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Review article

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South–South Cooperation across the Mekong: Practices, Dilemmas, and Pathways of Competitive Regionalism

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Abstract: In recent years, intensifying global strategic competition has given rise to what is prominently characterized as “competitive regionalism.” Under this framework, the present article shifts the focal point from great power rivalry to the South–South Cooperation dynamics through a comparative analysis of Chinese and Indian engagement in the Mekong River Basin. The article offers a comparative overview of how the two countries’ regional initiatives embody divergent development visions: China advanced a state-centric, infrastructure-driven pathway, while India emphasizes soft cooperation and humanistic connectivity. Aiming to show how the pursuit of power balance and institutional cooperation intertwine within mainland Southeast Asia, the author inquires into how the institutional and governance practices of emerging Asian powers (along with their development resource distribution patterns) reshape the traditional principles of South–South Cooperation, especially mutual benefit and solidarity with the Mekong countries. Likewise, to what extent does the interplay between Chinese Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) and Indian Mekong-Ganga Cooperation Initiative (MGCI) contribute to the evolution of competitive regionalism in the sub-region? A more specific focus is placed on examining how regional states, especially regional powers, employ self-initiated institutional mechanisms as instruments of strategic competition. Research conclusions point out that Chinese and Indian competitive engagements yield critical insights for the paradigm of emerging power “co-

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competition,” Global South regional governance, and embedding South-South Cooperation within the evolving world order.

Keywords: Global South, Mekong Countries, Lancang-Mekong Cooperation, Mekong-Ganga Cooperation Initiative, strategic rivalry.

Introduction

The term *Global South* generally refers to states whose political and economic trajectories have been shaped by historical inequalities rooted in colonialism and imperialism (Sud and Sánchez-Ancochea 2022). Beyond its geographical connotations, the term constitutes the ideology articulating the collective concerns of developing countries—despite the growing heterogeneity in their individual political and economic progression. Since the end of the Cold War, Global South has assumed a prominent role in global governance, acquiring heightened geopolitical and geoeconomic significance. This shift has renewed interest in South-South Cooperation (SSC), first defined as the mutual exchange of resources, technology, and knowledge to build capacity among developing countries (Mawdsley 2012). SSC now embodies a long-term endeavor to address the enduring legacies of poverty and developmental marginalization. Today, state and non-state actors in Global South are actively reshaping SSC as both a pragmatic governance mechanism and a transformative agenda. It functions as an organizing principle for historical change, grounded in the norms of mutual benefit and solidarity among actors structurally disadvantaged within the prolonged Western-constructed global order (Carmody 2013). The cooperation reflects an aspirational vision through collective action. Global South communities aim to reconfigure international systems in ways reflecting their shared interests and challenge the dominance of “Northern” states and traditional international regimes (Bachmann 2019).

From another perspective, SSC is a concept closely intersects with the study of regionalism. Regionalism entails a coordinated aggregation of shared development cognitions, normative values, and tangible strategic objectives among state actors, systematically institutionalized to reinforce cooperative mechanisms among specific national or transboundary groupings (Grugel and Hout 1999). This deliberate configuration functions to (re-)produce, stabilize, or

transform structural interests within a delimited geopolitical sphere, while potentially recalibrating prevailing modalities of world order (Gamble and Payne 1996). Engel (2019b) argues that regionalism is operationalized through formalized policy architectures and developmental blueprints, which cumulatively crystallize into the morphology of regional organizations.

Contemporary regionalism aims to explore alternative models of regional governance beyond the European experience, accounting for historical persistence and political-economic structural differences globally. Amid the recent wave of (de-)globalization, state actors—particularly emerging regional powers outside the superpower core—have regarded regional strategies as instruments for mitigating uncertainties of global interdependence. Consequently, a ‘returning region’ appeal has been observed scholarly (Rees and Legates 2013). As sub-regional³ and regional geospatial layers become crucial arenas for interstate engagement, regional countries driven by rational calculations to stabilize regional order, expand avenues for collaboration, and preempt the strategic gains of rivalry competitions, have actively pursued the institutional design of cooperation frameworks (Siekiera 2020). Through such efforts, they shape the political cooperation models and economic advancement pathways within regional settings. However, strategic competition among regional powers has catalyzed confrontational dynamics, constraining and disrupting cooperative initiatives. At the same time, the post-hegemonic landscape—the fade and absence of a single unipolar power provide stabilizing, system-wide leadership within international society—has granted regional states greater strategic autonomy. In this setting, the phenomenon of competitive regionalism has emerged, illustrating that regional cooperation encompasses multidimensional processes of integration, power shifts, and contests for leadership (Burroni 2014).

³ In contrast to the broader concept of a “region,” a sub-region denotes an analytical level in international relations that lies between the global and national scales. Conceptually linked to the region as a larger territorial unit, a sub-region conveys an analogous meaning while referring to a lower spatial level. The interpretation of a sub-region is primarily concerned with “relativity.” For instance, within East Asia, both Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia are commonly recognized as sub-regions. The Mekong River Basin is considered a sub-region within Southeast Asia. Accordingly, the term Mekong Subregion is frequently employed to capture its geostrategic level of analysis.

