

Interview of H.E. Mr. Prak Sokhonn, Senior Minister, Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation with the Cambodian Institute for Strategic Studies

What is the significance of the Mekong-Lancang Cooperation to the development and peace of the Mekong Sub-region? How can the Mekong-Lancang Cooperation contribute to ASEAN integration?

The rationale for the establishment of the Mekong-Lancang Cooperation (MLC) is peace and development. Sharing the same source of water, Lancang for the China's part and Mekong for the other five countries, all the 6 countries have felt the imperative to work together in order to ensure a destiny of shared security and prosperity. Separately, all the five Mekong countries have already established a comprehensive strategic cooperation with China. As such, the MLC was a natural, logical and pragmatic move to consolidate the bilateral achievements into a sub-regional cooperation framework that can take full advantages of geographic proximity, affinity and economic complementarities.

The MLC has also been designed to support and accelerate the ASEAN integration process and mitigate the existing development gap in the Mekong region. Most of the members of MLC are new members of ASEAN with relatively less advanced level of development as compared to the older members. The MLC is a useful complement to China-ASEAN cooperation that helps promote economic and social development of its members. It is therefore not surprising that when the MLC was established in 2015 at the 1st LMC Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Jinghong, Yunnan province, China, the MLC adopted similar three pillars like those of ASEAN namely, the political security pillar, the economy and sustainable development pillar, and the social and people-to-people and cultural exchanges pillar. Moreover, the MLC could be considered as a new model of South-South cooperation that supports the MLC member countries to deliver under economic prosperity to its people under the framework of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

With this strong spirit of cooperation, the MLC has rapidly evolved. The Sanya Declaration, which was adopted at the 1st LMC Leaders' Meeting, has set a clear direction for future development of this new sub-regional mechanism. In terms of *modus operandi*, the MLC has adopted the principles of consensus, openness, inclusiveness, equality, mutual consultation and coordination, voluntarism, common contribution and shared benefits, and respect for the UN charter and international laws as guiding principles.

What are the priority areas that participating countries in the Mekong-Lancang Cooperation can cooperate?

Being close neighbors, there are many areas that the 6 countries can cooperate to maintain a high level of political trust, thereby contributing to peace and stability, and to leverage synergy for development. Their combined force can enable them to deal more effectively on issues that require transnational attention such as climate change, natural disaster, cross-border infectious diseases, transnational crimes, etc.

At present, the mechanism has identified five priority areas of cooperation, which include connectivity, production capacity cooperation, cross-border economic cooperation, water resources cooperation as well as agriculture and poverty-reduction cooperation. To support concrete cooperation on these priority areas, six Joint Working Groups (JWG) on the key priority

areas have been set up. Currently, in light of the rapid increase cooperation activities, there are some consideration to upgrade this JGWs working level into a higher decision making stage.

What are the challenges that the Mekong-Lancang Cooperation is facing? How can participating countries overcome these challenges?

For any new mechanism, smooth implementation has been a challenging task. We foresaw this from the beginning and therefore we have pushed for the establishment of national secretariat or coordination unit in all the six countries in order to facilitate and coordinate each country's project implementation as well as cross-country coordination. Even though each country has their own rules and terms of engagement, all in all the MLC's flexible approach has enabled all the six countries to accommodate each other needs and expectations.

Institutional building has been an important goal for us to ensure implementation of tangible projects and sustainability of commitment. With a solid institutional base, such as the JGWs and the respective national secretariat/coordination unit in place, we are encouraged to see that cooperation projects have been implemented in a timely manner. 45 early-harvest projects and 13 initiatives proposed by China on the 2nd MLC Foreign Ministers' Meeting were advanced as planned, most of which have been completed and made substantial progress.

China's setting up of the MLC Special Fund is also an important factor that helps push and fast-track concrete projects' implementation. In 2017, 132 projects were approved for funding including 16 Cambodian projects. Now, the 2018 projects are in the pipeline for approval of the funding.

What do you expect from the Mekong-Lancang Cooperation Leaders' Meeting on 10 January 2018 in Phnom Penh, Cambodia?

Cambodia will host the 2nd MLC Leaders' Meeting, in which the Phnom Penh Declaration and a Five Year Plan of Action will be adopted. These are two very important document in terms of concrete and tangible outcomes, as they do set the tone for the short and medium development of the MLC.

International integration has been important for Cambodia's development as well as increased international posture. We see MLC as one of such mechanism to integrate Cambodia into the region and the world. The MLC is important for Cambodia because, as co-founding member, we can shape from the very beginning the agenda and the modalities of the mechanism. With a concrete project-driven as one of its key characteristics, the MLC can provide its member countries a strong sense of ownership with high level of stakeholder engagement. With such spirit, I am optimistic as to the future of MLC, particularly in terms of its contribution to peace and development of the Mekong sub-region.
