

The Intensification of the Mekong Subregion-Japan Relations Amidst Global Interregnum: Strategic Co-operation, Regional Dynamics and Implication for Thailand

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Abstract

This article examines the evolving international order, characterised by a transition from a unipolar to a multipolar world. As this transformation unfolds, the relative decline of the United States' global dominance has coincided with the rise of other states and the growing significance of regionalism and regional initiatives. I argue that such a redistribution of power has enabled various actors to reconfigure prevailing economic and political arrangements, thereby fostering a deepening of relations between Japan and the Mekong Subregion. The core research question posed is how the changing international order impacts the Japan-Mekong relations, and what foreign policy Thailand ought to pursue in response to these shifting dynamics. Moreover, the article explores the factors that influence Thailand's strategic approach in achieving its national objectives within this evolving geopolitical context. I contend that the strengthening of Japan-Mekong ties present considerable opportunities for Thailand, particularly given its central geographic location within the subregion, which positions it to capitalise on this engagement to advance its national interests. Nonetheless, there are six key factors likely to shape Thailand's benefits and challenges amidst this trilateral relationship: (1) the triangular relations between the United States, China, and Japan; (2) the institutional and strategic challenges facing regional initiatives in the Mekong Subregion; (3) domestic politics of the United States; (4) domestic politics of Japan; (5) domestic politics of China; (6) domestic politics of Thailand.

Keywords: GMS, Japan, interregnum, Thailand, geopolitics

1. Introduction

The ongoing transition in the international political and economic configuration is having increasingly profound and far-reaching consequences across multiple dimensions of the global order. Whilst the ultimate outcomes of these transformations remain unclear and uncertain, their effects are becoming more apparent worldwide. These changes manifest in various ways, including political leadership transitions in many countries, where right-wing figures have gained electoral support and assumed leadership positions, as seen in the United States and Germany. These shifts have policy implications for economic, trade, and investment strategies, which in turn generate ripple effects in different regions. Significant examples include the imposition of tariffs by the United States, the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine, the refugee and migration crisis in Europe, and security tensions in the South China Sea.

These challenges stem from great-power competition as well as national interest considerations, wherein global developments exert direct and indirect influences on national, regional, and international institutional interests. Given that these issues operate on multi-dimensional and multi-layered levels, responses to them require a variety of approaches. Possible solutions range from state-led mechanisms to bilateral co-operation, multilateral initiatives, and broader regional mechanisms. These multi-level governance frameworks function within an international political and economic environment that is undergoing rapid and significant transformation.

The Mekong Subregion, which comprises Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, represents a unique case of regional co-operation amidst significant economic, political, and socio-cultural diversity. Despite stark differences in economic development, political systems, and social structures, these nations have historically coexisted within a regional framework. Whilst bilateral tensions have occasionally emerged, large-scale interstate conflicts have been largely absent. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, intra-regional co-operation in the Mekong Subregion expanded in various forms, encompassing engagements with major powers as well as indigenous regional initiatives such as the Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Co-operation Strategy (ACMECS). The region's interstate relations and institutional co-operation are inherently shaped by broader international structures. Consequently, changes in global economic and political dynamics inevitably impact bilateral and multilateral relations within the Mekong Subregion, particularly in terms of regional initiatives involving major powers.

A prevalent view in contemporary discourse suggests that the Mekong Subregion has become a key theatre for U.S.-China strategic competition. The two powers are seen as competing for regional influence, each seeking leadership within the subregion as part of a broader effort to counterbalance the other's geo-political presence. This competition is frequently framed in terms of power balancing and the establishment of spheres of influence. However, a critical theoretical question arises: What will the future of the international order look like? (Fujii et al., 2023; Ikenberry, 2024). Many analysts put that the current global order is undergoing a fundamental transition, particularly as U.S. dominance appears to be waning whilst China's role is expanding (de Paiva Pires, 2022; Dian, n.d.; Nye, 2022). In this context, I aim to investigate how the evolving international order will impact the Mekong Subregion. Additionally, I will explore the shifting nature of Japan's engagement with the subregion and examine how Thailand, as a middle power and a self-proclaimed regional leader, should strategically position itself within this changing geo-political landscape. By analysing Thailand's diplomatic strategies, economic partnerships, and regional alignments, this research aims to offer insights into how middle powers like Thailand can navigate an era of global transformation whilst maintaining strategic autonomy and advancing national and regional interests.

I contend that the current international order is undergoing a transitional phase, marked by a shift from unipolarity to multipolarity. This transition creates an economic and political interregnum, which presents both challenges and opportunities in international relations (Knight, 2022; Stahl, 2019; Taggart, 2022). During this interregnum, middle powers and regionalism gain greater leverage, providing them with an opportunity to assume a more prominent role or to strengthen regional co-operation in pursuit of a strategic position in the evolving global order (Heiduk, 2023; Hettne, 2012). The existing literature on the transformation of international order and the interregnum elucidates how the transition of superpowers within the international order facilitates the reconfiguration of power among various actors. In this context, Japan has deepened its engagement with the Mekong Subregion by employing a diplomatic approach that I call "2Qs" diplomacy—'Quiet and Quality Diplomacy'. This strategy allows Japan to play a leading role in the region without directly competing for the 'geo-political spotlight' with other superpowers. By adopting a subtle yet effective diplomatic approach, Japan positions itself as a reliable and influential partner in the Mekong Subregion whilst avoiding overt rivalry with China or the United States. Given this strategic landscape, Thailand should actively utilise this interregnum by positioning itself as a key hub

within the international production network in the region. This strategy would not only enhance Thailand's economic competitiveness but also align with Japan's regional interests in strengthening its economic footprint in the Mekong Subregion. With this opportunity, Thailand can reinforce its role as a middle power and establish itself as a central player in regional economic co-operation.

From this point onwards, this paper is divided into five main sections. The first section examines the international order, focusing on the ongoing power transition and its implications. It highlights how the interregnum during this transitional period creates both opportunities and challenges for various actors within the international system. The second analyse how the institutionalisation of regional initiatives and the relations with that of superpowers are transforming geo-political landscape at the regional and subregional levels. The third section explores how Japan has utilised this interregnum to establish and strengthen its economic and political relations with the Mekong Subregion. The fourth section analyses Thailand's strategic options, assessing how the country can maximise the benefits of this transitional period whilst navigating its relations with Japan and the Mekong Subregion. Finally, the fifth section presents the conclusion, summarising the key findings and implications of the study.

