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## Changing Regional Dynamics in the Greater Mekong Subregion: The Rivalry between Japan, China and the US and the Impacts to Regional Connectivity

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### Abstract

This paper analyses the impact of the economic and political rivalry between Japan, China and the US upon the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS). The rivalry is part of the amicable and hostile relations between superpowers within the international system and has significant impacts on regional economic and political arrangements. The emergence of the 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' (FOIP) by Japan was welcomed by the US, India, and Australia and brought new factors and conditions to the region. Many scholars argue that the FOIP was a strategy to balance China's power in the region. The growing power of China's regional development projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) change the geopolitical and geo-economics configuration in the region significantly. BRI itself integrates many parts of the world into China's international production network and sphere of influence. This paper argues that the geopolitical rivalry between Japan, China and the US shaped the regional connectivity development in the GMS area. It integrated the GMS into broader geopolitical and geopolitical strategies which are FOIP and China's BRI.

### Keywords

China, Japan, US, Free and Open Indo-Pacific, Greater Mekong Subregion

## **Introduction**

The Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) is confronting many challenges.<sup>1</sup> The difference in economic and political regimes within this subregion is one of the critical factors that has shaped how the subregion forms regional initiatives. Accordingly, these differences have formed loosely structured regional initiatives such as the Greater Mekong Subregion Economic Co-operation Programme (hereafter 'the GMS Programme'), which was established by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) in 1992, and many other initiatives that emphasise economic co-operation.

When Shinzo Abe created the idea of the 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' (FOIP) strategy in 2016, regional initiatives in Southeast Asia were confronted with a new challenge. Before FOIP, the ideas of regional initiatives in Southeast Asia were not associated with democratic values, but the emergence of FOIP, which emphasised the ideas of 'free and open', brought a dilemma to Southeast Asian countries.<sup>2</sup> From 2016 onwards, after Abe announced his idea of economic, political and strategic collaboration between Japan and the 'Indo-Pacific' region, the idea of a 'free and open' region came forth.

There are some debates about the political intension of Japan's FOIP, such as whether it was formed to respond to its domestic economic and political situation (Brown, 2018; Lindgren, 2020; Yennie-Lindgren, 2019), or to balance regional power with China, with particular reference to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Chellaney, 2018; Choong, 2019; Hosoya, 2019; Katagiri, 2019; Kitaoka, 2019; Miller, 2019; Satake, 2019; Shah, 2020), or to reduce the tension in the region (Satake, 2019; Satake & Sahashi, 2020). Nonetheless, there is still a need to study the reasons behind Japan's initiation of the FOIP as it has indeed challenged the geopolitical rivalry between Japan, China and the US. Consequently, FOIP has become a new buzzword in the study of International Relations (IR).

As mentioned above, although there are many analyses of the reason behind FOIP initiation, the ultimate objective seems to be based on politics and security. However, apart from its political and security endeavour, FOIP also stresses the importance of infrastructure development with particular reference to 'connectivity.' The idea of infrastructure development has close relations with the idea of economic development. The study of the Global Trade Analysis Project (GTAP) reveals that if the Indo-Pacific region

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<sup>1</sup> This paper uses the 'GMS' in two ways. The first way is to signify a subregion which comprises Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. The second way is to signify a regional initiative which was established by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) in 1992. The usage of the former will appear as 'GMS,' whilst the latter will appear as 'the GMS Programme.'

<sup>2</sup> 'Indo-Pacific' is used to signify the region which covers East Asia (including Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia), South Asia, and East Africa. It does not cover Oceania. On the other hand, 'FOIP' signifies a strategy of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD).

could increase its level of infrastructure development, the actual GDP within ASEAN would reach \$437 billion, whilst the South Asian GDP would be \$305 billion (Yanagida, 2020). Kentaro Sonoura, Special Advisor to the Prime Minister of Japan, former State Minister of Foreign Affairs, emphasises that infrastructure is one of the required elements to aid economic growth and to support connectivity between countries throughout the region, which further supports global economic growth (Sonoura, 2017).

