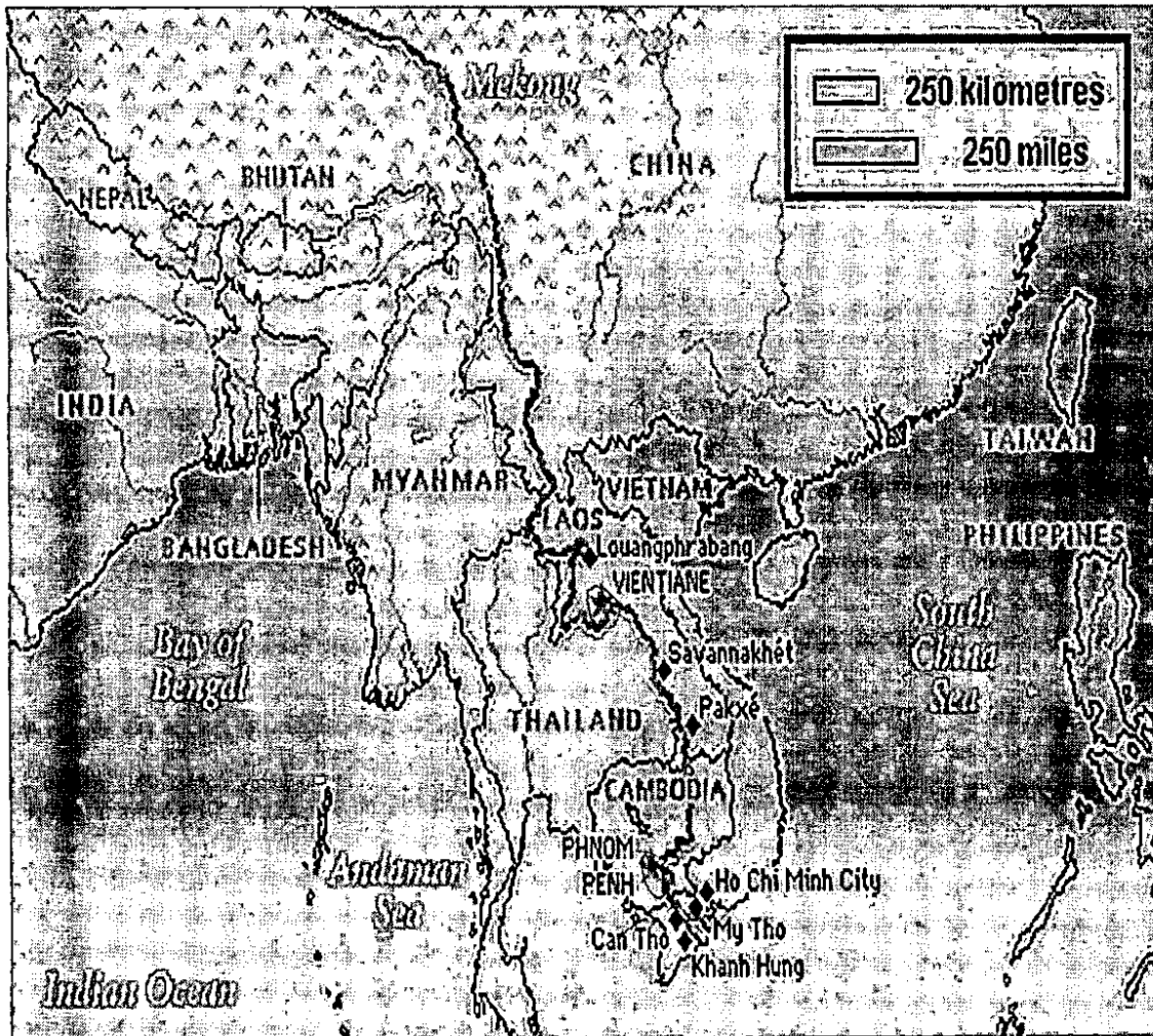


## CHAPTER III

### MEKONG RIVER ISSUE

This chapter explains about Mekong River dispute, Mekong as the potential power in Yunnan province, the Lower Mekong problems, demonstration and Mekong River Commission.

Picture 3.1 Mekong Map



## A. MEKONG RIVER

The Mekong River is a river that is crossed 6 countries in Asia. The Mekong River is the 12<sup>th</sup> longest river and 10<sup>th</sup> biggest river volume in the earth. Mekong River flows from north to south, starting from the Tibetan plateau (China), Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam.

### 1. History

Mekong River has a long history of civilization, it is because water is the primary human needs. Wide river gives benefit to the creatures that lived surround it. Fish that are lived hundreds of kilometers migrate to breed. This migration gives benefits to local people. Mekong River has indirectly benefited on the area of the countries that it is passed. Because basically, human needs water so it is not surprising if along the banks of the Mekong River there was a lot of historical civilizations.

