

WATER SECURITY IN THE GREATER MEKONG SUBREGION (GMS): A REALIST PERSPECTIVE

AN NINH NGUỒN NƯỚC TẠI TIỂU VÙNG SÔNG MEKONG MỞ RỘNG (GMS) DƯỚI LĂNG KÍNH CHỦ NGHĨA HIỆN THỰC

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Abstract - Water has become a strategic resource and pillar for national security in addition to its importance as a fundamental necessity for life of all creatures in this planet. This paper examines water security in the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) from a Realist perspective in addition to a combination of research methods namely analytical-synthetic, comparative-contrast, case study, and forecast. The research findings indicate that most of GMS countries prioritize national interests over regional security and environmental risks. Upstream countries leverage their geographical advantages by constructing hydroelectric dams for economic benefits and water flow control over downstream countries, whereas, downstream countries defend their sovereignty and national security by promoting internal strength, water diplomatic norms, and international cooperation. Accordingly, a number of recommendations have been proposed for Viet Nam to improve its self-help capacity and diversify partnerships for international financial and technical assistance to ensure sufficient water resource for production and security.

Key words - Water security; Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS); Realism; Water resource; Water diplomacy.

1. Rationale

In recent decades, water security has emerged as a non-traditional security threat due to impacts of climate change, population growth, and socio-economic development demands. More importantly, erratic rainfall patterns, prolonged droughts, rising sea levels, and declining water quality have increased the risk of water shortages for production, energy, and daily life. When supply is no longer stable, water becomes a high-stakes factor that can trigger socio-economic instability, intensify conflicts of interest, and directly affect national security. The Mekong River, extending approximately 4,350 km, originates on the Tibetan Plateau in China and flows through six countries - China, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Viet Nam [1], making it the longest river in Southeast Asia and the twelfth longest in the world. Within the GMS, water security is particularly acute because of heavy dependence on the Mekong River system for livelihoods and economic development. The rapid expansion of hydroelectric dams in the Mekong River Basin coupled with the dominance of upstream countries in regulating river flow, has resulted in dramatic changes in hydrological patterns, sediment transport, and aquatic ecosystems. These changes threaten food security and livelihoods of millions as well as intensify strategic competition among

Tóm tắt - Nước không chỉ là nhu cầu thiết yếu cho sự sống mà đã trở thành nguồn tài nguyên chiến lược gắn với an ninh quốc gia. Nghiên cứu này xem xét vấn đề an ninh nguồn nước Tiểu vùng sông Mekong mở rộng (GMS) dưới lăng kính Chủ nghĩa hiện thực, sử dụng phương pháp phân tích-tổng hợp, so sánh, nghiên cứu trường hợp và dự báo. Nghiên cứu cho thấy hầu như các quốc gia GMS đều ưu tiên lợi ích quốc gia hơn hợp tác vì an ninh khu vực và vấn đề môi trường. Các nước thượng nguồn tận dụng lợi thế địa lý xây đập thủy điện để thu lợi kinh tế và kiểm soát dòng chảy; các nước hạ nguồn bảo vệ chủ quyền và an ninh quốc gia bằng cách tăng cường sức mạnh nội tại, áp dụng các chuẩn mực ngoại giao nguồn nước và hợp tác quốc tế. Trên cơ sở đó, bài báo đề xuất Việt Nam nâng cao năng lực “tự cứu” và đa dạng hóa đối tác, tối ưu hỗ trợ tài chính và kỹ thuật, đảm bảo đủ nguồn nước cho sản xuất và an ninh quốc gia.

Từ khóa - An ninh nguồn nước; Tiểu vùng sông Mekong mở rộng (GMS); Chủ nghĩa Hiện thực; Nguồn nước; Ngoại giao nguồn nước.

major powers, elevating water security into a critical issue for regional stability. Accordingly, this study analyzes the behavior of GMS countries in addressing water security challenges in period 2015-2025 from a Realist perspective.

