

# The true intentions behind the Lower Mekong Initiative

American involvement in the field of water  
management in Southeast Asia placed in historical  
perspective



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# Introduction

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American involvement in Southeast Asia during the Cold War is in most history books dominated by the Vietnam War and American military presence in the lower Mekong sub-region. A less known part of American involvement is that from the end of the Second World War the US actively engaged in the development of hydrological water projects on the Mekong River and it played a central role in narrowing the poverty gap in developing Southeast Asian nations. The Mekong River provides Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Vietnam – and to a lesser extent Myanmar – with the water needed to irrigate the largest rice cultivation area in the world, with the livelihood of tens of millions of Southeast Asians depending on it. Hydro electrical development and economic prosperity are closely related in the Mekong, and water resource management is often attributed to be able to be a contributor to regional security in the region.<sup>1</sup> In the first half of the Cold War, the US initiated the development of several major dams and irrigation infrastructure on the Mekong River to spur industrialization and lift the part of the population out of poverty that was most susceptible to the communist ideology. It would have to prevent the spreading of communism in accordance with the Truman doctrine by attracting people to the American ideology of capitalism, propagating democracy and freedom as attractive American values. The foremost method used to align other nations was to display American technological superiority, in the understanding that less developed nations would automatically want to adopt the same lifestyle. Under the National Bureau of Reclamation (further abbreviated as ‘Bureau’) many American engineers were sent to Southeast Asia to provide the technical knowledge needed for the construction of major hydrological projects and Asian engineers were educated in the United States which transferred American technocratic tradition across the Pacific.

After the end of the Cold War the United States strongly reduced its presence in Southeast Asia, lasting for a period of almost two decades. The US remained largely on the sidelines during the 1997 Asian financial crisis and the administrations of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush focused their economic and military efforts mainly on Europe and the Middle East. It was not until the accession of President Barack Obama in 2009 that America started to engage actively again in the Asia-Pacific region. With the ‘pivot to Asia’ the Obama administration had put Southeast Asia back at the center of American foreign policy.

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<sup>1</sup> Felix K. Chang, ‘The Lower Mekong Initiative & U.S. Foreign Policy’ *Elsevier* (2013) 293.

In her first year as Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton made more visits to East-Asian countries than any of her three predecessors. Clinton stated on a press conference after a visit to the ASEAN summit that ‘The United States is back in Southeast Asia’, and solidified it with the signing of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in 2009, which would have to lead to a deeper partnership between ASEAN and the US.<sup>2</sup> Renewed American engagement would focus on strengthening bi-lateral security alliances, expanding trade and investment with the region and deepening the relation with regional multilateral institutions. Besides these reassuring words that promised long term engagement, the Obama administration also effectively put word into action by introducing a new foreign aid program in 2009 called the Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI), which would have to be the foremost instrument in reengaging with Southeast Asian countries.

The center of gravity of the initiative is on water and environment management, and the most concrete aim of the LMI is to help the Mekong River Commission (MRC) in creating an integrated water management scheme in order to enhance regional cohesion. What stands out is that the used methods in the new foreign aid initiative are highly reminiscent of American involvement in water management in Southeast Asia during the Cold War. Not only because the US got involved in water management again, but even more so because the LMI shows parallels with the efforts of the Bureau, as the LMI was launched as a tool to ‘help policy makers, academics, resource managers, and the public in these countries understand and predict outcomes from climate change and development projects in the Mekong River Basin.’<sup>3</sup> Although the focus is on managing negative environmental effects instead of building dams, the United States did re-engaged itself in educating Southeast Asian policymakers and technocrats which reminds of the development programs deployed in the Cold War. The apparent parallels between the usage of foreign aid during the Cold War as a geopolitical tool and the function of the LMI today thus suggests that it is worthwhile to put the intentions of the pivot to Asia in historical perspective.

The Obama administration presented the rebalance as an economic policy choice and stated that geopolitical objectives were not directive in the renewed engagement with Southeast Asia. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said in one of her first speeches as chief diplomat of the United States at the Asia Society:

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<sup>2</sup> ‘Press Availability at the ASEAN summit’ (Phuket, 22-6-2009).

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.state.gov/p/eap/mekong/faq/> (accessed on 4-11-2016).

‘Asia is on the cutting edge of so many of the world’s innovations and trends [...] and a region of vital importance to the United States today and into our future. Some believe that China on the rise is, by definition, an adversary. To the contrary, we believe that the United States and China can benefit from and contribute to each other's successes. It is in our interests to work harder to build on areas of common concern and shared opportunities.’<sup>4</sup>

Clinton thus stated that China’s growing influence in the region did not form a threat to US interests and that both countries can even ‘benefit from each other’s successes’. The renewed engagement in the Mekong-region with the LMI however, coincided with the close monitoring of the South China Sea disputes and growing concerns over regional security in Southeast Asia. Throughout the period of weakened presence of the US, Chinese influence in the region grew due to the effects of the Asian financial crisis and the active engagement in Southeast Asian multilateral institutions. The realization that the US was losing ground rapidly in a region that became of increasing geopolitical importance, may well have been an important motive in refocusing on Southeast Asia.

The question that rises is to what extent there are parallels and connections between the efforts of the Bureau of Reclamation during the Cold War and the Lower Mekong Initiative today, and what it can say about the intentions behind the centerpiece of Obama’s rebalance towards Asia. Can we - in the light of previous American involvement - speak of a redesigned containment strategy by the US Government for Southeast Asia to counterbalance China’s growing influence with the LMI, or would that over-color the intentions of the Obama administration?

Firstly a historical overview of American involvement in water management in Southeast Asia has to show to what extent there are correlations between the LMI and previous development efforts and to what effect past American engagement played a role in setting-up the LMI and its executed policy. Secondly, the growing Chinese influence in Southeast Asia after the end of the Cold War will be mapped and subsequently the influence it had on the American decision to return to the Mekong with another water management program will be analyzed. Thirdly, an exploration of the structure and functioning of the LMI in the larger context of the rebalance will be placed in a theoretical framework of relevant international relations theories in order to gain insight into the driving forces behind the decision to return to the Mekong.

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<sup>4</sup> ‘Hillary Clinton’s address at The Asia Society New York on US-Asia Relations’ (13-02-2009), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8gBsvYZUULc> (accessed on 7-11-2016).

There are several voices which contest the existence of a grander containment scheme of the Obama administration and argued that the rebalance often is taken out of context. In the collective volume *Origins and Evolution of the US Rebalance towards Asia* the choice to refocus on Asia is portrayed as predominantly economically driven with the main argument that a containment strategy for China would have no chance of succeeding.<sup>5</sup> In Jeffrey Bader's account of his years as senior director at the National Security Council under Obama, he also claims that containment in the style of the Cold War was not an option to the administration and that it would prove counterproductive.<sup>6</sup> There are (fewer) scholars such as Felix K. Chang<sup>7</sup> and Edward N. Luttwak<sup>8</sup> who do believe that the pivot and the LMI hold containing elements. Chang discusses the function of the LMI in American foreign policy and believes, as well as Luttwak, that the LMI is the foremost tool in achieving a larger American goal of preventing the spreading of Chinese influence.<sup>9</sup> What lacks in this discussion though, is a comprehensive historical analysis of the LMI as a foreign aid program in a larger history of American engagement in Southeast Asia with water schemes launched in the twentieth century. The question if the LMI was built on the foundations laid by previous involvement needs answering to understand the institutional continuity and the influence of the efforts of the Bureau on the set-up of the LMI. There is another open space in the discussion around the intent of the LMI, as there does not yet exist a thorough examination of the structure and different programs of the LMI. To be able to say something about the purpose of the LMI, understanding its conceptualization is essential. This research tends to fill that space by distinguishing the agenda of the LMI by examining its different programs and initiatives.

## **Theoretical framework**

When researching to what extent the LMI can be understood as a part of a containment policy, there are several theoretical tools that can help explain American involvement in Southeast Asia. Thinking of the term containment, it relates directly to the creator of the concept George F. Kennan and the use it was put to in the Cold War by the US. In a report to the National War College in Washington in 1947 Kennan conveyed his thoughts that the best way to serve

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<sup>5</sup> Hugo Meijer (ed.), *Origin and Evolution of the US Rebalance towards Asia: Diplomatic, Military, and Economic dimensions* (New York 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Jeffrey A. Bader, *Obama and China's rise: an insider's account of America's Asia strategy* (Washington 2012).

<sup>7</sup> Chang, 'The Lower Mekong Initiative'.

<sup>8</sup> Edward N. Luttwak, *The Rise of China VS. the Logic of Strategy* (London 2012).

<sup>9</sup> Chang, 'The Lower Mekong Initiative'.

US national interests was to maintain equilibrium in world politics, and that national security could be achieved through the careful balancing of power. Truman's Secretary of Defense James Forrestal and Secretary George C. Marshall took interest in Kennan's views and in May 1947 Kennan was appointed as the staff's first director.<sup>10</sup> The publication of 'The Sources of Soviet Conduct' in *Foreign Policy* in the summer of 1947, where Kennan introduced the term containment, was seen by many as a statement of US national strategy. Although Kennan did not intend to prescribe US policy, his ideas were leading in the foreign policy choices made by subsequent administration.<sup>11</sup>

To ask if the LMI can be seen as a continuation of the Cold War containment would be a mistake, as the context is fundamentally different. John Lewis Gaddis, often called 'the dean of the Cold War-historians', stated in the revised epilogue (2005) of *Strategies of Containment* (1982) that there is selective transferability possible however, as Kennan's concept of containment itself was based on grand strategies he had studied at the National War College.<sup>12</sup>

Kennan – although he never thought of himself as a theorist – is attributed to have laid the foundations for realism with his theory of containment. Hans Morgenthau developed this conception into a comprehensive international relations theory he marked as classical realism, which assumes that the international politics is a struggle for power between states that all seek to dominate the international system.<sup>13</sup> With his revolutionary work *The Theory of International Politics* Kenneth Waltz extended this theory into structural realism or neorealism, stating that the international system is indeed anarchic, but that states are rather concerned with their own survival than seeking domination, and are driven by the fear of losing power in the future.<sup>14</sup> Realism was for decades the leading theory to describe the international political system until the opposing school of neoliberalism emerged. Neoliberalism pointed out ambiguities and weaknesses in Waltz's work and stated that the international system had fundamentally changed and that not states were the central actors, but institutions and nongovernmental organizations. Waltz argued in a response to the neoliberal criticism that although the end of the Cold War meant that character of international politics had transformed from bipolar into unipolar, the guiding principles of the system remain the same; an anarchic, self-help system where states are the still the main

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<sup>10</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A critical appraisal of American national security policy during the Cold War* (Oxford 1982) 380.

