

China and Japan in the CLMVT: Institutional Coexistence and Sub-regional Governance

Hsin-Chi *Lu**

*General Education Center, Ming Chi University of Technology

Abstract

This article examines China and Japan in the CLMVT—Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam and Thailand—through the lens of institutional coexistence and sub-regional governance. It argues that development assistance in the Mekong Basin should not be understood simply as a zero-sum competition between Chinese and Japanese influence, nor as a process in which China’s rise replaces Japan’s long-standing role. Instead, the CLMVT has become a layered sub-regional space in which China’s Belt and Road Initiative, BRI and Lancang–Mekong Cooperation, LMC, coexist with Japan’s Official Development Assistance, ODA and the Mekong–Japan cooperation framework. China’s assistance has expanded through infrastructure finance, policy-bank lending, state-owned enterprises, rapid project implementation and highly visible connectivity projects. Japan, by contrast, has adjusted its Tokyo Strategy by emphasizing quality infrastructure, institutional coordination, human security, sustainability, resilience, digitalization and non-traditional security. The article shows that these two assistance systems are competitive but not mutually exclusive. Their interaction creates a form of institutional coexistence in which recipient states compare, combine and selectively use external resources to expand their bargaining space. By analyzing China’s expanding development assistance, Japan’s strategic adjustment and the role of CLMVT recipient states, this article demonstrates that sub-regional governance in the Mekong

* Assistant Professor at the General Education Center, Ming Chi University of Technology. Email: argu@mail.mcut.edu.tw.

Basin is shaped not only by major-power rivalry, but also by the practical coexistence of different development models.

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1. Introduction: From Japan's ODA Transformation to China–Japan Institutional Coexistence in the CLMVT

This article examines the changing relationship between Chinese and Japanese development assistance in the CLMVT countries—Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam and Thailand—from the perspective of institutional coexistence and sub-regional governance. Japan has long used Official Development Assistance, hereafter ODA, as an important instrument for postwar reconstruction, regional re-engagement and economic diplomacy. By contrast, China's Belt and Road Initiative, hereafter BRI, has since the mid-2010s introduced a different model of infrastructure-centered development assistance in Southeast Asia. The coexistence of these two assistance systems has not produced a simple pattern of replacement, exclusion, or direct confrontation. Instead, it has generated a layered governance environment in which Japanese ODA, Chinese policy finance, multilateral development institutions and recipient-state strategies operate simultaneously within the same sub-regional space.

The central question of this article is therefore not only how Japan has transformed its ODA policy, but also how Japan's assistance strategies have been adjusted in response to China's expanding presence in the CLMVT. By comparing Japan's ODA-centered approach with China's BRI-centered assistance model, this article argues that sub-regional governance in the Mekong Basin has created conditions for institutional coexistence. In this article, institutional coexistence refers to a situation in which multiple aid and development systems, despite differences in norms, financing mechanisms, implementation procedures and political visibility, continue to operate in parallel and are strategically used by recipient states. This perspective helps explain why China's rise in Southeast Asian development assistance has not simply displaced Japan's role and why Japan's Tokyo Strategy has continued to evolve as a mechanism of institutional adjustment and regional engagement.

For the Japanese government, ODA has taken diverse forms and covered a wide range of recipient regions. Since 1954, Japan began to implement postwar reparation-type assistance programs with the aim of reconstructing its national image and reshaping its external relations. In October of the same year, Japan joined the Colombo Plan, which enabled the Japanese government to promote economic and social development through the model of regional cooperation (The Colombo Plan Secretariat, 2024). Today, most of the twenty-eight member countries of the Colombo Plan are located in the Asia-Pacific region, thereby providing Japan with a diplomatic and institutional channel through which it could rebuild relations with recipient countries and gradually expand its economic influence (The Colombo Plan Secretariat, 2024).

Compared with its early ODA programs, the Japanese government's expectations regarding the effects of development assistance have changed in response to transformations in the international environment. After the end of the Cold War, state actors no longer focused exclusively on zero-sum competition over traditional national security and territorial issues. Instead, greater attention was directed toward non-zero-sum issues such as international trade, economic interests and development cooperation. By guiding stronger external economic forces into domestic development processes, state actors were able to promote economic growth and social development, thereby maximizing the effectiveness of Japan's ODA programs and expanding Japan's international influence.

Japan's ODA programs have been implemented in accordance with policy charters formulated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. After the Japanese Cabinet adopted the ODA Charter in 1992, it clearly stated that the underlying spirit of the policy was to contribute to the peace and development of the international community and, by doing so, to ensure Japan's own security and prosperity. The main policy priorities included poverty reduction, sustainable economic growth, responses to global issues and regional and national peace and development (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2005). In 2010, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs further rearticulated the concept of "development cooperation" as a form of "All Japan" cooperation, integrating public and private sectors in terms of funding, technology, human resources and professional expertise (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2010, 2011). In 2015, the Development Cooperation Charter again revised the policy direction by emphasizing

non-military cooperation, human security and support for the self-reliant development of recipient countries (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2015a). These revisions allowed Japan to present its assistance not only as economic cooperation, but also as a contribution to quality growth, human security and a rules-based regional order.

However, Japan's ODA has also been shaped by historical constraints. As a state that launched wars in modern world history, Japan has often been interpreted by scholars as using postwar assistance to compensate, implicitly or indirectly, for the damage caused by past wars (Hasegawa & Yamada, 2022: 1-13; Xu, 2018: 91-135, 176-210; Kato, 2016: 1-18). In the 1950s, Japan successively signed War Reparations Agreements with the Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam, Burma and South Korea. Although such arrangements were formally presented as "cooperation" or "loans," they were substantively a form of disguised reparation (Tomotsugu, 2019, pp. 34-37). This historical background continues to shape how Japan presents the legitimacy and political meaning of its development assistance.

