Rethinking transboundary waters: A critical hydropolitics of the Mekong basin

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Abstract

Efforts to understand the geographical and political complexities of transboundary river basins—both within national jurisdictions and at international levels—must embrace critical interdisciplinary perspectives. In this paper, we focus attention on underdeveloped aspects of transboundary water conflicts and cooperation—e.g., how ecological understandings of river basins are transformed within transboundary institutional arrangements; the way multiple actors in transboundary basins construct geographical scales; and how control over water is represented and exercised within governance and management institutions. We advance the notion of critical hydropolitics as a way of explicating these processes. We draw on a case study of conflict over and within the transboundary waters of the Mekong River basin to illustrate this approach. Our aim is to complement and extend ongoing research and policy debates concerning transboundary waters.

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Introduction

Many of the world's transboundary river basins are simultaneously perceived as important engines of regional economic development, as crucial bases of livelihood resources, and as critical sites of biodiversity conservation. These often competing roles make governance particularly challenging. When basins encompass multiple sovereign states, a paramount concern is how to design and sustain institutions to equitably share water resources. An extraordinary number of multilateral agreements designed to promote cooperation over international rivers have been drafted and signed over the course of the 20th century (Beach et al., 2000), yet the specter of 'water wars' continues to dominate popular conceptions of how interactions among states that share a river basin, particularly those in the Middle East (see Toset, Gleditsch, & Hegre, 2000) and other water-scarce regions, will proceed in the future (Ward, 2002).

The ‘water war’ thesis draws support from the water resource development literature, where postulations of an ‘inevitable’ global water crisis that will lead to more overt geopolitical conflicts have been advanced for nearly two decades (Falkenmark & Lundqvist, 1995; Gleick, 1993; Postel, 2000; Seckler, Barker, & Amarasinghe, 1999). Such predictions are also emblematic of the international rivers literature, which tends to focus almost entirely on the details of water rights and sharing among states (Kliot, Shmueli, & Shamir, 2001; Yetim, 2002), the technical and engineering challenges of water management (Ganoulis, Duckstein, Literathy, & Bogardi, 1996), and the legal dimensions of water use (Albert, 2000; Tarlock, 2001). These and similar works understand conflicts over water as limited almost exclusively to inter-state conflicts, and thus have very little to say about the multi-scalar, multi-actor character of water politics. Within political geography and cognate fields, studies of the efficacy of international accords in promoting river basin cooperation (Wolf, 1999), geopolitical developments in specific basins (Brichieri-Colombi & Bradnock, 2003; Freeman, 2001), the adaptability of multilateral river basin institutions (Shmueli, 1999), and the relationship between domestic and transnational forces driving water conflicts (Feitelson, 2002; Giordano, Giordano, & Wolf, 2002) have made important contributions to the growing empirical foundations for analyzing transboundary rivers. Yet they are also symptomatic of several missed opportunities. For example, some scholars of transboundary waters direct attention towards the ‘international community’ as the primary actor in forwarding a progressive global water agenda (Giordano & Wolf, 2003). However, evocation of the ‘international community’—composed primarily of a network of elite actors (e.g., the global water industry, water research ‘think tanks’, representatives of the UN system, government representatives, policy experts, and scientific advisors)—pushing a global water agenda reveals little about the socioecological processes that delineate conflicts and transformations in specific basins.

Ultimately, the themes outlined above—the international scale of negotiations, transnational institutional arrangements, the relevance of international legal principles, and normative goals of efficient and equitable water-sharing—privilege the principal of ‘cooperation’ as analytical category and normative objective. This obscures the ways in which states, non-state actors and river basins themselves interact to construct ‘transnational’ basins through institutional and material processes. Cooperation in and of itself is not the desired end for third-world riparian governments who create transboundary governance institutions; rather, cooperation is perceived as the basis for proceeding with the development of water resources encompassed by basins. This has typically implied significant interventions in the form of hydroelectric dams, large-scale irrigation works, and other infrastructure projects. By focusing on the ways in which cooperation, among sovereign states, over shared rivers can be negotiated and implemented, past research
has sorely neglected the fact that ‘cooperation’ over transboundary waters may actually contribute to an intensification of ecological alterations, resource degradation and socioecological disruptions for the people who depend on river basins for their livelihoods. This directly contradicts claims from the international community of ‘water experts’ that cooperation over international rivers will necessarily lead to benefits for river ecosystems (Sadoff & Grey, 2002).

In this paper, we focus attention on underdeveloped aspects of transboundary water conflicts and cooperation—e.g., how ecological understandings of river basins are transformed within transboundary institutional arrangements; the way multiple actors in transboundary basins construct geographical scales; and how control over water is represented and exercised within governance and management institutions. One of our primary goals is to lessen the normative emphases on appropriate legal and institutional frameworks for shared governance, and turn instead to questions of what is omitted in discussions of ‘equitable allocation’, ‘sustainable development’, ‘prior notification’ and the other ways in which states and their international legal advisors talk about river basins. For instance, how do river basin institutions construct the object of cooperation (i.e., the river basin) through the discourse of legal arrangements and through particular geopolitical framings? In particular, how do institutions for governing transboundary waters perceive and frame the ecohydrologic dynamics of river basins? How do these institutions theorize spatial scales and social actors that do not correspond to the geopolitical scale at which river basin institutions are created and operated? We are also interested in pursuing an ecologically inflected political geography. Robbins (2003) argues that there are a number of potential spheres of inquiry where a blend of political geography and political ecology might produce conceptually sophisticated accounts of complex human–environment relations. We thus sketch the outlines of a critical hydropolitics that combines elements of political and human–environment geography by drawing attention to the ways in which geopolitical constructions (i.e., the institutional arrangements to govern the Mekong) simplify socioecological networks and obscure environmental conflicts.

A critical hydropolitics stands in contrast to mainstream studies of water resource development, transboundary waters, and international rivers. Blatter, Ingram, and Doughman (2000: 32), in an examination of the history of water resource studies, argue that, historically, “the dominance of law, engineering, and economics ensured a narrow, bounded set of meanings of water” as applied within a “water resource” paradigm. As noted above, analysts of international water politics have focused almost exclusively on the capacity of sovereign states to achieve cooperation over shared resources. This narrowing of disciplinary practice and analytical focus has given rise to a state-centered view of hydropolitics, in which the “overriding question” is

“How can sovereign states, pursuing national self-interest and those policies that would best assure the regime’s survival, cope with the challenge of bi- or multi-national coordination in the use of a common resource?” (Shmueli, 1999: 441)

Applied to transboundary waters, this question, and the paradigm it suggests, has led to a number of conceptual blind spots, most notably (1) clarifications of how and why development agents (e.g., riparian states) have discursively engineered transboundary basins into spatially fixed entities, and (2) the complex interaction among different scales of conflict within basins’ socioecological dynamics. A critical hydropolitics, we argue, responds to these blind spots by pushing to the fore several interrelated themes. First, it examines the ways in which discursive strategies (e.g., the 1995 Mekong Agreement), as expressions of power relationships and codified within transnational agreements, simplify and represent river basins (and other
complex entities) in certain ways—as cooperative space, as transnational space. Second, it identifies nodes of water conflict (e.g., the Pak Mun dam), and the multiple networks of political—economic, discursive and ecohydrologic processes intermingling within these nodes, that fall outside or under the fixed scale of the transnational basin. Finally, a critical hydropolitics sets the stage for alternative imaginings of river basins, ones that derive from non-state actors (and from the river itself) as they struggle for livelihood security along trajectories that see river basins in quite different terms.

