

Diplomatic Approaches to International Watercourses: Analyzing Chinese Policy on the Mekong and Brahmaputra Rivers, 1997-2018

Vaughn Howard Campbell



Research Puzzle

- How do powerful upstream states determine their approach to diplomatic interactions on international watercourses?
- What explains the the difference between China's recent actions on the Mekong River and those on the Brahmaputra?

Significance

Theoretical

- Gap: material drivers of cooperation and conflict
- Conceptualization of river sovereignty
- “Responsible stakeholder” debate

Practical

- Regional water scarcity and human security

Existing Approaches and Hypotheses

Pre-existing
Regional
Norms

- Constructivist
- Johnston, 2003

Bureaucratic
Processes

- Pluralist, China-centric
- Ho, 2014

Expedient
Statecraft

- Realist
- “Diplomatic Opportunity Cost”

Research Design

Mekong



Data Agreement (2002)

Creation of LMC (2015)

Brahmaputra



Data Agreement (2002)

Data Dispute (2017)

Findings

- Chinese officials regularly and heavily cite potential material gains when discussing river cooperation on the Mekong
- Brahmaputra used as a lever to exert control over the local territory
- China pursues material gains on its rivers: whether these efforts are cooperative or conflictual is due primarily to the net strategic and economic significance of the watercourse.

Implications

Theoretical

- Increased attention to local material factors
- Contextualizing “responsible stakeholder” claims

Practical

- Advice to downstream states: offer material incentives