


# Chapter 6

## China's Global South Strategy in the Mekong Region in Geopolitical Implications, Economic Prospects, and Challenge: The Dragon's Reach Into Southern Arc

**Tin Maung Htwe**

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-3002-169X>

*Chiang Mai University, Thailand*

### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter argues that China's engagement in mainland Southeast Asia illustrates a new mode of hegemony: one that substitutes formal empire with economic corridors and strategic interdependence. China's rise as a global power is reshaping the political economy of the Global South, and the Mekong region now stands as a revealing case of this transformation. Through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC), Beijing has fused infrastructure, influence, and ideology into a model of state-led development that promises modernization, but at the cost of sovereignty. In the absence of robust institutional buffers, Chinese investments have embedded asymmetric relationships that erode state autonomy and fragment regional coherence in Mekong Region.*

DOI: 10.4018/979-8-3373-0938-5.ch006

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the shadowed corridors of twenty-first-century geopolitics, few transformations have been as consequential as China's emergence as a global power (Curtis & Klaus, 2024). Now China become the world's second-largest economy (Moe et al., 2024). No longer a peripheral actor, China has reshaped the political and economic terrain of the Global South (Montano Ramirez & Petersen, 2025) through a web of calculated strategies, both overt and subtle (Xiaotong, 2025). Nowhere is this transformation more palpable than in the Mekong region. In this strategic crucible between South and Southeast Asia, China's ambitions find fertile ground, projected through grand infrastructure, economic corridors and the seduction of soft power (Carminati, 2024).

Mekong region is a landscape of rivers, jungles, and contested histories comprising Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam. The Mekong offers Beijing more than just markets or minerals, it offers geographic leverage (Boer et al., 2015). With its labyrinthine riverways and fractured sovereignties, It is the connective tissue between China's heartland and the southern seas, a fulcrum for regional influence where development is often indistinguishable from domination (Rodríguez Álvarez, 2024). In this arena, two frameworks encapsulate Beijing's strategic drives. One is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and other, the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) (Siphana, 2018). Launched in 2013, BRI is not merely an economic program but a reimagining of Asia's very infrastructure map. Railways, special economic zones, and hydropower dams are the instruments of a vision that binds the region to China's logistical orbit (Lee, 2024). Meanwhile, the LMC, introduced in 2016, positions itself as a model of South-South cooperation. It ostensibly promotes shared development and water governance in Mekong region, even as it deepens bilateral asymmetries that favor Beijing (Gong & Li, 2024).

This narrative is not unilinear. For all the gleam of highways and high-speed rail, shadows gather beneath. China has bridged infrastructure gaps, expanded trade routes and bolstered energy grids across the Mekong region. The dividends of Chinese investment are real but so too are the costs (Ranjan & Changgang, 2021). Rising debt burdens, environmental degradation and anxieties over national sovereignty, the Mekong is thus not merely a theater of development. But a contested frontier where the promises of globalization meet the perils of dependency. Understanding this landscape demands more than technical assessments of dams and dollars. It calls for an excavation of the power structures and strategic intentions embedded within (Liu et al., 2025) region.

This study employs the lens of geopolitical economy to reveal the deeper undercurrents shaping China's posture in the Mekong. Unlike conventional paradigms that isolate state behavior within abstract notions of balance or rational interest (Sil

32 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage: [www.igi-global.com/chapter/chinas-global-south-strategy-in-the-mekong-region-in-geopolitical-implications-economic-prospects-and-challenge/381996](http://www.igi-global.com/chapter/chinas-global-south-strategy-in-the-mekong-region-in-geopolitical-implications-economic-prospects-and-challenge/381996)

## Related Content

---

### Connecting Theory and Practice: Secondary ELA Teachers Using Critical Literacy to Engage Students in Disrupting Dominant Narratives

Andrea LeMahieu Glaws, Kate Barosand Meg Woodrich (2024). *Challenging Bias and Promoting Transformative Education in Public Schooling Through Critical Literacy* (pp. 56-75).

[www.irma-international.org/chapter/connecting-theory-and-practice/346866](http://www.irma-international.org/chapter/connecting-theory-and-practice/346866)

### Alternative Tourism Strategies to Enhance Local Sustainable Tourism Development: The ALTER-ECO Project in Gandia (Spain)

Rafael Temes-Cordovez, Begoña Serrano-Lanzarote, Juan José Tuset Davóand Ruth De León-Rodríguez (2020). *Handbook of Research on the Impacts, Challenges, and Policy Responses to Overtourism* (pp. 261-283).

[www.irma-international.org/chapter/alternative-tourism-strategies-to-enhance-local-sustainable-tourism-development/250500](http://www.irma-international.org/chapter/alternative-tourism-strategies-to-enhance-local-sustainable-tourism-development/250500)

### From Childhood Institutions to Aged Care: Older “Care” Leavers Navigating Cumulative Harm Across the Lifespan

Susan Baidawi, Lena Turnbull, Sarah Morrisand Philip Mendes (2026). *Trauma-Informed and Accumulation-Aware Approaches to Child Protection* (pp. 393-424).

[www.irma-international.org/chapter/from-childhood-institutions-to-aged-care/401133](http://www.irma-international.org/chapter/from-childhood-institutions-to-aged-care/401133)

### The Impact of Routine Activities on the Number of School Shooting Injuries and Fatalities

Justin J. Joseph, Christopher W. Purser, Elizabeth Eliaand Logan A. Yelderman (2023). *Addressing Violence in the U.S. Public School System* (pp. 191-217).

[www.irma-international.org/chapter/the-impact-of-routine-activities-on-the-number-of-school-shooting-injuries-and-fatalities/323007](http://www.irma-international.org/chapter/the-impact-of-routine-activities-on-the-number-of-school-shooting-injuries-and-fatalities/323007)

## Moroccan University Student Mental and Psychological Health in the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Review and Directions for Further Research

Youssef Nadri and Malika Haoucha (2022). *Policies and Procedures for the Implementation of Safe and Healthy Educational Environments: Post-COVID-19 Perspectives* (pp. 39-54).

[www.irma-international.org/chapter/moroccan-university-student-mental-and-psychological-health-in-the-covid-19-pandemic/297181](http://www.irma-international.org/chapter/moroccan-university-student-mental-and-psychological-health-in-the-covid-19-pandemic/297181)