In addition, the approach we advocate engages discussions concerning critical geopolitics, which focuses on how representations of political actors and of social interactions influence and shape particular geopolitical orders (Agnew & Corbridge, 1995; Ó Tuathail & Dalby, 1998). A focus on transboundary river basins enhances the purview of critical geopolitics in at least two ways. First, most work identified as critical geopolitics—with some notable exceptions (see Dalby, 2003; Luke, 1999)—has managed to elide consideration of environmental practice as geopolitics, preferring instead to concentrate on geopolitics as “social, cultural and political practice” (Ó Tuathail & Dalby, 1998: 2). In the case of river basins that transcend national boundaries, geopolitics as environmental practice has had, and continues to have, enormous implications for how humans understand and relate to the natural world. Second, by advancing a critical hydropolitics, we are responding to critiques of critical geopolitics that charge it has become “disengaged from the real world” (see Sparke, 2000: 373). The approach suggested here allows for a careful tracing of the connections between, on the one hand, powerful discourses cast at the level of the basin and, on the other hand, ecological changes and conflicts occurring at the level of communities and ecosystems that at first glance seem far removed from basin-oriented practices.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, we examine how the 1995 Agreement among the lower Mekong River basin’s riparian states (Lao People’s Democratic Republic, Thailand, Cambodia and Viet Nam) represents a particular geopolitical framing of the basin’s socioecological dynamics, a framing that simplifies and distorts the agency of basin-scale processes. Second, we scrutinize the notion of ‘water conflict’ in the Mekong, arguing that the overarching focus in the transboundary waters literature on inter-state cooperation and conflict has masked water conflicts not easily associated with a particular scale of analysis. We support this argument by examining the ongoing struggle over a specific water development project (the Pak Mun dam in Northeast Thailand) within the Mekong basin. Finally, we briefly discuss the ways in which a critical hydropolitics framework might be used for analyzing and contesting the dominant geopolitical discourse concerning the Mekong.

Reinventing the Mekong: watercourse or basin?

A variety of Mekong spokespersons, scholars and international development officials have lauded the institutional framework for sharing the river basin, first launched under the auspices of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in the late 1950s, due to the long history of cooperation among riparian states (dubbed the ‘Mekong Spirit’) (see Hori, 2000; Jacobs, 1994; MRC, 1995a). One observer predicts that “it [Mekong cooperation] may well turn out to be one of the few examples in the Third World where the changing geopolitical and regional circumstances, and local and international efforts, may yet lead to the integrated and sustainable development of an international basin for the benefit of all the riparian states sharing it” (Elhance, 1999: 192). Yet such pronouncements rest largely on a taken-for-granted, and
problematic, geopolitical vision of what the Mekong basin is and should become (see Bakker, 1999), and ignores the complex geopolitical history of ‘cooperation’ over the basin’s resources.

The lower Mekong ‘Basin’ as geopolitical object, 1957–1995

Historically, governance of the Mekong has been dominated by an institutional regime that stressed the rapid collection of hydrologic data in order to convert the Mekong into a “working” river (see White, 1995). The overall goals were (and arguably remain) the production of hydroelectricity for industrial development, storing of water for the expansion of irrigated agriculture, and control of annual floods. The ‘birth’ of the Mekong as a transnational and transboundary basin (see Fig. 1)—something that transcended the water coursing through the main channel and its tributaries—can be traced to the late 1950s. The Committee for the Coordination of Investigations in the Lower Mekong Basin, or ‘Mekong Committee’, was created in 1957 under the aegis of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). The Committee’s 1957 statute mandated that it “promote, coordinate, supervise, and control water resource development projects in the lower Mekong basin” (MRC, 1995a: 5). Almost immediately upon inception, the Mekong Committee set about what would become one of its primary tasks for the next 15 years—the collection of hydrologic data necessary to construct large mainstream hydroelectric dams and the overseeing of tributary projects within the national territories of the Lower basin’s states (Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Viet Nam).

From roughly the mid-1960s to the early 1970s, a period corresponding to the intensification of armed struggle between Viet Nam and the United States, the Mekong became embroiled in Cold War geopolitics as a symbol of cooperation. Cooperation among the four basin states was constantly invoked as a means of bringing peaceful political relations to the region (Brady, 1993: 90–92). The United States had championed cooperative development of the Mekong since the creation of the Mekong Committee, and officials and engineers from both the United States Bureau of Reclamation and Army Corps of Engineers played prominent roles in the Committee’s early planning and hydrologic activities. In addition, the US government’s promotion of Mekong cooperation was a key part of its more general geopolitical strategy to funnel aid dollars towards economic development projects in the region, particularly Thailand, as ideological and material counterpoints to socialism (see Glassman, 2003: 98–99). One outcome of this strategy was the concentration of an inordinate amount of decision-making power within the Thai state apparatus around agencies concerned with water resource development in the country’s semi-arid northeast region, which was seen as a particularly sensitive area due to its proximity to and historical links with Laos (and, to a lesser extent, Cambodia). The Thai government’s principal agency with responsibility for Mekong matters—the National Energy Authority (NEA)—was transformed in the early 1970s into two separate agencies (the Department of Energy Development and Promotion and the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand) that remain at the center of many state-community conflicts within Thailand (Sneddon, 2003). While we return to the roles of individual agencies and non-state actors in discussing the Pak Mun conflict (see below), we emphasize here that Mekong hydropolitics should not be characterized solely as a case of interactions among monolithic states. Rather, our research demonstrates the consequences of falling into (and designing agreements based upon) the “territorial trap” of an uncritical state-centrism (Agnew, 1998: 51), which fails to recognize many actors and processes—from water development bureaucracies to Mekong fish species to globalization—that simultaneously support and challenge the state at multiple scales.
The United States continued to support Thailand militarily and financially throughout the 1970s and 1980s (see Hewison, 1989)—a source of strained relations between Thailand and its socialist neighbors during this period—but abandoned development of the Mekong basin as a geopolitical strategy following withdrawal of US Forces from Viet Nam in the mid 1970s (see Hori, 2000: 162–165). The Mekong Committee became the Interim Mekong Committee (IMC) in 1978 following the ascension of the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia three years earlier.
earlier, and continued in this interim identity until the early 1990s. With cessation of the civil war in Cambodia in 1991, the governments of the region once again contemplated the Mekong’s resources as a source of rapid economic development due to its vast hydroelectric potential and capacity to store water for irrigation schemes. This renewed interest in converting the region, in the words of the Thai Prime Minister at the time, “from a battlefield into a market place” contributed to the negotiation of a new accord, which crystallized in the signing of the 1995 Mekong Agreement (see below). This period is the point of departure for Bakker’s (1999) insightful analysis of the recent hydrodevelopment discourse of the region’s states and international development actors (e.g., the Asian Development Bank, bilateral donors), who have collectively re-imagined the river as “under-utilised” and “uncontrolled” (Bakker, 1999: 220). This most recent era of Mekong development entails a rescaling of human—environment interactions in the Mekong in order to privilege the regional (basin-wide) level as the primary scale at which the river becomes an effective site of production. Such a move effectively makes illegitimate the activities of local resource users who depend on the river for sustenance and livelihoods (Bakker, 1999).