2. Global Structural Changes and Their Impact on Regionalism

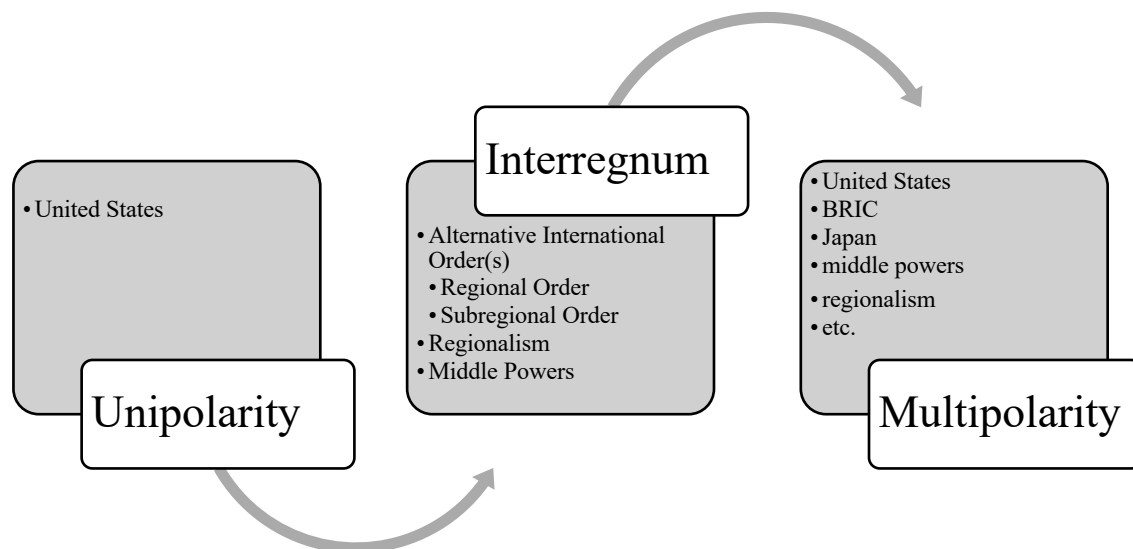
A fundamental theoretical question to consider when analysing the current global political landscape is: What are the prevailing dynamics of the international system? Academic debates and perspectives from practitioners across various sectors in Thailand and nearly every other country converge on the notion that the polarity of the international system exhibits characteristics of multipolarity (Hellmüller, n.d.; Labuda, 2025; na Thalang, 2023; Newman & Visoka, 2023; Suporn et al., 2021). This implies that multiple actors hold significant power and influence on the extent that they constitute 'polar' within the global economic, political, and security framework. A related and crucial question is: What has prompted the structural transformation of the international system towards multipolarity? Furthermore, within this 'transition process,' what stages and characteristics should be examined to discern its significance and policy implications?

I contend that the world is transitioning from a unipolar system—centred around the United States as the dominant actor in the global economic, political, and security order—towards a multipolar world system. This transition involves distinct processes and characteristics. From

a theoretical perspective, many studies have endeavoured to comprehend power transitions through Power Transition Theory (Duggan & Grabowski, 2021; Mazarr, 2022), which focuses on the degree of satisfaction or dissatisfaction of rising powers with the *status quo* (Organski, 1969). However, when applied to contemporary global affairs, it may not simply be a matter of states being ‘satisfied’ or ‘dissatisfied’ with their position in the international system. Rather, the shift in global power dynamics is occurring due to two key factors, which are:

1. *The relative decline of the existing hegemon* – The dominant power, in this case, the United States, is experiencing a diminishing capacity to manage global public goods, which undermines its influence over the international system. This may stem from domestic challenges or a decline in resources available to sustain its global leadership (Ashraf, 2023; Cox, 2001; Poletti & Zambernardi, 2021).
2. *The relative rise of other powers* – The emergence of other states, such as China and various middle powers, has altered the global power structure. These states have accumulated economic and political influence and have begun playing a more active role in shaping global governance and public goods distribution (Gilley & O’Neil, 2014; Gilley, 2011; Jacobs & Van Rossem, 2014; Kim, 2015; Mansfield, 2014).

I argue that the contemporary global transition is driven by the simultaneous occurrence of these two dynamics: the relative decline of the United States, and the relative rise of other influential actors. The diminishing global role of the United States, partly due to internal constraints and its waning ability to manage global public goods (Chase-Dunn et al., 2011; Kindleberger, 1986; Norrlöf, 2020), has coincided with the increasing global engagement of other powers. A key feature of this transition is the existence of a temporary strategic window, during which various actors in the international system have an opportunity to recalibrate their relations—both amongst themselves and with major powers. This phenomenon has been observed in different regions, where states have actively sought to strengthen and expand their strategic partnerships. The exact starting point and duration of this transitional period remain uncertain. However, this moment presents a crucial opportunity for scholars and policymakers to examine the nature of this transformation in order to extract meaningful insights and formulate appropriate policy responses.



A clear example of how states have sought to forge or strengthen relations during this transitional period is the increasing role of the BRIC group in global politics, particularly with the expansion of its membership into BRICS. The growing influence of BRICS demonstrates the emergence of alternative configurations within the international order, offering new political and economic frameworks for international co-operation. The alternative international economic order envisioned by BRICS provides states and other actors with additional option for economic engagement amidst the ongoing structural transformation of the global system (Öniş & Kutlay, 2020; Rodriguez-Triocci, 2024). At the same time, regional and subregional orders are also being developed within the broader international order. These regional and subregional arrangements are being actively shaped during this period of transition, often through initiatives spearheaded by major powers. For instance, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has created trans-regional, regional, and subregional orders, reconfiguring relations between China and other states and international organisations. In other regions, similar patterns can be observed. In South Asia, for example, India's leadership within South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC) has generated asymmetrical relations between India and its neighbouring states. This power imbalance has led to stagnation within SAARC, resulting in a quagmire that prevents the organisation from playing a significant role in the international political economy—particularly in trade, investment, and global production networks (Kumarasingha, 2024). On the other hand, the Mekong Subregion has benefited from great power competition, which has led to an influx of regional initiatives and mechanisms. This competition has triggered a wide range of regional development projects and schemes, underscoring the subregion's strategic importance as an area of major power interest (Everhart, 2024). Furthermore, beyond its geo-political

significance, the Mekong Subregion possesses great potential because of its abundant natural resources, human capital, urbanisation, and strategic positioning as a bridge between two oceans. This combination of internal capabilities and external geo-political interest provides the subregion with a unique opportunity to maximise its position within the evolving international system. By leveraging these dynamics, the Mekong Subregion can actively shape its development trajectory in ways that benefit from the strategic engagements of global powers.

