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The Impact of Mekong Transboundary Water Disputes on
China's Relations with Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia: A
Strategic Narrative Analysis.

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

China is one of the most influential global powers, and while extensive research exists on its global strategies, there is less focus on its role in Southeast Asia, a region where China actively seeks to assert its leadership. Most studies tend to concentrate on the U.S.-China relationship and its impact on Southeast Asia. Additionally, much of the existing literature primarily examines how major actors respond to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), with an emphasis on the reception of China's strategic narratives by different countries. In contrast, transboundary freshwater resources, particularly the Mekong River, have become an increasingly important strategic issue that remains underexplored. This thesis addresses the power dynamics in the Mekong region from the perspectives of both China and the smaller regional countries—Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia—by analysing their responses to China's strategic narrative on the Mekong water disputes. This research makes both theoretical and empirical contributions. Theoretically, through thematic analysis and strategic narrative theory, the study reveals that the reception of China's strategic narrative by the Mekong countries is not limited to simple acceptance or rejection, but ambiguous contestation, which consist of alignment and disagreement. Empirically, the research shows that smaller regional countries can exert strategic narrative power. By utilising methods such as agenda-setting, strategic silence, semantic adaptation, and exposure manipulation, Mekong countries able to deliberately create the ambiguity to keep the Mekong water disputes contested and influence China's tone and actions. In conclusion, this study argues that China's strategic narrative is insufficient to address the concerns of Mekong countries regarding water security and the ontological security related to the asymmetry in regional power distribution. The Mekong water disputes are likely to persist in the long term.

Key words: Strategic narrative, Mekong water disputes, power, China study, water diplomacy

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Authors deliration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, that this thesis is the result of my own work and had not been submitted for any other degree at University of Glasgow or any other institution.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

Power and narrative are central concepts in international relations. Narrative perspective gives a new way of studying and analysis of power. The relationship between them is an important focus of theory-building. This project examines power and narrative dynamics in Southeast Asia, specifically in the context of the Mekong water disputes, which is a unstudied aspect. It explores the interaction between the regional major power, China, and smaller regional states, including Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam.

This chapter begins with a background introduction, providing both theoretical and empirical contexts to frame the research question. It then outlines the research design employed to address the question. The third section summarizes key empirical findings, followed by a discussion and conclusion. Finally, the chapter concludes with an overview of the structure of the thesis.

1.1 The importance of the Mekong

Environmental issues have emerged as crucial new security threats that could endanger the whole human race and have gradually become an important field of study in International Relations (IR). One IR theorist compared environmental hazards to ‘zombies’ (Drezner, 2011), as they will spread across the planet unless countries make efforts jointly in solving them. Within this category, disputes about freshwater are a new but significant branch. Freshwater is a vital necessity to livelihood, affecting irrigation and fishing, even the evolution of civilisation. Due to population growth, economic growth, power demand, pollution and environmental deterioration, limited and shrinking freshwater resources have become one of the most endangered resources in the world (Liu, et al., 2019; Givental & Meredith, 2016). Almost 60% of freshwater resources are provided by 276 rivers shared by more than two countries (UN report, 2013). At the international level, the water issue has sometimes been highly politicised and a source of disputes, even wars, including the wars over the Jordan River, Nile River

and the disputes over the Tigris-Euphrates Basin (Wolf, 1995; Degefu & He, 2016; Zagonari & Rossi, 2014). These conflicts have undermined regional peace.

As a rising power, China has gradually become an essential theme in international relations. With its economic strength growing, China has become more active in international cooperation, such as in peacekeeping operations and environmental cooperation under its slogan of ‘community of shared future for mankind’. Understanding itself as a responsible actor and multilateralism supporter, China has also been criticised for its assertive policies and ‘responsive’ actions (Hartig 2016; Le Thu 2018; Vu 2023).

Current IR research about China mostly focusses on U.S.-China relations, the Belt and Road Initiative or the territorial disputes and China-ASEAN relationship among Southeast Asian countries. There is a lack of empirical research on the Mekong water disputes, a highly important livelihood issue, but not mentioned enough in academia. Considering the Mekong water disputes from the perspective of power and narratives provides a unique way to understand regional dynamics and the extent and limits of China’s power.

1.1.1 Mekong water disputes

The Mekong water issue refers to Mekong River transboundary water disputes between China and lower Mekong countries. China gains hydro power from the Lancang Cascade plan, referring to construction of several dams along the Lancang River (the upper river of the Mekong River). However, this has caused problems and even led to severe drought in the lower Mekong riparian countries.

Fresh water is vital for livelihood survival. With climate change and increasing demand on limited shrinking transboundary water resources, the water issue is becoming highly politicized and a potential source of disputes, even wars. Water disputes, as very urgent and controversial issue that affects livelihoods, need to be settled through cooperation (Nye, 2005; Drezner, 2011; Guo, 2015; Zhang,

2017). The disputes about Mekong River needs to be discussed in the similar way.

The Mekong River is one of the four major water conflict hotspots in the world. It is the most important river system in the Southeast Asian region, with the total length of 4180 km and the whole basin area about 795.000 km². As the map suggests, it stems from the Tibet plateau, running down through 6 countries, including China, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam. The upper part of the Mekong River is called the Lancang River in China, with approximately 30% of the whole basin, including Tibet and Yunnan province in China and the eastern territory of Myanmar. China and Myanmar are the two upper river countries. The lower basin, covering 70% basin including the rest Mekong countries (Radosevich and Olson 1999, Pearse-Smith 2012, Mekong River Commission 2016).



Figure 1-1, (Wikipedia, 2021)

The core of the Mekong water disputes is water distribution because of the water shortage. The Mekong River water is the major water resource for lower Mekong countries. It is essential to agricultural irrigation and fishing, which are the pillars of economic survival for lower Mekong basin countries. For example, the Mekong water system provides agricultural water for food supports over half of Vietnam's population (Laohasiriwong & Oishi 2019: 144); similarly, it provides the primary fishing source for Cambodia, which is essential both for its economy and people's daily nutrition (Osborne, 2009). Moreover, the Mekong river also supports the

energy supply and new green energy which contributes both for environmental protection and basin countries' development. In China, the Lancang River provides the whole of Southwest China's water supply. The basin countries suffer from the unstable water level. Besides the floods in rain season, droughts are even worse.

Along with the dry season's influence, the lower basin countries criticise that China's Lancang Cascade project (a cascade project consisting of several dams along the Lancang River) has made the seasonal drought worse. Several droughts between 2010-2019 intensified water disputes over the Mekong region. Vietnam blames China's dam for a domestic shortage of water. Severe drought in 2010 aggravated tension over water resources. Lower Mekong countries are also concerned that the Lancang Cascade project would change the climate pattern in the Mekong basin, which reduces the basin environmental resilience towards disasters. The more frequent extreme weather is perceived as part of the proof. This tension has gradually become an obstacle to China's pursuit of a leading regional position, which it considers as the basis of its world's leadership.

There are two key times in Mekong water disputes. The first one masked by the launch of Belt and Road Initiative. Before then, China adopted a completely ignorance attitude to Mekong water disputes. The other one is marked by the establishment of Lancang Mekong Cooperation Organisation in 2016. After since, Mekong cooperation has become an example for China's mode of multilateralism. The changes of China's tone is worth exploration - how does smaller powers manage to influence big power's action?

Because of linkages with power supply, food security and freshwater resources, the Mekong river is very important to both China and lower Mekong countries. To negotiate the solution for water disputes, all six riparian countries agree on regional cooperation.

1.1.2 Major lower Mekong countries and international organisations

Among all the lower Mekong countries, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam are selected as the case study countries, due to their similarities on the dependence level to Mekong River water, as well as different level on the needs to material incentives, ontological (in)security level, and political regimes. The detailed content will be introduced in chapter 3. This section will introduce the basic status of the three major lower Mekong countries that will be discussed in empirical chapters.

Laos is a one-party communist state governed by the Lao People's Revolutionary Party, though it defines itself as a "people's democratic country" in a socialist transition. Economically, it is one of the least developed countries, with a predominantly agricultural economy and weak industrial development. Initially following a centralised planned economy, Laos introduced economic reforms in 1986, shifting towards a market-oriented model. Despite sustained economic growth in the 21st century, it remains economically underdeveloped. China plays a significant role in Laos' economy, being its largest foreign investor and major trade partner.

Cambodia, a Mekong country, relies on Phnom Penh Lake for resources and has a population of over 11.5 million, mostly Khmer. Politically, it has been a constitutional monarchy since 1993 but has territorial disputes with Vietnam. Economically, it remains one of the least developed ASEAN nations, with a GDP of \$27.985 billion (2022), driven by tourism, clothing, construction, and agriculture, with major investment from China.

Historically, Cambodia faced colonial rule, conflicts with Thailand and Vietnam, and the Khmer Rouge regime. Vietnam's 1978 invasion led to the establishment of the CPP, which still governs. Today, Cambodia balances relations with China and the U.S. while pursuing modernization amid ongoing challenges.

Vietnam, a communist country on the Indochina Peninsula, has a population of over 96 million and is bordered by China, Laos, and Cambodia. The Vietnamese

Communist Party is the only legal political party, and the country is part of the Chinese cultural sphere and the lower Mekong region.

Economically, after reunification, Vietnam faced poverty and backwardness. In 1986, it introduced economic reforms, transitioning from a planned economy to a market-oriented one. This shift spurred significant growth, making Vietnam the fourth-largest economy in Southeast Asia by 2022, with a GDP of \$415.493 million. Agriculture and fishing are key sectors, and Vietnam is actively involved in global trade, being a member of both the CPTPP and RCEP. China remains a major trading partner for Vietnam.

For better management and negotiation on the Mekong River water resources, riparian countries also established inter-governmental international organisations.

1.1.3 Main international organisations on Mekong water disputes

There are two major international organisations established under this purpose, Mekong River Commission (MRC) and Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Organization (LMCO).

Mekong River Commission was found in 1995 by the four lower Mekong countries, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia, which is designed for facilitate sustainable management and cooperative development of the Mekong River Basin. It is the major platform for the basin to conduct scientific research, sustainable development and exploit water resources, political cooperation especially on hydro power development, climate change. Monitoring and assessing hydropower and infrastructure projects to minimize environmental and social impacts (MRC, 2019). Upper countries, China and Myanmar, are dialogue partner countries instead of fully member of MRC. Though exclusive to lower Mekong countries contribute to the water management riparian countries, MRC also under critiques of lack of executive power. Moreover, China is eager to lead regional cooperation.

The Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Organization (LMCO) led by China was initiated in 2012 and established in 2016, aiming to develop trans-boundary water and economic cooperation for all six Mekong countries. Based on Belt and Road Initiative, The LMCO serves as a wide-ranging platform for leaders' and foreign ministers' summits as well as academic workshops in various fields. Political and security cooperation; economic and sustainable development cooperation; and social, cultural, and people-to-people exchanges are the three pillars for LMCO. Though with the critique of China's unilateral actions based on LMCO, China promotes it as an inclusive cooperation platform designed for regional water management and regional development and integration.

The Mekong water tension can be sensed not only between upper and lower riparian countries, but also between the MRC and LMCO led by different countries. The major question about how China legitimates its Cascade plan internationally is interesting. So next part is about research question.

Current literature stressing international organisations is not sufficient. Understanding it from political communication aspect is helpful to understand the Mekong water disputes as well as the regional power dynamics. This question will be answered by comparative studies and strategic narrative as research method.

1.2 Puzzles and research question

The complexities of Mekong water disputes present both theoretical and empirical challenges. Current research primarily focuses on power dynamics within the region from the perspective of major powers, often emphasising power politics. Consequently, the behaviour of Mekong countries is frequently interpreted as passive responses to external pressures from regional and international systems. However, decisions and policies made by smaller regional powers are, in fact, intentional and strategically chosen to serve their own national interests.

Empirically, this project aims to shift the focus towards the perspectives of smaller

Mekong countries in their responses to China's strategic narrative. A key aspect of this analysis is understanding how these smaller regional states navigate their relationships with China, carefully balancing areas of agreement and disagreement to manage their strategic position.

Before delving into the broader theoretical puzzle, it is essential to introduce the concept of strategic narrative, which serves as the core analytical framework for this study. This project adopts the definition proposed by Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, who conceptualise strategic narrative as a tool for understanding how political actors construct and communicate their position in the international order. Strategic narratives shape perceptions both domestically and internationally, influencing how actors seek legitimacy and alignment. Traditionally, audiences respond to strategic narratives through acceptance or rejection.

Theoretically, this study extends the discussion of strategic narratives by exploring how Mekong countries engage in a response beyond simple acceptance or rejection—what can be termed ambiguous contestation. This nuanced response requires further exploration to understand how regional states deliberately craft their narratives to maintain strategic ambiguity while managing their geopolitical constraints.

The research question for this project is How and why do Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam vary in their reception of and response to China's strategic narrative about the Mekong water disputes? It is helpful for understanding these puzzles. The next section will explore the answer to this question from current literature.

1.3 Related answers from current literature

Strategic narratives contain three stages as a cycle, from formation, projection to reception. This project mostly focusses on formation and reception. Strategic narrative contains three levels and usually works with the spectrum of persuasion

in application. These levels are: (1) strategic narrative about international system, which refers to the political actor's particular interpretation of current international order and what it ought to be; (2) strategic narrative about issues, which refers to the specific policies that the actors trying to influence; (3) strategic narrative about identity, which refers to how the actors cast their identity in every political actions (Miskimmon, O'loughlin & Roselle 2013 pp. 11-19; 2017 pp. 2-4). Among these levels, identity level is specific important as it reflects how a country consider itself.

Besides the levels, strategic narrative generates the spectrum of persuasion contains four degrees varies from very thin to very strong: (1) very thin: these studies prefer a rationalist stand and believe the influence of strategic narrative is limited. Strategic narrative forms from the known facts and the reactions normally are anti or favour.; (2) thin: similar to 'very thin scenarios', studies are influenced by rationalism. Actors project their given identities during interactions, trying to forge mutual understanding of some issues. Strategic narratives come from the state's interpretation of its identity, specific issues, and international order.; (3) thick: different from the former two, actors are more reflective. Their identity is generated both from its own understanding of the world and the responses from the others. Beyond power, states pursue values which contribute to magnify their international influence. In this case, strategic narratives come from the fact from long history; (4) very thick: studies prefer a post structuralist stance. Actors believe that discourse creates the identity, politics, and other concepts. Strategic narratives completely come from meaning the current events by the crafts form the past (Miskimmon, O'loughlin & Roselle 2013 pp. 146-153; 2017 pp. 27-44). This spectrum may be helpful when analysing China's changes in behaviour on Mekong water issue from totally ignorance to actively participating.

Ontological security introduced into strategic narrative theory for response analysis. Ontological security considers as the stable sense of being (Kinnvall and Mitzen 2017; Lebow 2016). It refers to how states and political actors construct

coherent self-narratives to maintain a stable identity amid crises, conflicts, or geopolitical shifts. The interpretation of history is one of the major sources to secure ontological security. Hence, a consistent strategic narrative about history is a way for a state to reinforce its ontological security. Ontological security and strategic narratives are concepts applied in research to explain different reactions from audience countries to China's Belt and Road initiative. Countries with high material gaining and low ontological concern tends to accept strategic narrative about BRI; countries with low material gaining and high ontological concern tends to refuse strategic narrative about BRI (van Noort 2019, 2020; Van Noort and Colley 2020). In this project, I found this concept is helpful to explain the behaviour of hedging for Southeast Asian countries and different level of importance of strategic narrative about history.

Identity and collective strategic narrative are another element that considers shape response. Identity from shared experience contributes to the formation of collective strategic narrative, which contributes to acceptance as response (Bushell et al., 2018, 2019, 2020; Lingston & Nassetta, 2018; de Moor & Wahlström, 2019).

Only one research offer examination on examination of small powers choices on strategic narratives. The smaller powers forge the 'sense of shame' develop based on the strategic narrative about Blue Pacific Ocean. The big powers cooperate with undermining part of their own economic interest for get rid out of 'shame' (Wallis, Koro, and O'Dwyer 2024) However, how the 'shame' work for big powers is not clear.

Overall, by analysing the strategic narrative from Mekong regional small powers of Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia, this thesis provides a better explanation systematically on how smaller powers wield narrative power to encourage the big power to cooperate. The next section is about how the research question is answered.

1.4 Research design

In this project, I will employ a comparative case study research method. For this study, I have chosen three lower Mekong countries—Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam—to compare their strategic narratives against China’s strategic narrative. These countries were selected based on two primary criteria. First, they are all located within the lower Mekong basin, making them highly dependent on the Mekong River for freshwater resources. Second, they exhibit political and developmental variations, which may help to explain variation in their narratives about China’s approach to the dispute.

To begin, I will outline the strategic narratives of each of these countries. After establishing the narratives, I will compare the points of alignment and differences between them. Alignment between the narratives indicates the extent of China’s influence and power, while differences highlight the gaps in China’s narrative power and the challenges it faces in asserting its control over the region. This analysis will reveal not only the areas of consensus but also the contentious issues and resistance within the narratives of the lower Mekong countries.

The selection of these three countries is grounded in both geographical and political reasoning. Geographically, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam are crucial to the Mekong River ecosystem, making them natural subjects for this study. Politically, these countries differ significantly from each other in terms of governance, economic development, and international alignments. These variations shape their responses to China and lead to different outcomes in the study of strategic narratives. For instance, strategic narratives emphasizing material incentives tend to foster acceptance, whereas ontological concerns often drive contestation or even rejection. Overall, these variations enhance the analysis of strategic narratives by providing a more nuanced understanding of the factors influencing regional responses.

Regarding the data collection process, I focused on governmental documents and reports, as all four countries in the study operate under authoritarian regimes where the state plays a dominant role in shaping public discourse. For China, I relied on Chinese government sources, while for the other Mekong countries, I used English-translated data directly from their official websites. The use of English was a strategic choice, as it serves as a widely accepted communication platform, enabling more accessible approach to data collection. This also helped mediate potential biases, as the lower Mekong countries, given their sensitive relationship with China, may be hesitant to openly express critical views in domestic languages.

For locating the data, I employed targeted searches on the countries' official websites, using a range of key terms such as "China," "dam," "Lancang," "Mekong," and "water." The specific details of the search process and key terms used are discussed further in Chapter 3. An important observation in this process was the variation in data accessibility between the countries. Laos, as one of the least developed countries in the region, presented significant challenges in finding data, reflecting the overall limitations in openness and data availability. Despite these challenges, I was able to gather over 300 pieces of data from each of the four countries, ensuring a comprehensive analysis.

The primary method of analysis I use is thematic analysis, supported by the software Nvivo14 for coding and organizing the data. Since there has been no prior research specifically examining the Mekong water disputes through a narrative lens, I believe that the thematic analysis will offer valuable insights into the ways in which these countries construct their strategic narratives. Furthermore, the inductive approach of this study allows for a flexible exploration of emerging themes and patterns based on the relationships between key terms in the data.

Strategic narrative theory proves to be a particularly effective framework for organizing the themes. By categorising the narratives into three levels—system,

identity, and issue—I am able to sort the findings into coherent groups. This categorisation provides a clear structure for the comparative study, enabling a deeper understanding of how each country’s strategic narrative reflects its stance on the Mekong water dispute and its broader geopolitical interests.

1.5 summary of empirical cases and discussion

After examining the strategic narratives of the countries in the Mekong region, it is evident that China stands out as the only regional actor with a comprehensive and consistent strategic narrative across all three levels—system, identity, and issue. At the system level, China’s strategic narrative is primarily shaped by its competition with the United States for global leadership, grounded in the concept of worldwide equality. While emphasizing the notion of a shared human destiny, China also strategically promotes narratives of victimhood and brotherhood to legitimize its leadership, particularly in the developing world. This is especially apparent in its approach to Southeast Asia, a region that China views as crucial to its broader claim to global leadership due to both its power dynamics and shared cultural similarities. The Mekong region, in this context, plays a pivotal role in China’s strategic vision, with the country framing its narrative in terms of ‘shared river, shared future’. This messaging is central to China’s efforts to integrate the region into its larger developmental and geopolitical agenda.

Despite remaining relatively silent on the immediate water challenges faced by the Mekong countries, China’s narrative includes a comprehensive set of solutions aimed at addressing these water issues. A significant component of this narrative is the Lancang Cascade Plan, which China promotes as a mechanism to stabilize water levels throughout both the rainy and dry seasons. Alongside this, China proposes a range of development strategies, including infrastructure projects that are part of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), positioning these solutions as essential for the regional development and integration of Southeast Asia.

In contrast, Laos, as one of the smaller powers in the region, lacks a clear,

coherent strategic narrative on the system level. Its political stance is somewhat more inward-focused, with the country prioritizing its own development over a broader regional identity. Laos has set ambitious goals, such as becoming a regional logistics hub, and it places significant value on infrastructure cooperation with China, particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative. However, Laos also faces significant water-related challenges due to its dependence on the Mekong River, especially concerning agriculture and fisheries. While Laos does not openly oppose China's strategic narrative, it does express its disagreements subtly, particularly on issues related to the Lancang Cascade Plan and its impact on water resources.

Similarly, Cambodia is another smaller power in the region, and like Laos, it does not possess a distinct and unique strategic narrative at the system and collective identity levels. Instead, Cambodia has aligned itself with both China and Vietnam to some extent, integrating elements of both countries' strategic narratives. Cambodia emphasizes its "true friendship" with China, which is rooted in economic cooperation and financial aid. In terms of the Mekong water dispute, however, Cambodia expresses dissatisfaction with China's cascade plan and its potential environmental impact, signalling a nuanced position in the regional discourse.

Vietnam, the most powerful regional actor after China, frames its strategic narrative not on a global scale, but at the regional level. Rather than competing with China for global leadership, Vietnam focuses on establishing itself as a regional leader by highlighting its shared interests with other medium and smaller powers in Southeast Asia. Despite ongoing territorial disputes in the South China Sea, Vietnam seeks to position itself as a promoter of sustainable development, particularly for the Mekong region. On the issue of water disputes, Vietnam consistently criticizes China for its lack of cooperation, arguing that China should adopt a more collaborative approach to managing shared water resources. In general, Vietnam is opposed to China's dam construction projects, believing they

pose a threat to the region's ecological sustainability and to the livelihoods of communities dependent on the Mekong River.

The major similarities among the strategic narratives of the four Mekong countries can be summarized as follows. First, all Mekong countries acknowledge the regional power dynamics, recognizing China's dominant economic and geopolitical influence in the region. Second, there is a shared eagerness among these countries to secure economic support from China, as its financial and infrastructural investments are crucial for their national development. Third, all regional actors express support for regional cooperation, underscoring the importance of collective action in addressing common challenges. Fourth, all countries endorse or at least accommodate China's narrative of victimhood and brotherhood, which China employs to legitimize its leadership in the developing world. Lastly, despite their alignment on these broader themes, all countries exhibit pragmatic tendencies, prioritizing their national interests over ideological commitments when shaping their strategic narratives.

However, significant differences emerge in other aspects of their narratives. At the system and identity levels, Vietnam directly challenges China's claims, positioning itself as a regional leader in contrast to China's global aspirations. Unlike other Mekong countries, Vietnam actively promotes its own strategic narrative at the regional level, constructing an alternative vision of regional order.

Regarding the Mekong water disputes, the responses of the lower Mekong countries demonstrate varying degrees of opposition and subtle resistance. Vietnam, as the most politically and economically influential actor after China, chooses to contest China's discourse on water governance by adopting a similar rhetorical framework but imbuing it with a different meaning. This form of discursive contestation serves as an implicit challenge to China's narrative, signalling Vietnam's disagreement with its policies.

In contrast, Laos and Cambodia, as smaller powers, adopt more subtle and indirect forms of resistance. Rather than openly challenging China's interpretations of regional cooperation and water governance, they tend to maintain the linguistic consistency of China's narrative while strategically aligning it with negative connotations. One of the key strategies they employ is the selective reproduction and dissemination of critical perspectives. Instead of explicitly voicing opposition, Laos and Cambodia frequently republish articles and reports that criticize China's Lancang water policies and the Cascade Plan. By allowing a disproportionately large volume of critical content to circulate within their media and policy discussions, they effectively signal their discontent and reservations without directly confronting China's official narrative. Moreover, the Mekong countries try to securitise water-related issues to raise the importance of this agenda.

This pattern of subtle contestation highlights the complexities of strategic narratives in the Mekong region. While economic dependence and geopolitical considerations constrain direct opposition, smaller regional actors still find ways to express disagreement and negotiate their position within China's broader strategic framework.

For China's side, its strategic narrative fails to address anxieties stemming from both water-related security risks and concern over ontological security due to regional power asymmetry. As a result, water disputes in the Mekong region—along with broader geopolitical tensions linked to water governance—persist and are likely to remain unresolved in the long term.

1.6 Outline of the thesis

This project is structured as follows. Chapter 2 will provide a comprehensive literature review, focusing primarily on the concept of strategic narratives. It will also explore the application of narrative research within Asian studies and examine existing research on the Mekong water disputes. By the conclusion of this

chapter, I will highlight the research puzzles that this project seeks to address and the contributions it aims to make to the broader academic discourse.

Chapter 3 will outline the research design in detail, explaining the methodology, data collection techniques, and analytical framework employed throughout the study. This chapter will serve as a foundational guide to understanding how the empirical chapters are structured and analysed.

The empirical analysis is presented across Chapters 4, 5, and 6. Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 will examine the strategic narratives at the system and identity levels. These chapters will first provide a detailed presentation of each country's narrative and then include a comparative analysis section, highlighting the similarities and differences among the countries' narratives. This comparison will offer insights into how regional actors align or diverge in their approaches to issues of power, identity, and governance. Chapter 6 will focus on the strategic narrative at the issue level, with a specific emphasis on the Mekong water dispute. Given the shared nature of water-related challenges across the Mekong countries, this chapter will be organized around key issues rather than focusing on individual countries. By addressing the issue of water scarcity and the impacts of dam projects, this chapter will analyse how these countries construct and frame the problem of Mekong water management within their broader regional and global strategic narratives.

Chapter 7 will provide a discussion of the empirical findings presented in the previous chapters. This chapter will explore the similarities and differences in the strategic narratives identified in the data, offering explanations for why these variations exist and what they reveal about the regional power dynamics in Southeast Asia. The discussion will aim to contextualize the findings within broader geopolitical and developmental frameworks, considering the role of each country within the Mekong region.

Finally, the project will conclude in Chapter 8, where the research question will be revisited, and the implications of the findings will be discussed. The conclusion will also outline potential directions for future research, suggesting how subsequent studies could build on the insights gained through this work and further explore the evolving dynamics of strategic narratives and water governance in the Mekong region.

Chapter2. Literature review

This chapter provides an overview of the existing literature on strategic narratives, China's role, power dynamics in Southeast Asia, and Mekong water disputes, all of which are essential for addressing the research question.

2.1 Introduction

China is becoming an increasingly powerful country with growing global influence. It presents and calls for a different development model from the U.S. and 'Western'-leading ones, which is considered as a threat by lots of countries including some Southeast Asian countries. The Southeast Asian region holds significant importance in China's foreign policy and grand strategy. China emphasizes the need for strong relationships with these countries to ensure national security and expand its international influence. China considers its cooperations with Southeast countries as the example of the Belt and Road Initiative and Shared Future for mankind. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched by China in 2013, is a multilateral global cooperation platform focused on development and infrastructure. Rooted in the ancient Silk Road of the Han Dynasty, the BRI comprises six major land-based development corridors and the Maritime Silk Road, interconnected through roads, railways, energy networks, and digital cooperation. According to the Chinese government, the initiative is founded on the principles of inclusiveness, shared benefits, green development, and sustainability (China, The State Council Information Office, Belt and Road Initiative, 2023). The concept of a Shared Future for Mankind was introduced by China as a framework for addressing global challenges such as geopolitical conflicts, economic inequality, climate change, and public health crises. To achieve this, China advocates for a shared future characterized by lasting peace, universal security, common prosperity, openness and inclusivity, and a clean, beautiful world. China seeks to advance this vision by fostering cooperation through a set of multilateral initiatives, including the BRI, Global Development Initiative, Global Security Initiative, and Global Civilization Initiative. Furthermore, China is committed to active participation in global multilateral

cooperation through international organizations such as the United Nations, Group of Twenty, Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) (China, The state council information office, Shared future, 2023). However, Mekong countries consider these cooperations as the compensatory measures for restoring water along Lancang River. For these countries, the water disputes directly threaten their livelihoods and development. Hence, Mekong water disputes between China and the lower Mekong countries represent a major challenge in China's relations with Southeast Asia as all five lower Mekong countries are members of ASEAN.

Conversely, securing cooperation from the Mekong countries is crucial for China's vision of a 'shared future' and its influence in Southeast Asia. Hence, this thesis focuses on the question of How and why do Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam vary in their reception of and response to China's strategic narrative about the Mekong water disputes? Answering this question will provide a clearer and more integrated view of the content and impact of the Mekong water disputes. It will also reflect the power dynamics in the Southeast Asian region and how regional countries respond differently on which specific situation to China. Theoretically, it broadens the application of strategic narrative theory as well as developing new findings on narrative reception.

This literature is structured as follows. In section 2.2, I will discuss the importance of Southeast Asia in China's grand strategy and diplomacy. Then, I will examine the bilateral relationships between China and Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia in section 2.3. Section 2.4 will address the Mekong water issues. Section 2.5 will explore strategic narrative theory by establishing how existing research explains variations in the reception of and responses to the strategic narratives of major powers. Section 2.6 and 2.7 will present the how strategic narrative theory applied in understanding China-related studies and environmental issues related studies. This chapter will end with section 2.8 conclude with the discussion of current literatures and potential contribution of this project. It ended with the

introduction of puzzles in section 2.9.

2.2 China's multilateralism and changes in strategy towards neighbouring countries

China's development is under debate continuously in recent years. Although China is committed to international cooperation mainly based on the UN, it still is perceived as a threat by some countries. China has gradually realised the importance of its international image and has re-stressed the importance of neighbouring countries in its diplomacy. China's change to be more active and its belief in multilateral cooperation can be observed from changes in the tone of its foreign policy towards neighbouring states under different leaderships, from Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping. In general, China started to become more active in international cooperation with the accumulation of economic strength. At the regional level, China basically prefers a close relationship with regional countries.

2.2.1 China's multilateralism

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Mao's administration pursued three strategies, described as 'leaning to one side', 'the three worlds theory' and 'the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence' proposed by former prime minister Zhou Enlai. The latter two strategies set a friendly and cooperative fundamental tone for China's neighbouring policy. In 1953, Zhou proposed Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence during negotiation with India. It became one of the fundamental foreign policy principles. Mao proposed the 'three worlds' theory in 1974, dividing countries into three categories according to their development level. Asian countries (except for Japan) were all in the third world, the same as China (Xinhua Website). Hence, China aimed to strengthen its solidarity with the vast majority of the Third World countries. These two policies set up a friendly tone for China's dealings with neighbouring countries. In practice, China was described as practising self-restraint because it ceased military operations against Taiwan. According to the policy of 'leaning to one side', China stayed closely aligned with the Soviet Union. Because of the Korean War and the

'Mutual Defence Treaty between U.S and ROC' in 1954, the prospects of retaking Taiwan dimmed, and domestic economic development became China's primary focus. Hence, China shelved the idea of liberating Taiwan by military force (Nie, 2016). Under Mao's administration, China focused more on domestic economic growth than being an active participant in international relations.

Under the Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin administrations, though domestic economic development was still the primary goal, China became more active in the international arena. With the Reform and Opening-up Policy, China believed that using domestic urbanisation to improve the domestic economy would 'win over' international friends (Ferdinand, 2016; Xia, 2018). China kept a low profile (following the policy of *taoguang yanghui*—literally, avoiding the light and cultivating oneself in darkness) in foreign policy and focused on domestic poverty. Against this background, in 1988 Prime Minister Li Peng first used the term 'periphery' to describe neighbouring countries (Smith, 2021). China aimed to create an equal and friendly relationship with periphery countries following the 'Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence'. Multipolarity was written into the 14th Party Congress strategy (Deng, 2008, p. 5). Under Hu Jintao's administration, establishing a 'Harmonious Society' based on Confucianism was China's grand strategy. China became more active in international cooperation to develop its image and brand as a friendly and responsible power (Ferdinand, 2016; Nie, 2016). China established the SCO aiming at Strengthening mutual trust and good-neighborly relations, promoting effective cooperation, and jointly safeguarding regional peace, security and stability (China, State Council Communiqué, Shanghai Cooperation Organization Founding Declaration, 2001). In 2009, the SCO became a crucial part of the international cooperation among Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, known as BRICS, which was established for promoting peace, security, and development in multilateral relations (China, MOFA, Introduction on BRICKS, 2024). It also emphasised 'good neighbour' relations and built regional cooperation. Hence, ASEAN and China signed a Free Trade Area (ACFTA) agreement in 2002. Under the instruction of the 'Peace and Development era theme'

proposed by Deng in 1985 and the 'Harmonious Society' idea, China hoped to create a peaceful international environment to boost the domestic economy. It began to become an active participant on the international stage.

China has become dramatically more assertive in foreign policy during Xi Jinping's presidency. In the context of China's economic 'triumph' in the 2008 world financial crisis and the 'Asia-Pacific rebalancing' strategy of America, China realised the importance of countries on its periphery. China understands that it should be responsible for East Asia's prosperity by increasing economic cooperation based on mutual benefit and equal relations (Smith, 2021). Thus, President Xi proposed the Belt and Road initiative (BRI) during his visit to Kazakhstan and Indonesia in 2013. BRI serves as the platform of economic cooperation and regional integration. From official documents, China's regional priority goal is to gain the support of East Asian states, which would legitimise China's international leading role (Rana, 2019; Smith, 2021). Although the reason can be interpreted differently, there is no doubt that the importance of neighbourhood countries to China's grand diplomacy is rising.

There are two main reasons behind the this return of Chinese diplomacy back to neighbourhood countries. The first one is changing of national interest. Fang Yinzhou and Wang Junsheng (2023) believe the changes are caused by different interpretation of China's national goal. In Mao's era, survival was the pivotal goal (Fang et al, 2023). From Deng to Hu's era, economic development was in dominant position for China's grand strategy. For example, China calls for 'shelving the difference and seeking joint development' for South China sea territorial disputes (Deng, 1984). With the accumulation of strength, China wants to move beyond economic gain, and intends to expand its international influence (Fang et al, 2023; Wang, 2017; Wang, 2020). The second main reason is the pressure form U.S. With the escalation of competition between the two powers, U.S. sought to balance China's influence by allying with Southeast Asian countries. This competition mainly contains three aspects, hard power, development model, and

communication In hard power aspect, David Shambaugh compared the two powers and pointed that though the economic strength of the two are similar, the U.S.A.'s influence includes culture, security and values, whereas China's influence is more focused on economic development (Shambaugh, 2018, 2023). Moreover, the U.S. has allied with Japan, supported Vietnam and Philippines during their territorial disputes with China over the South China Sea (Fang, 2016; Pu, 2019). Another example is the competition between U.S-led TPP and China-led RCEP (Wang, 2020) which commonly link to the competition of development between the two. Luo and Zhang argue that the 'shared future for mankind' is vital for China to lead regional development from the regional security structure aspect (Luo & Zhang, 2022). Lu argues for the importance of creating a regional collective identity based on 'shared future' between China and ASEAN countries (Lu, 2021, 2023). Based on the discussion of development models, a discussion about the competition of influence was introduced into regional studies. Ba views narrative as an indicator of influence. The popular version of narrative indicates stronger influence (Ba, 2019). Both Wang and Cao believe that not pushing regional countries to choose sides between China and U.S. is constructive for building China's favourable regional international structure (Wang, 2023; Cao, 2024). Hence, the increasing engagement from the U.S. is part of the reason why China is pushing back in the region.

In summary, the current research presented above tends to understand the regional situation from power politics aspects by focusing on the material gain, political conflicts, and economic competition. China and the U.S are the two major actors. However, there are three gaps. Firstly, these studies failed to present a clear picture of China's intention in the region. These questions are worth thinking about, such as what is China's preferable regional structure? What does 'shared future' mean in the regional context? How does China understand its own role in the region? What is the collective identity for China-Southeast Asia from China's perspective? Secondly, compared to the two major powers, small Southeast Asian countries, which are the most directly involved actors inside the

region, are neglected in the research literature. Research from the perspective of regional countries will help us to understand the regional power dynamics. Thirdly, research beyond realism on regional strategy is important to understand China's regional strategy, especially because the idea of a 'shared future' has strong normative features.

2.2.2 Responses to China's multinationalism within Southeast Asia

Hedging refers to the alignment, non-alignment, or balancing behaviours adopted by secondary or weaker states in managing their relations with great powers (Goh, 2007; Kang, 2003; Kuik, 2016). At its core, hedging implies that smaller powers deliberately avoid choosing sides between major powers (Dung, 2022; Kuik, 2023). The strategies employed by these states are thus neither purely bandwagoning nor purely balancing (Wu, 2019). When operationalised, these strategies typically combine measures of both opposition and counteraction (Kuik, 2016a; Cooper and Schulz, 2023), which simultaneously preserve or expand the capacity of smaller powers to hedge while also securing material and strategic gains (Kuik, 2016a; Kim, 2024). In this sense, hedging can be understood as a survival strategy for small and secondary powers, particularly in the Southeast Asian context.

Southeast Asian states, as smaller and secondary powers, tend to hedge at both regional and international levels as a form of risk management in their relations with great powers. Their vulnerability to external risks generates inherent uncertainty, which is especially pronounced in the domains of security and economic interests (Lim and Cooper, 2015). From this perspective, hedging emerges from a tension between material acquisition and security imperatives (Ross, 2006). For smaller powers, hedging represents a strategic response to risk and uncertainty, conceptualised as a trade-off between alignment—coordinating with one great power to counterbalance another—and autonomy (Lim and Cooper, 2015). Lim and Cooper (2015) further differentiate levels of alignment, noting that strong alignment tends to reflect shared security interests, whereas hedging

behaviour often manifests as an avoidance of clear-cut alignment, thereby increasing ambiguity and uncertainty. Framed in terms of security, hedging can be interpreted as a combination of ‘risk-contingent options’ and ‘return-maximising options’ situated between pure bandwagoning and balancing strategies (Kuik, 2016b, 2016a). In sum, hedging aims both to maximise gains and maintain security, highlighting its close relationship to great-power dynamics in the region.

The extant literature on hedging has largely focused on the perspective of great powers. However, the role of smaller powers has grown increasingly salient. Traditionally, hedging has been understood as a response to the heightened regional security pressures generated by intensifying competition between great powers (Boon and Teo, 2022; He and Feng, 2023). In this view, smaller powers are forced to choose between aligning with China for economic benefits or with the United States for security guarantees (Wu, 2019). Similarly, smaller states tend to hedge when confronted with the rising threat of an ascendant power and a declining willingness of an established great power to intervene (Meijer and Simón, 2021). Country-specific studies within Southeast Asia illustrate how hedging strategies are shaped by local conditions. For example, Singapore exhibits both covert and overt hedging behaviour, with covert strategies involving subtle security alignment through non-traditional security cooperation, and overt strategies including strong security alignment, such as the establishment of military bases (Meijer and Simón, 2021). Through this combination, smaller states are able to exert influence over great-power actions, underscoring the growing significance of secondary powers in shaping regional dynamics.

Secondary states and smaller powers are no longer merely passive recipients within the international system. Hynd and Connolly (2023) argue that secondary states actively shape regional power structures. While reluctant to submit to regional great powers, these states cannot fully escape their influence. By employing ‘firewalls and dissonance strategies’ and, in extreme cases, tactics such as ‘self-harm and subordinate violence’, smaller powers can influence the

behaviour of great powers (Hynd and Connolly, 2023). This perspective challenges traditional understandings of power hierarchies and highlights the importance of connectivity. In this context, the concepts of ‘bridges’ and ‘hubs’ have become critical resources for smaller states (Cooper and Schulz, 2023). Bridges refer to strategically positioned states situated between competing powers, while hubs are states that leverage adaptability and versatility to become central actors (Cooper and Schulz, 2023). Through these mechanisms, smaller powers and secondary states can gain influence over great powers, further complicating traditional hierarchical assumptions.

Hedging remains a classical, yet evolving, topic within Southeast Asian studies and the broader literature on great-power-small-power relations. Across the literature, hedging is commonly framed as a response to uncertainty, explaining the ways in which smaller powers balance security imperatives with material interests. Nevertheless, several puzzles persist. First, much of the literature attributes hedging primarily to external pressure from great powers, leaving the motivations of secondary and smaller states insufficiently explained. Second, there is a lack of clarity regarding the function of uncertainty and ambiguity, and the mechanisms linking the two. Both uncertainty and ambiguity are conceptualised as causes of hedging (Goh, 2007b; Lim and Cooper, 2015; Elliott, 2023; Kuik, 2023) and as its objectives (Meijer and Simón, 2021; Dung, 2022; Cooper and Schulz, 2023; Phan, 2025). These conceptual tensions cannot be fully addressed without a deeper engagement with the notion of ambiguity.

Constructive ambiguity is a common feature in international relations, yet it has received relatively little analytical attention. It refers to deliberately created uncertainty in political or diplomatic contexts (Bellmer & Möller, 2023; Bērziņa-Čerenkova, 2025)(Bellmer & Möller, 2023; Bērziņa-Čerenkova, 2025). There are three main ways to understand ambiguity as a concept in international relations.

First, ambiguity can be understood as a diplomatic strategy. Stanley Hoffmann

highlighted this when observing the 1998 EU summit, where France and the UK interpreted the notion of ‘autonomy’ differently, reflecting deliberate ambiguity in their diplomatic language (Rayroux, 2014). Similarly, Henry Kissinger defined it as ‘the deliberate use of ambiguous language in a sensitive issue in order to advance some political purpose’ (Jegen & Mérand, 2014). A classic example is the “One China Policy” between mainland China and Taiwan, in which China deliberately maintains ambiguity to leave interpretive space for its actions (Wang, 2025). This strategy is also evident in China’s narrative surrounding the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Bērziņa-Čerenkova, 2025). Constructive ambiguity is frequently studied in the context of EU cooperation: the EU deliberately creates ambiguity to allow member states to frame different narratives at the national level, thereby maximizing cooperation at the EU level (Jegen & Mérand, 2014; Rayroux, 2014).

Second, ambiguity can be perceived as an analytical tool for understanding and coping with complex systems, particularly in peacebuilding contexts after humanitarian interventions. In this perspective, ambiguity is embedded within broader methodological frameworks, referring to a ‘structure of thinking and acting’ (Bellmer & Möller, 2023: 54). Ambiguity functions as a ‘political-rhetorical device’ designed to increase an actor’s ‘freedom of political action’ (Bellmer & Möller, 2023: 56). Narrative—especially identity narratives, due to their simplifying function—stabilizes rigid divisions between “we” and “other.” Repetition and dissemination of such narratives can escalate differences into entrenched conflicts between identity groups (Bellmer & Möller, 2023: 57-63). However, ambiguity allows these differences to coexist, thereby creating possibilities for peacekeeping. In this project, I argue that ambiguity is a possible response to strategic narratives. This will be elaborated in detail in Chapter 7.