The interactions between China and India, two leading powers of the Global South, reveal how competitive regionalism has taken shape in the 21st century. This manifestation not only reflects the profound transformation of the global power structure, but also illustrate the complex reconstruction of regional order with the inherent contradiction embedded in South-South Cooperation as a framework. The integration initiatives pursued by China and India exemplify the proactive engagement of emerging powers in shaping Global South regional governance. The two countries conduct pronounced strategic approaches of regionalism—China adopts a state-led model prioritizing infrastructure, connectivity and productivity development as formalized mechanisms for constructing an integrated scaffolding (Jia and Bennett 2018). In contrast, India promotes a consultative, multi-stakeholder regional cooperative model, emphasizing soft institutional building and the cultivation of shared identity, fostering a flexible governance architecture (Bhadauriya and Mishra 2023). These paradigmatic regionalism practices converge and collide within the geopolitical hotspot—the Mekong River Basin—ideationally and materially. In this sub-regional space, the Chinese Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) and the Indian Mekong-Ganga Cooperation Initiative (MGCI) embody salient regionalism. The strategic interplay between these mechanisms reflects the broader trends in competitive regionalism, and positions the Mekong Countries⁴—Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam, and Thailand—as pivotal actors and beneficiaries with enhanced agency. By navigating between these contending frameworks, the Mekong Countries acquire leverage and flexibility, becoming selective recipients within the evolving landscape of Global South competitive regionalism.

Considering the aforementioned, the upcoming section will first provide a brief historical retrospective on the key terms and core research issues, including the principal research questions. This part will be followed by the literature

⁴ The Mekong Countries refers to the five states located in the Mekong River Basin: Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam, and Thailand. This group is commonly represented by the acronym “CLMVT.” The Mekong Countries also been holistically known as “Indochina” culturally, or “Mainland Southeast Asia” geographically. This article conceptualizes the Mekong Countries as a specific (sub-)region-oriented cluster of actors to more precisely define the participation and intervention of political entities in the Mekong River Basin affairs.

review to situate the research topic and specific questions within the context of regionalism studies, considering also specific Mekong political environment. The analysis will then examine empirical case studies to illustrate the dynamics discussed, before concluding with remarks that synthesize the main findings and highlight potential directions and contributions for further research.

Historical Review and Core Research Issues

In the realm of practical international politics, following World War II, the Global South embarked on regionalism through a sequence of distinct phases (Bhagwati 1993). The inaugural phase emerged in the 1950s, coincided with decolonization that restored national sovereignty to many Global South states, as well as with early phase of European integration. Rather than pooling sovereignty as in the European model, postcolonial regionalism emphasized intergovernmental cooperation that strengthened national authority and projected a shared voice for newly independent states. The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), promoted by India, provided an important ideological foundation for this period. During the Cold War, these states gradually moved beyond the anti-colonial narratives that had defined their early cooperation and began developing the endogenous models based on regional histories, cultures, and socio-economic conditions. A notable manifestation was the creation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

A second wave of regionalism arose in the late 1980s, resonating with the institutional maturation of European Single Market. For Global South along with South-South Cooperation, regionalism has exhibited as a dialectical character since the late twentieth century (Kennes 2000), complementing globalization process while maintaining a dynamic tension with it. Regionalism has also become a critical instrument for Global South countries seeking to rectify structural asymmetries of international order. The intensification of globalization has further catalyzed the emergence of diverse regional organizations, accelerating intra-regional coordination as well as innovative interregional initiatives across the South.

As previously stated, contemporary regionalism seeks alternative models of governance beyond the traditional power interventions. In the context of recent

(de-)globalization, many states have turned to regional strategies to mitigate the risks of global interdependence. Cooperative engagement through institutional and other means has become a strategic tool for maintaining stability and securing national and other interests. Chinese and Indian strategies in that regard could be observed in the context of their roles as emerging international powers. As noted in the previous section, whereas China tends to pursue a more institutionalized form of cooperation, employing a state-driven approach emphasizing infrastructure, interconnectivity, and economic capacity building; India advocates a more flexible and participatory multilateral option privileging soft institutional collaboration.

The growing focus on regionalism in the Global South highlights how South–South Cooperation unfolds in the Mekong River Basin, positioning it as a critical geostrategic arena. In this context, China and India advance respective regional initiatives, while the Mekong Countries exert strategic agency by mitigating risks of asymmetric political and economic dependence. This dynamic challenge traditional regionalism paradigm through its intersubjectively overlapping and inherently competitive logics. Building on this narrative foundation, this article addresses the following research inquiries.

The first question asks how the institutional designs and governance practices of emerging Asian powers—along with their development-aid distribution patterns—reshape the traditional principles of South–South Cooperation, particularly those of mutual benefit and solidarity with the Mekong Countries. While the SSC literature frequently assumes genuine solidarity and equality among partners, contemporary practice has grown more state- or bloc-centered and strategically selective, potentially altering these normative foundations at the stage of implementation. Second, to what extent does the interplay between Chinese Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) and Indian Mekong-Ganga Cooperation Initiative (MGCI) contribute to the evolution of competitive regionalism in the sub-region? By exploring these issues through a qualitative means, the article seeks to examine how competitive regionalism manifests in SSC practice, and to assess the strategic opportunities and tensions it presents for inclusive Global South regional governance.

