It’s no secret that the US is engaged in heated competition with China and openly aspires to “contain” China’s rise as a global power and its otherwise inevitable surpassing of US primacy.

It should by now also be no secret that in order to do this, Washington has attempted to recruit China’s neighbours into various united fronts regarding everything from disputes in the South China Sea to baseless allegations of “human rights abuses” by China in its western Xinjiang region.

Perhaps less understood, however, is Washington’s ongoing focus on the Mekong River and Chinese dams upstream.

It must seem strange to onlookers that Washington is so concerned about water management in Southeast Asia thousands of kilometers from its own shores while Americans back home go without safe drinking water.

But if we understand Washington is not concerned at all about the Mekong River and the people living along it, and is instead using it as yet another leverage point in what is ultimately its power struggle with China over the Indo-Pacific, this conundrum is easily unraveled.

Mekong-US Partnership: Maintaining Poverty, Building Hostility
According to the US State Department’s own official website in a “fact sheet” titled, “The Mekong-US Partnership and the Friends of the Mekong: Proven Partners for the Mekong Region,” the Mekong-US Partnership (MUSP) is described as:

The countries of the Mekong sub-region and the United States reaffirmed their long-standing relationship at the second Mekong-US Partnership (MUSP) ministerial on August 2, 2021. Through the MUSP, the US government, working with Congress, continues to support the autonomy, economic independence, good governance, and sustainable growth of Mekong partner countries.

“Autonomy, economic independence, good governance and sustainable growth” is thinly veiled code for “blocking out Chinese influence, blocking economic cooperation with China, building up Western-friendly political opposition groups and blocking infrastructure development in favor of continued subsistence fishing and farming.”

The so-called MUSP describes its investments in the region over a period of now over 10 years, claiming:

The Mekong-US Partnership includes 14 US government agencies and departments with over 50 programs to strengthen cooperation to address shared interests and common challenges. From fiscal year 2009 to 2021, the US government provided over $4.3 billion in bilateral and regional grant assistance to the five Mekong partner countries, including nearly $4.0 billion from the State Department and USAID.

There is, however, nothing tangible to show for this investment. In reality, this money, like the money the US “invested” into Afghanistan over a period of nearly twice as long, has been spent to build up US-backed opposition groups and organisations posing as “nongovernmental organisations” (NGOs) and to hook impoverished local communities along the Mekong River on US handouts and programmes.

The “flagship programs” of the MUSP are not infrastructure projects granting the people economic opportunities, ease of travel, electricity or other absolute necessities required for modern civilisation, but instead programs like “USAID Mekong Safeguards.”

The State Department explains:

Mekong Safeguards provides policy makers, government regulators, financiers, and contractors with information and tools to apply environmental, social, and governance standards for infrastructure development in the Mekong sub-region. This helps MUSP countries build locally developed solutions, improve transparency in infrastructure decision-making, and accelerate the role of the private sector as a driver of development.

In other words, the US is injecting itself directly into matters that should be determined by the governments of Southeast Asia, not a Western capital on the other side of the Pacific Ocean.

Other “flagship programs” include the “Mekong Water Data Initiative,” where Washington supplies “data” to help skew decision making regarding infrastructure projects toward abandoning them entirely or recruiting the US, EU, Japan and the World Bank to develop “alternative” projects for the region.

There is also the “MUSP Track 1.5 Policy Dialogue Series” in which the US sponsors “civil society” (fronts funded by the US government, EU governments, the British government as well as Western corporate-funded foundations) to push US foreign policy objectives in the region.

Finally, there is the “Pathfinder Health Program” which the US State Department claims, “helps Mekong sub-regional health authorities identify and respond to future emerging infectious diseases.”

This last programme is particularly revealing. Its funding bypasses central governments to address healthcare locally. Rather than depending on each sub-region’s respective central government, they depend on USAID instead. Those familiar with USAID’s role in US “counterinsurgency” strategy will understand the implications of this.

The goal is to “capture” communities along the Mekong River, cutting them off from their respective central governments, creating dependence on USAID and other Western forms of funding, control policymaking locally to reflect US foreign policy objectives and create enthusiastic political cadres who will vocally oppose regional
governmental cooperation with China.

The end result is communities along the Mekong deliberately kept in poverty to cement their dependence on Western funding and encouraged (and essentially paid) to oppose any cooperation with China and for all local problems to be blamed on China.

Through funding and the West’s formidable control over Southeast Asia’s information space, otherwise obscure, fringe points of view are brought to centre stage.

Montree Chantawong of “Mekong Butterfly” is a career activist based in Thailand who insists no dams of any kind, anywhere should be built, ever. He cites risks to the environment and the disruption of small, impoverished villages that would need to be relocated as the primary reason projects that would benefit millions including those being relocated should otherwise never be built.

He has been afforded space in Bangkok Post, a Western-leaning newspaper, to spell out his agenda which almost always involves attacking China for trying to push development and criticising the US, not for interference in Southeast Asia’s internal political affairs, but for not interfering enough. He regularly attends Western sponsored forums and openly supports other forms of US interference in the region including US-backed anti-government unrest in Myanmar and Thailand.

In reality, there is a need for genuine civil society to ensure dams are designed properly to maximise sociopolitical benefits and minimise the impact on the environment. Public oversight is also needed to ensure relocation is done fairly. Contracts between governments and those building dams also deserve public scrutiny.

Instead of the region’s civil society space being filled with groups dedicated to doing this important work, the US has displaced genuine civil society along the Mekong and filled it up with “Montree’s” who insist no development take place at all, rivers be allowed to flow “unimpeded” and impoverished villages be left to fish in canoes before eating their meals in shanties along the banks of the Mekong.

The Mekong-US Partnership is revealed as no partnership at all, but an abusive relationship where the US batters its partner and prevents them from achieving any sort of personal growth. To take this analogy further, in an abusive relationship, the dominant, abusive partner is often driven by extensive insecurity and fear that if their partner is afforded personal growth and independence, they may one day decide they are better off without this relationship.

For Washington, this translates from analogy to geopolitical reality so well, it is almost palpable.

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