2.3 China’s bilateral relationships with Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia

This section will start with the bilateral relationship between China and Vietnam, then moves to the bilateral relationship between China and Laos, and Cambodia.

2.3.1 China and Vietnam

Vietnam is one of China's neighbour countries. The Sino-Vietnam relationship is complex. The historical ties go back to the Qin Dynasty (B.C.221), which is interpreted differently by China and Vietnam. China understands these ties as part of its cultural influence process, whereas Vietnam sees it as part of a fight for independence.

China understands that it contributed to Vietnam's establishment and development. In the Han Dynasty, the central and northern parts of Vietnam, which used to be called Jiaozhi, were generally referred to as a southern region of China. After the middle of the Tang Dynasty, it was officially chronicled as Annan. Later, in 1802, 'Annan' was renamed 'Vietnam' by the first Nguyen Dynasty (Peng, 2006, p. 35; Gu, 2014). Vietnam used Vietnam original, Nan (喃字), was under the influence of China's culture. China contributed to Vietnam's cultural progress by spreading Confucianism (Fudan Institute of literature and history, 2010, p. 155). Under the tributary system, what the tributary state paid was far less than what China gave back. Thus, Vietnam gained economically by being integrated into this system. In contemporary history, China supported Vietnam in fighting against France and the U.S to become an independent country.

However, Vietnam views China as a northern invader and characterises the Sino-Vietnam relationship as three pairs of asymmetrical relationships: strong China vs. weak Vietnam; weak China vs. strong Vietnam; strong China vs. strong Vietnam (Anderson, 2013). Vietnam was exploited in the first pair, fought for partial independence in the second pair, and maintained partial autonomy, and benefitted from the tribute system in the third pair. In contemporary history, although the countries shared a close relationship from 1950 to 1969, the Sino-Vietnam relationship weakened because of the deterioration of the Sino-Soviet relationship (Taffer, 2015; Richard, 2015). The Sino-Vietnam war about Nansha territorial disputes and boundary conflicts in Guangxi and Yunnan provinces in 1979 worsened

the Sino-Vietnam relationship. Though the bilateral relationship started recovering in early 1990, the Sino-Vietnam relation is still complex and ‘mixed hate with love’ (Sithirith and Gillen, 2017; Richard, 2015). In general, because of the historical ties, Northern Vietnam has a better attitude toward China than Southern Vietnam (Sithirith and Gillen, 2017).

Though shared a complex relationship, both countries agreed with cooperation for development. Conflict arises in the Sino-Vietnam relationship around territorial disputes in the South China Sea and the Mekong water dispute.

2.3.2 China and the Laos

Similar to Vietnam, Laos is also one of China’s neighbouring countries. The discussion of the bilateral relationship between China and Laos is often intertwined with that of Vietnam and Thailand. Generally, China views Laos as a smaller regional power reliant on Chinese aid, while Laos considers China the most powerful neighbouring country, with the potential to strategically counterbalance other regional powers. The Sino-Laos relationship faces challenges related to economic dependence and natural resource management.

The Sino-Laos relationship can be traced back to the Han dynasty when Laos was part of the tribute system. There are three major phases in contemporary China-Laos relations. Firstly, China and Laos formally established diplomatic ties in 1961. Similar to Vietnam, China supported Laos in its struggle for independence. Secondly, during the 1970s and 1980s, due to the strong relationship between Vietnam and Laos, coupled with the tensions between Vietnam and China, the bilateral relationship deteriorated, resulting in Laos’ termination of trade with China. Finally, the Sino-Laos relationship was normalized in 1989 and have progressively deepened and strengthened since then (Zhang, 2006; Fang, 2011). Research focuses on the final stage. Since normalisation and Laos’s Open and Reform strategy in 1986, Laos promoted the comprehensive opening and reform strategy and developed the strategic partnership with China and Vietnam in 2009

(Fang, 2011; Wang, 2016).

The China-Laos relationship is primarily economically driven, with trade, investment, and infrastructure cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) serving as its core pillars (Fang, 2011; Fang, 2016; Wang, 2016; Hai & Luo, 2020). China views these economic linkages as a model for China-led international cooperation, contributing to its vision of a "shared future." Moreover, as China's engagement with Laos deepens, it seeks to expand its influence within ASEAN through Laos (Creak & Barney, 2022; Sayalath & Creak, 2017), which has also raised regional concerns.

Security concerns surrounding the China-Laos relationship primarily revolve around economic dependence, natural resource control, and geopolitical security. As economic ties deepen, Laos' growing debt to China raises concerns over its ability to repay external liabilities, potentially increasing its economic reliance on China (Kishino, 2017). However, despite these concerns, Laos benefits from its decentralized economic structure, which provides certain advantages in regional integration (Jerndal & Rigg, 1998).

The management of natural resources, particularly in hydropower cooperation, is another critical concern. Creak and Barney (2022) analysed Laos' hydropower development and conceptualized resources in Laos as comprising three dimensions: natural resources, ideological resources, and institutional resources. The exploitation of natural source of Mekong River water—framed through the , ideological resources of communist identity and institutional resources—ultimately reinforces the durability of the Laotian regime (Creak & Barney, 2022).

Geopolitically, Laos' diplomatic decisions have often been interpreted as reactions to regional power struggles, particularly between Vietnam and Thailand. Examining Laos' historical trajectory, Kittikhoun (2009) argued that geography is central to understanding Laos' revolution and national identity. Laos has

frequently found itself caught between regional rivalries, including the historical conflict between Thailand and Laos, the competition between Vietnam and Thailand, and the Cold War-era geopolitical contest between the U.S., the USSR or China. These power dynamics have shaped Laos' regional policies, often forcing it to navigate external pressures though without the intention of seeking direct involvement (Kittikhoun, 2009). Similarly, Wang (2022) applied the subregional structure theory to explain Laos' strategy of hedging among Vietnam, Thailand, and China. Smaller powers like Laos, when facing security threats, tend to align with dominant regional powers within the subregional structure. The balance of power between Thailand and Vietnam has historically shaped Laos' foreign policy. However, due to China's lack of strong engagement in Southeast Asia, Laos sought closer ties with Vietnam rather than China when confronted with security threats from Thailand in 1827 and 1977 (Wang, 2022).

In summary, the existing literature offers a relatively narrow perspective on Laos and Sino-Laos relations, overlooking two key aspects. First, Laos' policy decisions are often framed as passive responses to external pressures, rather than considering the possibility of its own strategic agency. The argument that Laos aligns with China solely due to China's engagement contradicts Laos' historical preference for neutrality. In other words, aligning with China may not be Laos' intended strategy. Second, much of the literature provides a broad political analysis of Laos' foreign relations, primarily focusing on China's influence through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). However, limited research explores Laos' perspective on hydropower projects or its own priorities and interpretations of Mekong water resource management.

2.3.3 China and Cambodia

Similar to other countries in the region, the interactions between China and Cambodia date back to ancient times, long before the Tang Dynasty (Yu, 1981). The Funanese culture, referring to Cambodian civilisation situated between India and China, is a crucial part of Southeast Asian heritage. It derives from the Khmer

word ‘Vnom’ (Chandler, 2008), which is translated as Funan (扶南) in Mandarin (Duan, 2019). In general, the two countries have enjoyed a stable and peaceful bilateral relationship, evidenced by the absence of war between them (Yu, 1981). This relationship endured through the colonial and world war periods, with China providing assistance to Cambodia, fostering interdependence. The formal establishment of diplomatic ties occurred in 1958 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, 2024). However, the Khmer Rouge, which was partly supported by China, severely strained the bilateral relationship. Later, when Vietnam invaded Cambodia to end the Khmer Rouge regime, China, amid tensions with the Soviet Union and its close ties to Vietnam (Burgos & Ear, 2010), supported the establishment of a democratic Cambodia. The bilateral relationship remained strained following the establishment of the Kingdom of Cambodia in 1991 through the Paris Peace Accords but deepened after 1997, culminating in a special strategic partnership (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, 2024; Burgos & Ear, 2010).

Scholars argue that the development of this relationship can primarily be attributed to the alignment of the national interests of both countries. China has provided material incentives, including foreign aid, financial support, trade and investment, and infrastructure construction, which Cambodia requires. In return, Cambodia has supported China on key issues such as the Taiwan question (Li & Shao, 2012; Yang, 2018). However, this bilateral relationship has also been subject to varying interpretations.

While the overall relationship is crucial for Cambodia’s development, it is asymmetrical, leading to uncertainties, particularly in the security domain. The dramatic shifts in China’s foreign posture have raised concerns about the stability of the relationship from Cambodia’s perspective. Additionally, China’s peace gestures largely depend on external pressures, such as its relationship with the United States (Burgos & Ear, 2010). Similarly, Shambaugh (2022) argues that the

uncertainty generated by China's active pursuit of increased influence in Southeast Asia has harmed its regional image since 2019. In this context, Cambodia, as a smaller power, may find it prudent to adopt a hedging strategy in its foreign policy, maintaining flexibility between China, ASEAN, and the U.S. (Hill and Menon, 2014; Po and Sims, 2022; Travouillon and Bernath, 2021).

Among various areas of cooperation, water-related uncertainties have been largely overlooked. Disputes over water resources between China and Vietnam have historically impacted Cambodia, as seen during the Khmer Rouge era. Additionally, fishery issues are a direct concern for Cambodia, as they affect the daily lives of its people, especially regarding protein supply. A social-ecological approach to understanding these issues integrates agriculture, fisheries, and sedimentation into the broader Mekong water discussions, making the fishery issue more visible (Grundy-Warr and Lin, 2020; Verbiest, 2013).

In summary, this section concludes the major changes in the bilateral relationships between China and Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. In comparison to studies on China, there is a notable lack of research focused on the bilateral relations between China and other regional countries. As previously mentioned, the responses of smaller regional powers are often framed as passive reactions shaped by regional power dynamics, rather than as strategic decisions. Among the existing literature, the interrelationships between the regional countries significantly influence the Mekong countries. Moreover, the uncertainty generated by China and the disputes over Mekong water are two major challenges for the region. The former has been well-researched, whereas the latter remains relatively underexplored.

The Mekong water issue presents a clear empirical puzzle in the current literature. With the exception of Vietnam, most studies focus on energy and hydropower, highlighting concerns over economic dependence and sovereignty erosion. However, the source of hydropower—the Mekong River itself—receives less

attention. Although some Cambodian research mentions the fishery, water resources, as a comprehensive resource, are also linked to other major discussions concerning agriculture, energy, regional climate change, and energy. Taken together, the Mekong water issue affects the development of the region. However, the interrelations among these key aspects remain largely unexplored. Discussions on Mekong water governance are underdeveloped, despite the growing political and strategic significance of the issue in recent years. This thesis focuses on the disputes surrounding the Mekong River water and how they contribute to regional tensions.

2.4 Mekong water disputes

Freshwater resources are of vital importance because they are a necessity for livelihoods. In this case, the Mekong River is highly important to basin countries' economies. Riparian countries have established various organisations trying to manage this issue but they have but turned out to be ineffective. This part will start with the importance of this issue and then reflect on why it remains a source of tension in regional relationships.

2.4.1 The importance of water in IR

Fresh water resources are important not only because they affect state peace but also because they are vital to individuals' survival and to state development.

Freshwater is also vital to individual survival. Transboundary rivers provide the water for agriculture and fishing, helping riparian people survive and develop their country. Drought and flooding caused by seasonal climate change led to disasters. Additionally, accidents that happen in one of the basin/region countries may affect others. For example, the collapse of the Xepian- Xenamnoy saddle dam in southern Laos caused a flood which devastated villages down the Mekong River in Cambodia, even as far as Vietnam in the lower Mekong basin Delta (Hirsch, 2020). This tragedy caused significant damage. This transborder water issue also calls for international cooperation.

It is evident that managing freshwater resources requires international cooperation, which is determined by the nature of water disputes. The core of transboundary water disputes is conflict over the allocation of the shared river resources to satisfy the water needs of riparian countries. In the case of the Mekong basin, water must be shared to secure the agricultural cycle in both drought and flood seasons, for navigation, to share fish resources; to generate electricity by hydropower, and to contribute to development and urbanisation (McCormack, 2001; Liu et al., 2019; Givental & Meredith, 2016). However, the Mekong River is in short supply considering nearly 1% of the world's population depends on its water. In short, there are questions over how to allocate the Mekong River water resources fairly, reasonably and efficiently among the riparian countries. Disputes about China's Mekong River Cascade (all the dams China built-in Lancang River) are part of it.

2.4.2 Water diplomacy as a solution to water issues

Natural science cannot solve all water issues. Hence, water diplomacy has emerged in international relations. It arose as a joint effort to deal with problems in managing transboundary public water resources internationally during the last century. Scholars started to discuss water resource conflict and cooperation as a matter of public diplomacy (Black, 1954; Nadeau, 1961; Lepawsky, 1963; Ingersoll, 1968). With continuous practice, observations and research, water diplomacy theory has been gradually created and systematised in the 21st century (Li, 2014). When countries share boundary waters, there is an assumption that the necessary amount of processed water will be affected by increases in water demand and other uncertain climate variables (Shafiqul, 2012, 2015). As a highly interdisciplinary subject, interest in water diplomacy has recently moved from geography to the social sciences, including economics, international law, history, and political economy. Spring examined this subject using a multi-dimensional framework, connecting water management with human rights, environmental security, conflict, risk, threat, social vulnerability, and resilience. He argues that

water cooperation could be the solution to Mexican poverty and marginalisation and could improve relations between Mexico and the U.S (Spring. 2007). Spring's model has become a basic model in water diplomacy research and inspired research on Mekong River water disputes.

The definition of water diplomacy is still under contestation between two mainstream explanations. Some scholars, represented by Islam et al. (2012), define water diplomacy as a new form of resolution to water problems based on scientific verification and sensitivity to social constraints. Others define water diplomacy as a way to mitigate and resolve conflicts over access and usage of transboundary water resources between riparian countries by negotiation, trade and exchange (Minto-Coy, 2012).

Several common features can be drawn from those contested definitions: regional, social, technical, and binding (Zhang & Lu, 2015; Kittikhoun & Staubli, 2018; Xiao, 2018). In other words, the water resources subject to water diplomacy should be transboundary (regional); water exploitation projects should consider their potential social impact (social); water exploitation projects should be conducted in a 'green' and sustainable way (technical); and during the exploitation process, the riparian countries should resolve any disputes by collective negotiation with the integrated goal considering political, economic, and state development elements.

However, there is less research which presents a good explanation of how water diplomacy is done, including in the Mekong region. So, we will explore this in the next section.

2.4.3 About the 'Dam Debate' in the Mekong River

The Mekong River is one of the major water conflict hotspots in the world. Because of its links to power supply, food security and freshwater resources, the Mekong River is significant to riparian countries, including China and Vietnam. Vietnam

blamed China's dams for a domestic shortage of agricultural water and decreased yields in the fishing industry, hurting Vietnam's economy.

The countries involved in water disputes related to the Mekong have created a set of international organisations to research solutions. However, several droughts between 2010-2019 and intensifying tensions suggest that these international organisations are incapable of solving the Mekong water disputes. Scholars have begun to re-evaluate the issue by examining its political and economic nature, searching for the reasons for the inefficiency of the IOs and proposing new solutions.

Dam-building disputes between China and Southeast Asian countries, including Vietnam, have always been central to Mekong River disputes. Dams in upper riparian countries will affect the lower basin countries' water usage, especially in the drought season. For example, the severe drought in 2016 forced China to open Jinghong waterpower station drainage to lower basin countries, including Vietnam (Zhang & Fan, 2018). Like other downstream Mekong basin countries, Vietnam blames China's dams for uncertain ecological consequences brought by the storage of such a large amount of water. Vietnam's water vulnerability is exacerbated by climate change and migration and economic globalisation at the global level, hydro politics (upstream countries' dam building) at the regional level, and water governance problems (saltwater intrusion, mercury, and arsenic contamination) at the local level. A peaceful and cooperative resolution system based on shared economic interests (Givental & Meredith, 2016) is vital to resolve Vietnam's water problems.

China has adopted a conventional method of exploiting hydropower by building dams. Though providing benefits by controlling the water supply in drought and flood seasons, storing such a large amount of water in the upper stream has uncertain consequences. It may damage the fragile ecological environment in the Mekong basin. Besides, instead of unilaterally controlling the river by dams, cooperation is considered a more modern way (McCormack, 2001). Healthy and

sustainable development should integrate water, food security and energy as a positive cycle as ‘water-food-energy (WFE) nexus’ (Biba, 2016). However, China’s dams on the Lancang River emphasise selectively power and water, which harm the WFE nexus and the ecology of the Mekong region.

Chinese scholars defend the Mekong Cascade to manage seasonal water fluctuations, arguing that through the Mekong Cascade plan, China can increase regional energy and water cooperation (UN report, 2013; Guo, 2015; Zhang & Lu, 2015). Scholars have analysed household-level data collected by the government using a sustainable livelihood development model. The result suggests that people resettled as a result of the Nuozhadu dam construction have improved their living conditions and livelihood (Ma et al., 2020). Considering its population size, China’s significant water demand, both for agriculture and power generation, could be justified (Webber & Han, 2017; Magee, 2013; Flatø, 2020). The reduction of poverty in China’s southwest contributes to regional development, and using hydropower as a clean energy also contributes to environmental protection. According to a UN water report, managing seasonal floods and droughts improves the downstream countries’ economies (UN report, 1999, 2003), which contributes to regional economic prosperity and integration (McCormack, 2001; Guo, 2011; Xu & Sun, 2016)

2.4.4 International organisations in Mekong water management

To manage the Mekong River jointly, international organisations at different levels have been set up. The major ones are Mekong River Committee (MRC), led by lower Mekong countries, and Lancang Mekong Cooperation Organisation (LMCO) led by China. These IOs do provide a communication platform for negotiations, especially MRC, which is designed to be water conflict management roles, which have evolved beyond technical data sharing to acting as a forum for discussion and negotiation among riparian states and external partners (Miledtton, 2023). Research emphasizes the MRC’s role as a knowledge hub and diplomatic mediator,

even if it lacks strong enforcement authority, and notes both successes and challenges in this role. However, the droughts and tensions among riparian countries suggest the IOs are not entirely effective.

Scholars argue that because countries struggle to maximise their own gains, intergovernmental organisations are slow to reach consensus (Press, 2018; Zhang, 2014, 2017; Kittikhoun & Staubli, 2018). Hirsch (2020) argues that international organisations are unable to mediate Mekong River water resource disputes because of competing national interests and because of the power imbalance between China and other riparian countries. Besides, local governments in Vietnam cannot sustainably provide for their citizens' livelihoods. Hence, the international and local communities which share a direct interest in the Mekong River should come together and play a leading part in transboundary water governance (Hirsch, 2020). Similarly, Press argued for applying the concept of 'Mekong Civil Society' (MCS) to develop transnational advocacy networks. These networks could raise public awareness, within or across borders, and even empower local actors who may be excluded from the mainstream policymaking process. This open, connected structure includes grassroots organisations, NGOs and local interested parties (including community, media, experts, etc.). This organisational flexibility is thought to facilitate continuity and avoids excessive government oversight. In practice, MCS may have forced China to adopt a more transparent and responsible framework to support its dam plan (Press, 2018). Moreover, Kanti uses the example of the cancelled Nu Jiang dam to prove the effectiveness of protesting against dam construction in the name of environmental justice with alliances outside the government system (international scholars and NGOs) (Kaneti, 2020).

Meanwhile, grassroots organisations struggle to implement policies at a local government level (Xiao, 2018; Luo, 2011). Moreover, overlapping IOs and misunderstanding of scientific information also contributes to their ineffectiveness. Other scholars argue that Mekong transboundary water as a public

good is vital for the water-food-energy cycle. If countries negotiate from a shared-benefit perspective instead of sharing water itself, then cooperation becomes possible. Gray and Sadoff classify ecological, economic, political benefits and argue the river also will help contribute to regional integration (Sadoff & Gray, 2002). Combined with the public good theory and this model, Chinese scholars argue that BRI will provide a platform for the country to cooperate and balance absolute sovereignty and basin integrity (Guo, 2015; Zhang, 2015; Zhang & Fan, 2018; Zhang, 2018).

In view of the challenges faced by international organisations, scholars have started to re-evaluate the Mekong water disputes by stressing the political and economic nature of dam-building. Firstly, dams represent the absolute control of water rights within the territory, which means independence and urbanisation, which is irresistible to China, given its humiliating history. China's water demand is vast due to the southwest's population density. The southwestern region accounts for nearly a fifth of China's population. For example, Guangxi province has 204 people per square kilometre (Rousseau, 2019). Secondly, from the perspective of discourse and cost-effect theory, if dam construction is framed as bringing economic benefits to a country, then local government will consider it from the cost-benefit perspective. The interest in electricity, security risks, and economic profits will make all parts of government reach a consensus on supporting the dam building and blocking protests against it (Kaneti, 2020). Given its vested interests, the government will use discourse to shape the usage of water and land as a benefit to everyone (Rousseau, 2019). Finally, the Mekong Cascade also has its 'bridge' image to frame China as a water and power provider, cooperator and developer of the region (Ptaka & Hommel, 2016). Provinces are the actors most directly involved in Chinese interactions with the Mekong river riparian countries. Yunnan province is the 'gateway' of China's liaison with Southeast Asian countries (Li, 2014). Yunnan province led the economic and cultural cooperation among China and Vietnam, Laos, India and Cambodia and contributed to China entering the ASEAN + 3 format. From the provincial aspect,

analysing political mobility in the decision-making processes of Yunnan's dam building and their impact on water issue negotiations is also important (Li, 2014; Mage, 2006). In other words, the Mekong cascade can help to present China to the world as a responsible country (Sithirith & Gillen, 2017; Hirsch, 2016).

As discussed above, the current understanding of Mekong River water disputes is largely shaped by the perspectives of international organisations. However, in an environment dominated by authoritarian states, national governments remain key actors worthy of investigation. The Mekong water disputes are embedded in and can be analysed through the communication among regional states. In other words, contested narratives provide valuable insights into the contested nature of the water itself.

During this process, the use of different language strategies for various audiences can enhance the effectiveness of communication. Therefore, applying a discursive analysis through a strategic narrative lens to examine how regional states perceive and respond to the Mekong water disputes can offer a deeper understanding—not only of the disputes themselves but also of the broader regional power dynamics at play.

2.5 Strategic narrative

In interactions among states, discursive power has gradually become popular as a way to explain power dynamics. Strategic narrative is an emerging concept and associated theory within political communication and International Relations, which describes how narratives shape understandings and behaviours. This section will review literature about strategic narratives, which contributes to the theoretical framework of this thesis. It will begin with the definition, then move to explanations of variation in how strategic narratives are received and responded to.

2.5.1 Discourse, narrative, and strategic narrative

Work on strategic narrative, rooted in narrative research, emerged as a distinct branch of narrative theory after 2006 to explain how influence operates through communication in international relations. It is, however, important to distinguish narrative research from discourse analysis.

The concept of discourse originates from literary studies (Milliken, 1999). It is understood as a system (Alejandro, 2021; Tatum, 2018) and refers to the process by which texts shape and “construct social realities” (Alejandro, 2021; Krulichová, 2025; Milliken, 1999). Texts within the scope of discourse are generally forms of written or spoken communication (Hagström & Gustafsson, 2019; Tatum, 2018), such as social media posts, political speeches, or newspaper reports. As Hagström and Gustafsson (2019) note, ‘all discursive forms ascribe meaning and are intersubjective.’

Narrative, by contrast, is characterised by a chronological storytelling structure (Elliott, 2009) that typically concludes with an resolution. With the expansion of discourse analysis in political science, narrative research gradually developed as a complementary approach. Narrative research investigates how stories and discursive accounts shape political beliefs, identities, and policy debates (Patterson & Renwick Monroe, 2025). Narratives provide structured accounts that convey empirical events, emotions, and relationships, enabling political actors to interpret their reality, construct their identities, and define their roles (Miskimmon et al., 2017; Patterson & Renwick Monroe, 2025). While narratives share with discourse the function of shaping opinion and exercising influence, their boundaries are narrower and more clearly defined.

A story, understood as the distinctive feature of narrative, emphasises temporality and causality (Hagström & Gustafsson, 2019; Krulichová, 2025; Schiff, 2016; Shenhav, 2015). These two elements—timeline and causality—are central to constructing stories that underpin narratives. The sequential order (Hagström &

Gustafsson, 2019; Shenhav, 2015) helps researchers distinguish narratives from other forms of discourse or communication. Moreover, narratives rely on plot, character, and setting to form a coherent storytelling structure (Freistein et al., 2024; Krulichová, 2025). Characters act as the agents driving the plot within a given setting. In this sense, narratives are clearer, narrower, and more analytically manageable than discourse.

Within narrative research, two broad approaches can be identified: agency-centric and non-agency-centric. The agency-centric perspective regards narratives as strategic tools crafted by actors (Freistein et al., 2024; Krulichová, 2025) to exercise power or influence. Strategic narrative is a prominent example of this approach. In contrast, non-agency-centric approaches include several variants. First, the structure-centric view embeds narratives within broader discursive environments, assuming that actors have limited autonomy in crafting them; narratives are thus seen as prone to continuity and historical sedimentation (Krucichová, 2025). Second, the creative approach conceptualises narratives as forms of scholarly intervention or social practice (Freistein et al., 2024), emphasising creativity and innovation in conducting IR research, including experimental and literary forms of writing. Third, another strand focuses on how narratives illuminate the societal contexts of international relations, with particular attention to rhetorical performance through communication technologies (Freistein et al., 2024). Additional perspectives, such as research on counter-narratives (Lueg & Lundholt, 2020), exist but lack a fully developed research agenda.

This project adopts strategic narrative as its theoretical framework. The intentionality of states is central to examining how China seeks to achieve its goals, as well as how Mekong countries manage their relationships with China, balancing cooperation with critique and distancing. In addition, given the authoritarian nature of the regimes under study, state authorities—as the primary decision-making entities—possess greater freedom to craft narratives aligned with their

interests. Conversely, under such regimes, scholars and other societal actors have limited opportunities to voice competing perspectives in international affairs. For these reasons, an agency-centric approach, and specifically strategic narrative theory, provides the most suitable analytical framework.

The concept of strategic narrative connects strategy with political discourse. It refers to a set of narratives about past, present, and future that can be used to obtain domestic and international support and shape the behaviours of other actors (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, & Roselle, 2013, 2017). Through narrative design, political actors can construct shared values, shape beliefs and behaviours, and change the discursive environment (Szostek, 2017; Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, & Roselle, 2013, 2017). Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle argue that a strategic narrative can be deconstructed into five key parts: AGENT refers to characters or actor; SCENE refers to setting or environment; ACT refers to conflict or action; AGENCY refers to tools or behaviours; PURPOSE refers to suggested resolutions to conflict. Hence, in this thesis, the term 'actor' designates the state that constructs strategic narratives, while 'audience' refers to those who receive these narratives and serve as the targets of the state's communicative efforts.

Strategic narrative is distinct from general narrative in political science. Strategic narrative is purposely crafted by political actors for mobilisation support, counter rival discourse or project a vision of future (Roselle, Miskimmon & O'Loughlin, 2014). Meanwhile, the general narrative in political science stresses on a broader audience and aiming to make sense of identity and interpret political reality. Strategic narrative theory provides a framework on understanding how narrative shapes the politics.

2.5.2 Strategic narrative theory: three types and a cycle

Strategic narratives can be examined at three distinct levels: system strategic narrative on international level, identity strategic narrative on national level, and issue strategic narrative on issue level (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, & Roselle, 2013,

2017). The system strategic narrative addresses international structures and world order, explaining how global power is organized and maintained. The identity strategic narrative explores how a state conceptualizes its past, present, and future—answering questions such as ‘Who was I?’, ‘Who am I?’, and ‘Who will I be?’—and typically emphasizes the distinction between ‘us’ and ‘others’ to bolster domestic support during conflicts (Paul, 2019; Noort, 2019; Svente & Arne, 2008). This process also informs how states perceive their relationships with other actors, whether as allies, competitors, or rivals. Finally, the issue strategic narrative focuses on specific policy interventions and actions that a state designs to address particular challenges.

These three types of strategic narratives are interconnected rather than separate, particularly the system strategic narrative and the identity strategic narrative. Although they emphasise different aspects, they are deeply intertwined. The system strategic narrative focuses on how states perceive the international order, which cannot be examined without considering their position within the current system. Conversely, the identity strategic narrative concerns the roles of actors in shaping the system. Understanding a state’s position within the system is inherently linked to its perception of itself and others.

In this project, the system strategic narrative will specifically refer to how different countries interpret the global and regional order, as well as their preferred vision for it. Meanwhile, the identity strategic narrative will refer to how states construct their own identities and how they conceptualise the identity of the Mekong region as a whole. Issue narratives refers to the narratives about the water issues and solutions regarding Mekong water disputes. Strategic narrative analysis relies on the integration of different narrative types within the framework of the strategic narrative cycle.

Strategic narrative follows a cyclical process that comprises three key phases: formation, projection, and reception (Bushell et al., 2017; Miskimmon, O’Loughlin,

& Roselle, 2013, 2017). In the formation phase, political actors deliberately construct narratives to advance their specific objectives. During the projection phase, a diverse set of actors—ranging from political organizations and media outlets to individual elites—disseminates these narratives across different levels. The reception phase then examines how target audiences interpret and respond to the strategic narratives. Feedback from the reception phase often prompts the narrative-sending state to reassess and adjust its formation and projection strategies.

Ultimately, strategic narratives encapsulate a state's interests and goals, generating persuasive power that shapes both domestic and international perceptions and policy outcomes.

2.5.3 Persuasive power and the spectrum of persuasion

Narratives are considered to be persuasive as they constitute an epistemological lens. With their argumentative and literary features, narratives are both situational and historical, serving as approaches for the human to understand the world. In this perspective, the persuasive power of narratives comes from the augmentative nature of rhetoric in human communication (Fisher, 1984, 1985). Fisher's narrative paradigm theory suggested that narratives gain credibility after audience evaluation through two key elements: narrative coherence and narrative fidelity. The former focuses on the logical structure inside the narratives, while the latter emphasises attraction or distance to pre-existing values of the audience (Bevan, Colly, & Workman, 2020; Rideout, 2008). A compelling story has more persuasive power than facts. Similarly, work on strategic narrative stresses the importance of logic and structure in the framing phase to enhance credibility and persuasive power (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, & Roselle, 2013, 2014, 2017). Moreover, Dahlstrom explains narrative's credibility from a psychological perspective, arguing that delicate narrative structures generating strong internal logic have more credibility (Dahlstrom, 2010).

Work on strategic narrative also intersects with soft power theory in international relations. Established by Joseph Nye (1990), soft power became a widely used concept in IR. Soft power theory indicates that it is possible to pursue interests and objectives by influence and attraction instead of coercive power such as military force (Nye, 1990). Critiques of soft power theory inspired work on strategic narrative. Soft power theory is criticised for vagueness in conceptualisation and measurement. It is also criticised as been ‘hijacked’ recently because related research focuses on how to use soft power to pursue interests instead of influence (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, & Roselle, 2013, 2014, 2017; Nye, 2008; Hartig, 2015). Hence, the strategic narrative concept is proposed and discussed as a step toward solving fundamental questions of soft power. It provides a practical way to understand soft power theory by shaping persuasive narratives based on shared value about past, present, and future, targeting specific audiences.

The ‘spectrum of persuasion’ offers a way to understand how strategic narratives wield persuasive power. Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle (2013, pp. 6-8) developed this spectrum, which ranges from ‘thin’ communication—where rationalists assume that system and actor variables are fixed—to ‘thick’ communication, which post-structuralists employ to emphasize the dynamic construction of identity, actors, and systems. The audience’s response to a strategic narrative ranges from full acceptance to outright rejection. Full acceptance occurs when audiences internalize the narrative and adjust their behaviours accordingly, whereas outright rejection involves dismissing the narrative and often developing counter-narratives. The intermediate state, termed contestation (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, & Roselle, 2013, pp. 26-45), characterises situations in which audiences neither completely accept nor entirely reject the narrative but engage with it critically, negotiating its meanings and implications. Contestation is comprehensive because it can also link with other elements, including the narrative content, degree of ambiguity, narrative and action, formation process, projection process, etc. (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, &

Roselle, 2017, pp. 165-167).

In general, strategic narrative is crucial as it offers a unique perspective for observing and understanding the development, projection, dissemination, and reactions to key political concepts, such as identity, systems, and world order. It also provides a novel approach to analysing influential power and power dynamics. Reception is a particularly interesting phase within the three stages of strategic narrative. However, academic research has predominantly focused on the two responses of acceptance and rejection, which have been studied through a combination of various theories.

2.6 Strategic narrative related theories

2.6.1 Responses of strategic narrative

Scholars of strategic narrative have worked to locate the elements that affect reception in explaining the different choices of acceptance or rejection. Identity and strategic narratives for collective identity are the two key elements related to the likelihood of acceptance. On the other hand, contestation as a response is more complicated.

Reception varies by the identity of actors according to the identity of the audience (Bushell et al., 2018, 2019, 2020). In other words, reception varies from the elite audience to the ordinary audience. To better tailor strategic narratives to the audience's level of understanding and thereby increase the likelihood of acceptance, it is crucial to establish narrative boundaries.

Identity at the individual level contributes to the acceptance response of audiences at the public level. Strategic narrative from a non-official actor (narrative sender) which contribute to forge or increase the personal connections would contribute to the transportation which would increase the possibility of acceptance (Bushell et al., 2018). Similarly, combined with credibility theory,

personal motivation to the actors sending narratives (Szostek, 2015, 2017, 2018), including educational experience and family influence from Russia, help to increase the likelihood of individual Ukrainians to accept Russia's strategic narrative. Based on framing theory (Lingston & Nassetta, 2018), similarly, when analysing India's strategic narrative in the digital era targeting terrorism actions, the information conveyed by public outlets are more acceptable because the audience covers the whole society (Natarajan, 2014). On the other hand, to domestic audience, formation of the concept of enemy could be used in justify actor's strict policies and gain domestic acceptance. Kluver argued that Trump team linked contestation strategic narratives of world order to the conflict between China and the U.S. In Trump's campaign, he framed China as a threat to U.S hegemony by highlighting the conflicting interpretation of the world order. Hence, China was a threat to America. To secure its interests, the U.S. administration had to be tough on China (Kluver, 2018). This foreign policy strategy partially contributed to the victory of Trump in the presidential election in 2016.

Collective strategic narrative would affect the response on states internationally. Researchers discovered the maintenance and integration of EU and NATO benefit from collective strategic narratives about human rights and the war of terror (Kaldor, Martin, & Selchow, 2007; Wiseman, 2013). Similarly, the formation of collective narrative of 'Copenhagen narrative' contributes to the strategic adaption from international organisation level to domestic level (de Moor & Wahlström, 2019). Strategic narrative also been adopted in analysing internal BRICS development challenges by looking at the internal conflict between Brazil and South Africa. Brazilian investigations into resource exploitation in South Africa were boycotted due to the lack of a clear and consistent strategic narrative, which affected the integrity of the BRICS (Noort, 2019). After examining the joint declarations of the BRICS states, Van Noort distinguished three portions of strategic narrative: Geopolitics - BRICS frame themselves as rising powers, able to re-order the world; economy - calling for a more just international economic order; Solidarity - with inclusive participation and equal relationship, the solidarity of

BRICS increased which contributed to the formation of its identity narrative and international order narrative. The likelihood of acceptance of the international organisation will increase if the international organisation could have a collective strategic narrative which is in accordance with the individual members' strategic narratives (Noort, 2019).

Contestation, a commonly occurring intermediate response to strategic narratives, is difficult to study due to its complexity, as it does not follow the clear-cut patterns of either acceptance or rejection. Contestation between strategic narratives can be understood as a process where different actors engage in persuasive power dynamics. The success or failure of strategic narratives depends on the communication process shaped by these contested narratives (Noort, 2019). Through contestation, actors defend their position by identifying inconsistencies in their opponent's strategic narrative. Blanchard used a metaphor to explain the success of America's 'Open Door' policy towards China. In the 1980s, conservatives rejected the 'Open Door' policy, while others supported it. The schema likens the policy to a container, where people interpret the policy by adding elements into it. By applying the 'Container Schema', Blanchard argued that the 'Door' symbolized the distinction between the 'us room' and the 'others room'. Understanding the Open-Door policy as 'opening China's door to let us in' rather than 'opening America's door to let Chinese in' contributed to the success in winning the contestation (Blanchard, 2013).

Contested strategic narratives reflect the engagement of power dynamics. Contestation of narratives also reveals the identities and interests of the actors involved. A study of media reports from Russia, China, and the Arab world on the 2016 U.S. election illustrates how different countries' responses not only reflect their intentions for world order but also their perspectives on democracy as non-democratic states (Kluver et al., 2019). On the other hand, persuasive power increases with greater influence. Contesting strategic narratives attract attention from audiences, providing a platform for competing sources of influence.

Weissman (2019) applied contestation narratives to explain the narrative conflict between China and the U.S. She argued that contesting narratives are essential to understanding international order. The strategic narrative competition between China and the U.S. represents different views of the world order. The 'bigger voice' of the narrative, reflects the enormous global influence and power wielded by the U.S. (Weissman, 2019).

In summary, acceptance and rejection are the most commonly observed responses to strategic narratives. Actors frame strategic narratives at various levels, and aligning these narratives with the audience's level of understanding significantly increases the likelihood of acceptance. Conversely, contestation of strategic narratives can be seen as a dynamic of persuasive power and may also be connected to broader themes, such as world order. Current research tends to treat contestation as a process between acceptance and rejection. However, the state of contestation itself is rather less studied. Furthermore, how actors response with contestation remains unclear.

2.6.2 Strategic narrative about historical ties of different countries

Historical narratives contribute to audience identity formation and bridge the past and the future. Theoretically, history is an important element in increasing a strategic narrative's credibility in the framing process. It is commonly used in identity strategic narrative. It is the very first step to set up a framework for the audience's identity by distinguishing 'us' from 'other'. When framing strategic narratives, drawing on historical elements contributes to the identity of 'us'. 'Us' can include domestic citizens and international states who share a similar culture and experiences (Khaldarova, 2019; O'shea, 2019; Ventsel et al., 2018). In the post-Cold War era, scholars have demonstrated that Russia frames itself as a victim of its opponent U.S. (Szostek, 2015, 2017, 2018). Meanwhile, Russia has shifted from framing Ukraine as a 'little brother' to framing it as a 'betrayed' and 'enemy' to explain their deteriorating relationship (Khaldarova, 2019; Ventsel et al., 2019).

History also provides a logical chain to explain the present and action choices in the present and future, contributing to the coherent logical chain of strategic narrative. By extracting historical roots, scholars traced Russia's strategic narrative about 'Machiavellian Russia', which led to Russia's uncompromising attitude to the Crimea issue (Gackouski & Brylska, 2020). Other scholars have suggested that Russia uses the historical conflict frame of Russia as a victim, bullied by U.S.-led NATO. By magnifying the concern about a particular 'enemy', Russia justified its Zapad 2017 military exercise in the Black Sea as a necessity to protect itself (Ventsel et al., 2019) and gain domestic support. In explaining Italy's military operation in the Middle East, Cobicchia (2015) highlights international interactions in the historical empire of Italy as the historical roots of its global concern for freedom. Hence, Italy justified its military operations as a way to promote liberty and human rights in Iraq, Libya and Lebanon (Coticchia, 2015).

Empirically, it's commonly used in understanding Russia related question in the world and less in work has been done in analysing Asia topics. Unfortunately, though strategic narrative about history holds a critical position in China's strategic narratives in general, there are less research about it. Main research on this topic focus on the relationship between history and identity. Combining discursive epistemology with framing theory and strategic narrative, O'Shea examined historical conflict between China and Japan to consolidate the 'China threat' strategic narrative, which justified the Japanese government's continuing support for U.S. military bases in Okinawa, ignoring local protests (O'Shea, 2019). The close historic ties between China and Singapore led to Singapore supporting China when China was criticised, especially when selling The Belt and Road initiative. This policy partly led to Singapore's position being imitated in ASEAN (Ba, 2019). Ohnesorge and Owen argued that China's quest of global power is better understood from the 'memory narrative' based on the colonial history by the west (Ohnesorge & Owen, 2023). (Ohnesorge & Owen, 2023). This certain history is helpful to understand Chinese security concern which leads to action. However,

the memory narrative neglect the state's explanation power on construct and spread their favourable version of the understanding of the history. For example, this idea cannot explain that though faced with similar situation, China and Southeast Asian countries now have different understanding of security. To stress this issue, Smith and Fallon argued that by explaining history, government can form the ontological security properly (N. R. Smith & Fallon, 2024)(N. R. Smith & Fallon, 2024). Scholars also considers 'bounding narrative' as emphasising shared experience to creating mutual understanding of history (Adams et al., 2024).(Adams et al., 2024). However, the definition of bounding narrative is vague and mixed with system, identity and issue strategic narrative. Moreover, with the effort of China stressing shared colonised history, the understanding of security is still different between China and Southeast Asian countries. This also relates to the debate of explanation power - considering the asymmetric regional structure, does China has stronger explanation power over regional countries to silence their disagreement opinion?

In summary, the strategic narrative about history contributes to the develop of identity strategic narrative as it holds the key answer to 'who I was?' question, which on the other hand shape the actors' understanding of system. On empirical level, it plays an important role in China's official discourse. Related research focuses more on BRI related narratives from China's side. However, questions about the history role on forming China's favourable regional collect identity is unclear. Though with similar experience, the myth of history matters differently in China's and regional countries' discourse remained unsolved.

2.6.3 Security and ontological security

The narrative approach is crucial for understanding security-related research. Security and threat are not objective realities but rather socially constructed concepts (Buzan et al., 1998). Threats are framed through deliberate political discourse, rather than being inherently present in the international system. Narratives serve as key instruments in this securitisation process, shaping

perceptions of security threats and legitimising policy responses.

As the field of security studies has evolved, the concept of security itself has been expanded beyond physical security to include ontological security. Unlike traditional security, which focuses on material threats, ontological security refers to the continuity and stability of identity (Weinfurter, 2024; Subotić, 2016). In other words, just as individuals seek a coherent sense of self, states also strive to maintain a stable and consistent identity over time. When ontological security is challenged, states may experience ontological insecurity, which disrupts their self-narrative and generates uncertainty or existential anxiety (Bryant & Higgins, 2021; Mitzen, 2006; Subotić, 2016). Similar to physical security threats, strategic narratives play a critical role in managing ontological security concerns.