In synthesis, this article launches with the academic review of existing scholarship to map key terminologies and conceptual frameworks under consideration. It then proceeds with a comparative, third-party—oriented

research approach to analyze China's and India's region-facing engagements with the Mekong Countries. By comparing societal interactions, economic interdependence, and security collaboration within multilateral formats, the analysis identifies discernible features regarding political atmosphere, implementation effectiveness, and sustainability of cooperation dynamics between major East, South Asian powers, and the Mekong Countries. Ultimately, the article argues that in the regional space constituted by the Mekong Countries, competitive regionalism unfolds through the positive notion of co-competition—a terminology encompassing both the business and power politics domains (Brandenburger and Nalebuff 1996). This term refers to the phenomena where great power friction and regional cooperation concurrently constrain and reinforce one another at the institutional level. This ultimately leads to a paradox: the very structures of competition may be conducive to achieving cooperative synergies.

Review of the Scholarly Landscape

To analyze South–South Cooperation and competitive regionalism, this article develops a conceptual framework explaining how these dynamics have shaped the Global South. The article synthesizes critical scholarly debates to establish the notional foundation for empirical analysis: first, by examining SSC as a transformative normative and counter-hegemonic praxis; and second, by tracing the conceptual evolution of regionalism, culminating in its contemporary competitive manifestations.

The Theoretical Lens for Interpreting South-South Cooperation

As early as the 1940s, Karl Polanyi, in his seminal work *The Great Transformation*, observed that states opposing the *status quo* within the international system are often quick to identify the vulnerabilities of existing institutional orders and to envision alternative frameworks better aligned with their national interests (Polanyi 1944). Such perceptive state actors not only hasten the decline of the prevailing orders but also shape the evolutionary process of emerging institutional arrangements. While they may appear to function as architects of institutionalization, they are strategic beneficiaries

empowered by structural changes generated through such transformation in essence. Building on Polanyi's insights, Gray and Gills (2016) elaborate that "development" implies a concept encapsulating the complex processes of social transformation. It embodies profound promises and aspirations for billions seeking improvements in human conditions, while representing a long-term historical project aimed at liberating nations and peoples from the legacies of colonialism, oppression, and underdevelopment. South-South Cooperation emerges both as a normative framework and as an implementational set of initiatives driving transformative change. In practice, SSC is highly heterogeneous across providers, varying in policy instruments, institutional arrangements, and the depth of engagement with multilateral forums and initiatives (De Renzio and Seifert 2014). Ideationally, rooted in principles of mutual benefit and solidarity among marginalized states, SSC conveys an epistemic community within Global South, contests North-centric narrative of development, and seeks to reconstruct the material foundations and hierarchies of knowledge production order in the global system (Sidiropoulos et al. 2012).

Golub (2013) contends that SSC is framed by the dual dynamic: the collective ascent of Global South and the deepening of inter-state relations among Southern actors. As an institutional expression of Global South's intersubjective agency, SSC embodies multiple mandates. At the operational domain, it advances concrete development policies through mechanisms such as technology transfer (e.g., China–Africa agricultural aid projects) and capacity building programs (e.g., India's ITEC technical training scheme). At the structural level, SSC aims to foster alternative models for the provision of global public goods that reflect the priorities and values of Global South, as exemplified by institutions like the BRICS New Development Bank (Sithole and Hlongwane 2023). The overarching objective is to establish a normative and institutional architecture that facilitates power redistribution and embodies the contours of a genuinely "post-Western" world order. Drawing on the Southeast Asian praxis of South-South Cooperation, Engel (2019a) contends that contemporary SSC has been cast as a liberal norm with technical cooperation programmes as its key instrument. The spread of SSC norm has been incremental, shaped by state interests, regional dynamics, and the strategic preferences of initiating and recipient actors within development cooperation.

From a macro perspective, Mohan (2016) posits that South-South Cooperation constitutes a comprehensive framework for cooperation among Global South countries across a wide range of sectors. Such cooperation can occur at bilateral, regional, sub-regional, and interregional levels, enabling developing countries to collaborate by sharing knowledge, expertise, resources, and technology. The aim is not only to achieve development objectives but also to promote a more inclusive and equitable global development order. This conceptualization aligns with the definitions presented in the official United Nation documents (UNCTAD 2019).

From Regionalism to Competitive Regionalism: A Comparative Genealogy

In the sphere of governance, the ideological foundation of SSC is expressed through the ordering practices of regionalism, with the two engaged in a mutually constitutive and dynamically dialectical relationship. According to Kacowicz (1998), regionalism denotes the tendency of governments and societies to establish voluntary associations and pool resources to create shared functional and institutional arrangements. In this sense, regionalism can be perceived as a developmental process situated within a specific geographical vessel, in which diverse actors, including states, regional institutions, and other non-state entities converge around common values and norms. Kim (2004) underscores that regionalism is a normative concept encompassing shared values, collective identities, and common aspirations. He contends that regionalism consists of state-led cooperative initiatives enacted through intergovernmental dialogues and agreements, with institutionalized collaboration as its defining feature. Rozman (2005) identifies analytical dimensions of regionalism—economic integration; institutional integration through regional bodies and summits; social integration involving labor mobility and the expansion of business networks; the formation of regional identity; and security integration. In the same vein, Andrew Hurrell (1995) recognizes several key components: (1) regionalization; (2) regional awareness and identity; (3) practices of regional inter-state cooperation; (4) state-driven institutional integration; and (5) the construction of regional cohesion. Hurrell further emphasizes the nature of regionalism: on one hand, it functions as a narrow ideological or political slogan; on the other, it operates as a broader material

process propelled by market dynamics, which deepens regional linkages and fosters integration within international system.

