Major Countries’ Strategic Approaches on the Mekong River Basin and Korea’s Standpoint*

Lee, Yohan
Seoul National University

Abstract

As the Mekong River Basin (MRB) was increasingly regarded as a huge potential with abundant socio-economic resources and a core geo-political place, major power states such as the United States, China, and Japan have sought for the close relationship and multilateral governance with the Mekong region. Korea is also taking part in MRB development, embarking on various efforts to promote the Korea-Mekong relationship including the annual Korea-Mekong Foreign Ministers meeting started from 2011. This article looks at the approach and strategic positioning of Korea towards the MRB, it seeks to explicate why and how Korea has involved in the MRB issues under current geo-politic and economic circumstances. It also examines the mutual significances and expectations of the Korea-Mekong cooperation in terms of the diplomatic and economic approaches. This study draws out the conclusion that Korea needs to make differentiated approach and strategic positioning itself from other major states in the MRB.

※ 주제어: Mekong, Mekong River Commission, Greater Mekong Subregion, Mekong–Korea Minister’s Meeting, Strategic Approaches, Lower Mekong Initiative, Mekong–Japan Summit

* This work was supported by the National Research Foundation of Korea Grant funded by the Korean Government(NRF-2014S1A5A2A03064915)
I. Introduction

Water is an inevitable resource for human survival in Asia as well as in the rest of the world. In fact, Asia is the world’s most water-stressed continent because of its dramatic economic rise (Chellany 2014, 622). The Mekong River Basin (hereafter referred to simply as MRB) in Southeast Asia, a main region of water resource conflict, is also undergoing rapid social, economic, environmental transitions (Varis et al. 2008, 146). Since Mekong River has been regarded as socio-economic resource rather than natural resource in riparian states, major regional and external states have paid attention to the growing MRB political and economic importance. China, one of the riparian states with Yunnan province border, is a major economic partner with Mekong riparian states in terms of trade, investment and development assistance. The United States and Japan also launched the multilateral institutions such as Lower Mekong Initiative (hereafter referred to as LMI) and Japan-Mekong Summit, in an attempt to broaden and strengthen the cooperative relationships with Mekong basin states. All of that shows that MRB is now verified as a place of strategic importance because MRB’s economic importance and potential, globalization and regionalization of Mekong boosted its geo-political value (Lawson 2012, 12).

The main objectives of this article are to explore the policies and measures of so-called major powers to the improvement in MRB involvement. This article will answer the questions as follow. First, why have major states committed to the MRB? Second, what kinds of policies and measures have the major states put into action to strengthen the development of the MRB? Third, how has the strategic positioning of Korea that has been adopted by of other major states in the MRB? This paper aims to discover Korean space and roles for the MRB issues in spite of