Japan, China and the US have their own diplomatic way of using regional connectivity diplomacy. Japan's FOIP focuses on hard infrastructure development, which does not come as a surprise. The Japanese government has been supporting mega-project development (e.g., dams, roads, railways, deep seaports) since the end of the Second World War as one way to revive its leading position in the international system through the use of official development assistance (ODA). Interestingly, Japan's mega-projects are not officially associated with any political ideas. Unlike the US's assistance, which is mostly associated with democratic values as one of the conditionalities to help recipients, Japan's ODA philosophy mainly focuses on the idea of self-help, meaning that the recipients must be able to use and sustain the projects funded by the ODA themselves (Rix, 1993; Sawamura, 2004). Japan has been one of the biggest financial contributors to mega-project development within the GMS through the allocations of the Japan International Co-operation Agency (JICA) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA). China, meanwhile, is another critical financial contributor to the GMS subregion. Recently, China's BRI, which aims to link China with other regions in the world, along with the Lancang-Mekong Co-operation (LMC), have challenged Japan's position in the GMS. Amidst the China-Japan rivalry, the US also plays a significant role in the GMS subregion. The US initiated the Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI) which later changed its name to the 'Mekong-U.S. Partnership' (MUSP). The MUSP also emphasises the importance of regional connectivity as an important element that can help regional economic cooperation.

The financial assistance from Japan, China and the US brings a dilemma to the region. Japan, China and the US utilise different approaches to assist the GMS subregion, and such assistance differs in political ideology. This paper, thereby, analyses how the rivalry between Japan, China and the US within the GMS shaped the regional connectivity development project; and how the rivalry shaped and integrated the subregion into the Indo-Pacific region.

From this section onwards, this paper is divided into four parts. The first part discusses the concepts related to FOIP. It aims to analyse how the ideas of 'free and open' challenge the existing regional initiatives in the subregion. Next, the second part analyses how the rivalry between Japan, China and the US shapes other geopolitical rivalries within the GMS subregion. The third section provides examples of how regional connectivity within

the GMS is one of the main factors of the rivalry. It analyses the geopolitical and geo-economics significance of integrating the GMS subregion into the international production network. It further analyses how this rivalry is significant to, and has implications on, future regional connectivity development in the GMS. The fourth part is the conclusion of this article, which recapitulates the arguments of this paper and proposes some ideas for future research.

### **‘Free and Open’ and ‘Indo-Pacific’: A Contested Region**

This section aims to analyse the ideas of ‘Free and Open’ and ‘Indo-Pacific.’ What are the problems behind these concepts? How does FOIP challenge geopolitics in the GMS subregion? Before we proceed, I would like to point out that this paper uses ‘FOIP’ in two ways. The first usage refers to the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD)’s FOIP, which is a strategy towards the region, whilst the second usage refers to a newly constructed region including Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, East Africa and some countries in the Pacific Ocean. It must also be stated that, in fact, the concept of the Indo-Pacific is broad and equivocal. Each country has its own version of the Indo-Pacific region, meanwhile the areas and countries that are counted as the Indo-Pacific are also being seen differently.

‘Indo-Pacific’ is a constructed concept. Academically, there are many terminologies that have been used to signify a certain region and to expand upon the understanding of that region. The former is the terminology that we commonly use to describe a region, typically based on geographic location, such as ‘South-East Asia,’ ‘East Asia,’ or ‘South Asia.’ These terminologies shape our understanding of regions by identifying their location. The latter, on the other hand, has a wider and more comprehensive meaning, such as ‘Asia-Pacific.’ Each term is constructed and used differently based on the context. The former can be used strategically, whilst the latter has a more economic-focused dimension. On the contrary, ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific’ is composed of two main elements. The first element represents the values, and the second represents the geography. Unlike the terminologies above, this is the first regional concept that combines values and geography. It is a political project embedded with democratic values. This new way of identifying the three combined regions was coined by Shinzo Abe who initiated the idea of ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific’ at the Sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD VI) in 2016, which was held in Nairobi, Kenya. When Shinzo Abe announced the FOIP strategy, many scholars saw this as a way to counter or contain the growing influence of China within Southeast Asia and South Asia. However, Kentaro Sonoura, Special Advisor to Japan’s PM, and a former Japanese ambassador to ASEAN, continues to state that Japan’s FOIP does not aim to contain China (Chhengpor, 2018). For example, Kentaro once stated that:

*Japan bears the responsibility of fostering the confluence of the Pacific and Indian Oceans and of Asia and Africa into a place that values freedom, the rule of law, and the market economy, free from force or coercion, and making it prosperous. (MOFA, 2016)*

Kentaro sees the FOIP as a strategy to help establish certain principles in the Indo-Pacific region. Japan's MOFA (2019) also states that Japan's FOIP was developed based on three vital values and principles: the rule of law, freedom of navigation and peace and stability (MOFA, 2019). Similarly, Kawashima (2017, pp. 85-86) sees the values and ideas behind Japan's FOIP as attempts to build a rules-based region by using rule of law and the market economy. Such values and ideas challenge China's role within Southeast Asia, South Asia and East Africa, regions in which China has made significant investments. China also uses its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and other economic assistance programmes to support its presence in those regions. However, it is notable that China's projects do not focus on values and norms, unlike the FOIP, which emphasises democracy and human rights, and the ideas of a market-oriented economy, rule of law, and open navigation. After Japan proposed the idea of the FOIP to the world, the US, Australia and India also welcomed its initiation. They then revised the FOIP into their own versions, each of which varies slightly in regard to values and principles.

**Table 1** Values, Ideas, Emphasises in FOIP

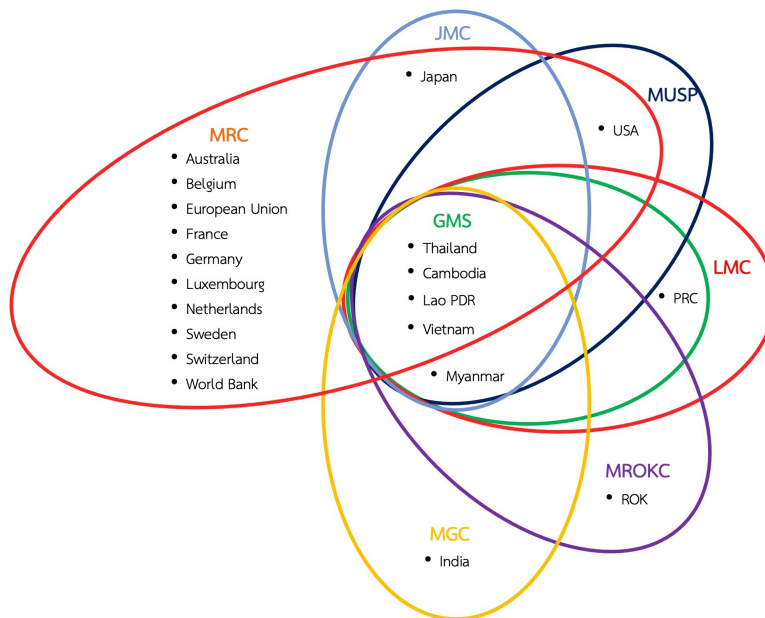
	Values and Ideas in FOIP
Japan	Rule of Law, Freedom of Navigation, Openness, Free Trade
US	Freedom, Democracy, the Rule of Law
Australia	Conflict Dispute Resolution, Open Markets, Flow of Goods, Economic Integration, Freedom of Navigation
India	Connectivity, Maritime Security, Counterterrorism, Non-Proliferation, Cybersecurity

**Source:** Accumulated by the author from the State Department (2019), MOFA (2019), Australian Government (2017) and Ministry of External Affairs (2019).