3. Japan-Mekong Relations

As previously discussed, the interregnum has created a degree of political vacuum in international relations, allowing states, regional groups, and international organisations to reconfigure their diplomatic relations through new frameworks of co-operation. During such periods of uncertainty, when existing great powers face potential declines in influence—whether in scope, scale, or permanence—there is an increased tendency for countries to reassess their alignments and forge new partnerships. Since the end of the Second World War, Japan has actively sought to reassert its international role through Official Development Assistance (ODA) as a key diplomatic tool to regain its relations and reputation (Fujikura & Nakayama, 2016; Huda, 2016). However, the characteristics of Japan’s diplomatic tools and approaches have been widely debated. I agree with the perspective that a defining feature of Japan’s diplomacy is its ‘quiet’ nature (Dang & Glenn, 2022; Halpern, 1973; Meyer, 2003), characterised by subtle influence and strategic engagement. Japan employs diplomatic instruments that emphasise ‘quality’ over quantity (Yoshimatsu, 2023), differentiating itself from other states whose tools of engagement may be subject to greater debate in terms of effectiveness. I therefore propose the concept of ‘2Qs Diplomacy’ which encapsulates Japan’s approach to maintaining a low-profile yet influential role in global political and economic affairs. This is particularly evident in the Mekong Subregion, which serves as a crucial manufacturing base for Japan, particularly within Thailand. A key characteristic of this “2Qs” style of diplomacy is Japan’s emphasis on providing assistance of ‘quality.’ However, such assistance is not delivered in an obvious diplomatic manner, nor does it involve conspicuous ceremonies or forms of giving that attract global attention (as seen in China’s publicised collaborations with other countries through the BRI). Instead, Japan extends assistance through government-to-government mechanisms or various forms of aid, making Japanese assistance appear to focus on quality rather than on conspicuous displays when compared to other countries.

The Japan-Mekong relation has evolved over an extended period, with substantial engagement intensifying since 2009, when Japan launched the Mekong Japan Co-operation (MJC). However, the historical roots of this relation extend as far back as post-1945, aligning with the development of regionalism in the Lower Mekong area (Black, 1969). Japan's engagement with the subregion is underpinned by strategic considerations aimed at fostering closer political, diplomatic, and economic ties. This objective is reflected in Japan's longstanding relation with ASEAN, which has spanned over five decades, and with Mekong Subregion (Charoensri, 2019). These two diplomatic frameworks—Japan-ASEAN relations and Japan-Mekong relations—have evolved in parallel with Japan's bilateral engagements with individual Southeast Asian countries.

The areas of co-operation between Japan and the Mekong Subregion operate on both multilateral and bilateral levels and cover a broad spectrum, including human resource development, human rights, cybersecurity co-operation, and educational advancement. These collaborations have developed in both horizontal and vertical dimensions, signifying the expansion of thematic and structural co-operation over time. However, Japan's engagement in these areas overlaps with the priorities of other major powers that are actively involved in the Mekong Subregion. For instance, the United States has placed significant emphasis on human resource development, environmental sustainability, and cybersecurity, whilst China has prioritised human capital, trade, and investment. The overlapping nature of these areas of co-operation raises critical strategic questions regarding Japan's prioritisation of engagement in the Mekong Subregion. Specifically, it necessitates an assessment of which areas of co-operation would yield the greatest mutual benefit for both Japan and the subregion, particularly in light of the competing interests and involvement of other global actors.

4. Thailand's National Interests and Strategies

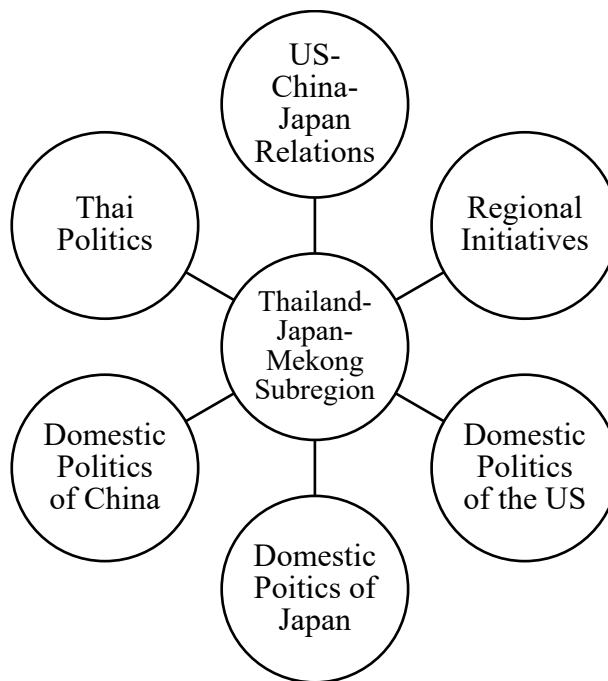
Having examined the structural transformation of the global order and the evolving relations between Japan and the Mekong Subregion, this section shifts the focus towards Thailand's strategic positioning. The global order is undergoing significant changes, and within this evolving context, Japan has intensified its engagement with the Mekong Subregion. The shifting geo-political landscape, particularly the return of Donald Trump to power, further complicates international relations and raises important questions about how global structures

influence Japan-Mekong Subregion relations and, crucially, how Thailand should develop its foreign policy to make the most of these regional dynamics.

