

Multiple Mekongs: Changing Spatial and Temporal Visions

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Abstract

The authors trace the successive dreams and visions held with respect to the Mekong River, known as the ‘Mother of Waters’, which has sustained life within its region for many millennia of seasons. Initially the preserve of hunters, farmers and fishers, the river spawned a hydraulic civilization centred on a cosmological master plan designed to produce harmony between heaven and earth. The decline of the Khmer Empire precipitated the invasion of Europeans whose vision for the river was both exploitative and partial, the main prize being a perceived routeway into the fabled wealth of China, with the river marking a convenient boundary rather than being a unifying force. The immediate postcolonial era, while restoring the river to its natural owners, brought with it a new vision with an emphasis upon riparian domination and control, hindered from the outset by the difficulties of international cooperation and the emergence of an ideological divide. While hostilities brought a stay of execution for this all-encompassing development vision, its spectre still haunts contemporary discourse within the reconstituted Mekong River Commission, now searching for sustainable solutions to unleash the river’s historic potential, and with it fuller regional development, whilst preserving the essential life force of Southeast Asia’s greatest natural asset. Drawing upon these visions from the past, this paper evaluates the prospects for a cooperative, sustainable, water future within the Mekong region.

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Introduction

The Mekong River, alternatively known as the “Mother of Waters”, is Southeast Asia’s longest river, the main source of livelihood and a lifeline for the people who inhabit its basin¹. The river has determined ways of life for thousands of years, sustaining hunters, fishers and farmers, rice growers and traders, villages and towns. Its annual floodwaters have defined time for those dwelling along its banks, modified their living spaces, provided a home for their spirits, and supported a succession of agrarian-based societies that have evolved in harmony with the vicissitudes of the natural environment. While the river has nurtured its inhabitants, it has on occasions destroyed them, and its flow is an ever-present reminder of the transience of human life, a quality reflected in the region’s dominantly Buddhist beliefs, which also stress the unity of all things natural and spiritual. Indeed, some scholars have argued for the integration of Buddhist thought into the study of the environment, creating a kind of “moral ecology” whereby notions of moderation and equilibrium blend naturally into the central tenets of sustainable development (Rigg 1997, p. 56).

If the connection between such arcane beginnings and present-day development of the Mekong River might appear somewhat tenuous, a geographical perspective on the issues involved can forge that link and be particularly instructive in determining a cooperative, sustainable water future. Responding to a challenge that geographers should articulate the “big questions” in their field in order to attract the attention of the public, the media and policymakers, Susan Cutter et al. (2002) responded on behalf of the *Association of American Geographers* (AAG). Their selection of ten big questions can be narrowed to

four in order to focus our discussion of Mekong visions past, present and future; these are (ibid, pp. 310-314),

How has the Earth been transformed by human action?

What role has geographical skill played in the evolution of human civilization, and what role can it play in predicting the future?

How and why do sustainability and vulnerability change from place to place and over time?

How do we measure the unmeasurable?

Such questions, in varying guises, have been the preserve of geographical investigation since its inception (see Thomas 1956). But new resonance has been given to their resolution since the publication of the “Brundtland Report” (WCED 1987) and growing international awareness of the potential impacts of rapid environmental change. Cutter et al. (p. 311), draw parallels with the notion of moral ecology by linking the enhancement of human experience to the existence of diverse ecosystems.

More specifically, in taking up the big questions, Nancy Lee Wilkinson, writing on “Water and the Geographic Imagination” (2003, p.18), argues for a geographical approach which includes holistic and ecological thinking; addressing both natural and social forces simultaneously; tracing patterns and causes across time and space; understanding changes in human values and “getting to know places very well”. Although other disciplines may subscribe to many, if not all, of these approaches, invariably within these other disciplines some are left in thrall as one or two dominant perspectives take precedence. Wilkinson’s sentiments have been echoed by William Graf

(2001) who writes of an emerging era of multiple uses of rivers, which will require broad perspectives rather than mechanistic limiting viewpoints. The implication here is that for too long limited visions of rivers and their qualities have pervaded the developmental psyche, often with disastrous consequences. Today, more than ever before, accumulated evidence from a succession of failed or flawed visions can be marshalled in order to contest such singular viewpoints.