Table 1 shows the values and ideas that differ between Japan, the US, Australia and India. The US pays attention to democratic issues, including democracy, freedom, and the rule of law (Parameswaran, 2019). Australia focuses on the broader idea of 'free and open,' as this covers both the economy and business opportunities. India, on the other hand, pays attention to security-related issues. The ideas of 'free' and 'open' in each country are interpreted differently. 'Free' can be associated with either economic or political dimensions. We can see here that the idea of 'free' has been interpreted both as the freedom of navigation and freedom as a whole. At the same time, it was also interpreted as freedom

from threat, such as the freedom from terrorism, freedom from nuclear insecurity and freedom from cyber-attacks. 'Open,' on the other hand, was interpreted as the openness of economic opportunities, including free trade, open markets and open seelines (Lee, 2019). These values and ideas challenge other ideas within the international system. In Asia, for example, there are different ideas and values in each country, challenging the concept of universal value(s). So much so, in fact, that Mahathir Mohamad's concept of 'Asian values' is considered to be provocative (Harper, 1997). The interpretation of ideas and values in the name of the FOIP is, thus, political. Many scholars have discussed the rivalry of Japan and the US with China in the Indo-Pacific region. Many studies have also paid attention to the question of how ASEAN has readjusted its strategy to address the geopolitical rivalry between the 'QUAD,' which comprises Japan, the US, India and Australia, and China in the Indo-Pacific region. Most of these studies see the 'ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific' (AOIP) as a potential proactive response to the FOIP (Fujita, 2021; Tay, 2020; Yu, 2000).

FOIP is a new form of what I call a 'cross-regional order' (Charoensri, 2021b). This cross-regional order shapes political and economic configurations within the Indo-Pacific region. It creates an order that integrates, harmonises and narrows the gap of policies that were implemented separately into one broad, comprehensive mega-order. Some existing cross-regional orders that we have seen thus far include the FOIP and BRI. Cross-regional orders, thus, have the power to shape other orders within the international system, such as regional orders (e.g., ASEAN) and subregional orders (e.g., the GMS Programme). The GMS subregion is, thereby, a battlefield. We have witnessed the engagement and contribution of superpowers within the GMS from different levels and utilising various methods. Regional initiatives have also been widely established to help the GMS develop its economies, politics and environment (see Figure 1). We can see in Figure 1 that the GMS subregion is of interest to Japan, the US, China, South Korea, India, and multiple European countries.



**Figure 1** GMS in Regional Architecture

Source: Author

Figure 1 shows the overlapping regional initiatives that were created by superpowers. These regional initiatives are under the FOIP, which is a cross-regional order. As I have mentioned above, the FOIP encompasses democratic-oriented values, focusing on the ideas of 'free' and 'open,' forcing other regional- and subregion orders in the region to confront a dilemma of normative issues. Figure 1 also demonstrates how superpowers engage in regional initiatives within Southeast Asia.

1. Japan: Japan-Mekong Co-operation (JMC)
2. The US: Mekong-US Partnership (MUSP)
3. China: Lancang-Mekong Co-operation (LMC)
4. South Korea: Mekong-ROK Co-operation (MROKC)
5. India: Mekong-Ganga Co-operation (MGC)
6. Various Countries: Mekong River Commission (MRC)

These regional initiatives mainly focus on connectivity, which links further to economic development (Charoensri, 2019; Kessides, 1993; MOFA, 1992; Nakao, 2015). Not only does this idea play a prominent role in the FOIP, but the main development project of the FOIP is also regional connectivity. The FOIP focuses on regional connectivity because Japan sees it as both a means and an end to support economic development, increase living

standards, and help connect the regions (Yanagida, 2020). As we have seen over nearly ten years, China and Japan have contributed considerably to infrastructure development in Southeast Asia, which have triggered a significant number of development projects within the region including high-speed railways, cross-border transport systems and the development of airports and deep seaports across the region. For Southeast Asian countries, this could be an opportunity to receive assistance from both China and Japan, or it may cause a dilemma for them.

### **The GMS in FOIP: Japan, China and the US Rivalry**

I have mentioned above about the regional rivalry between superpowers. I have also touched upon the concept of 'cross-regional orders' (Charoensri, 2021b), which I developed to analyse how international orders shape regional- and subregional orders. China's BRI and the FOIP strategy for Japan and the US, which are the main case studies of this paper, are also shaped by the dynamics of international politics. As the geopolitical rivalry between China, the US, and Japan within the Indo-Pacific region is serious, this section will analyse how it has shaped the regional economic and political configurations thus far.

