

Behind Sino–Japanese Rivalry in the Mekong Subregion

Research Article

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Abstract

This research has two main objectives: 1) to identify the causal factors of Sino-Japanese rivalry in the Mekong subregion and 2) to analyze the evolution and aspects of Sino-Japanese rivalry in the Mekong. As the analytical tool, this paper applied the power-based approach-realism and power transition theories. This study is qualitative research, which relies on both primary and secondary sources. The information derived from the semi-structured interview will only be used as a supplement.

The study reveals that the power shift between China and Japan is the principal cause that spurs rivalry between the two Asian powers whereas conflicting interests between the rivals add negative energy into the chain of actions and reactions and thus sustain their rivalry. Areas of overlapping interests between the two countries appear in the realms of strategic importance, geopolitics, and economy in the case of the Mekong subregion.

Keywords: Rivalry, Sino-Japanese Relations, the Mekong Subregion, China, Japan

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Introduction

The Mekong subregion consists of five riparian countries—Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, and includes China’s Yunnan province and Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. The Mekong subregion has become a new growth center of Southeast Asia with an average annual growth rate of over 5% and a combined population of more than 240 million (Seneviratne, 2018). Recently, the subregion has increasingly witnessed the intensifying rivalry between the two great Asian powers - China and Japan, both of which possess their strategic, geopolitical, and economic interests in this subregion, which are not always in tune. In the post-Cold War era, both China and Japan independently pursued their own versions of economic and diplomatic ties with the Mekong states. Japan’s Mekong development policies heavily focus on infrastructure development, environment and climate change, human resources development, and technical support (Vannarith, 2010). Even though Tokyo has remained as an important foreign direct investor and donor in this subregion for decades, its renewed interests have been stimulated by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s enthusiasm for the “*Free and Open Indo-Pacific*” strategy (FOIPs). The strategy has been viewed by Beijing as an attempt to keep in check China’s growing economic and political clout in the region (Seneviratne, 2018).

During the 10th Mekong-Japan Summit Meeting held in October 2018, leaders of the Mekong countries and Japan announced the incorporation of the 2009 Mekong-Japan Action Plan into the Mekong-Japan Initiative for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) toward 2030, the new Tokyo Strategy (Ministry of Foreign Affairs [MOFA], 2019). Japan has planned 150 projects for the region over the period of 2018-2021 in three areas: building connectivity, constructing people-focused societies, and environment and disaster management (IPDForum, 2019). Some viewed that Japan’s promised of fresh assistance as a signals of its attempts at establishing closer relations with the resource and population-rich subregion in an apparent bid to foil China’s growing ties with the Mekong countries (Makino, 2009).

Albeit a latecomer, China has been trying to expand its influence by providing assistance to the least developed CLMV (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam). Since the 1990s, China has strengthened its relations with the ASEAN states in the fields of foreign aid, trade, finance, infrastructure, business, labor, environment, and development as well as tourism. A close link to the Mekong region means advanced political and economic linkages and sustainable development for China’s southern less-developed areas (Yoshimatsu, 2010). China’s commitment to the Mekong subregional cooperation was also reflected in Premier Wen Jiabao’s remarks about

steady economic progress of the subregion and reinforcement of China's commitment to the region during the 3rd Greater Mekong Subregion Summit (GMS) in Laos in 2008. Close linkages with the Mekong countries were China's indispensable policy to achieve geopolitical objectives such as the cementing of influence in Southeast Asia, demonstration of leadership potential in East Asia, and securing of a sea route to the Indian Ocean (Yoshimatsu, 2010). In recent years, China has pledged some \$US 4 trillion for a great number of infrastructure projects in Asia (Seneviratne, 2018). The Chinese government launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), or the New Silk Road, and correspondingly formed Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) as a mechanism to materialize and accelerate its planned projects in the subregion. At the second LMC's leaders meeting in 2018, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang announced that China will provide another 7 billion yuan (\$US 1.08 billion) of government concessional loans within the LMC framework (Xinhua, 2018).