Accordingly, this paper traces a number of the earlier dreams for Mekong River development that have dominated thinking at various times since European discovery of the river in the sixteenth century. By recalling these visions from the past, this paper seeks to expose the limitations of successive geopolitical mindsets, which have constructed partial or over-zealous solutions to development issues in the lands and peoples that taken together constitute the Mekong Region. In revisiting these earlier *Weltanschauung* the paper recalls past follies while drawing cautious parallels with today's ownership and control of Mekong space. The paper argues that to be truly successful both the symbolic and the pragmatic must be brought together in order to ensure a cooperative, sustainable, water future for this fabled "Mother of Waters". If not the region may be faced with an appalling alternative, a river so fragmented and dissipated that it fails to flow to sea, witness the tragedies which have already befallen two of the world's greatest rivers, the Hwang Ho and the Murray (Hudson-Rodd and Shaw 2003). The regional security implications of such reductions in flow cannot be overstated, and in the decades to come have the potential to define the existence of all countries who share the Mekong's bounty.

The River and the *Raja*

Prior to European discovery the Mekong had given rise to a series of hydraulic civilizations based upon wet rice (*sawah*) surpluses and bountiful fish harvests, overseen by all-powerful rulers, or god-kings (*deva raja*) (Wittfogel 1957). The most extensive and celebrated of these being the Khmer empire, centred on Angkor but extending south to embrace the Mekong delta, northwards into present-day Laos and Thailand and westwards to the Indian Ocean. Flourishing between the ninth and fifteenth centuries, the kingdom owed its resilience to the careful and intricate management of fluvial resources. The unity between man and nature being reflected in the design of splendid city complexes, which reproduced the “cosmological master plan configured to guarantee consonance between heaven and earth, and thereby promote harmony and prosperity” (Reed 2000, p. 46). When measured against contemporary environmental excesses, some six hundred years would seem to be a period of remarkable sustainability, but it is instructive to trace the seeds of Angkor’s dissolution, an event which has implications for the present and future health of the region’s ecosystem.

While the generally accepted explanation for the demise of Angkor lies in the Thai invasions and final sacking of the complex in 1431, the underlying elements that weakened and exposed the kingdom are still the subject of much debate and ongoing scientific investigation. A number of propositions have been put forward, including the extravagance of temple construction, deterioration of the irrigation system, mass conversion to Theravada Buddhism and, more recently, the inherent weaknesses of

dispersed, low-density urbanism (Fletcher 1995)². But in ecological terms, indications that the Angkor complex was associated with extensive forest clearance for rice growing begs comparison with present day experiences of severe flooding and reduced fish supplies (Asia-Pacific Focal Point 2005). Parallels can be drawn between the problems besetting Angkor and the demise of the Mayan civilisation, another region of low-density urbanism bound together by a cult ideology, which appears to have overshot its ecological carrying capacity after prospering for some three thousand years (Sharer 1996). Both civilisations are stark reminders that sustainability and vulnerability can change quite remarkably over time.

The River as Routeway

Following European “discovery” of the Mekong in the sixteenth century its role changed from that of a river of life and cradle of civilisation to that of a “mystery river”, somewhat akin to that of the Nile in terms of seasonal inundations emanating from an unknown source. Despite Portuguese, Spanish and Dutch expeditions seeking “souls, trade and power” (Osborne 2000, p. 43) there was little detailed knowledge of the area prior to French incursions during the nineteenth century. Osborne records that knowledge of the Mekong’s course was still very limited as late as 1830 when Josiah Condor in writing *The Modern Traveller* sketched out a confluence between the Mekong and the Chao Phraya Rivers somewhere between Laos and Yunnan (ibid, p.58). In an attempt to overcome such obvious *terra incognita* the French expedition of 1866-1868 led by Capt. de Lagrée and Lt. Garnier sought out the source of the Mekong and

hopefully an alternative river route through which the French could control navigation into the very heart of China.