The formative evolution of regionalism mirrors a paradigmatic shift in scholarly discourse from “old” to “new” regionalism. The former associated with the early development in the Europe, drew on integration theories built upon Karl Deutsch’s concept of supranational communities (Breslin and Higgott 2000). On the other hand, new regionalism emerging in the late 1980s is outward-oriented and emphasizes interregional linkages with broader “global regions” (Gill 1998). It has inspired various theoretical approaches, including transaction cost economics, rational choice, neoliberal institutionalism, and structural interdependence (Schults et al. 2001), highlighting multiplicity of drivers arise through spontaneous and bottom-up governance. Hettne and Söderbaum (1998) outline key distinctions: while old regionalism was Cold War–induced, protectionist, and state-centric, new regionalism arises in a multipolar order through endogenous and voluntary processes responding to global challenges beyond national capacities. It is characterized by openness to global markets, multidimensional engagement across functional domains, and the involvement of non-state actors within complex transnational networks. Overall, new regionalism signifies a comprehensive and pluralistic mode of regional governance, resonating with the principles of SSC in its emphasis on cooperative autonomy and endogenous initiative in the Global South.

Competitive regionalism advances both conceptual inquiry and methodological innovation of conventional regionalism. Narrower focus is placed on examining how regional states, especially regional powers, employ self-initiated institutional mechanisms as instruments of strategic competition. This phenomenon is expressed through several interrelated practices: the creation of rival regional institutions; the expansion of influence via existing platforms; the obstruction of alternative initiatives advanced by regional competitors; and in some cases, the dismantling of competing institutional arrangements (McCarthy 2000). Existentially, competitive regionalism relates to interregional rivalry, wherein regional mechanisms function as proxies of political power in regional competition, particularly across Global South. In Africa, various intergovernmental organizations with divergent agendas compete institutionally, at times undermining the continent’s peace and security (Franke 2007). In Asia, regionalism exhibits pronounced nation-state orientations, intensified by

“amplified nationalism” and the excessive emphasis on state-centrism. Rather than functioning as a vehicle for genuine multilateral solidarity, it serves as the geopolitical roots of competitive regionalism. This dynamic has often led to the fragmentation of institutional architectures and the proliferation of overlapping or conflicting frameworks, an outcome widely described as “institutional congestion” (Pich 2022)—a defining feature of competitive regionalism in Asian landscape, most visibly the Mekong sub-region. In the context of shifting international circumstances, regional and extra-regional actors engaged in the sub-regional governance have introduced diverse cooperation platforms under their respective commitments. These mechanisms not only entangle in membership and issue domains but also give rise to competitive dynamics of strategic contestation.

Empirical Case Studies

The empirical section grounds the theoretical discussions of South–South Cooperation, regionalism, and competitive regionalism within the concrete geopolitical setting of the Mekong River Basin. It provides a fertile site for comparative inquiry, owing the importance and active involvement of two major Global South leaders: China and India (Verma and Li 2025). As emerging regional actors and prominent advocates of South-South Cooperation, both states have each constructed regional cooperation mechanisms—the Chinese Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) and the Indian Mekong-Ganga Cooperation Initiative (MGCI)—serving as vehicles for projecting strategic interests and articulating developmental visions.

Anchoring Point of Comparative Regionalism Analysis: the Mekong Countries

From a physical geography perspective, a river system consists of a main channel and its tributaries, collectively forming a river drainage system. In Asia, the Mekong exemplifies a classic transnational drainage system, flowing across multiple countries. It can be divided into distinct segments: the Za Qu headstream as its source; the Lancang section as the upper course; and the Mekong River section forming the lower course. These segments define the objective

geographic basis of the Mekong River Basin. Hydrologically, the Mekong is a transboundary river basin—a joint system shared and managed by multiple states. Such basins are generally classified into two types: contiguous rivers, which form international boundaries and cannot be exclusively utilized by any single country; and successive rivers, which flow across territories in sequence, allowing each riparian state to exercise exclusive use of water resources within its jurisdictional reach (Zeitoun and Warner 2006). The Mekong River is a prototypical successive river. Based on elevation, hydrological, and topographic factors, it is divided into the Upper Mekong Basin (the Lancang River within China) and the Lower Mekong Basin (hereafter delimited referred to as the Mekong River Basin). The catchment areas have a surface ratio of 1:4. The Lancang section spans approximately 2,139 kilometers, while the Mekong stretches for roughly 4,880 kilometers across downstream states (Gao et al. 2017).

