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ABN # 65 648 097 123



Background Brief:

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Mekong: China to Share Water Management Data

August 26, 2020

China's Premier Li Keqiang just pledged to share data on water management on the Upper Mekong River with downstream states. We request your assessment.

ANSWER: Premier Li made this pledge at a virtual summit meeting of the Lancang Mekong Countries (LMC) that includes China, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam.

A Thai government spokesperson noted that data sharing would be worked out in coming months among the relevant ministers of the six LMC members.

There are two questions that arise from Premier Li's pledge. First, how far will China go to be completely transparent about its water management practices on the Upper Mekong? Second, how will this information be shared?

With respect to the issue of transparency, China has always looked to its own interests first. China is unlikely to release complete details of its water management practices especially if this data reveals that downstream states are disadvantaged. If past practice is a guide, China will only dole out limited data.

With respect to how China will share this information, it is clear that China prefers to deal with this issue within the framework of the LMC. Premier Li was quoted by Xinhua News Agency as saying, "China is willing to offer more assistance within its capacity to other Lancang Mekong countries for better utilizing water resources."

The LMC, as it is presently constituted, does not have the resources, personnel or expertise to utilise data on China's water management in the Upper Mekong efficiently. That is why Thailand suggested that China share its data with the Mekong River Commission (MRC) and work out an effective information-sharing platform.

The MRC is composed of four members, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam. China and Myanmar are observers. The MRC is funded by its four members plus eleven partners, the European Union and the World Bank. Because the United States, Japan and Australia are MRC's development partners, China has worked to advance its interests by creating an alternative, the LMC. China will not want to share data on water management in the Upper Mekong with these rivals because it could lead to criticism of Chinese water management practices.

Suggested citation: Carlyle A. Thayer, "Mekong: China to Share Water Management Data," *Thayer Consultancy Background Brief*, August 26, 2020. All background briefs are posted on Scribd.com (search for Thayer). To remove yourself from the mailing list type, UNSUBSCRIBE in the Subject heading and hit the Reply key.

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