The strategic narrative framework is widely applied in conflict-related fields, particularly in international relations (Kluver et al., 2019; Crilly, 2015; Mary et al., 2007). In the context of ontological security, strategic narratives help states construct and maintain a coherent identity over time, reinforcing their legitimacy and justifying their policies. Identity-based strategic narratives allow states to define their role in the past, present, and future, ensuring continuity in self-perception. When these narratives are challenged—whether by external actors, geopolitical shifts, or internal crises—states may experience ontological insecurity and seek to restore stability (Bryant & Higgins, 2021; Chan, 2020; Mitzen, 2006; Skey, 2010).

Ontological security narratives considerations are a factor explaining responses to strategic narratives. It helps to understand that identity as a major factor explaining responses to strategic narrative reception. For instance, this approach has been frequently applied in Russian studies, where historical narratives shape national identity and foreign policy discourse. In China and Asia studies, scholars have used the concept to examine responses to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Cooley and Noort (2020) argue that a state's engagement with the BRI

depends not only on material incentives but also on ontological security considerations. Their study demonstrates that countries with high material incentives and strong ontological security (e.g., Italy) fully embraced the BRI, whereas states with low ontological security and limited material benefits (e.g., the UK) participated only marginally. Conversely, low material incentives combined with high ontological security concerns led to outright rejection, as seen in the United States' response to the BRI.

With the growing influence of strategic narrative theory and an increasing awareness of media power, China has recognised the importance of narratives in shaping both domestic and international legitimacy. As a result, analysing China's foreign policy and international engagement through the lens of strategic narratives is essential for understanding its evolving global role.

2.7 China's strategic narrative in grand strategy and framing its relations with neighbouring countries

China's strategic narratives are systematic. China Dream (CD), designed for the domestic audience, and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), designed for the international audience, represent a grand strategy. President Xi has proposed both, they underpin all the other narratives, including the narratives about environmental issues and China's relationships with the South China Sea countries. CD mainly refers to pursuing the great historical rejuvenation of China while BRI advocates mutual respect, economic cooperation, market operation, and community prosperity (Loh, 2018; Yuan & Yang, 2007; Cooly, 2020).

From China's perspective, the relationships of BRI, China's foreign policy to neighbouring countries, etc, all contribute to the achievement of China's Dream. Through BRI, China uses its excess capacity and foreign exchange assets to lead regional cooperation to boost China's economy and the achievement of 'a community of shared future for mankind'. Economic growth and international impact contribute to consolidation of the China Dream.

China's strategy towards its neighbours under Xi's era has become more active and has its own normative features (amity, sincerity, mutual benefit, inclusiveness) and is a crucial part of the BRI. In 2012, China started to include neighbouring countries as part of a peripheral strategy. Hence, under the guideline of these normative features and institutional cooperation through the BRI platform (Smith, 2021; Li, 2014), China frames itself as a regional responsible major country, leader, peacekeeper, and provider of regional integration and prosperity.

2.7.1 Understanding China's narratives from a strategic narrative perspective

CD and BRI share the same features that frame China as a peaceful rising power and advocates for an alternative to the U.S-led world order. Through strategic narrative theory lens, there are 3 important portions of CD and BRI narratives: actors, narrative logic, and historical resonance. Both state actors and non-state actors at individual and community level actively engage into the process to draw more support from a larger audience domestically and internationally. Domestically, CD combines individual dreams into the China Dream to frame collective interests (Robert, et al, 2018), while neglecting domestic conflicts to draw public support and belief in the CCP and China. Though there is intense material competition (including competitions for funding, economic growth, and provincial ranking position, etc.) at the provincial level, stressing the core ideology of the CCP and Communism by linking CD and BRI with each province increases domestic support (Loh, 2018). Internationally, intergovernmental international institutions and forums, along with other forms of diplomatic activity, forge an inclusive environment for participation. At the state level, government-led funding bodies and state-owned companies campaign for prosperity (Robert et al, 2018; Cooly, 2020). The scholarly community addresses CD and BRI with some contestation to create an 'objective' image to enhance their credibility (Loh, 2018) at the individual elite level.

Consistent logic and accordance with the audience's knowledge are expected to enhance narratives' credibility (Miskimmon. et al., 2017; Paul, 2019; Noort, 2019;

Svente & Arne, 2008). Both CD and BRI are based on China's economy, which also could be strengthened by their implementation. This is a positive cycle of achieving the 'promising community prosperity'. The central-leading role of CCP is highlighted in this process and can be observed in China's documents and movements (Robert et al., 2018).

Historical resonance, referring to shared historical interactions and experience, is expected to contribute to triggering the interest of the audience and forging an easier environment for narratives to be understood (Weissman, 2019; (Khalderova, 2019; O'shea, 2019; Ventsel, et al, 2018). For China's case, CD emphasises the pursuit of China's historical rejuvenation instead of directly criticising the U.S. led world order (Robert, et al, 2018). During the BRI campaign, narratives about a similar history of being suppressed are stressed with South China Sea countries (Cooly & Noort, 2020; Zhao & Tan-Mullins, 2021). Narratives about similar historical empire positions are addressed when introducing BRI to developed countries such as UK and Italy (Robert et al., 2018).

2.7.2 Reception situation of China's strategic narrative

This section will present how audiences vary from accept to reject to strategic narrative of BRI from China.

Despite China's effort in framing and projecting the BRI, it is still not a mainstream narrative. Scholars analyse BRI reception conditions with the combination of strategic narrative and signalling and security theories. Costly signals (if cooperation failed, the signal sender would face expensive costs) are more likely to build trust and narrative acceptance. Zhao and Tan-Mullins argue that mutual trust could be established only if current information about narratives and costly signals fit the audience's knowledge of signal senders. This is the first condition: that the audience can understand the narratives' intent. Therefore, trust will be built, and the sender's narrative will be received. In case studies, they compare the cases of promotion of the ancient Silk Road in the Han dynasty and the current BRI campaign. In both situations, China is the signal sender. They draw 'Brightness'

in China's ancient culture (being honest regardless the self-interest) and argued that this is the pre-condition of signal acceptance (Zhao & Tan-Mullins, 2021).

From a formation perspective, after examining the media reports of the early stage (mid-2013 - mid-2017) of BRI, researchers have identified two explanation's for China's narrative success in this period. The first one is that China framed BRI as a comprehensive mechanism instead of a power; the second one is European medias lack of in-depth and independent reports. Turcsanyi and Kachlikova explained this from two paths: the former one is 'Journalists routine that journalists lack enough time to frame their reports; the latter one is 'affective sticking points', which includes valued signifiers (the mutual benefits and win-win cooperation in BRI narratives); fantasies (specific economic cooperation opportunities provide by BRI); and biographical narratives (linkage with the Old Silk Road that makes the BRI familiar to the European audience and more acceptable). Hence, in early BRI promotion, the European journalists mainly adopted China's frame of BRI and contributed to persuading the audience to put economic profits over security concerns (Turcsanyi & Kachlikova, 2020).

From a projection perspective, Van Noort examined the 'Vision for maritime cooperation under the BRI framework' and distinguished two portions of the BRI infrastructure cooperation - the soft infrastructure aiming at increasing technology cooperation and people interactions, and the hard one aiming at the material infrastructure projects such as high-speed trials, ports, port cities, airports, etc. She argued that this strategic narrative contributes to translating infrastructure projects into resources and could link infrastructure with norms and values to increase the influence of system narratives to increase international legitimacy (Noort, 2021).

The BRI is an instrument that China has used to influence the world order, but it faces challenges due to the absence of a collective strategic narrative and the lack of support for such a narrative. A mutual or shared narrative about BRI will

affect its reception. Miskimmon and O’Loughlin analysed the BRI from the strategic narrative levels. Firstly, at the system level narratives, China suffered from a slow-down in its economic growth. The EU struggled with regional conflicts in Libya, Syria and Ukraine as well as the Covid pandemic. Moreover, both the EU and China seek to change the world order. This system-level similarity has become the context for the emergence and reception of BRI. Secondly, China used to lack a straightforward and coherent identity narrative, which could also be seen as a gap that BRI could fill. Thirdly, at the issue-level narratives about security - China and EU have different geopolitical foci of attention. China is more interested in the South China Sea and East Asian issues than the Middle East area that the EU values. With the challenge in issue and identity level, a shared narrative between China and EU of BRI is still hard to generate (Miskimmon & O’Loughlin, 2021).

Norms are an important factor that explains narrative responses from formation and reception perspectives. BRI narratives grow out of China’s domestic legitimation. China frames BRI as a solution to its domestic slow-down in economic growth to increase domestic legitimacy (Liu, 2021; Shi & Trigkas, 2021). Internationally, China uses the ‘community with a shared future for mankind’ narrative to legitimate the new forms of engagement and cooperation. However, narratives about the bright future are contested by the EU’s solidarity. Liu argues the different narratives that China and the EU have towards the same issue have produced the paradox that China faces in cooperation: interactions with individual countries are necessary for China to implement the cooperation projections. However, the negotiations with the EU would increase the pressure on individual countries to comply with China’s intentions. Hence, China was reckoned as a strategic challenger. BRI undermines the solidarity of the EU. The ‘16+1’ framework was set up as a response and solution to this situation. After examining the emergence of this platform, Liu argues that different strategic narratives generate contestations while joint narratives increase the legitimacy. Similarly, Shi and Trigkas understand BRI as an international legitimacy tool focusing on norms and principle. From this perspective, the fundamental difficulty preventing

China and the EU from generating a shared narrative is their ideologies and normative divergence on BRI (Shi & Trigkas, 2021).

The BRI narratives change along with its promotion. With the observation of the whole BRI, Ma identifies three paradoxes existing in Sino-EU cooperation, leading to differentiation in reception among European members. The first one is the double standards of the audience. From past experience, the audience only accepts pure economic cooperation with China. Any collaboration related to politics would lead the EU to criticise China because China as the narrator cannot meet the needs and win the recognition of the audience. Secondly, great power engagement is supposed to be at a global level. Hence, China's cautious steps avoid involvement in regional conflicts, leading to the suspension of the EU audience. Finally, the differences in norms. China's cooperation is mainly led by governments, whereas the EU audience expects and is more habituated to investment being capital-driven (Ma, 2021).

More research tries to understand the challenge faced by China with its international cooperation and public diplomacy based on BRI. China spent a huge amount of money on public diplomacy but with an unsatisfied outcome. Through the 'new communication' including social media communication, student exchange, and technology sharing, Hartig argued that China considers itself misunderstood in a hostile international environment (Hartig, 2016). (Hartig, 2016). The solution for being a friendly and constructive partner as China wants internationally relies more on Chinese governments' actual creditable action than information output. From identity narrative prospect, Wu and Wang argue the current dilemma caused by the misalignment between China's international identity, as a confident great power, and international cooperation as projecting soft power (Wu & Wang, 2024)(Wu & Wang, 2024). On the research of China's influence to smaller countries, 'blue pacific' narrative was examined to stress the 'shame' became the leverage of smaller pacific island countries to influence China's 'rhetorical action' (Wallis et al., 2024). Unfortunately, this article didn't explain

how to frame and function ‘shame’ to gain leverage for smaller countries.

The strategic narrative research regarding China’s BRI presented above are mostly centred with China’s relationship with more powerful countries, such as European countries and U.S. Though there are research about China’s international claim and identity, none of them explicit the actual content of China’s intention. It’s hard to understand China without research the Sino-developing countries interactions specifically on non-traditional security agenda, as it’s the main way to project China’s soft power. Hence, the strategic narrative research about Mekong counties is helpful. Unfortunately, there is no research on this topic. So next section will present the strategic narrative about environmental issues as the foundation for Mekong water disputes analysis.

2.8 Strategic narrative in environment issues

Compared to other fields, strategic narrative theory has been less applied in environmental issues research. Scholars including Simon Bushell, Géraldine Buisson, Mark Workman, Thomas Colley argue that strategic narrative theory effectively analyses ecological issues. Multiple actors frame and project strategic narratives about climate change issues. From the formation stage of strategic narrative, these various narratives targeting different audiences provide the possibility of building a ‘shared understanding’ of urgent environmental issues, which will contribute to state ‘buy in’ of environmental strategic narrative and encourage them to take collective actions accordingly (Bushell et al., 2017). The climate change strategic narrative has a whole-population landscape. Bushell’s team examine climate change strategic narrative (such as protecting polar bears, saving environment equals saving humanity) by deconstructing them into hero, victim, villain, subject, object, helper, opponent, sender and receiver. They argue that the identity of the narrator would influence the reception. They conclude that top-down international organisations, such as inter-governmental organisations, are suitable for calling global level collective action to mediate global warming. The GOs could provide a platform for environmental issues but are not good at

targeting an emergent ecological crisis, as reaching a consensus will need time. Their credibility among ordinary audience may decrease because GOs work closely with politicians, which easily arouse people's suspicion about political deals. The 'bottom-up' structure provided by grassroots organisations will be better received by an ordinary audience, as individuals can quickly get connected and shared their ideas via the internet. These grassroots organisations also act swiftly on responding to the urgent environmental crisis and urge GOs to take action by exerting pressure outside the governmental system, such as voice with media or digital media ecology (Bushell et al., 2017; Bevan, Colley, & Workman, 2020). Aligning with collective strategic narratives enhances the likelihood of acceptance at the international level. De Moor and Wahlström (2019) examined the UN Climate Summit as a social movement, highlighting how the formation of the 'Copenhagen narrative' facilitated strategic adaptation by integrating climate change mechanisms into domestic systems. States that viewed the Copenhagen experience as a success were more likely to align with the 'Paris Camp' during the 2015 UN Summit (De Moor & Wahlström, 2019).

China has become dramatically assertive about the environment, alongside the change in its regional role. China has given up the strict difference between the developed and developing countries. Instead, it recognises environmental issues as a severe threat to 'a community of a shared future of mankind' (Zhang and Orbie, 2019). China now understands itself as a more active and responsible participant in international environmental cooperation instead of a 'victim of ecological imperialism'.

In summary, strategic narrative research is commonly applied at the international level to global issues such as climate change. Most studies focus on the relationships between states as key participants and international organisations dominated by powerful state actors. However, similar research on regional-level issues remains relatively scarce.

2.9 Puzzles inspired from the literature

In summary, China has become a more active actor internationally and seeks to expand its influence both within and beyond the Southeast Asia region by supporting multilateralism and international cooperation, particularly in the realm of non-traditional security. Material gain is one of the key incentives that China offers to regional countries. As previously mentioned, China views its relationship with developing countries as a model for international cooperation and global governance. However, this relationship is contested by other nations. Beyond this, several key puzzles, as identified in the literature, warrant further investigation. These puzzles can be explored by examining the water disputes between China and Southeast Asian countries—Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam—through the theoretical lens of strategic narrative.

The research question for this thesis is: How and why do Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam vary in their reception of and response to China's strategic narrative about the Mekong water disputes? I believe the answer to this question will provide a deeper understanding of China's intentions and the asymmetric power dynamics at play, while also addressing the intriguing puzzles presented in the literature.

The main puzzle lies in understanding the responses within the context of strategic narrative studies. Current literature primarily focuses on binary outcomes—acceptance or rejection—of strategic narratives. This project will enrich the field by exploring challenges that fall short of rejection between China's strategic narratives and those of the Mekong regional countries. Furthermore, an examination of these strategic narratives and their narrative strategies will help in understanding the strategies adopted in contestation. As system and identity strategic narratives influence actors' behaviours on issue narratives, examining the three levels of strategic narrative is crucial.

From the literature discussed above, three key elements emerge that may potentially affect the response of the Mekong regional countries to China's

strategic narratives. Firstly, the shared norms of Confucian culture and the status of developing countries could contribute to a collective narrative, thereby increasing the likelihood of acceptance of China's strategic narrative. Secondly, the shared historical experiences, including past interactions and wartime experiences such as imperial wars and World Wars, could foster a collective identity, further increasing the possibility of acceptance. Thirdly, material incentives, as highlighted in Van Noort's research, would likely increase the likelihood of acceptance. Fourthly, ontological security concerns regarding China's increasing regional influence could increase the possibility of rejection. Finally, conflicts of interest over water resources may also lead to a greater likelihood of rejection or challenges.

Empirically, this thesis will provide insights from the perspective of small to medium regional powers, offering a more comprehensive understanding of regional power dynamics. I expect different countries to respond variably to China's strategic narrative. For Laos, with its shared wartime experience, a similar communist system, and high material incentive needs, I anticipate that it will align most closely with China's narrative. Cambodia, while sharing similar historical experiences and high material incentive needs, has a different political system and significant conflicts of interest over the Mekong water, which may make it less aligned with China compared to Laos. Vietnam, on the other hand, shares the same system, historical experiences, and norms, but with greater conflicts of interest and fewer material incentives, is likely to contest China's narrative on the Mekong water issue while aligning with China on identity.

In summary, I will answer the research question by distinguishing, comparing, and analysing the strategic narratives concerning the Mekong water disputes from China, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. The next chapter will outline the methodology for addressing this question.

Chapter 3 Research design

This chapter presents how I will answer my research question. It starts with the research question and my expectations on the key elements and major hypothesis. It will also present the case selection, data selection and sampling. It ends with the analytical framework.

3.1 Research question and theoretical expectations

My Research question is How and why do Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam vary in their reception of and response to China's strategic narrative about the Mekong water disputes?

There are five possible elements affect the answer to this question based on current literature, including (1) historical experience. The similar historical experiences and culture between China, Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia refer to the historical integrations in ancient time, similar experience in war time between imperialist war till their independence after World War II; (2) political regimes. Similarity and differences in political regimes refer to except Cambodia, the other three countries are communist countries; (3) material incentives. It refer to the economic relations between China and regional countries; (4) ontological (in)security; (5) physical security. The inter-relations between the neighbour counties refers to the territorial disputes between Cambodia and Vietnam and South China Sea territorial disputes between China and Vietnam. The dependent variable is qualitative alignment and differences between the strategic narratives about Lancang Cascade plan from Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam against China.

To be more specific, I have four expectations:

Firstly, about political regimes and historical experience, similarity in political system and the similar historical experiences and culture between China, Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia may increase the credibility of China's strategic narrative. I expect alignment in narratives on this one.

Secondly, about economic incentives, strategic narrative related to economic compensation around the water disputes: different level material incentives would affect the level of alignments on China's strategic narratives. Mekong regional countries who have higher material incentive expectations would possible have a deeper economic dependence relationship with China. This may affect the response of China's strategic narrative - the higher economic dependence level, more support to China's action. Chinese dam-building aid to selected countries may soften their attitude of China's Lancang Cascade plan.

Thirdly, about physical security, the inter-relations between the neighbour counties may affect their attitude to China's action. Cambodia and China both have territorial disputes with Vietnam, which may push Cambodia align with China over the Mekong water disputes in exchange for its supporting over the disputed lands.

Fourthly, about ontological security, the ontological concerns of Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam to China may lead to contestation respond to China's strategic narrative.

The following part 3.2 will explain why Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia were chosen as the case studies; part 3.3 mainly focuses on data selection and sampling, including the media sources; part 3.4 will explain the method of processing these data, which is thematic analysis; the framework about analysing the data will be presented in part 3.5; the final subsection is a reflection on data selection and a plan for the future study.

3.2 Country case selection

The analysis of Mekong water disputes involves multiple countries, as the Mekong Basin comprises six nations. Therefore, a comparative study using a cross-national design is essential to address the research question effectively. In this project, a differences-system approach is adopted, focusing on three of the six Mekong countries—Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam—to examine their responses to China's strategic narrative. This section begins with a brief introduction to these three

Mekong countries, then outlines the comparative study design, which plays a critical role in answering the research question and concludes with an explanation of the case selection and data selection process.

3.2.1 Comparison as a method

Comparative research is a widely used methodological approach in social and political science, offering a structured framework to identify and test variables across diverse contexts. In comparative politics, cross-national comparisons are especially valuable due to their versatility and capacity to integrate with qualitative research methods. By conducting in-depth examinations of individual cases, such studies enhance our understanding of how variables operate within distinct historical, systemic, and cultural settings (Peters, 2013: 26-27; Lijphart, 1975).

Two principal approaches underpin comparative study design: the ‘similarity system’ and the ‘difference system’. The similarity system focuses on cases that share common characteristics yet yield different outcomes, thereby highlighting the influence of specific explanatory factors. In contrast, the difference system emphasizes the contrasting features among cases to uncover common causal factors that may operate despite contextual variations (Lijphart, 1975; Peters, 2013: 30).

This project employs a cross-national comparative design using the difference system approach to analyse Mekong water disputes. It aims to explore how Mekong countries with similar historical and cultural backgrounds respond differently to China’s strategic narrative regarding the Lancang Cascade Plan due to variations in their political systems and economic strengths. The criteria for case selection are detailed in the following section.

3.2.2 Key elements for Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia

The relationships among Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and China during the early contemporary era laid the foundations for the complex dynamics that characterise their current regional interactions. The content about similar historical experience, political regime and security situation mentioned in the previous content. This section provides an overview of the relative economic strengths and contemporary positions of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia within the regional power structure, as well as their dependence on the Mekong River.

Firstly, Mekong water is relatively equally important to all three countries. Vietnam is heavily dependent on the Mekong River for its freshwater resources. According to Open Development Mekong (ODM, 2018), the Cửu Long River, a branch of the Mekong, is one of the country's two major sources of freshwater. More than 60% of Vietnam's river basin area originates from the Mekong Basin (ODM, 2018), underscoring the river's critical role in sustaining the country's water supply and agricultural productivity. Similarly, Mekong River is the major resource for Laos's freshwater resources. Over 90% of Laos territory locates in Mekong Basin (IWRM, 2020). Compare to Vietnam, Laos situated at upper stream of Mekong River. Mekong River contributes to about 35% of Laos annual flow (IWRM, 2020). It's similar to Cambodia as well. Cambodia has the largest freshwater lake in Southeast Asia, known as the Phnom Penh Lake, part of the Mekong River water system (Britannia, 2021). Moreover, similar to Vietnam, Mekong River accounts for one out of the two resources for fresh water supply for Cambodia (ODC, 2015). It is the leading source for providing food and water for the Cambodian people. Moreover, all three countries are all MRC and ASEAN countries.

Secondly, three countries vary on different economic incentives based on their different economic strength. Vietnam, a significant and diverse nation in Southeast Asia, holds a prominent position as a crucial actor in the region. While with the stress of independence and development as Vietnamese core national interests, it is widely regarded as a rising regional power. By 2020, Vietnam's

economy had attained a noteworthy size of US \$343 billion, positioning it among the top 40 global economies and securing fourth place within the ASEAN bloc. Moreover, Vietnam's per capita GDP stood at \$3,521, placing it sixth among ASEAN nations (Appendix V1). Bolstered by the accumulation of national strength, Vietnam aspires to adopt a proactive stance on the international stage.

Economically, Laos is one of the relative poorer countries and as one of the least developed countries designated by the United Nations. According to International Monetary Fund, it has a GDP of 20,631 million dollars by 2022, ranking as the 9 out of 10 ASEAN countries (IMF, 2021). The economic structure of Laos is predominantly agricultural with a relatively weak and poorly developed industry sector. After the establishment of the Lao People's Democratic Republic, it implemented a highly centralised planned economy system, then reform and opening-up in 1986. Similar to China, it gradually reduced government control and transferred to a mixed economic model dominated by market economy. However, Laos failed to change its backward economic situation. Laos has received a large amount of external investment, and its economy is experiencing sustained and rapid growth since 21st century. China has close economic and trade ties with Laos. China is the largest source of foreign investment country.

Economically, Cambodia is currently one of the least developed countries in the world. According to IMF, it has GDP of 27.985 million dollars by January 2022, ranking 8th place in ASEAN countries (IMF, 2022). The Cambodian economy has four pillars, including tourism, clothing, construction, and agriculture. As a newly developed country, the annual economic growth of Cambodia is about 7% (IMF, 2022), which is slower than Vietnam. Increasing tourism and political stability contribute to Cambodia's financial improvement, which attracted investment from China, South Korea, and Japan. Cambodia has become one of Southeast Asia's emerging popular receiving investment countries. By 2017, China was Cambodia's sixth largest export partner and the most significant import partner (IMF, 2022).

In general, among all three Mekong countries, Vietnam is the most powerful one on economy strength, whereas Laos and Cambodia are small regional powers. But for the Southeast countries, merely considering the material strength is limited to understanding their position in power dynamics. The reflection on understanding Southeast Asian power structure will be explained in chapter 7. On the other hand, all three countries heavily depend on Mekong water for their freshwater resources and shares the commonality of being a Mekong country but is also an integral member of both the Mekong River Commission and the ASEAN community. Similar position constitutes the foundation for comparison.

3.2.3 Key differences and similarities between Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam

Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos are selected for the case studies out of the five lower Mekong countries because they are similarly dependent on Mekong water, but they vary in their history, culture, economic incentives, political regimes, ontological (in)security, and physical security. I expect this variation to help explain their different responses and receptions to China's narrative about the Cascade plan.

The selected countries should have similar dependence on Mekong River for freshwater resources, as the differences of importance of Mekong water would significantly affect their response on China's cascade plan. The water dependence level is the major reason for the exclusion of cases. Myanmar and Thailand are excluded because they are less dependent on Mekong water. Myanmar is relatively the upper river country with close cooperation on hydropower with China (Kim, 2025). Hence, it will naturally support China's cascade plan. Moreover, the Mekong basin is just a small part of Myanmar territory, suggesting the Mekong River is not the primary freshwater source. Moreover, Myanmar is not a member of Mekong River Commission. Hence, Myanmar is not a suitable country. Similarly, though Thailand is in the lower part of the Mekong River, Mekong basin is just a small part of Thailand's territory. The Chao Phraya River is the biggest river in Thailand. Hence, Thailand's water dependence on the Mekong

River is lower than Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam which makes it not suitable to this project.

In contrast, the freshwater resources of the three selected countries primarily depend on the Mekong River. Moreover, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam occupy comparable roles in the international arena and experienced with similar challenges. Despite these shared characteristics, notable differences exist in their political systems and economic capacities, which will be explored in the following subsections.

Firstly, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam are similar in geographical conditions and international identity. They are all lower Mekong region countries and primarily rely on the Mekong water system, as mentioned in the last section. Internationally, all three countries used to be French colonies and are all the members of Mekong River Commission and ASEA. Culturally, they are all in Southeast countries and under the influence of China historically. However, they are influenced to different degrees. Vietnam used to be a part of China's Junxian (equivalence to a province inside Qin's territory) in the Qin Dynasty, then became a vassal state in China's tributary system. Compared to Vietnam, Cambodia has fewer historical ties to China. It was a neighbour country in China's tributary system. Similar to the other two countries, Laos is also one of the southeast Asian countries influenced by traditional Chinese culture. Laos was a tributary state of China from The Three Kingdoms Period to the late Qing Dynasty. The main ethnic group, Lao Loum, is closely related to ethnic groups of Dai and Zhuang in the southwest border of China. However, Laos is not Chinese-character cultural circle country. Though shared historical ties in ancient times and colonist contemporary times, Vietnam was more deeply influenced by Confucianism than Cambodia and Laos because of different historical relations.

Secondly, the political system and economic reliance vary among Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. On the one hand, Vietnam and Laos are communist countries, the

same as China, whereas Cambodia is a constitutional monarchy. On the other hand, Cambodia and Laos are currently among the least developed countries in the world and are still suffering from the poverty. China is the biggest donor country to Cambodia. Vietnam's economic strength is better compared to Cambodia and Laos. Vietnam has become one of the fastest growing economies in Asia. However, despite their different financial strength, all three countries' economic increase mainly rely on agriculture.

Thirdly, the territorial disputes between China and Vietnam and Cambodia and Vietnam. This point may link with China's Lancang cascade plan to affect the reception of China's narrative about the dams by Vietnam and Cambodia. In other words, Mekong water disputes include two parts at the regional level: a) upper stream country China vs the other lower stream countries Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. In this case, the lower riparian countries have similar stance on criticising China; b) territorial disputes between lower countries. Vietnam and China have the South China Sea territorial disputes. Vietnam has the actual control over the most disputed islands in the South China Sea. However, Cambodia and Vietnam also have territorial disputes over the unsolved border line. Vietnam is a 'common opponent' of China and Cambodia when it comes to territorial disputes. These territorial disputes may push Cambodia to support China's cascade plan in exchange for China's support on claiming the disputed lands.

3.3 Data selection and sampling

This section outlines the criteria for source selection and data sampling and explains the rationale behind these choices. Given that the countries are authoritarian regimes and government-funded media constitute the primary sources of data. I concentrate on English-language publications for Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, which serve as a common medium for communication and mutual understanding. The majority of the sources are official, reflecting the study's focus on analysing the governmental alignment of strategic narratives related to China's Lancang Cascade Plan. Consequently, the analysis emphasizes narratives

disseminated through official outlets, including government agencies and state-affiliated media. I anticipate that data from government-funded news media will offer a more unvarnished perspective on China's Lancang Cascade Plan, because these sources are less constrained by diplomatic considerations compared to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which might avoid overt criticism in order to prevent provoking China and jeopardizing material incentives. These contents includes:

- Governmental documents about the Mekong River collected from the Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam foreign ministry websites, as well as media reports from these countries about the Cascade plan and Mekong water disputes.
- News reports about China and China's role in Mekong water disputes. In this category, the resources from the central government level will be mainly focused.
- Reports and comments about LMO, including the governmental agreements, speeches from LMCO official website and MOFA.
- Announcement and reports from Mekong River Committee, including the announcement on Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam participation.

3.3.1 Data sampling: searching engine, number, and time periods

Because different search engines produce different results, I use Google, Baidu (www.baidu.com), and Bing search engines to double check the data. Google mainly uses for searching for data of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. However, Google was banned in China. Whereas the Baidu searching engine is the most used in China. I rely on Baidu to digging China's data. Bing, with the background with Microsoft company and well functioned in China and UK, uses for checking the data.

Mekong water disputes have a long history. With climate change and economic development, the droughts are tending to become more serious. However, it is not possible to research from the beginning of this problem. I included the latest 10 years as the data period from 2011-2020. 2011-2020 as this was a period when the

Mekong water issues were particularly salient for all the countries. M

3.3.2 China

Here presents a list with a brief introduction of each source.

For the central governmental departments begin with China's Foreign affair ministry: <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn>. The official website for China's central government foreign affairs department includes China's official reactions to international events. Thus, it is a trustworthy source for China's narrative research. There are 175 texts about 'Lancang River', 'Cambodia', and 'Vietnam', 'Laos', including spokesperson's daily speech, leadership speech, international forum documents, etc. A second source is China's Ministry of ecology and environment, including the ministry of water resources: <http://www.mee.gov.cn>. It is Chinese specialist environmental department. There are 192 texts about 'Lancang River', especially including evaluation of dams in the Lancang Cascade plan.

Compared to government, China's state owned press has fewer reports about Mekong water disputes. The first one is Qiushi newspaper: <http://www.qstheory.cn>, which is owned by China's Communist Party. According to its website, it is 'an important ideological and theoretical front for the CPC Central Committee govern the country'. Qiushi focuses more on domestic affairs. There are 17 reports about 'Lancang River', 'hydro power', 'Vietnam', 'Cambodia', 'Mekong region', and 'water disputes'. The second one is People's Daily: <http://www.people.com.cn>. Similar to Qiushi, People's Daily is also owned by China's central government. Launched in 1948, People's Daily is the largest newspaper in China. Over the past 70 years, the People Daily has actively publishes the Party's theory, major political decisions and plans of the CPC Central Committee, and big events domestically and internationally. Online edition of People's Daily officially entered the international Internet in 1997. There are about 49 reports about 'Lancang river hydro power', 'water disputes', 'Cambodia', 'Vietnam', 'Mekong', and 'drought'. The third one is Guangming Daily: <https://guangming.com.my>. It is also state-owned by China's government.

Launched in 1949, Guangming Daily has become one of the largest newspapers in China. It has about 12 recourses on about Mekong River, Lancang River, Cambodia and Vietnam. The fourth is Huanqiu Net: <https://www.huanqiu.com>. It launched by People's Daily and Global Times in 2007. Compared to the others state-owned media, Huanqiu Net aims to present China to the world. There are 40 texts about the Mekong water disputes.

Out of an initial total of 485 texts located for the China case, only 361 were retained for analysis. The remaining texts were excluded because they were either duplicates, irrelevant, or comprised only brief news descriptions that did not provide sufficient detail for meaningful analysis. Official data will be my primary data from China, including the reports from different government sites and state-owned presses. The central governmental level data will be most focused.

3.3.3 Laos

Compared to the Cambodia and Vietnam, Laos has fewer data resources. There are few English-language sources in Laos. But texts here are all official data. Similar to other countries, the first source is Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Lao PDR: <http://www.mofa.gov.la/index.php>, which contains about 25 articles about 'China' and 'Mekong'. Followed by Laos Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment: <http://www.monre.gov.la/home/>, which only has 4 results related to Mekong water disputes. The final one is the media called Vientiane Times: https://www.vientianetimes.org.la/About_us.htm. It is the first foreign language media of Laos launched in 1994. According to its introduction, The Vientiane Times is part of the Lao Press in Foreign Languages, a specialised agency of the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism. There are 183 results on searching keywords like 'Mekong', 'China', 'Vietnam', 'dam', 'water disputes', 'development', 'Belt and Road Initiative'.

Out of an initial total of 313 texts for the Laos case, only 297 were retained for analysis. The remaining entries were excluded because they were either

duplicates, irrelevant, or comprised only brief news descriptions that did not provide sufficient detail for meaningful analysis.

3.3.4 Vietnam

Similar to China, the texts for Vietnam come from official sources. There are 351 texts for Vietnam's case. The first source from Vietnam is Vietnam's Foreign Affairs Ministry: <http://www.mofa.gov.vn/>. There are 219 results about China and Mekong, including reports about the water disputes and the cooperation in the Mekong regions. The second one is Vietnam plus (Vietnam Net): <https://en.vietnamplus.vn/>. It is the official news outlet of the Communist Party of Vietnam. According to its description, it is the 'the voice of the Party, the State and the people of Vietnam.' There are 96 texts about China, water issues and the Mekong region.

3.3.5 Cambodia

The two media below have a long history and are more famous in Cambodian society. Their reports cover the time periods in this project. Moreover, the English page is unavailable for the Cambodian Ministry of Agriculture, forestry and fisheries. But there are agreements and other vital documents that exist on the Cambodian foreign ministry website. Here presents the list of Cambodian sources.

The first source of Cambodia is the Foreign Affairs Ministry of Cambodia: <https://www.mfaic.gov.kh>, which contains 70 texts when searching 'Mekong' on the key word. They include Cambodia government documents on Mekong issues, their reactions to China's Lancang Mekong cooperation, as well as the alignment with other countries, such as Korea, Japan, Vietnam.

The second source is Khmer Times <https://www.khmertimeskh.com>. The Khmer Times launched in 2014 based in Phnom Penh, the capital city of Cambodia. This newspaper aims to bring the latest and not-biased English-language reports to its

readers about matters and affairs happening in Cambodia. Though its owner is Malaysian, it stays very close to Cambodian government stance. According to Khmer Times, besides most Cambodian journalists, there are a small team of foreign journalists in its team. The audience of Khmer Times includes political and business elites, as well as the young generation. When searching ‘China’ ‘Mekong’ ‘dam’ on its website, there are 175 texts.

The third source is The Phnom Penh Post: <https://www.phnompenhpost.com>, which is the oldest English paper in Cambodia, also based in Phnom Penh. The Phnom Penh Post launched in 1992, aiming to let ‘the nation talking to itself’. According to its description, it has a large group of readers who are well educated, especially political decision-makers and elites. Malaysian businessman Sivakumar Ganapathy purchased it in 2018, who also owns a public relations firm working on behalf of the Cambodian government. There are about 156 texts for ‘Mekong’ and ‘China’.

Out of an initial total of 401 texts for the Cambodia case, only 345 were retained for analysis. The remaining texts were excluded because they were either duplicates, irrelevant, or comprised only brief news descriptions that did not provide sufficient detail for meaningful analysis. This is because there are not very many English-language media in Cambodia.

3.3.6 International organisations of Mekong River Commission

Apart from the country-specific sources, international organisations’ websites have also been used as sources, as they are the platforms for gathering and presenting different countries opinions and agreements. The first is the Mekong River Commission: <https://www.mrcmekong.org>, which aims to negotiate Mekong water disputes among Cambodia, Lao, Thailand, and Vietnam. There are 97 results when searching ‘China’. The second is Lancang-Mekong cooperation organisation: http://www.lmec.org.cn/zlyjz/lmhjz/201711/t20171106_425926.html. The Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) mechanism is an important initiative put

forward by Chinese Premier Li Keqiang at the 17th China-Asean Leaders' Meeting in November 2014. It aims to further deepen all-round friendly cooperation between China and Mekong countries and raise the overall development level of the region. There are 18 resources about Cambodia and Vietnam. The third is the Belt and Road Initiative forum: <http://www.beltandroadforum.org/>. This website provides Chinese leaders' speeches about BRI. There are 30 speeches and articles about the BRI and outcomes it achieved.

For Laos's system strategic narrative I had hoped to include the 9th, 10th, and 11th national reports of Lao PDR. Unfortunately, only the 9th congress report in Lao language was available, so I used Lao's five-year plans to supplement the data.

The number of texts are roughly similar among China, Cambodia and Vietnam. Unfortunately, due to the language and internationalisation issue in Laos, there are few texts for the Laos case. Texts from the MRC contributes to understand the reason of Mekong River water disputes as China has not mentioned it. The data from BRI and LMCO are highly repeating with the data from China.

3.4 Research method: tracing strategic narrative by thematic analysis

As mentioned before, the primary resources for this project are documents and reports. Thus, a type of content analysis is the research method used to approach the data. The goal of adopting this method is to summarise (1) China's strategic narratives about the Lancang River cascade plan; and (2) strategic narratives of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam about China's cascade plan and China's role in Southeast Asia. Comparison of the alignment and differences among the narratives highlights the different response from the Mekong countries to China's narratives. I will rely on thematic analysis for this project.

Thematic analysis, noted for its adaptability and suitability for identity-oriented research, serves as the principal method for analysing data in this study. It enables the systematic identification of recurring patterns and meanings within narratives.

While structural narrative analysis similarly focuses on key components of narratives, it places greater emphasis on their linguistic construction, narrative logic, and critical junctures (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007; Biego, 2013). Given this project's emphasis on interpreting meaning and uncovering subtle variations across narratives, thematic analysis provides a more appropriate methodological framework. In conjunction with strategic narrative theory, it offers a coherent foundation for comparative analysis and interpretive discussion. The following sections outline the keywords, codes, and themes that underpin the thematic analysis and inform the organisation of narrative data.

3.4.1 Thematic analysis

As a type of qualitative content analysis method, thematic analysis is mainly used to extract descriptive content, test hypothesis, and the merit or utility of particular constructs (Freistein, Gadinger, and Groth 2024; Milliken 1999; Tatum 2018). Thematic analysis enables researchers to identify patterns in narratives by detecting recurring codes and examining the interactions among themes across diverse texts (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2019). For the Mekong water disputes, thematic analysis is helpful to identify the themes and pattern of strategic narratives for each country.

Hence, this project provides the analytical support for answering the question of 'How and why do Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam vary in their reception of and response to China's strategic narrative about the Mekong water disputes? The following steps are designed for answering the research questions:

- Data selection: the documents and reports will be searched and selected by the keywords mentioned above. I am using multiple key words to ensure the richness of the data.
- Analysing tool: Nvivo14 software, which is available from University of Glasgow.
- Inductive & deductive coding: the combination of inductive coding and deductive coding will be in this project. This part will be explained more in the following part.

3.4.2 Key words, codes, themes, and narratives

As described in Section 3.3, the initial phase of data selection involved identifying relevant keywords to locate relevant texts. In the first round of coding, I used NVivo to select keywords as codes. Based on the strategic narrative theory, key words describe the region and world system are grouped as deductive codes for system narratives. Similarly, key words about ‘who I am’ and ‘who they are’ are grouped as the deductive codes for identity narratives. Key words such as ‘problem(s/atic)’ ‘solution’ are grouped for issue narrative. The inductive codes are developed from frequently recurring terms, such as ‘infrastructure construction’ and ‘logistic hub’. Subsequently, I conducted additional keyword searches in NVivo using the same terms that were employed in the initial data search to ensure comprehensive coverage. The co-occurrence of multiple keywords confirms the richness and relevance of the dataset. Further details, deductive and inductive codes, along with additional codes and their corresponding themes, are presented in the following sections.

I developed initial codes based on combinations of keywords. Although there are differences among the cases, three major groups of codes align with the expected dimensions of system, identity, and issue strategic narratives. In addition, for issue narratives, the recurrence of similar codes across different countries highlights the shared challenges related to Mekong water.

The first group of codes and themes pertains to system strategic narratives. China’s case is particularly illustrative, reflecting its understanding of international order in Southeast Asia and its role in forging this order. In this context, I coded keywords such as ‘human community with a shared future’ and ‘community with a shared future for mankind’ to indicate China’s conceptualization of international order. These codes align with additional terms like ‘amity, sincerity, mutual benefit, and inclusiveness’, ‘new international political and economic order’, ‘justice and fairness’, ‘prosperity and development’, and ‘public good’, which together convey China’s perspective on

its neighboring countries and regional order. Conversely, negative connotations also emerge with keywords such as ‘victim’, ‘war’, ‘conflict’, and ‘inequality’. When these words are associated with the U.S. or ‘Western’, they contribute to codes like ‘inequality’ and ‘selfish’, reflecting contrasting issue narratives. Thus, from China’s perspective, two main themes characterize its system strategic narrative: the shortcomings of the current system and China’s proposed solution for a preferable regional and global order.

The second group of codes relates to identity strategic narratives. Three main sub-types of keywords across the four countries. , China provides a clear example with the system narrative. So the groups is discussed with China’s example. First, the words used by each country to describe themselves in the past, present, and future—for example, ‘survivor’, ‘builder’, and ‘contributor’—form the basis for codes such as ‘China self in history’, which includes terms like ‘old Silk Road’, ‘historical ties’, and ‘survivor’. These codes develop into themes that portray China’s role in the Mekong region as that of an ‘amiable builder’, ‘leader’, or ‘contributor’. Second, I developed the codes describing the roles of other countries in the region, signalled by keywords like ‘brother’ alongside country names such as ‘China’, ‘Laos’, ‘Cambodia’, and ‘Vietnam’. Additional terms such as ‘power/powerful’, ‘selfish’, ‘just’, ‘respect’, ‘danger’, and ‘bully(ing)’ further enrich this coding, leading to themes of ‘victimhood’ and ‘brotherhood’ among the Mekong countries. Third, the concept of a regional collective identity is captured by keywords such as ‘shared river, shared future’ and ‘sustainable development’.