Tokyo's renewed interests have been mainly found not only in funding the construction of highways, railways, and bridges but also in trade facilitation for better flows of people and goods in Cambodia, Myanmar, and Vietnam. Following the announcement of the BRI by Beijing, Tokyo expressed skepticism. China's BRI projects have been often criticized for its heavy and one-sided focus on the building of

infrastructure and the lack of attention to developing human resources in the host countries. This also leads to the suspicion of Beijing's support of creating complex infrastructure network for its own benefits and not for two-way trade. When the Japanese government proposed high-quality infrastructure projects in Asia with an offer of \$US 110 billion a few years ago, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi welcomed the overture but warned that more funding is needed than what was pledged by the Japanese. The increasing rivalry between China and Japan has raised the concern of the ASEAN, whose membership also includes the Mekong countries, as it is possible that the ASEAN-centrality strategy of the regional grouping in the matter of development may be sidelined (Seneviratne, 2018).

Objectives

1. To examine the causes that spur rivalry between China and Japan.
2. To explore the evolution and aspects of China-Japan rivalry in the Mekong subregion.

Theoretical Framework

This research adopts the theoretical concepts of power-based theories such as neorealism and power transition to explain the emergence and evolution of rivalry between China and Japan in the Mekong subregion. As argued by power-based theorists, because capacities of states shape their national interests,

a change in states' capacities could lead to a change in states' interests. According to Fareed Zakaria (1998), as relative capacities/power of states expand, states then are inclined to expand their interests abroad. This is because states change their perception about what is essential to their survival when their power grows. As interestingly noted by Choucri and North (1975, p.1), *"a growing state tends to expand its activities and interests outward-colliding with the spheres of influence of other states - and find[s] itself embroiled in international conflicts, crises and wars"*. Gilpin (1981) also agreed with this notion, arguing that a state or a group of states have a tendency to increase control over the environment to achieve some particular interests when its power improves.

As mentioned above, the expansion of interests by a state with growing capacities could induce a conflict of interests as it could happen only at the expense of other states. Thompson (1999) related states' conflicting interests to the causes of rivalry between them. Thompson contended that states could become rivals because they share the same objectives: wishing to occupy the same territory, controlling the same markets, or monopolizing overlapping positions of influence. Based on Thompson's argument, unless the conflicting interests are solved, rivalry will continue.

From the aforementioned arguments, a diagram of the theoretical framework of this research is drawn as follows:

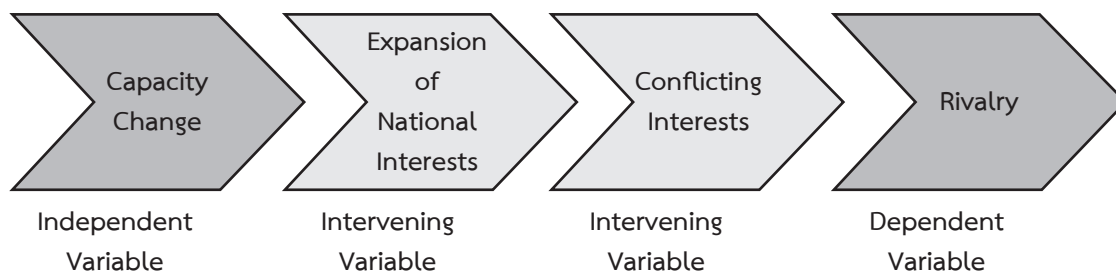


Figure: The causal factors of interstate rivalry

Methodology

This research has adopted the case study analysis under the qualitative method to answer the questions of what causes Sino-Japanese rivalry in the Mekong basin and how Sino-Japanese rivalry evolves. As mentioned above, the study analyzes the causes and features of China-Japan rivalry through the power approach.

Primary sources mainly rely on media reports, related organizational and governmental documents and be supplemented by in-depth interviews with academics, experts, and officers of related organizations and government agencies, either in person or by emails or any other ways of communications. Secondary sources include, but not limited to, books, journal articles, previous researches, and reports.

Human Subjects Protection

This research underwent the procedure of ethical standards for the research related to humans and was improved by the Secretary of the Research Ethics Office of Rangsit University. All the interviewees who have agreed to participate in the research project were informed thoroughly about their rights and the duration and were provided with the list of questions well ahead of the scheduled interviews. The Participation Information Sheet was created in both Thai and English versions so that the participants can clearly understand the research project's objectives and details. Before giving the interview, the participants were required to sign the Informed Consent Form along with the Participation Information Sheet. All the interviewees were allowed to withdraw at any point without any disadvantage to themselves of any kind. The interviewees can choose to remain anonymous or merely allow their names and positions to appear in the annex of the research report only. In either case, their names would not be cited directly in the research or its related papers.