Realism posits that the state is the dominant actor in international relations, always pursuing power to enhance national security and influence [2]. Therefore, states seek power to maximize relative gains, often at the expense of others. In this paper, Realism is considered with respect to two relevant strands: Defensive Realism and Offensive Realism. Defensive Realists believe that in the contemporary context, offense becomes more costly than defense due to technological and geographical constraints, thus, states prioritize rational choices in seeking balance of power to secure survival. In contrast, Offensive Realists argue that states must assume the worst about others' intentions, so states seek to maximize relative power to become regional or global hegemon, which is the most reliable means to ensure security. Both Defensive and Offensive Realists agree that states continuously seek power to avoid domination in two main strategies: internal balancing (strengthening themselves through self-help measures) and external balancing (forming alliances or coalition to counter potential hegemons) [2].

Water security, as an emerging non-traditional security

threat, has become a focal point of intensifying strategic competition among GMS countries. The struggle over water resources is not only to ensure national security and meet the demands of daily life, socio-economic development, but also to enhance power and leverage in negotiations with other states. Therefore, from a Realist perspective, water security extends beyond the imperative of survival to an emerging tool of geographical power and relative gain optimization.

2. An overview of water security in period 2015-2025

Currently, global warming has intensified hydrological instability, resulting in increased rates of water evaporation, significant declines in water availability in many parts of the world, and heightened risks of salinization and desertification [3]. At the same time, rapid population growth and rising demand of water for domestic use, agriculture, and livestock in the context of finite accessible freshwater have further exacerbated water scarcity and struggles over water control.

In fact, a 2022 report by the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) indicated that over 50% of global river basin and reservoir systems experienced significant fluctuations in water levels. About half of the world's population faced severe water scarcity at some point during the year [3]. Similarly, the World Bank's 2025 report estimated that the world loses 324 billion tons of freshwater annually due to prolonged droughts and poor management. In response, the United Nations (UN) convened the UN Water Conference 2023 [4], which generated nearly 700 commitments from member states under the Water Action Agenda to protect and manage water resources sustainably [5]. Nevertheless, water scarcity continues to intensify geopolitical tensions and conflicts in many regions around the world, such as the disputes among Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan over the Nile River [6]. Another example is Afghanistan's construction of the Qosh Tepa Canal (initiated in 2022) to divert water from the Amu Darya River leading to disputes with downstream countries [7].

These challenges are also evident in the GMS region driven by hydro-hegemony and infrastructure development. Upstream dam construction, especially 11 large dams in China [8], has diverted the flow, causing severe droughts in downstream countries, peaking in the period 2019-2021 (i.e., saline intrusion in the Mekong Delta in Viet Nam). Moreover, water insecurity has generated irreversible economic, social and ecological risks for downstream countries, particularly large-scale displacement for alternative livelihoods and declining agricultural productivity [3], [9]. This has worsened the struggle over water resources among countries in the region. Existing cooperation mechanisms such as the Mekong River Commission (MRC), Lancang - Mekong Cooperation (LMC), Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI) etc., established as regional efforts to facilitate cooperation on water governance, have faced limitations in addressing water security due to conflicting national interests and asymmetries in power among member states [9].

3. A Realist analysis of water security in GMS in period 2015-2025

3.1. Factors affecting water security

3.1.1. Objective factors

The first objective factor is the hydrological characteristics of GMS topography. Most GMS countries have a tropical monsoon climate with relatively high annual rainfall. More importantly, in times of global climate change, weather and rainfall have become increasingly unusual and unpredictable. Therefore, GMS countries face higher risks of severe floods and prolonged droughts, affecting water availability and quality as well as life quality of local residents [3].

Second, water quality has been affected by rapid industrialization and urbanization. In GMS, these processes have led to the concretization of water retention areas, deforestation, illegal mining, and unsustainable agricultural practices, thereby depleting groundwater resources and deteriorating water quality significantly. In addition, increasing untreated or inadequately treated waste from households and industrial facilities combined with pollution from chemical fertilizers has further exacerbated water contamination [8].

Consequently, hydrological characteristics of GMS topography along with rapid industrialization - urbanization, and population pressures have significantly increased water demand, thereby resulting in more competition to ensure water security.