<sup>11</sup> Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 25.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, 380.

<sup>13</sup> Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: the struggle for power and peace* (New York 1948).

<sup>14</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, *The Theory of International Politics* (New York 1979).

actors.<sup>15</sup> This continuity of the international system forms the premise for the possibility of selective transferability of the containment theory; it would after all be obsolete if the core actors would have changed. It will be researched to what extent a realist framework and transferable elements of the containment theory can explain the use of the LMI as a counterbalance of Chinese influence in Southeast Asia.

There is an imperfection in using neorealism to explain LMI's use as a foreign policy tool however. The foremost currency that determines the result of this neorealist power-struggle is military power and the forging of military alliances according to Waltz.<sup>16</sup> The use of the LMI to gain influence hints that there are other effective forms of achieving power however. Therefore, to be able to explain the use of the LMI as a power-tool within a neorealist conception of international politics, there is the need of an additional perspective where not only military power is conceived as the way to obtaining power. Robert O. Keohane and Joseph N. Nye Jr. provide such a perspective in their work *Power and Interdependence*, where they introduced the concept of 'complex interdependence'.<sup>17</sup> They observed an ever growing constraint on the use of coercive power (think of military action and economic sanctions), which makes it more attractive for states to engage in the use of power-tools where attraction, rather than coercion and the use of force, serve as the basis for acquiring power. This distinction in behavioral power is coined in the terms hard (i.e. coercive) and soft (i.e. attractive) power. After the first mentioned in *Power and Interdependence*, Nye further explores the concept soft power in *Soft Power: The means to success in World Politics*, where soft power is described as an ideological appeal with primary currencies of values, culture, policies and institutions.<sup>18</sup> The hard and soft power spectrum that Nye created to differentiate between attractive and coercive ways of obtaining power will be used to analyze to what extent the LMI is used as an ideological appeal and what that can say about the underlying intentions.

To use this theory alongside Waltz's understanding of the international political system may seem somewhat paradoxical, as Keohane and Nye's institutional liberalism was a direct reaction to Waltz's neorealism. These two schools can however, instead of contradicting each other, be complementary perspectives in the case of explaining American foreign policy towards Southeast Asia as they both explain the use of the LMI as an effort to

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<sup>15</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, 'Structural Realism after the Cold War' *International Security* 25 (2000) 5.

<sup>16</sup> Waltz, *The Theory of International Politics*.

<sup>17</sup> Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Power and Interdependence* (New York 2012).

<sup>18</sup> Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The means to success in World Politics* (New York 2004).



gain power. Neorealism will be used to explain why the Obama administration made the rebalance towards Asia, and the soft power-theory can shed light on the way it is executed.

### **Chapters and sources**

To be able to determine the parallels between the LMI and previous water management programs, the first chapter will discuss the changing intensity of American involvement in the field of water management from the start of the Second World War until the end of the Cold War by looking at foreign policy of the consecutive administrations in US government. The Bureau of Reclamation will play a central role in the analysis, as it was the most important tool in realizing American foreign policy in Southeast Asia. There will be discussed how involvement in water management in Southeast Asia was part of a containment strategy, which can subsequently be used to display parallels with the LMI.

The second chapter will focus on the context of the rebalance towards Asia and the way it is presented by the Obama administration. Speeches, press statements and reports of ministerial meetings between the US and ASEAN will be used to explain the reasoning behind the pivot and how it is intended by the US government. An important hypothesis of the research is that the LMI is used to stop China's growing influence in the region and it will be analyzed to what extent an expanding China was of influence on the decision to refocus on Asia.

The closing chapter will contain the actual analysis of the question to what effect the new foreign aid program is used to counterbalance Chinese influence in Southeast Asia, by using a theoretical framework to explain US foreign policy. The focus will be on the first term of Obama when most of the LMI was shaped and its course was set out, and is most important in analyzing the intentions behind. Obama's second administration will receive less attention as there were no major changes in the program and only saw an intensification of the efforts. Primary sources such as policy documents concerning the LMI program, communication between the State Department and the US Embassy in Thailand together with reports of programs will form the basis for the analysis.

# Chapter one: American involvement in water management in Southeast Asia during the Cold War

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American involvement in Southeast Asia was characterized and shaped by its involvement in water management in the lower Mekong region. To be able to draw parallels between past and present initiatives, it is necessary to begin with identifying the key players and events during a succession of American administrations going as far back as the beginning of the Second World War. Analyzing the way water management was used as a foreign policy tool can give an insight in underlying rationale and the intentions behind it. It also places the LMI in a historical perspective of involvement in the Mekong region, which has laid the foundations on which the LMI was built.

From 1947 until mid-1980s the American government-agency the Bureau of Reclamation took a central role in American foreign policy towards Southeast Asia. Originally the Bureau was created to supply the West of the United States with major hydro-electrical dams to attend to the rising national energy demand, but after the completion of the Hoover Dam in 1935 a dozen Chinese engineers who had interest in building large concrete dams along the Yangtze were invited to the Denver Hydraulics Lab to follow a long-term training program. During the Second World War more engineers from Asia as well as the Soviet-Union, India and the Middle East followed suit. President Roosevelt had the strong belief that the need to build popular support among Asian peasants for American postwar development was crucial in preventing future conflicts caused by millions of people displaced by the war. To this end the top secret 'M Project' was created, which was led by anthropologist Henry Field and produced over 600 reports on irrigation projects and settlement efforts in the Soviet-Union, Japan and Nazi-Germany. The results of the M Project were shared with the State Department and had to give insight in the way American foreign policy could best be adjusted to entice people to the American way of living.<sup>19</sup>

In 1949 Truman incorporated the M Project in his 'Point IV program', which focused on using American technical know-how for a big promotional campaign of the US among other nations:

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<sup>19</sup> Christopher Sneddon, 'The 'sineu of development': Cold War geopolitics, technical expertise, and water resource development in Southeast Asia, 1954–1975' *Social Studies of Science* 42 (2012) 569.

'The United States is pre-eminent among nations in the development of industrial and scientific techniques. The material resources which we can afford to use for the assistance of other peoples are limited. But our imponderable resources in technical knowledge are constantly growing and are inexhaustible. I believe that we should make available to peace-loving peoples the benefits of our store of technical knowledge in order to help them realize their aspirations for a better life.'<sup>20</sup>

There was no elaboration in the speech on who these 'peace-loving peoples' exactly were, but a general idea can be drawn from those who were invited to the US for technical training and education: engineers from Indochina and Thailand made up the biggest group of foreign trainees at the Denver Hydraulic Lab.<sup>21</sup> This is not very surprising, as the earlier efforts of Roosevelt to train Chinese engineers and inspire Chinese peasants to adopt an American culture of modernization became fruitless due to the failure of the Marshall Mission<sup>22</sup> in 1946 and the rapid expansion of Chinese Communist forces in 1948. This had transformed China's periphery (Indochina and Thailand) into crucial strongholds in the prevention of a communist Southeast Asia. There thus seemed to be a strong linkage between Truman's belief in the use of transferring technological knowledge on other cultures and the containment of communism, which marked the emergence of Cold War thinking that would be a driving force behind the efforts of the Bureau thereafter.

As early as 1946 the Bureau accommodated some short-term visitors from Thailand to show major dams like the Grand Coulee and Hoover, and in the early 1950's numerous foreign trainee-programs were created at the Denver Hydraulic Lab. Foreign engineers learned the way of building modern dams in the American tradition, but also adopted the bureau's 'culture of objectivity', which meant that they were trained in gaining the public's trust in their methods and subsequently claiming political immunity for the projects they engaged in. When these trained officials returned home, they soon received lucrative jobs in private- and government agencies and spurred development that modernized their home-countries.<sup>23</sup>

The best example of the influence of American technocratic culture on institutionalization in the Mekong region can be found in the form of the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT), a central player in hydropower development in

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<sup>20</sup> Harry S. Truman, 'Inaugural Address' (January 20, 1949).

<sup>21</sup> David Biggs, 'Reclamation Nations; The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation's Role in Water Management and Nation Building in the Mekong Valley, 1945-1975' *Comparative Technology Transfer and Society* 4 (2006) 229.

<sup>22</sup> The Marshall Mission was a special mission undertaken in 1945 to negotiate a settlement in the Chinese civil war (1945-49) between nationalist and communist opposing forces. US sponsored peace talks between nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek and communist leader Mao Zedong turned to nothing and the fighting recommenced in 1946, signifying the failure of the mission.

<sup>23</sup> Biggs, 'Reclamation Nations', 242-243.

Southeast Asia to this day that was initiated by the Bureau of Reclamation. Most officials were trained by the Bureau in the US and the first Thai multi-purpose dam - the Bhumibol dam in the Northwest of Thailand - was finished in 1964, in large by American aid and knowledge.<sup>24</sup>

### **Building on the foundations**

The belief of Roosevelt and Truman that transferring technical knowledge would attract others societies to adopt an American lifestyle laid the foundation for the initiation of numerous foreign aid programs in countries around the world during the Cold War. In the aftermath of the Second World War most of these programs focused on countries in Europe in the form of the Marshall Plan, but shortly thereafter American involvement using foreign aid could be noticed in numerous other countries outside of Western-Europe. From 1950 the Bureau of Reclamation started foreign operations in developing regions in Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Latin America. The list of countries that were supported was largely compromised out of newly independent states that were believed to be persuadable to join the US in the Cold War struggle.