Within this novel scale and geopolitical discourse concerning the Mekong region, or in the language of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) the “Greater Mekong Sub-region” (GMS), the appropriation of the basin’s resources for state-initiated development programs assumes a common-sense quality. The region’s complex power relationships and the existence of localities as sites of conflict and/or participation in basin-wide governance decisions take a back seat to the dominant geopolitical vision of the Mekong as an engine of regional development (Hirsch, 2001). The ADB’s vision of regional development—closely related to Japan’s dominant role within the ADB and its longstanding interest in development of the Mekong (see Hori, 2000)—arose concurrently with China’s economic transformation and emergence as a globally significant political—economic power. While beyond the scope of the present work, the non-participation of China and Myanmar within official Mekong governance arrangements, both past and present, is a rather serious hurdle (to say the least) to managing the basin in an integrated fashion. China has already finished construction of two large-scale hydroelectric dams on the Lancang River (the Mekong as it flows through Yunnan Province) in the 1990s that are, according to some, reducing downstream flows. Most recently, China negotiated an agreement with the Lao PDR, Thailand and Myanmar governments—outside of the official inter-governmental framework of the MRC—to begin blasting rapids for navigation improvement in the Mekong proper as it runs along the Thai–Lao border near the Thai province of Chiang Rai (see Oasawa, Li, Deetes, & Higashi, 2003). These and other activities by the Chinese government vis-à-vis the Lancang have prompted Chinese NGOs (prominently an organization called Green Watershed) to advocate for greater transparency and participatory decision-making in water resource development planning concerning the Upper Mekong (Tang, 2005). Still, given China’s hydrodevelopment agenda and the Japan-dominated ADB’s prioritization of a regional electric grid (see IRN, 2003), conversion of the river’s significant flows into energy for human consumption and industrial processes has become the dominant geopolitical and developmental goal in the region.

The lower Mekong as watercourse: the 1995 agreement

We argue that the 1995 Agreement on the Cooperation for the Sustainable Development of the Mekong River Basin (henceforth the 1995 Mekong Agreement), in the main because it

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1 We owe thanks to an anonymous reviewer for making this salient point.
codifies the institutional relationships amongst the lower basin’s riparian states and thus defines the mechanisms through which ‘cooperative development’ will be attained, is a crucial component of the regional geopolitical imagination sketched above. Within this vision, the Mekong is seen first and foremost as a set of channels (or watercourses) whose flowing water needs to be equitably distributed among the basin’s primary ‘owners’ (i.e., the riparian states of the lower basin). In addition to providing the institutional foundation for transnational cooperation among the riparian states of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (PDR), Thailand, Cambodia and Viet Nam, the 1995 Agreement also created the Mekong River Commission (MRC), the central institutional actor responsible for transboundary environmental governance in the region.2 Although the Agreement was heralded as a key moment underpinning a renewed emphasis on cooperative development amongst the lower basin states (Radosevich, 1996: 245), we argue that the scalar and spatial discourses that sustain it are deeply problematic. The Agreement’s representation of the Mekong as a particular sort of geographical entity, one that is primarily concerned with watercourses and river channels, obfuscates the Mekong’s existence as a multi-dimensional basin. We highlight two aspects of the Agreement that help accomplish this simplification: (1) an overarching emphasis on the importance of channels and the Mekong mainstream throughout the document; and (2) a discourse centered on ‘equitable utilization’ of the Mekong’s water, a goal to be achieved through procedures of ‘notification’ and ‘prior consultation’ among the basin states. To understand the simplification of the basin accomplished by the agreement, it is crucial to first understand the complex ecohydrologic dynamics of the Mekong.

The Mekong River basin (see Fig. 1) is arguably the least altered of Asia’s large river systems. The river begins its 4800 km journey on the plateau of Tibet, flows through Yunnan province in China, forms the border between Lao PDR and Burma, flows eastward into Lao PDR, and defines the Lao–Thai border for over 600 km before flowing into Cambodia, where the river is conjoined with the Tonle Sap (‘Great Lake’) river and basin. Within southern Cambodia, the river begins its gradual transformation into the Mekong delta of Viet Nam, where its flows sustain the complex land–water relationships that characterize the waterscape of the delta and its associated agroecosystems. As it flows into southern Viet Nam, the river branches out into a multifaceted network of tributaries and canals before emptying into the South China Sea.

A central aspect of the Mekong’s hydrologic dynamics is its flood-pulse driven character, which has generated a series of complex land–water interactions that traverse vertical, temporal, lateral and longitudinal dimensions within the basin (for general discussion of river dynamics, see Junk, Bayley, & Sparks, 1989; Stanford et al., 1996). Throughout the basin, annual flooding—reaching peak flows during the months of September and October—sustains exchanges between terrestrial and aquatic ecological and agroecological systems; stimulates abundant fisheries; and, in the delta, maintains ecologically and agriculturally important salinity gradients and renders rice fields arable by flushing out acidic soils (Dudgeon, 1992; Pantulu, 1986; Phanrajsavong, 1996). The landscapes through which the Mekong flows are characterized by significant levels of biological and cultural diversity, with both peoples and species depending on the ecological services created and sustained by a free-flowing river. Rice farming

2 The MRC is composed of a Council, Joint Committee, and Secretariat. The Council and Joint Committee are the decision makers, with members drawn from various ministries of the four riparian states. The Secretariat implements the decisions of the Council and Joint Committee, providing technical, administrative, and scientific support and expertise. There are no specific requirements about the nationality or affiliation of Secretariat members.
abetted by subsistence and semi-subsistence fishing is the dominant pattern of livelihood for the vast majority of the lower basin’s 70 million inhabitants.