Beyond natural configuration, the Mekong River Basin—traversing diverse ecological zones—also carries multiple national and regional interpretation in political discourse. This diversity is most evident in China’s dualistic role as both a subject and an object of regional engagement. While many commentators portray China as the upstream hydro-hegemon,⁵ the objective hydrology of the Lancang–Mekong offers both the upper and lower riparians some bargaining leverage in hydropolitics, shaping how cross-basin development initiatives are contested and coordinated. At the national level, the concept of Lancang–Mekong Basin emphasizes physical interconnections among all six riparian states, including China. Beijing has been pursued the soft power pathway—by adopting water diplomacy in the Mekong subregion under the Lancang Mekong Cooperation (Zhang and Zhang 2021), promoting a narrative of interdependence and a common identity articulated through the “Lancang–Mekong Community

⁵ Recently, scholars have conducted rigorous investigations into the headwaters of international rivers including the Mekong, Ganga, and Indus whose sources lie on the Qinghai–Tibet Plateau, labeled in Western discourse as the “Asian Water Tower.” Empirical data indicate that mean surface runoff and glacial meltwater account for only a limited share of headwater discharge; scientific evidence further shows that local precipitation is in fact the key driver of runoff variability in the middle and lower reaches of rivers originating on the Plateau. The “water-tower” metaphor fosters a public misconception in downstream states that the Plateau unilaterally controls water supply. The misperception erodes the mutual trust necessary for transboundary cooperation and distorts the design of water-resources management mechanisms and water diplomacy policies (Tian et al. 2024).

of Shared Future (Xing 2017; Tsjeng 2024).” At the regional level, broader framings are scaled up as the Lancang-Mekong Region and the Greater Mekong Subregion have become widespread currency in regional policy and academic discourses (Ren et al. 2021).

Conversely, in regional studies (especially in analyses concerning the involvement of external and internal actors in the Mekong River Basin), Mekong Countries refer to the five downstream states situating within the cultural, historical, and human-geographical space of Southeast Asia and are often depicted as aid recipients and affected stakeholders in the political and economic dimensions of regionalism. Treating Mekong Countries as a distinct analytical unit facilitates a clearer examination of actor–structure dynamics, allowing for relational analysis both at the individual and collective aspect of their interactions with the major external regional actors: China and India.

As relatively weak actors, the Mekong Countries lack the requisite capacity to construct “regional fortresses (Bellamy 2004)” on their own. Consequently, they have adopted an outward-looking and open stance toward major powers involved in basin affairs, maintaining a positive attitude toward the participation of key actors in local governance and the establishment of sub-regional mechanisms. The Mekong Countries have also demonstrated strong resilience in safeguarding national and regional sovereignty. Rather than seeking complete dependence on, or avoidance of any external power, they have pursued political and economic hedging strategies, striving to achieve an “inclusive balancing” that simultaneously preserves regional stability and enhances the autonomy and flexibility amid power competition (Yeo 2010). This approach is reflected in the five countries’ ongoing efforts to expand inter-state groupings, develop limited-scale multilateral cooperation frameworks, and deepen integration into the ASEAN Community. Evelyn Goh conceptualizes such collective behavioral patterns—whereby small and medium-sized states draw upon multiple sources of influence through dense networks of bilateral and multilateral institutions under conditions of economic interdependence and asymmetrical power distribution—as a strategy of “omni-enmeshment” (Goh 2008).

On the other hand, although India is geographically situated outside the Basin, it has maintained long-standing religious and civilizational ties with the Mekong Countries. These enduring connections make the Mekong and the Ganga River basins spatial anchors of regionalism interaction. Historically, such

embedded linkages have shaped the bilateral cultural, economic, and political trajectories of the sub-region (Mishra 1995). From a more pragmatic standpoint, India constitutes a viable geostrategic hedging alternative, capable of helping the Mekong Countries mitigate their dual overdependence on both China and Western powers in the economic and security domains. India's overall economic scale, internal market potential, and shared interests with the Mekong Countries in border and maritime security further position it as a potential partner and strategic ally within the context of the ongoing US–China strategic rivalry.

*Lancang-Mekong Cooperation:
The Regionalism Ties of China and Mekong Countries*

Owing to the distinctive geographic position and abundant natural resources, coupled with the limited institutional capacity and political will of riparian states in the early stages of sub-regional cooperation, the Mekong River Basin has served as a key arena where multiple extra-regional actors have competed for political and economic influence since the Cold War. The United States' involvement was particularly prominent, concentrating on extensive activities in transboundary water resource management and basin-wide infrastructure development, largely executed through the institutional platform of the UN system (Ti and Lien 2003).

In 1957, under the auspices of the United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE), Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, and Thailand jointly established the Mekong Committee. The event not only marked a historic moment of direct international participation in the planning of a transnational river basin but also symbolized the initial institutionalization of sub-regional development cooperation among state actors (Schaaf and Fifield 2021). The US extended substantial support to the Mekong Committee, assuming the role of its principal financier and material contributor. Japan, by contrast, sought to rehabilitate and earn its regional reputation through war reparations and the deployment of Official Development Assistance (ODA) (Song 2021). As the US withdrew from the sub-region following setbacks in Vietnam, economic assistance under the UN diminished significantly. Within this shifting configuration, Japan sustained its engagement by supporting the Interim Committee for Coordination of Investigations of the Lower Mekong Basin—comprising Laos, Vietnam, and Thailand—through ODA projects focused on

domestic infrastructure development. This strategy not only stimulated economic growth in Thailand, the sole non-socialist state in the Basin at the time, but also effectively safeguarded overall interests and presence of Japan and Western powers in the Mekong Countries during the late Cold War period (Nakayama 2020).