Research Tools

To cross-check the information and understanding currently appearing on the existing literature on Sino-Japanese rivalry in the Mekong subregion, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with the aforementioned group of

interviewees. The interview is of semi-structured type, the question order is flexible and adaptable to suit the background and role of each interviewee but is in line with the framework of the research. The interview questions are open-ended and based on ethical standard.

Results

This part is tasked with two purposes: firstly, to explain the causes of Sino-Japanese rivalry in the Mekong subregion; secondly, to delineate the development and features of their rivalry.

1. Origin of Sino-Japanese Rivalry in the Mekong Subregion

The relationship between China and Japan has been often viewed as being affected by the shadows of the past conflict. However, this observation does not always hold. In the 1970s and 1980s, the Chinese leaders such as Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping mentioned on several occasions that the territorial dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands should be shelved (Welfield, 2013) while the wartime history was only the fault of a handful of Japanese militarists, not the whole Japanese people (He, 2007). In the 1972 normalization communiqué, the two countries declared that “*the abnormal state of affairs*” between them has terminated, suggesting their intention to move past the historical issues and obstacles to mend their relationship. Accordingly, Japan

started to provide yen loans to China along with meaningful support for China's economic development since 1979 (Bush, 2010, p.14).

However, China changed its attitude towards territorial disputes around the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands after the country experienced rapid economic growth and became a gross importer of oil in 1993. China's search for new sources of energy in the East China Sea grew quickly afterward. As a result, territorial dispute and energy exploration often disturbed the Sino-Japanese bilateral relationship (Bush, 2010). The conflict emerged in 1996 over the lighthouse controversy when the landing of the Japanese nationalists on the islets prompted large protests in Hong Kong and Taiwan as well as an eruption of anti-Japanese critiques from both the Chinese government and its state-run media (Anti-Japanese mood fosters Chinese unity, 1996). At the turn of the 21st century when its military capability increased impressively, China's research ships began encroaching on Japan's exclusive economic zone (Bush, 2010). In 2010, a flare-up between the two countries took place again after a Chinese trawler deliberately ran into the Japanese coast guard patrol boats while operating in the disputed waters around the controversial islets. Yet again in 2012 when the Japanese government decided to nationalize the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, the Sino-Japanese relationship plummeted to the lowest point, sparking violent protests against the Japanese in over 125 Chinese cities (Bendini, 2014).

In the Mekong subregion, Japan has a complex history with the riparian countries and has maintained its role as a major provider of development aid and investment for the region. Nevertheless, many analysts have recently noted that China's engagement in the Mekong has increasingly prevailed (Lentz, 2018). The Chinese government's eagerness to compete with Japan and its concern about Japanese influence in the Mekong subregion has not gone unnoticed and has been reflected in various aspects of its policy. The researcher witnessed this personally when working as a reporter at Xinhua News Agency's Bangkok Bureau, the mouthpiece of the Chinese government. When the 4th Mekong-Japan Summit took place in April 2012, all Thai and Chinese reporters at Xinhua's Bangkok Bureau were required by the headquarters in Beijing to survey Thai people's attitude towards Japan and its influence in Thailand and the region. Logically, a similar request should have been directed to other bureaus throughout the Mekong. It was evident that policymakers in Beijing were concerned about the Japanese movement in this subregion. An expert on China-Japan relations once noted that over the past five years, China has become more assertive in its strategy towards development and regional cooperation in the subregion. He further remarked that in doing so Beijing has intensified a regional backlash (Male Professor, Interview, 30 October 2021).