The third group of codes addresses the issue strategic narrative concerning Mekong water challenges. Several water-related issues are common to the Mekong regional countries. The first set of codes focuses on Mekong water itself, with keywords such as ‘flood’, ‘drought’, ‘Mekong River’, ‘dam(s)’, and ‘water disputes’ indicating issues of water excess and shortage. These are complemented by codes for solutions, including terms like ‘share water data’ and ‘warning and forecasting

system', which collectively lead to the theme of an 'unstable water level'. The second set of codes relates to agriculture and fisheries, where keywords such as 'lack of irrigation water', 'fishery', and 'fish migration' are prevalent across all Mekong countries; these codes support the development of a 'food security' theme. The third set of codes concerns economic growth and development, with terms such as '(foreign) trade', 'foreign aid', 'dam building/construction aid', 'China', 'economic cooperation', 'agricultural danger', 'export', 'win-win cooperation', and 'the Belt and Road Initiative' indicating both issues and solutions on the economic front, leading to themes of varying resilience and overall development. The fourth set of codes addresses energy, where expected keywords include 'Lancang cascade (plan)', 'hydro power', 'electricity', 'clean energy', and 'electricity grid', with additional terms like 'lack of energy', 'energy difficulty', or 'power deficiency' framing the issue of energy security. Finally, the fifth set of codes focuses on environmental aspects, with keywords such as 'sustainable development', 'green Mekong', 'biological diversity', and 'climate change' shaping both the issues and solutions, thus contributing to the theme of 'environmental security'. Inductive coding is helpful for both double-checking the codes and complementing codes to provide more ideas on this issue.

Themes are developed through the alignment of codes. For instance, the Mekong countries share common concerns related to water. Codes such as 'droughts' and 'floods' are grouped together to form the theme of water instability, directly addressing fluctuations in water levels. Similarly, codes like 'decreased agricultural rice output' and 'difficulties in fishery' align to develop the theme of agricultural and fishery challenges. In some cases, themes emerge more subtly from the narratives of regional states. Mekong countries often employ contrast in their discourse to highlight these issues. For example, the code 'rice bowl' (Appendix V62) in Vietnam's data signifies the central role of agriculture in the national economy and livelihoods. When contrasted with codes such as 'yield dropping' or 'decreasing production,' it underscores the theme of water-related agricultural difficulties. Similarly, the contrast between the role of Mekong fish as

a primary protein source and the declining fisheries in Cambodia illustrates the theme of water-induced fishery challenges. These thematic patterns form the foundation of broader narratives.

The interaction of these themes contributes to identifiable and traceable narratives. Continuing the earlier example, the narrative linking Mekong water shortages to food insecurity arises from the shared agricultural and fishery difficulties experienced by the three Mekong countries. Likewise, China aligns the theme of being a ‘kind, constructive, and responsible regional contributor’ with the ‘shared future’ narrative to legitimise its regional leadership. The interaction among themes contributes to trace the pattern of narrative. For example, the dilemma between hydro power and fishery faced by Cambodia presents the importance of water issue in Mekong region livelihood and in understanding the complexity of Mekong water disputes. These narratives are interpreted within the framework of the strategic narrative theory.

3.4.3 Strategic narrative theory as the analytic framework

The strategic narrative framework is used to analyse the results of the thematic analysis. It is used to trace and summarise the strategic narratives from China, Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia. By analysing the alignment and differences between Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia’s narratives, and China’s narrative, the reception differences can be captured. Given the sensitivity of Mekong water governance and the regional power dynamics, Mekong countries seldom express open disagreement with China. Instead, they often employ ambiguity as a deliberate communicative act. Recognising this subtlety is crucial to understanding their narratives.

Strategic narratives can generally be deconstructed into five key components: agent, scene, act, agency, and purpose (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin and Roselle, 2013, p. 7). In this study, narratives—adapted from strategic narrative theory—are understood to comprise the agent or actor (revealing identity), the scene (the

Southeast Asian and Mekong regional context), and the purpose of the narrative (manage Mekong countries' relationships with China while simultaneously expressing disagreement). Due to the sensitivity and regional power structure, the original concepts of act and agency are captured by the discussion of the construction of ambiguity—that is, how and when regional countries express their attitudes.

This analytical alignment is relatively straightforward. The primary interest of this study lies in how Mekong countries articulate disagreement through selective non-alignment with China, particularly through decisions about when and how not to align. Different forms of non-alignment—such as silence, the choice of platforms, and the manner in which critique is expressed—contribute to the construction of ambiguity. In other words, the ambiguous state of non-alignment without explicit rejection is central to understanding the subtlety of regional positioning. Rather than identifying clear instances of acceptance or rejection, the concept of ambiguity captures nuanced, in-between positions that signal ongoing negotiation and contestation. Accordingly, this analysis focuses on when, how, and on which issues Mekong countries align with one another or with external actors.

The arguments are examined through a comparative analysis of regional countries' strategic narratives, focusing on levels of exposure and degrees of cooperation. Through comparison, elements mentioned by all countries clearly indicate their relevance to the research question, such as material incentives and historical experience. Conversely, elements not mentioned by any country suggest limited relevance for understanding the issue, such as territorial disputes. Regime differences do not appear to align with water-related narratives, nor do they produce discernible differences in Cambodia's or Laos's alignment with China; as such, regime type is not a relevant explanatory factor in this context. Considerations of ontological (in)security are instead embedded within discussions of broader regional power dynamics. The specific strategies employed by regional actors are examined in detail in Chapter 7. Overall, the framework of system,

identity, and issue strategic narratives enables a longitudinal examination of regional discourse, and the meanings embedded within it.

Although the issue strategic narrative may appear to be the focal point of this project, system and identity strategic narratives are equally crucial. As discussed in previous sections, historical and cultural narratives are essential for defending and understanding regional and international claims, making it vital to examine both identity and system narratives. This approach also enables the identification of ontological security derived from past narratives. Secondly, understanding the roles of the four countries relies on exploring their identity strategic narratives. Thirdly, system and identity narratives provide the macro-level context and background for the micro-level issue narrative (Miskimmon et al., 2013; 2017). Specifically, the system narrative outlines a vision of what the world should be, while the identity narrative explains the roles of specific actors within that system. Together, these narratives shape the perception of the issues and challenges under investigation. In other words, analysis of these three levels of strategic narrative integrate contributes to a throughout understanding of states interactions as well as power dynamics.

Firstly, the system strategic narrative encompasses China's understanding of global order and the regional order of the Mekong, as well as how it integrates the Lancang Cascade Plan into its broader international ambitions. This narrative articulates China's normative vision—emphasizing concepts such as 'a human community with a shared future'—which calls for a more just and equitable international system. The language, symbols, tones, metaphors, and emotional appeals China employs are critical to conveying this vision.

In contrast, the system strategic narrative from the perspective of Mekong countries refers to their preferred regional structure. Given the existing power distribution, these countries tend to express their views in a more subtle manner. The extent of alignment or divergence between their ideal regional structure and

China's vision indicates how these regional actors respond to China's claims.

Secondly, identity strategic narrative refers to how actors perceive themselves and others (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, & Roselle, 2013, pp. 11-19; 2017, pp. 2-4). In this context, it pertains to how the four countries articulate their individual and collective roles within the Mekong region through a strategic narrative of regional collective identity. Since differences—and even conflicts—often stem from identity-related issues, analysing identity strategic narratives enables us to uncover underlying ontological security concerns that are deeply rooted in these self-conceptions. Consequently, the similarities and differences between the identity strategic narratives of Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam compared to China provide insight into how these regional actors perceive China's role and the actions it adopts under that persona.

Thirdly, the issue strategic narrative focuses on the specific challenges directly affecting Mekong countries in relation to the Mekong River's water resources, as outlined in Section 3.4.2. The Mekong water dispute is inherently complex because its issues are deeply interwoven. For example, concerns about food security and energy security are closely linked to risks that could undermine regional development, while climate change and shifting environmental patterns further exacerbate these challenges, potentially triggering self-reinforcing cycles of instability. In addition to the narratives emerging from Mekong countries, the issue strategic narrative also examines China's policies and actions in the context of international cooperation over Mekong River water disputes. To disentangle this multifaceted process, the issue strategic narrative can be divided into the following categories.

- Narrative about the Lancang cascade plan, including how China describes this cascade plan; when China softens its tones on Mekong water disputes and shares the Lancang River data; how it describes the discharge water to lower Mekong River countries; the transparency of the decision-making process,

etc.

- The narrative about other solutions provided by China centre with material incentives such as economic cooperation. Issue and solutions provided by regional countries.

The alignment and divergence in strategic narratives on specific issues provide insights into how China's strategic narrative has been received. The varying responses from regional countries across system, identity, and issue-based strategic narratives further reveal the limitations of China's influence on specific issues. Therefore, a comparative analysis of the narratives from Mekong countries and China offers an in-depth examination of regional power dynamics.

3.5 Reflection on research design limitations and the plan for future chapters

The primary limitation of this project lies in the availability of data. The analysis would have been strengthened by processing materials in their original languages and conducting fieldwork to better understand how the Mekong water issue affects citizens in riparian countries. The main limitations can be summarised in three aspects.

First, in terms of research design, direct engagement with citizens living along the Mekong River would have been highly valuable. Fieldwork could have provided richer and more grounded insights into local perceptions of water dependency and the power dynamics both within authoritarian regimes and between the Mekong countries and China. Such empirical data would offer a more practical understanding of the Mekong water issue. However, as this project was undertaken during the COVID-19 pandemic, time constraints and travel restrictions made field research impossible. Future studies are therefore planned to examine how domestic interest groups influence governmental positions and strategies regarding the Mekong water issue.

Secondly, the consistency and availability of the data are very challenging, though

most of the data have open access. Some official websites from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos are not available. For example, till April 2022, the webpage of environment and development department of Vietnam did not function; and the Economic plan and development department from Laos had ‘error’ in opening them. The countries like Cambodia and Laos seldomly have electronic documents for data around 2011-2014. Though I contacted the national library of Singapore for Cambodian and the Embassy of Laos in UK, unfortunately, I did not get any replies.

Thirdly, language represents a significant challenge in conducting international research. English was the primary language selected for data collection. Given the regional power dynamics and strategic hedging behaviours, English often serves as a neutral communication platform through which Southeast Asian countries engage with the international community. Consequently, I expected that Mekong countries might express their positions on the Mekong water issue more directly in English-language materials, given their different target audiences.

However, relying solely on English data carries risks of misinterpretation and omission. Some translated sources may distort meanings, and certain local websites lack search functions or English versions, leading to potential data gaps. To address this, I supplemented English data with selected documents in the Lao language, though these were processed using Google’s image translation tool due to accessibility constraints. This machine-assisted translation may also have affected the precision of interpretation and the preservation of original meanings.

Despite these challenges, the results of the data analysis will be presented in the subsequent chapters. Chapter 4 examines the system-level strategic narrative, Chapter 5 explores the identity strategic narrative, and Chapter 6 focuses on the issue-specific strategic narrative.

Chapter 4. China's strategic narrative about the international system compared to the narratives of Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia

This chapter will present system strategic narrative of each country: first China in Section 4.1, then Laos in Section 4.2, Vietnam in Section 4.3 and Cambodia in Section 4.4. It will finish with a comparison in Section 4.5.

4.1 System strategic narrative of China

A system narrative is all about the world order. Narratives give meaning to world order, and states attempt to identify, produce, and maintain world order using strategic narratives (Miskimmon, O'loughlin & Roselle, 2013, pp.89-91). Contestations between system strategic narratives indicate conflicts on understanding world power distribution between countries. Hence, state of reception of the contested narratives indicates the influence. Accordingly, a relatively well-established strategic narrative reflects a widely accepted world order, granting greater influence and power to the state that designs the narrative (O'Shea 2019). Criticising the current dominant system strategic narrative by pointing to loopholes and international problems contributes to weakening its narrative power. China proposes its new international order following a similar logic.

This chapter identifies three pairs of themes in China's system strategic narrative, focusing on problems and solutions. They include (1) development imbalance and non-traditional security threats, solved by pursuing 'the shared future of mankind', (2) U.S hegemonism and international inequality, which can be solved by the new international order that China proposed; (3) Asia, especially East Asia as a new economic boost to cure the slow growth of international economy.

4.1.1 Shared future for all mankind: a cure to current world problems

China insists that multilateralism is the cure for current worldwide problems. Traditional security problems including conflicts rely on international negotiation and collaboration to be solved. Similarly, multilateral international cooperation is the only way to cope with non-traditional security threats. These threats including public health crisis such as covid (appendix C1, C2, C4, C5, C6), environmental issues such as global warming, new security threats such as information and cyber security, drug dealing and terrorism (Appendix C4, C5). Moreover, these threats, not only make developing countries more vulnerable, but also increase the development imbalance between North and South. Hence, China proposed the strategic narrative of 'shared future for all mankind' of pursuing the common development and prosperity through win-win cooperation. The world should align to fight with the common thereat for their common future instead of fighting with each other (Appendix C4, C5 etc) This ideal world is more peaceful, and its development more balanced with China's great contribution. The United Nations should lead multilateral cooperation. Instead of attempts of manipulation, all countries should show genuine respect to International Law and the U.N.

The 'shared future' indicates China's expectation of a multi-polar world order. This is critical as it answers the question of what kind of world China wants. 'Shared future' suddenly becomes the centre of China's politics and the other foreign policies are designed to fulfil this goal. It has two features, historic roots and differences from the U.S.-led international governance model. The former makes it appeal to the domestic audience and the latter is for international audiences. The latter will be discussed in section 4.1.2.

Resonance with key traditional concepts makes 'shared future' easily acceptable among the domestic audience. Firstly, this 'common development' or 'shared future' concept stems from the concept of Greater Peace (Datong, 大同) in ancient culture. This concept stresses the importance of peace and opposition

rather than using force as solution to conflict. Greater peace is a key concept in Confucianism (儒教) which was the dominant governance philosophy from the Han Dynasty to the Qing Dynasty. In other words, familiarity with this concept helps the Chinese public to accept the shared future strategic narrative. Secondly, it is the international projection of China Dream. As part of China's narrative about its own rejuvenation, 'shared future' indicates China is strong enough to propose a new set of international normative values and be listened to. For example, 'shared future' is written in many international legal documents, such as UN Security Council Resolution 2344 on Afghanistan; two resolutions of the UN Human Rights Council on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the right to Food, etc. This strategic narrative caters to the Chinese public's wish of a powerful and rejuvenated China. The contrast with China's history of humiliation suggests that the CCP is the only saviour for China, which resonates and increases domestic support. To secure and achieve the 'shared future', China proposed a new international order based on the concept of 'shared future.'

4.1.2 New international order: pathway to secure the collective interest for mankind

When it comes to the practice of international cooperation, China diagnoses that U.S hegemonism and the western-dominant cooperation mode have been causing international inequality, bullying, and sovereignty violations, endangering multilateralism and international cooperation for the 'shared future of mankind'. Hence, Xi brought his thoughts on Chinese diplomacy grand strategy and called for a new international order. It contains three key points, self-restriction of great powers, absolute equality among countries, and integrity of sovereignty.

China builds its international order strategic narrative by criticizing the U.S. and U.S-led international system. China insists that hegemonism and unilateralism of great powers are responsible for inequality. Without limitation, great powers would seek self-interest even through illegal means (appendix C6). China refers to

the U.S as the bully and violator of other countries' sovereignty when discussing conflicts in the Middle East. The U.S. is representative, pursuing unilateralism jeopardised international institutions and cooperation, which undermines global stability (Yang, 2021). Based on this, Xi proposed the international democratization and international new order.

International democratization emphasizes absolute equality among countries (Appendix C3, C5, C6; Yang, 2021). It is contrasted against the U.S.A's world protector identity, and indicates China does not understand itself as a superior power over other countries. China insists that all countries, especially big powers should pursue the 'greater good'. This concept stems from the famous Chinese traditional debate of 'greater good and self-interest' (Yiliguan, 义利观) (Appendix C19, C20). President Xi interprets 'greater good' as the 'communism values' and 'self-interest' as inclusiveness development and win-win cooperation. 'Pursue greater good and shared interest' understands as pursuing greater good and shared development, which is a fundamental 'principle' of China's foreign policy (Appendix C19, C20). Internationally, greater powers naturally bear more responsibility. Considering collective interest, the 'greater good', for the other countries is a key element. Just maintaining core interests would be enough for pursuing 'self-interest'. Thus, China conceives self-restraint as part of being a great power, which offers more developing opportunity to less-developed countries.

This self-restraint also includes respect for other countries' sovereignty and treating countries with absolute equality. China insists big powers should abide by international law and the Five principles of peaceful coexistence (Appendix C6; Yang, 2021; Qi, 2021). China claims it is willing to support less developed countries while talking about its self-interest less in international cooperation. It believes this new international order will bring a better environment for international cooperation for a 'shared future', which is accordance with the collective interest

of people throughout the world.

4.1.3 World economic recession and East Asia as a boost

China blames Covid for accelerating the world's economic recession, which led to global inflation, slower economic growth, increasing danger of monetary instability, and anti-globalisation. This global economic recession impacts developing countries more than developed countries. On the other hand, China's leading development model has been questioned and criticized for environment pollution. Thus, China calls for East Asia regional cooperation centered on the green economy as a new economic boost worldwide. ASEAN, as the centre of Asia's cooperation, will provide a new strategy in coping with problems for development. Asian countries include SE countries diverse in religion, culture, size, etc. This diversity generates a more tolerant and flexible ASEAN cooperative mood, which China says will bring new solutions to boost the economy. It also believes that this cooperation will forge a stronger and more integrated East Asia.

China's stress on East Asia and its importance in world economy recovery indicates China's calling for a more confident Asia. This is the outward extension of domestic confidence in China's culture.

4.1.4 How China legitimises its system strategic narrative

When examining China's system strategic narrative, China tries to legitimise its narrative in three ways: providing solutions to the 'impossible' questions, using the UN and International Law as a gateway to reach its international audience, and highlighting normative features to justify itself and attract potential audience.

Firstly, China tries to justify its claim through mediating two pairs of irreconcilable contradictories. The first pair is international cooperation and sovereignty. When international cooperation outcomes, such as treaties and agreements, affect the

domestic policy system, individual countries' sovereignty is undermined. Anti-globalisation becomes popular. So China tries to use a loose cooperation mode to secure 'absolute' sovereignty. The second pair is environmental protection and economic growth, mostly for developing countries. Without advanced technology, economic growth often causes severe environmental damage. The idea of the 'green economy' tries to resolve this dilemma as well as increasing China's impact while promoting China's development pattern.

Secondly, China tries to delicately align its international goals with U.N and International Law to make its strategic narrative more acceptable to international audiences. By emphasising the UN's core concept, multilateralism, and China's efforts to support it, China's strategic narrative indicates that to support China is partly to support the U.N. On the other hand, this also indicates that China is a status quo country, rather than a revolutionary country.

Finally, China's system strategic narrative has typical normative features such as valuing peace, equality, justice, international democracy. As mentioned above, these normative values are based on China's traditional culture and experience of historical humiliation. China tries to combine its values with Western norms but still maintain its uniqueness. China sees itself as a representative of the third world. This set of strategic narratives aims to cater to developing countries' interests. Developing countries are the target audience for China.

4.2 System strategic narrative of Laos

Similar to China, this section will follow a problem-solution structure. Laos's core national interest is economic development. Instead of directly pointing out the issues of international order, Laos identified the international obstacles embedded in international order that hindered their progress. There are three pairs of obstacles and solutions proposed by Laos: (1) the potential for a peaceful revolution due to international prejudice, which can be addressed by maintaining and increasing special relations with regional communist countries, China, and

Vietnam; (2) economic uncertainty caused by anti-globalisation, which can be mitigated through increased regional economic connectivity; and (3) non-traditional security challenges posed by Covid-19, which can be addressed by increasing regional and international connectivity. Section 3.2 will conclude with an overview of the key features of Lao's strategic narrative.

4.2.1 Peaceful revolution and comradeship

Laos considers peaceful revolution (Appendix L74, 75; Wang 2016; Fang, 2011) as one of the biggest threats to its stability. Laos believes that this type of revolution arises from international prejudice, particularly from developed capitalist countries towards developing communist countries. With the 'cold war logic' (Appendix L75, Fang, 2011, Hai, 2021), Western nations may try to overthrow the Lao PDR regime and exploit Laos. However, Laos sees its important geopolitical position as a way to benefit its national interest and improve the well-being of its people.

Laos proposes two solutions to address this issue. Firstly, Laos emphasizes the need to strengthen the Lao People Revolutionary Party (LPRP), which is the ruling communist party in Laos, to make it a 'powerful, strong, and stable party' (Appendix L74, 75; Hai, 2011; Wang, 2016) that can withstand any regime threats, including peaceful revolution. Secondly, Laos seeks to align with and establish close relationships with other communist countries, specifically China and Vietnam. Laos values its 'special and great comrades' relationship (Appendix L74, 75) with these countries, as it provides Laos with examples and experiences of national development and response to regime risks.

4.2.2 World economic recession and international cooperation

Laos attributes the world economic recession to international inequality and anti-economic globalisation due to several reasons. Firstly, Laos was affected by the global financial crisis, which led to a decrease in capital sources (Appendix L71)

and increased pressure from developed countries and international organizations to depress prices for raw materials. Secondly, the global inflation (Appendix L74), trade war between great powers (Appendix L72, 73), and the pandemic (Appendix L73) have increased economic uncertainty, especially for developing countries like Laos. Thirdly, the economic recession of China poses a challenge to Laos's economic condition as China is the biggest donor to Laos's economy and its vital infrastructure construction projects. China's slow economic growth could decrease its financial aid to Laos.

To mitigate the world economic recession, Laos proposes two main solutions. Firstly, domestically, Laos implements policies to upgrade trade conditions and structures, such as decreasing tariffs (Appendix L73, 74) and opening markets. Secondly, Laos seeks to increase its economic strength by calling for economic regional connectivity. Laos acknowledges that the world economy is highly competitive (Appendix L71, L74, L75), and partnerships with developed countries and international organizations (Appendix L73, 74) are vital for the survival of smaller economic entities like Laos. Therefore, Laos is eager to integrate itself into regional and international economic organizations such as ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA), Greater Mekong subregional economic cooperation (GMS), and ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) (Appendix L72, 73, 74), among others.

4.2.3 Non-traditional security threats and regional connectivity

Non-traditional security threats have gradually become a major concern for Laos's international affairs. Laos identifies climate change and COVID-19 as the two main threats. Firstly, as a country in the Mekong River basin, Laos's livelihood heavily relies on the river. With the increase in extreme weather events due to climate change (Appendix L72, 73, 74), there is an increased risk of water shortages during drought seasons and floods during rainy seasons, which further increases Laos's economic uncertainty. Secondly, COVID-19 poses a threat to the well-being of the people of Laos and the world economy (Appendix L74, Hai, 2021). Economic recovery remains a major challenge for Laos.

Laos recognizes that these types of new security threats cannot be dealt with by one country alone. Laos calls for international cooperation and connectivity (Appendix L74) to integrate the strengths of Southeast Asia and the international community to collectively tackle pandemic challenges. Laos has proposed leveraging its central position in the Mekong region and the China-Laos railway to become a ‘regional logistics hub’ (Appendix L72, 73, 74) and contribute to regional economic recovery.

4.2.4 Key features of Laos system narrative

Pragmatism is a key feature of Laos’s system narrative, which prioritizes economic development and political independence. Laos’s foreign policies are designed to serve its national interest and pursue economic growth, emphasizing regional and international cooperation to create a favourable financial environment. Despite being influenced by powerful neighbours (Jerndal & Rigg, 1998; Kittikhoun, 2009; Mariani, 2012), Laos presents its foreign relations as an independent choice (Appendix L73, 74, 75), as demonstrated by its close relationship with China, which is seen as a means to boost Laos’s economic development. Pragmatism also guides Laos identity and issues narratives.

4.3 System strategic narrative of Vietnam

The Vietnamese system narrative encompasses two distinct features. Firstly, it is designed to safeguard Vietnam’s national interests, and secondly, it prioritizes the Southeast Asian region within the global world order. The Vietnamese government acknowledges the significance of an international order characterized by ‘peace, stability, and development’ (Appendix V1, V2, V3, V4, V5). It recognises that such an order, particularly within the Southeast Asian region, fosters the most favourable environment for Vietnam’s development and the realization of its national interests. Vietnam identifies three primary threats to its desired international order: China’s aggressive action in South China Sea territorial

disputes, uncertainty brought by great powers competition, and non-traditional security threats. To cope with these challenges, Vietnam proposed three solutions: establish strategic partnership with significant actors within and beyond region, calling for more active international organisation to mediate and stable great power's competition, and propose multilateral international cooperation to face the new challenges.

4.3.1 China's aggressive action and strategic partnership

Vietnam perceives a significant threat to its own sovereignty and territorial integrity due to China's aggressive actions in the South China Sea (Appendix V12, 13, 5). Such actions not only undermine Vietnam's core national interests, as previously discussed under the concept of 'domestic nationalism' (Appendix V1, V2, V3, V11), but also pose a direct challenge to Vietnam's national security. Consequently, 'security and defence' remain pressing concerns that Vietnam continues to confront (Appendix V1, V2). The tensions between Sino-Vietnam relations further exacerbate the instability within the regional international order.

To effectively address this threat, the Vietnamese government recognizes the need to adopt a 'proactive' approach (Appendix V13). In response, Vietnam has identified key actors both within and beyond the region, including Japan, India, and the United States, and seeks to establish 'strategic partnerships' with them (Appendix V1, V2, V3, V13). The primary aim of these partnerships is to counterbalance China's influence and assertiveness. By upgrading its bilateral relations with these partners, Vietnam seeks to foster a preferred 'Indo-Asia-Pacific' (appendix V11) environment that aligns with its interests and enhances its regional international standing.

4.3.2 Uncertainty and international organisations

Vietnam identifies the uncertainty arising from the security dilemma among great powers, driven by factors such as 'unipolarism, military modernization, military

build-up, and territorial disputes’ (Appendix V8, V9, V10), as a significant hindrance to its own development and that of ASEAN as a collective. This uncertainty not only exacerbates the challenges posed by non-traditional threats like the Covid pandemic and drug trafficking but also adversely affects economic recovery in the post-pandemic era. Moreover, it contributes to the escalation of ‘strategic distrust’ in the Asia-Pacific region (Appendix V4).

In response to this complex issue, Vietnam proposes collaborative efforts with ASEAN and other international organizations to find solutions. Vietnam advocates for international organizations to serve as a ‘bridge’ (Appendix V4), leveraging the ‘ASEAN mood’ (Appendix V4, V8) and its ‘central position’ (Appendix V8, V9) to foster improved relationships within the Asia-Pacific region. Emphasizing a ‘responsible’ approach, Vietnam sees this measure as crucial for the overall future of ASEAN (Appendix V4).

4.3.3 Non-traditional threats and international cooperation

Vietnam acknowledges non-traditional threats (Appendix V4, V7, V6) as major impediments to its development. These threats encompass a range of issues, including the challenges posed by the Covid pandemic, drug trafficking in the Mekong Delta, water shortages and disputes in the Mekong region, climate change impacts (Appendix V4, V6, V7, V8), and the consequent slow economic growth. Vietnam recognizes that coping with these threats is a daunting task for any country, particularly for developing nations and within the ASEAN context.

In response to these challenges, Vietnam advocates for ‘multilateral international collaboration’ (Appendix V5, V6). Vietnam asserts that every country and entity must shoulder responsibility and demonstrate ‘full commitment’ (Appendix V4) to secure the future of Asia. To overcome these non-traditional threats, Vietnam is eager to collaborate through ASEAN and other international organisations. Additionally, Vietnam calls for ‘globalization and international democratization’ (Appendix V1) to foster a more conducive environment characterized by ‘peace,

stability, and development’ (Appendix V1, V7, V9). Moreover, Vietnam also recognises increasing ‘regional connectivity’ (appendix V2, V1) is vital for regional development.

4.4 System strategic narrative of Cambodia

The driving force behind Cambodia’s strategic and policy decisions is its national interest. At the international level, the cornerstone of Cambodia’s pursuit of ‘growth, employment, equitability, and efficiency’ (Appendix K1, K2, K3, K4) lies in its commitment to multilateral cooperation. To this end, the Cambodian government has identified ‘territorial integrity, sovereignty, peace and political stability, and economic benefits’ (Appendix K9, K10, K14) as the fundamental pillars underpinning its diplomatic policies.

Within the framework of regional and international multilateral cooperation, Cambodia places great emphasis on economic collaboration and foreign investments (Appendix K1, K2, K5, K6). The government believes that such cooperation, rooted in multilateral frameworks, is instrumental in fostering national economic development. Simultaneously, this approach is viewed as advantageous in addressing domestic challenges, including issues related to drugs and public health crises such as the Covid pandemic (Appendix K1, K4, K6). Consequently, Cambodia regards the creation of a peaceful and inclusive international environment as a crucial condition for the successful implementation of its multilateral cooperation strategy.

Consistent with preceding content, this section employs an issue-solution logic to present two primary facets of Cambodia’s strategic narratives. Firstly, it delves into the challenges impeding Cambodia’s international multilateral cooperation system and outlines the solutions proposed by the Cambodian government. Secondly, it elucidates Cambodia’s perspective on the international order within Southeast Asia and the Mekong region.

In general, Cambodia government identifies three main international challenges, the development uncertainty brought by US - China tension, regional drug issues that would threat Cambodia domestic security, covid and post covid issues that would danger its economic development.

4.4.1 US-China tension and Cambodia's neutrality

The Cambodian government underscores the profound impact of the rivalry between China and the US, characterizing it as a source of 'strategic and security uncertainties and tensions' (Appendix K7, K8, K9), with potential ramifications for the nation's peace and economic development. Politically, Cambodia envisions Southeast Asia and ASEAN countries as a battleground (Appendix K11, 12, 13) where the 'inevitable' competition between these two major powers plays out due to differences in 'values and divergent strategic interests' (Appendix K7, K12). The escalating conflicts between a waning 'US-led alliance system' and a 'Sino-centric regional order' (Appendix K7, K10) exert pressure on ASEAN countries, coercing them to 'choose sides' against their preferences. Cambodia aptly describes its situation as 'walking on a tight rope' (Appendix K7), reflecting its precarious position.

Given Cambodia's history as a victim of civil war during the Cold War, there is a palpable concern that the US-China tension might precipitate a new Cold War in Southeast Asia, posing threats to both its own and regional security (Appendix K8, K11). Economically, the barriers stemming from the trade war compound challenges for Cambodia's exports (Appendix K14) and its appeal to foreign investments. Additionally, tariff barriers impede the establishment of a Free Trade Agreements (FTA) zone in Southeast Asia (Appendix K1, K5, K6, K14). Cambodia grapples with these difficulties without reservation.

In its assessment, Cambodia places a significant responsibility on the US for the regional tensions but does so with subtlety. Notably, Cambodia opts for the phrasing 'US-China' (Appendix K7, 11, 12) over 'China-US,' emphasizing the

leadership role of the US in the current situation. This choice not only underscores the US's primary responsibility but also highlights the impact of protectionist policies implemented by the Trump administration, compelling Cambodia and other ASEAN countries to turn to China. This shift further complicates Cambodia's efforts to maintain neutrality (Appendix K8, K11). Nevertheless, Cambodia's stance on this issue is nuanced, and its complex attitude toward China will be further expounded in the section addressing the strategic narrative of the regional order. Given the disparities in the power size of the countries involved, Cambodia navigates this situation with measured accusations and adopts neutral measures to safeguard its security and economic interests.

Guided by a steadfast commitment to neutrality, the Cambodian government advocates a non-aligned foreign policy and regional unity as pragmatic solutions to navigate the complexities arising from the tensions between the United States and China. At the core of Cambodia's foreign policy lies an emphasis on 'permanent neutrality, non-alignment, peaceful co-existence, and non-interference' (Appendix K9, 10, 15), aligning with its identity as a regional small power in comparison to the formidable capacities of China and the US (Appendix K13). Recognizing its relative size, Cambodia underscores the importance of regional unity as a means to bolster its neutrality. Despite its acknowledgment of its 'small' stature, Cambodia believes that, collectively with other ASEAN countries, it can establish an ASEAN-led 'rules-based' (Appendix K8, K15) regional order that serves the long-term interests of all countries in the region. This policy, Cambodia contends, not only enhances its policy flexibility but also opens avenues for balancing the influences of the two major powers.

In confronting the challenges posed by the US-China tension, the Cambodian government perceives an opportunity to amplify its influence by striking a delicate balance between these two powers. Firstly, Cambodia contends that its identity as a peace-loving nation provides a reliable basis for mediating between the two giants, seeking to shed the perception of being a mere client country of China.

This strategic shift will be explored further in the forthcoming identity strategic narrative section 5.4. Secondly, leveraging its geopolitical advantage and existing Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) with China, South Korea, and Japan (Appendix K5, K9, K14), Cambodia believes it possesses the capability to navigate the US-China tension. This proactive stance not only expands its negotiation leverage in FTAs with other nations such as the UK and Canada (Appendix K12, 14, 15) but also aligns with its economic diplomacy strategy. Cambodia anticipates reaping economic benefits and increasing its regional influence through the completion of the Eurasian FTA framework. Beyond the tensions among major powers, Cambodia remains cognizant of collective regional threats encompassing issues such as drugs, water security, and the ongoing challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

4.4.2 Collective regional issues and collective regional solution

Cambodia identifies three critical issues—drugs, water, and COVID—as threats to its security, with both domestic and international implications that necessitate collective solutions. The illicit drug trade, surpassing the Golden Triangle countries (Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand), is deemed a significant threat to Cambodia’s domestic security and public health (Appendix K1, 2, 3, 4). Similarly, challenges related to water, such as droughts and floods, have repercussions domestically, influencing Cambodia’s regional image, especially concerning its food diplomacy plans (Appendix K20, 28). A comprehensive exploration of the water issue will be provided in the upcoming water issue narrative chapter [insert chapter location]. Although the COVID-19 pandemic is a relatively recent challenge compared to the others, it has swiftly and profoundly impacted Cambodia, endangering both its citizens’ lives and its economy (Appendix K17, 18). Described as ‘a new test for the Southeast Asia region’ (Appendix K17) and ‘a glass fate’ (Appendix K19) for ASEAN countries, the interconnectedness of these issues underscores the need for collective regional solutions. Cambodia advocates for regional unity and cooperation as the key to addressing these challenges.

The main solution proposed by Cambodia involves multilateral regional

cooperation, utilizing various regional and international organizations, with a primary focus on the ASEAN platform. In the fight against the drug trade, Cambodia advocates for a joint effort under the auspices of ASEAN and ASEAN 10+China (Appendix K1, 2, 3, 5, 6). It underscores the necessity of regional unity to combat the challenges posed by COVID-19, urging international aid for vaccine distribution and medical resources (Appendix K7, 16, 19). Cambodia specifically highlights China as a crucial contributor to these efforts and designates the Mekong region as a priority for vaccine distribution (Appendix K18, 19). In terms of post-COVID economic recovery, Cambodia envisions regional economic cooperation based on ASEAN and ASEAN 10+X platforms (Appendix K16, 17). While acknowledging the importance of cooperation with China as a major regional power, Cambodia is careful not to align itself with China's international stance. The following section will delve into Cambodia's understanding of the regional order.

4.4.3 Strategic narrative about Cambodia's regional order

This section will expound on Cambodia's self-perception within the regional order, elucidate its relationships with key regional players, including China, Laos, and Vietnam, and articulate its stance on the regional order. Cambodia characterizes itself as a modest regional power, drawing an analogy that likens its size to that of a shrimp amidst larger entities, particularly Russia and China (Appendix K29). It embraces the identity of a late-developing country within both the Mekong and Southeast Asia regions, as highlighted in various sources (Appendix K8, 15, 21, 24). Cambodia's conviction lies in the belief that its national development is intricately linked with regional integration (Appendix K6, 7, 8). Consequently, comprehending Cambodia's perspective on the positions of different countries within the region becomes pivotal for fostering regional integration and collective development.

The first half presents how Cambodia understand its bilateral relationship with China, Vietnam and Laos. the Firstly, Cambodia designates China as its 'top friend' and a 'close and good friend' (Appendix K29, 30, 31), a stance largely influenced

by China's provision of aid without conditions and concession loans (Appendix K29). The close Sino-Cambodian relationship is perceived as instrumental in bolstering Cambodia's economy, given China's status as the world's largest market and its rapid economic development (Appendix K26, 27, 28). Describing itself as developing under the 'lead of China' (Appendix K34), Cambodia acknowledges China's contribution to its infrastructure through the 'Build-Operate-Transfer (BOT)' framework (Appendix K29, 34), leading to improved roads, bridges, and a foundation for regional connectivity. China's assistance in constructing hydro power stations (Appendix K30, 31) further provides Cambodia with cleaner and more affordable energy. However, amidst the uncertainties arising from the US-China tension, Cambodia maintains a neutral stance, wary of being labelled as China's client state, which could undermine its neutrality strategy (Appendix K33). Cambodian experts caution against excessive reliance on China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), emphasizing the need for an independent, resilient, and strong economy (Appendix K35). Additionally, Cambodia and China encounter challenges related to the regional order, a topic to be explored in chapter 4.5.

Secondly, Cambodia regards Vietnam as a regional 'equal member on equal footing' (Appendix K29), particularly within ASEAN. Despite historical complexities, including Cambodia once being considered the 'economic colony of Vietnam' (Appendix K29) and ongoing territorial disputes leading to occasional conflicts in border villages, common interests drive cooperation between the two nations. Cambodia takes pride in normalizing its relationship with Vietnam (Appendix K29, 36). A noteworthy example is their shared concern over Mekong water issues, as both countries, being downstream, heavily rely on the Mekong River, fostering mutual interests in addressing challenges posed by dams in Laos and upriver countries.

Thirdly, Cambodia views Laos as a potentially precarious ASEAN neighbor, primarily due to the construction of the Dong Sahong hydropower station within Laos's territory, threatening to impede a mainstream of the Mekong River just 2,000 km

away (Appendix K29). except for this, Cambodia also refer ASEAN as ‘family’ (appendix K7, K28).

The later half is about Cambodia’s understanding on the China-cantered regional structure. Similar to Cambodia’s approach to China, its stance on the current regional order in Southeast Asia is nuanced. On one hand, Cambodia acknowledges China’s influential role in the region, recognizing it as a significant power whose absence could pose challenges for ASEAN (Appendix K32). Cambodia believes that collaboration with China, particularly through current multilateral platforms such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC), contributes substantially to regional integration in an efficient manner. However, Cambodia also identifies certain issues within the existing regional order. Firstly, the tensions between the U.S. and China in Southeast Asia are perceived as a potential threat to regional security, with concerns that China may exploit ASEAN and Southeast Asian nations in the ongoing power dynamics (Appendix K37). Secondly, Cambodia contends that China tends to muddy the waters of regional cooperation frameworks, blurring the boundaries among issues. For instance, South China Sea territorial disputes are intertwined with the LMCO, designed for Mekong water cooperation. Cambodia characterizes China as an ‘elephant in every room’ (Appendix K33), suggesting that this omnipresence weakens the efficiency of regional cooperation platforms.

In response to these identified concerns, Cambodia advocates for the establishment of an ASEAN-led and rule-based regional order as a solution, underscoring the importance of regional autonomy and cohesion (Appendix K33). Cambodia envisions an ideal regional order cantered around ASEAN, where all member countries adhere to established principles and regulations, such as those outlined by the United Nations. It places significant emphasis on the idea that regional rules should be uniformly applied to all nations, irrespective of their sizes, fostering an environment where ‘big fishes, small fishes, and shrimp’ are subject to the same regulations (Appendix K8, K27, K28). This approach, Cambodia argues,

is pivotal for ensuring the security and equilibrium of the Southeast Asia region, allowing for a balanced negotiation between major powers and fostering a more collective and effective development future for all regional countries.

4.5 Comparison between system narrative of China and Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia

This section examines China's strategic narratives in comparison with those of other countries, highlighting their alignments and differences.

4.5.1. Similarities between system narrative of China and Laos

China and Laos share similarities in their system narratives. Firstly, both countries place great importance on international cooperation and connectivity in the face of non-traditional security threats. For instance, they advocate for joint efforts to combat the pandemic (Appendix L73, C5). China's 'shared future' slogan (Appendix C1, C5) is also supported by Laos, as seen in the analysis of Laos's identity narrative in the following chapter. Secondly, both countries acknowledge the international inequality between developed and developing countries. China promotes a 'more just international order' (Appendix C3, C4, C5), while Laos highlights the challenges faced by developing countries, such as the pressure on raw materials markets (Appendix L73) from developed countries and international organizations. Thirdly, both China and Laos value the communist party character and emphasize mutual aid among communist countries.

4.5.2 Difference between system narrative of China and Laos

The main difference between China and Laos is their approach to identifying the cause of international problems. China takes an anti-U.S. stance and blames the U.S.-led international system for many issues, while Laos avoids directly pointing fingers and focuses on addressing factual difficulties such as the pandemic, trade wars, and market pressures (Appendix L71, 72, 73). This approach allows Laos

more flexibility in international cooperation, as seen in the 9th Lao Congress conference in 2011 (Appendix L74), where Laos viewed the U.S. as a cooperative actor in Southeast Asia and a potential partner for economic development.

4.5.3 Alignment in the System Narrative between China and Vietnam

While Vietnam does not overtly echo China's narrative as directly as Laos, there are subtle areas of agreement in their respective system narratives.

Firstly, both countries concur on the importance of maintaining a peaceful international environment to foster regional development. Additionally, Vietnam resonates with China's call for international democratization. Secondly, both nations emphasize the significance of multilateral international cooperation. Thirdly, they stress regional connectivity as crucial for advancing regional development. Vietnam acknowledges the connectivity facilitated by China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in promoting ASEAN's economic development (see Appendix V9). Finally, though Vietnam does not explicitly echo China's concept of a 'shared future,' it does address the collective efforts needed to build the future for the Asia-Pacific region (see Appendix V4).

In conclusion, Vietnam's foreign policy and system narrative share a pragmatic character with Laos, driven by a commitment to independence and development. Despite differences in their perceptions of regional tensions, Vietnam subtly aligns with various aspects of China's system narrative, including the importance of a peaceful international environment, multilateral international cooperation, regional connectivity, and collective efforts toward the future of the Asia-Pacific region.

4.5.4 Difference in System Narrative between China and Vietnam

Like Laos, Vietnam exhibits a pragmatic foreign policy and system narrative characterized by its emphasis on independence and development. This

determination shapes Vietnam's approach, including adopting a hedging strategy between China and the United States, as well as maintaining open options with great powers to align with its system narrative. Consequently, Vietnam subtly expresses both agreement and disagreements with China's narrative.

The primary divergence in the system narrative of the two countries lies in the reason for regional tensions. Vietnam attributes regional tensions to China's aggressive movements (see Appendix V12, 13), which it perceives as a direct threat to its sovereignty and integrity. Vietnam contends that China's actions violate the 'rule of international law,' particularly concerning the '1982 UNCLOS, DOC, and GOC' (see Appendix V4, V5, V13). Conversely, China presents itself as a peaceful regional builder and a promoter of peace, positioning itself as a faithful executor of international law.

4.5.5 Alignments between system narrative between China and Cambodia

Compared to the other countries, Cambodia roughly aligns with most of China's system narrative. Similar to Laos and Vietnam, it expresses its disagreements in a subtle way.