Before assessing Thailand's policy direction, it is necessary to first analyse Thailand's core interests within the global economic, political, and security spheres. At a broad level, Thailand's national interests encompass the preservation of sovereignty and national dignity, the promotion of economic prosperity, and the socio-political stability necessary for sustainable development. However, to translate these abstract national interests into practical policy goals, it is important to assess Thailand's strategic interests within the Mekong Subregion and the broader international economic and political order.

Thailand's economic, trade, and investment relations with major powers are of paramount importance. As a country geo-graphically central to the Mekong Subregion, Thailand is uniquely positioned as a strategic hub connecting neighbouring states. This positioning enables Thailand to be a gateway to both the Pacific and Indian Oceans, as well as maritime Southeast Asia, one of the world's largest and most dynamic markets (Banomyong, 2012). Additionally, Thailand's well-developed infrastructure enhances its potential as a centre for aviation and maritime trade routes. Other key strengths include a highly literate workforce, a stable socio-political environment, and a secure investment climate, all of which contribute to Thailand's competitive advantage in the region. However, Thailand's national interests must also align with regional interests to ensure long-term stability and prosperity. A key question, therefore, is: What constitutes regional interests? Regional interests are defined by the harmonisation of national interests among subregional states whilst simultaneously upholding public interests at a broader level. This necessitates a foreign policy approach that not only safeguards Thailand's national interests but also upholds dignity and strategic sovereignty, ensuring that Thailand retains the autonomy to define its own objectives, tools, and strategies in a way that is both independent and pragmatic.

Having outlined Thailand's strategic interests, the next step is to formulate an effective strategy to achieve these objectives. I propose that Thailand should use on the current geo-political shifts by positioning itself as the central hub of the Mekong Subregion within the context of Japan-Mekong Subregion relations. This would enable Thailand to maximise its strategic advantages, foster greater economic and diplomatic ties, and enhance its role as a regional leader in shaping the economic and political trajectory of the subregion (Busbarat, 2014).



The contextual and environmental factors influencing the relations between Thailand, Japan, and the Mekong Subregion are multifaceted. I propose that there are six key factors, which are (1) the triangular relations between the United States, China, and Japan, (2) challenges of regional initiatives in the Mekong Subregion, (3) domestic politics of the United States, (4) domestic politics of Japan, (5) domestic politics of China, and (6) domestic politics of Thailand.

1. The Triangular Relations Between the United States, China, and Japan

The prevailing narrative regarding the interactions between the United States, China, and Japan, particularly in relation to the Mekong Subregion, is shaped by two dominant perspectives. The first concerns the geo-political competition between the United States and China, whilst the second focuses on the economic and developmental rivalry between China and Japan.

The first narrative centres on the notion that the United States and China are engaged in a strategic contest to establish spheres of influence and balance power within the subregion (Dung & Phuong 2023; Egawa, 2023; Theosa, 2020; Tran, 2021). This perspective suggests that the United States seeks to counterbalance China's growing influence, particularly in light of China's increasing economic engagements through investment, trade, and development projects. One explanation for China's expanding role in the Mekong Subregion is historical: the presence of overseas Chinese communities, particularly those who fled the Chinese Communist Party after 1949, has contributed to strong cultural connectivity, cultivating close

economic and social ties between China and the subregion. However, this dynamic is not without its tensions, as exemplified by historical disputes, such as those between China and Vietnam (Phan, 2025). As economic interactions between China and the Mekong Subregion have intensified under the forces of economic globalisation, the United States has responded by increasing its engagement to prevent China from exerting excessive influence.

The second narrative examines the competition between China and Japan, particularly in terms of ODA and infrastructure development (Egawa, 2023; Koga, 2022; Peng, 2018; Shihong, 2017; Yoshimatsu, 2010). Both countries have actively funded and developed economic corridors, high-speed railways, and other major infrastructure projects. Japan's long-standing cultural and economic presence in the subregion has further heightened perceptions of a competitive dynamic between the two nations. As both China and Japan use economic tools to strengthen their relations with the Mekong Subregion, their competition in infrastructure investment and development has become increasingly pronounced.

Both of these narratives significantly shape the way international relations in the Mekong Subregion are conceptualised and managed. Drawing upon Graham Allison's concept of the "Thucydides Trap" (Allison, 2017), I propose the notion of the 'Mekong's Geo-Political Competition Trap.' This concept highlights a cognitive entrapment among scholars and policymakers, wherein the Mekong Subregion is predominantly analysed through the lens of major power competition. Such an approach presupposes that international relations in the region are defined by great power rivalry and that regional states must inevitably 'choose sides.' The predominant policy response to this dilemma is often a strategy of non-alignment, advocating for selective co-operation with major powers based on specific policy domains to maximise national interests.

However, this analytical framework reduces the complexity of international relations in the Mekong Subregion by overemphasising the U.S.-China-Japan rivalry. It overlooks the broader spectrum of actors, including regional initiatives at both the regional and subregional levels, and neglects opportunities for multilateral co-operation. Structural realism, which focuses on the international system's polarity, reinforces the perception that smaller states must align themselves with a major power to avoid instability. This binary perspective suggests that the United States and China are locked in a zero-sum struggle over influence in the subregion.

Rather than adopting the traditional perspective that portrays the Mekong Subregion as a battleground for U.S.-China geo-political competition, we should consider that the Mekong Subregion and ASEAN are actively redefining their relations with major powers. The shift in international order has prompted Southeast Asia and the Mekong Subregion to recalibrate their external relations in response to broader geo-political transformations. By shifting the analytical focus inward, we can examine how regional actors are restructuring their relations with global powers to advance their own interests. This approach allows us to reconsider how regional mechanisms and multilateral frameworks can be leveraged to shape external engagement. Rather than focusing solely on how the U.S.-China rivalry affects ASEAN and the Mekong Subregion, we should explore what ASEAN and the Mekong Subregion aim to achieve and how they can proactively engage with external actors to fulfil their strategic objectives. This perspective also challenges the dominant narratives associated with the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy (FOIP) promoted by the United States and China's BRI. Both strategies have fostered a regional discourse that pressures states to choose between two competing models: FOIP, which emphasises 'freedom' and 'openness,' and the BRI, which has been criticised for debt trap. Huong Le Thu has pointed out that these grand strategies create a binary framework that influences regional sentiment, making it difficult for countries in the Mekong Subregion to maintain a balanced approach (Le Thu, 2019).