At the end of nearly a century of French colonial rule in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, the political vacuum that had developed in those countries formed a daunting image in the minds of the Americans, and in the 1950s and 60s preventing communist take-overs in Southeast Asia became of more and more importance in stopping a chain effect of falling dominos in accordance with the Truman doctrine. Mao's communism gained ground rapidly in Vietnam and Laos, and seemed to be expanding into the rest of the region. The importance of steady economic growth and political and social stability in non-communist Asia soon received high priority in US foreign policy.<sup>25</sup>

American modernization theorists gained more and more influence in Washington with the thought that providing material resources and moral tutelage could be an effective instrument against communist insurgencies.<sup>26</sup> The US State Department believed the exploitation of the lower Mekong river basin with hydroelectric dams was key to incense economic growth and thereby lift the poorest part of the population out of poverty that was

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<sup>24</sup> Molle, *Contested Waterscapes in the Mekong Region*, 26.

<sup>25</sup> Mikiyasu Nakayama, 'International Collaboration on Water Systems in Asia and the Pacific: A Case in Transition.' *International Review for Environmental Studies* 3 (2002) 274–282.

<sup>26</sup> Micheal E. Latham, *Modernization as Ideology; American Social Science and "Nation Building" in the Kennedy Era* (London 2000) 7.

most susceptible to the communist ideology. Commissioned by the US State Department the Bureau of Reclamation – which had already gained foothold in Southeast Asia because of the exchange-programs – started mapping and conducting surveys of potential dam sites, in order to work towards an intergovernmental cooperation of the surrounding countries on the development of the Mekong-delta. Following this exploratory research by Bureau officials, the Mekong Committee – representing most riparian countries of the lower Mekong River Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam, but excluding Burma and China – was created in 1957 under the auspices of the United Nation Economic Commission of Asia and the Far East (ECAFE).<sup>27</sup> The major roles of the Committee were to coordinate studies and develop a water resource development scheme for the lower Mekong, to apply for technical and financial assistance in the name of the member-countries and to individually manage the assistance provided by foreign donors.<sup>28</sup>

During the beginning years of its existence, the Mekong Committee received 37 percent of the 86 million US Dollar of non-member aid from the United States and US officials had considerable influence on the course the committee took. The training of Southeast Asian engineers had provided the Bureau with a respectable status in the lower Mekong, and the support to build the first modern dam in Thailand made the Bureau a wanted partner in developing the Mekong. In 1958 the US government signed an agreement with the Mekong Committee to collect scientific data to look at the feasibility of building a major dam in Pa Mong (at the Thai-Lao border), which would also be conducted by the Bureau.<sup>29</sup>

Concluding from promotional documents of the Bureau, the Pa Mong dam would be only the beginning of a complete transformation of the Mekong basin which bureau-officials called ‘the sinew of development’.<sup>30</sup> Apart from Pa Mong, two other massive water schemes were to produce enough hydroelectricity to spur industrialization in the region while at the same time stimulating modern irrigation management. The Pa Mong project received by far the most attention however, because it was also meant to be a display of American technological magnificence that could serve as a development-model for other countries.

The need to make a showcase out of the planning and building of the dam became clear when Commissioner of Reclamation Floyd Dominy was flown to Thailand in 1961. Urged by the US Ambassador to Thailand Kenneth Tod Young, who had received instructions

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<sup>27</sup> Biggs, ‘Reclamation Nations’, 232.

<sup>28</sup> J. W. Jacobs, ‘Mekong Committee: History and Lessons for River Basin Development’ *The geographical Journal* 161 (1995) 142.

<sup>29</sup> François Molle, Tira Foran and Mira Käkönen, *Contested Waterscapes in the Mekong Region: Hydropower, Livelihoods and Governance* (London 2009) 6.

<sup>30</sup> Sneddon, ‘The ‘sinew of development’’, 572.

from the State Department to promote the project, Dominy was to demonstrate – against his own better judgment – long-term commitment for economic and technical assistance to build a major dam in the region. Beside the promotion of the project, Dominy also was instructed to glorify the Bureau of Reclamation as the world’s foremost water development agency, willing and able to provide the appropriate technical expertise for what was one of the world’s largest and most challenging projects.<sup>31</sup>

Dominy must have joined in the propagandistic circus very reluctantly, as he advised the riparian countries in an intergovernmental meeting to ‘proceed carefully to determine the exact nature of the Pa Mong project’. There had not yet been extensive research on the financing, other options for resource development and the needs of the people in the region around the dam. The research that had been concluded - first by the bureau itself and later by the Mekong Committee - agreed that a number of small hydro electrical projects appeared attractive for study, but did not mention the potential to build a dam near Pa Mong at all.<sup>32</sup> The belief existed among US State officials however, that rapidly deployed technical assistance could be a critical tool in the struggles of the Cold War and objections on the practicability were put aside.

Southeast Asia specialist Kenneth Landon advised the Kennedy-administration at the time of Dominy’s mission to the Mekong, believing that ‘the Mekong has enormous potential for the political and economic future of Southeast Asia and great significance for the future of U.S. relations with the riparian countries’ and that engaging in the planning of a major dam would ‘derive the maximum short- term political impact possible’.<sup>33</sup> The State Department’s push to start conducting engineering feasibility studies prevailed and what would be the most expensive overseas venture in American history was launched in August 1963.<sup>34</sup> To dive headfirst into an extensive hydrological project (considerably larger than the construction of the Hoover Dam) that had not been thoroughly examined beforehand, demonstrated that there was a gaping hole between technical knowledge and expertise on water management on the one hand and the geopolitical imagination produced by American foreign policy objectives on the other. More importantly, it became clear that the use of water management as a foreign policy tool had clear geopolitical objectives; stopping the spreading of communism at any cost.

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<sup>31</sup> Christopher Sneddon, *Concrete revolution; Large Dams, Cold War Geopolitics and the US Bureau of Reclamation* (London 2015) 105-110.

<sup>32</sup> Sneddon, *Concrete revolutions*, 110.

<sup>33</sup> Kenneth P. Landon, Memorandum to Walt W. Rostow, ‘Political Implications of the Mekong River Basin for Southeast Asia’, (6-3-1961).

<sup>34</sup> Sneddon, *Concrete revolutions*, 111.

The use of the Bureau of Reclamation as a geopolitical tool very acutely displays that the US used soft power tactics of ideological attraction and agenda setting to gain foothold in Southeast Asia. With the involvement in the work of the Mekong Committee and the lobbying for developing the Pa Mong Dam with American assistance the US hoped to steer political agenda's in Southeast Asia in the desired direction, without military intervention. Furthermore, by training Southeast Asian engineers and policymakers in the US and spreading the ideology of technological modernity, the US hoped to ally Southeast Asian countries in the Cold War struggle. Although Nye only coined the concept of soft power in the 1990s and had the conviction that it was of increasing relevance as states were gaining power in increasingly different ways, the applicability thus seems to be going decades back.

One of the effects of the push for modernization was, ironically enough, that the social group that was targeted to benefit from the development of the Mekong the most actually was the first to suffer. It brought to light at what cost the American development programs were to serve grander ambitions. During the 1960s it became clear from other projects within and outside Southeast Asia that the effects of the construction of a major dam for neighboring (often very poor) peasants were devastating. An estimated 230,000 to 480,000 people would have to move when the Pa Mong Dam would be complete, and the planning of future development in the mid-1960s was characterized by stark competing visions of social scientists and Bureau engineers. One of the best know critiques on the work of the Bureau came from geologist and social scientist Gilbert White, who argued that from a moral standpoint, the project had to bring immediate and substantial benefit to the people living in the areas surrounding the dam-site.<sup>35</sup> The anti-movement of social scientists brought to light that the US government had far more regard for demonstrating its grandeur, than holding on to its originally formulated goal; decreasing the development gap by strengthening the position of the poorer part of the population.

Apart from showing American technological superiority, initiating water schemes in the Mekong also had to make sure that America's 'footprint' in the region was not dominated by the massive deployment of troops in the Vietnam War. When Lyndon B. Johnson pushed for integrative development of the Mekong and announced during a speech at John Hopkins in 1965 that he would seek a \$1 billion subsidy from congress to help construct an internationally supported water collaboration in the lower Mekong that could even dwarf the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). At the same time he announced that there would be a

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<sup>35</sup> Biggs, 'Reclamation Nations', 237-238.

considerable increase of American troops in Vietnam.<sup>36</sup> In the perspective of the function of the LMI today, it is thus important to realize that the US has traditionally been using water management as means of reputation building and to use it as counterbalance against the presence in Vietnam.

### **The crumbling away of the Pa Mong Dam**

In first phase during the planning of the Pa Mong dam, from 1963 to 1966, the Bureau gathered information on whether the construction was feasible biophysically and economically. The outcome of this research already seemed to have a foregone conclusion however – considering the geopolitical value attached to the project – and with the conclusion that building the dam was feasible phase two was initiated in 1966. At the end of the second phase, which would take 5 to 7 years, a report was projected to be published on the exact costs and benefits of all aspects of irrigation, power production, flood control, and improvement of navigation from increased flows and reduction of salt water intrusion.<sup>37</sup>

When conducting these studies it became clear that there was a long way to go before there would be a fully operating dam site at Pa Mong. By late 1967, Bureau officials started to echo concerns made in earlier studies about the possibility to utilize the soil for irrigation development and the economic viability of the project. Project experts had put the total costs for the dam itself at \$600 million, which did not even include the costs for the irrigation infrastructure of another \$1 billion.<sup>38</sup> For the first time during the course of the project, foreign policy officials started to question if the geopolitical gains outweighed the towering expenses.