China's growing expansion of interests into the Mekong subregion can possibly be explained by looking at the strategic, geopolitical, and economic motives. For strategic and geopolitical reasons, after becoming a net importer of crude oil, China started to perceive the Mekong as a land route provider in substitution of the conflictual sea lane in the South China Sea as the country needs to secure the uninterrupted transport of energy supplies. Besides, the Mekong region has been regarded as a crucial "testing ground" for China's ambitious plan, though not officially admitted, to become an East Asian hegemon and even beyond (Biba, 2019). China aims to use its own initiated institutions including the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) to materialize the New Silk Road projects and internationalize its currency, yuan. Yuan could be used as an alternative to the US dollar in Asia if the currency becomes globally used for national reserve and trade transactions (Kikuchi & Zi, 2016). With regards to economic drives, China's successful economic development encouraged its leaders to pay more attention to maintaining stability in the western area and closing the deep gap between the southwest and the east. Therefore, Beijing prioritizes the development projects in the Mekong with an expectation that massive infrastructure building could spawn economic activities in the southwestern

Yunnan and Guangxi provinces and that cross-border connectivity would create the export markets for the western Chinese-manufactured products (Kraisoraphong, 2017, p.160-161; Biba, 2019).

In the post-World War era, the Mekong basin has been regarded as a resource and production base as well as a significant market for the Japanese businesses (Kraisoraphong, 2017; Yoshimatsu, 2010). Following the end of the Cold War, Tokyo still sees its engagement in the development of the Mekong subregion as significant for two reasons. First, Japan's economic cooperation with the riparian countries contributes to the prosperity and stability in Asia, which is always important to Japan's national interests. Second, Japan's involvement in development is part of its post-Cold War diplomatic strategy which aims at enhancing the country's political role in forming a new order in East Asia (Ogasawara, 2015, p.35). Beyond economic-development standpoint, from military and geopolitical positions, the Mekong basin, as an inalienable part of Southeast Asia, has increasingly become vital to Japan's broader Indo-Pacific strategy. Recently, Japan has attempted to promote the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy by strengthening cooperation with the Mekong region (MOFA, 2018). This strategy is getting in line with Japan's new security posture and especially possible

following the reinterpretation of Japan's pacifist constitution. Given China's growing aggressive stance on the issues of the South China Sea, where one of the world's most crucial shipping sea lanes is situated, Japan has good reasons to develop an alternative way to circumvent any obstacles in the face of deteriorating tensions or China's growing control of the areas around the South China Sea. The 10th Japan-Mekong Summit in Tokyo, where the new Tokyo 2018 Strategy for Mekong-Japan Cooperation was proposed, strongly suggested the intention of Japan to offer an alternative future of the international order in Asia (Lentz, 2018).

2. Development and Features of Sino-Japanese Rivalry

China joined the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) Economic Cooperation Program in 1992 and later became a dialogue partner of the Mekong River Commission (MRC) while joining the ASEAN-Mekong Basin Development Cooperation (AMBDC) in 1996. Despite the aforementioned facts, Beijing's contribution to economic development and multilateralism building in the subregion had been kept passive, remaining as one of the beneficiaries, until the country experienced rapid economic growth. President Xi Jinping proposed the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 to create a trade and infrastructure network connecting Asia, Europe, and Africa along China's ancient trade routes.

The Mekong riparian countries are included in the China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor (CICPEC), one of the six main BRI corridors and planned to pass through the Mekong states of Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand to Malaysia and Singapore, connecting the Land and Sea Silk Roads, China and Southeast Asia. The Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) and the LMC Special Fund as well as the AIIB were formed to promote the BRI projects. Realizing that regional order and institutions in the Mekong have been controlled by the West and Japan, Beijing established the LMC in order to exercise greater influence over the region (Biba, 2019).

It is widely known that Japan has been ahead of China in the Mekong region on multiple fronts, namely official development assistance (ODA), trade, and investment. Japan's development policy towards the Mekong countries has been heavily guided by an economically driven stance as Tokyo views the subregion as a crucial resource base as well as a production foundation and a market. However, it has been recently noticed that Japan's revived interests towards the Mekong have been fueled by China's growing role and influence. The Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was very enthusiastic in collaborating with the U.S. and its allies in Asia Pacific regarding the FOIP strategy, to which China perceives as a plan to contain Beijing's rise (Seneviratne, 2018).

