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Possibility of Building a New Architecture in the Mekong Region

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1. Introduction

The Mekong region, which has been often described as the "remaining frontier of East Asia," has been attracting attention from Japan and other countries for its geopolitical significance, abundant natural resources, and excellent labor force. The Mekong region is in a situation sometimes called a "Mekong Congestion," where various regional cooperation frameworks have been intricately overlapped. In order to understand the current situation of this seemingly complex region, it is important to ask, "Why have these numerous cooperative frameworks been formed?" "What actors benefit from them?" "Is the regional order cooperative or competitive or confrontational?" While having these questions in mind, it is necessary to consider how not only the states but also non-state actors shape regional order from a multifaceted perspective. With the above in mind, this report will discuss the following three issues: 1) the increase of cooperation frameworks formed by states, 2) the growth of civil society and the transformation of the Mekong Congestion, and 3) the expansion of cross-border cooperation among local governments (local administrative units) in the Mekong Congestion.

2. Increasing the Framework for Cooperation by States

In the Mekong region, at least 14 frameworks for cooperation among nations have been formed since the 1990s, giving rise to a situation called as the Mekong Congestion. Among the major ones are Japan-led AMEICC (AEM-METI Economic and Industrial Cooperation Committee) and Japan-Mekong Summit, the U.S.-led LMI (Lower Mekong Initiative), the China-led LMC (Lancang Mekong Cooperation), India-led MGC (Mekong Ganga Cooperation), the South Korea-led Mekong-ROK Summit, Thailand-led ACMECS (Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy), and Malaysia and Singapore-led AMBDC (ASEAN-Mekong Basin Development Cooperation). This situation appears to be caused by the diverse and overlapping interests and agendas of various countries. Some frameworks are operated with an awareness of rivalry with other frameworks. In practice, there is no single framework in which Japan, the United States and China participate simultaneously. The MRC (Mekong River Commission), led by Japan, the

United States and Europe, has recently been at odds with the China-led LMC in the management of the Mekong River's water resources. In ASEAN, as the AMBDC led by Malaysia and Singapore and the CLV-DTA (Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam Development Triangle Area) led by Vietnam began to make progress, Thailand began to expand the ACMECS. Looking at the overall picture, it can be said that the Mekong Congestion is generally characterized by its development orientation, although the areas of cooperation being pursued in each framework are diverse and overlapping.

What are the interests of the countries that are leading these regional frameworks in the Mekong region? First of all, Japan values the Mekong region as a junction of Asia's enormous emerging markets with a population of 3.3 billion people, placing great importance on the East-West and Southern Economic Corridors. In recent years, Japan regards Mekong region as an important nexus of the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Initiative." China is promoting the "China-Myanmar Economic Corridor" and the "China-Indochina Economic Corridor" through the GMS (Greater Mekong Subregion) led by the Asian Development Bank and the One Belt, One Road Initiative, while showing strong interest in the safe operation of dams and management of water resources through the LMC. Since the Obama era's "Pivot to Asia," the U.S. has emphasized water resource management and other issues using the LMI framework, and last year upgraded the LMI to a partnership to strengthen its stance against China. India, based on its Look East and Act East policies, is approaching the Mekong region out of caution toward China. South Korea is approaching the Mekong region under its New South Policy in an attempt to break away from its dependence on China in terms of trade, in light of the friction with China caused by the deployment of THAAD. As Thailand is geopolitically located at the core of the Mekong region, it has developed an omnidirectional diplomacy, and the ACMECS, which it is leading, positions all countries including Japan, the United States, China, India, and South Korea as development partners.