Especially the election of Richard Nixon in 1969 and his reelection in 1973, meant that far fewer funds were available for the implementation of foreign aid programs during the 1970s, because the administration did not believe that nation building efforts using development programs such as the Pa Mong Dam were the best remedy to the communist disease. The US withdrew itself from the contested field of water development of the Mekong, as well as pulling back 600,000 military personnel from Indochina. Under Nixon, the US also reduced its contribution to the Mekong Committee from \$5.6 million in 1973 to zero in 1975 and became less involved with the course the Committee took.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore,

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<sup>36</sup> Biggs, 'Reclamation Nations', 240.

<sup>37</sup> Sneddon, 'The 'sineu of development'', 577.

<sup>38</sup> Ibidem, 579.

<sup>39</sup> Molle, *Contested Waterscapes in the Mekong Region*, 8.



the changing political environment in Laos and armed conflicts made projects throughout the country unachievable and the Khmer Rouge - who came to power in Cambodia in 1975 - had renounced all USAID-initiatives. With Vietnam being a (lost) warzone, the whole lower Mekong River basin except for Thailand practically became unworkable terrain.

Although the dam was to be completed in 1984, by 1973 it became clear that the Pa Mong dam was not going to be built. All the hundreds of studies, years of extensive research and investigations were shelved and what was to be the greatest showcase of American technological superiority never took material form. Most Bureau officials left Southeast Asia as the US withdrew its military presence from Indochina and largely halted its economic aid to Southeast Asian countries. The role of USAID as foremost foreign policy tool in shaping the relations with Southeast Asia declined rapidly, although Thailand was still supported to continue its tributary projects and to train staff at home and abroad. Because the US had pulled back most of its military staff back into Thailand, it made it into the last American stronghold in Southeast Asia, and created an armed frontier along the Mekong River between the American backed Thailand, Chinese backed Cambodia and the Soviet backed Vietnam and Laos.<sup>40</sup>

The shifting political focus of the US and the changing regional conditions also expressed itself in the changing face of the Mekong Committee. The US stopped its financial support to the Committee in 1975 and in 1978 the committee evolved from a noticeable institution that represented the four riparian countries of the Lower-Mekong, to the 'Interim Mekong Committee', which did realize a few small-scale dams in Thailand, but was predominantly an advisory organ that focused on data collection. This process was even further accelerated because earlier noted social scientists such as White gained more and more influence in the work of the committee, and steered it away from the initiation of large water schemes.<sup>41</sup>

The unsuccessful construction of the Pa Mong dam and the loss of face by the Mekong Committee showed that cooperation on the development of the lower Mekong basin largely depended on economic and technological input of the US government. It also showed that American foreign policy and the accompanying geopolitical objectives determined the focus and shape of foreign aid in Southeast Asia during the Cold War. When America's need to show that it was invested in the region weakened, it did not bother to finish the nation building efforts it came to Southeast Asia for in the first place.

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<sup>40</sup> Latham, *Modernization as Ideology*, 203.

<sup>41</sup> Biggs, 'Reclamation Nations', 239-240.

When summarizing the way the US has been involved in water management in Southeast Asia, three different aims can be distinguished. Firstly, with the investments in water resource development the US tried to counterbalance the image of its destructive military presence in Vietnam and used it as a means of reputation building. It can thus be seen as using water management as soft power to balance out the use of hard power in the Vietnam War. Secondly, with the building of the Pa Mong Dam as part of a cascade of large dams on the Mekong, on the long term the US hoped to strengthen the economies of underdeveloped Southeast Asian countries, in order to prevent communist insurgencies. Thirdly, by using the Bureau of Reclamation as a geopolitical tool with the soft power tactics of ideological attraction and agenda setting the State Department attempted to align Southeast Asian countries with the US in the Cold War struggle. All these aims have in common that the guiding principle was not only to manage water itself, but predominantly to manage Southeast Asian societies with it.

### **American presidents losing interest**

Nixon, and later Gerald Ford, pressed Japan and European countries to also take account for regional security in Southeast Asia. Nixon had also opted for normalizing the relationship with China, and received considerable domestic support for it. The Carter-administration made this one of its most important pillars of its Asia policy, and came to a Joint Communiqué on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1979 which acknowledged the one-China policy and accounted the rule over Taiwan to the Chinese government in Beijing.<sup>42</sup> This normalization between the US and China had as side-effect that the Southeast Asian security situation became more stable and there was less need for the US to be a military counterweight than the previous decades.

Apart from engaging in diplomatic relations with China, the Carter-administration seemed largely uninterested in developments in East Asia. This stance characterized a succession of administrations thereafter. Ronald Reagan reintroduced the active impugnation of communism in Southeast Asia by supporting ASEAN as an institution, but otherwise gave Southeast Asian affairs little priority. His ideology of only reacting to the spreading of communism in important geopolitical areas caused him to see the developing world as irrelevant to American foreign policy, unless it was a frontline in the East-West struggle. The George H. W. Bush administration and subsequently the administration of Bill Clinton

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<sup>42</sup> Robert G. Sutter, *The United States in Asia* (New York, 2009) 18-20.

focused their foreign policy more on the Middle East, Europe and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. At the end of the Cold War the US emerged as only superpower and dictated the world's economy without needing to be a regional power on every continent.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Diane K. Mauzy and Brian L. Job, 'U.S. Policy in Southeast Asia; Limited Re-engagement after Years of Benign Neglect' *Asian Survey* 47 (2007) 623.

## Chapter two: The pivot to Asia

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During the Asian financial crisis of 1997-98 it became clear that there was little left of the Cold War ideology of narrowing the development gap of developing nations in Southeast Asia, as there was no initiative from Washington to offer any bilateral bailouts to the countries that were hit the hardest by the crisis. The attitude of some in Washington was that non-democratic governance and 'Asian values' had caused the crisis, which generated significant resentment in Southeast Asia against the US and lessened American influence in the region considerably.<sup>44</sup>

Although there thus was a clear discontinuation in development efforts, to state that the US was completely absent in Southeast Asia in the 1990s is misleading. The US remained a military superpower in the region and Southeast Asian countries were among the leading trade-partners of the US. Throughout the twentieth century, there has also been a bipartisan consensus in congress between the Democrats and Republicans that the South Pacific region is of great geopolitical importance to the US.<sup>45</sup> In a surge of nationalism in 1992 the Philippines had closed all its American military bases, but at the turn of the century Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia had signed military access arrangements with the US and they effectively controlled the surrounding waterways. Although the US had responded to the 1995-1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis with a display of considerable military might, the Chinese seizure of Mischief Reef (in Philippine territorial waters) in 1995 led ASEAN to identify China's expansionist drift as the biggest regional security threat, but the Clinton-administration refused to take position and confirmed the distant relation between ASEAN and the US.

It was not until the appointment of George W. Bush that the US again sought selective rapprochement. While Clinton's foreign policy towards Asia was often characterized by showing 'benign neglect', the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers in 2001 made Bush engage in an active war against terrorism in Southeast Asian countries with a Muslim population such as Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand, which became the 'second front' in the war on terror.<sup>46</sup> Under the 'American anti-terrorism program' (ATA) governments and secret services in these countries were supported financially and the US sent anti-terrorist squads to

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<sup>44</sup> Mauzy, 'U.S. Policy in Southeast Asia', 625.

<sup>45</sup> Kurt Campbell and Brian Andrews, 'Explaining the 'Pivot' to Asia', Chatham House (august 2013) 2, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/papers/view/194019> (accessed on 18-11-2016).

<sup>46</sup> Ibidem, 629.

train the police and military forces. The correct way of interpreting this re-engagement is indeed selective, because relations with Cambodia, Lao PDR, Burma and Vietnam remained largely unaltered and engagement with multilateral institutions like ASEAN barely existed.

### **Obama's pivot**

From the 1980s on, a succession of administrations thus directed their foreign policy towards areas outside of Asia. The appointment of Obama as president brought a fundamental change to the focus of American foreign affairs, as East and South Asia received a central place again. Although ending the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan would have to be the most visible achievement and refurbishing the image of America abroad had to give the US political credibility again, significant elements of the foreign policy were being redirected towards the Asia-Pacific region in a 'strategic pivot' which had to show long-term American commitment to the region. The pivot can therefore best be described as a rebalance, with a vast and dynamic increase in engagement with Southeast Asia, which for the first time since the Johnson administration dominated the course of foreign policy again.

Obama announced at an UN-summit at the beginning of his presidency to revitalize foreign aid and development programs as a 'core pillar of American power', which – apart from continued support to Thailand – had been marginalized since the end of the Cold War.<sup>47</sup> The Lower Mekong Initiative thus seems to be the result of the aim to give the US a better image abroad and to revitalize foreign aid programs, but to understand the intentions behind the LMI, we must first analyze the roots of these objectives and explore the context in which the rebalance took form.

Shaping this rebalance has been accompanied by active promotion of what Secretary Clinton had called 'forward deployed diplomacy' in her sixth trip to Asia in 2010. In this form of diplomacy the goal was to create an 'open, fair, stable and predictable political, economic, and security operating environment across a vast region spanning from India to the United States'.<sup>48</sup> While scaling back the construction of embassies and consulates, and enforcing major cuts of 18 percent in spending's in Europe, Central Asia and Eurasia, the budget for

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<sup>47</sup> Howard LaFranchi, 'Obama at UN Summit: 'foreign aid is core pillar of American power'' *csmonitor* (22 September 2010) <http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Foreign-Policy/2010/0922/Obama-at-UN-summit-foreign-aid-is-core-pillar-of-American-power> (accessed on 22-12-2016).

<sup>48</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, 'Remarks on Regional Architecture in Asia: Principles and Priorities' (Honolulu, 12-1-2010).

implementing foreign policy in the Asia-Pacific was increased.<sup>49</sup> This signified that the refocus was not merely a diplomatic initiative, as the state finances were also directed towards that objective.

