

Journal of International Relations (JIR)

**The Impact of U.S.–China Strategic Competition in the Mekong Sub-region on
Vietnam’s National Interests**

Son Tung Tran



**The Impact of U.S.–China Strategic
Competition in the Mekong Sub-region on
Vietnam’s National Interests**



Son Tung Tran

Military Science Academy; VNU, University of
Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam

Article History

Received 4th May 2025

Received in Revised Form 9th June 2025

Accepted 1st July 2025



How to cite in APA format:

Tran, S. (2025). The Impact of U.S.–China Strategic Competition in the Mekong Sub-region on Vietnam’s National Interests. *Journal of International Relations*, 5(1), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.47604/jir.3413>

Abstract

Purpose: This article aims to examine the strategic competition between the United States and China in the Mekong subregion from 2009 to 2024, focusing specifically on its implications for Vietnam.

Methodology: As the largest downstream nation in the Mekong River basin, Vietnam is uniquely positioned as both highly vulnerable to upstream actions and influential within regional diplomacy. The analysis employs a multi-dimensional analytical framework to assess contrasting strategies by the U.S. and China. It examines institutional engagement, infrastructure investment, and environmental diplomacy, focusing specifically on mechanisms such as the Mekong–U.S. Partnership and Lancang–Mekong Cooperation.

Findings: The study finds that the United States has emphasized transparency, multilateralism, and sustainable development through initiatives like the Mekong–U.S. Partnership. In contrast, China has strategically projected influence through the Lancang–Mekong Cooperation, primarily by using dam construction, concessional loans, and strategic political communication. Vietnam, navigating this competition, has effectively leveraged both frameworks to advance its national interests but continues to confront critical challenges regarding water security, institutional coordination, and maintaining geopolitical equilibrium.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy:

The article recommends that Vietnam pursue strategic policies aimed at enhancing its autonomy, bolstering environmental resilience, and strengthening its regional leadership role. These include proactive diplomatic engagement, improved institutional coherence, and careful balancing of relationships with both major powers.

Keywords: *U.S.–China Competition, Strategic Autonomy, Vietnam Foreign Policy, Lancang–Mekong Cooperation, Mekong–U.S. Partnership, Environmental Diplomacy*

JEL Codes of Classification: *F51, F53, F59, Q56, O53, H77*

©2025 by the Authors. This Article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

INTRODUCTION

The Mekong subregion, encompassing Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam, has emerged as a focal point of strategic rivalry between the United States and China over the past fifteen years. As a region rich in natural resources and ecological diversity, and situated at the confluence of continental and maritime Southeast Asia, the Mekong has drawn the attention of major powers seeking to shape the regional order in their favor. The intensifying U.S.–China competition in this area reflects broader dynamics of power transition, strategic hedging, and institutional contestation in the Indo-Pacific.

Since 2009, both the United States and China have launched parallel initiatives to strengthen their foothold in the Mekong. The U.S., through the Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI) and the upgraded Mekong–U.S. Partnership (MUSP), has focused on transparency, sustainability, and regional governance. China, on the other hand, has utilized the Lancang–Mekong Cooperation (LMC) mechanism as an extension of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), prioritizing infrastructure investment, resource control, and influence through state-led diplomacy. This strategic juxtaposition has resulted in overlapping and sometimes conflicting spheres of influence across political, economic, environmental, and institutional domains.

Vietnam, as the largest downstream country in the Mekong basin, occupies a uniquely vulnerable and strategic position. It is heavily dependent on the river for agriculture, aquaculture, and water resources, particularly in the Mekong Delta. At the same time, it plays an increasingly active role in regional institutions and diplomacy, and is a key factor in ASEAN. Thus, understanding the manifestations of U.S.–China competition in the Mekong—and how they affect Vietnam—is critical not only for Vietnam’s national interest but also for regional peace and sustainable development.

This article aims to systematically analyze the manifestations of strategic competition between the United States and China in the Mekong subregion from 2009 to 2024, and to assess the political, economic, and environmental impacts on Vietnam. It also examines how Vietnam has responded to this great power rivalry and what strategic adjustments may be needed moving forward.