The importance of large flows is most convincingly demonstrated by fisheries in the Cambodian Mekong and in the delta, where annual flooding is the dominant process driving fisheries production. Fisheries production is integrally related to the inundation and extent of the floodplains (van Zalinge et al., 2003). The seasonally inundated areas of the delta and other Mekong flood plains are the feeding and breeding sites (90 percent of all Mekong species reproduce in the flood plains) for fish, including many economically important species, that migrate to other stretches of the mainstream and to tributary systems during the wet monsoon. Mekong fisheries are a vital resource in terms of livelihoods in the basin (40 million people are partially—if not full-time—engaged in fisheries activities), particularly for people residing in the low-lying areas of Cambodia and Viet Nam. The delta region alone produces between 240,000 and 400,000 metric tons of fish annually, and annual fisheries in the basin as a whole are worth an estimated US$1.2 billion (Sverdrup-Jensen, 2002). Within Cambodia, fisheries production accounts for 16 percent of GDP based on an annual catch of approximately 700,000 metric tons, and 6 million people (over half the population) are engaged full- or part-time in fishing activities (van Zalinge et al., 2003). Yet these socioecological concerns are not the focus of the 1995 Agreement.

The primary intention of the 1995 Mekong Agreement is to provide a general framework that highlights the rules by which individual states might utilize the water resources of the river and tributaries in ways that do not inhibit other states’ abilities to use the water for their own purposes. In short, it seeks to identify the Mekong as a cooperative geopolitical space. As stated clearly in Article 1, the general aim of the agreement is to ensure that riparian states “cooperate in all fields of sustainable development, utilization, management and conservation of the water and related resources of the Mekong River” (MRC, 1995b). Yet we argue that, for the riparian states that signed the 1995 Agreement, the Mekong is ultimately limited to the water flowing through its primary and secondary channels, despite oft-repeated references to the ‘basin’ and its resources. This is reflected within the pages of the document itself, as well as in the negotiations leading up to the 1995 signing. Article 5 of the Agreement (which we return to below) defines “reasonable and equitable utilization” of the Mekong’s resources solely in terms of the water flowing in the main channel and tributaries. Article 6 focuses on “the maintenance of the flows on the mainstream from diversions, storage releases, or other actions of a permanent nature,” [emphasis added] underscoring the geopolitical importance of water in the river’s main channel. During negotiations in the early 1990s, it became clear that use of the phrase ‘basin’ as the focal point of the Agreement was controversial—some riparian governments preferred ‘system’ as referring to only the Mekong’s watercourse network. Ironically, representatives of the four governments eventually agreed to use ‘basin’ in the title not because it connoted an interconnected ecohydrologic unit, but because they were concerned that ‘system’ would limit developmental activities exclusively to tributaries, branches and the mainstream (Radosevich, 1995). The result is a rather one-dimensional ‘basin’, one that neglects crucial hydrological and ecological aspects of the Mekong’s identity as a drainage basin.

Some of this neglect arises from the Mekong Agreement’s reliance on international legal principles focused on watercourses. For example, Article 9 of the 1995 Agreement, which addresses state responsibility for damages, explicitly refers the signatories to the principles of international law in order to resolve disputes. The term ‘watercourse’ has prevailed in international water law because drainage basins pose a potential threat to state sovereignty: the processes that create and sustain large catchments literally transcend the territories of the
states involved in their governance (Wescoat, 1992: 304). The UN Convention on the Law of the Non-navigational Uses of International Watercourses (1997), the most recent effort to create a constitutive foundation for legal regimes in international watercourses, clearly demonstrates this ambivalence towards the notion of the basin or watershed. While drafting the Convention, the International Law Commission (ILC) was “unable to agree on adopting ‘watersheds’ or ‘watershed ecosystems’ as the basic units of its proposed regime,” arguing that “(s)urrounding land areas are held as having minimal bearing on the protection and preservation of the watercourse itself” (Korhonen, 1996: 487–488). Defined exclusively as a watercourse, the river is effectively disconnected from its geological, hydrological, chemical, and biological linkages with adjacent land areas. The end result is a disregard within international legal arrangements (concerning rivers) for interactions within the entire basin, such as the interrelations between flowing freshwater, streamside vegetation, and upland environments (Korhonen, 1996: 482–483). A focus on the watercourse obviates the need to address the complex connections among the spatial dimensions of the river ecosystem, linkages which in many senses, for example fisheries production, define the Mekong’s ecological dynamics. The 1995 Mekong Agreement firmly upholds this bias against a basin-oriented framework, instead opting for a continuous emphasis on channels and watercourses.

The principle of equitable utilization, along with its corollary principles of notification and prior consultation, are also illustrative of how international watercourse law simplifies basin processes and excludes alternative ways of envisioning the river basin. Article 5 of the 1995 Agreement underscores the importance of utilizing “waters of the Mekong River system in a reasonable and equitable manner in their respective territories” (MRC, 1995b). Article 5 goes on to stipulate the mechanisms through which reasonable and equitable utilization shall be guaranteed: a system of notification (when various uses of tributary and/or mainstream water are expected to have no or minimal impacts on the water availability of other states) and prior consultation (when a proposed water use by a riparian state is more likely to have some impact on another riparian’s water availability). Taken together, this principle and its rules are designed to inhibit any future, or latent, conflicts regarding use of Mekong water by requiring any individual state contemplating a specific water use (e.g., withdrawals from the mainstream for irrigation purposes, construction of a dam on a tributary) to notify, and in some cases consult, with the other riparian states, and in particular downstream states. Yet, as we argue, this codification of equitable use is only possible through a radical simplification of the Mekong basin’s spatial and temporal dynamics. This becomes apparent when considering the ways in which ‘notification’ and ‘prior consultation’ establish different standards for inter- and intra-basin water use during wet and dry seasons, and then comparing this discursively constructed Mekong with actual biophysical processes.

Under the terms of the 1995 Agreement, all tributary projects require only notification of the proposed activity (e.g., the construction of dams or irrigation pumping stations within the national territory of one of the riparian states). Likewise, intra-basin uses of the Mekong’s mainstream water during the wet season simply require notification to the Joint Committee. However, prior consultation is required for (1) inter-basin diversions from the mainstream during the wet season (when flows are presumably adequate to accommodate such interventions); and (2) intra-basin uses on the mainstream during the dry season (applicable to only those stretches of the mainstream that flow within a state’s national territory). At the extreme, any inter-basin diversion project during the dry season (i.e., those that would result in water being withdrawn from the mainstream and diverted to another basin, even if a tributary of the Mekong) requires a specific agreement among the four countries. Prior consultation is the
stricter of the two standards because it stipulates that an actual dialogue among the riparian states must occur before a water project can proceed. Presumably, a particularly objectionable project (for example, one that results in dry season, main channel flows below the minimum flow threshold) would meet its demise during the consultation process. On the other hand, notification, or simply informing one’s riparian neighbors of one’s intentions regarding a water resource development project, is the less demanding standard and is required for intra-basin uses during the wet season, and for alterations such as impoundments and diversions on the tributaries.