Reframing the geo-political discourse from an inside-out perspective offers several advantages. Firstly, it shifts the focus towards regional agency, compelling ASEAN and Mekong Subregion states to assess their own strategic interests rather than reacting passively to external pressures. This approach encourages a self-reflective analysis of regional strengths and weaknesses, helping policymakers identify opportunities to develop strategic policies that maximise regional benefits. Secondly, by de-emphasising the great power competition narrative, regional actors can escape the trap of balancing strategies and instead focus on multi-dimensional engagement. If the dominant discourse remains fixated on U.S.-China competition, there is a risk that the region will be locked into a framework that prioritises rivalry over constructive co-operation. Finally, this approach can contribute to winning hearts and minds within the Mekong Subregion by fostering a regional identity that is not solely defined by external competition. If regional populations continue to view the U.S.-China rivalry as the primary determinant of economic and political dynamics, it could lead to adversarial political sentiments that undermine long-term co-operation. A more nuanced perspective that

emphasises regional agency will support the development of a more autonomous and strategic approach to external relations. The Mekong Subregion should not be seen merely as a contested space between great powers but as a proactive actor in shaping its own future. By shifting the focus from external competition to regional agency, scholars and policymakers can develop more sophisticated strategies for engaging with the international system in a way that prioritises regional interests whilst maintaining autonomy and strategic sovereignty.

2. Challenges of Regional Initiatives in the Mekong Subregion

A fundamental challenge in analysing regional initiatives in the Mekong Subregion stems from the constructed nature of the subregion itself. Unlike natural geo-political entities, the Mekong Subregion does not exist as an inherent, organically defined unit; rather, it has been politically constructed. This process of constructing a regional identity has fostered a perception of unity and coherence within the subregion, often masking the contested nature of regional interests. This framing presents a challenge as it downplays the competitive and often conflicting priorities among Mekong states and external actors, ultimately influencing how regional initiatives are formulated, implemented, and perceived.

Given the contested nature of regional interests, states in the Mekong Subregion engage with major powers through both bilateral relations and regional initiatives. Several key regional frameworks have been established, including the Mekong River Commission (MRC), Mekong–US Partnership (MUSP), Mekong–Japan Co-operation (MJC), Lancang–Mekong Co-operation (LMC), Mekong–ROK Co-operation (MROK), Mekong–Ganga Co-operation (MGC), and Mekong–Australia Partnership (MAP). These initiatives serve as platforms for engagement between Mekong states and major powers. However, a critical issue arises regarding the role of great powers within these frameworks—how does their membership influence decision-making, policy formulation, and the distribution of benefits? Whilst these initiatives facilitate economic and political engagement, the involvement of major powers also introduces asymmetrical power dynamics, whereby external actors may exert disproportionate influence over regional decision-making processes. The only regional initiative exclusively composed of Mekong countries, without external major power involvement, is ACMECS. However, ACMECS itself faces substantial challenges. Its low level of institutionalisation, lack of a budget, and absence of a permanent secretariat significantly hinder its ability to co-ordinate policies and ensure continuity in regional co-operation. Unlike initiatives backed by major powers, ACMECS

struggles to implement projects effectively due to its limited institutional capacity (Charoensri, 2024).

The ongoing transition of the international order, which I characterise as an interregnum, presents a unique moment for restructuring relations among key actors in the Mekong Subregion. As major powers seek to assert influence, they have strategically leveraged regional initiatives to expand their spheres of influence and establish new economic and political alliances within the subregion. Both China and the United States have actively pursued engagement in the Mekong Subregion, offering assistance in financial support, human resource development, environmental protection, and technological advancements. However, they are not alone—other middle powers such as India, South Korea, Australia, and Japan have also deepened their engagement.

Understanding the dynamics of regional transformation in the Mekong Subregion, thus, requires a broader perspective beyond just US-China competition. The engagement of multiple external actors highlights that regional states are not merely passive recipients of external influence, but rather active participants navigating a complex geo-political landscape to maximise their national and subregional interests. However, despite this diversified engagement, ACMECS remains ineffective in responding to these changes. Its lack of major power engagement and support, and financial constraints have prevented it from evolving into a robust institutional mechanism capable of articulating and negotiating subregional interests on the global stage.

Another critical issue is the absence of a clearly defined regional identity and institutional representation within the Mekong Subregion. Without a unified institutional actor representing the subregion's interests, the region lacks a strong negotiating position in its interactions with major powers. Whilst ASEAN serves as the primary regional framework for Southeast Asia, there remains a need to clarify the relations between subregional and regional interests. The key question remains: How do subregional interests align with or diverge from ASEAN's broader regional interests? Can the Mekong Subregion synchronise its priorities with ASEAN whilst also advancing its own distinct economic and strategic objectives? The ability to define and institutionalise subregional interests will be crucial in strengthening the Mekong Subregion's role in regional governance. Without this, the negotiating power of the subregion remains weak, making it vulnerable to external pressures and limiting its ability to shape its own developmental trajectory. The fundamental issue with existing regional initiatives is that

they have primarily been shaped by external influences rather than emerging organically from within the Mekong Subregion. This has led to an imbalance in agenda-setting power, where major powers define the region's developmental priorities. To reframe regionalism, the Mekong states must take greater initiative in shaping their own regional strategies rather than simply reacting to external engagements.

A key strategy for addressing these challenges is to enhance institutional capacity within the Mekong Subregion. This could involve: (1) strengthening ACMECS by increasing institutionalisation, securing independent financial resources, and establishing a permanent secretariat; (2) clarifying the relations between the Mekong Subregion and ASEAN, ensuring that subregional interests are effectively represented in broader regional frameworks; and (3) reducing reliance on bilateral arrangements with major powers by prioritising multilateral approaches that enhance bargaining power and create a more balanced form of co-operation. By addressing these institutional gaps, the Mekong Subregion can move beyond the limitations of existing regional initiatives and develop a more autonomous, strategically cohesive regional architecture that effectively navigates great power competition whilst advancing its own economic and political interests.