The structure of this article is as follows. The next section reviews the theoretical and conceptual underpinnings of strategic competition and presents the analytical framework used. Section 3 explores the concrete manifestations of U.S.–China rivalry in the Mekong in terms of initiatives, tools, and competing narratives. Section 4 assesses the opportunities and risks posed to Vietnam, evaluates current policy responses, and proposes strategic recommendations. The article concludes with reflections on Vietnam’s role in shaping the evolving power dynamics in the region.

Theoretical Framework and Analytical Approach

The analysis of U.S.–China competition in the Mekong subregion is grounded in the broader literature on strategic competition and geopolitical influence in international relations. In recent years, strategic competition has increasingly replaced notions of engagement or cooperation in describing relations between major powers, especially between the United States and China. Strategic competition refers to a sustained contest for power, influence, and legitimacy, often waged across multiple domains—military, economic, technological, and ideological—within a specific regional or global context (Mazarr et al., 2018).

This article adopts a regionalized understanding of strategic competition, which focuses on how great powers engage in contestation within specific geostrategic theaters, such as the

Mekong subregion. Unlike traditional geopolitical rivalry defined solely by military power, this competition often involves tools of soft power, economic leverage, institutional innovation, and environmental diplomacy (Green, 2019; Caballero-Anthony, 2021).

To examine how such competition unfolds in the Mekong, we use an analytical framework organized around three interrelated pillars:

Political–Institutional Influence: This includes the creation and use of multilateral mechanisms (e.g., MUSP, LMC), diplomatic summits, elite-level dialogues, and norms promotion. It assesses how each power seeks to shape regional governance structures, assert leadership, and define the rules of interaction.

Economic and Infrastructure Leverage: This pillar focuses on foreign direct investment, infrastructure financing, concessional loans, and connectivity projects. China’s BRI-related activities and U.S.-led alternatives in infrastructure quality and financing standards are analyzed as competing economic influence models.

Environmental and Resource Control: The third pillar highlights the strategic importance of the Mekong River as a transboundary resource. It includes hydropower development, water data sharing, ecosystem management, and climate adaptation. Control over upstream flows and access to hydrological information are seen as instruments of influence and coercion.

This framework is useful in capturing the multi-dimensional nature of U.S.–China rivalry in the Mekong, which does not fit neatly into binary categorizations of “hard” vs. “soft” power. Instead, it reveals a competition that is simultaneously institutional and developmental, material and ideational, coercive and cooperative.

Additionally, the article integrates Vietnam’s strategic behavior within this competitive context, drawing on concepts such as strategic autonomy, hedging, and middle power diplomacy (Vuving, 2021; Hà, 2021). Rather than portraying Vietnam as a passive recipient of influence, the analysis highlights how it selectively engages with both China and the U.S. to enhance national resilience, manage asymmetry, and shape regional order.

This article draws on a combination of primary and secondary sources collected between January 2023 and March 2025. Primary sources include official Vietnamese government publications (e.g., *Vietnam National Defense White Paper*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs statements, Party Congress resolutions), and regional institutional outputs (e.g., MRC and LMC communiqués). Secondary sources include peer-reviewed Vietnamese journals (e.g., *Tạp chí Nghiên cứu Quốc tế*, *Nghiên cứu Đông Nam Á*), Western academic literature, and policy papers from credible think tanks such as the Stimson Center and the Asia Foundation.

Sources were selected based on relevance to U.S.–China competition in the Mekong, authorship credibility (academic affiliation, institutional backing), and triangulation across at least two data types (e.g., government reports and academic analysis). Vietnamese-language sources were included to ensure analytical balance and to reflect localized perspectives. Where possible, claims were cross-validated with field research summaries, expert interviews, and international monitoring platforms (e.g., Eyes on Earth).