China's rise as a major provider of development finance has changed the political economy of assistance in Southeast Asia. Since the mid-2010s, China's assistance to the CLMVT has gradually developed into an integrated mechanism linking investment, debt, infrastructure construction and political influence. Unlike Japan's ODA-centered model, which places greater emphasis on institutional procedures, technical cooperation, long-term capacity building and policy coordination, China's BRI-centered model has prioritized rapid implementation, physical connectivity, policy-bank financing and the participation of state-owned enterprises. Railways, highways, ports, special economic zones, energy projects and digital infrastructure have therefore become key instruments through which China has expanded its presence in the Mekong sub-region.

The interaction between China and Japan in the CLMVT should therefore not be understood solely as a zero-sum competition for regional influence. Japan's ODA and China's BRI are competitive in infrastructure financing, connectivity projects and symbolic leadership in regional development. However, they also coexist because recipient states do not necessarily treat them as mutually exclusive options. For CLMVT governments, Japanese assistance often provides institutional credibility, long-term technical cooperation and quality infrastructure standards, whereas Chinese assistance offers speed, scale, physical visibility and

flexible financing. These different strengths allow recipient states to diversify external resources, manage dependence and increase bargaining leverage.

Therefore, what the BRI has shaped in Southeast Asia is not a single-centered order in which China simply replaces the ADB, JICA, or Japan's ODA system. Rather, it has contributed to a governance reality in which old and new tracks of development finance coexist at the institutional level. In the CLMVT, China's BRI-centered assistance and Japan's ODA-centered cooperation overlap, compete and coexist through different mechanisms of financing, implementation and political legitimation. This article argues that such coexistence is not merely a transitional phenomenon, but a defining feature of sub-regional governance in the Mekong Basin.

To develop this argument, the article first situates the transformation of aid strategies within the broader context of sub-regional integration and institutional coexistence. It then examines China's expanding development assistance and infrastructure diplomacy in the CLMVT as a parallel model of regional engagement. Against this background, the analysis turns to Japan's Mekong sub-regional assistance programs and the evolution of the Tokyo Strategy, showing how Japan has adjusted its ODA-centered approach in response to changing regional conditions. The subsequent discussion further explores how Chinese and Japanese assistance interact in the Mekong Basin and how recipient states use this coexistence to diversify external resources and expand their bargaining space. Through this analysis, the article demonstrates that China–Japan institutional coexistence has become a defining feature of sub-regional governance in Southeast Asia.

2. Sub-regional Governance, Institutional Coexistence and Aid Strategy Transformation

Compared with a conventional approach that treats development assistance mainly as a bilateral relationship between donor and recipient countries, the CLMVT demonstrates that aid strategies increasingly operate within a multi-layered sub-regional environment. In this context, sub-regional governance is not merely a geographically limited form of regional cooperation. Rather, it refers to an institutional process through which local development needs, cross-border connectivity, external assistance and broader regional frameworks are linked together. This understanding is particularly important for analyzing China–Japan aid interaction in the Mekong Basin, because Chinese and Japanese assistance do not operate in separate spaces. Instead,

they overlap within the same infrastructure corridors, development agendas and recipient-state strategies.

Maho Kawagoe's conceptual distinction between regional integration (地域統合) and regionalism is useful for clarifying this point. Kawagoe argues that the key difference between the two lies in whether development policies are centered on the needs of recipient countries (Kawagoe, 2025: 282-284). From this perspective, "sub-regional" development may refer either to intra-national regions or to relatively small-scale cross-border cooperative frameworks. What makes sub-regional cooperation analytically significant is that it remains closely aligned with the priorities of recipient states while also incorporating broader regional concerns. This understanding is particularly relevant to the Mekong sub-region, where development needs are shaped not only by national policy agendas, but also by cross-border infrastructure, connectivity, environmental management and external assistance.

Seiichi Igarashi's discussion of East Asian sub-regions further highlights the importance of a multi-layered regional architecture. Igarashi argues that East Asia contains multiple sub-regional initiatives, each with distinct geopolitical and developmental characteristics (Igarashi, 2020: 1-6). These initiatives may overlap, but they do not necessarily contradict one another. Instead, they form a layered structure in which sub-regional policies function as linkages between individual nation-states and broader regional frameworks. This perspective helps explain why the Mekong sub-region has become an important site for external aid strategies. It allows external actors such as Japan and China, to participate in regional order-building not only through bilateral assistance, but also through infrastructure planning, policy coordination, development finance, human resource development and institutional cooperation.

At the same time, sub-regional governance should not be understood as a purely top-down or state-led process. Other contributors to the literature on East Asian sub-regions suggest that sub-regional policies may also emerge from local demands, cross-border interactions and the participation of non-state actors. In this sense, effective sub-regional governance requires not only state-led initiatives, but also the involvement of private enterprises, local actors, non-governmental organizations and transnational expertise. Such cooperation may be understood as a form of societal institutional reinforcement mechanism, through which local and transnational actors

help strengthen the practical operation of regional development frameworks (Sadotomo, 2020; Komatsu, 2020; Mineta, 2020). This point is especially important for the CLMVT, where infrastructure development, industrial relocation, environmental management and local implementation all depend on cooperation among state agencies, private firms, local governments and external development institutions.

Building on these discussions, this article defines institutional coexistence as a condition in which multiple aid systems, development frameworks and external institutional logics operate simultaneously within the same sub-regional arena. Institutional coexistence does not imply the absence of competition. Rather, it highlights a governance reality in which competition, complementarity and selective adaptation occur at the same time. In the CLMVT, Japan's ODA-centered model and China's BRI-centered model differ in terms of norms, financing mechanisms, project implementation and political visibility. Yet these differences do not necessarily produce mutual exclusion. Instead, they create a layered institutional environment in which recipient states can compare, combine and selectively use external resources.