In November 2011, Clinton further specified this forward deployed diplomacy by publishing an official statement in *Foreign Policy* to outline the strategic intent of the refocus on Southeast Asia.<sup>50</sup> The central point in the article was that the US government believed that not the Atlantic but the Pacific will form the epicenter of the world in the coming decades, and the Asia-Pacific region is more important to the US than ever before. Clinton stated that the best part of history of importance will be written in Asia. In reshaping foreign policy towards Asia, six pillars were created to follow up on this refocus. The strengthening of bilateral security alliances and forging a broader-based military presence had to make sure the US was seen as an eminent force in the region again. The Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) and creating Free Trade Agreements with Singapore and South-Korea had to ensure deepened economic ties and Clinton announced to seek new partnerships with emerging powers such as China, India, Malaysia, Vietnam and Indonesia. The delineating framework was focused on the encouragement of democracy and human rights.<sup>51</sup> These focus points were not new to US foreign policy; post-Cold War administrations had based its diplomacy towards Southeast Asia on generally the same pillars, although it was not followed up by active engagement with Asia. A new course in the foreign policy of the Obama Administration however, was a greater emphasis on engaging with Asian multilateral institutions.

Although there had been administrations such as the Carter administration and Reagan administration that saw engagement with ASEAN as an important part of the foreign relations with Southeast Asian countries, and although the Bush administration had called the United States an 'Asian power', it was never followed up by concrete involvement.<sup>52</sup> To distinguish itself from the Bush administration, the Obama administration thus set out a course which had to show that the US was a lasting presence in the region. In his account of the first two years with the Obama administration as Senior Director for East Asian affairs on the National Security Council (NSC), Jeffrey A. Bader noted that when he started his work 'they would be

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<sup>49</sup> Xinhua, 'US urged to build trust in Asia-Pacific', *World Affairs* (3-2-2012).

<http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/content/secretary-clinton-us-pursue-forward-deployed-diplomacy-asia-pacific> (accessed on 21-12-2016 ).

<sup>50</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, 'America's Pacific Century' *Foreign Policy* 2 (2011) 23-38.

<sup>51</sup> Micheal McDevitt, 'The Origin and Evolution of the Rebalance', in: Hugo Meijer, *Origin and Evolution of the US Rebalance towards Asia: Diplomatic, Military, and Economic dimensions* (New York 2015) 31-32.

<sup>52</sup> See Seng Tan, 'Change and Continuity in America's Asia Pivot: US engagement with Multilateralism in the Asia Pacific', in: Hugo Meijer, *Origin and Evolution of the US Rebalance towards Asia: Diplomatic, Military, and Economic dimensions* (New York 2015) 59.

inheriting a mixed bag at the Asia department'.<sup>53</sup> Part of this inheritance was an image in Asia that the US was distracted and preoccupied elsewhere caused by the global fight against terrorism and the war in Iraq. It was because of this neglect of Southeast Asian politics of American presidents after the Cold War that ASEAN gained its political viability. With the eminent regional power distracted, ASEAN took the role of a peacekeeper in the region and forging cooperation among the member-countries, though not very credible and effective.<sup>54</sup>

Bader further notes that the decision to miss two of the annual meetings of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Regional Forum (ARF) by Bush's Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice further confirmed the view that the US did not give priority to Southeast Asia. By embedding the US in Southeast Asian multilateral institutions and events such as ASEAN, APEC and the East Asia Summits, Obama and his staff hoped to take away the distrust of durable commitment, while at the same time enforcing the role of ASEAN as a key partner of the US in balancing the security situation in the region.<sup>55</sup>

Multilateral diplomacy consequently became the hallmark of American Asia policy throughout the service of the Obama administration. Part of the objective of this diplomacy was strengthening the role of the Mekong River Commission (MRC) as a conjoining regional institution. After Cambodia had joined the weakened Interim Mekong Committee in 1995 again, it was transformed to the MRC in the hope to settle issues between the riparian countries and come to a joint water management approach of the Mekong region. The LMI was marked as an important tool in strengthening the role of the MRC, and several programs within the LMI focus on creating trans-border cooperation on water management between ASEAN-members in the lower Mekong basin.<sup>56</sup> An important part of the rebalance was taking away the anxiety among Southeast Asian nations about American absence. This unease originated for a large part from the fear of a growing China with an expanding military force and an increasing financial grip on the region. Enforcing the role of ASEAN and the MRC through LMI-programs could help in rebuilding trust in a lasting and sustainable American presence.

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<sup>53</sup> Jeffrey A. Bader, *Obama and China's rise: an insider's account of America's Asia strategy* (Washington 2012) 1.

<sup>54</sup> Tan, 'Change and Continuity in America's Asia Pivot', 60.

<sup>55</sup> Bader, *Obama and China's rise*, 3-4.

<sup>56</sup> Chang, 'The Lower Mekong Initiative', 299.

## Growing Chinese influence

The increased Chinese engagement with Southeast Asia was precluded by the reaction to the Asian financial meltdown of 1997. When Thai and Indonesian currencies devaluated disastrously, China did not devalue the Yuan and facilitated a relative softening of the effects of the crisis for its neighbors. After the meltdown ASEAN Secretary General Rodolfo Severino stated that ‘China is really emerging from this smelling good’, which signified the improving relations China was building with Southeast Asian countries.<sup>57</sup>

In the years thereafter China launched several initiatives and the concept of ‘a peaceful rise’ received a central place in China’s public diplomacy to get rid of the image of a power hungry nation. Chinese leaders propagated a doctrine of ‘win-win relations’, which promised that Southeast Asians could benefit from interaction with China without Chinese infringement in the sovereignty of neighboring nations. It implicitly contrasted its philosophy with that of American involvement in the region that was more and more associated by Southeast Asian countries with imposing a web of sanctions and the demanding of economic and political concessions in exchange for support.

To demonstrate its willingness to follow up on the rhetoric, in 2003 China signed the ‘Southeast Asian Treaty of Amity and Cooperation’ and closed cooperative bilateral agreements with several neighbors. It adjusted its previous disregard for Southeast Asian multilateral institutions and cooperated with ASEAN on many fronts, initiating far more joint projects than the US and becoming an official ‘dialogue partner’. Informal business and cultural summits were organized in China to bring together Asian opinion leaders, emphasizing its potential to be a strong trading partner and a regional leader. Through the promotion of Chinese culture and Chinese language studies with institutions across its borders, China hoped to draw other societies nearer with its public diplomacy.<sup>58</sup>

In making the shift from foreign policy that was based on authoritative behavior through an aggressive military philosophy to what Joshua Kurlantzick calls a ‘charm offensive’, China hoped to expand its influence in neighboring societies through attraction instead of coercion. This charm offensive – by actively promoting Chinese culture and gaining support for the ideology of China as local leader – contains many elements of Nye’s description of soft power and can serve as a good qualification of the way China has been approaching Southeast Asia from the Asian financial crisis on.

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<sup>57</sup> Kurlantzick, ‘China’s Charm Offensive in Southeast Asia’, 272.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibidem*, 271-273.



The charm offensive has only been able to shape the relations between Southeast Asian countries and China in part though. Besides modernizing its diplomacy, China also modernized its army and navy. The defense budget has swollen gradually since the 1980s, but accelerated in the 2000s when it enlarged its military capacity and started to make impressive improvements on the navy. This was especially important to ASEAN-members in relation to the South China Sea dispute, as China shifted from being a green-water force (its attack-range stretching only as far as Taiwan and a small part of the South Chinese Sea) to a blue-water force (with an attack-range to reach all of the South Chinese Sea down to Indonesia and East-Timor).<sup>59</sup> It became clear that China's peaceful rise easily could fall back into the more coercive way of shaping bilateral relations of the first half of the 1990s, which meant that Southeast Asian countries had to seriously reevaluate their security situation.

China's growing assertiveness became an important factor in shaping American foreign policy, as one of the main objectives of the Obama administration was to maintain freedom of navigation (which is of vital importance to the US as a hegemonic naval world power) and maritime security in the South China Sea. The potential challenges posed by the Chinese navy were reason for the Pentagon to come up with an 'Air Sea Battle' concept that could counter the developed anti-access and area denial capabilities<sup>60</sup> of the People's Liberation Army.<sup>61</sup> To mark the refocus on Asia as a militaristic reaction on an expanding Chinese army would however overemphasize the militaristic aspect, as it must also be understood as an economic consideration.

Another posed threat from China did not come from the sea, but from the Mekong River, that originates in the Chinese province of Yunnan. In 2000 China unrolled the major infrastructure-development project 'Go West', in which the Western provinces including the Vietnamese and Lao bordering province Yunnan had to undergo an energy transformation. Part of this development was constructing some immense hydrological projects to provide for the rising energy demand in the west.<sup>62</sup> From 2003 until 2012, seven mega dams were built in

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<sup>59</sup>Tun-jen Cheng and Peter C. Y. Chow, 'The TPP and the Pivot: Economic and Security Nexus', in: Peter C. Y. Chow, *The US Strategic Pivot to Asia and Cross-Strait Relations. Economic and Security Dynamics* (New York 2014) 114.

<sup>60</sup> Anti-access/ Area denial (A2/AD) is a method where large ballistic missiles are used to destroy key points such as naval facilities and air bases, in order to disrupt the adversaries power projection. Chinese area denial capabilities include counter-air and counter-maritime systems as well as cyber-attack capabilities, which are best suited for the event of a confrontation with the US over Taiwan. *Source*: Major Christopher J. McCarthy- US Air Force, 'Anti-Access/Area Denial: The Evolution of Modern Warfare'.

<sup>61</sup> Eric Frécon and Hugo Meijer, 'The US Rebalance in Southeast Asia: Maritime Security, Nontraditional Security Threats, and "Bamboo Diplomacy"', in: Hugo Meijer, *Origin and Evolution of the US Rebalance towards Asia: Diplomatic, Military, and Economic dimensions* (New York 2015) 177.

<sup>62</sup> Richard Cronin, 'Mekong Dams and the Perils of Peace' *Global Politics and Strategy* 52 (2011) 149.