Manifestations of U.S.–China Competition in the Mekong Subregion (2009–2024)

Strategic Context and Motivations of the Two Powers

The Mekong subregion—comprising Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam—holds a unique geostrategic position in Southeast Asia. Rich in natural resources, ecologically significant, and situated at the crossroads of key transportation corridors, the region has become

an arena for strategic rivalry between the United States and China. Since 2009, their growing engagement has signaled not only geopolitical competition but also contrasting visions of regional order.

For China, the Mekong is a southern gateway within its “go global” development strategy and a critical component of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). For the United States, it is a frontline in preserving a “rules-based international order.” The Mekong subregion's growing strategic value has prompted both countries to introduce parallel initiatives and deepen their influence in diplomacy, economics, environmental policy, and institutional development.

U.S. Engagement Strategies in the Mekong Subregion

Since the launch of the Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI) in 2009, the United States has gradually expanded its presence in the Mekong through programs targeting sustainable development, institutional capacity, and environmental resilience. The Mekong–U.S. Partnership (MUSP), established in 2020, marked a strategic upgrade, positioning the Mekong more prominently within the broader U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy and directly responding to China’s influence via the Lancang–Mekong Cooperation (LMC).

One of the most cited U.S. initiatives in Vietnam is USAID’s Mekong ARCC (2011–2016), which implemented climate adaptation pilots in An Giang and other vulnerable Delta provinces. While the program succeeded in introducing ecosystem-based adaptation models and community-level resilience plans, its scale was limited and lacked follow-up funding for institutional mainstreaming. Similarly, the Eyes on Earth platform has enhanced Vietnam’s access to real-time hydrological data, particularly in the absence of transparent reporting from China. Yet uptake at the provincial level remains uneven due to gaps in technical capacity and limited data integration into national water governance systems (Stimson Center, 2020).

More broadly, U.S. assistance has been welcomed by Vietnam, especially in areas of technology transfer, environmental diplomacy, and regional rule-making. However, it has had limited impact on regional infrastructure connectivity, where China’s BRI remains dominant. Unlike Chinese concessional loans, U.S. support is often grant-based but relatively modest in financial terms.

Politically, the U.S. has emphasized multilateral engagement and sought to align MUSP with ASEAN centrality. However, tensions exist. ASEAN’s principle of non-interference and consensus-based decision-making sometimes contrasts with the more normative and value-driven approach of MUSP, which foregrounds transparency, accountability, and civil society engagement. While Vietnam appreciates the non-coercive nature of U.S. initiatives, it also cautiously ensures that these align with ASEAN’s diplomatic culture to avoid being perceived as siding with any bloc.

In short, MUSP’s strengths lie in soft-power projection, institutional support, and environmental norms, rather than geoeconomic scale. For Vietnam, these programs offer valuable technical and strategic inputs, but must be better integrated into national priorities and ASEAN-compatible regional frameworks to achieve long-term traction.

China’s Strategies: Infrastructure Dominance and “Water Diplomacy”

China launched the Lancang–Mekong Cooperation (LMC) mechanism in 2016 with six member countries under Beijing’s leadership. As a central platform for the BRI in mainland Southeast Asia, China focused on infrastructure development, concessional loans, and large-

scale investment projects in hydropower, transport, and cross-border industrial zones (Chen, 2022).

With control over the Mekong’s upstream flow (called the Lancang in China), Beijing possesses significant leverage in regulating water volume. The construction of over 11 major Chinese dams and dozens more in Cambodia and Laos has raised ecological concerns across the lower basin, particularly in Vietnam (Cronin, 2019).

China long withheld real-time hydrological data, contributing to water stress downstream. Only under international pressure in 2020 did it begin limited data sharing, retaining full control over its database (Green Finance & Development Center, 2022). This practice illustrates China’s coercive form of soft power—strategically using water as a tool of influence.

China also promotes narratives such as a “shared destiny” and “common development,” supported by Confucius Institutes, media exchanges, and academic diplomacy, especially targeting Laos and Cambodia (Ha, 2019).