3. Domestic Politics in the United States

The domestic political landscape of the United States plays a crucial role in shaping its engagement with ASEAN and the Mekong Subregion. Under a potential second Trump administration (Trump 2.0), there are clear indications of a strengthening US-Japan relation, as evidenced by high-level meetings between Donald Trump and Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba. Whilst internal US politics may not directly impact Japan's relations with the Mekong Subregion, the broader policy orientation of the United States will have indirect consequences, particularly in terms of investment and development assistance. Recent policy analyses have increasingly focused on scenarios concerning China's growing influence in the Mekong Subregion, particularly in light of Trump's decision to cut funding for USAID, which has historically played a key role in human development, environmental conservation, and economic co-operation in the region. This shift is likely to provide China with greater political and economic leverage, allowing it to expand its role in the subregion (Al Jazeera, 2025).

The extent to which the United States prioritises foreign policy, particularly its engagement with Asia, largely depends on domestic political dynamics and leadership transitions. Prior to

Trump's presidency, the Mekong Subregion was recognised as a strategically significant area within the FOIP strategy, primarily due to its geo-graphical position between the Pacific and Indian Oceans. However, in comparison to China and Japan's strategic approaches, US influence in the region has remained less pronounced. Whilst the MUSP serves as a regional initiative focusing on human resource development, environmental issues, technology, and energy, its institutional and policy impact has been relatively limited compared to China's BRI and MJC.

From an economic and political perspective, the US has not established a dominant presence in the Mekong Subregion. However, from a security perspective, the situation differs significantly. The United States functions as a key catalyst in shaping the regional and subregional security architecture through its bilateral security partnerships and broader efforts to maintain peace and stability. The bilateral security relations between the United States and the Mekong Subregion (excluding Myanmar) are exemplified by the Cobra Gold military exercise, which involves more than thirty countries.¹ This exercise serves as a platform for military training, tactical exchanges, and weapons training. Whilst Cobra Gold symbolises close security co-operation and the strategic influence of the United States in the region, it primarily functions as a symbolic demonstration of military collaboration rather than a direct mechanism for addressing security challenges. In practice, when dealing with actual security issues, the focus tends to shift towards non-traditional security co-operation facilitated through regional initiatives, which emphasise tackling non-traditional challenges rather than traditional military engagements. This role is evident in US-led initiatives addressing traditional and non-traditional security concerns, including transboundary haze pollution, water governance of the Mekong River, refugee and migration crises, and cybersecurity threats. The US remains a critical actor in assisting the Mekong states in addressing these evolving security challenges.

As the world undergoes a period of interregnum, characterised by a power transition and shifting global alliances, the future of US engagement with the Mekong Subregion remains a key issue to monitor. The bilateral and multilateral relations that the US has developed with

¹ The participating countries are categorised into four groups: (1) Full Participating Nations, which include Thailand, the United States, Singapore, Japan, Indonesia, South Korea, and Malaysia; (2) Limited Participating Nations, comprising China, Australia, and India; (3) Multinational Planning Augmentation Team (MPAT), which consists of Bangladesh, Canada, France, the United Kingdom, Mongolia, Nepal, New Zealand, the Philippines, Fiji, and Brunei; and (4) Combined Observer Liaison Team (COLT), which includes Cambodia, Laos, Brazil, Pakistan, Vietnam, Sri Lanka, Germany, Sweden, Greece, and Kuwait.

the region may undergo significant transformation, leading to either an expansion of co-operation areas or a deeper, more targeted engagement in specific sectors. The primary question is whether these evolving relations will enable the United States to solidify its influence and expand its sphere of engagement within the subregion. Given the growing strategic competition in the Mekong Subregion, future US policy directions will determine whether Washington can enhance its partnerships with Mekong countries and whether its regional presence will be able to counterbalance China's expanding role. The ability of the US to strengthen its economic, political, and security commitments in the subregion will play a decisive role in shaping regional dynamics, particularly in the face of China's deepening engagement and Japan's continued diplomatic and economic influence in the region.

4. Domestic Politics of Japan

The domestic political landscape of Japan remains a crucial factor influencing the trajectory of Japan-Mekong relations. Since assuming office as Prime Minister, Shigeru Ishiba has been subject to scrutiny regarding the uncertainty of Japan's foreign policy direction. As Koga Kei has previously observed, Japan's strategic orientation under Ishiba's leadership remains unclear (Koga, 2024). However, early indications suggest that Southeast Asia continues to be a priority, as evidenced by Ishiba's official visits to Malaysia and Indonesia in January 2025, where he reaffirmed Japan's commitment to both the FOIP and ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). Furthermore, his only official visit to the Mekong Subregion thus far was to Laos, where he participated in the ASEAN Summit in October 2024. Despite this lack of extensive direct engagement, there will be no significant shifts in Japan's strategic posture towards the Mekong Subregion. Japan's economic and political ties with the region remain deeply entrenched, primarily due to the Mekong Subregion's role as a critical production base for Japanese industries. Data from Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) indicates that Japanese investment in the region continues to grow, reflecting the strategic importance of the Mekong economies to Japan's regional supply chains and industrial networks.

Beyond economic co-operation, Japan's diplomatic and political engagement with the Mekong Subregion remains substantial. Japan has maintained long-standing institutional partnerships such as the Mekong-Japan Co-operation Framework and the Mekong-Japan Foreign Ministers' Meeting, both of which serve as platforms for expanding bilateral and multilateral co-operation. The key areas of engagement between Japan and the Mekong

Subregion continue to focus on connectivity projects (including physical infrastructure and digital connectivity), people-to-people exchanges and educational collaboration, environmental initiatives under the Green Mekong framework, emphasising sustainable development and environmental protection, health security and pandemic preparedness, energy and economic co-operation under Japan's FOIP strategy, and trade and investment partnerships, particularly in supply chain resilience (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2024). From an institutional perspective, Japan's Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) has been actively involved in shaping Japan-Mekong co-operation. METI has identified the Mekong Subregion as a priority for further economic collaboration, particularly in the energy sector. Key projects include the Mekong Power Tool, which aims to enhance grid code improvement and grid operation capacity in ASEAN countries. Additionally, Japan has been working with the MRC to address plastic pollution and improve regional environmental governance. These projects, which are being carried out in partnership with MOFA and Japan International Co-operation Agency (JICA), reflect Japan's long-term commitment to sustainable development in the region (Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, 2024). Given these factors, I contend that Japan's relations with the Mekong Subregion are unlikely to undergo significant changes under Ishiba's leadership, nor in the foreseeable future, even if there is a change in Japan's premiership. Japan's engagement with the Mekong Subregion is not merely a standalone policy but rather an integral part of its broader ASEAN-Japan relations. Furthermore, Japan's continued endorsement of AOIP principles reinforces its strategic commitment to ASEAN's regional leadership.