Firstly, both nations concur on the significance of a peaceful international environment as a catalyst for improved development. Secondly, there is mutual recognition of the importance of multilateral international cooperation in addressing both traditional and non-traditional security threats, such as drug trafficking and the COVID-19 pandemic. Thirdly, concerning the tensions between the U.S. and China, it is the consensus that the U.S. bears the major responsibility. Finally, Cambodia pragmatically aligns with China's leading role and the Sino-centric order in the Southeast Asian region.

4.5.6 Differences in System Narrative between China and Cambodia

Cambodia tactfully articulates its disagreements with China through careful

language choices and an air of indifference towards certain claims. Firstly, Cambodia refrains from echoing China's narratives targeting the U.S., recognizing that doing so could compromise Cambodia's commitment to neutrality. Secondly, while Cambodia acknowledges the existence of a Sino-centric regional system based on initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC), it maintains a belief in the merits of an ASEAN-centric and UN rule-based regional order, emphasizing the benefits such a framework could bring to all countries involved. Thirdly, Cambodia employs phrases that subtly link the concept of a 'shared future' with negative connotations to convey its stance. For instance, it refers to the Mekong water issue as a 'shared problem' (Appendix K37) and characterizes the impact of COVID-19 as a 'glass fate' (Appendix K19). In conclusion, Cambodia aggregated with China roughly but present its disagreements subtly.

Chapter 5. China's strategic narrative about identity compared to the narratives of Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam

This chapter traces strategic narratives about identity. It starts with China's narrative in section 5.1, then moves to the other countries: Laos in section 5.2, Vietnam in section 5.3 and Cambodia in section 5.4. A comparison of the narratives of Mekong countries against China's narrative is presented at the end in section 5.5.

5.1. China's identity narratives

Identity is essential to countries and is fluid rather than fixed. The process of identity formation is closely tied to the alignment and construction of societal values, achieved through the diffusion of narratives and knowledge (Bukh, 2022). The dissemination of knowledge mirrors the spread of narratives, with strategic narratives playing a key role in shaping China's identity both domestically and internationally.

Identity narratives are an essential aspect of strategic narrative theory. They indicate how the actor understands itself and the relationships of 'self-others' by answering questions such as 'who was I', 'who I am' and 'who I will be' (Callahan 2003; Singsuriya 2016; Davis Cross & Jacob, 2022, p43). Identity is a concept of similarity, but its creation always addresses the difference between 'us' and 'others' and puts a negative label on 'others' (Singsuriya 2016). This comparison and contrast are major ways of exploring China's identity, especially in its collective international identity formation.

5.1.1. China's four identities

Firstly, China still sees itself as a developing country. Though China is proud to be the world's second largest economy (Pu 2017), it insists on itself as the 'largest

developing country' and 'belongs to the 'developing countries family' (appendix C3, C4, C5, C8, C10, C11, C12). It also intensifies the sense of a fellow-developing country by stressing similarity, which contrasts with the developed countries. In other words, when facing an international audience, China believes 'we' refers to developing countries and 'other' refers to U.S-led developed countries.

Secondly, China is a leader of developing countries. With its tremendous economic power, China thinks of itself as a leader and needs to fight for the common interest of the developing countries' family by calling for a more just international order and promoting the Chinese development model. For example, leadership speeches (Appendix C7, C8, C9, C10, C11) stresses international equality, China's economic and infrastructure aid, and promotion of South-South cooperation repeatedly.

Thirdly, China is a responsible power. In Xi's keynote speeches, he claims China is a responsible power when defending the international trade order and calling for a 'more invigorated, more inclusive and more sustainable' and criticising U.S.'s trade protectionism (Xi Jinping 2017, 2019; Boon 2022). This was also linked with 'international responsibility to act over climate change' when criticising the U.S. withdrawal from the Paris Accord in 2017. After the Covid-19 pandemic began, China's responsible role was embodied by sharing medical supplies, including vaccinations, mainly with BRICS and developing countries in Southeast Asia (Zhao Lijian, 2020; Wang Wenbin, 2021; Wang Yi, 2021).

Finally, China is the regional power and builder of regional order. China sees itself as a constructive regional power in Southeast Asia. It was a dominant regional power for thousands of years in ancient times and is still the most powerful country in the region (Chan 2014; Pu 2017). However, in keynote speeches, China blurs this asymmetric regional power structure. It emphasises the friendly historical ties, mutual respect and beneficial cooperation brought by Zheng He and Zhang Qian in history. China also stresses its contribution to regional prosperity through BRI and other economic and financial aid, more importantly,

providing the Chinese developing model and modelling cooperative inclusion in coping with problems, including security issues.

5.1.2 Chinese characteristics

There are two qualities behind the identities which link them together: the central position of China's Communist Party (CCP), and history's vital function in forging China's identity.

The rightful ruling position of China's Communist Party is a crucial feature in China's identity narrative. Nearly every keynote speech stresses this (Pu, 2017; Breslin, 2009; appendix C9). A key feature of this strategic narrative is that it links the domestic and international audiences. CCP's leadership was the saviour of 'old China' during the history of China's national humiliation and is the only way to lead 'new China' to its rejuvenation. Domestically, China's narrative suggests that only the CCP can solve China's development problems. For example, the BRI is part of the solution to the domestic economic growth slowdown by transferring excess capacity. Internationally, international cooperation under the CCP's leadership is supposed to provide for fair and peaceful win-win cooperation (appendix C7, C8, C10). Thus, China portrays itself as a strong but just world leader, intensifying the domestic identity of 'stronger China'. History is often recalled as evidence.

History is also an accessible resource for forging the identity of international 'victim', 'responsible builder', and 'peaceful friend'. Firstly, the humiliation in China's history makes China a victim of imperialist and developed countries. Japan as the invader then becomes the 'other' (Suzuki 2007). Domestically, nationalism triggered by victimhood reminds audiences of the importance of the CCP in the Anti-Japanese war, which contributed to increasing the CCP's domestic legitimacy. Internationally, with the Southeast Asian countries sharing a similar history, this shared sense of victimhood would contribute to the foundation of the 'collective Mekong identity'. This argument will be presented in section 5.1.3. Secondly,

China's narrative recalls the history of the silk road and tribute system which started during the Han and Tang Dynasties when China was the most powerful county in Asia and even the world. This historical heritage is used to justify (appendix W30, 33, 32) China's involvement and action in Southeast Asia. Hence, making a contribution to regional development becomes part of China's international responsibility. China's contribution includes material benefits, including economic, financial, and infrastructure construction cooperation and aid provided by BRI and other regional cooperation. More importantly, China stresses its regional non-material contribution, including fair, inclusive win-win cooperation, China's development model, and China's wisdom. Finally, historical evidence is often recalled to support the identity of China as a peaceful regional friend. China's traumatic experience with wars reinforce its identity as a peace-loving and peace-cherishing country. Communist China claims never to have started a war since its establishment in 1949 (Xi Jinping, 2020; Zhao Lijian, 2022). Moreover, 'a peaceful, active, and united ASEAN is in the best interest of China' (Foreign Ministry, 2013; 2017; Wang Yi, 2017). Naturally, China is willing to contribute and maintain regional peace and prosperity. This is the core incentive of China-led international cooperation, including the Sino-Mekong countries' relationship.

5.1.3 Self-others: China's identity with Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam

Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam are the main actors in China's regional blueprint. They make up half of the six Mekong region countries. A close relationship with them would contribute to China's impact in the Mekong basin and ASEAN. China's desire for a close relationship shows in China's strategic narrative of identity about these three countries. In this part of the narrative, there are two key features: the historical ties between China and these countries as the origin of their identity; and there are continual efforts to maintain it from the present to the future.

China considers Cambodia as a trustful, loyal, and die-hard friend. This friendship

has a long history. There was never a war between China and Cambodia throughout history. Diplomatic relations were first established during the Wei and Jin Dynasties. Cambodia, translated as Funan (扶南) in China's history, refused to lend military force to neighbouring country Linyi (林邑) located in what is now central Vietnam, which planned to attack China's territory of Jiaozhou (交州) (Yu, 1994). As a significant power in Southeast Asia, Cambodia and China developed trade and cultural communication. This historical relationship provides a favourable background for communication in modern times.

In contemporary history, a close relationship between leaders has contributed to a 'die-hard friendship' between the two countries. China and Cambodia, led by Norodom Sihanouk (នរោត្តម សីហនុ), established diplomatic relations in 1958. China's former president Mao Zedong and the subsequent presidents had a personal friendship with Sihanouk (Li & Shao, 2012; Gu, 2019). China provided asylum and support to Norodom Sihanouk when he was exiled and sentenced to death in the 1970s. With joint help from China, North Vietnam and Laos, Norodom Sihanouk came to power in 1975 (Foreign Ministry, introduction on Cambodia; Gu, 2018, 2019; Xu, 2005). This historical connection contributes to deepening the Sino-Cambodian relationship in modern days.

In 1993, China and Cambodia established a comprehensive partnership. Cambodia then became China's loyal friend. Mutual support is the feature of this period. China provides unconditional aid to support Cambodia's development (Jiang & Zhang, 2021; Yang, 2017). Through investment, trade, foreign aid, and diplomatic support, China has been the largest donor to Cambodia since 2010 (Chen, 2016).

On the other hand, Cambodia provides political support to China. Cambodia shares China's stance on the South China Sea territorial disputes and the Taiwan issue. ASEAN members even question its independence because Cambodia stays in too close a relationship with China.

In summary, there are three critical reasons why China considers Cambodia as a die-hard friend: the close leadership relations, China's economic aid, and its close international political stance. In Xi's era, China plans to support Cambodia through BRI cooperation and anti-Covid aid to maintain and deepen this bilateral relationship and forge a 'shared future' for China and Cambodia.

5.1.3.2 Laos: China's brother, partner, and comrade

China describes the Sino-Laos bilateral relationship as brotherhood, partnership, and comradeship. It contains three key elements. Firstly, like in Cambodia, historical interactions matter in the Sino-Laos relationship. France invaded both China and Laos in the 19th century. Despite its weak economic condition, China supported Laos in winning the war of independence in 1954 and its sovereign integrity during Geneva Conferences in 1961 and 1962 (Ma & Fang, 2004, 125-126). This interaction contributes to close Communist parties' communication.

Secondly, party communication is vital in forging Sino-Lao brotherhood and comradeship. During the war of independence, China's Communist Party helped establish the Laotian communist party, fight the independence war, and establishing a socialist system (Wen, 2022; Shen, 2022). Currently, China connected its 13th 5-year domestic plan to Laos's domestic strategy to 'Change the land-locked country into a land-linked country'. China is also ready to help Laos formulate a unique scheme for its economic development if needed. 'Strategic shared future' between China and Laos is especially stressed (appendix W31). Deepening and widening party and political cooperation have a unique position in this bilateral relationship. Internationally, like Cambodia, Laos shares the same political stance with China on the Taiwan issue and the South China Sea territorial disputes. In future, they wish to safeguard developing countries' global interests.

Thirdly, the economic relationship is a crucial feature. Historically, China provided

189 million RMB in total free aid for Laos' construction (Zhang, 2010). China has become Laos' most significant donor since 2013. Besides economic investment and support, China also helps Laos to develop economic growth points such as tourism and cross-border trade (Zhang, 2009; Liu, 2021). In sum, historical ties, the communist leader party and close economic relationships are key elements in forging Sino-Lao's identity. Similar to Cambodia, future cooperation under BRI and party communication will maintain the current brotherhood and deepen it by building a 'shared future' between China and Laos.

5.1.3.3 Vietnam: China's comprehensive partner

China considers Vietnam as a 'comprehensive partner' (全面合作战略伙伴) (appendix W30) Historical ties and economic connections are vital points in this partnership, whereas Communist country identity seems less critical.

Firstly, in history, since the establishment of diplomatic ties between China and Vietnam in 1950, bilateral relations have experienced ups and downs. China's support for Vietnam's independence led to a period of working 'comrades and brothers'. Then the China-Vietnam war led to a confrontation period (Gu & Liang, 2010). The bilateral relationship was normalised in the 1990s, and a "comprehensive partnership" was established in 2008 (Wei & Pan, 2021). With the territorial disputes in the South China Sea, mutual trust and understanding are explicitly stressed in China's official documents.

Secondly, Party cooperation is not as important compared to Sino-Laos. Instead of the coordinated party and national interest between China and Laos, the Sino-Vietnam partnership just stresses the similarity in the party and state system. The two countries' flexible and efficient high-level leadership suggested a less close party relationship.

Thirdly, economic ties bridge the Sino-Vietnam partnership. The asymmetrical

structure of bilateral economic relationships leads to a contradictory attitude to China (Zhao, 2021; Cheng, 2021). Vietnam is eager to cooperate with China economically for material benefits, but worries economic dependence on China would enlarge this asymmetry. Vietnam has better financial strength than the other two, and China is not Vietnam's largest donor. This situation makes the Sino-Vietnam relationship cooperative.

In general, China is leading and aiding in Sino-Cambodian relations. The Sino-Laos relation is similar but filled with the idealism of communism. In contrast, Sino-Vietnam relations lean on cooperation in other fields, for example, economic cooperation, while putting aside disagreements.

5.1.3 The forging of Regional collective identity: 'shared river, shared future' for all Mekong countries

The 'shared future' is central to China's strategic narrative. As mentioned before, the differentiation between 'us' and 'others' is the standard way to forge identity (Suzuki 2007; Varrall 2013; Boon 2022). The similarities always stress the concept of 'us'. Meanwhile, the actor tends to highlight the negative elements of the 'other'. By contrast, the 'good us' and 'bad other' intensify the 'us' identity. In this case, this regional collective identity forged base on 'we' concept defended by the 'other' identity. Hence, China tries to forge a collective identity for the Mekong region under the theme 'shared water, shared future' by emphasising the similarity between China and other Mekong regional countries and by contrasting the U.S-led western regional cooperation.

5.1.3.1 We: forging Mekong collective identity

'Shared river, Shared future' is the slogan for establishing the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Organisation (LMCO), the China-led regional cooperation organisation. It echoes the slogan of a shared future for the Mekong region. Besides promoting

LMCO, China is trying to forge the Mekong collective identity by speaking of a similar geographic connection, Asian civilisation, history and self-identity.

Firstly, China stresses the geographic similarities shared with Mekong region countries by following two points. 1) Multi-ethnic countries. Similar to China, the rest of the Mekong region countries are multinational countries. 2) Shared river. China blurs the geographic differences between the Lancang River and the upper river of the Mekong River but stresses their common origin. In 2016, China's first minister Li Keqiang said that the six Mekong countries are 'close neighbours enjoying a deep bond of culture' and 'sharing of the Lancang-Mekong River' reinforces 'these natural connections' (Li, 2016). Similarly, China's vice Foreign Minister Luo Zhaohui (2020) referred Mekong-Lancang River as 'the natural bond' that links the six countries and 'a cradle for generations of riparian people' for thousands of years. Shared river and multinational features generate inclusiveness as regional features, which will be illustrated below.

Secondly, shared Asian civilisation contributes to a solid base of collective regional identity. Variety of nations and multinational countries comprise the dimensional Asian civilisation with unique features of 'open, inclusive, and values peace' (Kong xuanyou, 2017). Instead of pointing out that China is an impact over thousands of years, it stresses China is also a humble part of the whole Asian civilisation, just as equally important as the other Mekong countries. Moreover, China is proud of Asian civilisation and its membership. President Xi stressed that 'Asia is the cradle of human civilisation' (Xi Jinping, 2019). Asian civilisation generates from regional countries' interactions over thousands of years.

Thirdly, the similar history between China and Mekong region countries intensifies the 'us' conception. On the one hand, China draws on the shared history of colonisation during the two World Wars, which generates victimhood. All four countries were victims of the imperialist western world. China helped the Mekong countries in their independence wars. For example, China helped Vietnam and

Laos in their war against France. After that war, China, along with the other regional countries, became a developing country. The developing country's self-identity and victimhood are the base for collective regional identity. On the other hand, the BRI proposes regional development based on ancient historical ties. 'The ancient trade routes, notably the Silk Road, the Tea Road and the Spice Road,' Zhenghe voyages provide the future for development with the 'shared future'.

5.1.3.2 Others: Differences from the Western world intensify collective identity

In contrast with the West from the identity to cooperation mode, China stresses the advantage of Mekong and Asian cooperation to intensify the shared river and shared future collective identity.

Firstly, China emphasises fairness in Mekong cooperation as different from the Western model. As mentioned before, victimhood is the base of collective identity, which indicates that Western, developed countries are the 'other' that bullied Mekong countries in history. With this baseline, China stresses the advantages of Mekong regional cooperation over the Western model to intensify the sense of 'us'. Hence, China's strategic narrative highlights absolute fairness and equality by describing Western cooperation as 'exploitative', 'unipolar', and 'protectionist' (Wang Yi, 2018). Western-led international cooperation and order only serve strong powers' interests, according to China's narrative. Opposite to the Western style, caring about other Mekong countries even in an asymmetrical structure, China tries to reinforce its self-portrait as a good partner in the Mekong region and calls for a unique Asian-style collective identity.

Secondly, China emphasises the inclusiveness of Mekong regional cooperation over the Western cooperation model. Inclusiveness is one of the keywords that China uses to describe Lancang-Mekong cooperation. For example, Foreign Minister Wang Yi repeatedly stressed the 'inclusiveness', 'multilateralism', and 'economic integration direction' for LMCO. In practice, China welcomes other countries' investment in the Mekong region. It wishes LMCO to work collaboratively with

other regional international organisations such as ASEAN and GMS.

In contrast with China, Western-led cooperation is described as dominant ‘power politics’ and unfair. Unlike the western style, Mekong regional cooperation is not an ‘exclusive small circle’ (Wang Yi, 2018) and all the participants join of their own free will.

Finally, China emphasises the effectiveness of Mekong regional cooperation. China describes the LMCO as a ‘bulldozer’ instead of a ‘talking shop’ (Wang Yi, 2017). It took just one year for LMCO to go from negotiation to implementation. Moreover, the cooperation projects were designed to directly solve problems faced by the Mekong countries’ people, such as Vietnam’s power station construction and Laos’s water supply system. This will be explained clearly in the issue strategic narrative section of this chapter.

In summary, this collective identity illustrates China’s perspective of the Mekong region. Mekong region countries used to be weak but tenacious and won their independence wars. The regional cooperation model of Asian civilisation has its unique advantage. At present, the Mekong region is developing a brighter future with China’s contribution. The Mekong region has a bright future by preserving and developing its collective identity. In China’s strategic narrative, all this cooperation is made possible by pursuing the Mekong regional shared future. In this ‘shared future’, China will help the other Mekong countries reduce poverty, cope with current economic problems through scientific and green development.

5.2. Laos’s identity strategic narrative

The geographic position has a significant impact on forming Lao’s national and international identity. Laos is a unique country in the Mekong region. Laos is a completely land-locked country in their narratives, surrounded by powerful neighbours, Thailand, Vietnam, Myanmar, Cambodia, and China. Balancing its neighbours’ influence has been critical to Lao’s survival throughout history. This

unique circumstance causes struggles for Laos to form its own national identity. This section will first present four themes in Laos' national identity, then move to Laos' perception of Cambodia, Vietnam, and China.

5.2.1 Laos's four national identities

Laos, as a relatively small regional power, has a complex historical trajectory. Its national identity emerged and strengthened during the struggle for independence. This part presents four critical points in Laos's national identity.

Firstly, the idea of 'Laos's way' is the core of Laos's national identity. Laos's way represented a 'hard life' from the beginning and was given different meanings afterwards. Laos is a unique country in Southeast Asia. 'Laos's way' generates from this awkward situation of establishing an independent country on a 'forgotten land'. As mentioned, Laos is a country under its neighbours' influence throughout history. It is a multinational country sharing the Miao / Hmong ethnic group with China, and the Tai and Siam with Thailand. The Lao ethnic group only accounts for around 53% of Laos's population (Britannica, Laos).

Laos has struggled to form its own stable national identity. But its culture and identity are traced to the Lan Xang (written as Lan Cang in Chinese) kingdom which existed from the 13th century to 1893. During this time, wars and disputes among Tai, Siam/Thailand, and Annam/Vietnam dominated Laos's history. Unlike other countries, the Lao built their state based on land instead of the nation (Jerndal & Rigg, 1998; Mariani, 2012). Historians have argued whether Laos was a country for a long time during the under colonial rule of France (Giovannini, 2018; Kishino, 2017; Kittikhoun, 2009; Stuart-Fox, 1993). This was a famous debate when Modern Laos's border was set by the French colonial government. Laos called themselves the 'forgotten land'. Laos' original way refers to a special sticky rice (Evans, 2002, P. 37) that used to be the staple food of the Lao nation. Because the Lao were relatively less developed than the Tai, Siam, Hmong, and Vietnam, so this sticky rice represented a poor and undeveloped region. Nearly self-mocking 'Laos's way'

dramatically gathered the Lao people on ‘forgotten land’ from the time of French Laos (1893-1954). Since then, Laos’s way refers to ‘perseverant Lao people conquering difficulties and solve problems’. Hence, choosing the Communist path to establish Laos and win the war of independence embodied the wisdom of Laos’ way. In modern days, to cope with poverty, Laos’s way encourages people, especially women, to start businesses.

Secondly, Laos identifies itself as a victim and a persevering survivor from the traumatic wars in the past; and thirdly, it identifies itself as a member of the group of Communist countries. Lao considers itself a buffer state between Southeast Asian countries, a historical victim and survivor. Lao describes itself as a proud survivor of a ‘bitter and destructive war’ (appendix L1) after it ‘fought courageously against the imperialists’ (appendix L2, L3, L4) and established Laos PDR as a ‘great victory’ (appendix L2). From the Lan Xang time, Lao was the wrestling field of Tai, Siam, Hong and Annam. This buffer state situation ended with the establishment of the Laos PDR. Today, Vietnam still has a significant impact on Laos. Explicit content will be present in the Laos-Vietnam section. Thirdly, Laos considers itself a Communist country. Laos cherishes and wishes to deepen its relationship with Cambodia (appendix L2, L6, L7), Vietnam (appendix L2, L9, L9, L10), China (appendix L2, L15, L16, L17, L18), and Russia (appendix L2) based on common anti-imperialist war historical ties.

This narrative contributes to Laos’s domestic identity and international cooperation. Domestically, similar to China, the contrast between the old, poor, less-developed Laos and modern Laos contributes to forging the national identity of Laos. Rising national pride also contributes to the Laos PDR’s credibility as it is depicted as the only saviour for Laos’s people. Internationally, following the ‘us-them’ logic, the common identity of Communist countries forges China, Vietnam and Lao as ‘us’. The rest of the world, especially countries with colonial history, are portrayed as ‘them’. This narrative benefits Laos in two ways. Firstly, it encourages cooperation with China and Vietnam. The vast amount of foreign aid

from China to Laos through the BRI during the Covid pandemic is part evidence. Secondly, the stress on tragic history and attacks by colonial countries could trigger their sympathy and encourage them to give foreign aid, especially in coping with Covid and Mekong River management. This point will be explained in detail in Chapter 6 about issue narratives.

Fourthly, Laos identifies as a rising regional power and the regional connecting hub for the Mekong and whole Southeast Asia area. This is a crucial part of Laos's national identity in modern days. With its particular geographic position, Laos wishes to become the connecting hub 'for the region and beyond' (appendix L5, L15). By linking the infrastructures such as the Thanaleng Dry Port, logistic park, Laos-Thai bridge and railway, and China-Laos railway, Laos plans to become a 'land link' (appendix L5, more) country and build a regional better 'shared future' (appendix L13, L14, L15).

This strategic narrative answers the question 'what Laos will be'. Laos wants to be a physical connection and communication bridge within and beyond the region. The transborder flow of goods and business exchanges integrate Laos back into the regional centre and benefit economic growth regardless of the development gap between Laos and neighbouring countries. Moreover, Laos describes itself as the 'link' (appendix L16, L17) between China and ASEAN. With 'deepened connectivity' (appendix L6 more) with regional countries, Laos 'supports China' and regional countries' stance on multilateral international cooperation in 'security, anti-Covid, and economy' (appendix L19) to jointly build the brighter shared regional future. As China's gateway to MRC and ASEAN, China is the lever to lift Laos's regional status.

In sum, 'Laos's way' is the centre of four identity narratives. It has a unique pragmatic feature that changing its meaning in different time and providing solutions to timely issues. In French Laos, Laos's way referred to bonding of Lao people on the Lao territory. During independent wartime, Laos's way referred to

the choice of Communist path, on which the Lao fought hard, won the war and established the Lao PDR. Development issues, including Laos's modernization, international recognition, and domestic economic growth, are the main issues for the Lao PDR. The regional connectivity hub is part of Laos's way as a solution to its problem. Hence, the renewed meaning of 'Laos' way' repeats continuously in Lao people's daily life and solidifies Lao national identity along with its development. This Lao wisdom also embodies balancing and managing Laos's relationships with its neighbours.

5.2.2 Laos and others: Vietnam, Cambodia, and China in Laos's picture of the world

Balancing influence from neighbouring countries is crucial to Laos's survival. Bilateral relationship management between Laos and Thailand, Vietnam and China is vital. French colonial rule eliminated Thai influence during French Laos. Hence, the importance of Vietnam and China rose in Laos's foreign strategy. In the Mekong Region, Laos considers Cambodia a friend of similar strength, Vietnam as a close-big brother, and China as a significant power and bigger brother. In general, Laos perceives itself as a regional rising middle-level power.

Laos and Cambodia agreed to build a 'comprehensive and long-lasting strategic partnership' (appendix L7) and deepen 'bonds' of cooperation on defence and public security, including transborder drug management, economy, agriculture and Mekong resource management (appendix L7, L8). From a power distribution perspective, Laos-Cambodia is the most equal among the three relationships. Laos and Cambodia have similar economic strengths and share similar problems with poverty and agricultural and energy difficulties. Moreover, both countries plan to / are constructing dams on the Mekong River. This partnership would bond the two countries when discussing hydropower stations inside MRC, particularly when facing different opinions from Vietnam.

Vietnam is a brother to Laos. The two countries have shared close political

cooperation since the independence wars. Vietnam provided the Lao with a political structure by helping construct its Communist political system (Giovannini, 2018; Kittikhoun, 2009; Evans, 2002, pp. 73-81). This historical tie has lasted till now. Laos 'highly values' (appendix L9) the 'loyal and long-lasting' (appendix L8, L11) bilateral relationship with Vietnam and is willing to 'enhance and strengthen ties within the framework' of ASEAN (appendix L9, L10). Exchange visits continued even during Covid (appendix, L11). Laos was 'pleased' when Vietnam's new president chose Laos as his 'first goodwill visit before China and USA' (appendix L12). In general, the asymmetrical bilateral relationship between the two countries is solid and stable despite the disagreements when Laos tried to construct dams.

Laos considers China as a big brother. It describes China as a 'strong country' (appendix L71), big power (appendix L73) along with Chinese economic help to Laos (appendix L71, 74, 73). Though China is stronger compared to Vietnam, but Laos and Vietnam have a longer and closer relationship. Historically, China is not as close to Laos as Vietnam. Laos was completely leaning on Vietnam. During the China-Vietnam war, Laos shared Vietnam's stance. Hence the bilateral relationship between China and Laos only normalised in 1989. Since then, with China's rapidly increasing economic strength, Laos started considering China as a 'friendly socialist neighbour' (appendix L18), a 'good friend, comrade and partner' (appendix L19). China supports Laos in economic development, providing 'valuable assistance' (appendix L16) and bringing in vast foreign aid and investment, helping with Laos's infrastructure construction, such as the China-Laos railway and hydropower station. China will become Laos's largest donor shortly. After the BRI and LMC0, China's support expanded from economy-centered to people's well-being. Explicit content will be presented in the issue narrative section. In short, China provides Laos significant help within and beyond the financial field. With the development of cooperation between the two, Laos supported the BRI, helping link China to ASEAN, and echoed China's shared future narrative.

5.3. Vietnam identity narratives

This part will present Vietnam national identity; it's identity of regional selected countries including China, Cambodia, and Laos; then follows the Vietnam international identity. Vietnam narrative features the central position of its national interest. Hence, national interest guardian is the most important among all its identities. To secure independence and development, which are crucial to national interest, it designed its international identities seeking to enlarge 'Vietnam's voice' and be 'more listened to' (appendix V14). Vietnam's understanding of the role of regional countries also contributes to its identities domestically and internationally.

5.3.1 Vietnam's national identity

Vietnam's domestic identity is rooted in its self-perception as a communist country, a survivor of colonial warfare, and a steadfast guardian of national interests. These facets of identity are intricately interconnected, shaping Vietnam's worldview and strategic choices.

First and foremost, Vietnam proudly identifies itself as a communist nation. Much like China, Vietnam regards communism as a historical imperative, deeply intertwined with the well-being of its populace (see Appendix V1 and V2). Notably, Vietnam's iconic leader, Ho Chi Minh, was a prominent member of the French international communist party. Vietnam not only views itself as a torchbearer of correct communist principles but also believes that policies aligned with these principles inherently benefit its citizens (see Appendix V1, V2, and V3), even in the context of occasional disagreements with China. For instance, during the Sino-Soviet split period, Vietnam sided with the Soviet Union. Vietnam's steadfast faith in communist philosophy is underpinned by its belief that this ideology played a pivotal role in its successful struggle for independence.

Secondly, Vietnam identifies itself as a survivor of colonial warfare, a legacy that profoundly influences its contemporary values and aspirations (see Appendix V1, V2, and V14). The bitter experience of colonial rule has instilled in Vietnam a profound appreciation for its hard-fought independence. Consequently, safeguarding national sovereignty, territorial integrity, and independence remains paramount to Vietnam's core national interests.

Thirdly, Vietnam sees itself as a resolute guardian of its national interests, particularly in matters concerning territorial integrity and sovereignty (see Appendix V1, V2, V3, V4, V13, and V14). Vietnam perceives the territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea as the most significant threat to its national interests. In response, Vietnam has forged international strategic partnerships with countries like Japan, India, and the United States to counterbalance China's regional influence. This proactive stance in international relations has further contributed to Vietnam's evolving domestic identity as a guardian of its interests in the face of China's perceived threats.

In summation, Vietnam's national identities are intricately interwoven. Its unwavering commitment to communism not only fuelled its victory in the struggle for independence but also underscores its unique interpretation of communist ideology distinct from China's. Additionally, Vietnam's traumatic history of colonialism has instilled a deep-seated appreciation for territorial integrity, driving its contentious stance in territorial disputes with China. The imperative to safeguard national interests has led Vietnam to actively engage with international partners to counterbalance China's regional influence—a dimension of its identity that we will delve into further in subsequent sections.

5.3.2 Vietnam's identity for regional countries

Similar to the rest of countries, Vietnam has its understanding on how regional countries fit in its plan. This part will present Vietnam's understanding on the role of Laos, and Cambodia, and China.

Among the selected countries, Laos stands as the closest neighbour to Vietnam. The bilateral relationship between these two nations is often characterized by Vietnam as a ‘special solidarity’ (Appendix V31), a ‘great friendship,’ and a commitment to ‘comprehensive cooperation’ (Appendix V30 and V31). Notably, Laos was the first country to establish a comprehensive strategic partnership with Vietnam. Vietnam frequently uses the terms ‘rare, pure, and faithful’ to describe the bonds between the two nations (Appendix V31). These ties trace their roots back to the founding of the Indochinese Communist Party in 1930 and have played a pivotal role in the independence and nation-building efforts of both countries (Appendix V31, V32, V33, and V34).

In contemporary times, Vietnam and Laos have forged close economic cooperation and have developed strong diplomatic relations, extending from governmental levels to grassroots exchanges (Appendix V32 and V30). Regionally, Vietnam regards Laos as a vital supporter of its multilateral diplomacy efforts within ASEAN and the Mekong River Commission (MRC). On the international stage, Vietnam appreciates Laos’s support for its claims and shares a common commitment to securing a ‘proper international position’ for both nations (Appendix V30, V31, and V32). Vietnam views Laos as an ‘equal friend’ and takes pride in the ‘faithful friendship’ of the Lao people (Appendix V30 and V32).

Vietnam perceives Laos as a loyal ally that supports its regional initiatives. Vietnam expresses confidence in Laos’s ability to achieve its development goals, as highlighted in the Laos congress report (Appendix V33 and V34). Additionally, Vietnam aims to assist Laos in bridging the development gap within the ASEAN community (Appendix V31, V32, V14, and V2). However, it is worth noting that when disagreements arise, as in the case of Laos’s dam construction, Vietnam recommends that Laos continues scientific research on the potential impact of these dams on the neighbouring countries (Appendix V35).

In summary, Vietnam extends its support to its ‘loyal friends’ in their development endeavours, even while engaging in constructive criticism when necessary.

In Vietnam’s perspective, Cambodia is regarded as a friend, and the historical ties between these two nations can be traced back to the 15th century. Following their respective quests for independence, Vietnam and Cambodia formally established diplomatic relations in 1967 (Appendix V36 and V37). Both countries frequently employ terms such as ‘traditional friendship,’ ‘solidarity,’ and ‘comprehensive cooperation’ to describe their bilateral relationship (Appendix V36, V37, V38, and V39).

However, it is essential to acknowledge that the border issue remains a significant challenge in the relationship between Vietnam and Cambodia. Vietnam perceives the resolution of this matter through negotiations as a notable achievement (Appendix V38 and V39). Furthermore, Vietnam actively supports Cambodia’s economic development and facilitates its engagement in international cooperation, particularly in initiatives related to the Mekong River, which they believe will bring mutual benefits to the entire basin (Appendix V39).

From Vietnam’s standpoint, Cambodia represents a potential ally with whom they can extend their goodwill and support to regional friends. The manner in which Vietnam engages with Cambodia underscores its commitment to being a responsible and constructive regional actor.

Vietnam and China have a love-hate relationship. The South China Sea territorial disputes represent one of the gravest challenges to Vietnam’s national interests, particularly its commitment to maintaining the integrity of its sovereignty and territory. Vietnam often characterizes China as a regional ‘trouble maker’ (Appendix V40) due to its actions in claiming contested territories, which Vietnam deems as ‘wrongdoing’ and contributing to heightened regional tensions (Appendix V40, 41, 42). In response to incidents such as the arrest of Vietnamese fishing

boats by China, Vietnam has called for ‘respect’ (Appendix V43, 44). Simultaneously, Vietnam seeks economic cooperation with China, even positioning itself as a ‘coordinator’ between China and ASEAN nations (Appendix V46). Vietnam has also recognized the benefits of China’s regional investments through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) for regional development. However, there is a genuine concern that territorial disputes may lead to hostility directed at Chinese businesses operating in Vietnam, which could harm Vietnam’s economic growth (Appendix V46, 47).

In summary, Vietnam’s relationship with China can be characterized as a complex blend of affection and tension. On the political front, Vietnam portrays itself as a regional leader, while harboring concerns about China’s overwhelming regional power and resentment over territorial disputes. Nevertheless, China remains one of Vietnam’s four ‘comprehensive strategic partners,’ and Vietnam is eager to collaborate with China on economic endeavors to stimulate its own economic development. Paradoxically, the need to manage relations with China also contributes to Vietnam’s domestic identity as a ‘brave national interest guardian.’ In essence, Vietnam views China as a challenging but necessary regional partner.

5.3.3 Vietnam’s international identity narratives

Overall, ASEAN has a central place in Vietnam’s foreign strategy. Vietnam supports ASEAN as the ‘central framework’ within and beyond region. This part will present Vietnam’s international identities within and beyond Mekong and ASEAN region.

Within the region, Vietnam positions itself as a pivotal actor, often assuming the role of a ‘steward’ among the lower Mekong countries. Vietnam plays a multifaceted role as a builder, leader, and coordinator within the Mekong River Committee (MRC) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Firstly, Vietnam is not only a participant but also a driving force behind ASEAN. Although ASEAN was initially established by Indonesia in 1967, Vietnam perceives

its own involvement as marking the culmination of the organization's formative period (Appendix V15). Moreover, Vietnam co-founded the Mekong River Commission by signing the Agreement on Cooperation for Sustainable Development of the Mekong River Basin, commonly referred to as the 1995 Mekong Agreement, alongside Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand (Appendix V1, V2, V16, V18, V21).

Furthermore, Vietnam considers itself the 'leader' within the ASEAN framework, contributing to the realization of the collective aspirations of the ten ASEAN member states (Appendix V14). Vietnam's active participation contributes to the overarching goals of 'peace, stability, cooperation, and prosperity' within ASEAN (Appendix V14, V15). Vietnam believes that Laos and Cambodia can attain their objectives within ASEAN under its leadership (Appendix V14, V17). Additionally, Vietnam promotes advanced development concepts such as 'sustainable development' and 'multilateral cooperation and connectivity' for the benefit of regional developing countries (Appendix V13, V1, V2, V3, V17), as will be elaborated upon in subsequent sections.

Secondly, Vietnam serves as a regional bridge, advocating for infrastructure development and international collaboration. Vietnam actively supports the construction of regional logistics links, encompassing Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand (Appendix V1, V2, V3, V10). Notably, Vietnam's multilateral international collaborations are primarily organized within the ASEAN framework. For instance, Vietnam participates in 'regional FTAs (free trade areas) with 58 partners' (Appendix V14). Additionally, Vietnam is actively engaged in the MRC as a 'sub-regional organization' and the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) cooperation, particularly the GMS Business Council, aimed at fostering connections within the local business community (Appendix V19), thereby contributing to regional economic integration.

Thirdly, Vietnam assumes the role of regional coordinator, adeptly managing both political conflicts and substantive regional issues. Vietnam hosts active

negotiations with Cambodia and Laos to address border disputes and water-related conflicts (Appendix V20, V21, V13). Furthermore, Vietnam positions itself as a leader in addressing graphic issues related to ‘water and food resource security,’ ‘poverty reduction,’ and the ‘green economy,’ rather than focusing solely on its own national interests (Appendix V14, V18, V20, V21). These aspects will be expounded upon in greater detail in subsequent chapters, where Vietnam’s commitment to establishing an image of a selfless and responsible regional leader with shared interests will be further explored

Beyond its regional role, Vietnam perceives itself as a vital intermediary between the region and the global arena, taking on the responsibilities of a conscientious international actor committed to multilateralism and sustainable development. Vietnam also sees itself as a representative of small to medium-sized developing countries, advocating for international equality and democracy.

Firstly, Vietnam plays a pivotal role in connecting ASEAN with the broader international community. On the economic front, Vietnam aspires to transform itself into a trading hub within the Asia-Pacific region (Appendix V14). It actively pursues this goal through strategic partnerships with the United States and membership in regional international organizations such as LMCO, APEC, and G20 (Appendix V20 and V21). Regionally, Vietnam acts as a bridge for expanding ‘strategic partnerships’ (Appendix V22) between ASEAN and major regional countries. Vietnam seeks to enhance the ‘strategic partnership’ between the Mekong region and countries like South Korea and Japan, building upon existing Vietnam-South Korea (Appendix V23) and Vietnam-Japan partnerships (Appendix V22 and V24). Furthermore, by fostering connections between Vietnam and EU member countries like Denmark and Germany (Appendix V24, V25, V26), Vietnam diversifies investments in sustainable development and water resource utilization within the Mekong basin. Beyond economic and regional realms, Vietnam also strives to expand its regional political influence by championing principles of equity, which will be elaborated upon in the following section.

Secondly, Vietnam considers itself a representative voice for small to medium-sized developing nations, advocating that the voices of these countries should be acknowledged and respected (Appendix V14). Vietnam firmly believes that active participation by small and medium-sized countries enriches international cooperation, calling for a ‘new multilateralism cooperation’ and ‘international democracy’ (Appendix V14, V22, and V3). The former concept pertains to participating in international organizations to shape international rules in favour of Vietnam’s national interests, while the latter highlights concern about the unequal influence wielded by major powers over smaller nations.

Thirdly, Vietnam actively endeavours to foster a collective Mekong regional identity centered around ‘sustainable development’ (Appendix V21, V25, V26, and V27). In addition to economic development, Vietnam’s vision of sustainable development emphasizes the security of food, water, and energy resources, regional internationalization, and human rights. Vietnam underscores the significance of inclusive cooperation among the lower Mekong countries, emphasizing the importance of English education (Appendix V27), cultural connections, and vocational training (Appendix V27 and V28) to strengthen the ties between medium-sized countries in the Mekong basin, beyond mere economic considerations. Vietnam also actively engages within the UN framework to support human rights in regional countries (Appendix V14). Moreover, Vietnam seeks to establish strategic partnerships with countries confronting transboundary water issues worldwide, hosting international water conferences as a part of this effort (Appendix V28 and V29). In summary, Vietnam aims to cultivate a collective Mekong identity encompassing pertinent issues with direct relevance to the lower Mekong countries.

In summary, Vietnam’s perception of other regional countries significantly contributes to its domestic and international identities. Confrontations with China contribute to the forging of Vietnam’s identity as a ‘brave national interest

guardian' Meanwhile, Vietnam's support for Laos and Cambodia contributes to its identity as a regional responsible actor and contributor. These interactions also contribute to the narrative surrounding Vietnam's character, portraying it as both brave and generous. Vietnam's perception of the concept of 'we' and 'the other' undergoes subtle shifts when dealing with different audiences. Within ASEAN, Vietnam strategically aligns itself with other Mekong River Commission (MRC) member countries, notably Laos and Cambodia. This alignment is evident in Vietnam's belief that the completion of ASEAN's foundation effectively occurred with the inclusion of these three nations in the mid to late 1990s (Appendix V14, 15). Vietnam also envisions its role in integrating Laos and Cambodia's development goals into ASEAN cooperation, seeking to 'narrow the development gap' (Appendix V18, V14) between these MRC members and the rest of the ASEAN countries. Consequently, within ASEAN, Vietnam places the MRC members in the 'we' category while delicately situating the other ASEAN nations in the 'other' realm. Vietnam, however, adopts a 'we' stance when hosting or attending 'ASEAN 10+1' conferences and liaising with the EU and the U.S. Moreover, it is intriguing to note the similarities in Laos' responses to Vietnam and China. Both China and Vietnam place a strong emphasis on equality and respect when interacting with Laos (Appendix V30, V31, V32, C15, 17, W31). However, Laos' narrative with these two countries is predominantly focused on economic advantages and material benefits that align with Laos' developmental goals.

5.4 Cambodia's identity strategic narrative

In alignment with preceding sections, this segment aims to articulate Cambodia's strategic narrative regarding its self-perception, as well as its relations with key regional stakeholders such as China, Vietnam, and Laos, along with an examination of its position within the broader Mekong region.

5.4.1 Cambodia's self-identity: proudly profound transformation

Cambodia perceives itself as a proud survivor of war time, a resignedly small

regional actor, and a real regional integrator. The nation's developmental trajectory can be traced through two pivotal milestones: the transition to an 'island of peace' and its emergence as a 'regional real partner.

