Is global job competition here to stay? It seems as though it is, and that it is continuing. If so, this process has implications that will need to be dealt with.

China may be a case in point. That country has been the big winner in recent decades in terms of jobs shifting from the United States and elsewhere to fuel its export-driven economy. Now, however, labor unrest, economic shifts, and accelerating Southeast Asian integration – particularly in the Mekong River Basin – may be combining to shift some jobs away from China toward Southeast Asia – as reported in September by the Financial Times (<http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/0b5b63de-d860-11e0-8f0a-00144feabdc0.html#axzz1vbjpYKTz>).

For example, as the FT reported, a Hong Kong lingerie maker with factories in south China has found Thailand to be a more attractive place to do business after speeding plans to cut its sewing workforce because of increasing minimum wages.

Worker unrest has become a feature of Chinese industry, in places like a footwear factory in a city called Dongguan last year, as reported by the Washington Post (http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\_pacific/china-labor-unrest-linked-to-global-slowdown/2011/11/26/gIQALDPwyN\_story.html). This unrest is fueled in part by wealth gaps and the disillusionment of younger factory workers unwilling to accept the conditions their parents were willing to endure. On top of that, Chinese workers have faced layoffs, lower overtime and even withheld pay.

Partly as a consequence, China has moved to improve wages. These rising wages, together with Chinese demographic changes and, perhaps, Chinese desires to move into cleaner high-technology industries, may be starting to push apparel, footwear and similar manufacturing jobs out of China. The beneficiaries of this shift are other countries, including Southeast Asian countries.

Developments in Southeast Asia, meanwhile, make it an attractive destination for migrating jobs.

China’s increased physical, commercial and political presence in the region is one such factor. This is something that is clear to anyone on the ground in, say, northern Laos.

In addition, Mekong Basin countries themselves have shown remarkable development and accelerated integration in recent years, turning the basin into what could become an important and dynamic new economic zone, and, therefore, a potential source of labor for companies wishing to outsource production.

Finally, the apparent opening in Myanmar after 50 years of isolation may offer a significant source of labor for Western companies – such as garment companies – that have stayed away because of economic sanctions and popular opposition to previous Yangon governments.

If manufacturing jobs continue to chase the lowest-cost venue, the question is whether this process will be of overall benefit or detriment.

Part of that question is how such a new constant will affect direct participants – workers gaining or losing jobs; companies, in terms of both profits and ease of operations; and consumers. These questions may involve more than simple economics; working conditions or a government’s respect for human rights, for example, can affect whether a company operates in a country or whether consumers accept products from plants there.

Another question is what this process’s effect on overall economic and political systems will be. If access to jobs that offer low wages, but wages that are higher than earnings from subsistence farming or that offer rural workers a bridge to a better life, that is one thing. However, if those low-wage jobs lead nowhere or, worse, lead to a return to unemployment as soon as workers start to move up or as soon as a cheaper labor source emerges, that is quite another.

Job competition is likely to be a long-term phenomenon, but one with implications beyond the immediate bottom-line concerns of multinational companies, and those implications need to be fully explored.