### 2. Ways of Life

Mekong not only gives benefits in economic aspect but also considered as ways of life by residents who live around the river. Mekong has already given life to civilization in the past until today. Mekong can be used for obtaining protein requirements like fish in several countries that it is crossed. Mekong River became a vital area in Laos because this country has no sea to meet the protein needs of the community. With the volume

of the main source that is kept by the government for gaining food security in Laos. However, it that does not mean that only Laos that is requiring Mekong River for their daily needs and the food. Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam also require the river as the support of needs of the surrounding community, also in agriculture and transportation aspects.

Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam are countries that are very active in the plantation sector and agriculture. Particularly Thailand is the country with good food growth rate which is obviously needed water to irrigate their rice fields and plantation areas.

“The Mekong Delta of Vietnam is one of the most productive agricultural areas in the world. The Mekong River fans out over an area of about 40,000 km<sup>2</sup>, and over the course of many millennia has produced a region of fertile alluvial soils and constant flows of energy”<sup>8</sup>.

Thailand and Vietnam is the two biggest rice production in the world (UNFAO 2011). Both of them are ASEAN member, in lower Mekong. Without the water supply, the plant will not live so that water becomes necessity on the food sector. The insufficient water will threaten the agricultural sector, it growth is the proof that the national food is also helped by the presence of the Mekong River. Not only meet the needs of protein and food, but the Mekong also has a function as a means of transportation action

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<sup>8</sup> Mart A. Stewart and Peter A. Coclanis (2011) advances in global change research: Volume 45.

from one region to another by using boat. The Mekong River has many positive effects for the daily needs of the people who live in the upstream to downstream of the river without considering the states. Mekong River is considered as the way of life for them. Along with population growth that has continued to improve since the end of World War II, the world needs are also increasing. Humans need a lot of things for daily life. In this case the Mekong certainly takes a very important role in the life of people in that region. From upstream to downstream of the river is wide enough variety of food and economic needs of the community.

## B. MEKONG POTENTIAL POWER IN YUNNAN

China is the first state in Mekong regions which has the ability to take another potency for itself. It is known that China has the biggest population in the world not only in the late of 20<sup>th</sup> century but also nowadays. China needs a lot of energy power for supplying its millions of populations activities. Since by using the nuclear energy is too risky for its populations, the hydro power energy becomes the best solution to overcome the energy crisis. Using clean energy is the dream of many countries. Mekong River is one of the rivers which supported China's government projects to satisfy the national energy. China is very lucky because it has the biggest water volume in Asia in which it can develop projects involving hydro energy in the southern region (Yunnan

people and big corporations in China that is China Huaneng Group. China Huaneng Group is the second largest corporation for energy in China. This corporation helps the government to build a dam in the South of China. The citizens also support their government by moving from the project area to the new safe area in the North. When the Manwan Dam was finished, the power produced is very admirable that is 1,750 MV. The project is not only helping China's government for supplying energy but also helping citizen, especially in South province for saving water in drying season for agriculture and daily needs in China.

China is one of the countries that is very aggressive in exploiting energy resources, especially hydropower. According to the World Dams Committee's Criteria, China have 22,000 dams or 45% of the world in total. In China, there are three major rivers that have potential for hydropower, such as the Yellow, the Yangtze and the Mekong River. China has managed to build the three gorgeous largest dams in the world. By exploiting the potential of different kinds of those rivers, it is very helpful to meet the needs of Chinese society.

Manwan Dam is really successful, the next idea is "if the dam can produce 1,750 MV so how about if we build more than that?". China Huaneng Group sees more potencies from Mekong River that encourage them to build

3. China Huaneng Group try to hegemony Mekong River in

### C. LOWER MEKONG PROBLEMS

Mekong River is crossing national boundaries, it means that the river not only belongs to China but also Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and also Vietnam. If the Chinese government project in Yunnan province that is building 8 hydropower goes well, it will cause some problems to the Lower Mekong countries. The problem is related to the food aspect and natural disasters. Mekong dam also will cause a change in the environment and sustainable agriculture.

The construction of dam in south China is certainly detrimental for Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam as a country that also use the river to meet their needs. China was getting under pressure from the countries in lower Mekong for stopping the project. Not only from those commissions which ran protest for China government, the international news also gave their report for supporting society to stop the project. Many people talk about it as the environmental issue. Finally, in 2004 in Wen Jiabo era China's government stopped the project.

However, in Xi Jin Ping era the project was continued. There are many meeting that focus in solving problems in Mekong River case. The rumor now for political expert is "Mekong is going to be second South China Sea". I do think so, in South China Sea case, the main actor is South East Asia countries and China who has the bigger power. Similar with it, in Mekong case, the

main actor is South East Asia countries and China as the bigger power. China

becomes so aggressive nowadays in trying to solve these problems. This situation got the attention from ASEAN that also tried to solve the problem by negotiations.