This conceptualization is useful because it shifts the focus away from a simple competition-centered narrative. If China's BRI and Japan's ODA are viewed only as rival instruments of major-power influence, the agency of recipient states and the institutional complexity of sub-regional governance may be overlooked. In practice, CLMVT governments often do not treat Chinese and Japanese assistance as mutually exclusive choices. Japanese assistance may be valued for its institutional credibility, technical cooperation, long-term capacity building and quality infrastructure standards, while Chinese assistance may be valued for its delivery speed, financing scale, physical visibility and project-based flexibility. Institutional coexistence therefore captures not only the interaction between external powers, but also the strategic space available to recipient states.

Hideyuki Miura's discussion of Asia-Pacific economic integration further clarifies why institutionalization matters for the transformation of aid strategies. Miura argues that, before the early twenty-first century, the Asia-Pacific region lacked highly institutionalized mechanisms of economic integration centered on free trade agreements (Miura, 2021). Although market forces played a leading role in driving regional integration, institutional frameworks often lagged behind. Miura further examines the

transition from market-driven to institution-driven integration, particularly in relation to trade in services, investment regimes and their interaction with multilateral negotiation mechanisms. The high-standard rules and provisions of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, TPP, are therefore identified as an important milestone in promoting institution-led integration in the region (Okabe, 2020).

Although this discussion focuses primarily on economic integration, it also has implications for the transformation of aid strategies. As regional integration becomes increasingly institutionalized, development assistance can no longer be understood only as the transfer of funds, technology, or infrastructure from donor to recipient. It also becomes a means through which external actors participate in the formation of rules, standards, procedures and regional development agendas. For Japan, this transformation is reflected in the increasing emphasis on quality infrastructure, human security, public–private partnerships and policy coordination. For China, it is reflected in the expansion of infrastructure finance, state-owned enterprise participation, policy-bank lending and project-based connectivity under the BRI. In both cases, aid strategy has become closely connected to the institutional organization of regional development.

In 2013, the Japan Institute of International Affairs conducted a critical assessment of Japan’s economic integration strategies, arguing that the framework of large-scale international integration initiatives was undergoing significant transformation. Major arrangements such as the World Trade Organization, ASEAN Economic Community, Trans-Pacific Partnership and Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership were no longer the sole or dominant forms of integration. Instead, a growing emphasis had been placed on the emergence of “coordinative frameworks,” through which state actors responded to international political and economic pressures by engaging in more closely aligned institutional cooperation (Terada, 2013). This shift suggests that large-scale economic integration agreements, regional cooperation frameworks and sub-regional initiatives increasingly operate in parallel rather than in a fixed hierarchical order.

At the same time, the primary implementing agency of Japan’s ODA, the Japan International Cooperation Agency, conducted internal reviews of its Southeast Asia assistance programs in 2006 and 2015. These assessments, focusing on policy interaction and institutional design, proposed that development assistance should actively promote sub-regional integration and

regional governance (Japan International Cooperation Agency, 2006). Both JIIA and JICA converge on the view that sub-regional development models should be understood as integral components of a multi-layered institutional framework closely linked to larger-scale agreements. Such an approach represents a key strategic direction in Japan's aid policy configuration, because it allows Japan to connect ODA with broader regional cooperation mechanisms rather than treating aid as isolated bilateral assistance.

In this sense, sub-regional integration offers several notable advantages. First, it facilitates consensus-building among participating states and enables the implementation of concrete cooperative projects tailored to regional conditions. Second, it serves as a bridge to larger regional frameworks, functioning both as a testing ground and as a preparatory stage for broader integration initiatives. Third, because sub-regional development is more closely aligned with the needs of participating states, it enhances competitiveness within the region and strengthens interdependence among actors through complementary economic structures and mutually reinforcing trade networks. These advantages help explain why the Mekong Basin has become an important site for both Japanese and Chinese development strategies.

For this reason, sub-regional integration should be understood not only as a development framework, but also as a strategic arena in which external assistance systems are institutionalized, compared and selectively absorbed. For Japan, it provides a channel through which ODA can be linked to broader regional order-building. For China, it offers an opportunity to embed infrastructure finance and project-based cooperation into local development agendas. For recipient states in the CLMVT, the coexistence of these two models expands the range of available resources and increases their room for institutional maneuvering. Sub-regional governance is therefore the key mechanism through which China–Japan aid interaction becomes embedded in the political economy of Mekong development.

3. China's Expanding Development Assistance and Infrastructure Diplomacy in the CLMVT

China's expanding role in the CLMVT has become one of the most important external factors reshaping development assistance and sub-regional governance in the Mekong Basin. Unlike Japan's ODA-centered model, which has been gradually institutionalized through policy charters,

technical cooperation and long-term capacity building, China's approach has developed through a more project-based and infrastructure-centered logic. Since the mid-2010s, the Belt and Road Initiative, hereafter BRI and the Lancang–Mekong Cooperation, hereafter LMC, have provided China with two important channels for deepening its involvement in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam and Thailand. Together, these mechanisms have enabled China to connect development finance, infrastructure construction, state-owned enterprises, policy-bank lending and diplomatic engagement within a broader regional strategy.

The LMC is particularly important because it gives China a sub-regional institutional platform distinct from, but not entirely separate from, ASEAN-centered frameworks. Officially, the LMC emphasizes good-neighborliness, pragmatic cooperation, socio-economic development, the narrowing of development gaps, support for ASEAN Community building, South–South cooperation and the implementation of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2021). In this sense, the LMC allows China to present its engagement not only as bilateral project financing, but also as a form of sub-regional cooperation. However, unlike Japan's assistance model, which often emphasizes rules, standards and long-term institutional coordination, China's LMC and BRI practices tend to emphasize rapid delivery, material visibility and direct contribution to infrastructure connectivity.

