle the problem. Therefore, by participating in the other institutions, Laos has much room for negotiation and is more flexible in bargaining its interest with other actors. Laos also has a chance to step aside from the negotiation that brings less benefit to them. In addition, Thailand, a country categorized as a middle power (Freedman, 2022), is trying to initiate the institution involving the major powers into it. Thailand is becoming a hub to connect the region with the major powers. Based on this situation in the Mekong and connected to Yeo's framework, naturally, overlapping institutions are caused by the region's small and middle power dynamic behavior.

Furthermore, their behavior also affects the development of regionalism in East Asia. As mentioned before, AMBDC serves as an ASEAN branch in the region and is undoubtedly part of ASEAN's strategy to place itself as the center of regional cooperation activity in the region. This initiation shows that ASEAN supports the Mekong development. In the early forming, ASEAN and China had already envisioned linking every corner of Mainland Southeast Asia with China. In this initiative, China benefited, and ASEAN members placed China as the core actor, so China built another project. However, the AMBDC is not progressing well because it was held only until 2014 (16th AMBDC) (ASEAN, 2014). It is possible because the core actor does not originate from the ASEAN countries, and the leading project donor also mostly comes from China. Under Xi Jinping's leadership, China is incorporating all of the infrastructure projects under the BRI, so the SKRL project is now part of the BRI, regardless of whether the project has yet to progress well (Wu, 2020).

Consequently, China prioritizes implementing its policy under the platform it leads, such as LMC. The LMC presence in the region probably became a challenge for ASEAN centrality; for instance, AMBDC's role is slowly becoming invisible as AMBDC cannot provide a binding mechanism for the members to commit concretely. In addition, the LMC can grow as the stumbling block for regional integration in the region, as the Mekong countries always choose the path that benefits them, and today, China, with its policy, can serve them well. Even so, China supports the deepened relations between ASEAN and LMC (LMC, 2016). Besides, from this point of view, ASEAN still has the opportunity to become a central node in the Mekong region as long as ASEAN pays closer attention to the issue that arises. It was like Vietnam did when they were ASEAN Chairman in 2020. At that time, Vietnam proposed an agenda about synergizing sub-regional development cooperation in the Mekong with ASEAN community building (ASEAN, 2020). Vietnam's behavior shows that it is still essential for ASEAN to participate in the Mekong issue because ASEAN may be a buffer institution for the Mekong countries when dealing with major actors. Undeniably, the Mekong region needs to be more strategic in politics, geography, and economics, which always attracts the major powers to come and compete for influence in the region. Amid the contestation, overlapping institutions in the Mekong may become testing for ASEAN centrality in East Asia regionalism.

Conclusion

In this case, the Mekong region is open to major actors because of the growing economic potential. Often, they form an institution to achieve their interest and maximize their profit. The institutions such as the MRC, the GMS, the AMBDC, and the LMC became the leading institutions. This is because almost all Mekong countries participated. Additionally, the competition between major powers to gain influence and the dynamic of middle and small powers to determine which institution provides a better voice for their interests complicates the regional situation. They frequently initiate, participate, or withdraw from one cooperation institution to another depending on their interest, as Thailand did. The overlap institutions phenomenon benefits the small and middle powers rather than the regionalism development. This behavior then creates institutional overlap in the region. Consequently, the AMBDC is slowly disappearing in the Mekong because

China raised and led the LMC. Under the LMC mechanism and linked to the BRI, China can offer more benefits than the AMBDC.

As an ASEAN extension of the hand, the AMBDC should preserve the ASEAN influence in the region, but the critical actor was not from an ASEAN country. Therefore, the AMBDC could not play a significant role as the center of regional institutions. It is noteworthy that institutions need a state actor to back up their continuity. In addition, the phenomenon of overlapping institutions can influence the durability of the institution to survive. However, Vietnam's decision to bring the Mekong issue to the ASEAN forum is an excellent example that ASEAN still has a chance to become a center amid overlapping institutions, with notes as long as the ASEAN members, notably riparian states, support ASEAN's role. Hence, as regionalism in East Asia, ASEAN centrality and regional integration are challenged by the Mekong dynamic, which has many overlapping institutions. Indeed, if the ASEAN members can overcome the challenge, it will positively impact the region's development.

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