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Did Vietnam Just Doom the Mekong?

A policy reversal on Mekong dams has put Hanoi's credibility – and the river's fate – on the line.

By Tom Fawthrop

The recent decision by a Vietnamese oil company, Petrovietnam, to invest in a huge dam close to the much-loved World Heritage Site in Luang Prabang, Laos, has caused confusion and dismay for many Mekong experts, civil society groups, and some government officials in Hanoi.

A cascade of dam projects on the Lower Mekong in Laos has triggered consistent expressions of critical concern from Vietnam, with its delta highly vulnerable to such dams' damaging downstream impacts. Back in 2011, the former Vietnamese prime minister publicly called for all construction to stop on the Xayaburi dam. Vietnam has also called upon Laos to rethink all subsequent dams.

Now, however, the Vietnamese government has switched sides and slipped into bed with the dam developers through its promotion of the largest dam yet on the lower Mekong – the 1,410 MW Luang Prabang dam.

“I am very disappointed by this development,” Dr. Le Tuan Anh, vice director of the Institute for Climate Change Research at Can Tho University, told The Diplomat. He pointed out that the government had recently passed resolution 120 to strengthen Hanoi's sustainable development plan for the delta. The resolution specifically cited efforts to combat the dual threats of upstream hydropower and climate change

“Already reeling from the impact of upstream Mekong dams, Vietnam actually joining in building one does not make sense.” Vietnamese environmentalists declared in a press release last month.

“If Vietnam participates in the construction of the Luang Prabang Dam, it will also contribute to the negative impact on the Mekong Delta. [The] Vietnam Rivers Network proposes the Vietnam Oil and Gas Corporation (PV Power) and authorities to reconsider investing in the Luang Prabang Hydropower Project in Laos.”

The Luang Prabang dam is the fifth hydropower dam submitted by Laos to the Mekong River Commission (MRC) for prior consultation with the other three member states (Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam).

The four previous dam projects came under fire from Vietnam on the grounds that they blocked nutrient-rich sediment from reaching the fragile ecosystem of the delta. 18 million Vietnam citizens are desperately dependent on this delta, the rice-bowl of the nation, for their livelihood and survival.

Dr. Philip Hirsch, the former director of the Mekong Research Center at Sydney University, commented that “the involvement of a major state owned company in developing hydropower on the Mekong mainstream undermines earlier official positions that such development poses great risks to the millions of people living, farming and fishing in the Mekong Delta.”

This astonishing policy reversal caused VN Express, an online newspaper, to refer to the move as “Vietnam shooting itself in the foot” in a post that has since been removed from the website. The change to embrace Luang Prabang dam puts Hanoi’s diplomatic credibility on the line at a time when Southeast Asia’s longest river is still trying to recuperate from the massive drought in July, which led to plummeting fish stocks. Water levels in the Mekong in the current dry season are still alarmingly low, with no monsoon rains expected until June next year. Water shortages have been declared in many provinces in Cambodia and Thailand.

Dam Diplomacy and the Geopolitics of the Mekong

The World Wildlife Fund’s water resources specialist Marc Goichot warns that the costs of going ahead will be very high both for Laos and Vietnam.

“The Luang Prabang dam would have many impacts, notably drowning an amazingly beautiful riverscape, and a mosaic of ecosystems; causing the relocation of communities, whose culture is so intimately linked to the ecology of the river; and changing water flows and river appearance will disfigure the priceless World Heritage site of Luang Prabang,” Goichot said. This huge dam will force the evacuation of 17,700 villagers to make way for the dam’s huge reservoir.

Given that the Luang Prabang dam will also inevitably worsen the suffering of 18 million Vietnamese citizens in their sediment-starved and sinking delta, what mysterious force could have driven Hanoi to apparently act against its own interests?

A well-informed source working inside Vietnam’s energy sector (who requested anonymity) explained to this correspondent the government’s logic over the Lang Prabang dam: “Vietnam had no choice. Yes, it is bad for the delta, but if we don’t develop the dam, then China will. Absolutely sure! And that would be a threat to Vietnam’s sovereignty. It is all about geopolitics.”

Vietnam has long been worried by China’s steady expansion of commercial interests along the Mekong and especially their investment and construction plans for three dams on the lower Mekong in Laos – the Don Sahong (under construction), the Pak Beng, and Pak Lay.

It is this fear of China, a country that already controls so much of the water flow down the Mekong, snapping up another downstream dam project that has triggered Vietnam’s improbable foray into dam-building on the mainstream Mekong.