Efforts to clarify the rules regarding consultation and notification have proven difficult. In an effort to complete the 1995 treaty in a timely fashion, many of the thorny issues concerning biophysical dynamics, data collection and data sharing (e.g., the precise dates of wet and dry seasons, the operation and maintenance of a hydrological station network in the basin, the methods for determining surplus water during the dry season, communication networks among countries, and mechanisms for monitoring mainstream diversions) were set aside within the Agreement itself to be dealt with under a separate MRC-sponsored Rules for Water Utilization and Inter-Basin Diversions (see Article 26, MRC, 1995b). Just prior to the annual meeting of the MRC Council in November 2003, the Thai delegation argued that under the rules of utilization the dry season should be two weeks longer than previously agreed, which would presumably allow a longer time period for withdrawals of various development projects (Samabuddhi, 2003). At issue is the definition of a hydrological process—the timing of annual floods—that is characterized by a fair amount of uncertainty. The misgivings expressed by Thailand reflect the inclination to overwrite hydrological complexity with geopolitical simplification in order to facilitate autonomy of decision-making. The representation that underpins Thailand’s demands is clearly ‘river as watercourse,’ which makes it possible to conceptually separate parts of the river ecosystem.

In general, the principle of equitable utilization is a standard method for fostering cooperation in international rivers, but such principles are far removed from the hydrological and ecological processes of river basins. In the future, these overlooked biophysical functions of the basin could lead to conflicts at a variety of scales over unaccounted for flow alterations, and will almost certainly contribute to disruption of basin livelihoods dependent on the relationship between annual flooding cycles and fisheries production, as the following example illustrates. In the 1995 Mekong Agreement, Article 5’s strictest standards—those concerning prior consultation—are designed to ensure minimum mainstream flows during the dry season. This provision is understandable in terms of the riparian states’ desire—particularly the downstream states of Cambodia and Viet Nam—to ensure sufficient flows for agricultural activities and environmental services throughout the dry season. However, the focus on maintaining minimum flows is not accompanied by a concern for maintaining high flows during the wet season, a point about which the 1995 Agreement and subsequent documents are silent. Neither the extent nor duration, not to mention timing, of peak flows—so critical to Mekong fisheries and livelihoods—are mentioned by the 1995 Agreement. Because intra-basin activity during the wet season is subject to so little oversight (only ‘notification’ of planned uses), any serious degradation of the river ecosystem through water resource development activities is likely to occur before any legal or institutional mechanism might be activated to prevent or mitigate harmful alterations. Downstream states (e.g., Cambodia and Viet Nam), not to mention resource users, who may object to the impacts that upstream development is having on critical fisheries production retain little recourse under the current terms of the agreement. As a series of studies sponsored by the MRC itself demonstrates, alteration of flood peaks via mainstream development projects and some combination of tributary development will almost certainly result in a reduction in
fisheries production, a loss that would have significant negative consequences, perhaps even catastrophic, for rural livelihoods (Coates, Poeu, Sunthornratnan, Nguyen, & Viravong, 2003; Hill & Hill, 1994; Poulsen, PoeuViravong, Sunthornratnan, & Tung, 2002). The kind of intensive, hydropower-driven water development favored by the Mekong states is likely to produce other socioecological consequences: a disruption of increasingly threatened wetland ecosystems throughout the basin; and alteration of rice-growing practices in the delta region that have coevolved with the timing and extent of annual floods. Such changes, where critical resources are threatened and/or disrupted, create conditions where social conflicts are more likely than cooperation, a rather ironic circumstance given the intent of the 1995 Agreement.

In this section, we have argued that the 1995 Agreement reinvents the Mekong in order to privilege cooperative inter-state relations, with the ultimate aim of developing the Mekong’s water resources, above all other considerations. One of the effects is the near complete erasure of the complex of biophysical processes that constitute the basin’s socioecological networks, despite the Agreement’s references to maintaining the “ecological balance” of the river system. By interpreting the discursive simplification of the Mekong as a type of geopolitical effect, a central tenet of what we are calling critical hydropolitics, we suggest that this representation of the natural environment both generates and sustains the power of states to carve out and favor certain political scales (the transnational basin) and alter biophysical relationships in the name of sovereignty. This privileging of the transnational scale ultimately confers benefits upon specific kinds of transnational and national actors—in the case of the Mekong those investors and business elites able to take advantage of the development opportunities in energy, transportation, tourism and the like opened up by ADB-style economic liberalization (see Sklair, 2001). This of course greatly complicates efforts to promote ecological and social sustainability. In seeing the Mekong basin as primarily a watercourse, the 1995 Agreement also enshrines the principle of equitable utilization as the central fulcrum of cooperative development. ‘Equity’ as thus defined by the 1995 Agreement applies only to the sovereign states of the basin and elides considerations of socioecological justice at other levels and scales. As the next section aptly demonstrates, governance arrangements such as the Mekong Agreement, designed above all else to prevent inter-state conflicts, have little to say regarding water conflicts involving the livelihoods of basin residents.

‘Underneath’ the transnational basin? The struggle over Pak Mun

As noted earlier, a crucial component of our analysis involves examination of water conflicts that are typically ignored by conventional analyses of transboundary water governance. Indeed, most conflicts over water occurring within transboundary river basins have not involved struggles among riparian states, but rather have involved conflicts between state agents (e.g., dam-building agencies, irrigation departments) and non-state actors (e.g., communities affected by water development projects) over specific interventions to alter river systems (i.e., dam construction, water withdrawals). Within the Mekong basin, numerous conflicts of just this type have emerged over the past two decades. Some of the more well-known conflicts include: the severe downstream consequences for rural Cambodian communities (including loss of

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3 By the late 1990s, multi-national corporations such as General Electric, General Motors and the American Investment Group were being courted by GMS countries. In Thailand, the Amata Group, responsible for developing and managing a majority of the country’s industrial estates, has taken a keen interest in the GMS initiative (The Nation, 1999).
life following an unexpected release of large flows from a reservoir in Viet Nam) of ongoing Vietnamese hydropower projects in the transnational Se San/Sre Pok basin (Fox & Kohler, 1999); intensifying struggles over the likely social and ecological impacts of the World Bank-supported Nam Theun 2 hydroelectric dam in Lao PDR (Hales, 2005); localized conflicts—centered on the Rasi Salai irrigation weir in the northeast—over the Thai government’s massive Khong-Chi-Mun interbasin transfer scheme (Sneddon, 2003); conflicts between subsistence fishing families and large fishing lot operations in Cambodia’s Tonle Sap region (Bonheur & Lane, 2002); and an array of socioecological problems and looming conflicts in the river’s Delta (Miller, 2000). All of these have somewhat misleadingly been characterized as ‘local’ or ‘national’ conflicts over water and water-related resources, when in actuality—as the Pak Mun case so clearly demonstrates—all involve human and non-human actors that transcend geopolitical boundaries. Thus, our intent in this section is to reinforce the point that a critical hydropolitics helps dissolve the division between water conflicts construed as ‘transnational’ versus those associated with other geographical scales.