From the perspective of the Mekong Subregion's priorities, it is evident that Japan remains a key economic and political partner. The Mekong countries continue to value Japan's trade and investment contributions, alongside its ODA, which supports human resource development, environmental sustainability, support for SMEs, cybersecurity co-operation, renewable and clean energy projects, and responses to human rights and refugee challenges, particularly concerning Myanmar's displaced populations entering Thailand. Moreover, Japan's commitment to addressing emerging transnational security threats—such as scammer networks and organised crime—proves its adaptive approach to new security challenges in the region.

Furthermore, a defining characteristic of Japan's approach to international relations, which I have previously identified as the '2Qs,' reinforces its distinctive role in global affairs. Unlike the United States and China, Japan consistently demonstrates a clear and methodical

approach to its foreign policy objectives, with a particular emphasis on fostering economic and social relations in a subtle and pragmatic manner. A key instrument in this strategy is Japan's ODA, which has been used as a pivotal tool in its diplomatic engagements. Historically, Japan's diplomatic trajectory with ASEAN and the Mekong Subregion has undergone four critical turning points, as analysed by Charoensri and Anantasirikiat (2023). These include the post-World War II reconciliation period, the Fukuda Doctrine, the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, and the introduction of the FOIP strategy. Throughout these phases, Japan's engagement with ASEAN and the Mekong Subregion has been framed in a manner that aligns with ASEAN's interests whilst maintaining a low-key diplomatic presence. This strategic restraint has allowed Japan to effectively utilise ODA to support high-quality infrastructure development, thereby reinforcing its image as a reliable and non-confrontational partner in the region. Moving forward, Japan's use of ODA will likely remain a key instrument in its foreign policy, continuing to be deployed as a highly effective tool that enables strategic engagement whilst avoiding overt competition with other major powers. This nuanced approach ensures that Japan remains influential in shaping regional development without drawing excessive political attention, thereby maintaining its distinctive diplomatic style within the evolving international order.

5. Domestic Politics of China

Another highly significant factor influencing dynamics in the Mekong Subregion is Chinese politics. Over the past decade or so, we have witnessed China assuming an increasingly important role in the global political-economic system. The BRI is a project of utmost importance to Chinese politics. China's efforts to provide funding for various connectivity projects—including roads, ports, railways, and airports—have been instrumental in establishing China as a major actor in the international order. China has initiated several initiatives and regional cooperation frameworks, such as the LMC, which aims to foster political and economic collaboration with countries in the Mekong Subregion. Additionally, China established the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) to secure funding for the development of the BRI and to facilitate regional connectivity.

The development projects designed to enhance connections with various regions across the globe via the BRI, and the co-operation extending into the Mekong Subregion, are in large part shaped by China's domestic politics, particularly with respect to international trade. Dosch (2019) analyses that one reason behind China's interest in forging links with the

Mekong Subregion lies in the desire to expand its market into this area and to import resources for its production system. Furthermore, it serves to accelerate the development of Yunnan Province. This is not merely a matter of establishing transport routes but also encompasses the transport of oil and natural gas from Myanmar to Yunnan. Kurlantzick (2007, pp. 101-102) also observes that connecting Yunnan with the Mekong Subregion enables China to develop its western region, which is landlocked, thereby providing economic benefits to Chinese businesses and construction companies engaged in the development work.

Another issue related to China's role and its significant impact on the Mekong Subregion is the construction of dams on the Mekong River by China. This has given rise to multifaceted problems, including environmental issues associated with changes in water volume and flow, impacts on fish spawning, and other ecological concerns. Moreover, it has created unresolved international political problems, as other major powers, such as the United States, have also become involved. At the same time, the riparian states along the Mekong River have not been able to utilise mechanisms such as the MRC to address these challenges effectively.

Nevertheless, despite the issues between China and the Mekong Subregion regarding the Mekong River, overall, China accords great importance to the Mekong Subregion. This attention is motivated not only by economic interests but also by normative interests. For instance, a study by Song et al. (2021) indicates that China's belief in a 'harmonious world' has greatly influenced its engagement in the Mekong Subregion, as China seeks to maintain good relations with neighbouring countries. In this regard, China's internal interests in fostering ties with the Mekong Subregion can thus be seen in both economic and normative dimensions.

6. Domestic Politics of Thailand

The dynamics of Thailand's domestic politics significantly influence its relations with Japan and the Mekong Subregion within the shifting landscape of global political and economic order. One of the most crucial factors shaping these relations is the country's leadership. Over the past two decades, Thailand has undergone significant political changes, with persistent internal conflicts between political factions leading to multifaceted consequences. These prolonged domestic challenges have constrained Thailand's ability to articulate a clear foreign policy stance at the regional level. Despite sustained economic growth and the country's substantial potential, its internal political landscape remains a major

obstacle to Thailand assuming a leadership role in regional affairs. This limitation is evident in Thailand's reduced capacity to champion normative leadership, such as advocating for human rights, political inclusivity, and environmental sustainability, or to take the lead in coordinating regional public interests, including cross-border environmental management, cybersecurity governance, and human rights protection.

One of the key reasons Thailand has struggled to play a leading role in these areas is that successive governments have been preoccupied with addressing domestic political challenges. As a result, foreign policy has not been prioritised as a strategic tool for nation-building or for enhancing Thailand's international standing. Official policy documents, such as *The 13th National Economic and Social Development Plan (2023–2027)* (NESC, 2023) and the *National Security Policy and Plan (2023–2027)*, indicate that Thailand recognises the shift towards a multipolar world and the increasing complexities it faces. These include challenges such as human rights issues, transboundary environmental concerns, cybersecurity threats, great power competition, and terrorism. Addressing these challenges requires Thailand to engage actively with other states and regional frameworks, including the Mekong Subregion, ASEAN, and broader international co-operation mechanisms. The critical question, therefore, is how Thailand can leverage this evolving global landscape to align its foreign policy with the interests of major powers whilst safeguarding its national priorities.