The story of this expedition is now a part of French imperial folklore, the six principal members of the expedition displaying enormous reserves of fortitude as they charted the river through to the mountains of Yunnan (Osborne 1996). But their quest was ultimately unsuccessful, foundering on rapids, shoals and the mighty Khone falls, “a series of interlocking falls and cascades running some seven miles and extending from one bank to the other” (ibid, p. 64). The French vision of “back door” access to the fabled riches of the “Middle Kingdom”, as a way of countering British commercial interests already based on Hong Kong, was frustrated by the vagaries of the region’s greatest river. Yet, Osborne makes the point that prior to the expedition Lagrée had ventured as far as the rapids at Sambor, and was well aware of the enormous physical barriers to any future navigation. In an age of technological marvels the Frenchmen “simply could not accept that they would not be able to overcome the physical barriers that stood in their way” (ibid, p. 80).

Some time later the French attempted to circumvent the rapids by construction of a narrow gauge railway capable of transporting boats upstream to more equable waters. However contingencies forced a change in plans, whereby the prepared route had to be extended for two additional kilometres, for which no rails had been allocated. Osborne recounts a scene redolent of a French farce, but undertaken in the most arduous of conditions (ibid, pp. 144-146),

But then it was necessary for teams of men to continue the vessels' advance by picking up sections of rail from behind the carriage bearing the boat and relaying them, a few dozen metres at a time, over and over again. This physically demanding work took place amid the frequent downpours of the late rainy season so that the workers were more often than not labouring in mud and drenched to the skin

Although the detour was finally completed, Laos' sole rail line failed in its greater mission to render the Mekong navigable. Notwithstanding late-nineteenth century exploration missions by Auguste Pavie, French aspirations turned to other potential routes into the interior, such as the Red River. In consequence the French *mission civilisatrice* was felt least along the middle reaches of the Mekong, with Laos being the most inconsequential part of the French Indochinese Union, effectively a western extension of Vietnam (Stuart-Fox 1996). There are contemporary lessons to be learned from this example of French intransigence as some again see the Mekong as a route to riches, rather than a blessing in itself.

The River as Boundary

During pre-colonial times the fluctuating fortunes of the region's dominant kingdoms gave rise to a series of *mandalas*, or regions of influence, rather than recognisable territories within fixed boundaries. In such times, kingdoms were not interested in the control of land *per se*, but rather for the captured people it could deliver to any conquering army (Jerndal and Rigg 1998, p.815). The Mekong River acted as a unifying force, which bound together the destinies of the respective kingdoms. This state of relative fluidity ended with western intervention as competing colonial powers sought to

demarcate the extent of their conquests. In response to the growing threat of British and French incursions, King Chulalongkorn (1868-1910) initiated the first full scale surveying and mapping of Siamese suzerainty (Winichakul 1994). However, following the 1893 Pak Nam incident, the Thais were forced into conceding to the French all lands east of the Mekong, and all islands in the river. In French colonial terms, having failed as a routeway, the Mekong was given the status of a demarcation line, a situation formally ratified in the 1896 Treaty of London.

This arbitrary divide was particularly inappropriate in the northeast region of present-day Thailand, where it cut across the geographical homogeneity of lowland areas either side of the Mekong. Under the control of the Siamese state, peoples of northeast Thailand were subject to a process of official cultural homogenisation, culturally Lao they have now become part of the Thai nation-state (McCargo and Hongladarom 2004). But as a superimposed boundary, without reference to the underlying cultural landscape, the Mekong has been a somewhat porous divide. In the immediate post-colonial period, as the region gradually split apart along ideological lines, the boundary took on a new dimension as a Southeast Asian extension of the “bamboo curtain”. However, unlike the mountainous existences or perilous sea voyages experienced by political refugees elsewhere in the region, the Mekong offered a quick and easy exit to temporary sanctuary in refugee camps, or resettlement abroad. The number of Lao refugees grew from some 10,000 in 1975, to 20,000 in 1976 and then 48,781 by 1978, as the country haemorrhaged its educated people during the first ten years of the Lao PDR (Stuart Fox 1996, p. 168).

In all some 350,000 people may have left the country, a flow that started to be reversed in the early 1990s.