Firstly, Cambodia's self-image as a survivor of war is deeply ingrained, marked by its transformation into an 'island of peace' (appendix K2). Like other key actors in the Mekong region, Cambodia has endured the ravages of colonial wars, global conflicts, and subsequent civil strife. It recalls its past as a 'war-torn' and 'conflict-stricken' territory (Appendices K2, 4, 5), but over nearly three decades, Cambodia has evolved into an 'island of peace' (Appendices K1, 2, 4, 5). This narrative underscores Cambodia's commitment to peace, a defining aspect of its national identity.

Having endured the ravages of war, Cambodia has emerged as a nation deeply committed to peace, a transformation it proudly acknowledges. This peace-loving identity serves as a guiding principle for Cambodia's actions, both domestically and internationally. Domestically, Cambodia perceives itself as a beacon of liberty (Appendix K1, 2, 3, 4), where citizens enjoy the freedom to elect their government. Domestically, Cambodia places significant emphasis on preserving territorial and sovereign integrity. Additionally, it actively opposes perceived threats to stability, such as 'colour revolutions' (Appendix K1, 2, 3, 38), viewing the current government as the sole protector of the Cambodian people throughout history and the sole guarantor of a prosperous future, including developmental goals. The 'colour revolutions' refers to the Cambodia opposition parties such as Cambodian National Rescue Party. According to Cambodian government, it has dissolved in 2017 after the attempt of launch the colour revolution funded by U.S. (Human Rights Watch, 2019). Maintenance of domestic political stability is pivotal to Cambodia's integration into the international community. Internationally, Cambodia portrays itself as a steadfast proponent of peace, aligning closely with non-aligned nations and maintaining neutrality within Southeast Asia, particularly within the ASEAN framework. This strategic narrative of peace and stability

domestically bolsters the government's legitimacy while enhancing Cambodia's stature on the global stage through the expansion of diplomatic relations both regionally and internationally. Consequently, Cambodia is gradually positioning itself as a key regional integrator. Hence, Cambodia's strategic narrative of peace-loving identity domestically stabilised its government's ruling, raise its international position by broadening diplomatic ties regional and internationally. Gradually, Cambodia considers itself as a regional integrator.

Secondly, Cambodia considers itself as a significant contributor within the region, moving away from its previous status as a recipient of aid and portraying itself as an active participant in regional development. Historically, Cambodia was characterized by a high rate of poverty (Appendix K1, 2) and deemed economically underdeveloped, relying heavily on assistance primarily from the United Nations and China (Appendix K1, 2, 5, 6, 10). Regionally, it was often regarded as a country lagging behind in the Mekong region, necessitating external assistance (Appendix K3, 4, 21, 23).

However, Cambodia now proudly identifies itself as markedly distinct from its past, assuming the role of a regional architect. Domestically, guided by the principles of 'Growth, Employment, Equity, and Efficiency' (Appendix K5, 6, 7, 8), Cambodia has experienced significant economic expansion, being ranked as the eleventh-fastest growing economy globally (Appendix K5). Internationally, as a developing country, has transitioned from a 'low-income' to a 'middle-income' nation (Appendix K5, 6), shedding the label of being solely reliant on aid (Appendix K38).

The bolstering of economic prowess significantly bolsters confidence in Cambodia's regional aspirations. Cambodia perceives itself as a substantial contributor and integral player in regional affairs. This perception is underscored by its active involvement in UN-led peacekeeping missions (appendix K1, K2, K15, K16). Moreover, Cambodia actively strives to foster regional integration, emphasizing its significance and advocating for strategies aimed at fostering joint

economic, political, and infrastructural development within the Mekong region (appendix K2, K3, K15, K21, K38). The Mekong region, acknowledged as the conduit between Cambodia and the global arena, holds paramount importance, as evidenced by Cambodia's historical engagements.

Thirdly, Cambodia considers itself as a resignedly small Mekong regional actor. This part will be present more detailed in section 4,4,3.

5.4.2 China, Vietnam and Laos in Cambodia's world

Firstly, Cambodia designates China as its 'top friend' and a 'close and good friend' (Appendix K29, 30, 31), a stance largely influenced by China's provision of aid without conditions and concession loans (Appendix K29). The close Sino-Cambodian relationship is perceived as instrumental in bolstering Cambodia's economy, given China's status as the world's largest market and its rapid economic development (Appendix K26, 27, 28). Describing itself as developing under the 'lead of China' (Appendix K34), Cambodia acknowledges China's contribution to its infrastructure through the 'Build-Operate-Transfer (BOT)' framework (Appendix K29, 34), leading to improved roads, bridges, and a foundation for regional connectivity. China's assistance in constructing hydro power stations (Appendix K30, 31) further provides Cambodia with cleaner and more affordable energy. However, amidst the uncertainties arising from the US-China tension, Cambodia maintains a neutral stance, wary of being labelled as China's client state, which could undermine its neutrality strategy (Appendix K33). Cambodian experts caution against excessive reliance on China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), emphasizing the need for an independent, resilient, and strong economy (Appendix K35). Additionally, Cambodia and China encounter challenges related to the regional order, a topic to be explored in section 5.5.

Secondly, Cambodia regards Vietnam as a regional 'equal member on equal footing' (Appendix K29), particularly within ASEAN. Despite historical complexities, including Cambodia once being considered the 'economic colony of Vietnam'

(Appendix K29) and ongoing territorial disputes leading to occasional conflicts in border villages, common interests drive cooperation between the two nations. Cambodia takes pride in normalizing its relationship with Vietnam (Appendix K29, 36). A noteworthy example is their shared concern over Mekong water issues, as both countries, being downstream, heavily rely on the Mekong River, fostering mutual interests in addressing challenges posed by dams in Laos and upriver countries.

Thirdly, Cambodia views Laos as a potentially precarious ASEAN neighbour, primarily due to the construction of the Dong Sahong hydropower station within Laos's territory, threatening to impede a mainstream of the Mekong River just 2,000 km away (Appendix K29). except for this, Cambodia also refer ASEAN as 'family' (Appendix K7, K28).

5.4.3 Mekong region in Cambodia's world

As mentioned before, Mekong region is important to Cambodia as it's the gate way between Cambodia and the world. However, Cambodia's overarching vision for the Mekong region appears nebulous, characterised by a stark contrast between its illustrious historical prominence and its current limitations in power and influence.

Cambodia considers itself as a resignedly small Mekong regional actor but willing to contribute. The leadership of Cambodia often emphasizes its illustrious historical legacy, harking back to a time when it wielded considerable power and influence as an empire in the Mekong region (Appendix K4, K8, and K29). In contrast to its former grandeur, Cambodia now characterizes itself as diminutive, often likening its position to that of a 'small' country or a 'shrimp' within the region (appendix K29 and K38). Nevertheless, Cambodia takes pride in its historical achievements and endeavours to offer the region its unique perspectives on development, rooted in its rich cultural heritage.

Cambodian path for Mekong region emphasizes 'shared and sustainable

development, inclusiveness growth, win-win cooperation and shared destiny' (appendix K9, 10, 16). This vision will be detailed discussed in Chapter 6, as it is connected to Cambodia's issue strategic narrative.

5.5. Comparison of the identity narratives of China against Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia

This part presents the similarities and differences between China and Laos identity strategic narrative.

5.5.1 Similarities between China and Laos

China and Laos identity narrative shares similarities. Firstly, Laos echoes China with the Communist and developing country self-identity narrative. Laos echoes China's Communist and developing country's identity. Similar to China, domestically, Laos uses it as an accomplishment to gain domestic support and national pride. Internationally, both countries use it to align with other communist countries. They consider themselves as special countries and distinct from the rest world.

Secondly, Laos echoes China's identity of being 'victim' of the Western world and wars in history and manages to forge it as a strategic narrative favouring their interest. In their strategic narratives, there is a similar logic: because of their traumatic war experience, Laos and China cherish and only wish to bring peace to the region and world. Hence, victim identity becomes part of the peace-loving character narrative. Similar to Communist country identity, victim identity also serves to align countries with similar experience. Laos agrees with China staying together and providing mutual help when needed. Both countries use this identity to gain international sympathy. Laos tries to gain more foreign aid. China, on the other hand, uses the 'victim' identity to define itself as a 'special' country and propose ideas such as 'shared future' distinct from U.S leading thoughts.

Thirdly, Laos also echoes China's international identity and partly the collective identity. On one hand, China considers Laos as a smaller brother. Laos accepts it and considers China as a bigger brother country (appendix L71, 72, 75), and willingly supports China in sensitive regional issues like South China Sea territorial disputes. Moreover, for regional international status, Laos self-understanding also fits China's imagination - an important but not strong or dominant regional power. On the other hand, Laos clearly accepts China's building the Sino-Laos shared future narrative. Especially when discussing issues around BRI and infrastructure projects, Laos stresses it would support China and build the shared future for people in both countries.

Finally, China and Laos both avoid mentioning the unpleasant historical experience. The 20 years of the China-Vietnam war, before the Sino-Laos diplomatic relations normalisation, are avoided both in Laos's and China's narratives.

5.5.2 Differences between China and Laos

Apart from the similarities, China and Laos narratives also have some differences. Firstly, China and Laos value history differently. In China's narratives history always appears at the beginning. The engagement and collaboration projects all seem to stem from this historical origin. However, for Laos, history is seldom mentioned, except for the independence war and establishment of Lao PDR. Hence, Laos does not value historical ties with China as important as in China's understanding. Interestingly, when describing the Laos-Vietnam relationship, Laos also does not stress its stance in this war.

Secondly, China and Laos value Communist identity differently. China emphasised the importance of comrades' relationship. However, when describing China-Laos relationship, economic elements are mentioned much more than Communist identity. When it comes to the understanding of cooperation based on BRI, China's perception leans to understanding them as led and part of two Communist parties' collaboration. Whereas Laos considers is as purely development-led collaborations

between the two countries.

Thirdly, China and Laos have different understanding of the closeness of their bilateral relationship. China considers Laos as a very close friend. Though grateful for China's support, Laos stills considers Vietnam closer than China. For example, Laos was 'honoured' (Appendix L16) when the Vietnamese president chose Laos as the first country to visit. When it comes to China, Laos prefers using the factual evidence (appendix L18, 19, 20) of the convenience brought by Laos-China railway. But Laos and Vietnam are not as close as before. It seems like Laos using China to counter balance Vietnam's influencing.

Finally, Laos does not echo China's narratives about collective regional identity of 'shared future for Mekong region' (appendix L35, 73, 23, 74, 75). Instead, Laos stresses itself as part of Mekong regional countries and its contribution of the Mekong Region for being the 'regional logistic hub' (appendix L73, 74).

In summary, Laos is a very practical country and expresses its disagreements with China subtly. Laos prefers China's economic strength. Given the need for economic development and dam-building on the Mekong River, Laos stays closer to China and more distanced from Vietnam. Moreover, Laos prefers avoiding engagement or direct comments on certain issues as disagreement to China.

5.5.3 Similarities between China and Vietnam

Similar to other countries in the region, China and Vietnam share certain features in their identity-based strategic narratives. First, both nations identify as communist and developing countries. Second, they mutually acknowledge their respective positions within the regional hierarchy: China views Vietnam as a smaller 'brother' within the Mekong region, while Vietnam recognizes China as the dominant or 'big brother'. Third, there is a degree of language alignment; Vietnam occasionally echoes phrases such as 'shared solution' and 'sustainable development' that China promotes. However, this alignment does not indicate full

endorsement of China's regional collective identity. Rather, Vietnam subtly expresses its disagreements by attributing different meanings to similar rhetoric.

5.5.4 Differences between China and Vietnam

The differences between identity strategic narrative between Vietnam and China are very subtly and mainly focusing on three aspects.

Firstly, though both countries stress the concept of 'we' to include the Mekong countries, but the version of 'we' concepts are actually different. Vietnam bolsters the 'we' concept by emphasizing the commonalities shared with Laos and Cambodia, positioning them as kindred nations within the 'international' context. In other words, 'we' concept in Vietnam strategic narratives refers to these nations are characterized by their shared attributes as small-to-middle-sized, developing countries facing similar developmental challenges. Moreover, the concept of 'we' also changes inside Vietnam's narratives. In Vietnam's interpretation, 'we' concept including Laos and Cambodia when stress the integration on Mekong region and highlight the identity as lower Mekong medium-small powers. However, when comes to dam construction issue, Laos and Cambodia who is eager on construction of dams are excluded from 'we' camp for Vietnam. In contrast, 'we' concept for China always refers to the developing regional countries.

Secondly, the shared problems for the region are different. For the Vietnam's definition of these shared problems encompasses issues such as the impact of Mekong River water management, the unbalanced distribution of food, water, and energy resources, as well as social development initiatives aimed at poverty alleviation and economic advancement. While China focuses on development in general.

When it comes to Vietnam and China's collective identity narratives, they emphasize different aspects. China's 'shared river, shared future' collective

identity places significant emphasis on the importance of governmental cooperation regarding the Mekong River, fitting within China's broader 'shared future for all mankind' narrative. In contrast, Vietnam's version focuses directly on pressing matters of water, food, and energy security. It frames the collective identity of 'sustainable development of the Mekong' from a pragmatic and grassroots perspective that resonates with other lower Mekong countries.

5.5.5 Similarities between China and Cambodia

Similar to the other countries, Cambodia's identity narrative has lots of similarities with China's narratives. It expresses its disagreement in a very subtle way.

The identity narratives of China and Cambodia share similarities. Firstly, both nations identify themselves as developing countries. Secondly, Cambodia echoes China's narrative of 'friendship'. While Cambodia regards China as its 'top friend', China reciprocates by viewing Cambodia as a 'die-hard friend'. Thirdly, Cambodia aligns with China's collective regional identity to some extent. Both states prioritize multilateralism and advocate for a shared destiny aimed at fostering development across the Mekong region. Cambodia acknowledges China's leading role in the Mekong region. Fourthly, both countries perceive themselves as victims of war and actively promote a peacekeeping image internationally. Finally, both countries share the similar recognition of regional power distribution. Cambodia considers itself as a small regional power whereas China is the most powerful regional country.

5.5.6 Differences between China and Cambodia

Cambodia subtly expresses its disagreements with certain aspects of China's narratives. Firstly, Cambodia acknowledges China's friendship but refrains from embracing the notion of brotherhood. In Asian culture, older brothers typically hold authority over younger ones. Cambodia's reluctance to adopt the language of brotherhood suggests that, despite China's regional dominance, Cambodia seeks

to maintain neutrality and does not align uniformly on all issues. Secondly, Cambodia's choice of language to describe the relationship between the two countries indicates its desire to uphold independence. As previously noted, independence is paramount to Cambodia's national interests, as demonstrated by its rejection of the notion of economic subjugation, particularly in relation to Vietnam. Similarly, Cambodia distances itself from China, primarily through linguistic distinctions, as a means of safeguarding its independence. Thirdly, while Cambodia acknowledges the concept of 'shared destiny' in resonance with China's collective identity, it also addresses 'shared problems' such as water scarcity, environmental degradation, and economic recovery. This subtle divergence from the concept of a 'shared future' serves as a soft disagreement with China's narrative. Fourthly, while Cambodia acknowledges its historical victimhood, it refrains from explicitly expressing its alignment with China or other Southeast Asian countries. Unlike China, Cambodia's narrative lacks the inclusive 'we' concept, suggesting a deliberate separation from collective identities in order to reinforce its national identity. In practice, Cambodia demonstrates support for multilateralism. I posit that this stance is influenced by asymmetrical power dynamics. Cambodia perceives maintaining its position within the metaphorical 'shrimp swarm' and preserving neutrality within this grouping as essential for survival. Finally, Cambodia delicately uses the different amount of information to express its disagreement with China. This will be detailed expressed in Chapter 6, as it's a general strategy for Cambodia's communication with China including in all narratives.

In Cambodia's data, the republish articles and reports from China and the other regional countries vary on different topics. Cambodia republish very often from China's Xinhua net news regarding the theme relates to development, including the economic and financial investment, infrastructure construction, concrete projects initiated from China targeting on development. China's reports are seldomly found in all the other themes. However, on topics about water difficulties, negative impact of dams, energy and sovereignty concerns, Cambodia largely

republished the reports largely from Vietnam on the theme of criticising China.

Chapter 6. China's strategic narrative about water issues compared to the narratives of Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam

Water allocation is a central issue in the water disputes between China and the lower Mekong countries (LMCs). This chapter discusses the strategic narratives surrounding these water issues. Although water allocation is an unconventional topic in political science, LMCs highlight its significance by linking water issues to security challenges across various sectors critical to national development. The LMCs securitize water issues primarily from five perspectives. Firstly, seasonal water instability, including floods and droughts, poses a threat to national security by endangering the lives of the population. Secondly, the combination of seasonal water instability and agricultural and fishery water shortages jeopardizes food security, impacting public well-being. Thirdly, water issues pose challenges to social development including economic growth. Fourthly, the contradiction between water scarcity and the demand for clean energy raises energy security concerns. Finally, the influence on water shortage to climate change also dangers environmental security. The following sections will delve into these aspects in detail following the logic issue-solution logic.

6.1 National security threat: seasonal instability of Mekong water

Water shortages and distribution are the factual issue of the Mekong water dispute. However, China and other Mekong countries have different understandings of the reason for this situation, and the dams' influence on this matter. Overall, droughts have more severe influence than floods for the Mekong basin. This section will present the issues from each country's narrative, then follows with their proposed solutions.

6.1.1 Laos's strategic narrative about unstable water

This part starts with Laos's understanding of causes, then moves to Laos's solution.

Laos considers extreme weather and changing climate patterns to be the main reasons responsible for the unstable water level of the Mekong River. According to MRC official report, the Mekong River's water level has been continuously falling since 1992 and reached the lowest point every year (appendix L32). China's dams were mentioned once - a Chinese dam 'slowing the flow of water to downstream sections' instead of 'hindered water flow' (appendix L29). Laos believed that less evidence shows that China's dams in Lancang River impacted Laos's Xayaboury dam of water flows. Laos's government reported 2.8% growth in the extreme weather (appendix L20, 21). In 2021 alone, Laos reported extreme weather and natural disasters '65 times', mainly referring to floods, which affected over 798 villages in 15 provinces (appendix L33). Despite the flood pressure, Laos has difficulties in collecting water data efficiently in flood season (appendix L30).

Laos proposes two ways to respond. Firstly, weather forecasting helps to cope with the extreme weathers. Hence, water data accessibility is vital for Laos to evaluate the Mekong River conditions. For the water data difficulty, Laos calls for the Mekong water data sharing within the framework of MRC (appendix L27), urging China to deepen water data sharing (appendix L27, L31, L22). Laos also praised China for the water data sharing platform and LMCO as a platform for water cooperation (appendix L25, 26). Secondly, Laos government calls for efforts on disaster risk management. Domestically, National Defence departments with 'related parties' inside Laos government established funds and committees for disaster risks control. Across the region, Laos values water cooperation with ASEAN. Memorandum signed by Laos and China's disaster management commission (appendix L33).

6.1.2 Vietnam's strategic narrative about unstable water

Similar to Laos, Vietnam also faced with challenges brought by unstable water level of Mekong River. This subsection will firstly present the water issues from Vietnam's narrative then followed with solutions.

Vietnam identifies three issues: water shortage and the droughts in dry seasons, floods in rain season, and the increasing saltwater problem.

Firstly, Vietnam is currently grappling with a severe water shortage, primarily attributed to inadequate natural water resources and the construction of cascades and large dams along the Mekong River. This water scarcity issue has significant implications for the country.

In addressing the insufficiency of water resources, it's essential to note that Vietnam heavily relies on the Mekong River, which accounts for more than 60% of the world's population, including two-thirds of the undernourished global population, and sustains fast economic growth. Despite this, the Mekong River only contributes 35% of the world's total freshwater resources (Appendix V48). As a downstream nation, Vietnam faces numerous water-related challenges, including a severe water shortage (Appendices V48 and V49). According to the Vietnamese government, the availability of freshwater resources, encompassing river water and groundwater, is steadily diminishing (Appendices V48 and V50), exacerbating the water shortage, particularly during droughts in the dry season (Appendices V54 and V55).

In addition to these natural factors, climate change-induced sea level rise (Appendices V48, V50, and V51) is compounding Vietnam's water-related challenges. Beyond these environmental factors, Vietnam also recognizes the impact of large hydro-power dams constructed along the mainstream of the Mekong River by China, Laos, and Myanmar. These dams introduce heightened risks and 'uncertainty' to the Mekong River basin and its people (Appendices V49, V51, V52, and V53), 'giving rise to socio-economic and environmental concerns' (Appendices V49 and V50). Supported by the Mekong River Commission (MRC), Vietnam asserts that these dams pose a 'substantial threat to the ecosystem and food security' of the lower Mekong countries (Appendices V51 and V52).

Secondly, floods during the rainy season represent a significant and pressing issue that Vietnam grapples with. Given its connectivity to the Mekong River, these floods also pose a threat to other Mekong countries, leading to damage to farmland, fisheries, and jeopardizing the safety of their populations (Appendix V48). For instance, in 2020, both Vietnam and Cambodia reported the adverse effects of floods, with 120,785 families and 483,140 people affected (Appendix V57). Tragically, the floods resulted in a death toll exceeding 100 (Appendices V58, V59, and V61).

Thirdly, Vietnam confronts a significant challenge in the form of saltwater intrusion, which is identified as a major water issue. This issue is primarily exacerbated by climate change, involving the intrusion of saltwater and the rising sea levels (Appendices V50, V51, and V55). These factors collectively contribute to a decline in water availability and a decrease in water quality for Vietnam (Appendices V48, V49, and V50), with the most pronounced impacts occurring during the dry seasons.

The Vietnamese government has put forth a comprehensive strategy that encompasses three pivotal solutions in response to the multifaceted water-related challenges it faces. These solutions include the promotion of a more effective water resources allocation plan, the emphasis on the significance of comprehensive water data, and extending support to regions grappling with water-related issues.

First and foremost, Vietnam underscores the importance of ‘sustainable, equitable, and proper’ allocation and utilization of Mekong River water resources (Appendices V48, V51, and V52). This perspective aligns with Vietnam’s overarching strategic narrative, which champions the principles of fairness and equality in water cooperation. The larger dams constructed in the Mekong’s mainstream have introduced an element of ‘uncertainty’, contributing to the water challenges faced across the basin. In particular, China and Myanmar, being

responsible for a significant number of these dams, wield considerable influence over the lower Mekong countries. Consequently, Vietnam strongly advocates for equal participation in water cooperation. Through ‘proper and sustainable’ collaboration, Vietnam aims to address issues such as human and food security, economic growth, social problem resolution, and disaster management (Appendices V48, V52, and V53). This approach is designed to benefit the residents of all riparian countries (Appendix V48).

Secondly, Vietnam places a high value on the sharing of water-related data. The country primarily manages floods and saltwater intrusion by ‘closely monitoring’ water data and disseminating forecasts. The Department of Agriculture and the National Centre for Hydro-Meteorology Forecasting closely monitor factors such as saline water levels and water level fluctuations and make this information available to the public (Appendices V50, V53, and V55). The government has, for instance, proactively informed the public about potential droughts in November (Appendices V49 and V50) and the occurrence of floods in the central region in October 2020 (Appendices V50, V59, and V60). Furthermore, Vietnam collaborates with the MRC to encourage China to share more detailed Mekong water data with the lower Mekong countries. Diplomatically, Vietnam has also proposed an increase in water discharge from the Jinghong Hydropower station through diplomatic channels (Appendices V52, V66, and V67) to benefit the lower Mekong basin. [Vietnam agreed and pleased of China’s discharge action.-for comparison]

Thirdly, the Vietnamese government allocates considerable financial support to regions affected by water-related disasters. Investments exceeding 40.4 billion VND (equivalent to 1.7 million USD) have been made in building facilities aimed at addressing water scarcity, including the construction of 11 dams (Appendix V55). The government anticipates that these dams will aid in restoring clean water and will prove to be valuable assets in managing saline intrusion and droughts during the dry season. Furthermore, Vietnam actively seeks international funding from organizations such as the United Nations, the United States, Japan, South Korea,

the European Union, and others (Appendices V58, V59, V60, V61, and V48) to support flood control measures and research on Mekong water-related issues.

In addition to the challenges posed by water shortages, excess water, and saltwater intrusion, Vietnam grapples with a myriad of social and economic challenges brought about by the Mekong River's influence.

6.1.3 Issue of Cambodia's strategic narrative about unstable water

Cambodia faces two primary water-related challenges: the excess water during rainy seasons, resulting in floods and water shortage like droughts during dry seasons. Among these challenges, Cambodia prioritises addressing the latter due to its enduring and far-reaching consequences. This section will initially delineate these water-related issues, followed by proposed solutions by the Cambodian government.

Similar to Vietnam and Laos, Cambodia also faces severe challenges posed by fluctuations in the Mekong River's water levels, including both excessive flooding and water shortages.

Excessive water, particularly floods, presents a recurring and significant challenge to Cambodia during the rainy season. These floods pose a serious threat to Cambodian security and result in annual casualties. For instance, in 2016, six fatalities and 27 injuries were recorded—a decrease of 40% compared to previous years (Appendix K39). Across five provinces along the Mekong River in Cambodia, floods claimed the lives of over 18 individuals, damaged residential areas, and inundated farmlands (Appendices K40, K41), resulting in the loss of over 5 tonnes of rice seeds and affecting crops across more than 50 hectares (Appendix K41). In response to these challenges, the Cambodian government endeavours to identify the underlying causes of floods and develop effective solutions to mitigate their impact.

Cambodia attributes the occurrence of floods and excess water primarily to two factors: natural phenomena such as storms and heavy rainfall during the rainy season (Appendix K42, K45, K47), and unnatural water releases from dams situated beyond Cambodia's borders (Appendix K43). The country recognizes that extreme weather events such as storms and typhoons significantly contribute to the rise in water levels (Appendix K42, K43, K44). Cambodian Ministry of Resources issues warnings regarding the potential for medium to high levels of rainfall from storms like Cempaka, which could result in widespread flooding across low-lying areas in the Mekong basin (Appendix K42, K44). Additionally, Cambodia is cognizant of the impact of dam releases in upstream countries such as China, Laos, and Thailand, which can exacerbate flooding along the Mekong River (Appendices K48, K44). The excess water caused by collapse of Laos's dam also mentioned as concerning elements (appendix K41, 43, 45) when considering managing floods.

In response to these challenges, Cambodia mainly disseminates early warnings and calls for regional cooperation. The country relies on regional information networks, with the Mekong River Commission (MRC) serving as a primary data provider. The Ministry of Water Resources (and Meteorology) collaborates with the MRC to issue flood warnings and predictions regarding water level increases and potential affected regions (Appendix K41, K42, K43, K44, K45, K47, K48). Recognising the importance of comprehensive data sharing, Cambodian officials, including members of the Youth Network's research and advocacy group, emphasize the need for enhanced cooperation with the Chinese government to ensure more robust data sharing practices (Appendix K44, K47, K48). While acknowledging China's existing contributions, they stress that current data sharing efforts fall short of meeting the nation's needs (Appendix K44). Access to integrated data spanning the entire Lancang-Mekong River basin is deemed crucial for the MRC and Cambodia to improve the accuracy of flood predictions and timely issuance of warnings. Overall, Cambodia heavily relies on international organizations like the MRC to access necessary data for managing both floods and water shortages.

On the other hand, water shortage poses a significant threat to both the security and development of Cambodia. This paragraph aims to underscore the gravity of this challenge, elucidate potential solutions, and explicate the rationale behind the Cambodian government's initiatives. According to official sources (Appendix K53), nearly every province in Cambodia grapples with drought, significantly impacting the livelihoods of both humans and animals (Appendices K50, K53, K54). The populace is confronted with a scarcity of water resources (Appendix K54), exacerbating socio-economic strains across various sectors. Subsequent sections will delve into the multifaceted repercussions of water scarcity on Cambodian society.

In response to these challenges, the Cambodian government has implemented measures to regulate water usage, including advocating for minimal residential water consumption (Appendix K39) and encouraging farmers to adopt water-efficient agricultural practices, such as planting crops once per season (Appendix K53), in order to distribute water resources equitably across societal needs. Additionally, Cambodia has initiated proactive measures, such as issuing water level alerts to anticipate and prepare for droughts in affected provinces. Moreover, recognizing the transboundary nature of water scarcity, Cambodia actively seeks regional collaboration to address droughts, notably engaging with China to mitigate water-related challenges (Appendix K38).

The Cambodian government acknowledges the severity of droughts and attributes their exacerbation primarily to extreme weather phenomena such as El Niño (Appendices K39, K50, K53) and the construction of dams upstream from Cambodia (Appendix K52). These factors compound the already precarious situation, necessitating comprehensive and concerted efforts to safeguard water security and bolster resilience against future droughts.

6.1.4 China's story: four strategic narratives to defend Lancang cascade plan

China is silent internationally about the unstable water in Yunnan Province but acknowledges the existence of the floods and droughts for Lancang-Mekong River and the difficulties to lower Mekong countries. It promotes its Lancang Cascade plan as the solution for the lower Mekong countries for four reasons. This section will start with the China's solutions on water issue for the regional countries, then move to China's four strategic narratives in defending Lancang Cascade Plan.

Resilience against unstable water levels (appendix W16, W17) is the main challenge for the Mekong basin. Low water levels caused domestic and irrigation water shortages, amid severe droughts in the dry season. Whereas floods in the rainy season also threaten riparian countries' survival.

Sharing water information and releasing water during droughts are China's direct solutions to water resilience problems. On one hand, China insists it has kept continuously sharing water data about the Lancang River for free, and it will keep doing so. In 2019, China agreed to share the whole year's water data for the Lancang River (Appendix W18). China launched the Lancang water resources information sharing platform in 2020 (Appendix W19). Since establishing LMCO, China has reported outbound water volume changes of the Jinghong Hydropower Station more than ten times. On the other hand, China continually opens the dams and releases water in the dry season. With the more frequent extreme weather, from 2018 China continuously increased the released volume of water despite domestic water shortage (appendix W1). As mentioned before, hydro projections on Lancang River storage excessive water contribute to managing the flood risk.

It seems China's efforts don't fully satisfy riparian countries expectations. Though China's efforts were appreciated by lower Mekong countries, MRC still asked for 'a full engagement' (appendix W17) from China, saying 'there is more need to do'. Moreover, China claims the inclusiveness of Mekong water cooperation. However, when facing accusations about the Lancang Cascade plan from Japan and the

United States, the spokesman commonly refers to Japanese data as ‘false’ and the U.S. as responsible for triggering regional discord.

In general, as an upper river country, China faces with less urgent water shortage issues compared to the lower Mekong countries. For the cascade plan that considered as at least part of the trigger for the Mekong water difficulties, China responds with defensive narratives.

China developed four strategic narratives in response to criticisms that the Lancang Cascade plan caused severe drought in the lower Mekong basin, by mainly arguing that the cascade plan has been beneficial to lower Mekong countries rather than the reason for water crises. First, they stress the Lancang River’s limited water amount when compared against the whole Mekong River. China insists that the Lancang River accounts for only 13.5% of the total water volume of the Mekong River (See appendix W1, W2, W5, W6). Second, they stress more impactful reasons for lower Mekong basin droughts. China insists that numerous water conservancy and hydropower facilities in other countries on the Mekong River and extreme climate phenomena such as El Nino (Appendix W2) are responsible for lower Mekong countries’ drought (appendix W6). Hence, China’s ‘well-researched and calculated’ investigations show that the 11 dams on Lancang River have a minimal impact on lower Mekong countries (See appendix W1, W3, W4). Third, they stress the inclusive right of building dams for the whole basin. China understands it is a nation’s natural right to exploit hydropower on any river inside its territory. For them, pointing out that the ‘Lancang River is inside China’s territory’ (Appendix W7) naturally justifies the cascade plan. Similarly, every Mekong River country ‘has the same right’ to build dams (Appendix W3) on the Mekong River or Mekong tributaries in their territory. Fourth, they stress that the Lancang cascade plan is beneficial to the lower Mekong basin. China endeavours to help lower Mekong countries through water information sharing and water flow amount adjustment. Lancang dams adjust the water level on the Mekong River (Appendix W3, W7) by storing excessive water in the wet season and releasing

water in the dry season, which wins high praise from lower Mekong countries.

There are two important changes in China's narrative. One is from being centred on China's interest to considering both self interest and other countries' development. The other one is a gradual increase in the importance of water issues. China has started to examine the Lancang Cascade Plan's impact on the lower Mekong basin. For example, the Chinese Foreign Ministry changed the language from 'limited impact' to 'advantage over disadvantage overall' (appendix W4) when describing the Lancang Cascade plan. In this context, China is creating a set of solutions to cope with water shortages and secondary issues caused by lack of water.

In general, all four Mekong countries are aware of the water resilience problems. Except for China, Laos has the biggest dam in lower Mekong countries. Vietnam and Cambodia also plan to construct dams to survive the dry seasons. However, dams along with the water distribution issue create huge challenges to Mekong countries.

6.2 Food security: strategic narrative about issues of agriculture and fishery

Agriculture and fishery are important sectors for lower Mekong countries. They are considered as the staple sectors in Laos's and Cambodia's economy. They both relate to riparian countries livelihood and their development. This section will introduce the issues and solutions proposed by every country about agriculture and fishery.

6.2.1 Laos's story: water issues and solution about agriculture and fishery

Firstly, droughts and floods increase the danger in agriculture (appendix L20, L21, L22, L23) and farmers' business (appendix L24). Water shortages have not only caused a drastic reduction in agriculture output leading to food shortage but resulted in bad quality crops (appendix L20). Moreover, pests' disaster due to

climate changes harm Lao's agriculture (appendix L34). Farmers have to sow their crops in dry season which increase farming costs and decrease the agricultural competitiveness. Agricultural slump exacerbates the challenge of Laos's economic development. By 2020, nearly 64% Laos's population are working in agriculture with only 3% sector growth (appendix, L23, L22).

There are three solutions proposed to this situation. Firstly, Laos's government needs a 'clear agricultural promotion policy' to increase 'domestic and international' investments (appendix L20). Secondly, Laos calls for agricultural modernisation and technology improvement. This includes three points: (1) crops with more yield and higher quality are needed to reduce the farming cost at least like Thailand and Vietnam to 'meet regional market needs' (appendix L21). (2) Laos's farmers need to upgrade the irrigation system to reduce the irrigation cost. (3) Farmers need technological support to upgrade the farm equipment as well as the knowledge on profiting quality crops (appendix L22). Thirdly, the Laos government makes a special budget (appendix L24) and invites experts from China, Japan, Vietnam (appendix L26) forming a panel for supporting agriculture development on technology level.

Secondly, Fish stock reductions and overfishing are the two main issues. According to MRC report, fishery is still a staple economic sector in Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Thailand (appendix L28). Unfortunately, the Mekong River's fish stocks have been dropping over the years (appendix L32). 'Reducing rain volume' and 'detrimental changes' (appendix L28, L33) in water volume caused by hydro power stations and water usage including agricultural irrigation, business and residential are blamed for the loss of fish. Moreover, there is a vicious cycle in Laos' fishery. Water shortages in the dry season caused the food security lead to 'fish releasing' (appendix L37), which increase the over fishing.

The Laos government calls for 'responsible development' and a good balance between regional and national, current and future interest (appendix L28).

Meanwhile, the Laos fishery department funds upgrades to fishing technology and no longer uses 'Lee traps'.

6.2.2 Vietnam's story: water issues and solution of agriculture

As a globally recognized 'leading supplier' of agricultural products, Vietnam faces an increasingly severe set of water-related challenges. These issues have become a 'pressing' concern, "direct and unfavourable" for the nation's (Appendix V48 and V52) agricultural sector and posing a significant threat to its identity as a 'rice bowl' (appendix V62). This underscores the pivotal role that agriculture plays in Vietnam's economy and its support of livelihoods. However, further elaboration might be beneficial here to elucidate the implications more explicitly.

In response to the pressing issue of water scarcity in agriculture, the Vietnamese government has introduced a trio of proposed solutions. First, Vietnam is committed to advancing farming technology to enhance water utilization efficiency. This entails promoting high-yield crops (Appendices V62, V63, and V64) over lower-yield rice varieties. The Agriculture Department of Vietnam recommends the cultivation of short-term crops, thereby allowing farmers to allocate more land and water resources for 'perennial trees and aquatic species' (Appendix V63). Concurrently, Vietnam is actively advocating for the adoption of advanced farming technologies and techniques, such as hydroponics, net house farming, and poly greenhouse farming (Appendix V64). These advancements collectively contribute to an improved overall efficiency in agriculture.

Secondly, the Vietnamese government extends political support in response to the water scarcity challenges. Recognising the importance of 'connectivity' (Appendices V48, V51, V52, and V62), Vietnam has initiated infrastructure construction projects, particularly in logistics, to enhance the transportation of agricultural products, with a particular focus on aquatic species. Furthermore, the government encourages farmers to establish strong partnerships with outlets to improve their profitability (Appendices V61 and V64). Moreover, Vietnam is

fostering regional cooperation in logistic chains (Appendices V64 and V65) to expand its agricultural exports globally. This regional collaboration is seen as a significant boon to the nation's economic development, which will be explored further in Part 3 of this study. On another front, Vietnam is also implementing policies that prohibit fishing during the fishing breeding season and cracking down on illegal fishing to ensure the sustainable development of its fishery sector (Appendix V62).

Thirdly, Vietnam offers financial support to its agricultural sector. The government provides economic assistance (Appendix V64) to farmers and actively seeks international funding. As part of its strategic partnerships with countries such as India, Japan, and China, Vietnam integrates agriculture into these regional cooperation efforts (Appendix V66). This extends to international collaborations, with the United Nations in agreement to share farming knowledge and standards with Vietnam (Appendices V64 and V65).

Vietnam's strategic narrative does not mention the difficulties in fishery, which is different from Cambodia.

6.2.3 Cambodian story: Agriculture, fishery, and food security

Agriculture remains a cornerstone of the Cambodian economy, providing stability amidst economic fluctuations. Its significance transcends mere economic metrics, as agriculture plays a pivotal role in both social and economic development, contributing to the country's overall stability (Appendix K55). Furthermore, fishery serves as a vital source of sustenance for the populace of livelihood (Appendix K49, 69). Despite its importance, Cambodian agriculture grapples with a multitude of challenges, chief among them being limited resources and low productivity (Appendix K55, 56). These challenges manifest in various ways, including disruptions caused by excess water, irrigation shortages, and the impact of dams. Similarly, the fisheries sector faces a decline in fish catch exacerbated by dam construction, collectively posing a severe threat to Cambodia's food

security. This section will firstly introduce the issues faced by Cambodia then move to the solutions.

For agriculture, Cambodian challenges are multifaceted. Firstly, flooding disrupts farming activities, leading to reduced productivity. In response, Cambodian farmers have resorted to abandoning the cultivation of autumn-winter rice to allow floodwaters to inundate fields during the wet season (Appendix K40, 57). This shift in farming practices, however, has resulted in decreased agricultural output, exacerbating food security concerns. Additionally, sediment deposition post-flooding further impedes agricultural productivity (Appendix K61). Secondly, the agriculture sector grapples with irrigation water shortages, particularly during dry seasons. Cambodia heavily relies on the Mekong River's freshwater for irrigation, making it susceptible to water scarcity during periods of drought (Appendix K49, 51, 52). Droughts have adversely affected cashew production and other agricultural activities, further compounding productivity challenges (Appendix K58). Thirdly, the proliferation of hydroelectric stations along the Mekong River exacerbates the instability of water resources. Concerns abound regarding the potential alteration of climate patterns and the exacerbation of flood and drought cycles (Appendix K56, 58, 62). Furthermore, upstream activities, such as water retention by countries like China, pose additional uncertainties regarding water availability (Appendix K58, 59). Consequently, Cambodian authorities perceive large-scale hydroelectric projects as disruptive elements and advocate for measures to mitigate their adverse effects (Appendix K62).

In summary, Cambodia's agriculture sector faces persistent productivity challenges exacerbated by unstable water levels, a situation further complicated by dam construction. Similar issues plague the fisheries sector, emphasizing the urgent need for sustainable solutions to safeguard the country's food security.

Fisheries sector holds significant importance for both the Cambodian economy and its food supply. The Mekong basin, encompassing Cambodia, stands out as the

largest inland fishery catchment, representing 15.2% of global fish catches in 2018, a figure projected to decline by at least two percent in the subsequent year (Appendix K65), a trend corroborated by the MRC (Appendix K73). The decline in fish catches, a primary concern for the region, stems from two key factors. Firstly, alterations in water flow patterns, attributed largely to climate change-induced extreme weather events (Appendix K70) and the proliferation of hydroelectric dams along the Lancang-Mekong River, are chiefly responsible for diminishing fish stocks (Appendix K51, 65, 66). Supported by evidence from the MRC and other authoritative reports, the construction of dams in the Mekong basin has significantly disrupted fish migration patterns, resulting in a notable reduction in fish populations and diversity (Appendix K66, 72, 73). For instance, certain species, such as the 'white fish', are nearing extinction in the lower Mekong basin (Appendix K73). Moreover, dams also caused the reduce of the Mekong water sediment flows which increasing the pressure of fish biodiversity (appendix K51, 59, 63). Cambodian fishermen express grievances against these dams and didn't 'want any new dams' (appendix K66, 67, 69) as they thought these 'frenzy' (appendix K66, 72, 73) dams were responsible to the fishery difficulties. Unfortunately, Cambodia couldn't persuade the other countries 'plan oppositely' (appendix K72, 73) referring to quit dam construction. Secondly, overfishing exacerbates the decline in fish populations, posing a shared challenge for all lower Mekong countries (Appendix K69). Cambodia recognizes the critical role of the fishery sector in sustaining livelihoods and values its conservation. However, the concurrent challenges of limited water resources, disrupted fishing patterns, and low agricultural productivity collectively threaten Cambodia's food security.

In summary, the fisheries sector holds paramount importance for Cambodia, akin to agriculture. However, the sector faces considerable threats, including altered water flow patterns due to climate change and dam construction, as well as overfishing. These challenges underscore the urgent need for collaborative efforts among Mekong basin countries to address these issues and safeguard the region's food security.

Beyond the physical challenges confronting agriculture and fisheries, Cambodia grapples with severe food security concerns. The nation views its sustenance as intricately tied to two vital resources: flood irrigation water and fish protein (Appendix K49). Consequently, food security is not merely an economic or social issue but is firmly entrenched within the realm of national security considerations (Appendix K1, 2, 3, 4). Moreover, food holds profound cultural significance for Cambodia, serving as a linchpin in the fabric of identity through culinary rituals and traditions (Appendix K20). Thus, Cambodia frames its food security status not only in terms of national security but also as a safeguard for its cultural heritage.

Furthermore, Cambodia recognizes that food security challenges are not confined within its borders but are shared among the lower Mekong countries, a predicament stemming from the collective issue of limited water resources. Consequently, the Cambodian government actively advocates for collaborative solutions to address these interconnected challenges (Appendix K1, 2, 3, 4).