This situation also brings into question Thailand's long-standing diplomatic approach, often referred to as "Bamboo Diplomacy," which is characterised by adaptability and pragmatism—'bending with the wind' to seize opportunities and engage with different actors based on evolving circumstances. However, as the global order undergoes significant shifts, it is worth assessing whether this approach remains an effective means for Thailand to achieve its strategic objectives whilst maintaining its dignity and credibility in international relations. Thailand should take advantage of this interregnum by reinforcing its role as a key hub in the international production network. Such positioning would not only enhance the country's economic competitiveness but also align with Japan's interests in strengthening its economic engagement in the Mekong Subregion. By capitalising on this opportunity, Thailand can solidify its status as a middle power and establish itself as a central player in regional economic co-operation.

Furthermore, with President Trump assuming office for a second term and discussions surrounding tariffs that could impact international trade and investment, Japan has sought to

diversify its economic exposure to mitigate risks. From 19 to 21 February 2025, Japanese investors—particularly from sectors such as automotive manufacturing, electronics, electrical equipment, machinery, petrochemicals, plastics, and processed food—visited Thailand for the *Thailand-Japan Investment Forum 2025*. Japanese investors expressed keen interest in relocating production bases from China to Thailand, a strategic move aimed at improving supply chain resilience and reducing exposure to potential US-imposed trade restrictions (Thansettakij, 2025).

The transition in the global power structure presents both opportunities and challenges for recalibrating international relations. Thailand and the Mekong Subregion must recognise that the shifting international order offers an opportunity to engage with major powers strategically, influencing policy options and alternative narratives. Rather than being passive recipients of external influences, regional actors should shape global discourse, fostering diplomatic strategies that gain public support and influence policymakers in different countries.

Japan's employment of its '2Qs' diplomatic approach offers Thailand and the Mekong Subregion a unique opportunity. Japan's goodwill, expressed through ODA, can serve as a diplomatic bridge to enhance co-operation in various sectors. However, to avoid being trapped in a binary great-power competition narrative—particularly the US-China rivalry—Thailand must take proactive steps to redefine its regional role. Instead of focusing solely on how the US-China power struggle affects ASEAN and the Mekong Subregion, Thailand should adopt an "inside-out" perspective, assessing what the region itself requires and how it can proactively shape its engagement with global actors.

To achieve this, Thailand's leadership must take decisive steps at multiple levels. Domestically, Thai policymakers and academic institutions should work to de-emphasise the narrative of great power competition and promote an alternative diplomatic sentiment that reduces political distrust towards both the United States and China. Encouraging balanced political discourse and shifting the narrative can help Thailand avoid being perceived as merely oscillating between competing major powers. At the regional level, Thailand should take the lead in pushing for the institutionalisation of ACMECS, transforming it into a regional political and economic body capable of effectively representing regional public interests. Strengthening ACMECS would enable Thailand to assert a more autonomous and collective subregional stance in negotiations with external powers. Internationally, Thailand should strengthen collaboration with regional initiatives such as the GMS, led by the Asian Development Bank (ADB), and

frameworks like MJC. Such engagement would allow Thailand to leverage its expertise in international production networks, human capital development in transport and logistics, infrastructure development, cybersecurity, and renewable energy. By working closely with Japan and regional mechanisms, Thailand can play a more influential role in shaping the regional economic and security landscape during this period of transition in the international order.

5. Conclusion

Throughout this paper, I have argued that the interregnum of the international order presents a window of opportunity for middle powers, regionalism, and other actors to play a more active role in shaping new relations during this transitional phase. Specifically, in analysing the Japan-Mekong Subregion relation, I have highlighted the importance of considering the US-China rivalry, domestic politics of the United States, domestic politics of Japan, and the domestic politics of China to fully understand the evolving geo-political landscape. I have concluded by proposing that Thailand should strategically position itself within these dynamics to maximise its role in the changing global order.

A key consideration in foreign policy today is that we are witnessing a power transition from a unipolar world order, dominated by the United States, to an emerging multipolar world whose final configuration remains uncertain. We are currently in an interregnum, but the critical question is: when will this transitional period end? The beginning of a truly multipolar world order is difficult to pinpoint, as multiple states are simultaneously increasing their influence, albeit at different rates. Consequently, it is impossible to define when this interregnum will conclude, and this period of flux provides an opportunity for middle powers and regionalism to assert themselves. This is particularly relevant for groupings of states with diverse levels of economic development, as they seek to negotiate new partnerships and establish influence in the global political and economic arena. Japan's relation with the Mekong Subregion stands to benefit from this transitional phase. Historically, Japan has maintained a stable, consistent, and understated relation with the Mekong Subregion. The low-profile nature of this engagement has ensured long-term stability in relations. Japan's key diplomatic tool has been ODA, which has served as an effective means of strengthening ties and has aligned well with the developmental needs of recipient countries. Given this precedent, both bilateral and multilateral relations between Japan and the Mekong Subregion are likely to continue thriving in the future.

For Thailand, strategically positioned at the heart of the region, this transitional period presents a valuable opportunity to leverage its expertise, political stability, and well-developed infrastructure as instruments for strengthening its ties within the Mekong Subregion. However, one critical factor to monitor is Thailand's domestic political landscape. Unlike some other states, Thailand has never prioritised security-related foreign policy issues in its political discourse or election campaigns. Instead, trade and investment relations—particularly with Japan—have taken precedence. Should Thailand undergo further political change, it remains to be seen how its relations with Japan will evolve. In the short term, two pressing issues will shape the Thailand-Japan-Mekong Subregion dynamic: the return of Donald Trump to the US presidency, and Thailand's challenges with non-traditional security issues. These challenges include transnational crime, environmental concerns, and cyber threats—both within Thailand and in co-operation with its neighbouring countries. Given these complexities, such security concerns could serve as a catalyst for Thailand, Japan, and the Mekong Subregion to accelerate their collaboration and forge deeper partnerships in addressing these urgent challenges.

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