Yunnan and twenty more are being planned or are already under construction in Yunnan, Tibet and Qinhai. The conception after the building of the first dams was – and nowadays the effects caused by the disturbance of the river flow show that these assumptions were right – that those schemes would drastically change the river’s natural flood-drought cycle and block the transport of sediment, affecting ecosystems and the livelihoods of millions living downstream.<sup>63</sup>

At first countries in the lower Mekong region hoped that it would prove possible for China to embrace a multilateral approach in the hydrological exploitation of the river, as it had propagated diplomatic rhetoric’s of cooperation towards Southeast Asian nations. It became clear however that China’s economic growth was Beijing’s top priority and that hydro electrical development of the Upper Mekong would not slow down. Many riparian countries saw their anxiety about provocations in the South China Sea mirrored in the construction of dams on the Upper Mekong and were afraid that China could regulate the flow of the rivers and have political and economic leverage over dependent regions downstream.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, among the riparian countries of the lower Mekong themselves and within the MRC there was no agreement on how to responsibly exploit the Mekong, and Lao’s plans of becoming ‘the battery of Asia’ by building multiple dams itself incensed Cambodia and Vietnam. The hopes for an integrated water scheme of the whole Mekong faded away and some riparian countries started to look for a world power that could restore the security balance in Southeast Asia.

Not all Southeast Asian countries in the lower Mekong region were uniformly opposing the growing Chinese influence however. Historically Laos and Cambodia, which are still led by communist governments, are ideologically and culturally more connected to China than the US. Also Burma, which did not have a communist government but was still accounted as a protégé of Beijing, was generally in favor of China getting economically and culturally embedded in the region. Especially Thailand (being a close American ally throughout the twentieth century), and to a lesser extent Vietnam (which is led by a one-party communist government, but has a tense relationship with China because of territorial disputes over the South China Sea Islands and the Vietnamese Coast) and the Philippines, were the countries that had the most reasons to dread China’s rise and actively requested increased American involvement in Southeast Asia.

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<sup>63</sup> Kurlantzik, ‘China’s Charm Offensive in Southeast Asia’, 276.

<sup>64</sup> Chang, ‘The Lower Mekong Initiative’, 291.

## America's post-Cold War China policy

From the early 1970s the US started to see China increasingly as a strategic partner in an alliance against the Soviet-Union in the Cold War, which resulted in an improved Sino-American relationship throughout the 1970s and 80s. China was even (strategically) exempt from America's worldwide campaign of improving human rights. This attitude towards China changed at the end of the Cold War because the demise of the Soviet-Union had made a strategic coalition with China less incumbent, and the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989 had led US congress to readjust its foreign policy towards China and forced the H. W. Bush administration to put more political pressure on China's human rights policy.<sup>65</sup>

The Taiwan Strait crisis in 1995-96 signified worsening relations between the US and China under Clinton and the relationship reached an all-time low when a US surveillance plane and a Chinese fighter jet collided in 2001 and the neo-conservative administration of George W. Bush saw their perceived China threat confirmed. Bush announced that he would do everything to defend Taiwan from a Chinese attack and support it in its struggle for independence.<sup>66</sup> The 9/11 attacks brought a fundamental change to the precarious relationship however, as the Bush administration focused its foreign aid on fighting terrorism and recognized that it needed China to support the war against Muslims separatist groups in and around China. Despite continuing military tensions over Taiwan with China, the Bush administration also favored China's support in battling the 'Axis of Evil' in Iran, Iraq and North-Korea, and especially expected China to be able to play a mediating role in relation to North-Korea's nuclear threat. To demonstrate that the US was willing to improve relations it allowed China into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in December 2001 and even encouraged China to continue to be a 'force for peace' on the Korean Peninsula, in Southeast Asia and in South Asia. Because of the focus on larger issues such as the war on terrorism and nuclear security, the Bush administration did not prioritize criticizing the building plans for Chinese dams on the Mekong and its cultural and economic expansion into Southeast Asia.<sup>67</sup> This became clear when there was international outrage over the building of the Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze River, which displaced 700,000 people from their homes. The US, normally on the frontline when it comes to fighting human rights battles, stayed surprisingly

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<sup>65</sup> Tao Xie, *US-China Relations: China Policy on Capitol Hill* (New York 2009) 144.

<sup>66</sup> Chi Wang, *George W. Bush and China: Policies, Problems and Partnerships* (Plymouth 2009) 30.

<sup>67</sup> Wang, *George W. Bush and China*, 15.

on the sidelines of the debate as US-firms were involved in the construction of the dams, but predominantly to not alter relations with China.<sup>68</sup>

Other than the presidential campaigns of Clinton and George W. Bush, Obama's campaign did not strike an adversarial tone towards China at the beginning of his presidency and Sino-American relations were considerably better than at the start of previous administrations. The Obama administration even presented the rebalance as a model for a cooperative future relationship with China. Secretary Clinton cited an ancient Chinese aphorism during a meeting of the Asia society in 2009 that says: 'When you are in a common boat, you need to cross the river peacefully together'.<sup>69</sup> Clinton referred to the official approach of the US government to cooperate with China in Southeast Asia and to adopt a welcoming approach to China's growing economic and political influence.

Although Obama propagated cooperation and saw China as an important mediator in the conflict of North-Korea and to some extent as a stabilizing force in South and East Asia, Obama and his staff nevertheless recognized that the US had lost its strategic geopolitical position in Southeast Asia and that China's growing influence over the region formed an increasing threat to US interest in the Pacific.<sup>70</sup> Bader underlines that the incentive to rebalance on Asia stemmed for an important part from the unease of Southeast Asian nations about the growing imbalance of power:

'They believed that a strong U.S. presence - political, economic, and forward-deployed military - was critical to ensure that they did not fall under the exclusive sway of a dominant new power in the region with which they all had substantial historical experience.'

Clinton's 'America's Pacific century' article must be seen in the same light, as the announcement of not including China in the TPP and encouraging cooperation among China's neighbors signaled a sharpened policy focus on China's expansionist tendencies. That 'it takes two to tango' did not seem to have been a suitable epigraph as well when looking at initiation of the Lower Mekong Initiative.

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<sup>68</sup> Ibidem, 21-22.

<sup>69</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, 'U.S.-Asia Relations: Indispensable to Our Future', Remarks at the Asia Society (New York, 13-2-2009).

<sup>70</sup> Bader, *Obama and China's rise*, 69.

## Chapter three: Americans return to the Mekong

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The rebalance thus had two faces; one that advocated cooperation with China, and one where China was opposed. The foremost reason for this bipolar stance towards China has to do with the different interests served. The US Department of the Treasury has been vigorously promoting China's economic growth, as cheap imported manufactured goods and cheap capital from China's foreign currency reserve have been increasing the standard of living in the US, without experiencing inflationary income increases.<sup>71</sup> This economic interdependence with China and the important role it plays in counter-proliferation efforts has made the State Department to strike a cooperative diplomatic tone. At the same time the Chinese promotion of anti-democratic practices and violations of human rights went against core American values. Together with the military expansionist drift in the South China Sea, this has caused the State Department to actively oppose China with its foreign policy. As discussed, investing in multilaterals and enhancing regional cooperation was the primal way the US used to counter China's influence in Southeast Asia, and this chapter will argue – by investigating the way the LMI functions and looking at its different initiatives – that the Lower Mekong Initiative played a central role in the State Department's policy of forming a collaborative political and economic coalition among Southeast Asian nations and Western powers present in the region.

At the launch of the Lower Mekong Initiative at 23 July 2009 at a ministerial meeting in Phuket, Thailand, foreign ministers from Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam (Myanmar joined the initiative in 2010) together with the initiator Secretary Clinton pronounced the commitment of working together towards 'sustainable development and prosperity' in the Mekong sub-region.<sup>72</sup> Several sub-committees were created to enhance integrated sub-regional cooperation among the five lower Mekong countries in the fields of environment, health, education and infrastructure and it was presented as 'an essential mechanism and platform for building cooperation and capacity to narrow the development gap within ASEAN'.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Luttwak, *The Rise of China*, 213-214.

<sup>72</sup> Bureau of Public Affairs, Joint Statement of the U.S.-Lower Mekong Ministerial Meeting (23 July 2009).

<sup>73</sup> *Ibidem*.

The structure of the LMI is based on six pillars or workgroups; agriculture and food security, connectivity, education, environment and water, energy security and health. Although water management receives a central place in the program again, its focus differs from earlier American involvement. The building of dams and grand water schemes had been executed more and more by private investors and developers since the 1980s (although the EGAT in Thailand still produces the majority of the national hydro electrical demand), and it became less attractive to allocate foreign aid funds into that sector. In fact, the LMI's central focus is on mitigating the effects of climate change and to manage the negative environmental effects caused by the construction of major dams and river basins.<sup>74</sup> It is rather ironic that the US modernized water management in Southeast Asia in the last century, to later discover that it has to use its current foreign aid initiative to mop up the effects.

In fact, previous involvement in the field of water management in the Mekong is barely mentioned by Obama, Clinton or Kerry in speeches and meetings concerning the LMI, only to the extent that the US has had successful bilateral relationships in the past with Southeast Asian countries such as Thailand and the Philippines. It is surprising that a project that has so much overlap with previous involvement in the areas of flood control, irrigation management and river basin management is not presented as a continuation in this respect. After all, transferred American technocratic culture has had considerable effect on water resource management in the Mekong and the EGAT as well as the MRC were strongly influenced by American foreign aid and the methods used by the Bureau of Reclamation.

It is likely that the Obama administration did not want to focus the attention on historic US involvement in the construction of dams, which is now regarded as controversial and had a negative effect on the lives of thousands of people. Modern American diplomacy focuses more and more on sustainable initiatives such as the strengthening of climate resilience which inherently has a moral added value. The Obama administration was actively trying to enhance America's image abroad and the historical involvement in water management in the Cold War for geopolitical reasons did not fit into this new development paradigm.