Compared with the Western-oriented frameworks, the Lancang–Mekong Cooperation (LMC) constitutes the first comprehensive, full-basin regional cooperation mechanism jointly initiated by China, as the upstream state of the river system, and the downstream Mekong Countries. Rooted in the genesis of transboundary water resource governance, the initiative seeks to cultivate good-neighborly relations and pragmatic cooperation among the six riparian states, advancing regional peace, development, and shared prosperity within the broader regionalism paradigm. The origins of the LMC can be traced to Thailand’s 2012 proposal for six-country collaboration in areas such as tourism, navigational safety, agriculture, and fisheries (Singh 2022). Formally launched in 2014, the mechanism culminated in the adoption of the 2016 Sanya Declaration, establishing the “3+5 Cooperation Framework.” This framework rests on three pillars—political and security cooperation, economic and sustainable development, and social and cultural exchanges; together with priority areas: connectivity, industrial capacity, cross-border economic cooperation, water resources, agriculture, and poverty reduction. The LMC is sustained by a multi-tiered dialogue architecture comprising working groups, senior officials’ meetings, foreign ministers’ meetings, and leaders’ summits at the highest level.

In its formative phase, LMC was consolidated through substantial Chinese financial commitments, including a 1.9 billion RMB special fund for regular projects, 10 billion RMB in concessional loans, and 10 billion USD in credit lines for industrial capacity and infrastructure development (Sovachana and Murg 2019). To date, the LMC Special Fund has financed over 500 initiatives covering sectors of agriculture, healthcare, and alternative energy, thereby embedding material foundations for sustained cooperation. Drawing on its domestic experience of “transport-oriented poverty alleviation,” China has prioritized physical connectivity as a means of deepening regional integration. The China–Laos Railway epitomizes this approach. Spanning 1,035 kilometers from Kunming to Vientiane, it forms a critical link within the Pan-Asia Railway central corridor. Beyond transport efficiency, the railway represents a significant step in

constructing shared economic space under the Belt and Road Initiative (Yoshikawa 2024). Since the 2020s, particularly in the wake of COVID-19, the scope of cooperation has expanded into new focal domains. Building upon the 2018 Lancang–Mekong Cross-Border HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control Project, the six riparian states have established joint mechanisms for epidemic surveillance, information sharing, and coordinated responses, with China providing substantial vaccine assistance during the pandemic. Concurrently, the digital economy has become a new pillar of regional engagement. Supported by Chinese technologies—including BeiDou satellite navigation and big-data platforms—LMC members have accelerated digital transformation, fostering collaboration in smart cities, industrial digitalization, and cybersecurity (Zheng and Ma 2024).

The LMC diverges from conventional regionalism models historically shaped by extra-regional great powers, marking a distinct phase of Asian cooperation under China's leadership. Its institutional design emphasizes the calibrated distribution of multilateral benefits and is distinguished by two structural features. First, it advances a cross-cutting agenda encompassing multiple functional domains. Second, it operates through a transgovernmental network governance model led by national leaders and sustained by multi-sectoral participation, which enhances policy coordination and strengthens the implementation capacity of expertise "sub-units" in conjunction with their regional counterparts (Yeh and Ni 2024). As China's global influence continues to rise, so too has its capacity and willingness to assume the leadership of LMC. Framed by the stance of "common but differentiated responsibilities," China positions itself as the driving force of the mechanism providing strategic direction. Nonetheless, from a regionalism perspective, the long-term endurance of the LMC ultimately hinges on China's capacity to sustain resource commitments to the Mekong Countries while simultaneously advancing the BRI objectives as well as addressing domestic economic challenges (Wu 2020).

From the chronological perspective of institutional development within the Mekong River Basin, the Lancang–Mekong Cooperation is frequently regarded as the mechanism through which China competes with other extra-regional powers such as the US and Japan, for influence at the sub-regional level (Wuthnow 2017). However, LMC differs fundamentally from earlier mechanisms as China shares direct hydro contiguity with the downstream Mekong Countries,

and together facing numerous complex challenges associated with the development and governance of the transboundary Lancang–Mekong River system. These shared challenges have given rise to endogenous imperatives for cooperation (Biba 2018). Currently, six riparian states commonly confront mounting global economic challenges, alongside a range of non-traditional security threats including infectious disease control, disaster management, environmental degradation, terrorism, and cybercrime. The convergence of internal development priorities and security challenges thus constitutes the driving force behind mechanism formation. As Morse and Keohane (2014) observe, when existing transnational mechanisms are slow to adapt or functionally deficient, dissatisfied actors and stakeholders tend to advance policy agendas and development goals by initiating new institutional frameworks—thereby intensifying competitive interactions among overlapping mechanisms. The LMC’s emergence as a response to structural pressures, as opposed to the externally supported mechanisms of earlier decades, is an additionally relevant aspect within the conceptual manifestation of competitive regionalism.