Cambodia perceives food security as a multifaceted issue intertwined with national security imperatives and cultural identity. Recognizing the shared nature of these challenges among neighbouring countries, Cambodia underscores the importance of concerted efforts to mitigate the risks and ensure the well-being of its populace.

Cambodia's solution is largely dependent on the domestic aid and international aid and cooperations. Domestically, Cambodia has implemented policies aimed at enhancing agricultural development, exemplified by a three-year initiative launched in 2016 to bolster vegetable farming (Appendix K63). Additionally, investments have been directed towards upgrading the domestic agricultural production chain, transitioning from traditional, low-yield methods to modernized, eco-friendly practices (Appendix K63, 64). Furthermore, there is a concerted effort to promote the adoption of new farming technologies (Appendix K64, 75,

76).

Concurrently, Cambodia advocates for regional cooperation, emphasizing the importance of sharing technology, collaborative investments, and joint planning. For instance, collaborations between Vietnam and Cambodia on digital farming have proven beneficial in promoting hi-tech agricultural practices (Appendix K67). Leveraging platforms such as the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) and the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), Cambodia endeavours to engage with countries like China to advance regional agricultural technologies (Appendix K60). Similarly, recognizing the interdependent nature of Mekong water resources and fisheries, Cambodia advocates for the establishment of a regional food security system encompassing the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) (Appendix K56).

In summary, the Cambodian government's approach to addressing agricultural, fisheries, and food security challenges is characterized by a combination of domestic policy initiatives and collaborative efforts at the regional level. By focusing on both fronts, Cambodia aims to enhance agricultural productivity, promote sustainable practices, and ensure food security not only for its own population but also for the broader regional community.

6.2.4 China's story: big brother's help

China's strategic narrative does not mention the agriculture and fishery difficulties. Instead, China has offered to build infrastructure and share technology to help with lower Mekong countries. For example, China helps Cambodia with 'rural residence water projects' (appendix W27) and other hydro projects with lower Mekong countries (appendix W28) for both irrigation water and residence water. In agriculture, China first called for cooperation to spread more efficient irrigation technology and more productive crops. Agricultural cooperation is one of the five priorities of the LMCO (appendix W29). China designed and implemented the 'Three-Year Action Plan on Agricultural Cooperation (2020-2022) at a faster pace and ensured the success of the LMC Bumper Harvest projects' (Li Keqiang, 2020).

In practice, China also shared highly productive crops researched by Yuan Longping (appendix, W18, W33) and constructed a ‘high yield demonstration field and excellent agricultural goods species demonstration station’ (appendix W29). China also calls for close collaboration with Vietnam on drought and saline-alkali soil conditions for hybrid rice planting (appendix W30).

In response to the concerns about effects on fisheries, China has stressed international cooperation on environmental cooperation. In 2011, China started environmental cooperation with ASEAN (Appendix W35). In the Joint Statement on Enhancing Sustainable Development Cooperation of the Lancang-Mekong Countries in 2021, China called for implementing the ‘Lancang-Mekong Environmental Cooperation Strategy and the Lancang-Mekong Green Plan’ to protect biodiversity (W28). The ‘Biodiversity Corridor Project’ (appendix W35) was also designed for biological diversity protection.

6.3 Economic growth: strategic narrative about economic issues

Development is a shared priority for all four regional countries, with economic growth and poverty alleviation being key concerns. However, due to the varying contributions of agriculture and fisheries to their national GDPs, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, and China have distinct needs and priorities in the Mekong region. This section explores their strategic narratives on economic challenges and proposed solutions within the region.

6.3.1 Laos’s story: economic development, poverty elimination, and people’s well-being

For the Laos, Mekong water difficulties also translate to economic growth challenge. Laos identifies development as its core issue, which can be detangled into three sub-issues: economic development, poverty elimination, and people’s well-being. Also, since the breakout of Covid-19, pandemic-aid and economic

recovery have become important. Laos believes infrastructure construction to be an effective solution for all three issues. Besides, Covid-19 has become another big issue since 2020. This sub-section starts with infrastructure programmes, then moves to Laos's solutions for economic development and people's wellbeing and ends with the new challenges brought by Covid.

As mentioned before, the Laos government believes infrastructure construction projects beneficial to Laos development in following ways. Firstly, these projects would attract foreign investment which directly supports the Laos economy. Secondly, infrastructure projects would create work opportunities to boost local economy. Besides dams on the Mekong River, infrastructure projects mainly refer to the energy grid, China-Laos railway, and dry port, which all link to Laos's 'logistics hub' strategy.

China and Laos signed an agreement on building an electricity grid as part of 'deepening energy cooperation' (appendix L40). Funded by China's National Energy Administration and the Ministry of Energy and Mines of Laos, China Southern Power Grid (CSG) signed an electricity agreement with Electricite du Laos (EDL) to build the grid together and jointly establish Electricite du Laos Transmission Company Limited (EDLT) (appendix L40, L41). Laos considers this project as the 'backbone' (appendix L42) of its electricity supporting and export plan. This project will support the business and residential energy usage (appendix L41). Laos sees it as part of 'green development' and will integrate with the Laos-China railway project as practicing the Laos-China community of 'shared future' (appendix L40, L42). Laos considers this grid project as 'Mekong's centre battery' which fits in its 'logistic hub' strategy (appendix L41).

Secondly, the China-Laos railway project is the most important and successful project for Laos. Laos considers it as the successful outcome of BRI, and supports Laos with tourism, economic, goods transportation, etc. This high-quality modern railway project serves as the 'strategic bridge' (appendix L48, L49) and body of

Laos's 'logistics hub'. With the side effect of connecting and increasing job opportunities, Laos is grateful that China 'supports Laos's rural' plan (appendix L49). With the execution of railway, it soon takes 'half of track' of transportation mission (appendix L50). This railway also supports other infrastructure construction, such as building a dry port (appendix L52, 53). In sum, Laos think it contributes to its development in multiple ways: goods transportation benefits trades; people exchange which benefits tourism and culture communication; increasing job and back up other program which benefits economic growth. Laos recognises the Laos-China railway contribute to fulfil Laos's 'change land-lock to land-connection' strategy (appendix L53).

Thirdly, dry ports such as Savannakhet and Thanaleng, are like important joints to accomplish Laos's logistic hub strategy. Together with a special economic zone, Laos believes these 'world-first class' (appendix L54) dry ports are the key to connecting the region and world (appendix L57). Connected with China-Laos railway, the main advantage of dry ports is to 'transport goods in much shorter time compared to sea freight' (appendix L55, 51). It also increases the connection with China, and other countries along the route, such as Thailand. Laos also expects the dry port to attract 'lenders' (appendix L56, 54) to increase economic revenue.

With the these projects, The Lao government has proposed three key strategies to stimulate economic growth: exporting electricity (Appendix L40, 41), expanding tourism, and developing the digital economy (Appendix L76). However, apart from its cooperation with China, the government provides limited concrete details on electricity exports and digital economy initiatives. Therefore, this section primarily focuses on tourism.

Laos considers tourism as a new economic growth point. With adequate tourism resources, Laos believes it would attract tourists domestically and abroad. For example, the unique architecture style of Ancient Champassak temple is

attractive to Chinese and French tourists (appendix L58). With support from governments, attracting one million Chinese tourists was considered ‘achievable’ in 2019 (appendix L59). According to Laos, the international tourists mainly come from China and South Korea (appendix L58, L59), and it has become Laos’s main source of foreign currency (appendix L60).

On the other hand, Laos praised China for its support of projects aimed at the wellbeing of Laos’s people. Apart from residential drinking water, China also supports Laos with its residential lightening system (appendix L61, 66), youth activity centre (appendix L64), hospitals and other house appliance, aiming to improve Laos rural villagers life conditions (appendix L63, 64, 65).

With the emergence of Covid, Laos faced lots of new challenges. Firstly, Laos calls for international cooperation (appendix L67). China answered Laos’s request and became Laos’s biggest anti-pandemic supplies donor, including vaccine (appendix L68, 69, 70). However, despite the convivence of the China-Laos railway, it also spread the Covid virus. Moreover, because of China’s restrictive policy on controlling virus, Laos’s tourism was hit. Economic recovery in post-pandemic time is a serious challenge to Laos.

6.3.2 Vietnam’s story: social development

In Vietnam, water-related concerns are intricately intertwined with the country’s development trajectory. Vietnam identifies domestic development as a fundamental national interest, with a primary focus on enhancing public wellbeing, eradicating poverty, and fostering economic growth. The nation grapples with three key challenges in relation to Mekong water issues. These challenges encompass the economic repercussions on agriculture due to water-related difficulties, the imperative of ensuring clean water access for poverty alleviation, and the integration of water considerations into national energy development initiatives. In essence, Vietnam actively promotes and incorporates developmental strategies into its overarching sustainable Mekong development

framework.

The economic growth of Vietnam faces two significant challenges: agricultural issues and solutions, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic along with proposed remedies.

Firstly, agriculture has traditionally been a pivotal component of Vietnam's economic growth. Over the years, its contribution to the GDP has witnessed a decline, from 23.2% in 2000 to 16.3% in 2011, further decreasing to 11.3% in 2021 (Appendix V72). Despite this decline in percentage, Vietnam recognizes that agriculture still constitutes over 75% of all economic sectors, contributing substantially to overall economic growth (Appendix V73). However, challenges arise due to the Mekong water disputes, as discussed in section 2.1. In response, the Vietnamese government has proposed various policies to address these challenges.

The government's strategies involve two main solutions: economic transformation and the development of complementary economic sectors. On one hand, Vietnam has outlined a ten-year plan, from 2011 to 2020, for 'industrialization-modernization' (Appendix V74, 3,4), aiming to increase the contributions of sectors with 'high economic growth rates' and 'job creation' to promote sustainable economic growth. Under central government guidance, Vietnam is also encouraging the growth of various economic sectors, such as tourism and cross-border E-trade, to integrate into 'regional labor distribution' (Appendix V74, 75). Despite such efforts, the development of these new economic sectors has been hindered by the challenges posed by COVID-19.

Secondly, the ongoing impact of COVID-19 has created continuous challenges for Vietnam's economy and necessitated corresponding solutions. The Vietnamese government perceives COVID-19 as an 'urgent matter' that poses 'great challenges' to the entire Mekong sub-region, alongside climate change (Appendix V76). The

pandemic has disrupted people exchanges, affecting nearly all economic sectors, particularly tourism. Recognizing the importance of regional collaboration in facing the challenges posed by COVID-19, Vietnam emphasizes international cooperation as a primary solution.

Vietnam advocates for multilateral cooperation, involving ‘three or four parties’ (Appendix V75, 76, 78, 79). It promotes partnerships such as the ‘Mekong-US partnership’ (Appendix V76), ‘Vietnam-China ties,’ and ‘China-ASEAN partnership’ (Appendix V80, 81, 82, 83, 84) to attract significant regional investments. Additionally, Vietnam underscores the role of international platforms, including the UN, APEC, and the Boao Forum, in facilitating economic recovery post-COVID-19 (Appendix V74, 80, 83).

In conclusion, for economic recovery concerning Mekong water issues, Vietnam proposes economic transformation and the development of alternative economic sectors to alleviate the pressure on agriculture. Despite challenges posed by COVID-19, Vietnam underscores the significance of external investment and regional cooperation, positioning itself as a central figure in regional economic collaboration. As a regional leader, Vietnam actively advocates for economic cooperation within the region and serves as a conduit for external economic aid. The impact of COVID-19 extends beyond economic concerns, affecting Vietnam’s public livelihood, aligning with the broader goals of Vietnam’s domestic development.

Vietnam identifies the eradication of poverty (Appendix V74, 75, 3, 4) as a significant imperative for enhancing public well-being and fostering domestic development. However, the nation does not explicitly articulate all the related challenges. Among the proposed solutions, Vietnam identifies water access as a primary factor contributing to its domestic poverty challenges, further exacerbated by the impact of Covid-19. According to the United Nations, 11% of the global population still lacks access to clean water (Appendix V29), a condition

that persists in certain regions of Vietnam. Urban development has intensified water stress, necessitating a delicate balance among energy, agriculture, and residential water demands. Concurrently, the pandemic has posed severe challenges to public health (Appendix V76, 77) and poverty alleviation due to sluggish economic growth. The solutions proposed by the Vietnamese government underscore the importance of regional cooperation.

The Vietnamese government advocates for both domestic development and international cooperation policies to uplift public livelihood. On the domestic front, Vietnam promotes ‘people exchange’ (Appendix V77, 78, 85) and economic transformation to narrow the economic disparities between rural and urban areas. The construction of dams is another domestic strategy aimed at addressing water and energy shortages. Internationally, Vietnam calls for multilateral cooperation, leveraging Mekong cooperation within ASEAN and extending beyond the region. Building on initiatives such as GMS and ASEAN + China, Vietnam advocates for infrastructure investment in clean water and regional connectivity (Appendix V86, 85, 84), encompassing the construction of highways and railways. Vietnam expresses eagerness to integrate water cooperation into existing platforms for data sharing and joint exploitation of water resources.

6.3.3 Cambodia’s story: economic growth and tourism

The Cambodian government places a high value on economic growth and envisions becoming an ‘upper-middle income country by 2030’ and a ‘high-income country by 2050’ (Appendix K1, 2, 3, 4). To achieve this goal, it considers enhancing overall economic competitiveness a key strategy (Appendix K1, 2, 3, 4). One significant obstacle to economic development is the heavy reliance on agriculture. Therefore, the government aims to upgrade the current economic structure, exploring new avenues for development, such as tourism. The detailed content of issues and solutions for Cambodia presents as below.

The Cambodian government views tourism as a critical sector for stimulating

economic growth (Appendix K4), referring to it as ‘green gold’ (Appendix K79, 80). It believes that developing tourism can foster integrated development, encompassing ‘socio-economic growth, national cultural promotion, and environmental protection’ (Appendix K79), while also enhancing regional integration (Appendix K4, 77). However, this important sector faces several challenges.

A major issue is the decline in Cambodia’s international tourism market, as indicated by decreasing visitor numbers. Although Cambodian tourism flourished after 1998, contributing 12.1% to GDP (Appendix K79, 80), it has encountered significant setbacks, such as an 82% drop in international tourist arrivals to Siem Reap between 2019 and 2020 (Appendix K79). The government identifies several threats and weaknesses contributing to this situation.

Firstly, natural disasters are considered a major threat (Appendix K3, 4, 79, 80). Floods, wildfires, and climate change (Appendix K79, 80) increase security concerns among tourists, leading to a decline in numbers. These disasters also impact the management of cultural and natural tourism resources, such as the ‘Phnom Kulen’ national park (Appendix K79).

Secondly, the reliance on an uneven tourist market is seen as a vulnerability (Appendix K77, 78, 79). The majority of tourists come from China, Korea, and ASEAN countries, with China being the largest source (Appendix K78, 79, 80). For instance, China accounted for 2.4 million out of 6.6 million international tourists in 2019 (Appendix K81). This asymmetry makes the market vulnerable, as demonstrated by the significant drop in Chinese tourists due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Thirdly, insufficient tourist infrastructure contributes to the prevalence of ‘one-time’ visitors (Appendix K79, 80). The lack of facilities such as lavatories and restaurants discourage repeat visits.

For solutions, Cambodian government believes that these challenges can be addressed through investment and promotion. Investing in tourism infrastructure and better management of tourist sites can attract repeat visitors and reduce security concerns. Additionally, promoting Cambodia to a broader international market can help balance the current market structure. Detailed solutions will be presented in the following sections.

The government prioritizes investments in tourist spots, focusing on three main areas: tourism capacity infrastructure (e.g., hotels, lavatories, restaurants), connectivity infrastructure (e.g., airports, railways), and investment in the tourist sites themselves. For example, Cambodia plans to build an international airport in Siem Reap to improve its hosting capacity (Appendix K80). The goal is to develop ‘green and sustainable’ tourism (Appendix K3, 4, 78, 80, 81), combining environmental protection with the development of cultural heritage tourism. For instance, Cambodia promotes Siem Reap’s ‘beyond temples’ identity to integrate natural scenery with cultural sites (Appendix K78, 79).

International and regional cooperation is another major solution for tourism. Cambodia relies on foreign investments and funds for infrastructure development (Appendix K3, 4, 79, 80). In 2017, China granted over 7 million USD to Cambodia under the LMCO initiative, supporting various projects, including tourism standard research (Appendix K82). Cambodia benefits from over 55 projects under the BRI, such as cultural heritage promotion (Appendix K83).

Moreover, Cambodia seeks to promote ‘innovative tourism’ by integrating creative industries like film production, handicrafts, and food (Appendix K79, 80). The government actively participates in cultural exhibitions, exchange weeks, festivals, and water festivals (Appendix K83, K75, 84, 85, 86, 87). For example, Cambodia promotes its film industry through the ‘Help Yourself Project’ by ASEAN, which collaborates with China to boost ASEAN movies and access the Chinese

market (Appendix K83).

Finally, Cambodia supports regional integration through initiatives like the ‘Mekong package’, promoting the region as a single tourism destination (Appendix K77, 78, 82, 83). Although initially proposed by Vietnam, Cambodia is eager to expedite a single visa for five countries (excluding China) under the ‘Five Countries, One Destination’ project (Appendix K78). The joint effort is expected to attract more tourists to the region.

Overall, tourism is viewed as a compensatory sector in Cambodia, aimed at balancing the dominant position of agriculture. Tourism development is integral to efforts to upgrade the economic structure. In this section, water issues are identified as ‘threats’ to tourism development. Consequently, water-related threats to tourism are considered part of Cambodia’s economic security concerns. Moreover, Cambodia integrates tourism development with infrastructure construction and environmental protection by pursuing green and sustainable tourism.

Apart from tourism, the Cambodian government provides political support for economic development by adjusting its economic sectors and strategic trajectory. Cambodia considers the promotion of creative economic sectors essential for fostering an innovative service industry, including tourism, which also contributes to sustainable development.

Furthermore, as discussed in Section 5.4, Cambodia’s regional strategy for Mekong development is based on the principles of ‘shared and sustainable development, inclusive growth, win-win cooperation, and a shared destiny’ (Appendix K9, 10, 16). Cambodia views this approach as a solution to regional challenges, particularly regarding water resource management. The government believes that sustainable development, shared prosperity, and inclusive growth are key to addressing water-related issues while fostering economic benefits for both

Cambodia and the broader Mekong region.

6.3.4 China's narratives: regional economic booster

China sees itself as a regional economic booster. In response to concerns about economic and country development brought by difficulties in agriculture and fisheries, China has three solutions. The first is increasing agricultural trade between China and regional countries to support Mekong countries agricultural development. China encourages the import of agricultural products from Mekong countries, leading to, for example, fruit imports increasing 21% over 10 years (appendix, W33).

The second is that China has tried to develop new regional economic growth points, for example by calling for cooperation in the tourism industry and digital economy. Increasing tourism cooperation is always mentioned in LMCO planning conferences, as at the first LMCO leadership meeting in Sanya in 2016. China calls for coordinating current historical sites, resources and tourist routes based on infrastructure construction such as railways and expressways (Appendix W34). China plans to host 'the Lancang-Mekong Tourism Cities Cooperation Alliance Conference and the Lancang-Mekong Mayors' Cultural Tourism Forum' based on LMCO (Appendix C15). Similar to tourism, the digital economy is another potential boost for the regional economy. Border trade, cross-border e-commerce, and industrial park cooperation are the three primary forms of the digital economy. In the 7th LMC leaders' meeting, China promised to operate special economic zones with Mekong countries and strengthen cooperation among small and medium-sized enterprises, border trade and cross-border e-commerce. China's third solution is that it tries to share its preference of seeing development and win-win economic cooperation as the ultimate solutions for all problems. Hence, regional economic cooperation is another solution proposed by China. This can be traced through the turning points mentioned before.

In the period before BRI, economic cooperation with ASEAN was central to China's

economic and financial plans. With close economic ties, for example, including a vast amount of imports and exports, China wanted to deepen its regional integration through a series of cooperation treaties and organisations, which were beneficial to both sides. In 2011, China's ASEAN Free Trade Area (CAFTA) was established, which covers territories with 1.9 billion people. By 2012, China had become the most prominent international trade partner to ASEAN (appendix W35), and trade volume between the two entities reached \$288.89 billion.

Economic cooperation in the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), including 6 Mekong River countries, was established in 1992 with funds from the Asian Development Bank. It aims to eradicate poverty and promote economic and social development in the subregion by strengthening economic ties. In 2012, GMS planned two other economic corridors: the western corridor, including the Kunming (China) - Laos - Bangkok (Thailand) railway connection, and the northern corridor, including Kunming (China) - Hanoi (Vietnam) - Haiphong (Vietnam). Among all this economic cooperation, China called for deeper regional integration by increasing the connectivity of transportation, information, and electricity. With the combination of industrial parks with trade collaboration, economic ties improved. Besides, China also encouraged local governmental and private sectors to invest in the region's economic development. GMS also worked as the base for BRI, highlighted by regional integration, infrastructure construction and investment.

Inheriting the same logic of boosting development and win-win cooperation, BRI targets more the structural reasons that China diagnosed for the slow economic growth of the Mekong and Southeast Asia. These structural issues refer to the poor connectivity and production capacity of SE Asia. Conversely, China was willing to share its excess productive capacity with regional countries. BRI was designed for this circulation of productive capacity and the spread of its economic and development outcomes in exchange for an enormous regional impact. China also believes that this complimentary productive capacity structure contributes to upgrading regional industrialisation. Financial institutions, including the Asian

Infrastructure Investment Bank and the BRICS new development bank were established as safety measures for mobilising BRI. With the alignment of BRI with the development strategies of various countries, China wishes to build regional networks of ‘fast tracks’ and ‘green lanes’, deepen cooperation in border trade, cross-border e-commerce and industrial parks, and build better sub-regional industrial and value chains’ with the support of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (RCEP) (appendix W19). Besides the comprehensive regional economic cooperation, China has also designed solutions for agriculture and fish migration concerns.

6.4 Energy security: water shortage and clean energy

As a relatively upper stream country, Laos does not consider itself faced with energy shortage issue. As mentioned before, Laos consider itself as an energy export country inside the region. Similar to Laos, Vietnam does not mention the energy shortage. As a Lower Mekong country, Cambodia frames energy as an issue in national development.

6.4.1 Cambodian story: energy security as a challenge to national development

Cambodia considers energy a crucial aspect of national development, facing three main energy-related challenges that may potentially lead to ‘energy security’ issues (Appendix K3, 4). Firstly, Cambodia struggles with inadequate energy supplies, higher energy rates and fees compared to neighbouring countries, and insufficiently clean energy sources (Appendix K3, 4, 58, 89). The country relies heavily on coal, which is less environmentally friendly, for over half of its energy needs (Appendix K58). Another major energy source is hydropower, which is unreliable due to the unstable water levels of the Mekong River (Appendix K58, 88, 89, 90). To address these challenges, the Cambodian government depends on diverse energy sources and international cooperation.

The Cambodian government has proposed two major solutions to the energy issue.

Firstly, it has designed an ‘energy vision’ (Appendix K4, K90) featuring a ‘mixed energy’ plan to supply energy from fossil fuels, coal, hydro, solar, and wind sources (Appendix K4, 58, 90). Cambodia has researched the feasibility of these various energy sources. Hydropower is particularly contentious, as experts have raised concerns about the significant impact of hydroelectric projects along the Mekong River and its upper tributaries on water patterns and the regional environment (Appendix K58, 89). The increasing frequency of severe droughts in recent years (Appendix K58, 88, 89) has also raised concerns about the sufficiency of water for hydroelectric generation. Cambodia aims to address these hydro-related challenges through regional cooperation.

Regional and international cooperation is another main solution for Cambodia’s energy issues. Cambodia views China as a key partner, particularly for coal plant projects, which are crucial for energy supply. Although Cambodia’s projects were deemed safe when China announced it would cease constructing international coal plants, this development is still seen as an opportunity for advancing green energy initiatives. Additionally, China provides technological and financial support for Cambodia’s hydroelectric projects. The construction of the Xiaowan Dam has reinforced Cambodia’s recognition of China’s leading position in this field and its desire for further support (Appendix K91). Cambodia also plans to ‘better exploit’ water resources under the Mekong River Commission (MRC) to build well-planned and well-designed hydropower stations (Appendix K58, 88, 90). Furthermore, Cambodia seeks to expand regional cooperation through the MRC, believing that it can amplify its voice on the international stage and secure aid from Australia, the EU, the US, and Korea (Appendix K88, 90).

Overall, Cambodia believes that Mekong water issues are directly linked to national energy supply, which is vital for national development and environmental protection. While increasing hydropower and other renewable energy sources contributes to green energy goals, dam construction also affects regional climate patterns. To balance these concerns, Cambodia ensures that dam construction is

approved by the MRC. Thus, water inadequacy is framed as a key factor in energy security, impacting Cambodia's national security and long-term development.

6.4.2 China's story: energy cooperation

In response to energy shortages, China has promoted energy cooperation with Mekong countries by constructing substitute energy generation facilities in place of hydropower stations. China invested in construction of the Yongxin thermal power station in Vietnam, and power grids in Cambodia (appendix W27) and Laos (appendix W31). China is also involved in construction of the Laos Nanou Hydro power station (appendix W32). China also calls for clean energy collaboration research with countries in the region.

6.5 Environmental security: water and regional climate change

Environmental security emerges as a prevalent and significant concern within the narratives LMCs. Climate change, in particular, has assumed a prominent position as a trending issue. Broadly, LMCs emphasise the pivotal role of water in mitigating regional climate pattern changes. Water is deemed crucial for preserving water biodiversity, forests, and overall regional biodiversity, representing a critical strategy for addressing climate change. Except for Laos, the other three countries all recognise the importance of this issue, detailed considerations are presented in the subsequent sections.

6.5.1 Vietnam's concerns about water and environment security

Vietnam asserts that water-related issues are 'deeply impinged' (Appendix V48) with the impacts of climate change. The emergence of diverse and escalating disasters further compounds the 'complexity and unpredictability' of these water challenges (Appendix V48, V53). These difficulties also pose significant threats to biodiversity within the Mekong Basin. In response, the Vietnam government has

outlined a set of three comprehensive solutions aimed at addressing climate change.

Firstly, Vietnam vigorously promotes the concept of ‘sustainable development’ (Appendices V48, V49, V51, V52, V53, V69, and V70) within the Mekong Basin, fostering a paradigm of healthy development. Guided by the theme of ‘living with nature’ (Appendix V69), this sustainable Mekong development strategy strives to harmonize economic growth with environmental protection, enhance ecosystem resilience, and actively engage in disaster mitigation efforts (Appendices V69 and V70). Politically, the Vietnamese government has established a ‘master plan’ spanning from 2021 to 2050 and a 5-year plan (Appendices V54, V68, and V69) to facilitate the sustainable development of the Mekong Delta. Furthermore, the government advocates for auditing meetings on water (Appendices V53 and V64) to ensure the ‘sustainable and responsible’ (Appendices V52 and V70) utilization of Mekong water resources. Infrastructure projects, exemplified by national parks like Ca Mau’s U Minh Ha National Park (Appendix V71), are constructed to safeguard biodiversity.

Secondly, the Vietnamese government extends financial support to address these challenges. Notably, it granted 81 billion VND (equivalent to 3.48 million USD) to support climate change mitigation and aid impoverished households in Tra Vinh during the period from 2014 to 2019 (Appendices V65 and V69).

Thirdly, Vietnam actively seeks regional and international cooperation to tackle climate change and environmental issues. Collaborations with organizations such as the World Wide Fund for Nature involve research on the influence of Mekong water and the protection of biodiversity (Appendices V70 and V71). Similarly, partnerships with the Netherlands (Appendices V67, V68, and V70) focus on studies related to ecosystem resilience, particularly in the context of climate change adaptation.

6.5.2 Cambodian concerns about water and environment security

Cambodia places significant value on environmental preservation, with water playing a pivotal role in this endeavour. The country directly links environmental security with challenges crucial to Cambodian development (Appendix K3, 4, 5, 7, 8). Cambodia acknowledges the ongoing issue of water resources management (Appendix K3, 4), which is essential for preserving Cambodian biodiversity and mitigating the impacts of climate change. Water is recognized as one of the ‘priority areas’ of Cambodian development. Cambodia perceives water as a fundamental element for maintaining both forests and fisheries (fish biodiversity) (Appendix K4, 92, 93, 58), which are integral parts of sustainable development.

Similarly, Cambodia aims to address these challenges through collaborative efforts, both domestically and internationally. Domestically, Cambodia scrutinizes and combats illegal logging and fishing activities (Appendix K92, 94). Internationally, Cambodia views organizations such as WWF and the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) as primary cooperation platforms. For instance, WWF-Cambodia establishes various wildlife reserve regions (Appendix K94, 95). Cambodia also advocates for collective efforts among all Mekong countries in environmental protection under the GMS framework (Appendix K94, 95), including China. Cambodia views the Core Environment Program (CEP) within the GMS framework positively (Appendix K96), as it fosters a ‘green and win-win’ relationship between the environment and the economy (Appendix K94, 96), mainly through technology sharing for pollution management and investments in green economy initiatives. Cambodia emphasizes that the concept of ‘grow now, clean-up later’ (Appendix K96) is unacceptable

6.5.3 China’s solution

China does not mention water’s relationship to environment but indicate the awareness of Lancang Cascade plan, along with other dams in Mekong River being mainly responsible for changes of the Mekong River flow pattern, which may change the regional climate. Reservoirs also endanger regional biological diversity.

In response to the concerns about effects on fisheries, China has stressed international cooperation on environmental cooperation. In 2011, China started environmental cooperation with ASEAN (Appendix W35). In the Joint Statement on Enhancing Sustainable Development Cooperation of the Lancang-Mekong Countries in 2021, China called for implementing the ‘Lancang-Mekong Environmental Cooperation Strategy and the Lancang-Mekong Green Plan’ to protect biodiversity (W28). The ‘Biodiversity Corridor Project’ (appendix W35) was also designed for biological diversity protection.

6.6 Comparison of the issue narratives of China against Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia

Similar to the previous chapters, this section will examine the key alignments and differences in the strategic narratives of the Mekong countries regarding China. While there are many similarities across these narratives, the most significant difference lies in China’s approach: it does not mention the Mekong water issue, whereas it occupies a central position in the issue strategic narratives of Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia.

6.6.1 Laos and China: similarities and differences in issue strategic narrative

The two countries share several similarities at the issue level, which are outlined as follows. Firstly, regarding the unstable water issue, China offers the solution of water data sharing, a request made by Laos. Secondly, in the agriculture and fisheries sectors, both countries’ narratives align on the sharing of technology related to these economic sectors. China also pledges to increase the import of agricultural products from the regional countries to support their economic growth. Thirdly, both countries align on energy and development issues, with a shared view that energy challenges do not pose a significant issue. Additionally, both nations see infrastructure cooperation as a key driver for poverty alleviation. Both also wish to deepen collaboration in the energy sector, with China assisting in dam construction in Laos, while Laos aspires to become the ‘battery’ of the region.

The differences between the two countries primarily focus on two points. Firstly, the Mekong water issue is clearly a concern for Laos, but it is not addressed by China. Secondly, Laos does not express significant concern about environmental issues and the environmental risks facing the region, whereas China acknowledges these concerns.

6.6.2 Vietnam and China: similarities and differences in issue strategic narrative
Similar to Laos, the two countries share several alignments in their strategic narratives. Firstly, regarding the unstable Mekong water levels, both countries emphasize the solution of "water data sharing." Secondly, in addressing food security challenges, China offers the technology and economic support that Vietnam has also called for. Similarly, on development issues, China proposes regional and infrastructure cooperation, aligning with Vietnam's call for projects that focus on improving people's wellbeing and poverty alleviation. Fourthly, both countries highlight the importance of regional cooperation on sustainable development and a "green economy" from an environmental perspective. Lastly, neither country explicitly mentions the energy issue.

The differences between the two countries can be identified in three major areas. Firstly, as with Laos, the water issue is significant in Vietnam's narrative but is not addressed by China. Secondly, China provides energy solutions, which are not mentioned by Vietnam. Overall, while there are semantic similarities between China and Vietnam, the deeper meanings differ. For instance, in Vietnam's vision of regional collaboration on sustainable development, the country sees itself as a leader in addressing regional climate patterns. In contrast, China's interpretation of sustainable development emphasizes aligning with China's development model and integrating it into a shared future goal.

6.6.3 Cambodia and China: similarities and differences in issue strategic narrative
Similar to the previous two countries, there are numerous similarities between the narratives of China and Cambodia. Firstly, both countries address water data

sharing as a key solution. Secondly, regarding food security, particularly in agriculture and fisheries, China's financial and technological support aligns with Cambodia's needs. Thirdly, on development issues, China's emphasis on regional cooperation in infrastructure construction aligns with Cambodia's priorities. Fourthly, in the energy sector, China's cooperation in electricity and hydropower development matches Cambodia's strategic interests. Finally, both countries call for regional collaboration on environmental issues.

However, there are three major differences in their issue-specific strategic narratives. Firstly, as with the other Mekong countries, China remains silent on the Mekong water issue, whereas it is central to Cambodia's discourse. Secondly, in discussions on economic development, China does not specifically mention tourism, whereas Cambodia places significant emphasis on it. Lastly, similar to Vietnam, Cambodia expresses its differences subtly, as reflected in its approach to regional collaboration projects. For instance, Cambodia's promotion of initiatives such as Five Countries, One Destination and Help Yourself highlights the lower Mekong countries' independent development efforts and their use of regional cooperation to counterbalance China's influence. Notably, the Help Yourself initiative, launched in 2016, stands in direct contrast to China's concept of a 'shared future', suggesting that, at least in the tourism sector, Cambodia and other lower Mekong countries seek to limit China's influence and pursue independent growth. Additionally, beyond regional cooperation, Cambodia places greater emphasis on international partnerships for environmental issues. For example, it refers to the Mekong River as the 'Mighty River' (Appendix K93) and has established a water partnership with the United States (Appendix K96), a move that does not align with China's narrative.

Chapter 7 Discussion

It is clear from the previous chapters that there are differences between China and Mekong countries regarding water issues. It is worth analysing how Mekong countries raise their disagreements while keeping their relationship with China. In this chapter, I will discuss the comparison result of the strategic narratives from China, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. I start by revisiting briefly about similarities and differences between the strategic narratives. Section 7.2 will focus on the question about How the strategic narrative about Mekong water disputes vary between China against the Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia by explore the narrative strategies vary between Mekong states and China; section 7.3 will focus on the why the strategic narrative about Mekong water disputes vary between China against the Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia from the perspective of the relationship between identity and issue strategic narratives.

7.1 Similarities and differences among strategic narratives

The similarities and differences on Mekong water issues are both very important. Considering the regional power dynamic, the differences and disagreements could hide behind those similarities subtly. This section will present a quick summary of each country's story. It will follow with the quick summary of the major differences and similarities among the strategic narratives which will be the base for develop the further discussion in the following sections.

7.1.1 Strategic narrative for all four countries on three levels

In this section, I will provide a brief summary of the empirical chapters which will serve as the base of comparison outcome.

Firstly, the strategic narrative at the system level highlights how each country addresses international issues and proposes solutions. China's system-level narratives include:

- 1) A shared future for all mankind;

- 2) A new world order emphasizing equality among all states;
- 3) Asia as the new economic driver for development and recovery.

The Chinese government frames these narratives as solutions aligned with its national interests. Domestically, China perceives the pursuit of these international goals and leadership as a natural outcome of its development, an essential component of the Chinese Dream and national rejuvenation, and a means of enhancing national pride. This, in turn, strengthens public support for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Internationally, these narratives emphasize moral principles distinct from those of the United States, particularly equality among states and between the Global North and South, addressing the geopolitical competition. In essence, these narratives challenge the U.S.-led world order and seek to legitimize China's leadership.

Vietnam advocates for an international environment of peace, stability, and development. While its rhetoric is similar to China's, Vietnam positions this narrative as a means to assert regional leadership and counter China, which it perceives as a source of regional uncertainty. This argument will be elaborated in the identity-based strategic narrative section. Moreover, Vietnam's vision of a favourable international environment also supports its national development, thereby reinforcing the legitimacy of its ruling party.

Laos and Cambodia do not articulate a clear strategic narrative at the international level. Instead, both countries emphasize a preference for a peaceful and inclusive Mekong region, as they believe such an environment supports domestic development and mitigates uncertainties stemming from U.S.-China competition.

Secondly, the strategic narrative at the identity level focuses on national self-perception and the delineation of 'we' versus 'others.' China positions itself as the representative of developing countries and wartime victim nations, including

those affected by world wars and colonial conflicts. In the Mekong region, China portrays itself as a constructive, responsible neighbour and leader, promoting a regional collective identity through narratives such as ‘shared river, shared future’ under the broader theme of ‘a shared future for all mankind.

Vietnam similarly identifies as part of the victimhood narrative and a responsible regional leader. However, it perceives China as a source of regional instability and a threat to its territorial integrity. Vietnam views Cambodia and Laos as smaller powers aligned with its stance. By framing China as the primary destabilizing force in the Mekong region, Vietnam positions itself as the rightful leader of small and medium-sized countries. Accordingly, it promotes the ‘Sustainable Development for Mekong Countries’ narrative to assert its leadership and signal opposition to China’s influence.

Laos and Cambodia, in contrast, see themselves as smaller members within the regional brotherhood, survivors of wartime struggles, and positive contributors to regional stability. Laos does not put forward a distinct regional identity, whereas Cambodia integrates elements from both China’s and Vietnam’s narratives, advocating for ‘shared and sustainable development, inclusive growth, win-win cooperation, and a shared destiny’ for the Mekong region. Neither Laos nor Cambodia explicitly aligns with China or Vietnam in this regard.

Thirdly, the strategic narrative at the issue level addresses the causes of Mekong River water challenges and the solutions proposed by the four countries. China attributes Mekong water difficulties solely to natural factors such as climate change and extreme weather. As solutions, China implements the Lancang cascade plan to stabilize regional water levels and shares Lancang River hydrological data with Mekong countries. Additionally, China offers financial, technological, and political support, along with infrastructure development assistance, through the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation framework and the Belt and Road Initiative.

Vietnam, however, argues that water difficulties stem from both China's upstream dam construction and climate change. It calls for halting further dam projects and urges China to share more comprehensive water data. While critical of Chinese dam construction, Vietnam also acknowledges that dams can help alleviate water shortages. Furthermore, Vietnam links water issues to broader challenges such as agriculture, poverty alleviation, and environmental protection, emphasizing the role of government intervention and regional cooperation in addressing these concerns.

Cambodia attributes Mekong water difficulties to both natural causes and the impact of upstream dams, particularly in terms of unstable water levels and resultant disasters. Laos, aligning with China, solely attributes water challenges to natural factors. Both countries advocate for government support and regional cooperation as key solutions for agricultural, fisheries, developmental, and environmental challenges. Laos aspires to become a 'regional battery' by expanding its hydropower sector without explicitly addressing energy shortages. In contrast, Cambodia faces significant energy challenges that impact its national development, viewing national energy planning and cooperation with China and Laos as primary solutions. A summary of these strategic narratives is provided in the table below.

7.1.2 Similarities and differences of the narratives

Based on the summary of narratives above, this section will highlight the major similarities and differences for discussion in Section 7.2. Additionally, I will provide reflections based on my observations of these narratives.

The similarities among the narratives can be categorized into four main points. Pragmatism is a common feature across all four countries, as it reflects a relatively objective recognition of regional power distribution and aspirations. Firstly, all countries share a mutual and objective understanding of the regional power

hierarchy among China, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, shaping their respective identities, ambitions, and interests. For instance, regional leadership is not an objective for Laos or Cambodia. Secondly, the identities of brotherhood and victimhood are acknowledged by all four countries. Thirdly, stemming from this pragmatic approach, national interests align with each country's position within the regional power structure and identity, influencing policy-making. For example, the national interest in development translates into regional cooperation based on maintaining peace in the Mekong region. Finally, there are shared themes emphasized by all four countries, such as development, sustainable development, and equality. However, the use of similar language serves as a communication strategy for Mekong countries to subtly signal their disagreements with China while simultaneously managing their bilateral relationships. This point will be further explored in Section 7.3.1.

On the other hand, the differences among the narratives can be categorized into six main points. Firstly, there is a notable divergence in identity and system narratives. Laos and Cambodia remain silent on their system designs or adopt a narrative stance that hedges between China and Vietnam. Secondly, China and Vietnam promote different collective regional identities based on their ambitions and perceptions of how the Mekong region fits into their broader geopolitical strategies. Thirdly, reactions to China's regional collective identity vary. Laos rarely acknowledges China's regional collective identity, while Cambodia partially aligns with both China's and Vietnam's narratives. Fourthly, the significance of historical narratives differs among the four countries. China regards history as the foundation of its strategic narrative at all levels, frequently referencing historical events in key speeches. In contrast, historical references are scarce in the narratives of the other Mekong countries. Fifthly, the strategic narratives concerning energy diverge significantly. Although dam construction is central to addressing energy shortages and Mekong water challenges, the issue of energy is surprisingly underemphasized in official narratives. Notably, Vietnam, as the estuary of the Mekong River and a vocal critic of China's policies, seldom mentions

energy explicitly. Finally, China does not acknowledge any water-related difficulties or challenges, a stark contrast to the narratives of other Mekong countries.

Before examining the underlying reasons for these similarities and differences, two aspects highlighted by the narratives are worth noting. Firstly, Laos and Cambodia appear relatively disengaged from regional power dynamics, showing apathy towards China's or Vietnam's claims over the region. Secondly, the differing attitudes towards water-related challenges reflect China's authoritarian tendencies. While water difficulties are a prominent concern in the narratives of other Mekong countries, China omits them entirely. Instead, China portrays itself as a saviour by proposing comprehensive solutions to water challenges, aiming to justify its Lancang cascade plan and assert its regional leadership. Regardless of China's intentions, the next section will focus on the general approach of different strategies between China and Mekong countries.

7.2 Different narrative strategies for strategic ambiguity

As the detailed content of the similarities and differences of the strategic narratives has been provided in the empirical chapter 4 to chapter 6, this section will focus on the strategies of ambiguity that deliberately created by adopting narrative strategies of, strategic silence, exposure manipulation, semantic adaptation and agenda-setting between Mekong countries against China.

Ambiguity is a common feature in contested strategic narratives. It refers to a vagueness—whether deliberate or inherent—that allows for multiple interpretations of a narrative. This ambiguity can enhance the resonance of strategic messages by enabling actors to appeal to a broader audience. Moreover, during engagements in contested narratives, ambiguity helps manage political sensitivities and maintain flexible positions (Miskimmon et al., 2013, pp. 156-196; 2017, pp. 34-46). Audiences, too, can exploit ambiguity to preserve their own positions. For example, during the Mekong water disputes, Mekong countries

deliberately use strategic silence, exposure manipulation, agenda setting and semantic adaption to create ambiguity in response to China's strategic narratives. On one hand, ambiguity contributes to keep the strategic narrative of Mekong water disputes remain contested. On the other hand, it enables Mekong countries to express their disagreements with China on water issues while simultaneously maintaining economic cooperation with China as well.

