

Greater Mekong Subregion: From Geographical to Socio-economic Integration

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The Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), arguably the most glittering development opportunity in Asia, is steadily attracting an international audience. After a period of mistrust and instability, the subregion has been the stage for a number of successful development stories as well as a few failures. When peace prevailed over the conflicts that divided its peoples, an unprecedented wave of regionalizing efforts in the entire area enticed many foreign institutions into investing in the development of the GMS. Given the peculiar situation characterizing most of the bloc's countries, the first priority was that of upgrading the existing infrastructure and building new links in order to improve the spatial connectivity of the subregion. In other words, priority was given to geographical integration through the abatement of physical barriers.

With this book, a collection of selected papers presented at the eponymous conference organized by ISEAS in Singapore in 2010, the editors attempted to present the events that have characterized the development of the GMS during the last two decades, with an overarching focus on the transition from geographical to socio-economic integration that the subregion is undergoing. The book is divided into two parts: the first is country-specific and aims to discuss some of the emerging issues from a national perspective (chapters 2–7); the second is thematic and each chapter aims to look at single issues from a subregional perspective (chapters 8–12).

Larry Strange (chapter 2) provides the reader with a very simple, yet exhaustive and persuasive description of the events that have characterized Cambodia's development over the last few decades. The analysis of the new development paradigm after 1998 and of the response subsequent to the 2008–9 global economic crisis is very accurate, and praises the timeliness and the appropriateness of the government's policies during this period. Unfortunately, the author fails to acknowledge some systemic flaws that hinder a more thorough incorporation of Cambodia into the GMS scheme, while giving too much attention to Cambodia's relation with ASEAN, China, and the rest of the world. Cambodia's strength in the GMS is weighed mainly in terms of its advantageous geopolitical location, which might produce economic benefits in the future. While remaining challenges and weaknesses are acknowledged, the conclusion is indeed not conclusive, as it does not properly consider the GMS context. It simplistically states that the country's future lies in exiting the vicious circle of aid-dependency and in graduating from LDC-status (Least Developed Country) in order to eventually distribute more equitably the national wealth.

Oudet Souvannavong (chapter 3) provides a good overview of recent development indicators in Lao PDR, although almost all of them are macroeconomic. Too much attention is given to government policies, and the author fails to explain with concrete cases how such governmental intentions are implemented on the ground, nor what people's reactions to them are. Policy sug-

gestions presented within the chapter are simplistic, and the tables shown lack units and could be clearer. However, the overall image of the country in the GMS context is very clear and objectively drawn: inadequate education, weak exports, unfriendly business environment, corruption, poor infrastructure, low population density, urban-rural divide, and the omnipresent lack of the rule of law are arguably the biggest obstacles hindering a more constructive participation of the country in development programs. The author also clearly identifies the country's strengths, such as the huge hydropower potential and a young population, and provides very down-to-earth policy suggestions on cross-border customs operations and the transit system, specific infrastructural projects, special economic zones, electricity for domestic consumption, a national rail grid to transport raw materials, smart agriculture (i.e. sustainable agriculture), and tourism.

Unfortunately, time and circumstances mean that the facts presented by Michael von Hauff in chapter 4 could not be updated after the recent developments following the general elections of 2010 in Myanmar. The author further develops an idea already presented by Andreff (p. 49), arguing that the country is currently in a double-transition from underdevelopment and from socialism. He goes on to explain how controls over the overall development of the country in the past decades were heavily driven by political objectives, which being inconsistent and impulsive, could not contribute to a positive growth. His analysis of the connection between the country's political situation and the economic mismanagement by the junta is very objective and accurate. Here he stresses the omnipresence of "levelling tendencies" (p. 66) as a political tool to curb social unrest, and the negative influence that such have had on health and education systems. He concludes with some suggestions but, as stated earlier, they were written before the elections and are no longer applicable. For instance, the shift towards a social market economy is already being implemented and the new challenges in this regard would be balancing the influence that external actors, such as the United States and China, are likely to have, not only on the country's economy, but on its political development as well.

Narongchai Akrasanee (chapter 5) bravely represents his country by not only mentioning the advantages Thailand accrues from being centrally located in the subregion, but also by vehemently voicing the challenges that rapid, yet loosely controlled connectivity has unintentionally brought about, i.e. cross-border illegal activities and the unregulated movement of people. Although addressing an audience with some awareness of the issue (some readers might not be able to easily follow most of the arguments), this chapter clearly argues that Thailand did, does, and will play a central role in the development of the GMS, particularly with regard to the provisioning of more responsible development assistance.

Vo Tri Thanh (chapter 6) explains in clear prose the importance of counterbalancing cooperation efforts in the GMS with what is happening at a broader level within ASEAN and East Asia. The author acknowledges that so far, economic progress has not been followed by social and environmental advances and that cross-border trade, while undoubtedly helping most economies,

is too often associated with serious non-traditional security issues. It is a real pity that the author, despite being a Vietnamese national, does not present his facts from the perspective of Vietnam, which it turns out, is the only GMS country not sufficiently covered in this book.

The last chapter of the first group (chapter 7), written by Guangsheng Lu, looks at the GMS integration process from Yunnan's perspective, although with a predominantly economic focus. Unfortunately, the general impression that the reader gets from this chapter is that what really bothers China is not the overall development of the subregion, but what it can gain from it without greatly damaging its own image.

The second part of this edited collection focuses on issues from a subregional perspective, respectively Foreign Direct Investment (chapter 8), financial markets (chapter 9), governance (chapter 10), energy (chapter 11), and social development (chapter 12). And although the economic aspect of each of the sectors is comprehensively explained, the only chapter of the whole book that really addresses social issues—the human dimension of the socio-economic transition mentioned in the title—is the last one. Even chapters 10 and 11, which would have made for a perfect platform to voice some of the extremely serious social concerns afflicting people in the GMS, take as case studies, respectively, the transport system and economic growth scenarios.

Chris Lyttleton (chapter 12) lends weight to the book's title by gauging the by-product of rapid economic development in the GMS through its impact on the local population. He constructively applies Michael Cernea's mitigation models to the reality of the GMS. This includes the impossibility of preventing interactions based on losses that can only be perceived and not computed because people interact in multidirectional ways with no specific causal primacy, thereby inevitably creating exploitative relations. The author concludes by explaining how intra-regional affiliations are strategically used by people willing to "invest whatever they see as having value in marketplace engagement" (p.248), such as their labor, land, bodies, families, and emotional companionship. These all intersect in the subjective realm of identity, experience, and progress, where people who are not always equipped to make choices that are in their own long-term best interests engage in "experimentations with freedoms" (p.248) that always more than sometimes put all they have at risk.

Altogether, this book provides the reader with a comprehensive analysis of the array of development efforts being implemented in the GMS. Unfortunately, the editors' intentions of clarifying the nexus between geographical and socio-economic integration were not sufficiently reflected in the chapters and the near absence of coverage on social issues is, alas, likely to overshadow many of the findings presented.

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