This distinction is central to understanding China's development assistance in the CLMVT. China does not rely on ODA alone as its principal instrument of regional engagement. Rather, it combines aid, concessional loans, commercial lending, state-owned enterprise participation, construction contracts, industrial capacity exports and diplomatic coordination. The result is an integrated mechanism in which development assistance, infrastructure finance and political influence are closely connected. Railways, highways, bridges, ports, hydropower facilities, transmission networks, special economic zones and digital infrastructure therefore become not only economic projects, but also instruments through which China embeds its presence in the political economy of the Mekong sub-region.

The China–Laos Railway illustrates this logic most clearly. As part of the BRI, the railway connects Laos more directly to China and to wider regional transport networks. The World Bank has argued that, if accompanied by appropriate reforms, the railway could help transform

Laos from a landlocked country into a land-linked economy and potentially increase the country's aggregate income over the long term (World Bank, 2020). From China's perspective, the railway is not merely a transport project. It also serves as a strategic corridor that links China's southwestern provinces to mainland Southeast Asia. From the perspective of Laos, the project creates opportunities for logistics development, trade expansion, tourism and investment attraction. At the same time, it also raises concerns about debt sustainability, unequal bargaining power and the long-term dependence of local development on external infrastructure finance.

Similar dynamics can be observed in other CLMVT countries. In Thailand, the high-speed rail project connecting Bangkok, Nong Khai, Vientiane and eventually Kunming reflects China's broader ambition to construct a north–south connectivity corridor across mainland Southeast Asia (Reuters, 2025). In Cambodia, Chinese participation in transport infrastructure, special economic zones and the Funan Techo Canal demonstrate how infrastructure finance can be linked to industrial development, logistics and strategic access to maritime routes (Cheang, 2025). In Myanmar, although political instability has complicated many infrastructure projects, China has continued to regard economic corridors, pipelines, ports and borderland connectivity as important components of its regional strategy. In Vietnam, despite Hanoi's cautious approach toward Chinese infrastructure investment, the broader regional environment created by BRI and LMC still shapes Vietnam's strategic calculations in transport connectivity, trade and supply-chain diversification.

These examples show that China's assistance in the CLMVT is best understood as infrastructure diplomacy rather than conventional development aid. Its effectiveness does not derive primarily from formal rule-making or institutional conditionality. Instead, it is built on project visibility, delivery speed, financing accessibility and the promise of immediate usability. For many CLMVT governments, this model is attractive because it provides access to large-scale infrastructure finance that may not be easily available through domestic budgets or slower multilateral procedures. In this respect, China's assistance offers a development option that differs from Japan's ODA, the Asian Development Bank, or other Western-led development institutions.

At the same time, China's infrastructure-centered approach also generates political and institutional constraints. Large-scale projects may increase fiscal pressure, deepen dependence on Chinese finance and

strengthen the role of local political elites who can transform external resources into domestic political capital. The bilateral and project-based nature of Chinese financing may also weaken transparency and public accountability when compared with more procedure-oriented development assistance. These issues do not necessarily prevent recipient states from accepting Chinese projects. Rather, they shape how recipient states negotiate, adjust and combine external resources. In other words, the political consequences of Chinese assistance depend not only on China's intentions, but also on how CLMVT governments use Chinese resources within their own domestic and regional strategies.

For this reason, China's expanding development assistance should not be interpreted simply as replacing Japan's role in Southeast Asia. Its rise has instead produced a parallel track of development finance that coexists with Japan's ODA, ASEAN-centered frameworks, the Asian Development Bank and other multilateral mechanisms. China's strength lies in the speed, scale and visibility of infrastructure delivery. Japan's strength lies in institutional credibility, quality infrastructure, technical cooperation and long-term policy coordination. These differences make competition unavoidable, but they also make coexistence possible. Recipient states can draw on Chinese resources for rapid infrastructure construction while continuing to rely on Japan and multilateral institutions for technical expertise, policy design, human resource development and institutional capacity building.

The expansion of China's assistance in the CLMVT therefore creates the structural background against which Japan's Tokyo Strategy must be understood. Japan's Mekong policy did not evolve in isolation. Rather, it developed in an environment increasingly shaped by Chinese infrastructure diplomacy, LMC institutionalization and BRI connectivity projects. The next section turns to Japan's Mekong sub-regional assistance programs and the evolution of the Tokyo Strategy, showing how Japan adjusted its ODA-centered approach in response to this changing regional environment.

4. Mekong Sub-regional Assistance Programs and Japan's Strategic Adjustment: The Evolution of the Tokyo Strategy

(I) The Developmental Trajectory and Transformation of the Tokyo Strategy

The developmental trajectory of the Tokyo Strategy demonstrates the gradual transformation of Japan's Mekong policy from conventional development

cooperation toward a more comprehensive framework of sub-regional governance. Across the strategies issued in 2012, 2015, 2018 and 2024, Japan's assistance priorities expanded from connectivity and development cooperation to quality growth, institutional coordination, human security, digitalization, resilience and non-traditional security. This evolution indicates that the Tokyo Strategy was not a static aid program. Rather, it functioned as an adaptive policy framework through which Japan responded to changing development needs, regional integration pressures and the growing complexity of the Mekong sub-region.

The Tokyo Strategy 2012 for Mekong-Japan Cooperation marked an important starting point in this process. It replaced the earlier Tokyo Declaration and established a future vision for Mekong-Japan cooperation under the idea of a "New Partnership for the Common Flourishing Future." The strategy organized Japan's cooperation around three major pillars: enhancing Mekong connectivity, developing together and ensuring human security and environmental sustainability (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2012). These priorities reflected Japan's attempt to connect economic development with cross-border infrastructure, industrial cooperation and social stability. At this stage, Japan's approach remained primarily development-oriented. Its main objectives were to narrow development gaps, support ASEAN Community building and strengthen the institutional foundations for regional integration.