Apart from using the LMI as reputation building, to involve itself in water and environment management in the Lower Mekong, the US indirectly opposes the Chinese construction of a cascade of dams on the Upper Mekong. A minor agenda item of the LMI is the monitoring and coordination of responses among the lower Mekong countries on the

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<sup>74</sup> <http://www.lowermekong.org/pillar/environment-and-water/projects-and-activities/environment-and-water-pillar> (accessed on 29-12-2016).

construction of dams on Chinese soil and strengthening the role of the MRC in these disputes. Luttwak even goes as far as claiming that this agenda item ‘provides the fuel for it all’.<sup>75</sup>

Although it is not very likely that the LMI with all its different programs and initiatives serves as a cover-up, only to create a multinational response to China’s hydrological development, there can definitely be made a case for the view that the LMI is a response to China’s growing influence in the region. As discussed in the second chapter, from the end of the Cold War on China has been setting about many foreign aid initiatives in Southeast Asia and used its public diplomacy to promote Chinese culture and values. When the US refocused on Southeast Asia, it found itself heavily under-represented and with the LMI could demonstrate that it made a lasting commitment to the region, while at the same time catching up with Chinese employed soft power tactics.

The second face of power, as Nye calls the indirect (soft) way of obtaining power, relies for a big part on the ability to set the agenda of the other party. Although agenda setting is closest to hard power methods in the soft and hard power spectrum (see figure 1), it does so without using coercion or inducement. The local headquarters based in the US Embassy in Bangkok synthesizes the information on which the programs under the different pillars are set-up and decides on what grounds grants are awarded. In the grant description for the ‘Environment and Water Pillar Training Program’ there is a Department of State-guideline that grants should work towards ‘building technical capacity within government ministries to manage environmental resources in a sustainable manner while advancing regional cooperation’.<sup>76</sup> This shows that agenda setting – in this case in the form of subsidies – is used to steer development in the desired political direction.

One could argue that this holds true for almost every foreign aid initiative; it is after all a diplomatic and political instrument. What makes this use of soft power specifically political agenda setting is the emphasis on transnationalism, as the LMI is presented as ‘a forum for partners to develop shared responses to the most pressing cross border development challenges’.<sup>77</sup> Two programs were introduced in 2013 that should enhance coming to these ‘shared responses’. The Mekong Partnership for the Environment (MPE), a program that supports constructive engagement among governments, business and civil society, aims to strengthen responsible development of regional projects.

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<sup>75</sup> Luttwak, *The Rise of China*, 159.

<sup>76</sup> <http://www.federalgrants.com/Lower-Mekong-Initiative-LMI-Environment-and-Water-Pillar-Training-Program-PTP-46476.html> (accessed on 30-12-2016).

<sup>77</sup> USAID, ‘The Lower Mekong Initiative’, <https://www.usaid.gov/asia-regional/lower-mekong-initiative-lmi> (accessed on 10-11-2016).

	Hard	Soft
Spectrum of Behaviors	Command ← coercion inducement	agenda setting attraction → Co-opt
Most Likely Resources	force sanctions payments bribes	institutions values culture policies

Figure 1: The spectrum of hard and soft power. (Source: Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Soft Power the Means to Success in World Politics* (New York 2004) 7.)

Alongside the MPE the Smart Infrastructure for the Mekong (SIM) is a mechanism that provides LMI partner governments with technical assistance from the US government’s leading scientists and engineers to mitigate potential negative social and environmental consequences from large infrastructural projects.<sup>78</sup> Both instruments are thus concentrated on re-enforcing transnational and regional cooperation and dealing with the effects of the rapid development and exploitation of the Mekong region. It is likely that underlying ambitions of present American foreign policy do not halt at helping ASEAN and the MRC become successful institutions, because otherwise it would have included China into the collaborations, as it is an indispensable presence in Southeast Asia on many fronts.

The creation of a convening donor platform in 2012 that is aligned to the LMI called ‘The Friends of the Lower Mekong’ (FLM) underlines this thought. Its function is to coordinate foreign aid initiatives in the Mekong region among the close American allies Japan, New-Zealand, Australia, South-Korea and the European Union. This Western block organizes annual consultations to identify potential areas of cooperation and prevent overlap between the different initiatives.<sup>79</sup> It is surprising that, although the US had made engaging in constructive discussions with Beijing on how to develop the region an important part of its Asia policy, and considering there are also countless Chinese foreign aid initiatives in the Lower Mekong, China is not included in the FLM. An analogy can be drawn on the exclusion of China in the TPP-agreement that includes most pacific countries; the official policy after

<sup>78</sup> USAID, ‘Sustainable Mekong’ (June 2013). <http://lowermekong.org/sites/default/files/pdf/Sustainable%20Mekong%20Factsheet%2010-30-2013.pdf> (accessed on 10-11-2016).

<sup>79</sup> ‘Extraordinary Friends of the Lower Mekong: Conference on Mekong Sustainability Summary of Joint Discussion’ (Pakse, 3-2-2015), <http://lowermekong.org/news/extraordinary-friends-lower-mekong-conference-mekong-sustainability-summary-joint-discussion> (accessed on 14-11-2016).



all was to facilitate China's growing economy.<sup>80</sup> Furthermore, most of the times the Obama administration actually engaged in a dialogue with China over the region, it was on matters of territorial disputes, trying to enforce China to resolve these matters multilaterally instead of bilaterally. It showed that the advertised diplomacy is based on cooperation, but the executed policy is based on opposition.

An email from Hilary Clinton's closest advisor Sidney Blumenthal (who also served as senior advisor to Bill Clinton during his presidency and working as a consultant for the Clinton-foundation) in March 2010 shows that there indeed were opposing voices to the rhetoric's of welcoming China as a world power. The email contained Blumenthal's view on China's expansionist tendencies, which he marked as 'neo-imperialistic' with a 'mercantile currency policy', clearly perceiving China as a threat.<sup>81</sup> Although Blumenthal was not a policy-maker in the Obama administration, he has proved to be very close to the Clintons on a political level and was not the only one in Washington that eyed China's growing influence with suspicion.

A classified telegram procured by Wikileaks from Beijing to all Chinese diplomatic posts, Japan and ASEAN in December 2009 shows that China has been eyeing the growing American influence with suspicion as well.<sup>82</sup> Although China has showed interest in collaborating with the US in several fields the LMI is engaged in and officially supports the initiative as a dialogue partner of ASEAN, in the telegram it voiced the concern of losing influence as a result of the initiation of American initiatives. It responded by raising existing commercial aid packages for ASEAN-countries with \$5 billion and announcing large investments in infrastructural projects in the lower Mekong region.<sup>83</sup>

This outbidding shows that both powers felt the need to show investment in the region, and it displays that realist power balancing dynamics are at the core of foreign policy choices towards Southeast Asia. The question remains how we are to account for the investment in ASEAN of both the US and China, which would be a confirmation of the neoliberal thought that institutions become ever more powerful and are taking over the role of states as shaping actors of international politics. The employment of ASEAN by the Chinese and the Americans to thwart each other's influence in the region shows however that it used to serve the interest of powerful states, confirming that (powerful) states determine the behavior of multilaterals and not the other way around.

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<sup>80</sup> Bader, *Obama and China's rise*, 7.

<sup>81</sup> <https://wikileaks.org/clinton-emails/emailid/4174> (accessed on 2-1-2017).

<sup>82</sup> [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09BEIJING3238\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09BEIJING3238_a.html) (accessed on 3-1-2017).

<sup>83</sup> *Ibidem*.

Gaddis voices similar concerns about the relevance of containment outside a Cold War context, as he concludes that containment is a state-based strategy and the main war that the US has been fighting since the end of the Cold War – the war on terror – has not been between states, but between the US and stateless actors without distinctive governments.<sup>84</sup> Gaddis' remarks were directed at the situation as it was when George W. Bush was in power in 2005 however, and it can be argued that in the case of the Sino-American relationship in Southeast Asia under Obama there are identifiable regimes that serve as actors. Also the component of 'there being something worse than American hegemony' disappeared with the end of the Cold War according to Gaddis,<sup>85</sup> but here too the US reaction of founding the LMI to address the anxiety of Southeast Asian countries about the growing Chinese assertiveness in the South-Chinese Sea and the building of dams in the upper-Mekong suggests that this aspect applies to current Chinese-US relations.

Surprisingly, some of the elements that Gaddis did think were applicable in the post-Cold War era do not seem to relate to US foreign policy in Southeast Asia today. The strategy to let the Soviet-Union slowly destroy itself does not apply to the attitude of the US towards China today. The financial crisis of 2008 showed that both countries are increasingly economically interdependent, with the effect that China's economic demise would have serious effects on the American economy too. As discussed, the Treasury Department has adopted a policy of actively supporting the Chinese economy under Obama and can hardly be considered a containing element. Also Gaddis' argument that US presence abroad is not based on invitation (like in the Cold War) but rather on imposition must be revalued when looking at the requests of Southeast Asian countries for the US to form a stabilizing force in the region.<sup>86</sup> Again, Gaddis' argument stands when looking at the actions of the Bush administration, which sent troops to Afghanistan and Iraq without invitation.

