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Lao Foreign Policy: The View From Vientiane*

Martin Stuart-Fox**

The Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR) is the least developed socialist state. As such it faces particular problems both in the development of its economy and in the formulation of its foreign policy. These difficulties have been compounded in the last five years not only by American refusal to assist in mending the ravages of war in Indochina and by Thai antagonism towards the new regime in Laos, but also by the series of events which have embroiled her three socialist neighbours in war and insurgency against each other. The Vietnamese involvement in Kampuchea and China's border war against Vietnam placed the Lao in an impossible situation. After some hesitation when it seemed that some members at least of the Lao Politburo would have preferred to adopt a more neutral stance, the authorities in Vientiane came out on the side of Vietnam in Hanoi's continuing dispute with Beijing. This move was widely interpreted as being due to combined Vietnamese and Soviet pressure. Be that as it may, however, the Lao have now to live with their choice. Laos finds itself in confrontation with the People's Republic of China (PRC) and increasingly locked into a common front comprising the three states of Indochina headed by the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV).

The purpose of this paper is to examine Lao foreign policy as this is exercised within the present international context. Lao relations with Vietnam, China and Thailand will be discussed in turn from the point of view of Vientiane as this is perceived by the leadership of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP). Finally an attempt will be made to bring out the logic behind present Lao foreign policy and indicate where it is leading.

The "Special Relationship" with Vietnam

The legal basis of the special relationship which Laos enjoys with Vietnam is the 25 year Treaty of Friendship and Co-operation signed between the two countries in July 1977. In addition to the treaty itself, three protocols are understood to exist dealing with delineation of the frontier, joint defence arrangements, and modes of economic co-operation, which have not been made public. However, the form of the relationship between the two countries is suf-

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ficiently clear, even if some of the details are lacking.

The Lao-Vietnam Treaty gives legal expression to a relationship which is based upon a range of shared sentiments and experiences and a common ideological commitment to Marxism-Leninism, particularly the ideal of proletarian internationalism. There has developed over years of struggle and hardship a close personal relationship between the leaders of the Vietnam Communist Party (VCP) and the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP).[1] Both groups shared the common goal of driving out first the French, then the Americans, in order to build the kind of society they believed was best for their respective nations. During these years of close and continuing contact common ways of thinking developed which bridged the cultural differences between them. The Lao revolutionaries were and continue to be genuinely grateful for the sacrifices made by the Vietnamese on behalf of the Lao communist movement. And such assistance continues. The Lao are quick to point out that during the poor harvests of 1977 and 1978, the Vietnamese provided more food aid than other nations, even though they had little themselves and living standards are generally lower in northern Vietnam than in Laos.

These bonds of fraternal assistance are reinforced by a shared perception of the significance of proletarian internationalism in promoting the world socialist revolution. Lao leaders constantly reiterate that Laos is the advance post of socialist revolution in Southeast Asia.[2] As such it both has an international role to play in furthering that revolution, and has the right to call upon the assistance of the Socialist bloc in promoting that goal through the strengthening of Laos in terms of economic construction and national defence. This view, extended to cover socialist Indochina as a bloc, is very much the Vietnamese position.

A further bond between the two countries derives from the common origins of the VCP and the LPRP, both of which trace their history back to the former Indochinese Communist Party, founded by Ho Chi Minh in 1930. In a statement issued on 22 March 1979 to mark the Lao Party's 24th anniversary, the LPRP was called "the continuer of the magnificent revolutionary cause and tradition of the former Indochinese Communist Party".[3] The solidarity between the Lao and Vietnamese peoples, according to Lao Information Minister, Sisana Sisane, "is a tradition fine and rare in the present world", a tradition "founded by the great President Ho Chi Minh".[4] Lao recognition of and pride in these common origins of the LPRP shares with the VCP contrasts with the refusal of the Pol Pot regime to admit that it owed anything historically to the Vietnamese.

Yet another factor seen by the Lao as important in linking the LPDR with Vietnam is their geographical proximity and mutual strategic importance. The Lao recognize the vital strategic role their revolution played in furthering Vietnamese national interests, particularly the struggle for national unification. Also Laos, by accepting Vietnamese forces, protects the northwestern frontier of Vietnam from a possible Chinese "second lesson". The Lao do not, therefore, see their relationship with Vietnam as at all one sided. It has been, and remains, of mutual benefit. LPRP Secretary-General Kaysone Phom-

vihan, writing in the Vietnamese theoretical journal *Hoc Tap* in November 1975 (before he became Prime Minister) described the revolutionary importance of the Lao-Vietnamese relationship in the following terms:

> "The revolution (s) of the two nations — Laos and Vietnam — have special interrelationships and mutual influence. For the Lao revolution, the contribution of Vietnam is indispensable, and for the Vietnamese revolution the contribution of Laos is indispensable . . . The Lao people have the obligation of continuing to strengthen their solidarity with Vietnam, so that those two peoples can continue to carry out their revolutions and continue to assist each other in developing and defending their countries."[5]

Both for defence and for socialist construction in the continuing revolution in both countries, the "special relationship" therefore remains essential. But while these two aspects are closely related, each requires further examination.