The significance of the 2012 strategy, however, did not lie only in its development objectives. It also showed how Japan began to link ODA with the practical operation of sub-regional governance. Through support for transport corridors, customs modernization, disaster risk reduction, environmental protection, public health, food safety and human resource development, Japan sought to strengthen the capacity of Mekong countries to participate in regional integration. In this sense, the Tokyo Strategy 2012 already moved beyond a narrow understanding of aid as the provision of funds or infrastructure. It treated development assistance as a means of building the institutional and social conditions necessary for cross-border cooperation.

The New Tokyo Strategy 2015 further deepened this direction. It placed stronger emphasis on transforming the Mekong region into a "global growth center" and introduced the concept of "quality growth" as a guiding principle (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2015b). Compared with the

2012 strategy, the 2015 strategy more explicitly connected infrastructure development with industrial upgrading, private-sector participation, legal and institutional improvement, environmental sustainability and coordination with other regional and international frameworks. Its four major pillars—hard connectivity, soft connectivity, Green Mekong and coordination with various stakeholders—indicated that Japan no longer viewed development assistance simply as the construction of physical infrastructure. Instead, infrastructure was increasingly linked to standards, institutions, human resources and policy coordination.

This shift was important because it reflected a broader transformation in Japan's development cooperation. Hard connectivity emphasized transport corridors, ports, airports, railways and other physical infrastructure. Soft connectivity focused on customs procedures, legal systems, human resource development, trade facilitation and institutional capacity. Green Mekong addressed environmental sustainability, disaster risk reduction, climate change and water resource management. Coordination with various stakeholders further showed Japan's intention to connect Mekong cooperation with ASEAN, the Asian Development Bank, the World Bank, the OECD, the United Nations, NGOs and other international partners. The 2015 strategy therefore represented a more institutionalized model of development assistance, in which infrastructure, rules, capacity building and regional coordination were mutually reinforcing.

The Tokyo Strategy 2018 for Mekong-Japan Cooperation marked a further strategic turn. It situated Mekong-Japan cooperation more clearly within Japan's broader regional vision of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific. The strategy identified three pillars: vibrant and effective connectivity, a people-centered society and the realization of a Green Mekong (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2018). Compared with the earlier strategies, the 2018 framework gave stronger attention to the relationship between connectivity, openness, sustainability, rules and regional stability. Mekong cooperation was no longer framed only as a development agenda for mainland Southeast Asia. It was also linked to the wider regional order of the Indo-Pacific.

The 2018 strategy therefore strengthened the strategic and geopolitical meaning of Japan's Mekong assistance. Connectivity was not treated merely as a matter of infrastructure construction or trade facilitation. It was also connected to principles such as openness, transparency, economic efficiency, debt sustainability and a rules-based regional order. At the same time, the

strategy maintained Japan's long-standing emphasis on human-centered development and environmental sustainability. By combining connectivity, people-centered cooperation and Green Mekong, Japan attempted to frame its assistance as both a development contribution and a regional public good. This marked an important stage in the transformation of the Tokyo Strategy from development cooperation toward order-building through sub-regional governance.

The Mekong-Japan Cooperation Strategy 2024 continued this trajectory while adjusting Japan's priorities to a post-pandemic and more security-conscious regional environment. It identified three major areas of cooperation: building a resilient and connected society in the post-COVID-19 world, promoting digitalization and responding proactively to non-traditional security issues (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2024). These priorities reflected the changing development agenda of the Mekong region. Public health, supply-chain resilience, digital transformation, climate change, disaster risk reduction, water resource management, gender equality, blue economy and economic security became more prominent than before. In this sense, the 2024 strategy showed that Japan's Mekong policy had moved beyond conventional infrastructure cooperation and had become a broader framework for regional resilience.

The inclusion of digitalization and non-traditional security in the 2024 strategy is particularly important. Digitalization reflects Japan's attempt to respond to the transformation of trade, finance, governance and supply chains in the post-pandemic period. Non-traditional security, by contrast, shows that development assistance is increasingly connected to climate risks, public health, water management, economic security and social resilience. These themes indicate that Japan's Mekong policy is no longer limited to material connectivity. It also seeks to strengthen the institutional, technological and social capacity of recipient states to respond to uncertainty and external shocks. The 2024 strategy therefore represents the latest stage in Japan's effort to redefine ODA as a mechanism of regional resilience and sub-regional governance.

From this perspective, the evolution of the Tokyo Strategy can be divided into four stages. The 2012 strategy established a development-oriented framework centered on connectivity, joint development and human security. The 2015 strategy introduced quality growth, hard and soft connectivity, environmental sustainability and stakeholder coordination.

The 2018 strategy connected Mekong cooperation to the Free and Open Indo-Pacific and strengthened the strategic and rules-based dimensions of Japan's assistance. The 2024 strategy further incorporated post-pandemic resilience, digitalization and non-traditional security into Japan's Mekong policy. Across these stages, Japan's assistance moved from development cooperation toward a more institutionalized and strategic form of sub-regional governance.

The developmental trajectory of the Tokyo Strategy thus reveals the adaptive character of Japan's Mekong policy. Japan did not abandon its ODA-centered approach, but it gradually expanded the meaning of ODA by linking it to connectivity, institutional coordination, quality infrastructure, resilience and regional order-building. This evolution provides the basis for understanding Japan's later response to China's expanding presence in the Mekong sub-region. As the following section shows, Japan's strategic adjustment did not take the form of direct confrontation with China. Rather, it involved the construction of a differentiated assistance model that emphasized standards, reliability, sustainability and long-term institutional trust.