7.2.1 Strategic silence

According to Merriam-Webster, silence is defined as 'forbearance from speech or noise' or 'absence of sound or mention' (Merriam-Webster Inc., 2019). In the context of strategic narrative, strategic silence refers to the deliberate withholding or selective omission of certain information or responding with silence. Silence is considered a key element of the information infrastructure, functioning as a communication platform. Control over this platform allows an actor to manipulate information in alignment with its objectives (Miskimmon et al., 2017, pp.249-251). Strategic silence allows actors to manage the sensitivity of specific issues and maintain flexibility in their positions. In the case of the Mekong water disputes, both China and the Mekong countries employ strategic silence to further their respective agendas.

Due to the high level of sensitivity surrounding energy issues, they are less frequently addressed in the strategic narratives of Mekong countries, as a means of maintaining their relationship with China. As previously mentioned, dam construction is the central theme of the Mekong water disputes, and energy would likely be a significant shared theme among all four countries. However, apart from Laos, which supports the dam narrative by positioning itself as the 'battery of the Mekong region', Cambodia and Vietnam remain silent on this particular issue. Despite this silence, the issue of energy shortages, as part of the Mekong water vulnerability, is frequently mentioned in research articles (Biba, 2016; Givental & Meredith, 2016; Liu et al., 2020; McCormack, 2001). As energy is a highly sensitive issue and a key resource for development, Cambodia and Vietnam strategically

choose to remain silent on this matter. This silence enables them to preserve their relationship with China for material gain. Furthermore, this silence subtly signals their disagreement with China, which can be interpreted by other actors. Therefore, in this case, the strategic silence adopted by the Mekong countries helps manage their relationship with China while implicitly indicating their differing stance.

Strategic silence is also employed by China to craft an image as the regional saviour. In the narratives traced, water issues are not mentioned, seemingly as though they do not exist for China. By strategically remaining silent on water issues while offering a comprehensive set of solutions for the Mekong countries' challenges, China positions itself as the saviour of the region.

In summary, strategic silence in the Mekong water disputes is employed by both China and the Mekong countries to manage sensitive issues, maintain flexibility in their positions, and subtly communicate differing stances while shaping their regional narratives. It is a double-edged sword and can be used to maintain the ambiguity of certain situations.

7.2.2 Exposure manipulation

Exposure has multiple meanings, with particular focus on its definitions as the 'condition of being exposed' and the 'act or instance of exposing' (Merriam-Webster Inc., 2019). In the context of strategic narratives, exposure refers to the amount of attention that information receives. In other words, actors have the ability to control the level of exposure of specific information. This exposure manipulation can be incorporated into information infrastructure (Miskimmon et al., 2017, pp. 249-251), contributing to information control. By manipulating exposure, actors can allocate different amounts of attention to various pieces of information, such as presenting differing portions of stories from opposing sides in a disputed issue. In this process, actors can subtly convey their perspectives through the exposure of certain contexts, particularly in an ambiguous narrative.

The Mekong countries utilise exposure manipulation to intentionally create ambiguity, thereby keeping the Mekong water disputes contested while also expressing their disagreements with China. Notably, China is rarely mentioned in the narratives of the three Mekong countries regarding water-related issues. When China is mentioned, it is often in a positive light. In contrast, the majority of content critiques the Mekong water disputes and China's behaviour concerning the Lancang Cascade plan. An intriguing aspect of this is that critiques of China often come from other countries or international organisations, such as the MRC. For example, Cambodia frequently re-reports news from Vietnam and Thailand, as well as the MRC's reports, to criticize China. Similarly, Laos also re-reports content from Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam to criticise China's actions, although this is less frequent than Cambodia's approach. Vietnam, on the other hand, either critiques China independently or aligns with the MRC's stance in critiquing China.

This blend of supportive and critical information contributes to an 'objectively neutral' tone or report. The manipulation of exposure—balancing positive and negative portrayals of China's actions—effectively conveys the disagreement of these countries. Therefore, exposure manipulation allows the Mekong countries to maintain the ambiguity surrounding the water dispute while managing their diplomatic relations with China.

7.2.3 Semantic adaption

Adaptation, in the context of strategic narratives, generally refers to the deliberate actions taken by actors to adjust, modify, or shift their strategic narratives in response to changing circumstances, environments, or challenges (Miskimmon et al., 2013; 2017). Semantic adaptation specifically pertains to the modification of a narrative from a linguistic perspective, aimed at creating different meanings while maintaining a degree of linguistic consistency. It is more commonly found in media communication research. In strategic narrative, this process involves two key strategies. The first strategy involves aligning the

language with emotional or affective cues to alter the emotional tone of the narrative. For example, actors may adopt language from another actor's positive strategic narrative but imbue it with negative connotations, thereby shifting the overall meaning of the narrative in a negative direction. The second strategy involves the audience's interpretation of the same linguistic elements, which may differ from the actor's intended meaning. In such cases, the audience may assert their interpretation as the correct one, thereby sustaining the contestation of the strategic narrative.

This subsection begins with an exploration of the first type of deliberate word alignment. I will then introduce the second type of semantic adaptation strategy by examining three contested concepts: 'equality,' 'brotherhood,' and 'security.' These examples have been selected for two key reasons. First, they are prominent instances of semantic adaptation in strategic narratives. Second, they illustrate differences and disagreements regarding China's system, identity, and issue-related claims. Specifically, 'equality' represents semantic adaptation at the systemic level, 'brotherhood' reflects semantic adaptation at the identity narrative level, and 'security' pertains to issue-based strategic narratives. However, the discussion on 'security' will be presented in Section 7.2.4, as it also aligns with the integrative narrative strategy of agenda-setting.

Firstly, word alignment is a form of semantic adaptation. By maintaining linguistic consistency while incorporating words that convey opposing emotional connotations, the original meaning of the strategic narrative is altered. In the Mekong water disputes, Mekong countries selectively repeated China's language but followed it with negative words or expressions. Together, they constructed a relatively negative image of China's strategic narrative in their responses.

For example, while China emphasized regional cooperation, Mekong countries framed the water issue as a 'war' with two opposing 'sides'—China on one side and the Mekong countries on the other—stating that it would 'end badly for one

side' (Appendix K97). Through this framing, Cambodia underscored the water disputes and positioned China as the adversary.

A similar pattern is evident in reports on dam construction. While acknowledging dams' contributions to water regulation—aligning with China's narrative—these reports also referred to dams as 'disruptions' and suggested that Cambodia 'should hold' dam construction when faced with the 'choice' between 'fish or electricity' (Appendix K56).

A third example concerns economic cooperation. While recognising China's role in infrastructure development including dam and energy related infrastructure construction in Laos. The strategic narratives from Laos also stressed the importance of 'regulations' to ensure things operate 'normally' (Appendix L26), subtly critiquing the current state of collaboration between the two countries.

Hence, through word alignment strategically, the Mekong countries selectively adopt and modify China's language, incorporating opposing emotional connotations to reshape the meaning of China's strategic narrative. Besides this subtle manner, regional countries also adopt a more straight forward way to challenging China's position and reinforcing their own stance.

Secondly, as mentioned in Chapter 4, 'equality' is important part when framing strategic narrative on regional claims for both China and Vietnam. Calls for equal regional or world relations are both employed for China and Vietnam to defend themselves. However, subject of 'equality' is different. For China, it refers to the equality between developed and developing countries, specifically refers to the China and U.S. On the other hand, equality for Vietnam refers to the inequality status between big powers and medium-small powers, which refers to China and other Mekong countries. As China's claim of 'new world order' partly based on the strategic narrative about equality, this difference questions China's representativeness of developing countries as well as China's system claim.

Brotherhood, the third example, is a very traditional and classical concept in Asian culture. In identity strategic narratives from all the studied countries, all countries agree on 'brother' identity. Mutual stress on brotherhood indicates the intentions on maintaining a relatively good relationship with China, as China is the most powerful actor inside the region. On the other hand, the different meaning on 'brotherhood' proposed by China and Mekong countries featured by Vietnam indicates contested explanation of 'righteous'.

The principle of Reality Matches the Name (名实相符), rooted in Confucian philosophy, emphasizes that names, concepts, and labels must accurately reflect the true nature of things. When names and reality does not match, Rectification of Names (正名) becomes necessary to restore order and social harmony (Mahé & Martel, 2023; Feng, 1974, pp. 13-17). In other words, it highlights the importance of aligning naming with the actual state and essence of entities or phenomena.

In the context of China-Vietnam relations, the interpretation of brotherhood exemplifies this contestation. While both countries use the term, Vietnam actively defends what it considers the correct understanding of brotherhood, aligning it with its own strategic interests. This reflects a broader struggle over narrative legitimacy, where controlling the meaning of a term becomes a means of asserting influence and authority. By invoking Reality Matches the Name, actors justify their challenge to dominant narratives, arguing that only when names align with reality can true harmony and order be achieved.

As mentioned before, different 'big' brothers from a hierarchical family relationship indicates the hierarchical regional structure. The 'righteous' and appropriate behaviour have two major points. Firstly, for the older brother, referring to China, is responsible for its younger brothers referring to Mekong countries. Secondly, the younger or smaller brothers should obey to their older one. Meanwhile, they also have the responsibility to tell and correct the mistake

and inappropriate behaviours of older one (Duong, 2022; Nguyen, 2021; Thanh Hai, 2021; Tung, 2023; Xuetong, 2018, 2020). The difference on brotherhood is clear if understand Mekong water issue from this view. Brotherhood in China's interpretation is 'be a responsible regional builder' which is practiced through different regional construction projects based on BRI and LMCO. China wishes regional countries would be a good brother and obedient. However, Mekong countries stress the different side of this brotherhood relationship. For example, Vietnam considers its act is the 'righteous' way. Brotherhood in Vietnam's interpretation stresses two points. Firstly, Vietnam stands up and confronted with China with its 'inappropriate' behaviours (Nguyen, 2021; Thanh Hai, 2021; Zhou, 2022), referring to the water disputes and territorial disputes. Vietnam, align with other Mekong countries considers China as the 'elephant in the room' (appendix) and Lancang cascade plan is irresponsible. Hence, Vietnam, acting in the true Confucius way, should and needs to send the disagreement message and help China correct (Nguyen, 2021) its behaviour. On the other hand, Vietnam is trying to be a responsible regional builder and contribute to ASEAN development and care smaller powers such as Cambodia and Laos. This contested meaning between China and Vietnam indicates the influence contestation between different narratives.

The contestation over the 'righteous' behaviour indicates that Mekong countries, mainly Vietnam, question the legitimacy of China's leadership. Vietnam tries to argue for the 'rightest' explanation to increase its regional influence against China as bigger voice suggesting stronger influence power (Singsuriya, 2016). Hence, Vietnam tries to legitimise itself as the good leader. In narrative, Mekong countries seldomly echo China's regional collective identity and hardly use same language. However, not only for China, small countries like Cambodia and Laos are not keen on following Vietnam as well. This will be presented in section 7.3.2. Overall, Mekong countries express their disagreement and criticisms by indicating different meanings.

7.2.4 Contestations on meaning of 'security' and agenda setting

Security is stressed by China and Mekong countries but with different meaning. China and Mekong countries both agreed the importance on 'security' issue mainly through issue strategic narrative. But word 'security' has different meaning. The differences mainly lie on the meaning of and attitude towards security issues from both sides. China's silence to the Mekong water issue verses Mekong countries' address on certain issues indicates different priorities for both sides as well as the securitisation and de-securitisation process for on-going Mekong water disputes.

Security refers to lack of security or threat situation (Buzan, 1991, P.19; Mirza & Mahmood, 2023). The actor or agency of security issues mostly refers to states. The issues securitised also reflect the 'matter of priority' (Buzan, 1998, p.29; Fischhendler, 2015). In strategic narrative on Mekong water issue, the mutual stress on 'security' with different meaning indicates different priorities for countries. Tracing back to the national interest discussion mentioned before, the priority for China focuses more on competition with U.S. Security stresses on 'political security' as one of the pillars of Mekong cooperation referring to hunting drug dealing and internet fraud and scams. Besides, China is also concerned that countries outside Mekong region, such as U.S. and Japan, 'intrude' (appendix W5), and that Mekong water issues may sabotage CCP's leadership domestically and meddle in Mekong and Southeast Asia region to undermine China's leadership. China is completely silent about the water issues themselves. On the other hand, the security for Mekong countries in narratives refers to water shortage and its influence, such as the droughts, floods, endangered agriculture. On this issue, China's priority is regional leadership and political security, whereas Mekong countries consider actual water related difficulties as priorities. The rising of water also undermines China's claim on regional leadership. In other words, Mekong countries try to securitise Mekong water issue whereas China tries to de-securitise it.

Water issue in Mekong region fits the features on discussion about security issue.

Firstly, Mekong water relates to the fate of Mekong people collectively and is not sufficient. Secondly, water shortage, which is evident in section 6.2., influences regional countries both domestically and regionally. The trigger is natural flow change in dry and rain seasons occur annually. Thirdly, there is an asymmetrical power dynamic. Based on this, demonstrated by issue strategic narrative in chapter 6, Mekong countries try to securitise Mekong water by arguing that Mekong water endangers food security, economic growth and national development, and the environment, which is directly relates to people's livelihood and national interests for riparian countries. Hence, Mekong countries raise the importance of Mekong water issue. On the other hand, China copes with the silence on the water issue but proposed a set of solutions for the water difficulties for the riparian countries. China tries to use silence, instead of directly denying, of water issues to diminish the water issues. Neglect of the water difficulties implies disagreements on water's influence on other aspects such as security in a gentle manner. The strategic narrative of solutions helps to frame China as a regional saviour contributing to its regional leadership. Together, China tries to de-securitise water issue.

Securitisation one issue is generously considered as increase the difficulty on cooperation to solve the problem (Fischhendler, 2015; Fischhendler et al., 2011; Mirza & Mahmood, 2023). However, on Mekong water issue, as securitization and agenda setting contribute to the raise of importance of water disputes, China changed its totally ignorance attitude. Hence, for non-traditional issue, securitization has surprisingly contributed to regional cooperation, at least regarding on water issue.

From the analysis above, emphasis on the same languages is important for the Mekong countries to maintain their bilateral relationships with China. Mekong countries use these communication strategies to express their disagreements to China. But it does not mean Mekong countries are standing against China on this issue - they do not align with Vietnam closely either. Strategic narratives from

these countries surprisingly suggested that Mekong countries tend to be hedging when facing any actors stronger than themselves.

7.2.5 Ambiguous contestation

For the whole section of 7.2, although the Mekong water disputes have persisted for a long time, the regional countries deliberately foster ambiguity in response to China's strategic narrative through tactics such as strategic silence, exposure manipulation, semantic adaptation, and agenda setting. By employing these methods, the Mekong countries maintain the contested nature of the water disputes.

Academically, this deliberate ambiguity contributes to the concept of ambiguous contestation, offering a nuanced response that goes beyond simple acceptance or rejection of China's position. On issues related to the Mekong water dispute, the regional countries' responses convey an underlying rejection through their strategic ambiguity. However, on themes related to collaboration—such as development initiatives and material gains—their supportive alignment signals a form of acceptance. Thus, the overall response of the Mekong countries can be interpreted as one of ambiguous contestation.

Empirically, these narrative strategies have also played a significant role in influencing China's attitude, which underwent a dramatic shift with the establishment of the LMCO in 2016. This marked the beginning of China's active engagement in offering solutions to the challenges faced by the Mekong countries, all while avoiding direct references to the contested issues.

7.3 Identity as the main reason for different response of Mekong countries to China's strategic narrative

Identity is the most significant factor influencing the varying responses of Mekong countries toward China. Firstly, differences in identity shape each country's understanding of and need for ontological security. Secondly, identity also

influences their perception and expectations regarding national interests, which in turn affect how they evaluate material incentives. This process will also in line with the discussion of regional power.

A state's self-identity is crucial for its understanding of the international order. Understandings of one state itself, and the other states inside the system, shape national expectations. This expectation includes the state's own position and contribution to the world. Together, it shapes a state's interest, which generates policies. Understanding a state's identity is helpful to understand its national interest.

This section will start with the discussion of different identity for Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia against China. Section 7.3.2 presents the discussion about how identity affects their understanding of ontological security. Section 7.3.3 presents how identity affects their material incentives.

7.3.1 State self-identity, regional position, and national interest

The self-identity of China, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam has strong pragmatic features. They are all deeply rooted in history and development levels, considering themselves as developing countries and victims and survivors of colonial war and the world wars. Besides shared brotherhood and victimhood, this pragmatic feature also contributes both to their national interest and expectation for the region.

The self-identity of China, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam are partly based on the power distribution inside the region. Inside the Mekong region, China is the most powerful country, as the regional great power. Among the others, Vietnam is the most powerful country among the lower Mekong regions. Hence Vietnam is a major power country. Laos and Cambodia are with similar strength weaker than Vietnam and China. They are the small powers in the region. Mekong region is a China - Vietnam - Cambodia and Laos power structure.

This hierarchical structure is mutually acknowledged and agreed by the regional actors. It translates into the understanding of 'brotherhood' regional position. China is self-recognised and accepted by the other regional countries as the 'biggest brother' inside the region. China hence considers itself as the leader based on Mekong region and Southeast Asia region and has a worldwide strategy. China sees Mekong region as a whole. Mekong region serves as an example of China-led cooperation and developing mode, which China hopes will have international influence and help it to compete with the U.S. China considers itself responsible for the Mekong region's development, which contributes China's clear collective regional identity of 'shared river, shared future', which fits in its general 'shared future for all mankind' narrative for the region along with the system strategic narrative. In other words, China translates the increasing regional influence at part of its national interest. Hence, it developed a full set of p[policies to pursue it, featured by the BRI and LMCO.

Vietnam is a bigger than the others but smaller than China 'brother' in Mekong region. Compared to other regional countries, Vietnam is more ambition on the regional level. Vietnam seeks the regional leadership's position. Medium level in power distribution of Vietnam is agreed by Cambodia and Laos. In between of China and Cambodia and Laos, Vietnam has a self-centred and region-based strategic view. Independence and territorial integrity are important to Vietnam, which contributes to its brave national interest protector against China identity.

The disagreement between China and Vietnam also spreads to influence in the Mekong region. Similar to China, Vietnam has a strong vision and will to lead the Mekong region. Vietnam stresses its 'bigger brother' identity to Cambodia and Laos and initiates a different regional development pattern from China based on its local identity. For Vietnam, competing the regional leadership is one of their national interest along with development.

Cambodia and Laos are the small powers in the region. They consider themselves as the follower in the region and only seek for survival and development by purely state-centred strategy. Considering the 'being influenced' history, independence from regional major powers is a crucial tool of survival, which will be explained in detail in section 7.3.2. Hence Cambodia and Laos only seldomly echo China's and Vietnam's collective identity on regional development and don't have a unique expectation for regional collective identity. Moreover, the 'brotherhood' has a passive feeling as it is mostly addressed directly to China or Vietnam in diplomatic settings such as leadership visits.

In summary, this section identifies the reasons for both similarities in the formation of strategic narratives on identity level, and differences in the existence of system narrative and collective regional identity. Self-identity, for Mekong region countries, is helpful to observe to explain each state's national interest. In Mekong region, a state's international identity is usually based on their self-identity and national interest. So the shared interest of seeking development result in mutual interest in regional collaboration. On the other hand, the power differences result smaller regional countries lack of collective regional identity and system narrative. Stem from pragmatic feature, Mekong countries are aware their position on power distribution and prioritise survival over influence, which limits formation of collective regional identity and system narrative. This self-help and self-focused strategy also explains these two countries seldomly react to the collective regional identity narrative or system narrative promoted by two major powers. Hence in Mekong region, the absence of system narratives companions with lack of collective regional identity. Smaller countries in Mekong region are relatively passive as receivers instead of active game-changer like China or Vietnam. The differences of collective identity between China and Vietnam will be present in the following section.

7.3.2 Different size, different ontological security needs

Ontological security, which can be shaped by strategic narratives about the past,

present, and future (Van Noort & Colley, 2020), is a key concept in the reception research of strategic narratives. For Mekong countries, historical strategic narratives significantly influence ontological security concerns, as these nations are shaped by the influence of major powers which increase the insecurity level of self-identity. The smaller size of the actor tends to have higher level of sensitivity to ontological insecurity as they are easily to be under influenced. Consequently, hedging is often regarded as a survival strategy, enabling Mekong countries to maintain a balanced distance and safeguard their ontological security. The audience of hedging vary between Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. This subsection will start with the discussion of hedging and then move on to different hedging types among the Mekong regional countries.

Hedging is commonly interpreted as a set of strategies and decisions positioned between counterbalancing and alignment (Medeiros, 2005; Zha & Lv, 2019), reflecting the fluctuating actions of Southeast Asian countries. When confronted with conflicts between the great powers—the United States and China—Southeast Asian countries tend to align with the side that offers greater potential benefits. In this context, hedging is exemplified by their pursuit of economic cooperation with China while simultaneously engaging in security cooperation with the United States (Kuik, 2016; Yoshimatsu, 2015). By maintaining relations with both powers, smaller regional states effectively preserve the status quo as a means of ensuring their security.

The majority of hedging literature tends to treat Southeast Asian countries collectively as smaller powers, often overlooking the power differences among them. However, evidence suggests that even among smaller powers, hedging occurs, as seen in Cambodia and Laos balancing between Vietnam and China in response to Mekong water disputes. For instance, Cambodia, as a smaller power, chooses to echo elements of both China's and Vietnam's collective regional identities rather than explicitly aligning with or counterbalancing either side. Consequently, existing literature struggles to account for the hedging behaviours

among these so-called ‘smaller powers’, which are traditionally analysed as a unified group. However, a more nuanced understanding of collective hedging actions emerges when examined through the lens of ontological security.

Ontological security is considered a ‘basic need’ (Mitzen, 2006) and encompasses both physical security and a stable sense of identity or a ‘sense of being’ (Delehanty & Steele, 2009; Lebow, 2016; Subotić, 2016). The ‘repeated narrative about self’ or ‘identity’ plays a crucial role in shaping ontological security (Van Noort & Colley, 2020). In other words, a state’s strategic narrative—particularly its historical self-perception—significantly influences its ontological security. Thus, strategic narratives about history are essential for understanding both ontological security and insecurity.

The differences in historical strategic narratives highlight the contrasting ontological security concerns of China and the Mekong countries. For China, as discussed in Chapter 2, historical legacies emphasised in its strategic narrative reinforce its self-image as the regional leader in the Mekong and a cooperative partner within a tribute system, thereby legitimising its claim to regional leadership. In contrast, the historical narratives of Mekong countries reflect their ontological insecurity, shaped by their past experiences and the broader regional power dynamics. Obviously, China does not have any concern of maintain self-identity from the regional countries. Instead, it is the one try to spread its influence. Hence, there is no spot of China’s hedging behaviour in Mekong or Southeast Asia region.

In contrast, the history of Mekong countries reflects their struggle for independence from the influence of both regional and external powers. As a result, a shared concern over external influence exists. However, variations in power and capacity among these countries lead to differing levels of resilience to such influence. As previously discussed, Laos has struggled to establish a stable identity due to the influence of its more powerful neighbours—Thailand, Vietnam, and

China. Similarly, Cambodia's 'shrimp identity' and its rejection of being seen as 'Vietnam's puppet', along with its historical apprehension toward Thailand, reflect deep-seated concerns about external domination. For Mekong countries, the influence of a larger power generates ontological insecurity. As a result, they share a common aspiration to maintain independence, both as a means of achieving ontological stability and ensuring physical security.

Self-isolation and distancing from larger powers serve as key strategies to minimize external influence, which is directly tied to their survival. At the same time, for economic development, Southeast Asian countries recognize the benefits of regional and international cooperation. Hedging emerges as a solution that balances both objectives—maintaining distance for security while engaging in collaboration for development—both of which are core national interests for Mekong countries. The ability and willingness to hedge remain strategic priorities for each of these states.

As the relatively smaller powers, Laos and Cambodia not only hedge between U.S. and China, but also hedge when dealing with Vietnam who is relatively bigger. In the context of Mekong water disputes, China's efforts to expand its influence clash with Mekong countries' strategy of maintaining distance to mitigate the risks of external control. Consequently, China's strategic narrative, which emphasises its historical influence and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), fails to gain positive reception among Mekong countries. The narratives surrounding solutions to Mekong water disputes highlight that China's claims of positive regional influence do not alleviate Mekong countries' concerns over their ontological security. They also seldomly echo Vietnam's narrative on regional collective identity or regional strategic narrative.

On the other hand, as a mid-sized power, Vietnam perceives ontological insecurity primarily in relation to China, given China's significantly larger influence. Vietnam fears that China's dominance could challenge its national identity and sovereignty.

Consequently, Vietnam engages in hedging primarily between China and the U.S.-led Western bloc, rather than between its regional neighbours, Cambodia and Laos.

Analysing this issue through the lens of ontological security not only deepens our understanding of the hedging strategies adopted by Mekong countries but also challenges the notion that these regional states are merely passive actors in their interactions with major powers. Hedging is an active strategic choice rather than a reactive response to external pressures. Furthermore, a country's relative power influences its perception of ontological security threats. Only actors with sufficient power to shape or undermine another state's identity are perceived as threats that necessitate hedging.

As the most powerful regional actor, China does not hedge against any other state in the region, as no actor poses a comparable threat to its identity or influence. Vietnam, in contrast, hedges between China and the U.S., as both possess significant influence over its national security and identity. Meanwhile, Laos and Cambodia hedge on two fronts: between China and the U.S., as well as between China and Vietnam. This is because Vietnam, despite being smaller than China, still holds enough regional influence to trigger ontological insecurity in its weaker neighbours.

7.3.3 Different identity, different material incentive needs

Different identity shapes their different understanding of the importance of material incentives. The actor with regional collective identity tends to offer or has less dependence material incentives from others. While the smaller powers with a more self-centred identity would consider material incentives more importantly.

Seeking development is continuously repeated by China's government and leadership China understands its development is achieved by international connections. For China, development is understood as both material gaining

through international cooperations and increasing international influence for competing with the US, which is fulfilled by promoting China-led international cooperation. Hence, to win over the audience, the importance of neighbour states in China's diplomacy has raised significantly in Xi's presidency. Thus, in practice, China is a material incentive provider by launching the BRI and promotes massive cooperation between developing countries.

Vietnam with the identity of regional powerful actor depend less on material incentives providing by the opponent. The huge power gap between Vietnam and China does not allow Vietnam to be hostile to China. This includes the consideration that China's economic support will benefit Vietnam's development. Among the regional countries, Vietnam aligns the least with China's issue strategic narrative about material gaining to the regional countries. On the other hand, Vietnam also tries to adopt the semantic adaption in section 7.2.3 to compete with China's strategic narratives during responses.

Cambodia and Laos as the smaller country with a self-centred identity. This identity shapes their behaviour with high needs of material incentive from China. As one of the core national interest, development, relies on the support, including economically, educationally and technologically, from China (largely) and Vietnam. Hence, Laos and Cambodia align the most with China's issue strategic narrative.

As emphasised earlier, Southeast Asian countries are frequently characterised as pragmatic in their foreign policy orientation. Although the term may initially suggest a preference for political outcomes over ideology and normative commitments, it remains analytically valuable for understanding regional states and power dynamics. This is not only because pragmatism is a descriptor commonly adopted by regional actors themselves, but also because it provides an important lens through which to examine how identity shapes power relations at both regional and extra-regional levels.

At the regional level, power should be understood not merely in material terms but also as the capacity to influence, particularly through forms of connectivity (Cooper and Schulz, 2023). When engaging with major powers such as China, the pragmatic orientation of Southeast Asian states encourages them to emphasise similarities rather than differences, especially when presenting themselves collectively as regional actors. In this context, identities that convey connectivity become central to understanding pragmatic policy choices. For instance, Laos and Cambodia, when framing cooperation with China—whether in infrastructure development or energy projects—often portray themselves as gateways facilitating China’s access to the wider region. Such identity construction reflects a pragmatic effort to enhance their strategic relevance and bargaining position.

Conversely, when regional states seek to balance China’s influence, pragmatism leads them to downplay internal differences and instead invoke a shared regional identity. In particular, Southeast Asian countries frequently mobilise the identity of the Mekong countries, placing less emphasis on national distinctions. This collective framing can facilitate regional integration and coordination (Appendix K1, K3, L1, L2; Thong et al., 2045). As discussed in Chapter 6, institutional critiques of China’s behaviour are more commonly articulated through the Mekong River Commission (MRC), rather than by individual states, reflecting a pragmatic use of multilateral identity to manage asymmetrical power relations.

Within the region, however, when interacting with relatively smaller powers, pragmatism operates differently. In such contexts, regional states tend to highlight differences rather than similarities, activating leadership identities in order to enhance their influence. Both China and Vietnam, for example, seek to legitimise themselves as regional leaders, selectively emphasising hierarchical distinctions to consolidate their authority. This strategic deployment of identity illustrates how pragmatism enables Southeast Asian states to shift between inclusive and hierarchical identity frames, depending on the power configuration and strategic objectives involved.

In summary, the distinct identities of Mekong regional states—as either leaders or followers—significantly shape their perceptions of national interest. More importantly, when the influence power as connection should be taken into consideration when understanding the power dynamic in Mekong region. Although development is a shared national interest across these four countries, it is closely linked to the material incentives provided by China. Vietnam, which competes for a regional leadership identity, attaches less importance to material incentives and thus competes with China on an identity level rather than aligning closely on material interests. In contrast, smaller regional powers like Cambodia and Laos adopt a self-centred strategy that emphasizes the importance of material incentives for their development, despite suffering from ontological insecurity arising from close cooperation that brings material benefits. Consequently, their hedging behaviour reflects the dilemma between their need for ontological independence and their material dependence for development—a dynamic that also helps explain their narratives in water disputes.

Chapter 8 Conclusion

Since President Xi came to power, China has become more active in international cooperation. It advocates for a value system distinct from the U.S.-led global order, promoting Wangdao—a concept rooted in Xunzi’s philosophy that emphasises ‘true kingship’ (Xuetong, 2008, 2020). In contrast, U.S. values are perceived as Badao, or hegemonic rule, which contributes to systemic conflicts and uncertainty (Xuetong, 2008, 2018). China seeks to leverage its distinct approach to power and influence to compete with the U.S. for global leadership, with its international image playing a crucial role (Hartig, 2016). Cooperation with Southeast Asian countries is presented as a success in this effort. However, China’s attempts to shape its global image have not always yielded the desired results, revealing limitations in its influence. This project examines how China’s influence is received, focusing on the Mekong region. This chapter consists of three parts: a review of the research questions and findings, a discussion of the project’s contributions, and an exploration of its limitations and future research directions.

With the background interest understanding power, the research question for this project is ‘How and why do Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam vary in their reception of and response to China’s strategic narrative about the Mekong water disputes?’ This question is answered by three major points, the strategic narrative on system, identity and issue levels of the four regional countries; secondly, the alignment and differences among these narratives and the ambiguous contestation as the overall response; thirdly, identity has been a significant reason being detected for the difference among the narratives.

8.1 Strategic narrative on system, identity and issue levels for four regional countries

The Mekong water disputes revolve around water allocation between China and the lower Mekong countries. For downstream nations, the river is a crucial freshwater source, supporting livelihoods, agriculture, fisheries, and energy production. Beyond seasonal fluctuations, water issues are linked to regional

climate patterns and resilience. Given the region's power asymmetry, the Mekong dispute serves as a lens to examine interstate interactions. As the biggest regional power, China seeks to safeguard its hydropower interests, while smaller states employ diplomacy to moderate China's stance and foster cooperation. These power dynamics can be analysed through strategic narratives at the system, identity, and issue levels, offering deeper insights into regional water governance.

At both the system and identity levels, China constructs a narrative of victimhood and brotherhood to foster solidarity with Mekong countries, drawing on shared historical experiences, particularly those of the two world wars. By positioning itself as the representative of developing countries, China seeks to legitimize its influence based on global power distribution. It constructs a collective 'we' identity, rooted in historical war experiences, to contrast its vision with that of the United States in the competition for global leadership. To support this, China promotes moral values such as equality and inclusive cooperation. It also advances a strategic narrative of a shared future for all mankind, alongside the slogan 'Shared River, Shared Destiny' for the Mekong region, to justify its Cascade Plan and reinforce a regional collective identity. Ultimately, China's regional identity is shaped by a strategic historical narrative, leveraging both ancient histories to justify its predominant influence and wartime history to reinforce the themes of victimhood and brotherhood. However, as with strategic narratives at the issue level, these messages are received differently across Mekong countries.

Regarding China's system-level narrative, Mekong countries do acknowledge its call for regional cooperation, though their responses vary. Vietnam, for instance, interprets the concept of equality differently from China. While China emphasizes equality between itself and the United States as well as between the Global South and the Global North, Vietnam prioritizes equality among states of different sizes, particularly between major, medium, and smaller powers. Consequently, Vietnam seeks to compete with China for leadership in the Mekong region, though it recognizes the challenges of achieving this ambition. Meanwhile, smaller states

like Laos and Cambodia lack distinct system-level narratives of their own. Instead, their strategic priorities focus on national survival and economic development, rather than advancing a regional framework. As a result, their system narratives often align with or hedge between the positions of China and Vietnam, as their limited influence constrains their ability to fully integrate regional interests into their national priorities.

At the identity level, all Mekong countries acknowledge the concepts of brotherhood and victimhood within China's narrative. However, this does not necessarily mean that they fully accept China's interpretation. Instead, Mekong countries use semantic adaptation to emphasize different aspects of these narratives depending on their own national interests and perceptions of regional power distribution. Vietnam stresses the obligation of the younger brother to correct the mistake of its older ones to justify its behaviour of confronting with China and legitimising its regional leadership. Whereas China stresses the brotherhood and victimhood which reinforces the follower identity of regional countries to claim the leadership for the purpose of competition with U.S.

At the issue level of strategic narratives, China's Lancang Cascade plan has been criticised by lower Mekong countries. While China seeks to use narrative power to justify the dams, these countries push back, advocating for their reconsideration. To mitigate disputes, China employs two key strategies: defending the dams and offering alternative solutions. Firstly, China remains silent on Mekong water challenges, attributing them to climate change and extreme weather. While lower Mekong countries view the Lancang Cascade as a primary cause of water difficulties, China frames it as a stabilising mechanism for water levels across seasons. Secondly, to reinforce acceptance of the dams, China proposes solutions through the LMCO and BRI. These include investments, aid, and technological support in agriculture; regional economic cooperation; promotion of a green economy and digital trade; and infrastructure projects, including dam construction, aimed at fostering regional integration and development. Through

these strategic narratives, China positions itself as a regional leader and benefactor, reinforcing its influence in the Mekong region. The regional countries react differently to this but major a subtly disagreements which will be mentioned in detail in section 8.2.

In general, the theoretical expectations of this study reveal that emphasizing similar systems and cultures in strategic narratives does not significantly drive acceptance, rejection, or ambiguous contestation—rendering this explanatory element largely irrelevant for the present research. In contrast, narratives based on shared historical experiences foster a collective identity of brotherhood and victimhood among Mekong states. However, these narratives also raise ontological concerns about China among regional actors, reinforcing a trend toward contestation that leans toward rejection.

A key element in understanding the differing responses of Mekong countries is identity. Self-identity shapes each country's understanding of national interest and their perception of regional power distribution. This, in turn, influences their reactions to material incentives provided by China and informs their hedging behaviour—a balance between concerns for ontological security and the need for material development.

The different perceptions of identity play a crucial role in shaping responses. As the region's most powerful actor, China does not view external influence as a threat that triggers ontological insecurity; rather, it actively seeks to extend its influence by offering material incentives. Vietnam, positioned as a significant regional power, is more wary of China's influence, which it perceives as a potential threat to its ontological security. Consequently, Vietnam adopts a hedging strategy by balancing its relations between China and the U.S., thereby placing a lower emphasis on material incentives while still maintaining peaceful relations with China due to its physical security and development concerns.

In contrast, the smaller regional powers—Laos and Cambodia—display less differentiation in their responses to China. Both countries, characterized by a self-centered strategy and a heightened sense of vulnerability, view material incentives as vital for their development. However, their ontological insecurities compel them to hedge between larger actors, namely Vietnam and China. Notably, Cambodia tends to distance itself from China's collective identity narratives, while both Cambodia and Laos selectively align with China's strategic narratives related to material incentives.

In conclusion, the relationship between strategic narratives at the issue level and systemic and identity levels is best understood as a mutually reinforcing process. This supports the argument that strategic narratives serve as tools for states to pursue their national and geopolitical objectives. China constructs its system-level strategic narrative to compete with the United States, while at the regional level, it employs narrative power to defend the Lancang Cascade Plan. Notably, prior to 2014, the Lancang-Mekong water issue was largely absent from China's official discourse. However, its significance has grown, as reflected in the establishment of the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Organization (LMCO). Since then, China has leveraged narrative power and cooperative initiatives to persuade Mekong countries to accept the construction of dams along the Lancang River. Furthermore, China's proposed solutions to water disputes have been integrated into its broader systemic narrative, reinforcing its claims to regional leadership. The Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) is also framed as evidence of China's commitment to its 'shared future for all mankind' narrative at the identity level.

China's strategic narratives on the Mekong water issue are generally met with surface-level acceptance but underlying scepticism from Mekong countries. The ambiguous contestation achieved by deliberately strategic silence, semantic adaptation, agenda setting, and exposure manipulation enables Mekong countries to navigate their relationship with China while subtly expressing dissent. The Lancang Cascade Plan, constructed within an asymmetrical regional power

framework, has raised concerns about its physical security implications for agriculture, fisheries, and environmental sustainability, alongside ontological security concerns related to China's growing influence over regional cooperation. The change of China's behaviour validates that strategic narrative from the smaller powers side can persuade larger powers.

Despite these dynamics, China's narratives largely omit these nuanced concerns, failing to address the anxieties arising from water-related security risks and regional power asymmetry. In other words, China's strategic narrative does not adequately bridge the gap between water-related security issues and the ontological security needs of Mekong countries. As a result, water disputes in the Mekong region—along with broader geopolitical tensions related to water governance—persist and are likely to remain unresolved in the long term.

8.2 Contribution and limitations

This thesis contributes both theoretically to strategic narrative research and empirically about understanding Mekong water disputes as well as Southeast Asia power dynamics. This part will start with the theoretical contribution combining with the part of the issue strategic narrative as examples, then follows with the empirical contribution. It will end with the limitation of this project and further research directions.

The major contribution of this project is its examination of the response of strategic narrative characterised by ambiguous contestation—moving beyond the conventional binary of acceptance or rejection. Moreover, this thesis deconstructs the narrative strategies underlying this specific response. In essence, Mekong countries deliberately generate ambiguity by employing strategic silence, exposure management, semantic adaptation, and agenda setting to respond to China with ambiguous contestation. In doing so, they express disagreement with China on water issues while simultaneously managing their bilateral relationships. This section highlights these theoretical findings, supported by illustrative

examples drawn from issue strategic narrative.

Firstly, Mekong countries utilise agenda setting to elevate the importance of Mekong water disputes by employing strategic narrative as a tool of securitization. By framing water issues as threats to food security, energy security, and environmental stability, they amplify the issue's urgency. Since China emphasizes security as a major concern in regional cooperation, securitising Mekong water disputes enables Mekong countries to communicate their concerns in a manner that resonates with China's own discourse.

Secondly, semantic adaptation plays a crucial role in how Mekong countries respond to China's issue strategic narrative. They employ two sub-strategies: word alignment and contested meaning over key concepts. Word alignment involves modifying China's positive strategic narrative by substituting terms with negative connotations to alter the overall meaning for their audience. Alternatively, Mekong countries sometimes echo China's language while ascribing different meanings to it. This subtle contestation of semantics allows them to manage their relationship with China without compromising their stance on Mekong water disputes—as evidenced in the contested interpretations of terms such as 'equality' and 'brotherhood' between China and Vietnam.

Thirdly, strategic silence is adopted regarding sensitive topics, particularly in the energy sector. By deliberately remaining silent on contentious issues, Mekong countries mitigate narrative conflicts, thereby managing their relationship with China more cautiously.

Finally, exposure management emerges as another prominent strategy. By controlling the level of exposure on specific issues, Mekong countries create ambiguity in the public sphere. For instance, they may flood discourse with positive reports on the Lancang Cascade Plan while concurrently circulating negative reports from other regional actors and the MRC. Although this approach

appears objective, it subtly conveys their disagreement.

Together, these strategies illustrate how Mekong countries navigate the complex interplay of contestation and cooperation with China. Their use of strategic narrative enables them not only to contest China's assertions on water issues but also to maintain a delicate balance in their bilateral relations. This multifaceted approach to ambiguous contestation offers a richer understanding of the region's strategic dynamics, emphasising the importance of narrative strategies in international relations.

Empirically, this project indicates that how strategic narrative works in authoritarian system. Additionally, it demonstrates that strategic narratives can empower weaker actors within asymmetrical power dynamics. It provides an original analysis of Mekong countries' narratives on water issues, an area that remains underexplored. It enhances understanding of the Mekong water dispute's significance and, through the analysis of narratives from Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, offers insight into the communication strategies employed by smaller states to shape regional discourse. Notably, it illustrates how these states can, in some cases, influence the behaviour of more powerful actors, even within authoritarian settings. Furthermore, it presents a more nuanced perspective on hedging strategies in the Mekong region, revealing the limits of China's regional influence.

Overall, this project situates the strategic narrative within the realm of 'complex and reflective communication' on the persuasion spectrum (Miskimmon et al., 2017, pp. 33-35). Here, strategic narrative functions not only as a political tool but also as a structured framework that shapes perceptions and elicits emotional responses. More importantly, its effectiveness is evident in China's shifting stance, underscoring the narrative's influence in shaping discourse and diplomatic gestures.

This project also faces key limitations, primarily due to data accessibility. Unfortunately, my lack of proficiency in Lao, Khmer, and Vietnamese restricts direct access to primary sources in their original languages. The reliance on English translations, which are often shaped by specific communication objectives, may introduce biases and limitations in interpretation. Additionally, a significant portion of Lao-language data remains inaccessible, with reliance on machine translation tools posing potential risks of misinterpretation. These language constraints may lead to gaps in data collection, particularly for the Lao case, which is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of the issue.

The study of Mekong water governance and regional power dynamics presents numerous avenues for future research. One pressing question is whether it is possible to foster a collective regional identity among the communities most affected by Mekong water challenges. Another critical issue involves the role of silence in authoritarian systems—for example, why are energy issues frequently discussed in Vietnamese academic literature but rarely in official government reports? At the theoretical level, further research could refine the classification of system versus identity-based strategic narratives. Additionally, understanding how to balance the interconnections between energy, food, and environmental security in the Mekong remains an open question. Finally, future research could explore whether international relations theory can be further developed to address water diplomacy and whether concepts of water and environmental justice can be tailored specifically to the Mekong basin.

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