The recent struggle over the Pak Mun dam, located in the province of Ubon Ratchathani in Northeast Thailand, is exemplary of those water conflicts that occur within the national territories of the Mekong’s riparian states, but remain generally invisible to the institutional arrangements constituted by the 1995 Mekong Agreement. In contrast to the rest of the lower basin, the portion of the Mekong’s drainage area falling within the boundaries of Thailand (constituting ‘Northeast Thailand’ in the language of Thai planning agencies and Isaan to its residents) has been the site of significant river basin development since the 1960s. The Thai state’s emphasis on large-scale hydroelectric and irrigation development in the Northeast, originally conceived almost entirely within the rubric of the international Mekong Project, has contributed to the degradation of aquatic systems and, over the past two decades, has fomented numerous social conflicts involving the state and local communities (Sneddon, 2002). The Pak Mun conflict revolves squarely around the livelihood concerns of dam-affected peoples living near the site of the Pak Mun hydroelectric project on the Nam Mun [‘River Mun’], the primary tributary of the Mekong in Northeast Thailand. The Pak Mun project has achieved a remarkable level of notoriety, due in large part to the length and intensity of struggles over its implementation and subsequent consequences. In the most penetrating analysis to date, Glassman (2002) delineates the strategic political actions of the dam-affected villagers, who form the core of the anti-Pak Mun movement, and their NGO allies to illustrate a broader argument about the contradictory means by which social movements challenge state power, linked to global corporate power, through the forging of national and international alliances.

We invoke the Pak Mun case for rather different reasons. At one level, writing on Pak Mun has rarely been linked directly to the Mekong-oriented set of discourses and development practices that inspired its construction. As mentioned above, the 1995 Mekong Agreement, interpreted as a specific geopolitical vision of the basin, is simply unable to see the type of water conflicts represented by Pak Mun in spite of its origin within the institutional context of Mekong governance. In addition, we see the evolution of the Pak Mun project as an example of the fluidity of scalar narratives and associated practices. Over the course of its history, the Pak Mun conflict, in ways similar to other environmental conflicts (see Kurtz, 2003) has been framed as ‘local’, ‘national’ or ‘transnational’ depending on how it is linked to broader geopolitical networks. The particular geopolitical moment that we highlight revolves around efforts of dam-affected communities and their NGO allies in Thailand, beginning in the early 1990s, to extend the political networks surrounding the dam to include global actors, explicitly the World Bank. The protracted struggle on the part of dam-affected people—abetted by a variety
of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (see Lertchoosakul, 2003)—has imbued the Pak Mun conflict with an expanded temporal and geographical scale of conflict that intersects in several ways with basin-scale governance of the Mekong and its evolving geopolitical vision.

The Pak Mun hydroelectric project was first imagined under the auspices of the National Energy Authority (NEA), the Thai state’s main point of contact with the Mekong Committee (see previous section) throughout the 1960s and early 1970s. Thai development planners and expatriate consultants conceived the Pak Mun scheme as an important tributary project on the Mekong system; Mekong Committee officials perceived it and other tributary projects as a way of demonstrating the efficacy of future large-scale projects on the mainstream (SOFRELEC, 1970). We underscore this context to highlight that the Pak Mun dam, in particular in its early phases, was linked directly to transnational circuits of development expertise and planning.

Also from its origin, the Pak Mun project has been a component of the Thai state’s long-term strategy, which intensified in the late 1960s, of employing water resource development as a counter-insurgency strategy within the country’s politically sensitive Northeast region (see Keyes, 1995). Throughout the 1960s, the Thai state (in cooperation with US advisors from the United States Operations Mission, or USOM, the precursor to the US Agency for International Development) undertook a range of rural development projects to ‘win the hearts and minds’ of rural northeasterners. As mentioned previously, the aim of US involvement in Thailand’s rural development planning was clear: “to increase the resources available in northeastern Thailand, on the assumption that the provision of such resources would slow the spread of communist influence” (Nicrowattanayingyong, 1991: 81). The development of water infrastructure (for irrigation and, later, for hydropower) in the Northeast was guided by the National Energy Authority (NEA). By the early 1970s, the NEA had been reorganized into the Department of Energy Development and Promotion (DEDP) and the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT). The former became the Thai state’s main conduit to the Mekong Committee (now the MRC), while the latter eventually became the state’s primary dam-building agency and government sponsor for the construction of Pak Mun. As a product of the institutional linkages between the inter-governmental Mekong Committee (dominated by US expertise and funding during the 1960s) and Thai development agencies, the Pak Mun dam has since its earliest stages been enmeshed in geopolitical dynamics involving Thai security policy and the Cold War machinations of the United States in Southeast Asia.

The subsequent geopolitical turmoil experienced by the Mekong Project during the 1970s and 1980s—for example, the withdrawal of Cambodia from the Mekong Committee in 1975—helped recategorize the transnational Pak Mun into, first, a national project that would ostensibly contribute to the overall development of the Thai nation and, second, a regional project to benefit the electricity-poor northeastern region of the country. The Interim Mekong Committee’s Revised Indicative Basin Plan of 1987 (IMC, 1987) discusses Pak Mun in precisely these terms, as a ‘national’ project designed to confer both hydroelectric and irrigation benefits to the underdeveloped northeast. Eventually, the Pak Mun dam became the central component of a World Bank loan (titled the Third Power System Development Project) to EGAT. The US$54-million loan designated for Pak Mun was disbursed over the period 1991–1995 (OED, 1998). Thus began a certain symbolic, in addition to financial, investment by, on the one hand, EGAT, and, on the other hand, the World Bank that presages the evolution of their later positions regarding the erupting conflict over the dam.