In order to differentiate itself from China's heavyweight BRI projects, which sometimes is criticized for its poor-quality and debt traps, Japan has rebranded its offerings to the Mekong lower basin nations as "*quality infrastructure*". Additionally, apart from "*hard connectivity*" which mainly focuses on the East-West and Southern Economic Corridors, Japan also emphasizes "*soft connectivity*" which implies cooperation in the field of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) (for example, cybersecurity, broadcasting, and the Asia Pacific Telecommunity (APT) and communication infrastructure) as well as the field of digital government, smart city, digital infrastructure, postal services, and technical cooperation for trade facilitation (MOFA, 2020). This suggests part of Japan's endeavor to regain its diminishing power in the region where China has stolen a march by applying checkbook diplomacy and offering generous assistance for infrastructure construction (Lintner, 2018). It is viewed that Japan is trying to project its position as a reliable alternative player to the Mekong states.

Building infrastructure is both China's and Japan's interests and priorities in which both have so far come up with their own initiatives. It is also evident that after China proposed the BRI and the AIIB, Japan also stepped up its efforts (Zhao, 2018). As mentioned above, Japan has since 2015 promoted the "*quality infrastructure*" to make their projects more attractive than

China's BRI ones and accordingly to increase its infrastructure exports. While the Partnership for Quality Infrastructure, together with the Asian Development Bank (ADB), aimed at providing around \$US 110 billion for quality infrastructure investment in Asia between 2016 and 2020, its extended version, the Expanded Partnership for Quality Infrastructure, pledged to provide approximately \$US 200 billion financial aid for infrastructure building across the globe between 2017 and 2021. The infrastructure investment competition between China and Japan has heated up across Asia and the Mekong subregion (Prasad, 2018) with lucrative export markets at the stakes. The high-speed railway rivalry between the two Asian powers was allegedly unveiled in full view in 2015 when both China and Japan competed for the bidding of Jakarta-Bandung HSR line construction. China eventually beat out Japan in this bidding war (Aizawa, 2019). The ongoing infrastructure rivalry between China and Japan illustrates the collision of their interests over the opportunities to export infrastructure.

Discussion and Conclusion

Japan is a long-established and principal provider of assistance, loans, investment, and infrastructure in the Mekong subregion. China, with its growing economic clout, has thus far ramped up its efforts to expand its interests into the Mekong subregion, pitching itself against Japan. What is predicted by neorealist and power

transition theories is that when states gain more power, they tend to extend their interests and activities outside their original domains, which in turn leads to the clashes of the spheres of influence and interests between the existing dominant states and the rising states. According to Thompson, the cause of interstate rivalry could be mainly attributed to the conflicting interests. In the case of China and Japan, are they aiming at controlling the same territory, dominating the same markets, or cancelling each other's influence as contended by Thompson? The answer is yes for the followings reason.

Although China had engaged with the subregion since the 1990s through mostly the GMS Economic Cooperation Program, it became apparent that China overtly increased its role in the Mekong since the 2010s. The Chinese government launched the BRI projects and included the Mekong as part of its mega plan. Shortly after that, China established the LMC together with the LMC fund to realize its ambitious goals. The major reason for China being able to play much more important role in regional development and cooperation is because of China's mounting confidence in its capabilities as a rising superpower. In 2010, China became the world's second largest economy, replacing Japan. Many commentators observed that Beijing's more active role has prompted Tokyo to respond. Clearly, the two greatest Asian powers have the overlapping

interests in the Mekong and both are not expected to back down from defending what they perceived as crucial.

The Mekong delta is important to China and Japan geopolitically, strategically, and economically. The most recent findings by Song, Qiao-Franco, and Liu (2021) reveal that President Xi Jinping has been trying to restore China's normative power in the Mekong by permeating normative Chinese concepts such as "*community of shared destiny*" among the Mekong countries. Additionally, Beijing views that the enhancement of economic cooperation with the Mekong countries will not only help boost the economy of its less-developed west but will also serve as a stepping stone for the achievement of the BRI, which is regarded as a key to China's success in its attempt to reshape regional order in Asia and beyond. Creating new institutions to diffuse ideas as well as investing in infrastructure network to facilitate the flow of goods and people are all crucial parts of China's normative approach strategy (song, Qiao-Franco, and Liu, 2021), especially in the very time that the U.S. and its strongest Asian ally - Japan are attempting to build transparent, rule-based approach in the region. It is evidenced that, in order to maintain the status quo in the face of China's rise, Japan and its' alliance network have renewed its efforts to uphold a "*rule-based order*" at both regional and international levels (Wilkins, 2021). More recently, Tokyo's focus on the subregion has

been more strategic and geopolitical oriented, considering the Mekong countries as an inalienable element of the FOIP strategy. Apart from the security concerns, FOIP strategy enshrines the rule-based, liberal international order led by the U.S. while being used to strengthen principles of free trade, freedom of navigation, and the rule of law (Koga, 2020). The fact that China and Japan envision their own versions of the regional and international order creates opportunities for clashes in the sphere of influence between them.