(II) Japan's Response to China's Expanding Presence in the Mekong Sub-region

Japan's adjustment of the Tokyo Strategy cannot be separated from China's expanding presence in the Mekong sub-region. Since the mid-2010s, China's Belt and Road Initiative, hereafter BRI and the Lancang–Mekong Cooperation, hereafter LMC, have strengthened China's role in infrastructure finance, connectivity projects, industrial cooperation and sub-regional diplomacy. These developments have changed the strategic environment in which Japan implements its Mekong assistance programs. For Japan, the issue is not simply that China has become a major development actor in the CLMVT. More importantly, China has introduced a different operational logic of assistance, one that emphasizes rapid implementation, large-scale financing, state-owned enterprise participation and the political visibility of physical infrastructure.

This Chinese model has posed both challenges and opportunities for Japan. On the one hand, China's infrastructure diplomacy has increased competition in areas where Japan has long been active, especially transport corridors, ports, energy facilities, industrial zones and cross-border

connectivity. On the other hand, China's rise has also created an opportunity for Japan to clarify the distinctive features of its own assistance model. Instead of directly replicating China's speed- and scale-oriented approach, Japan has increasingly emphasized quality infrastructure, institutional credibility, debt sustainability, environmental standards, human resource development and long-term policy coordination. In this sense, Japan's response has been less a strategy of direct confrontation than a strategy of differentiation.

The New Tokyo Strategy 2015 already reflected this logic of differentiation. By emphasizing "quality growth," hard and soft connectivity, Green Mekong and coordination with various stakeholders, Japan sought to distinguish its assistance from project-centered infrastructure finance. The idea of quality growth allowed Japan to present development not merely as the construction of physical infrastructure, but as a process requiring institutional capacity, inclusive benefits, environmental sustainability and long-term resilience. This was particularly important in the context of China's expanding infrastructure projects, because it enabled Japan to frame its assistance as more than a source of capital. Japan positioned itself as a partner capable of supporting both infrastructure development and the institutional conditions necessary for sustainable regional integration.

The Tokyo Strategy 2018 further strengthened this response by linking Mekong cooperation to the broader vision of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific. This did not mean that Japan's Mekong policy became purely geopolitical or anti-China in orientation. Rather, the 2018 strategy allowed Japan to embed its assistance within a wider normative and strategic framework centered on openness, transparency, rule of law, freedom of navigation, economic efficiency and debt sustainability. These principles served as Japan's answer to the governance concerns associated with large-scale infrastructure finance. They also allowed Japan to provide CLMVT countries with an alternative source of external support without requiring them to openly reject Chinese assistance.

The emphasis on quality infrastructure became one of the most important instruments of Japan's strategic adjustment. Compared with China's project-based model, Japan's infrastructure cooperation has generally placed greater emphasis on life-cycle costs, maintenance, safety, environmental and social impact, local capacity building and coordination with international standards. This approach does not necessarily generate

the same immediate visibility as Chinese-funded projects. However, it strengthens Japan's reputation as a reliable and institutionally credible partner. For recipient states, Japan's quality infrastructure approach provides a different type of resource: not only physical assets, but also technical knowledge, administrative capacity and long-term development planning.

Japan's response also relied on institutional coordination. Through cooperation with ASEAN, the Asian Development Bank, the World Bank, OECD-related standards and other regional and international partners, Japan sought to embed its Mekong assistance within a broader network of rules and institutions. This approach contrasts with the more bilateral and project-specific logic often associated with China's BRI financing. Japan's emphasis on coordination does not eliminate competition with China, but it changes the terms of competition. Rather than competing only over the number or size of infrastructure projects, Japan has attempted to compete over standards, trust, sustainability and institutional reliability.

At the same time, Japan's approach created additional policy space for CLMVT governments. Recipient states do not necessarily view Japanese and Chinese assistance as mutually exclusive. Instead, they often use the coexistence of these two models to diversify external resources, reduce excessive dependence on a single partner and improve their bargaining position. Chinese assistance may be attractive when governments seek rapid infrastructure delivery and large-scale financing. Japanese assistance may be more valuable when governments seek technical expertise, institutional strengthening, human resource development and long-term policy support. This selective use of external assistance reflects the agency of recipient states within sub-regional governance.

The Mekong-Japan Cooperation Strategy 2024 shows that Japan's response has continued to evolve beyond infrastructure competition. By emphasizing a resilient and connected society, digitalization and proactive responses to non-traditional security issues, Japan has sought to move into areas where development assistance intersects with economic security, supply-chain resilience, public health, climate change, water resource management and digital governance. These themes allow Japan to respond to the changing needs of the Mekong countries while also differentiating its assistance from China's more infrastructure-centered approach. In this sense, the 2024 strategy expands the scope of Japan's response from physical connectivity to resilience-oriented governance.

This evolution suggests that Japan's response to China is best understood through the concept of institutional coexistence. Japan has not attempted to remove China from the Mekong sub-region, nor has it abandoned its own ODA-centered model. Instead, it has adjusted its assistance strategy in ways that allow Japan to remain institutionally relevant in a regional environment increasingly shaped by Chinese infrastructure diplomacy. Japan's strategy is therefore to preserve influence through standards, coordination, trust and long-term capacity building, while recognizing that China's assistance will continue to operate in the same sub-regional space.

For this reason, China's expanding presence has not produced a simple replacement of Japanese assistance. Rather, it has intensified the coexistence of multiple development systems in the CLMVT. China's BRI and LMC provide infrastructure finance, physical connectivity and project-based cooperation. Japan's Tokyo Strategy provides quality infrastructure, institutional coordination, human security, resilience and long-term development support. The interaction between these two systems has reshaped the political economy of Mekong development by giving recipient states more options and by embedding external assistance within a layered structure of sub-regional governance.