Competing Models of Influence

U.S.–China rivalry in the Mekong is not merely strategic; it represents a clash between two models of regional influence:

Table 1: Model of Influence

Dimension	United States	China
Approach	Institutional, transparent, multilateral	Bilateral, top-down, China-centric
Strategic Priority	Sustainability, environmental governance	Infrastructure, hydropower, resource control
Key Instruments	Unconditional aid, tech sharing	Concessional loans, dam investments
Soft Power	Democratic values, civil society, transparency	“Shared destiny,” cultural diplomacy
Conditionality	Flexible, standards-based accountability	Leverage via infrastructure and finance

This competition transcends policy—it represents divergent regional development models: one emphasizing transparency and institutional integration, the other prioritizing control over critical resources.

Intensified Competition Since 2020

From 2020 to 2024, U.S.–China competition in the Mekong subregion intensified considerably across multiple domains:

- The United States ramped up funding for the Mekong–U.S. Partnership (MUSP), integrating it more directly into the broader Indo-Pacific Strategy and seeking alignment with the Quad (U.S., Japan, India, Australia). These efforts aimed to counterbalance China’s economic and hydrological leverage through capacity-building, civil society engagement, and open data initiatives.
- China, meanwhile, accelerated BRI-linked mega-projects, most notably the China–Laos Railway, and launched cross-border logistics corridors with Cambodia, enhancing its physical connectivity and influence in mainland Southeast Asia.

- Hydrological data became a new front of competition: the U.S. introduced platforms like Eyes on Earth to track water flows and promote transparency, while China countered with official reports asserting its role as a responsible upstream power.
- Regional states responded differently: Laos and Cambodia tilted toward China, drawn by infrastructure financing and political alignment. Thailand and Myanmar adopted hedging strategies, selectively engaging both sides.

Vietnam, for its part, sought to balance both powers while preserving autonomy. Vietnam's balancing strategy has involved several key elements:

Multi-vector diplomacy: Vietnam maintains strategic dialogues with both Washington and Beijing. It participates in MUSP and LMI while remaining engaged in LMC and BRI-linked forums—a deliberate effort to avoid exclusion from either axis of power.

Issue-based engagement: Vietnam differentiates its cooperation thematically—seeking U.S. support in governance, technology, and environmental transparency, while cautiously accepting Chinese investment in selected infrastructure sectors.

ASEAN centrality: Vietnam uses ASEAN frameworks to dilute pressure from either side, emphasizing regional norms, neutrality, and non-interference.

However, this careful balancing has produced internal and external tensions. Domestically, there are debates among policymakers over the long-term risks of Chinese capital and the alignment of U.S. environmental standards with Vietnam's development pace. Externally, Vietnam risks being perceived as non-committal by both powers—limiting deep trust-building. Additionally, as U.S.–China rivalry becomes increasingly zero-sum, the space for neutrality narrows, making Vietnam's hedging more difficult to sustain. Nonetheless, Vietnam's approach reflects a calculated pragmatism, grounded in historical experience and geographic necessity. Its ability to maintain this equilibrium will be crucial for both national resilience and regional stability.

Vietnam's Responses and Strategic Implications amid U.S.–China Rivalry in the Mekong Strategic Opportunities for Vietnam

Diversifying Foreign Relations and Enhancing Strategic Leverage: The dual engagement of the United States and China in the Mekong subregion has enabled Vietnam to pursue strategic hedging, expanding its diplomatic space and leveraging competition to secure national interests. Through the Mekong–U.S. Partnership (MUSP), launched in 2020, Vietnam has gained access to multilateral support in areas such as water data transparency, energy governance, and policy coordination. One notable example is the USAID Mekong Adaptation and Resilience to Climate Change (ARCC) program (2011–2016), which funded climate resilience and ecosystem-based adaptation projects in Vietnam's Mekong Delta, focusing on livelihood protection and biodiversity (USAID, 2016). The U.S. has also invested in smart infrastructure and environmental monitoring systems, such as the Mekong Water Data Initiative and the SERVIR-Mekong geospatial platform, offering Vietnam cutting-edge tools for transboundary water resource management and disaster preparedness.