Given that the Mekong subregion is located between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, the subregion is considered strategically and geopolitically important for both China and Japan. In the eyes of the Japanese, the sea lane shipping through the Strait of Malacca in the South China Sea is not secure due to pirate hijacking and becomes more and more vulnerable due to China's increasing grip. Thus, Japan wants an alternative to this route with those corridors across the Mekong delta. Likewise, with the mounting tensions and the increased activities of the U.S. and its allies in the South China Sea, the Chinese leaders were convinced to seek an alternative route for the energy supply. Beijing started shipping refined oil from Thailand through the Mekong River to Yunnan province in 2006 (Xinhua, 2006) and completed oil and gas pipelines running from Myanmar's Indian Ocean coastline to Yunnan province in 2013 (Yi, 2013).

Economically, the Mekong riparian countries are significant to both China and Japan as to its potential to provide resources and a fast-growing market. More recently, both prominent Asian powers have been involved in fierce competition as they aim to export more infrastructure and high-speed railway and HSR technology to the developing countries in the Southeast Asia and Mekong delta. The construction cost of all HSR projects under the agreements between China and Mekong nations (Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand) could be estimated around \$US 22 billion while the Japan-Thailand HSR contract of \$US 12 billion is still on the negotiation table. Despite their heated competition, China and Japan realize that they need to strengthen their collaboration in the areas where they can to maximize their interests. When Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visited China for the first time in seven years in October 2018, both countries' leaders agreed to promote their joint actions in third-country infrastructure projects (Jiangyong, 2018). In the Mekong subregion, the endeavors of China and Japan to strengthen their bilateral cooperation were shown in Thailand's Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC), where Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC) and China Development Bank (CDB) pledged to fund the HSR project linking the three international airports (U-Tapao, Suvarnabhumi, and Don Mueang). Chinese and Japanese firms were also among the top three

investors in the EEC projects in 2020 (EEC, 2021). Thailand welcomed this concerted support by China and Japan for the EEC projects (Theparat, 2019). A report by the ADB (2017) pointed out that the developing Asian nations need the investment of around \$US 26 trillion in infrastructure between 2016 and 2030, or \$US 1.7 trillion a year, for their sustainable development. Therefore, although the future competitions between China and Japan to win those bidding wars are foreseeable, it is also likely that both countries will try to cooperate in the areas where they can share the benefits.

Recommendations

China and Japan are the most prominent powers in Asia - the former is the rising power while the latter declining - and both also have vital national interests overlapped in the Mekong subregion. These are the factors that give birth to and sustain their rivalry but, unfortunately, they will not be changed or removed today or tomorrow. Instead, it is evident that China and Japan have become increasingly involved in strategic competition, a situation with which the Mekong riparian countries have to confront for at least another decade. To reap the benefits

from the still healthy Sino-Japanese rivalry, the Mekong nations must carefully tread head a fine line in their policies towards the two Asian giants without stirring up controversy with either of them. At the same time, to prevent the rivalry from swaying their development goals and regional cooperation, these developing nations must strictly adhere to their long-term national development strategy and their national interests as well as the regional cooperation plan. As great regional powers, China and Japan are also bestowed with great responsibility that is to maintain stability and prosperity of this region and beyond. Therefore, they need to find the possible areas where they could cooperate and locate common interests. A positive development took place back in 2018 when China and Japan sought collaboration over a high-speed train project and EEC smart city in Thailand. However, further similar efforts are still required and must be expanded to political and security domains. To alleviate the negative effects of conflicting interests, they must keep their commitment to strengthening cooperation and work towards more opportunities for collaborative actions promptly before their rivalry spiral out of control.

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