Funding for construction of the dam was officially approved by the Cabinet of PM Chatichai Choonavan in May 1989. Initially, adverse reactions to the project—based on the dam’s likely
impacts on local fisheries and ecosystems—were limited to a small group of academics and NGO representatives who questioned what they regarded as a lax and sloppy process of environmental impact analysis on the part of EGAT consultants (Amornsakchai et al., 2000). By March 1991, EGAT had started preparing the dam site for construction, and the intentions of the government became clear to local communities near the project site who were subject to, among other things, a constant barrage of rock-blasting as engineers removed rocks from the river. Within these communities, lines of conflict became drawn between pro-project kamnan [local administrative heads] and phuu yai baan [village heads] on the one side (both supported by EGAT), and a significant proportion of dam-affected villagers on the other (assisted by university students and several NGOs) (Amornsakchai et al., 2000: 80). It was during this phase of the conflict, towards the end of 1991, that actors resisting the Pak Mun dam—now coordinated by a set of Thai NGOS, the people directly affected by the project near the dam site, and Thai student groups—first ‘went global’ in their campaign to prevent the dam’s construction. With all avenues to challenging EGAT and other Thai agencies at the level of national politics effectively cut off, the campaign focused its efforts on lobbying the World Bank’s Board of Directors as they prepared to decide on whether or not to proceed with funding for the project.

The divergent visions of what the dam’s principal impacts would be, and who would bear them, came to a head during a meeting between the anti-dam Pak Mun villagers, along with their allies among student groups, Thai academics and Thai NGOs, and the World Bank’s Executive Directors (EDs) in October 1991.4 The World Bank directors were largely sympathetic to the views of EGAT, who has historically labeled all anti-dam forces in Thailand as ‘trouble-makers’. The villagers present at the meeting constantly reiterate the ways in which Pak Mun, in their eyes, will destroy their resource-based livelihoods. A resident of Baan Hua Haew testified starkly:

“I think that EGAT officials have lied to us. We do not have to believe EGAT any longer...We villagers, on both sides of the Mun River, request that the World Bank not give the loan. If you give the money and the dam is completed, we will die.”

The World Bank’s Executive Directors acknowledge the sacrifice of those displaced by the dam; however, they in turn argue that the ‘Thai nation’, rather than the destruction of specific localities within the national territory, should be the proper focus of attention when considering the impacts of the dam. The Bank ED from Australia at the time voices precisely this point:

“One thing to bear in mind regarding the Bank’s eventual judgment is the widespread effect of the Pak Mun Dam on Thailand. While the effect on people in this room is important, the effects on the rest of the country must also be understood. I would like to hear your feelings about the benefits for the whole country that would result from this project.”

In this manner, several EDs attempted to link the Pak Mun dam directly to Thailand’s national economic development, a geographical scale and political level which held little meaning

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4 The villager and World Bank statements in this section come from an undated transcript of the Bangkok meeting in October 1991. By chance, the Annual Meeting of the World Bank’s Executive Directors was taking place in Bangkok that year. Dam opponents felt that asking the Bank to withhold funding until such a time that the full socioecological impacts of the dam could be clarified was a more effective strategy of resistance. For example, campaigners argued that the Pak Mun hydroelectric project failed to meet the Bank’s own criteria for minimal socioecological harm, which had been delineated within the Bank’s recently adopted environmental guidelines for development projects (interview with Witoon Permpongscharoen, Director, Project for Ecological Recovery, Bangkok, 6 July 1992).
for the typical Nam Mun fishing household facing displacement and loss of livelihood. Indeed, it should not be surprising that the EDs assumed this scalar narrative. The Pak Mun project was structurally tied to the larger program of energy development that the Thai state sought to fund via the World Bank. The scalar imagination of the World Bank, as revealed through the EDs’ comments, was perforce limited to the scale of the nation as a whole, a view that meshed perfectly with the perspective of the Thai state. Accordingly, the Pak Mun conflict is largely invisible and unheard from the vantage point of the transnational mechanisms to govern the Mekong, which perceive the only source of conflict as originating from disagreements among states. In fact, it is only through the tenacity and long-term thinking of the dam’s opponents that the controversy has remained visible despite the ‘official’ desire to relegate it to history. Eventually, the World Bank decided to approve funding for the dam. Frustrated by the government’s inaction in approving adequate compensation payments for those whose livelihoods were irreparably disrupted, roughly 5000 people took over the dam site on 23 March 1999 and forcibly removed EGAT employees (Amornsakchai et al., 2000: 83). The government agreed, in June 2001, to keep the gates of the dam open for four months out of the year in order to allow the passage of fish that form the basis of local fishing livelihoods (SEARIN, 2002). At present, negotiations and a variety of studies are underway to decide if this will be a temporary or permanent solution to the Pak Mun struggle.

In summary, the Pak Mun dam and subsequent struggles over its construction and operation have been embedded within an array of scalar discourses and more or less extended networks of development actors. In line with a number of recent arguments discerning the social (and especially political) construction of scale and the fluidity with which such constructions can take place (Herod & Wright, 2002; Marston, 2000; Sneddon, 2003; Swyngedouw, 2004), the Pak Mun project and its associated networks went through several scalar transmogrifications: from an important component project of the much broader, transnational effort to develop the entire Mekong basin in the 1960s to a national and regional project that would ostensibly help Thailand and the northeastern region along the path towards industrialization in the 1970s and 1980s. The Pak Mun conflict only became identified with local scales when its effects became more explicit and contested by dam-affected communities. These communities, with the assistance of Thai NGOs, in turn laid bare the transnational networks (e.g., the World Bank and other international donors) that helped create and sustain the project in the first instance. Ironically, the current institutional arrangements to govern the transnational Mekong basin, represented by the 1995 Agreement and designed to enhance cooperation and stave off conflicts among riparian states, have literally no power to intervene in or even discuss the parameters of a nearly two-decade struggle over Mekong waters in the Pak Mun case. Because the Pak Mun conflict, despite its origin in the designs of the Mekong Committee and its enrollment of the World Bank and other transnational actors, is occurring entirely within the sovereign territory of Thailand, it is effectively beyond the geopolitical imaginary constructed by the Mekong Agreement. Pointing such absences out, and constructing counter-narratives whereby struggles such as Pak Mun and their resolutions might be reinserted into an alternative Mekong imaginary, are central to a critical hydropolitics.

Towards a critical hydropolitics

In this paper, we have attempted to demonstrate the efficacy of a critical hydropolitics approach, one that transcends the somewhat narrow purview of a majority of the literature on transboundary waters, in particular work on international river basins. We argue that the
analytic and normative focus on cooperation among states, characteristic of the vast majority of work in this vein, is unnecessarily limiting. Read as a purely geopolitical vision, the 1995 Mekong Agreement—following the path set down by previous iterations of cooperation among riparian states—seeks to reinvent the basin as development object, in line with the changing regional political dynamics of mainland Southeast Asia. By giving equal weight to the ecological ramifications of this vision, we begin to understand why some environmental conflicts (e.g., potential conflicts between riparian states) over water and their resolution (e.g., agreements among states over ‘equitable’ water utilization and ‘prior consultation’ concerning projects) are privileged in the Mekong realm, and other conflicts (e.g., those occurring within national boundaries, such as Pak Mun, involving livelihood security) remain invisible.