These efforts contrast with China's approach under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which emphasizes large-scale infrastructure investment. Vietnam has benefited from Chinese-funded projects that aim to improve connectivity and logistics. Although Vietnam has been selective in accepting BRI-linked financing, it has engaged with regional BRI-driven infrastructure such as the China–Laos Railway, which enhances overland trade corridors to central Vietnam, and

has considered linking to the Sihanoukville Special Economic Zone in Cambodia, a flagship BRI initiative (Chen, 2022). This dual engagement has not only expanded Vietnam's options for development cooperation but has also allowed it to act as a geostrategic balancer in the Mekong, avoiding over-reliance on any single power.

Access to Technology and Development Aid: Vietnam continues to benefit from diverse forms of assistance. The U.S. emphasizes capacity building, civil society empowerment, and open data systems, which align with Vietnam's institutional modernization goals. In particular, MUSP's support for energy diversification and environmental resilience helps Vietnam navigate Mekong-specific challenges like salinization and aquifer depletion.

Meanwhile, China offers financially competitive packages for physical infrastructure development. Despite concerns over debt sustainability and environmental risks, some Chinese-funded road, port, and energy projects remain attractive for provinces seeking capital and connectivity. Vietnam's careful, case-by-case engagement with BRI demonstrates its strategic pragmatism—seeking benefits without compromising autonomy.

Strengthening ASEAN Leadership: Vietnam occupies a unique position as the only Mekong country participating fully in the Mekong River Commission (MRC), Ayeyawady–Chao Phraya–Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS), Cambodia–Laos–Vietnam (CLV) Development Triangle, Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI), and Lancang–Mekong Cooperation (LMC). This multi-forum engagement enables Vietnam to mediate among major powers and advocate for a transparent, rules-based Mekong governance system. By actively participating in both Western-led and China-led mechanisms, Vietnam has increased its visibility as a middle power committed to regional stability. Its ability to bridge divergent agendas and translate technical cooperation into political dialogue makes Vietnam a potential norm entrepreneur in the Mekong subregion.

Strategic Challenges and Risks

As U.S.–China strategic competition deepens, Vietnam faces increasing pressure to align with one side, particularly in areas such as water security, infrastructure, and diplomacy. This pressure threatens Vietnam's long-standing policy of strategic autonomy and balanced engagement.

Vietnam's position is clearly stated in its 2019 Defense White Paper, which affirms the “Four No's” principle: no military alliances, no siding with one country against another, no foreign bases, and no use of force (Ministry of National Defence, 2019). This doctrine is operationalized through Vietnam's balanced foreign policy—deepening ties with the U.S. while maintaining stable relations and defense dialogues with China. At the 2021 UN General Assembly, Vietnam reiterated its support for a “peaceful, rules-based regional order” without exclusion or bloc politics (Vietnam MOFA, 2021).

Meanwhile, Vietnam remains highly vulnerable to water insecurity in the Mekong Delta. Dam construction in China and Laos has disrupted water flows, contributing to salinity intrusion, land subsidence, and crop failure. Studies by Eyes on Earth (2020) and the Stimson Center show that upstream water manipulation during drought years severely impacted downstream communities, especially in Vietnam's agricultural heartland.

Despite being active in regional forums, Vietnam still lacks a coherent national Mekong strategy. Responsibilities are fragmented across various ministries—environment, agriculture, foreign affairs—undermining integrated policy-making. Without a centralized mechanism for

inter-ministerial coordination, Vietnam's voice in regional platforms remains reactive and diluted.

In sum, Vietnam faces strategic, environmental, and institutional challenges that constrain its ability to navigate great-power rivalry while securing national interests in the Mekong subregion.

Vietnam's Strategic Posture: Proactive, Flexible, and Multilateral

Leveraging Multilateral Mechanisms: Vietnam has actively participated in regional platforms such as MRC, LMI, and MUSP. These allow Vietnam to voice concerns over data transparency, transboundary impacts, and climate change while co-developing mitigation strategies.