In this way, each country has formed a regional framework based on its own interests and concerns, giving rise to the Mekong Congestion. However, since around 2010, there have been moves to adjust this situation. For example, the Mekong-Japan Summit is seeking ways to optimize the effective functioning of the frameworks; the Mekong-ROK called for strengthening and complementing other bilateral cooperation frameworks and increasing interaction with existing multilateral Mekong cooperation frameworks; and the LMI declared that coordination should be made to avoid unintended duplication. In addition, the GMS program has made progress in listing the aid status of each donor and framework, the MRC has proposed the creation of a coordination mechanism among frameworks, and the Japan-China Mekong Policy Dialogue has called for mutual cooperation.

In reviewing these movements, it can be seen that the Mekong Congestion, while fraught with conflicts, has been heading in a cooperative direction to avoid conflicts, institutionalize the regional order, and eliminate inefficiencies, serving the interests of all countries involved, large and small.

3. Growth of Civil Society and Transformation of the Mekong Congestion

Next, I would like to look at the growth of civil society and the transformation of the Mekong Congestion. The Mekong Congestion has expanded opportunities for various non-state actors, including civil society, to participate in the regional frameworks. As mentioned above, the regional frameworks are generally development-oriented. This deflection has led to the expansion of civil society networks that focus on the environment, migration, human rights, and other related issues. The "Mekong Commons" concept, which views the Mekong region as a shared heritage, has also been proposed from the perspective of civil society. In response to the growth of civil society, the Asian Development Bank established a Civil Society Center, and an NGO called World Wildlife Fund (WWF) has participated in the GMS Biodiversity Conservation Initiative. Additionally, the Mekong Lanna Network for Natural Resources and Culture participated in the MRC's transboundary fishery management program. It can be said that through the Mekong Congestion, a cooperative relationship between civil society and the state is developing, and "participatory regionalism" is being partially realized. However, it should be noted that some researchers question the effectiveness of participation, such as whether the state is using existing frameworks as a means to suppress opposition from citizens in implementing its policies.

4. Expansion of Cross-border Cooperation among Local Governments (Local Administrative Units) in the Mekong Congestion

Lastly, I would like to look at a cross-border cooperation among local governments (local administrative units). One example is the MBDS (Mekong Basin Disease Surveillance) established in 1999 by the ministries of health of six Mekong countries to reduce the risk of death from epidemics and other sudden diseases. The MBDS aims to complement the shortcomings of state-led frameworks by providing a policy space for two adjacent local administrative units beyond borders. Specifically, two pairs of adjacent local administrative units will work in pairs to monitor epidemics. Savannakhet Province in Laos, Mukdahan Province in Thailand, and Quảng Trị Province in Vietnam are pioneering examples, where the movement of people was expected to increase in the process of developing the East-West Economic Corridor. The three local governments have set up joint websites to share information among themselves rather than through the central government. Another

example is the MRC's cross-border dialogue program. Since around 2010, the MRC has been promoting cross-border dialogue projects in various regions, focusing on "villages," which are located at the lowest level of local administrative units. Bokeo Province in Laos and Chiang Rai Province in Thailand are pioneering examples. The approach taken there was to match four pairs of villages in Laos and Thailand across the Mekong River. All four pairs of eight villages have fishery conservation zones (FCZs), and the project aims to protect and manage fishery resources across the Mekong River through villages' initiatives based on these FCZs.

5. Conclusion

As mentioned above, the Mekong Congestion has emerged against the backdrop of geopolitical factors. However, at present it is moving in the direction of cooperation while containing confrontation and competition. This can be understood as a move by each country to increase its share of economic resources in the long term. In the context of the Mekong Congestion, the importance of the role of non-state actors such as civil society and local governments has been already recognized, and opportunities for their participation in the regional frameworks are expanding. However, because of the growing opportunities for participation, concerns about its effectiveness are emerging. In the case of local governments, the Mekong Congestion is expected to expand their initiatives and transform the relationship between central and local governments.

(This is an English translation of an outline of the lecture delivered by IGARASHI Seiichi, Professor of the Graduate School of Social Sciences, Chiba University, at the 86th Policy Plenary Meeting of CEAC on December 3, 2020.)