### **The sister-river partnership**

Another important transferable component of the containment strategy used in the Cold War that is not discussed by Gaddis, but is very relevant for explaining the way the LMI is intended, can be found in the collaboration between the Mekong River Commission and the Mississippi River Commission called the 'sister-river partnership', launched within the LMI

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<sup>84</sup> Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 382.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibidem*, 381.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibidem*, 385.

in 2010. The reasoning behind the collaboration is that both rivers pose common challenges – how different the geographical circumstances may be – and that it is fruitful to share and exchange knowledge of practices in areas such as integrated floodplain management, climate change adaptation, and sustainable water basin development.<sup>87</sup>

The emphasis on the exchange of knowledge seems to be somewhat misleading however. If we look at the implementation of the partnership, much of the activities involve officials and engineers from ASEAN countries coming to the US for trainings, workshops, lectures and technical support from US technical agencies. The Chief Executive Officer of the Mekong River Commission, Hans Guttman, concluded his presentation on the perspectives of the MRC during the 6th World Water Forum by stating that over time, it would like to focus more on sharing experiences and practices instead of capacity building of the MRC itself.<sup>88</sup>

It seems that the US went on from where it had left of. In the 1950s and 60s the Mekong Committee was strongly influenced by US officials and worked in close collaboration with the Bureau of Reclamation. The Bureau was also far less interested in the exchange of knowledge than in transferring their own way of working on Southeast Asian engineers. Although the goal is different (enhancing regional cooperation instead of giving bilateral aid) the used methods are quite the same; educating the Southeast Asian public, engineers, and policy makers in the American tradition.

Characteristically the first ‘exchange’ took place on American soil. In June 2011 delegates from the Mekong River Commission Secretariat and high-level representatives from Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos made a weeklong visit to the Mississippi River Commission in which they visited US counterparts working on related issues. The visit was largely funded by the US State Department and the program was mainly focused on policy briefings by US Officials. Although the director of the Mississippi River Commission Stephen Gambrell had said that ‘the people of the lower Mekong have been living with and working alongside rivers much longer than [their counterparts] in the USA’, the State Department seem to have more important objectives than profit from the knowledge of Southeast Asian officeholders and engineers.<sup>89</sup>

The sister-river partnership must therefore be understood to be used as an attractive currency used in the soft and hard power spectrum, trying to transfer American methods and

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<sup>87</sup> Lauren Monsen, ‘Two Mighty Rivers, Intertwined to Protect Their Futures’, <http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/article/2011/06/20110614142131nerual0.6506464.html> (accessed on 28-12-2016).

<sup>88</sup> Hans Guttman, ‘Mekong River Commission: partnerships to enhance capacity’, 6th World Water Forum (15-3-2012).

<sup>89</sup> Monsen, ‘Two Mighty Rivers’.

policies on Southeast Asian technocrats and officials. We have seen that the Bureau of Reclamation has had great benefit from the trainee-programs in the 1940s and 50s, which laid the foundation for further engagement and the acceptance of American aid. Today the partnership between the two river commissions can be attributed similar dynamics. Secretary Clinton has ascribed Southeast Asia as the place where the most important part of history of the twenty first century will be written, and the US has shown that with the sister-river partnership it intends to play a significant part in that narrative.

In the second term of Obama and under the new Secretary of State John Kerry the LMI saw an intensification of existing efforts under the banner of 'LMI 2020'. From 2012 until 2015 the US committed an extra \$50 million to boost the program and marked the most successful initiatives as 'signature programs' to magnify the impact of the LMI.<sup>90</sup> In a speech at the Seventh Lower Mekong Initiative Ministerial Meeting, Kerry stressed the fact that apart from battling the effects of climate change and tackling border-crossing issues, the LMI also had to help work towards the ASEAN goal of creating an integrated economic community by 2015 among lower Mekong countries.<sup>91</sup> Intensifying regional cooperation thus still seems to be the main focus of the project, and by showing extended committing through LMI 2020 the US further reassured Southeast Asian nations of its lasting presence.

The hosting of the first US-ASEAN Summit on US soil on 15-16 February 2016 had a very symbolic value to that end, marking the 'rebalance legacy' Obama will leave behind when he leaves office. That legacy involves reaching an economic milestone as the US became the largest foreign direct investor in ASEAN and it constitutes the fourth largest export market for the US. During Obama's visit in May 2016 to Vietnam that followed on the summit, he announced that the US would increase armed support for Vietnam in the South Chinese Sea dispute and lifting a 50-year long arms embargo, hoping to lift 'the vestiges of the Cold War'. Obama even declared that the Vietnamese Head of State Tran Dai Quang had agreed set up several bases for the Peace Corps in Vietnam, with the main aim of teaching the Vietnamese population English. This altered relationship with Vietnam and an increasingly cooperative relationship with ASEAN signified that the investments made through the LMI and the sister-river partnership were having the desired effect of drawing Southeast Asian countries nearer to the US and away from China.

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<sup>90</sup> <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2014/230466.htm> (accessed on 21-12-2016).

<sup>91</sup> John Kerry, 'Remarks at the Friends of the Lower Mekong Ministerial Meeting' (Nay Pyi Taw, 9-8-2014).

# Conclusion

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Whereas the Clinton administration pursued a liberal world order where a web of transnational institutions, international organizations and treaties would have to give stability to a cohesive community of nations, and the Bush administration took a more neo-conservative approach by trying to spread democracy to create a stable world, the Obama administration is often branded as having adopted an idealistic foreign policy. The attempts at reconciliation with the Muslim-world, the apology tour to Vietnam and Japan together with the soul-searching abroad have certainly validated this image. We have seen however, that the pivot to Asia constitutes a less idealistic part of foreign policy. The diplomacy of cooperation and many policies such as the one-China policy had to make sure that the American stance towards China was not conceived as offensive or aggressive, but it has chosen to selectively oppose China, mainly for geopolitical reasons. The foreign policy decisions of the Obama administration towards Southeast Asia should therefore rather be classified as realistic instead of idealistic.

The initiation of the LMI is part of this realistic approach, as the US had come to the conclusion that Chinese influence by means of using soft power had caused their position as the eminent regional power to fade away, and they choose to engage into the same soft power tactics to turn the tide, showing that was the main battleground in Southeast Asia to gain relative power on the other. This power balancing behavior with states as main actors displays that even in a unipolar post-Cold War international system realism still is the driving force in US foreign policy towards Southeast Asia.

Can we then conclude that the LMI must be marked as containment, as it plays a vital role in the chess game between the US and China played on the Southeast Asian stage? To see the pivot to Asia as a form of containment as it was used in the Cold War would be an anachronism as the context is very different. What is more, the increasing interdependence of the Chinese and American economy and the increasingly important role of China in US counter-proliferation efforts made it counterproductive to adopt a grand containment-strategy as used in the Cold War. In the case of the LMI there is definitely selective transferability possible however.

Although Secretary Clinton had said in respect to the LMI that the US had entered into ‘a new era of diplomacy and development’<sup>92</sup>, the sister-river partnership has shown very similar dynamics to the influence the Bureau of Reclamation had on Southeast Asian engineers and policymakers however. The soft power tactics of agenda setting and ideological attraction were re-used in the form of transferring American methods and policies on Southeast Asian technocrats and officials. Also reputation building, which was an important function of the involvement in water management in the Cold War to provide a counter image to the military presence in the Vietnam War, can be attributed as a function of the LMI today. After a long period of neglect, with the LMI the US could show that they intended to be a lasting presence in the region again. Apart from the likenesses in the development efforts, the strengthening of the position of the MRC as an authoritative regional institution was once again an important aim of the LMI. Furthermore, just like the planning of the Pa Mong Dam was used as a geopolitical tool to strengthen the economies of Southeast Asian societies to make them less susceptible to communism, the LMI aims to make countries in the lower Mekong region less susceptible to the negative environmental impact of the exploitation of the Mekong, and to a less visible extent, Chinese influence. In this respect the LMI contains many encircling elements of the development program in the Cold War and can thus hardly be called new.

The component that can be called new compared to earlier involvement, namely the foundation of mini-laterals such as the LMI and the emphasis on multilateralism and regional cohesion, signals a clear interest in forming a block amongst Southeast Asian countries. Although China is – and will remain – an important regional power that needs to be included in discussions about an integrated water scheme for the Mekong in order for it to succeed, and although China has the potential of having a stabilizing effect on regional security, it was nevertheless excluded from most of the initiatives such as the American initiated FLM, the MRC and the TPP-agreement. It shows that the US has been thwarting China with the LMI as foremost instrument and actively tries to counter the growing cultural and political Chinese influence in the lower Mekong region. Shadowing China’s charm offensive, the US set about to counter the employed soft power tactics of cultural and ideological attraction with a familiar employment of American technological support in the area of water management that is of vital interest to China’s neighbors. Today the technical assistance of the LMI in the area of environment and water management with a delineating framework to enhance human rights

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<sup>92</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, ‘U.S.-Asia Relations: Indispensable to Our Future’, Remarks at the Asia Society (New York, 13-2-2009).

and democracy can be seen in the same light as the belief that American technological support would eventually attract supported nations to the American ideology of capitalism and democracy in the Cold War.

This research has demonstrated that the LMI in many ways was the most important instrument in the ‘selective opposition’ to the expanding Chinese grip on the region. Although the pivot to Asia must be seen in a larger picture of rebalancing on a region that proved of increasing economic and geopolitical strategic importance to the US, the LMI holds many old and new containing elements. It affirms that, despite the advertised diplomacy of cooperation, the Obama administration has been actively trying to contain the increasing growing Chinese influence in Southeast Asia with the Lower Mekong Initiative. Selective opposition remains opposition, and containment light is still containment.

It may prove however, once again, that the US has bitten off more than they can chew. Just as the building of the Pa Mong Dam was overshadowed by the megalomania of State Department Officials who had larger geopolitical objectives in mind than actually helping lift the poorest part of the population out of poverty, the LMI and its larger goal of creating an integrated water scheme among the lower Mekong countries is also likely to be overambitious. There is far too much dissention among ASEAN-members to adopt a multilateral approach towards water management in the Mekong and as long as the US is excluding China from multilateral initiatives and dialogues about the matter, a coherent approach to managing environmental effects is not possible, as its success depends for a large part on how the Mekong is managed in the Chinese province of Yunnan. The political momentum in the US also seems to be fading away, as President Donald Trump has announced that one of the first things he will do is to pull the US out of the TPP-agreement and he does not seem to set much store by economically supporting foreign aid initiatives such as the LMI. Just like Nixon changed the focus of US foreign policy which caused the building of the Pa Mong Dam to seize, the LMI might turn into a diminished remnant of Obama’s pivot to Asia.

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