3.1.2. Subjective factors

The first subjective factor lies in the intensifying competition for water control. Realism emphasizes self-help survival in an anarchic environment in which states prioritize national interests and accumulation of power. This perspective helps explain upstream countries' behavior in exploiting their topographical advantages by constructing canals and dams for hydropower or water storage and agricultural expansion regardless of negative implications to sustainable water management. Such large-scale infrastructure projects have altered river hydrology, resulting in ecological instability, saltwater intrusion in downstream countries, and transboundary challenges across the basin. Therefore, from a Realist lens, these dynamics reinforce asymmetric interdependence, in which downstream countries become more vulnerable and dependent, while upstream countries retain greater strategic leverage. Consequently, downstream countries must resort to non-water-related tools of influence to negotiate with upstream countries in addition to self-reliance means such as efficient water conservation or massive infrastructure investment to ensure water security.

Another factor is China's role and position. GMS is considered a southern gateway for China to project power to ensure national security. Therefore, from a Realist lens, China, with upstream advantages, aspires to dominate regional water distribution to ensure survival and relative gains including influence, negotiating and rule-making power in the region. However, when China increased intervention in water issues in GMS through LMC in 2016, the US upgraded LMI to Mekong-US Partnership (MUSP) in

2020 [10] to strengthen its regional presence and contain China's influence. In addition, other countries such as South Korea and Japan, through Mekong-Korea and Mekong-Japan cooperation frameworks [11], contributed to balancing the regional power dynamics. In this sense, the concept of water security is perceived as an institutional capacity to manage water sources and access to clean freshwater.

The third factor lies in the increasing livelihood reliance on the Mekong River leading to overexploitation of water for daily use, production and irrigation. In the 1990s and 2000s, GMS countries experienced a population boom. Although this was later somewhat controlled, such an increase put pressure on water supply for daily life needs [9] in the period 2010-2025. In fact, about 80% of 65 million people living along the Mekong River are dependent on the river for food and livelihoods, including rice and aquatic production [8]. Besides, countries with wet-field agriculture like Viet Nam and Thailand consume large amounts of water for cultivation and irrigation [9]. This has contributed to accelerating the drop in groundwater levels by 0.3-0.5 meters per year [3]. In this sense, the perception of water security is tied to "the ecological health of Mekong River" i.e., the sustainability of water flow and quality.

Fourth, existing regional cooperation mechanisms such as MRC, LMC, MUSP have not been very successful in resolving structural disputes related to water security, especially enforcement capacity to address political and ecological challenges caused by hydropower dam operations and climate change among Mekong upstream and downstream countries [8]. This makes water security a matter of regional governance and transboundary management effectiveness.

In short, it is evident that water has become a crucial factor in socio - economic development and national security, leading to intense competition among enclaved countries.

3.2. The role of the states

Realism emphasizes dominant roles of the state in international relations [2]. Thus, the state is the primary actor responsible for water security and sovereignty. Due to dissimilar geographical and topographical characteristics, there is a structural disparity in the control and access to water resources between upstream countries such as China, Laos and downstream countries like Viet Nam, Cambodia and Thailand. Among them, China, as an upstream state, has greater control over the Mekong river system. In fact, since the early 1990s, China has constructed and put into operation 11 hydroelectric dams on this river system [12], thereby adopting a proactive, unilateral control over seasonal flows of downstream countries to exert influence and maximize relative benefits. Laos is the second upstream country, after China in terms of its topographical advantage of controlling water resources. Laos advocates building hydroelectric dams for short-term economic benefits, positioning itself as the "battery" of the region [13], utilizing the resources of the Mekong River system to maximize national benefits and ensure water security for people's living and livelihoods. In this context, upstream states benefit from structural power asymmetry derived from their geographical position, enabling them to exercise a form of hydro-hegemony over

downstream states. This is in line with a Realist perspective in which states prioritize economic interests over environmental sustainability and the broader collective good.