Japan's response to China's expanding presence in the Mekong sub-region therefore reveals the central argument of this article. The relationship between Chinese and Japanese assistance is not adequately captured by a simple narrative of rivalry. Competition exists, but it is mediated by institutional differentiation, recipient-state agency and the multi-layered character of sub-regional governance. The Tokyo Strategy functions as Japan's institutional response to this environment. It allows Japan to adapt to China's rise without reducing Mekong cooperation to zero-sum competition. In doing so, it contributes to a pattern of institutional coexistence in which China and Japan continue to compete, overlap and remain simultaneously embedded in the development strategies of the CLMVT countries.

5. Institutional Coexistence in Practice: China–Japan Aid Interaction and Recipient-State Responses in the Mekong Basin

The coexistence of Chinese and Japanese assistance in the Mekong Basin is not merely an abstract institutional condition. It is a practical governance reality shaped by the interaction of external aid systems and the strategic

responses of recipient states. China's BRI-centered assistance and Japan's ODA-centered cooperation operate according to different logics, but they are embedded in the same development space. They target similar sectors, including connectivity, transport infrastructure, energy, industrial development, digital transformation, environmental management and human resource development. As a result, the Mekong Basin has become a site where multiple development systems overlap, compete and coexist.

This coexistence does not mean that China and Japan provide identical forms of assistance. China's approach is often characterized by large-scale infrastructure finance, rapid implementation, state-owned enterprise participation and strong political visibility. Japan's approach, by contrast, emphasizes institutional coordination, technical cooperation, quality infrastructure, human security, environmental sustainability and long-term capacity building. These differences create competition, especially in the areas of transport corridors, ports, railways, energy systems and regional connectivity. However, they also create functional differentiation. In many cases, recipient states do not need to choose one model over the other. Instead, they can use Chinese and Japanese resources for different purposes within their own development strategies.

Cambodia provides a clear example of this pattern. Chinese assistance and investment have played an important role in Cambodia's transport infrastructure, special economic zones, energy projects and large-scale construction. These projects have strengthened Cambodia's physical connectivity and created visible symbols of development. At the same time, Japan has continued to support Cambodia through technical cooperation, institutional capacity building, urban infrastructure, human resource development and governance-related assistance. Rather than replacing Japan's role, China's presence has added another layer to Cambodia's external development partnerships. Cambodian elites have therefore been able to use Chinese assistance for rapid infrastructure expansion while continuing to rely on Japanese cooperation for institutional credibility and long-term development support.

Laos illustrates an even more direct form of institutional coexistence. The China–Laos Railway has become one of the most visible BRI projects in mainland Southeast Asia. It has strengthened Laos's position as a potential land-linked economy and has created new opportunities for logistics, tourism and trade. However, the project has also raised concerns about debt,

dependence and the concentration of strategic infrastructure around Chinese finance and technology. In this context, Japan's assistance remains important because it provides complementary support in areas such as human resource development, technical training, disaster risk management, public services and institutional strengthening. Laos therefore does not simply move from Japanese assistance to Chinese assistance. Instead, it operates within a dual aid environment in which Chinese infrastructure finance and Japanese institutional cooperation coexist.

Thailand shows a different pattern because it has stronger administrative capacity and more diversified external partnerships. China's role in Thailand is most visible in railway connectivity and regional transport networks, especially projects that aim to link Thailand with Laos and eventually with southern China. Japan, however, has long maintained a strong economic and industrial presence in Thailand, particularly through private investment, industrial development, supply-chain integration and technical cooperation. For Thailand, the coexistence of China and Japan provides opportunities to balance infrastructure connectivity with industrial upgrading. Thai policymakers can engage Chinese projects when they serve transport and logistical objectives, while also relying on Japanese firms and institutions for industrial standards, technological cooperation and supply-chain resilience.

Vietnam represents a more cautious case of recipient-state response. Because of its complex historical and strategic relationship with China, Vietnam has generally approached Chinese infrastructure finance with greater caution. Nevertheless, China remains a major economic partner and regional connectivity under the BRI and LMC continues to influence Vietnam's trade and infrastructure environment. Japan has therefore occupied an important position as a trusted development partner for Vietnam, especially in infrastructure, urban development, human resource training and institutional reform. Vietnam's response to China–Japan aid coexistence is not simply one of acceptance or rejection. Rather, it reflects a strategy of selective engagement, in which Vietnam seeks to benefit from regional connectivity while maintaining strategic autonomy and diversifying its external partnerships.

Myanmar presents the most politically complex case. China has maintained significant interests in pipelines, ports, borderland connectivity, economic corridors and strategic access to the Indian Ocean. However, Myanmar's domestic political instability has complicated the implementation

and legitimacy of many external assistance projects. Japan has traditionally adopted a more cautious approach, combining development assistance, humanitarian concerns and engagement with institutional processes. In Myanmar, institutional coexistence is therefore unstable and highly conditioned by domestic political conflict. The interaction between Chinese and Japanese assistance is not merely a matter of development planning, but is also shaped by questions of regime legitimacy, conflict dynamics and the political risks of external involvement.

These country-level variations suggest that recipient states are not passive objects of external competition. They play an active role in shaping the outcomes of institutional coexistence. Cambodia and Laos may rely more heavily on Chinese infrastructure finance, but they still preserve space for Japanese cooperation. Thailand uses the coexistence of China and Japan to strengthen both connectivity and industrial upgrading. Vietnam selectively engages external assistance in order to maintain autonomy and reduce strategic vulnerability. Myanmar demonstrates that domestic political instability can limit the developmental benefits of external assistance and transform institutional coexistence into a more fragile arrangement. In all cases, recipient-state agency is central to understanding how China–Japan aid interaction operates in practice.

The coexistence of Chinese and Japanese assistance also affects the bargaining power of CLMVT countries. When multiple external actors provide development resources, recipient states can compare financing conditions, implementation speed, project quality, technical standards and political costs. This creates opportunities for bargaining and institutional maneuvering. Governments may accept Chinese assistance for large-scale and highly visible infrastructure projects, while using Japanese assistance to strengthen administrative capacity, technical expertise and long-term development planning. Such selective use allows recipient states to avoid excessive dependence on a single donor, although the degree of autonomy varies across countries.