At one level, we are striving to carry forward Robbins’ (2003) recent admonition to infuse political geography (and critical geopolitics) with sensitivities to scale-independent political ecologies. In this regard, the Pak Mun case clearly demonstrates “the way meso and macro scale political and economic forces set the context for local environmental action and interaction” (Robbins, 2003: 643). In a similar vein, our approach resonates with Walker’s (2003) “key challenge” for regional political ecology: “to integrate its well-established skills of local-scale analysis with a renewed focus on large-scale, structural factors—factors strongly mediated by regional processes” (13). We would note that a critical hydropolitics perspective helps flesh out these regional processes by examining not only the broader-scale structural processes, but the discursive elements at play in their production and, in the case of the Mekong, allowing for an additional transnational dimension (e.g., the cooperative development of the Mekong among the basin’s riparian states) that is absolutely crucial in explaining local outcomes along the lines of the Pak Mun conflict.

Our interpretation of the socioecological dynamics of the Mekong also highlights a contradiction inherent to transboundary basins. Attempts to mediate or eliminate environmental conflicts at the basin scale (e.g., the 1995 Mekong Agreement), by virtue of their invocations of sovereignty and overarching concern with cooperation among riparian states over a highly abstracted notion of ‘water resource’, are necessarily oblivious to environmental conflicts involving non-state actors (e.g., the Pak Mun struggle) centered on livelihoods and the full range of socioecological processes characteristic of river basins. As we interpret the 1995 Mekong Agreement, the geopolitical vision expressed therein sees the Mekong almost exclusively as a network of watercourses to be equitably utilized, above all other concerns, by the basin’s states. The irony is that the erasure of the basin’s socioecological and hydrologic dynamics (e.g., the flood pulse and its relation to fisheries production) that such a vision necessarily entails is likely to undermine the Agreement’s central goal of inter-state cooperation. The cumulative effects of the basin’s tributary projects—past, present and future—and the almost certain negative impacts of main channel impoundments on fisheries create conditions that are highly conducive to future conflicts both between states over water availability and among states and non-state actors in ways similar to the Pak Mun struggle.

In contrast to the 1995 Agreement, the campaign to oppose the Pak Mun project sought (and seeks) to render visible and legitimate the effects of dams on water-based livelihoods, whatever the legal status of the conflict’s primary actors. Moreover, several of the non-governmental actors engaged in the Pak Mun struggle—e.g., the Thailand-based Southeast Asian Rivers Network (SEARIN) and Towards Ecological Recovery and Regional Alliance (TERRA)—have been engaged for several years in building transnational networks to oppose the Mekong development schemes they argue sustain neither livelihoods nor ecosystems. Individuals from communities near the Pak Mun dam site have joined the global movement of dam-affected peoples.
to share advocacy strategies (see IRN, 2003), and regularly give testimony at national and international forums regarding their struggle with the Thai state and the World Bank. The activities of the anti-Pak Mun coalition and related movements thus constitute a powerful counter-narrative to the dominant geopolitical narrative of the Mekong as an exemplar of cooperative river basin development. It is a counter-narrative that we—in line with recent calls for political geography to be more explicit in its normative commitments (Agnew, 2003; Routledge, 2003)—agree with, and it is our hope that a critical hydropolitics approach will contribute to the alternative imaginings and associated praxes emerging within the environmental politics of the Mekong.

A logical place to begin contemplating an alternative Mekong development vision is through the lens of participatory development practices. Recently, the MRC has responded to calls from a variety of donor organizations and NGOs to enact more formal mechanisms of participation within its governance practices and decision-making institutions (MRC, 2003). While an encouraging trend, this move appears to be more aimed at enhancing participation within the organizational contours of the MRC and its member governments (who are referred to in official documentation as “internal stakeholders”) rather than the politically more difficult engagement with local communities and the critical voices of regional and transnational NGOs (termed “external stakeholders”). Such a classification of actors within official Mekong governance mechanisms underscores that participation is a contested concept, one that despite its increasing popularity among development practitioners is fraught with conflicting interpretations and potential misuses (Cleaver, 2001; Cornwall, 2003).

Given the current cooperative arrangement, we see limited opportunities for meaningful participation by non-state actors in Mekong governance without, first, the continuing struggles of local communities to open up more participatory mechanisms and, second, fundamental reform of the decision-making processes involving water infrastructure development along the lines of recent recommendations from the World Commission on Dams (see WCD, 2000). To date, the MRC’s participation programs and policies all occur within a framework of taken-for-granted assumptions about development, assumptions that are inextricably linked to a particular representation of the river basin wherein hydropower development is the ultimate goal of inter-state cooperation. As a result, ‘official’ participatory procedures are limited to community meetings or other stakeholder forums (after a project has been proposed) that include only a carefully vetted list of participants, while ‘unofficial’ participation in Mekong hydropolitics tends to occur through resistance and protest, as the Pak Mun case study demonstrates. None of this implies we should give up on participation as a transformative concept; rather, participatory development must be set within wider political projects to address the misuses of state power (Hickey & Mohan, 2005). In fact, it is with regard to questions about participation that we can see the value of critical approaches most clearly. Critical approaches help to reveal barriers—discursive, political, and institutional—to sustainable governance and meaningful participation. In the case of the Mekong, critical hydropolitics draws attention to the developmentalist biases ensconced within discourses of ‘cooperation’ in the 1995 Agreement and the erasure of water conflicts that are not transnational in scale. Recognition of the power relations that underpin seemingly apolitical discourses of development and cooperation clarifies the reasons why an alternative vision of Mekong development—one founded on livelihood and ecological sustainability—is unlikely to emerge spontaneously within current governance arrangements. It will only do so through the numerous political struggles over water, struggles that are multi-scalar in terms of actors and narratives, ongoing in the Mekong region.
Finally, we echo Dalby’s (2003: 182) assertion that “the environmental dimensions of geopolitics need to be rethought and the relation of humanity to ‘nature’ reconsidered.” As a contribution to rethinking human—environment relations within a geopolitics rubric, we submit that the ecological and hydrologic dynamics of the Mekong basin itself constitute a prominent counter-narrative to the geopolitical framings encoded within the 1995 Agreement. The Mekong will continue to ‘resist’ its simplification and erasure in the dominant geopolitical representations of the riparian states through its annual floods, through its linking of land and water, and through its coevolutionary relationship with fish species. All of these undercut the notion of the Mekong as a fungible ‘resource’ amenable to development. Understanding the Mekong, and other nature—society hybrids, as an active geopolitical agent would go a long way towards moving the study of geopolitics in a direction more cognizant of environmental dimensions. Ultimately, both of the counter-narratives cited here—the anti-Pak Mun movement and the Mekong’s biophysical dynamics—assist in the larger project of rethinking transboundary waters in a way reflective of critical theoretical and political concerns that go beyond mere calls for ‘cooperation’.

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