#### *1.1 The US-China Rivalry*

For IR scholars, the US-China rivalry within the Indo-Pacific region is inevitable. The rise of China challenges the supremacy of the US in East Asia and has triggered the US to initiate a more active role in the region. China is one of the most important trade partners for GMS member countries. Apart from Vietnam, which has a territorial dispute with China over the South China Sea, every country in the GMS subregion has comparatively higher amicable economic and political relations with China than with the US. However, the US is concerned about the growing power of China within the GMS subregion (Jones, 2018; Kim, 2019; Shambaugh, 2021). China's economic contributions to infrastructure development, as well as various other activities that support Chinese investors within the subregion, make China an active contributor to economic development (Blanchard, 2018; Teo & Lam, 2012). The US is concerned, therefore, that the growing power of China in the subregion might change the leading role of the US.

In 2009, the White House, under the Obama administration, initiated the LMI to help support environmental and social development in the GMS subregion and to reengage with Southeast Asia (Chang, 2013; Cronin & Himlin, 2012; USID, 2021). Later, in September 2020, the LMI changed its name to the 'Mekong-US Partnership' (MUSP).

Unlike China's initiatives and contributions, which are mainly focused on economics, the US pays more attention to normative issues, such as democracy and human rights (as reflected in the terms 'free' and 'open' in the FOIP), environmental problems and human resource development (e.g., health, education). The version of the FOIP touted by the US



aligns its ideas and values with democratic issues, thereby challenging China's existence in the subregion (Lee, 2019). The pressure that the US places upon Southeast Asian countries is: how can a diverse subregion like the GMS, where every country has a different political regime and economic development level, accommodate the engagement of both the US and China? While the US allocates assistance through USAID and other international organisations that support improved living standards, one of the 'quiet requirements' to receive such support is the recipient country's alignment with democratic values. For example, the US announced the 'DRL-Integrating Democracy, Human Rights, and Good Governance in Efforts to Address Climate Change and Protect the Environment in the East Asia and Pacific Region' in June 2021 to support infrastructure development, agriculture and environment protection, aiming to address human rights issues within the region and to bring marginalised peoples into the decision-making process. This initiative will help increase the level of governance, transparency and accountability in the region (U.S. Department of State, 2021).

The FOIP ideas of 'free' and 'open' as defined by the US challenge China in many ways. The US has launched a considerable number of social development projects through USAID and MUSP, nonetheless, the US has not actively contributed, or proposed, a concrete plan to support transport development within the subregion. In contrast, China has implemented the BRI project, supported the development of highspeed railways, and has planned other similar transport-specific projects.

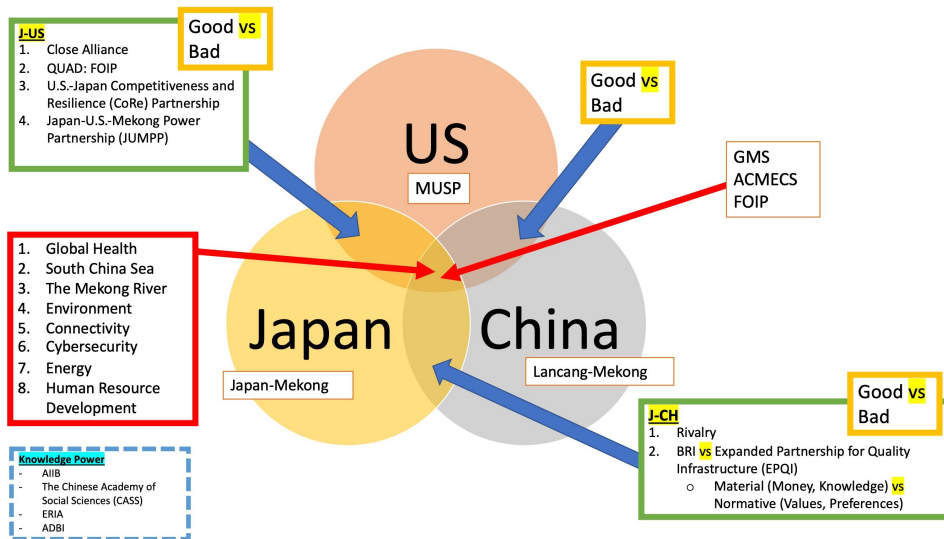
### *1.2 Japan-US*

The relations between Japan and the US have always been close. After the Second World War, the San Francisco Treaty was signed in 1952 as a security alliance, further establishing close economic ties between the two countries. However, scholars have long debated the influence of the US over Japan's political and international affairs. As Japan is a close alliance of the US, their economic, political and security ties may be seen by many as a cooperative security strategy in the Indo-Pacific region. There are many security issues that Japan and the US agree upon and work hand in hand to address, particularly those related to China's role in the region, including the South China Sea, the cross-strait crisis between China and Taiwan, and the growing power of China within the GMS Subregion.