For some time the colonially instigated political divide manifested itself in border disputes leading to armed conflict. Most recently, in 1984 and 1987-88, fighting occurred between Thai and Lao forces over contested land in Uttaradit/Xainyaburi provinces, the second incident resulting in some 1,300 casualties. The seriousness of the latter conflict had the effect of bringing the two parties together, and subsequent boundary disputes have been the subject of negotiation rather than military action (Stuart-Fox 1996, p. 210). However, the precise settling of border disputes has dogged diplomatic relations between the two countries, with the Lao government favouring principles established in earlier Franco-Siamese accords which stipulate that in cases where rivers divide into tributaries, the deepest channel *of the tributary nearest Thai territory* should be the border line (St John 1998, p.39). Not surprisingly, the Thais regard this as unfair, serving as a constant reminder of a time when they were compelled to negotiate away their sovereign rights under threat of colonial coercion. Today, these rights are again under threat, not in terms of land but, perhaps more importantly, of water.

The River as Project

The modern era of cooperation among countries bordering the Mekong River dates from the immediate post-World War II period as the United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE) commissioned a number of cooperative studies to examine the river's potential. The Mekong Committee (MC) was established in 1957,

but membership was limited to members from the lower Mekong, specifically Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and South Vietnam. Osborne (2000a, p.433) makes the point that the Committee was “very much a child of the Cold War” and the notable absence of the People’s Republic of China, which controlled the source of the river and approximately half its length, was a somewhat inauspicious beginning to a new era of international cooperation. Notwithstanding this omission, the times were of optimism and grand design as no less than seventy individual projects were identified by 1969, including dams, power stations, experimental farms, soil surveys, bridges, irrigation canals, flood control systems and transport schemes.

US backing for the project was influenced by its own domestic model in the Tennessee Valley Authority³, which had implemented an ambitious programme of dam construction, flood control and electricity generation. Wilkinson captures the mood of that earlier era in a quote from the publication *Popular Mechanics* (2003, p.12),

A dam is a device by which mankind gets something for nothing. Build a dam across a river and at once there are all sorts of benefits that didn’t exist before. ...Long after they have earned their cost, possibly for thousands of years hence, we shall be enjoying the benefits of these dams.

By 1970 the Mekong Secretariat, as the Committee’s operational unit initially based in Bangkok, proposed no less than 17 mainstem dam sites in a programme that would have led, among other effects, to the large-scale flooding of communities, mass relocations of people, and the abandonment of Savannakhet the largest town in southern Laos (Jacobs 2002: Osborne 2000a). If such a programme had been implemented the region would

most probably have been facing similar problems to those now experienced in the US, such as the silting up of reservoirs, the drying up of rivers, the decommissioning of some dams and a moratorium on further constructions. But the heightening of US military involvement in Vietnam and the subsequent polarisation of the region's political environment at the end of war put a halt to these visions. By the time they were renewed, in the mid-1990s, the participants had engaged in smaller scale ventures, and the world had become more wary of grand solutions.

Dammed if you do...

Today, in a new era of unparalleled amity and cooperation within the lower Mekong, the newly revived Mekong River Commission (MRC) celebrates ten years of achievements towards a common goal (MRC 2005),

To promote and co-ordinate sustainable management and development of water and related resources for the countries' mutual benefit and the people's well-being by implementing strategic programmes and activities and providing scientific information and policy advice.

Authority in the reconstituted body was transferred to four member countries, namely Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Vietnam, rather than ECAFE as previously. The four countries decided to cooperate in all fields of development and management of the river basin and its resources, which have transboundary effects. This includes agriculture, fisheries, flood control, navigation and power production, all with appropriate environmental protection. The overriding ethos of this new era of cooperation was a common understanding of the Mekong as a complex web of interacting systems to be managed cooperatively for the benefit of all stakeholders. Furthermore, the Secretariat

headquarters were moved from Bangkok to the banks of the Mekong, first to Phnom Penh in 1998, and more recently to Vientiane in 2004.