The prospect of another Chinese dam located at Luang Prabang has caused near-panic in Hanoi’s corridors of power. After pressure from Laos, the Vietnamese government signed on the dotted line a dam contract that virtually threw overboard 19 years of diplomatic efforts to defend the Mekong delta and Vietnam’s bid to curb the damming frenzy on the mainstream.

Many Vietnamese critics of this policy change say that this geopolitical calculation may cost Vietnam dearly in terms of their international credibility. Can Tho University’s Dr. Tuan laments that “this policy contradiction on the Mekong will make Vietnam’s voice in international affairs and forums much weaker.”

Energy Politics

In the government’s energy circles, officials argue that Vietnam “would be better able to regulate the water flow and harm from the dam” with Vietnamese company Petrovietnam playing a key role in regulating running the water flow from the Luang Prabang dam.

This claim is dismissed by Mekong water resource experts. A source from Petrovietnam admitted that, just like any other dam, “it will reduce sediment and water flow to the delta.”

A far greater concern is that, by the time this dam is operational in 2027, the Mekong’s water flow will already be so reduced that the dam might not be able to function at all.

The author of the widely-acclaimed *The Last Days of the Mighty Mekong*, Brian Eyler, told *The Diplomat* that “Vietnam should use its economic and diplomatic relationship with Laos to avoid mainstream dams, not build them.” Eyler also argued, “Hydropower technology is becoming obsolete technology,” which he predicts will happen “in five years or less, long before this Luang Prabang will be completed.”

Energy experts now point to clean energy renewables as increasingly more cost effective than hydropower, and both Vietnam and Thailand are rapidly increasing the role of renewables in their national energy mixes.

Dr. Tuan has already raised this question with the Vietnamese government and proposed that Hanoi put pressure on Laos to invest in clean energy and stop dams on the mainstream Mekong.

Vietnam’s Communist Party leaders and government, while always maintaining an appearance of unity in public, are often bitterly divided over water resource issues and their once-close relationship with longtime ally Laos. The old guard conservatives in the politburo are strongly committed to what is left of the special relationship with Vientiane’s communist leaders, in spite of the landlocked nation’s comprehensive dependence and indebtedness to China.

But any attempt to please Laos with investment in this dam at the expense of their own people in the delta is likely to prove extremely controversial at home and could trigger social unrest.

This is the worst of times to be investing in new dams. WWF’s Marc Goichot, a veteran researcher of the Mekong, points out that “six out of the 13 Mekong delta provinces have just either declared emergencies or cordoned off long stretches of land on the Mekong’s edge because of the serious large scale erosion, and it has also just been established that large parts of the delta are sinking under the rising sea much faster than anticipated.”

The dam site is located only 25 kilometers from the World Heritage Site and only 5 km from a popular tourist site, the Pak Ou caves. Experts say it would only take one extreme weather event to contribute to a dam accident and this priceless UNESCO recognized cultural asset, the ancient royal capital of Luang Prabang, could be savagely inundated and destroyed.

On November 20, an earthquake registering 6.1 on the Richter Scale hit western Laos, with the epicenter only 155 km from Luang Prabang. It was a timely reminder of one more among the many risks and dangers of hydropower. Laos is particularly unprepared for preventing dam breaks as the 2018 disaster in Attapeu province demonstrated.

According to the U.S. Stimson Foundation, eight Lao dams are under construction or have been completed within 100 km of the epicenter of this recent earthquake. With extreme weather becoming the new norm, it is time for the CEO of the Mekong River Commission to act responsibly and sound the alarm in public forums, not sit back and wait for member states to come to their senses.

International Rivers, the U.S.-based conservation agency, thinks “It is well past time for a strong and clear call [to halt dams] be made.” Maureen Harris, the regional coordinator for the Mekong region, urged that “for the sake of public safety, for the protection of the Mekong’s priceless

ecosystem and for economic reasons – current planned projects must be halted and a moratorium declared on all new dams on the Mekong mainstream.”

Yet Vietnam seems to be moving in the opposite direction. How much worse does the water crisis have to get before regional policymakers wake up to the ecological disaster caused by this frenzied damming of the Mekong?

Tom Fawthrop has been a correspondent in the Mekong region since the 1980s for many UK media including The Economist, the Guardian and the BBC and also contributed features to the South China Morning Post. He has directed the TV documentary “Killing The Mekong Dam By Dam.”