Japan's FOIP brought a new political and security dimension to the region. Japan coined the idea of a region that is 'free' and 'open' to the world; an idea that was welcomed by the US. Japan and the US have also developed bilateral initiatives to support the GMS subregion, for instance, the Japan-US-Mekong Power Partnership (JUMPP), which is part of the US-Japan Competitiveness and Resilience (CoRe) Partnership that aims to strengthen the diplomatic, economic and political relations between Japan and the US (Office of the Press Secretary, 2014; Office of the Spokesperson, 2019).

### 1.3 China-Japan Rivalry

One of the most important factors that has shaped economic development in the GMS since 1991 is the rivalry between China and Japan. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Japan expanded its approach to engage with Southeast Asia, specifically the GMS subregion. The Asian Development Bank (ADB), which was, and is still, run by the Japanese, established the GMS Programme to support economic development by focusing on infrastructure development. This includes development in transport, energy and telecommunications. Japan also initiated many economic development projects to help the subregion revive its economy. Moreover, one factor that has had a significant impact on Japan's engagement in infrastructure development within the GMS subregion is the 1985 relocation of Japanese manufacturing companies following the implementation of the Plaza Accord (Charoensri, 2018).



**Figure 2** The Relations and Issues in the Superpower Rivalry within the GMS

Source: Author

Figure 2 illustrates the rivalry between the US, China, and Japan. However, the caveat that must be addressed here is that as this paper focuses on the China-Japan rivalry only; it does not detail or analyse the rivalry between the US and China. It shows the areas of co-operation and conflicts between the three countries that impact the GMS subregion. For US-Japan relations, the QUAD security alliance and mutual economic initiatives both play an important role, while in contrast, the relations between Japan and China are contested. As I have mentioned above, the current rivalry between each pair of countries is not merely about economic assistance, but rather the ideas and values that are embedded in the engagement.

Apart from the economic and political conflict and co-operation that can be studied, this paper also proposes that a vital issue to address in future research is knowledge power. China and Japan both use this power to expand their knowledge, and further, their ideas, to the world. China utilises the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Chinese Academy of Social Science (CASS) to construct ideas and knowledge of regional development to shape the region. Additionally, the Chinese government supports the Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia (ERIA), an international organisation based in Jakarta, and the Asian Development Bank Institute (ADBI) to construct knowledge of regional connectivity (Charoensri, 2016).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For example, the Chinese government has been endeavouring to support academic activities to justify and disseminate knowledge and understanding of the BRI in Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai. What we have witnessed since 2018 is the support of international conferences in Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai focused on BRI development. The Chinese conference organiser asked the Thai conference organiser to select speakers who have positive opinions on the BRI. This reflects how Beijing is utilising its soft power through knowledge to justify, or 'PR', its BRI project within the region. Aside from China's economic and political engagement, Thailand also seeks to comprehend China's normative approach. The Thai-Chinese Strategic Research Centre (TCRC), National Research Council of Thailand (NRCT), one of the key research organisms on Thai-China relations, published a study on the role of Chinese think tanks in the development of the BRI and analysed how knowledge networks within China are formed under Chinese government supervision, as well as how these think tanks help China to disseminate a good image of the BRI (see Tantayakul, 2018). Japan does not only utilise its economic power, but also its knowledge power. I argued in my previous study (Charoensri, 2016) that the Japanese government supported the establishment of the ERIA, an international research organisation established in 2008 under the supervision of Japan's METI, to construct and disseminate knowledge of regional development. This reflects that the Japanese government is utilising its economic and knowledge power to influence and shape the trajectory of Southeast Asian transport development. Before 2008, METI's White Paper never mentioned the ERIA, but in 2008, for the first time, the ERIA was included in the White Paper as an 'international research organisation' to promote economic integration in East Asia (METI, 2008). In its 2009 White Paper, METI mentioned the anticipated role of the ERIA in various projects, including that it was hoped the ERIA could help to strengthen Asia's growth, promote regional development, promote regional integration, facilitate trade and investment (METI, 2009) and support and promote comprehensive regional development, particularly in the 'Mekong-India Industrial Corridor' (METI, 2009). The Japanese government also anticipated that the ERIA would provide "intellectual contribution through research and policy proposals" (METI, 2009). In 2010, when ASEAN initiated its 'MPAC,' METI adjusted the role of the ERIA accordingly. In its 2010 White Paper, METI details many significant international and regional dynamics, for example the expanding role of China, global production networks, infrastructure development in Asia and even "contribution to the global economic infrastructure" (METI, 2010).<sup>3</sup>