Balancing Bilateral Relations: Vietnam has carefully managed relations with both the U.S. and China, deepening security ties with Washington while maintaining high-level exchanges and economic partnerships with Beijing. This nuanced diplomacy reflects strategic flexibility and a commitment to non-alignment.

Toward a National Mekong Strategy: Vietnam must formulate an integrated National Mekong Strategy that combines environmental diplomacy, regional development, and non-traditional security. This requires an inter-ministerial coordinating body with clear authority to align local, national, and regional agendas.

Policy Recommendations

In light of the complex and evolving nature of U.S.–China strategic competition in the Mekong subregion, Vietnam must adopt a forward-looking and multi-dimensional policy approach that safeguards its national interests while enhancing its role as a responsible regional actor. The following policy recommendations aim to strengthen Vietnam's strategic autonomy, institutional resilience, and environmental security.

Institutionalize a Comprehensive National Mekong Strategy: Vietnam urgently needs to formulate and institutionalize a National Mekong Strategy that integrates foreign policy, water resource governance, regional development, and climate resilience. This strategy should be developed through a whole-of-government approach and anchored in three dimensions:

Domestic coordination: Establish an inter-ministerial coordination body with legal authority to align policies among the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Natural Resources and Environment, Agriculture and Rural Development, and Planning and Investment.

Regional integration: Position the strategy within ASEAN frameworks and Mekong-specific institutions such as the MRC and ACMECS.

International diplomacy: Ensure coherence with global environmental and development agendas, including the SDGs and Paris Agreement.

This strategy must also be legally binding and supported by budgetary commitments to avoid implementation delays or institutional fragmentation.

Strengthen Environmental and Water Diplomacy: Water and environment should become pillars of Vietnam's external relations in the Mekong context. Vietnam should:

Lead efforts within the MRC to upgrade its mandate from technical coordination to norm-setting and compliance monitoring on hydropower development.

Advocate for a legally binding transboundary water sharing agreement under international water law, especially within the LMC framework where power asymmetries are stark.

Promote “green multilateralism” by engaging in tripartite and quadrilateral initiatives with partners like the U.S., Japan, Australia, and the EU to counterbalance Chinese influence in the environmental domain.

Support the development of a regional hydrological data center hosted in Vietnam to ensure equitable access to real-time water flow data.

Enhance Strategic Foresight and Research Capacity

Vietnam must improve its strategic foresight capability to anticipate shifts in great power behavior and regional dynamics. This includes:

Investing in a dedicated Mekong Research and Policy Center with interdisciplinary expertise in hydrology, international law, diplomacy, and regional studies.

Creating a government-funded fellowship program for Mekong diplomacy, targeting mid-career officials and scholars to receive training in water governance, negotiations, and international development.

Integrating scenario planning and strategic simulations into the policy planning process to support evidence-based decision-making.

Diversify Strategic Partnerships in the Mekong Subregion

To avoid dependence on either the U.S. or China, Vietnam should cultivate deeper strategic partnerships with other Mekong countries, particularly Thailand, Myanmar, and regional middle powers.

With Thailand, expand joint initiatives on cross-border river monitoring, anti-salinization efforts, and eco-tourism development.

With Myanmar, offer capacity-building assistance in environmental governance and join efforts to promote inclusive regional institutions.

With Cambodia and Laos, prioritize mutual trust-building mechanisms, focusing on shared basin management and non-traditional security cooperation.

By strengthening ties with these countries, Vietnam can reduce asymmetries in the LMC and increase its bargaining power in regional forums.

Promote Vietnam’s Role as a “Norm Entrepreneur” in the Mekong

Vietnam should position itself not only as a stakeholder but as a normative leader promoting principles of transparency, sustainability, and accountability in the Mekong subregion. This involves:

Leading efforts to establish regional guidelines on sustainable infrastructure development, especially regarding environmental impact assessments and public consultations.

Launching a Mekong Governance Index in collaboration with international partners to track the performance of river governance across all member states.