However, as with the previous ill-fated Commission, the absences of both China and Burma (Myanmar) pose future problems for full cooperation along the river's greater length. China began dam construction on the upper river, known locally as the Lancang Jiang, during the 1980s with a view to supplying power throughout country's southwest regions. The 1500MW Manwan Dam was completed in 1996, another at Dachaoshan (1300MW) scheduled for completion in 2003, with a third at Xiaowan due by 2012. Six or seven dams (110-300 metres high) are to be installed on the Lancang Jiang in Yunnan to generate electricity by 2020. The People's Republic asserts that this grand development of a series of hydropower dams will allow them to regulate the flow of downstream water thus opening the Mekong River for navigation. However, above these dams, forest clearing, logging, and road building, are expected to increase the rate of erosion, sedimentation and landslides. The impacts of this combined hydropower/navigation "cascade" will have unknown consequences for those living downstream (Jacobs 2002: Osborne 2000a). While the Chinese would argue that only twenty per cent of total Mekong water emanates from China, the proportion is much higher in Laos which is particularly vulnerable to interruptions in water flow, particularly at a time when the Lao government is being drawn into its own dam building projects.

Impacts will result differently in individual countries but effects will be cumulative. Yet anticipated consequences are not even addressed in the official environmental impact

assessment made by the Joint Experts Group on Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) of China, Laos, Myanmar and Thailand. An evaluation of the environmental impact assessment report of the “Navigation channel improvement project of the Lancang-Mekong River from China-Myanmar boundary marker 243 to Ban Houei Sai of Laos”, showed a total lack of any investigation or documentation concerning environmental impacts. The EIA “lacks credibility” and is “seriously deficient” with no information on fish or other fauna in the development zone of the river (McDowall 2002, p. 9). The EIA Report is “substantially inadequate and in many places fundamentally flawed” and cannot be accepted as an account of the social and environmental impacts of the proposed project. The EIA Report ignored public participation in determining impacts and any long-term effects were overlooked (Cocklin and Hain, 2001). Reduction of river flow in concert with other systemic changes resulting from the dams is predicted to cause “harmful ecological simplification and deterioration of the Mekong ecosystem” (Tyson 2001, p. 2). The grand scheme is planned with less than fully transparent scientific input and no voice of the many people whose lives and livelihoods will be disrupted by the reduced, sedimented flow of the long Mekong River.

Burma’s lack of involvement is less critical, as that country has only a token involvement with the river, but more engagement with the MRC could be a useful strategy for the ruling military SPDC *junta* (State Peace and Development Council), seeking to legitimise its control of the country. Burma has signed the Quadripartite Economic Cooperation (QEC) agreement with China, Laos and Thailand on the development of commercial navigation on the Lancang-Mekong River between China and Thailand. If successful,

this could open a major shipping route from Simao in Yunnan, via Luang Prabang in Laos, and thence into northeast Thailand. Indeed, since the Lao government's economic reforms or *chin thanakaan mai* of the late-1980s, the region more popularly known as the "Golden Triangle" has been awash with infrastructure projects designed to provide yet another "routeway" into China (Rigg 1997: Hudson-Rodd and Shaw 1998).

The River as Water Wars?

Since the International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade of the 1980s the world's attention has been focused on issues of water access and management, and revisited in the 2000 Millennium Declaration, the 2002 Johannesburg Plan of Implementation and of Agenda 21, and most recently the launch of the UN "Water for Life" Decade 2005-2015 (GDRC 2005). These international actions have taken place amid a growing international awareness of the importance of natural resources and environment management in determining the well being and living standards of the world's population; and alongside extensive scientific debates and extensive media coverage of perceived global environmental change. Water, which has traditionally been regarded as a common asset, is now a scarce commodity in many areas, and some researchers estimate that as many as 1.4 Billion people may experience severe water scarcity in the period to 2025 (Seckler et al. 1999). The worst hit areas are likely to be the Middle East and semi arid Asia, including the Punjab and the North China Plain, the latter having possible ramifications for China's utilisation of Mekong waters.

As claims on scarce water accelerate, the abuse of water by ill-conceived and arrogant development projects, become viewed as ever more damaging. As Maude Barlow (2004: p. 39) argues, “Water belongs to the Earth and all species and is a fundamental right” and decisions made now as to use and ownership of water will determine who has access to this diminishing resource. Approaching development from a human rights perspective, people should not be seen simply as passive recipients of development schemes, or as in the case of the upper Mekong Development project, people as peripheral to grand dam building. When water is defined as a human right rather than a development resource to be used, then individuals are put at the centre of plans. Without this perspective the UN Millennium Development Goals will not be achieved (WHO, 2003).