At the same time, institutional coexistence does not eliminate risks. The availability of multiple aid systems may increase bargaining space, but it can also intensify elite capture, fragmented planning, debt exposure and uneven development outcomes. When external assistance is used primarily to serve domestic political interests, infrastructure projects may become tools of regime consolidation rather than inclusive development. Likewise, when

Chinese and Japanese projects are not effectively coordinated, they may produce duplication, competing standards, or uneven regional integration. Therefore, institutional coexistence should not be romanticized as an automatically positive outcome. Its effects depend on domestic governance capacity, transparency, policy coordination and the ability of recipient states to convert external resources into sustainable development.

From the perspective of sub-regional governance, however, the coexistence of China and Japan contributes to the resilience of the Mekong development order. Resilience does not mean the absence of competition or contradiction. Rather, it refers to the capacity of the sub-region to absorb overlapping external influences while maintaining policy continuity and development opportunities. In the Mekong Basin, China's infrastructure diplomacy and Japan's ODA-centered cooperation generate different forms of resources. Their coexistence allows the sub-region to avoid dependence on a single institutional model. It also enables recipient states to combine physical connectivity with institutional capacity, infrastructure delivery with technical cooperation and external finance with domestic development priorities.

The practical operation of institutional coexistence therefore reshapes the meaning of aid competition. China and Japan certainly compete for influence, visibility and strategic relevance. Yet this competition is mediated by the institutional structure of sub-regional governance and by the strategies of recipient states. Competition does not necessarily lead to exclusion. Instead, it often produces differentiation, adaptation and selective combination. Japan responds to China by emphasizing quality, standards and institutional trust. China expands its role by offering infrastructure finance, speed and project visibility. Recipient states then use the coexistence of these options to pursue their own development and political objectives.

This analysis suggests that the Mekong Basin should not be understood as a space in which one external power simply replaces another. Rather, it is a layered governance arena in which multiple aid systems operate simultaneously. China's rise has changed the conditions under which Japan conducts its development cooperation, but it has not eliminated Japan's role. Japan's strategic adjustment has allowed it to remain relevant, but it has not prevented China from expanding its influence. The result is not institutional displacement, but institutional coexistence. This coexistence is shaped by competition between external powers, differentiation among aid models and the agency of recipient states.

In this sense, the CLMVT experience offers a broader analytical implication for the study of sub-regional governance in Southeast Asia. External assistance should not be examined only through the lens of donor strategy. It must also be analyzed as a field of interaction in which recipient states, domestic elites, local institutions and external powers jointly shape governance outcomes. China–Japan aid interaction in the Mekong Basin demonstrates that sub-regional governance is not simply imposed from outside. It is produced through the negotiation, adaptation and selective use of multiple institutional resources. This is precisely why institutional coexistence has become a defining feature of development governance in the Mekong Basin.

6. Conclusion

This article has examined China and Japan in the CLMVT through the lens of institutional coexistence and sub-regional governance. Its central argument is that Chinese and Japanese development assistance in the Mekong Basin should not be understood simply as a zero-sum competition, nor as a process in which one external power replaces the other. Rather, the CLMVT has become a sub-regional space in which China's BRI-centered assistance and Japan's ODA-centered cooperation overlap, compete and coexist. This coexistence has become one of the defining features of development governance in mainland Southeast Asia.

China's expanding role has changed the structure of development assistance in the Mekong sub-region. Through the BRI and LMC, China has promoted a model of development engagement centered on infrastructure finance, policy-bank lending, state-owned enterprises, rapid implementation and project visibility. This model has given CLMVT governments access to large-scale resources for transport, energy, industrial zones, digital infrastructure and connectivity projects. At the same time, it has also raised questions about debt sustainability, dependence, transparency and the political implications of infrastructure-centered assistance. China's rise has therefore not merely added another donor to the region. It has introduced a parallel development logic that reshapes the choices available to recipient states and the strategic environment in which other external actors operate.

Japan's response has been to adjust, rather than abandon, its ODA-centered approach. The evolution of the Tokyo Strategy from 2012 to 2024 shows how Japan's Mekong policy gradually moved from development

cooperation toward a broader framework of sub-regional governance. Connectivity, quality growth, hard and soft infrastructure, Green Mekong, FOIP, resilience, digitalization and non-traditional security have all become part of Japan's assistance agenda. These adjustments demonstrate that Japan has sought to remain relevant not by directly imitating China's speed- and scale-oriented model, but by emphasizing quality infrastructure, institutional credibility, long-term capacity building, human security, sustainability and policy coordination.

The coexistence of these two assistance systems also highlights the agency of recipient states. CLMVT governments are not merely passive objects of China–Japan competition. They compare, combine and selectively use different external resources according to their own development needs, domestic political interests and strategic calculations. Chinese assistance may be attractive for large-scale and visible infrastructure projects, while Japanese assistance may be valued for technical cooperation, institutional strengthening, quality standards and long-term policy support. This selective use of external resources creates room for bargaining and institutional maneuvering, although it also brings risks of fragmented planning, elite capture and uneven development outcomes.

From the perspective of sub-regional governance, institutional coexistence helps explain why the Mekong development order has not been transformed into a single China-centered or Japan-centered structure. Instead, it has become a layered governance arena in which multiple aid systems, institutional logics and external development strategies operate simultaneously. Competition exists, but it is mediated by functional differentiation, institutional adaptation and recipient-state agency. The case of China and Japan in the CLMVT therefore suggests that sub-regional governance in Southeast Asia is shaped not only by major-power rivalry, but also by the practical coexistence of different development models. In this sense, institutional coexistence offers a useful framework for understanding how external assistance, regional order-building and recipient-state strategies intersect in the changing political economy of the Mekong Basin.

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