Conversely, downstream countries, with structurally disadvantaged position, face consequences of unstable flow, saltwater intrusion, reduced seasonal water supplies, unusual floods and droughts, particularly in coastal states. A typical example is the severe flooding in Viet Nam between late October and mid-November 2025, during which peak flood levels exceeded historical records. Downstream countries also face the reduction of fish stocks, loss of biodiversity and collapse of river ecosystems [14]. This is not merely a water resource issue but a matter of survival, jeopardizing economic development and food security [15]. Therefore, from a Defensive Realist lens, it is essential for downstream countries to pursue strategies to safeguard their survival and national interests [2]. Popular internal balancing measures include adopting more efficient water management practices or digitalizing wastewater treatment processes to ensure national water security. In addition, these countries could simultaneously adopt external balancing measures such as strengthening regional unity by establishing efficient cooperative mechanisms, while partnering with major powers such as the US, South Korea and Japan to help constrain the actions of upstream countries. From the lens of Offensive Realism, in shared water basins, states behave as rational actors seeking relative gains, often resorting to military or economic means to secure a larger share of water resources [2]. China, in this context, has enhanced its hydrological and political influence over downstream states by setting regional agendas and shaping information flows, thereby reinforcing its power in regional water governance. In this sense, China has securitized water resources and framed water as integral to a state's survival to exercise leverage over downstream states.

3.3. The role of multilateral institutions

To mitigate the asymmetrical power and conflicts, GMS countries have proposed diplomatic norms for water management. Many regional cooperation mechanisms have been established such as the GMS Economic Cooperation program, initiated in 1992 with the support of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) with GMS members (namely Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and China) to promote mutually beneficial economic development cooperation, making GMS a rapidly developing and prosperous region in Southeast Asia [8]; the Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Strategic Economic Cooperation Mechanism (ACMECS) established in November 2003 within the framework of economic cooperation including Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Viet Nam [16]; MRC; the Mekong-Ganges Cooperation (MGC); CLV Development Triangle; CLMV Cooperation framework including Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar and Viet Nam [8]. These mechanisms have been designed with the aim of creating a common strategic space to promote regional cooperation.

However, most of the existing GMS cooperation mechanisms faced significant challenges due to differences in approaches to national interests. These mechanisms lack strong binding force and participation of all relevant

countries, which limits their effectiveness in addressing transboundary challenges, especially those concerning the interests of all countries (particularly upstream countries) [17]. Realists view these cooperative mechanisms with skepticism, seeing them as state-centric instruments to advance national interest and security or to maintain a balance of power among key actors [2]. More importantly, these mechanisms will be sustained as long as they benefit member countries, especially major powers. For example, downstream countries engage in LMC to gain more stable access to water resources and hydroelectricity while avoiding direct confrontation with China.

Even formally established to address water resource challenges, these mechanisms, however, lack the authority to regulate the behavior of member states. This is evident in cases such as dam construction in China and Laos or the control of water flow in the upstream Lancang River during the dry season, which significantly affects downstream countries. From a Realist perspective, these multilateral institutions lack enforcement power and are, therefore, of limited effectiveness. For example, MRC excludes key actors such as China and Myanmar [17], and ASEAN, with efforts to address GMS water resources, is hampered by the principle of non-intervention and consensus-based decision-making [8], thus resulting in minimal outcomes.

Furthermore, while China continuously leverages its unilateral decision-making in the region through LMC - shaping norms of water sharing, controlling hydrological data and regulating water flows, the US also actively maintains its presence in GMS through initiatives such as LMI (now MUSP) [18], with the aim of rebalancing regional power and limiting the influence of upstream states. This strategic competition between the US and China for influence over regional water governance may put GMS countries in a position to “take sides”, thereby exacerbating regional security instability.

4. GMS water security scenarios to 2030

Currently, the water security context remains relatively tense, with upstream countries seeking relative benefits despite detrimental impacts to downstream countries [8]. Although China has reduced the frequency of dam construction in the Mekong River Basin, the number of existing dams still can control a significant volume of water, causing serious, on-going impacts for downstream countries. Laos continues to build hydroelectric dams, aiming to become the “Battery of Southeast Asia” by exporting electricity to other countries for short-term economic benefits, even though this may harm the environment. Downstream countries such as Thailand, Cambodia, and Viet Nam also have their own agenda to secure water supply. An example is their ambitions to expand rice production, or Thailand’s intention to further exploit economic activities such as aquaculture, waterway transport, flood management, and tourism on the Mekong River [8].