If there is a dispute then there is an opportunity to find friends. That is politics, the situation is always changing. The United States looked at the situation as an opportunity to make good relations with Vietnam.

#### 1. Environment

The dams save a lot of water for the needs of the state, but the problem is when in dry season the water does not distribute well like in other seasons. It also gave impact to the lower Mekong River which got less water because of it. The condition will be vice versa when rainy season is coming. The water will be too much and the dam's door has to be opened to avoid the water excess. It means that there will be the flood which can destroy everything behind the dam. Positive for China's economy does not mean positive for lower Mekong River economy too.

#### 2. Agriculture

As I've mentioned before that most of the countries in the lower Mekong is agriculture country which is a contributor to state revenue. It also affects the agriculture sector since Mekong River gives the water supply for rice fields and plantations. Water is the most important part for agriculture. Mekong River is not only supplying the water, but also bringing organic minerals for crop fertilizer. Without water and organic minerals from Mekong

River, it will decrease the farm income. These things influence the Gross Domestic Product of the states.

### 3. Fish Immigrations

The immigrations of fish is very important for fishers. Fish have to immigrate for regeneration but dams make them cannot breed well. If the fish can't breed well, it will make the population of fish begin to extinct in Mekong River and many fishers in five countries lose their jobs in fishing. The big problem is not in how many people will lose their job, but how many people will find difficulty in obtaining food energy. Food welfare is a key point that should be the first priority than anything.

### 4. Transportation

With the volume of water of Mekong River, it can be used as a means of transportation. The volume of water will decrease and this will give negative impacts to transportation that is using boat.

## D. DEMONSTRATION

Good for China does not mean good for lower Mekong. China is under the pressure of many actors including society, mass media and NGO (environmental issue). This situation is also becoming hot topic in South-East Asia aside from the South China Sea issue. Mekong River has complicated problem like South China Sea issue. Both the South China Sea and Mekong



and China as the big actor faces the ASEAN member countries. This situation makes the Mekong River issue looks like “Second South China Sea” issue. In one part, China-ASEAN relation is getting better but in another part, China has problems with several ASEAN members. Both of them are needed each other in economy sector, so China does not want to lose the trust of ASEAN as their partner. South China Sea problems are not finished yet but it has to face the Mekong River issue. It makes China has to solve this problem carefully without any hard power.

China is not only got the pressure from large organizations but also got the protests of the people who are on the lower Mekong.

Picture 3.2 Protest to Water Exploitations in Mekong River



## E. MEKONG RIVER COMMISSION

In 1995, Mekong River Commission was established and got the duties from four states under lower Mekong River. Mekong River Commission supported for sustaining management, development of water and related resources. MRC has the goals to make equitable social welfare, better economics and energy utilization. Mekong is a determinant of welfare by many people on the main island of South East Asia. So that, the countries that are still in question looked at the necessity of forming a joint organization to talk about the common need. In 1995, the Mekong River Commission (MRC), which has four member countries, namely: Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam. The vision of MRC is having a world class standard, financially secure, achieving the vision of International River Basin Organization serving the Mekong countries to achieve the Basin Vision. The mission is to promote and coordinate sustainable management and development of water and related resources for the countries' mutual benefits and the people's prosperity. Mekong River commission is a governmental organization that issued a policy based on the mutual agreement. This is very surprising because no single organization in the world that focus on natural resources, management and financing. Management of water resources is very important to distributing

Tabel 3.1 Vision and Mission MRC

Visions and Mission
<b>VISION for the Mekong River Basin</b> An economically prosperous, socially just and environmentally sound Mekong River Basin
<b>VISION for the Mekong River Commission</b> A world class, financially secure, international river basin organisation serving the Mekong countries to achieve the basin vision
<b>MISSION of the Mekong River Commission</b> To promote and coordinate sustainable management and development of water and related resources for the countries' mutual benefit and the people's well-being

Source: MRC, Strategic Plan 2011-2015, page xvii

The vision of the Mekong River and the vision and mission of the MRC were formulated in 1999 and reaffirmed by the Prime Minister of the four Lower Mekong countries (Lower Mekong Basin Countries) in the first MRC Summit in April 2010 in Hua Hin, Thailand<sup>9</sup>. MRC is an IGO which work directly in the sharing management of water resources and sustainable development of the Mekong River.

MRC Council meets once a year, that is consisting of one member from each state that has the level of ministers. Council makes policy decisions and provides the necessary guidance, concerning to the promotion, support, cooperation, and coordination of joint activities and programs in order to implement the agreement in 1995<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> MRC, (2013) Mekong Basin Planning: The Story Basin Development Plan, page 35

<sup>10</sup> MRC, (2013) Mekong Basin Planning: The Story Basin Development Plan, page 35