The areas of future co-operation, or of potential rivalry, for the three superpowers in the GMS subregion include the situation in the South China Sea, management of the Mekong River, environmental protection (e.g., biodiversity, river management, climate change), connectivity, cybersecurity, energy co-operation, and human resource development. Amongst these areas of future co-operation, regional connectivity will prove to be the most important issue. Connectivity can be a good platform from which to attract investment, engagement and financial contribution from other superpowers. Zhao (2019) argues that infrastructure development in Southeast Asia might be a good area of co-operation as the recipient countries will benefit from the assistance, one way or another. As such, this dilemma can be labelled as 'healthy competition' (Zhao, 2019), as it could lead to more opportunities in the future. Whether we agree with Zhao (2019) or not, the contributions from China, the US, and Japan brings us to reconsider the relationships between financial providers and receivers. What are the conditions that the providers expect from the receivers? What do the receivers consider when receiving the assistance?

### **Regional Connectivity**

In the previous section, I have briefly shown how the geopolitical rivalries between China, the US, and Japan are now shaping regional economic and political configurations within the GMS subregion. I have also demonstrated that these three countries have different economic and political ties, which trigger different economic and political co-operation and opportunities. Furthermore, I have discussed the shared emphasis placed on regional connectivity in both Japan and the US's FOIPs, as well as the BRI. However, as the concepts of 'free' and 'open' are the main ideas and values in the cross-regional order that has structural influence over other regional and subregional orders, the competition between China, the US, and Japan within the GMS subregion is problematic.

Transport development is an important factor for economic development. The studies from the World Bank (2017) and ADB and ADBI (2009) state that as the number of people in Asia is increasing, people's quality of life can be advanced by the improvement of transportation networks as these networks help to reduce the cost of regional trade, promote regional integration, reduce poverty, narrow the development gap, promote more efficient use of regional resources, promote sustainable development and create a single Asian market (ADB & ADBI, 2009). In doing so, every country must seek to construct a comprehensive transport system in order to establish 'connectivity.' Accordingly, it is becoming more common to use the term 'connectivity' to signify physical infrastructure.

Regional connectivity is one of ASEAN's main projects, and has been part of many regional initiatives within the subregion. The GMS Programme also plays an important role in framing and supporting the regional connectivity development scheme (Charoensri, 2018). There are three main GMS projects focused on regional connectivity that are supported by

the GMS Programme, including the East-West Economic Corridor (EWEC), the North-South Economic Corridor (NSEC) and the Southern Economic Corridor (SEC).<sup>4</sup> Many existing studies on the roles of Japan and China and their supportive contributions have analysed that Tokyo and Beijing not only seek economic interests through regional connectivity, but also the benefit it may have for their political presences within the subregion (Charoensri, 2018, 2019; Ishida, 2012; Isono, 2010; Takao, 2009). Although Japan and China use different strategies to support regional development within the GMS, they both use economic, political and knowledge power to support its construction.