Mekong–Ganga Cooperation Initiative: India’s Adaptive Regionalism Agenda

The Mekong–Ganga Cooperation Initiative (MGCI) represents the first regionalism cooperation mechanism jointly advanced by an extra-regional major power—India, and the Mekong Countries. Established in 2000, the MGCI has undergone three distinct phases of rapid development (2000–2003), stagnation (2004–2011), and eventual revitalization from 2012 onward (Padmanabhan 2023). In its formative stage, three ministerial meetings were convened, framing cooperation around four priority sectors: tourism, culture, education, and transportation. The inaugural Vientiane Declaration laid the groundwork creating five working groups and expanding the agenda to include small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), rice cultivation technology, and public health, while emphasizing India’s comparative strengths in information technology. The Ha Noi Programme of Action (2001) outlined a six-year roadmap for intergovernmental coordination and information sharing, while the Phnom Penh Road Map introduced healthcare collaboration and the innovative “2+1” funding model (two MGCI members plus one external donor), reinforcing operational effectiveness (Singh 2007). India subsequently broadened its commitments

through financing, scientific and technical scholarships, and support for tourism ministers' meetings and SSC development programs. It further promoted entrepreneurship training centers and transportation linkages in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. From 2004, India hosted workshops on healthcare financing and e-governance, facilitating technological and administrative capacity-building of MGCI (Asian Development Bank 2004).

Following 2004, the MGCI entered a dark period of stagnation, largely due to India's domestic election affairs and regime instability in Thailand. The 2006 ministerial meeting in New Delhi yielded no new agreements, and no ministerial meetings occurred between 2007 and 2011, resulting in the delay and suspension of several projects. India's plan to construct the India-Myanmar-Thailand cross-border highway was impeded by financial limitations and non-traditional security threats, including drug and arms trafficking, ethnic conflict, and insurgent violence along the India-Myanmar border (Yhome 2015). Consequently, many MGCI agendas shifted toward bilateral implementation rather than multilateral engagement of regionalism.

The revitalization phase of MGCI began after 2012, coinciding with India's regionalism strategic transition from "Look East" to "Act East" Policy. India introduced the Quick Impact Projects (QIP) fund, with an annual budget of USD 1 million to support connectivity, education, healthcare, and other critical development sectors (Hussain 2024). The Plan of Action to Implement MGC (2016–2018) institutionalized QIP as the initiative's core development instrument. By 2019, 105 QIP projects had been approved, of which 78 were completed (Deshpande 2023). That year, MGCI expanded its livelihood-related agenda to include climate change adaptation, flood and drought management, disaster mitigation, and water governance, alongside the enhancement of capacity-building and technical training. The 2021 virtual ministerial meeting launched the official MGCI website and emphasized regional cooperation on pandemic response and digital connectivity. In 2023, ministers proposed the MGCI Business Council to foster private sector engagement and reaffirmed commitment to ASEAN integration and narrowing intra-regional development gaps, highlighting MGCI's enduring relevance as a long-term regionalism cooperation platform (Ministry of External Affairs, India 2023).

In addition, the Mekong River Basin has developed a relatively mature transboundary water governance system, encompassing mechanisms such as

Mekong River Commission (MRC) and Lancang–Mekong Cooperation (LMC). In contrast, the Ganga River Basin in South Asia—home to nearly 500 million people—has witnessed a gradual increase in related initiatives but still lacks an effective framework for joint governance. Consequently, advancing regionalism through inter-basin cooperation with other international river management authorities has emerged as a feasible pathway for optimizing the Ganga water resource governance. Under the framework of the Mekong–Ganga Cooperation Initiative, the Mekong Program on Water, Environment and Resilience (M-POWER)—a collaborative program funded and operated by India’s Observer Research Foundation (ORF) and the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID)—established the Mekong–Ganga Dialogue (MGD), a transnational forum for cooperation on water resource management. Functioning as a secondary mechanism under the MGCI, the MGD has fostered a cross-basin network of knowledge exchange and governance linkages between the two river systems. Centered on the water–food–energy nexus, the MGD operates as a “soft institutionalization” platform that integrates both Track I and Track II dimensions connecting policymakers, practitioners, and the academic community (Observer Research Foundation and M-POWER 2014). By comparing policy frameworks, practical experiences, and sociocultural contexts across the two basins, it identifies actionable domains and solutions for cooperation, contributing via innovation to the water governance regionalism.

In summary, Table 1 below presents a comparative overview of the LMC and MGCI, highlighting their strategic orientations, core agendas, institutional architectures, and competitive regionalism dimensions, thereby elucidating the mechanisms through which China and India project and consolidate influence across the Mekong Countries.

*Table 1. Comparison of LMC and MGCI
in the Competitive Regionalism Context*

Dimension	Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC)	Mekong-Ganga Cooperation Initiative (MGCI)
Participants	China + Mekong Countries	India + Mekong Countries
Regionalism approach	Full-basin, pragmatic cooperation under Chinese guidance	Flexible regionalism, Act East policy
Core agenda/ priority areas	Political, security, economic, connectivity, water resource	Tourism, culture, education, information, health, climate change, water resource
Institutional design and multi-tiered mechanism	Working groups, senior official meetings, summits	Technical working groups, senior official meetings
Competitive regionalism component	Chinese regional leadership consolidated through economic and infrastructural development	India's trans-regional influence through ASEAN and other engagements

Source: Own Research.

Implication and Conclusion

In the practice of Global South regionalism in the Mekong River Basin, China and India encounter both opportunities and constraints. Divergent priorities in agenda-setting, cooperation scope, and institutional modalities have produced a competitive regionalism dynamic between the two emerging powers. This rivalry has generated overlapping governance schemes and hindered potential synergies between regional mechanisms. For the most part, historical and political legacies limited their cooperation to domains of low security sensitivity, such as educational exchanges and environmental governance, while consensus remains elusive on geopolitics and regional security.