Joern Kristensen (2001), MRC chief executive officer, writing about the huge challenges facing the sustainable development of the Mekong, noted the doubling of Lower Mekong Basin population over the past thirty years. Furthermore, an estimated increase of thirty to fifty percent could take the basin population to over 100 million by 2025. Presently some three-quarters of this population earn their living from utilising the natural resource base, mainly as farmers and fishers, and while this proportion is likely to decline the additional population will put increased pressure on natural resources. Such considerations, when added to the rise in national populations throughout the wider region, give rise to the prospect of resource-related conflicts or more specifically “water wars” (Uitto and Wolf 2002). The likelihood of water scarcity leading to warfare between nations, as it has with other, arguably less critical, resources such as oil, timber, gold and fish, looms as an alarming prospect for humanity (ibid, p. 289).

In the case of the Mekong any scarcity is likely to be relative rather than absolute. Six countries share the waters of the Mekong River and its natural resources, but they do so under contrasting situations of development and vulnerability. Cambodia and Laos are truly Mekong oriented with some 86 and 85 per cent, respectively, of their national areas within the Basin. Moreover, these countries are also Southeast Asia's poorest and Laos in particular has a quality of economic marginality that will be most difficult to surmount (Shaw and Hudson-Rodd 1998). Thailand with (36 per cent) and Vietnam (20 per cent) have substantial regional dependence upon the Mekong and would be greatly affected by any deterioration in water availability or quality. Burma (3 per cent) and China (2 per cent) have much less dependence upon the Mekong, but the river represents a most important transportation link to the outside world, and in China's case a currently indispensable regional energy source. Geography, however, determines that China's use or abuse of the river will impact upon the other five riparian nations, despite the relative inconsequence of the river to China's overall development.

In this regard ASEAN⁴ could play a more proactive role by linking regional infrastructure upgrades, which are of substantial benefit to China, to potential downstream impacts of dam construction and unsustainable river management. Certainly the combined voice of Southeast Asia needs to be marshalled behind the MRC, which despite its territorial scope remains a small organisation with limited resources. But such ASEAN solidarity may be slow to emerge given the increasing reliance of the SPDC *junta* on the Chinese in order to support its "military occupation of Burma" (Hudson-

Rodd and Nyunt 2005). Ultimately, the future prospect of “water wars” in the Mekong Region is a real one, with the prospects for peaceful and sustainable solutions depending upon the attitude taken by China, which more than ever before, stands at the apex of the Mekong’s “waters of life”.

By way of conclusion we might profitably return to the “big” questions in geography that in manifold ways address contemporary concerns with Mekong management. As this paper has indicated, if we cannot even ask the measurable questions in terms of scientific impacts, coupled with the absence of public hearings in regard to social impacts, what hope do we have of asking the immeasurable questions, those which engage the symbolic value and meanings of water for people living along the banks of the Mekong? Fates conspired to destroy the ancient water civilisations of the Mekong; to deny the French their dream of a river road to China; and the Mekong Committee its grand design. What future fates lie in store for the peoples of the lower Mekong Basin? Will one day their efforts at cooperation be seen as a tragic failure, wrecked between the Scylla of Chinese obduracy and the Charybdis of MRC impotence?

Endnotes

¹ The Mekong River is ranked tenth to twelfth among the world’s rivers in terms of length, as various estimates range between 4,200 kms and 4,889 kms. In terms of discharge the Mekong rates somewhat above its length ranking, annually discharging some 475 billion cubic metres of water (Jacobs 2002).

² Fletcher argues that a low density built environment can become a constraint on the long-term development of a settlement, placing constraints on social and political change, due to inertia which imposes great costs to move settlements, or to demolish and rebuild from scratch. Angkor in the C15th covered more than 500 sq km, with a dense core, an extensive low-density periphery and an almost indefinable edge (1996, p. 93).

³ The Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) was created as part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “New Deal” in 1933 to pursue an integrated programme of resource management in a depressed and over-exploited rural environment. In the context of the US political environment the creation of a government-owned corporation was somewhat contentious and the history of the TVA has been one of achievement and controversy. See TVA at <http://www.tva.gov/> accessed November 2005.

⁴ The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was formed in 1967 by Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand in order to provide solidarity against regional communist insurgency.

Today its membership of 10 nations includes Brunei and all the former communist countries of Southeast Asia.

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