Regional connectivity is part of the regional development scheme of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). ASEAN Connectivity aims to create a comprehensive transportation network within the region in order to enhance productivity, competitiveness and access to raw materials and markets. Thailand proposed the idea of ASEAN Connectivity in 2009 at the 15<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Summit, which was held in Hua Hin, Thailand. After the proposal, the High-Level Task Force on ASEAN Connectivity (HLTF-AC) was established to draft a 'Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity' (MPAC), which seeks to connect three areas by way of physical connectivity, structural connectivity and people-to-people connectivity (ASEAN, 2010). The first five-year MPAC (2010-2015) was issued in 2010 along with the formation of the 'ASEAN Connectivity Coordinating Committee' (ACCC). After five years of the 2010 MPAC, the second MPAC (2016-2025) was launched. The MPAC 2025 further extended its scope and categorised its strategic aims into five areas of co-operation, including sustainable infrastructure, digital innovation, seamless logistics, regulatory excellence and human mobility (ASEAN, 2016).

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<sup>4</sup> At present, although there are some studies argue that Japan has less interest in the NSEC (Ishida, 2012; Lauridsen, 2019), JETRO's *ASEAN Logistics Network Map* (2008) shows that Japan did, in fact, have some interest in constructing physical connectivity in the 'North-South' direction. JETRO's study demonstrates that Japan sought to support the construction of the 'North-South Corridor I', which aimed to link Bangkok-Malaysia-Singapore (JETRO, 2008). The study's North-South linkage is different, however, from the ADB's NSEC, which links the South of China with Bangkok. Moreover, the study also shows that JETRO anticipated to support four 'East-West' corridors, including the 'East-West Corridor I' aimed to link Bangkok and Hanoi, the 'East-West Corridor II' anticipated to link Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City with Hunnan (Hong Kong, and Guangzhou), the 'East-West Corridor III' expected to link Bangkok and Yangon, and the 'East-West Corridor IV' aimed to link Bangkok and Ho Chi Minh City (JETRO, 2008). These projects are different from ADB's EWEC, which more comprehensively links the East to the West, between Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam. These differences show that Japan had a different perception of the North-South and East-West economic corridors at that time compared to the present day, particularly in terms of Japan's supported of the ADB's GMS Programme.

Regional connectivity is one of the most competitive areas of co-operation in the Indo-Pacific region. We have seen how the US and Japan supported regional connectivity in the Lower Mekong area (Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam) during the Cold War, with the goal of helping to support rice production, irrigation systems and connectivity within the subregion. In the meantime, this connectivity also supported the export of rice to Japan in order to revive Japan's economic and social development, which was devastated as a result of WWII (Black, 1984; Charoensri, 2014). Connectivity development is part of infrastructure development, which remains one of the political ideas that is most often manipulated, particularly during the Cold War.

The GMS regional connectivity helps integrate the GMS subregion into the international production networks. The EWEC, NSEC, and SEC induced economic activities, such as the mobilisation of capital, tourists, or support logistic systems in the subregion. The competition between Japan, China and the US, thereby, helps bring more economic regionalisation within the subregion, whilst coalescing the subregion into international production networks. It has been almost a decade since the competition between Japan, China, and the US led to many economic contributions and engagement. For Japan, the ODA was used to help it has a leading role in the region (International Development Centre of Japan, 2018; Makishima, 2010). China, on the other hand, uses its BRI to create an influential international order through infrastructure development around the world. The US uses its economic, political and security power to influence the world. The GMS regional connectivity, accordingly, could be argued that it was triggered, and supported by superpower rivalry.

## **Conclusion**

The GMS subregion will always be a proxy battlefield. This paper starts by looking into the contested concept of FOIP. I contend that the geopolitical rivalry between Japan, China and the US shaped the regional connectivity development in the GMS area. It integrated the GMS into broader geopolitical and geopolitical strategies which are FOIP and China's BRI. We must keep a close eye on the negotiations between the governments of GMS member states and China, the US and Japan. Cross-regional orders, like the BRI and FOIP, will play an important role in shaping more economic and political arrangements in the future; and will undoubtedly shape other regional and subregional initiatives. The rivalry shaped regional connectivity development. The integration of the GMS into a broader international production network will help the region to have more economic opportunities. The remaining question for policy practitioners is: what strategy should the GMS countries use, individually or collectively, to make the most of their superpower rivalry?

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