Amid these shortcomings, socio-cultural cooperation may persistently offer a viable entry point for advancing regionalism engagement. Notably, the Chinese

21st Century Maritime Silk Road and the Indian Project Mausam provide opportunities for convergence, particularly in regional connectivity and cultural heritage preservation—areas that also carry political symbolism (Silva 2024). Moreover, the LMC has demonstrated preliminary coordination with other regional frameworks like the Mekong River Commission (MRC), thereby providing useful institutional references for Sino-Indian interaction—the most complex architecture of South-South Cooperation. Equally significant is the rising prominence of “triangular cooperation” as an emerging modality of Global South regionalism. This model typically entails a donor country or international organization partnering with a Southern country to deliver aid and development support to a third developing state (Zhou 2013). In the Mekong context, China and India could adopt a more accommodating posture by allowing limited mutual participation in respective mechanisms and facilitating constructive involvement of external actors, thereby lowering frictions typical for competitive regionalism. The China–Myanmar oil and gas pipeline illustrates multilateral co-construction under the BRI, while Thailand’s Eastern Economic Corridor exemplifies China–Japan–Mekong triangular cooperation. Looking ahead, China and India could jointly identify target states, strategic sectors, and early-harvest projects within the Mekong Countries, initiating low-risk triangular cooperation with demonstrative and catalytic effects.

Keohane (1984) argues that institutional creation is often facilitated by mutual trust accumulated through the operation of existing mechanisms. International cooperation rarely emerges in a vacuum but instead evolve through path dependence shaped by the interplay between established and nascent agents and frameworks. As two of the largest developing countries and leading Global South representatives, China and India are proximate neighbors whose interaction is both inevitable and consequential. Within this logic, the engagement between the two sides is most visibly characterized as *co-competition*: the coexistence of cooperation and competition under conditions of complex interdependence and the practice of competitive regionalism. Building on this insight, some scholars have introduced the term *institutional co-competition* to describe how rivalry and partnership between China and India may coexist and generate joint benefits in the Mekong sub-region. Institutional co-competition is the contingent product of compromise and negotiation among participating parties and relevant stakeholders. It combines dual advantages of inter-mechanism competition enhancing efficiency, and inter-mechanism

cooperation reducing transaction costs, while iteratively shaping both ideas and practices of regional governance (Lu and Jin 2020). For rising powers, institutional co-competition can maximize the scope and expectations of cooperation between actors and their affiliated mechanisms. Over time, it can foster co-governance and a functional division among similar mechanisms, thereby advancing the incremental construction of regional order.

While China advances the Belt and Road Initiative and India pursues the Neighborhood Diplomacy and Act East Policy, both should perceive their respective rising major-power roles as mutually constructing rather than zero-sum. Such recognition could transform rivalry into a constructive path of competitive regionalism, fostering positive-sum outcomes and shared prosperity across sub-regional, regional, and interregional levels. Under this premise, a comparative analysis of Chinese and Indian strategies toward Mekong Countries holds not only theoretical insights but also far-reaching implications for Global South governance and the formulation of South–South Cooperation policies.

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**SARADNJA JUG-JUG U MEKONGU:
PRAKSE, DILEME I PUTANJE KONKURENTNOG REGIONALIZMA**

Apstrakt: Tokom poslednjih godina, jačanje globalne strateške konkurencije dovelo je do pojave onoga što se sve češće označava kao „konkurentni regionalizam“. U okviru tog koncepta, kroz uporednu analizu kineskog i indijskog angažmana u slivu reke Mekong, ovaj članak pomera fokus sa rivalstva velikih sila na dinamiku saradnje Jug–Jug. Članak nudi uporedni pregled načina na koji regionalne inicijative ove dve zemlje oličavaju suprotstavljene razvojne vizije. Kina je razvila državno-centrični pristup usmeren na infrastrukturu, dok Indija naglašava meku saradnju i povezanost na osnovu prilagođavanja. Nastojeći da pokaže kako se težnja ka ravnoteži moći i institucionalnoj saradnji prepliću unutar kontinentalnog jugoistočnog dela Azije, autor istražuje na koji način institucionalne i upravljačke prakse novih azijskih sila (zajedno sa obrascima raspodele razvojnih resursa) preoblikuju tradicionalne principe saradnje Jug–Jug, posebno uzajamnu korist i solidarnost sa zemljama Mekonga. Takođe, u kojoj meri sadejstvo između kineske platforme Lankang–Mekong (LMC) i indijske inicijative Mekong–Ganga (MGCI) doprinosi razvoju konkurentnog regionalizma u ovom podregionu? Posebno težište stavljeno je na ispitivanje načina na koji regionalne države (naročito regionalne sile) koriste institucionalne mehanizme kao alate strateškog nadmetanja. Zaključci ukazuju da kineski i indijski konkurentni angažmani pružaju ključne uvide u paradigmatu specifičnog vida nadmetanja („ko-konkurencije“/„su-konkurencije“) novih sila, kao i na regionalno upravljanje na Globalnom jugu i saradnju na nivou Jug-Jug u kontekstu razvoja svetskog poretka.

Ključne reči: Globalni jug, zemlje Mekonga, Lankang–Mekong, Mekong–Ganga, strateško nadmetanje.