Advocating for gender-sensitive and community-based approaches to water resource management that center the voices of affected populations, particularly in the Vietnamese Mekong Delta.

Conclusion

Between 2009 and 2024, the Mekong subregion has emerged as a crucial theater of strategic competition between the United States and China. Their rivalry encompasses not only political and economic interests but also diverging visions of resource governance, institutional engagement, and regional development. Vietnam, as the largest downstream country, is both a major stakeholder and a potential strategic balancer.

This competition reflects a clash of models: one promoting multilateralism, transparency, and sustainability; the other prioritizing infrastructure dominance and resource control. While the U.S. emphasizes standards-based partnerships, China wields its upper Mekong control and infrastructure investments to shape political alignments.

Vietnam has shown resilience and agility in navigating this complex environment. It has engaged constructively in regional mechanisms, maintained strategic equilibrium in its bilateral ties, and gradually asserted its voice on environmental and governance issues. Nevertheless, challenges remain—particularly institutional fragmentation, environmental vulnerability, and growing regional polarization.

Going forward, Vietnam must adopt a more comprehensive and proactive strategy for the Mekong, grounded in strategic foresight and institutional coherence. Establishing a national Mekong framework, strengthening interagency coordination, and deepening regional and international partnerships will be critical. Rather than being trapped in a binary choice, Vietnam must build its own strategic identity in the Mekong—one that enhances national autonomy, supports sustainable development, and contributes to shaping the future of regional order.

REFERENCES

- ADB. (2020). *Asian economic integration report 2020: Making digital platforms work for Asia and the Pacific*. Asian Development Bank. <https://www.adb.org/publications/asian-economic-integration-report-2020>
- Caballero-Anthony, M. (2021). *Understanding regional security and norm contestation in Southeast Asia*. NTS-Asia Working Paper Series.
- Chen, X. (2022). China's high-speed rail diplomacy in Southeast Asia: Strategic implications and challenges. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 31(134), 599–616.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2021.1970846>
- Cronin, R. (2019). *Mekong hydropower development and China's strategic intent*. Stimson Center. <https://www.stimson.org/2019/mekong-hydropower-development/>
- Eyes on Earth. (2020). *Monitoring the quantity of water flow in the Mekong River using satellite data*. Commissioned by the U.S. Department of State.
- Green Finance & Development Center. (2022). *China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) investment report 2022*. Fudan University. <https://greenfdc.org>
- Green, M. J. (2019). *The legacy of American strategic competition in Asia*. Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).
- Ha, N. T. (2019). Sáng kiến “Vành đai, Con đường” của Trung Quốc và ảnh hưởng tại Tiểu vùng Mekong. *Tạp chí Nghiên cứu Trung Quốc*, 6(230), 21–30.
- Mazarr, M. J., Heath, T. R., & Cevallos, A. S. (2018). *China and the international order*. RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2423.html
- Ministry of National Defence (Vietnam). (2019). *Vietnam National Defense White Paper 2019*. Hanoi: National Political Publishing House.
- Stimson Center. (2020). *Eyes on Earth report: Monitoring the flow of the Mekong*. Retrieved from <https://www.stimson.org/project/mekong-dam-monitor/>
- Storey, I. (2020). The Mekong–U.S. Partnership: Washington’s new regional initiative. *ISEAS Perspective*, 2020(113). <https://www.iseas.edu.sg>
- Thayer, C. A. (2020). Vietnam’s foreign policy balancing act between China and the United States. *Global Asia*, 15(2), 78–83.
- USAID. (2016). *Mekong ARCC: Adaptation and resilience in Vietnam*. U.S. Agency for International Development. <https://www.usaid.gov>
- Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA). (2021). *Statement at the United Nations General Assembly 76th Session*.
- Vuving, A. (2021). Vietnam’s strategic hedging and the future of regional order in the Mekong. In M. Cook (Ed.), *The Mekong region in flux: Infrastructures, institutions and identities* (pp. 103–118). Lowy Institute.