From a Realist perspective, China has continued constructing dams, reflecting its exercise of upstream power to strengthen national security and regional influence. As a result, water resources have been employed

as a strategic tool to enhance pressure and dependence on downstream countries. Laos’ pursuit of the “Battery of Southeast Asia” plan [13], despite environmental and livelihood risks borne by other countries, demonstrates its prioritization of national interests and self-help through a Realist lens. Accordingly, it can be argued that the possibility of these upstream countries subordinating their national interests to regional cooperation is impossible under Realist assumptions. It is unlikely for GMS countries to reach a consensus on regional water security and sustainable development in the near future. Instead, it is highly likely that GMS countries will continue to compete for control of water resources. As this competition intensifies and water pressure exceeds the tolerable threshold, these countries may turn to negotiation and cooperation to avoid a predictable crisis. Such a scenario reflects the cornerstones of Realism: cooperation among states is typically temporary and driven by pragmatic response to an immediate threat.

Simultaneously, downstream countries will proactively adopt soft balancing strategies by enhancing their internal strengths such as hydrological research and political negotiation capabilities, and by diversifying partners to optimize development resources. However, this dynamic may force downstream countries and regional cooperation institutions to accept asymmetric agreements proposed by upstream countries, potentially undermining their national interests and sovereignty.

5. Policy recommendations for Viet Nam

Given increasingly unpredictable water security scenarios, Viet Nam needs to adopt both internal and external balancing strategies from a Realist perspective. Domestically, Viet Nam should prioritize investment in water-related technologies, especially the application of seawater and brackish water desalination technology to produce freshwater on-site for industrial use and daily consumption. In addition, it is necessary to strengthen water source protection, promote water conservation awareness, and develop water distribution policies that ensures safety, efficiency, and equitable allocation. The irrigation system must also be interconnected across regions and cities enabling the government to regulate water transfer from areas with surplus to deficit ones; proactively drain water and effectively mitigate flooding; ensure the prevention of saltwater intrusion, coastal erosion, and sea level rise [19]. Actively promoting afforestation, improving the quality of upstream forests, and limiting the expansion of low-productivity economic forests that may cause soil erosion are also measures to enhance Viet Nam’s internal response capacity [19].

In addition, in terms of external balancing, Viet Nam should engage more proactively in multilateral cooperation mechanisms in the region, especially MUSP, MRC, LMC, etc.; strengthen international cooperation through implementing bilateral and multilateral agreements to protect the environment, manage river basins, coordinate and regulate water resources rationally, thereby minimizing human impacts on the nature, especially in the

Mekong River and Red River basins, etc. More importantly, Viet Nam should diversify development resources from partners inside and outside the region to maximize relative gains and ensure national sovereignty in accordance with the principles of independence, self-reliance, resilience, and neutrality.

6. Conclusion

Water security remains a significant challenge for GMS countries. From a Realist perspective, competition for water governance is inevitable. Whether viewed from an aggressive, offensive upstream perspective or a defensive downstream one, states must strive to compete, strengthen their internal capabilities, and leverage external resources to secure maximum national benefits and ensure national survival and sovereignty. Viet Nam, as a downstream country, faces considerable risks from changes in the Mekong River system, particularly upstream China's control of water flows. Accordingly, Viet Nam must strengthen its internal capabilities, proactively maintain existing dams and canals to ensure adequate water reserves, and prioritize the efficient and economical allocation of water resources. At the same time, Viet Nam should diversify its partnerships to maximize relative strategic gains, both in negotiations and reality.

In this study, Realism provides a useful framework for explaining the behaviors of upstream and downstream states, which are clearly driven by national interests and security concerns. However, the issue of water resources needs to be considered from the complementary perspectives of Liberalism and Dependence Theory to better explain the complexity of cooperation in GMS involving both states and non-state actors (international organizations). Liberalists argue that the state is a rational actor capable of acknowledging the benefits of cooperation; therefore, in addressing non-traditional security challenges related to water resources - an issue that no single state can handle independently - cooperation is required for the collective good of all humankind. In addition, employing Dependency Theory helps analyze structural and power imbalance that leaves downstream countries vulnerable to upstream decisions. Future research should consider incorporating the perspectives of both theories to deepen the analysis of water security risks and the need to design a more equitable cooperation mechanism in GMS [10], [13], [18], [17].

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