The military factor in Lao-Vietnamese solidarity has played a major historical role in cementing the present alliance. This has been explicitly recognized by the Lao, both in their gratefulness for Vietnamese military assistance in support of the Lao revolutionary struggle,[6] and in the often repeated reference to the militant solidarity existing between the two armies of Vietnam and Laos as distinct from and in addition to that between the two Parties and two peoples.[7] Relations between the armies of the two countries have remained remarkably close, despite reports of occasional disaffection, and defection by former Pathet Lao troops to the ranks of the resistance. Vietnam, with Soviet assistance, is largely responsible for equipping and training the Lao People's Liberation Army, and Vietnamese influence is probably stronger in the military than in any other Lao institution or government agency.

The Lao-Vietnamese military relationship is presently reinforced by the stationing of Vietnamese troops in Laos. This is defended by the Lao on the grounds that these forces, which are believed to number more than 50,000 men, i.e. more than the total Lao army, were requested by the Lao government in conformity both with the provisions of the charter of the United Nations and the principles of the non-aligned movement in order to defend Laos' independence and sovereignty.[8] Lao spokesmen point to the presence of US forces in Western Europe as a situation similar to their own with a similar legal basis. Vietnamese forces in Laos are there to guard against threats to the security of the state. These came initially from reactionary forces within the country, notably continued resistance from CIA supported Hmong (Meo) forces loyal to General Vang Pao, and from raids mounted by Lao exiles from Thailand. More recently the Chinese have been identified as the major threat to Lao sovereignty, a situation which, given the present state of Chinese-Vietnamese relations, seems likely to require the stationing of substantial Vietnamese forces in Laos for the foreseeable future. The Lao have stated that only "when there is no more menace from the outside" will the Vietnamese be asked to leave. Then "Vietnamese troops will withdraw from Laos as soon as the Lao government requests it".[9] Chinese and Western claims that the Vietnamese military presence in Laos is tantamount to an army of occupation preventing the Lao from exercising any real independence, are vigorously re-

jected by the authorities in Vientiane as a calumny aimed at souring relations between the two nations, thus weakening the efforts of both to defend their revolutionary gains and build socialism.[10]

On the economic and financial side the "special relationship" involves a wide range of assistance provided by Vietnam in every area of the Lao economy. Financial assistance under the terms of the treaty includes both "non-refundable aid" and loans either without interest, or at very low rates. Technical assistance covers such major areas as agriculture (given priority under the 1978-1980, and the 1981-85 plans), irrigation, industry, road construction and transportation and communications. Danang is to become a duty free port for the transportation of goods to Laos via a new road being built by Vietnamese military engineers via Quand Tri, to Tchepone in Laos along Route 13 and so up to Vientiane.[11] There have also been reports of a joint feasibility study for a rail connection between the two countries.[12]

The extent of Vietnamese economic assistance to Laos is such as to link the two states closely together. The two nations have co-ordinated their respective five year plans to run from 1981 to 1985. The new transportation network, once it is completed, will have the effect of transferring Lao dependence on Thailand for access to the outside world to dependence on Vietnam. In part this close economic co-operation is determined by geographical proximity and the need to limit transportation costs for Lao natural resources. Laos can hardly hope to develop a steel industry of its own, but it might be possible to exploit the iron ore deposits in Xieng Khouang for sale to the Vietnamese. Ore from Laos and coal from Tonkin could form the basis for a viable steel industry meeting the needs of both nations. Such complementarity offers the best possibility of developing Laos' abundant natural resources the Lao argue.

Lao-Vietnamese co-operation extends to two further areas which are seen by both sides as essential to the continued revolution in both countries. These are firstly the technical and scientific, and secondly the cultural and ideological domains. Both relate to the theory of the three revolutions, as developed by the Vietnamese and ascribed to by the LPRP, that the building of socialism in Indochina necessitates the simultaneous carrying out of revolutions in the relations of production, in the area of science and technology, and in culture and ideology.[13] Vietnamese assistance is required for the simultaneous promotion of all three revolutions. Thousands of Vietnamese technicians are at work in Laos, while many Lao are undergoing technical training in Vietnam in everything from seed production and stock breeding to dentistry and public health. Vietnam is also assisting Laos in the fields of propaganda, education and culture, through the training of cadres, printing of textbooks, and exchange of artistic troupes and delegations. In this way a common ideological stance is promoted and common goals pursued.

The same militant solidarity and fraternal friendship which characterizes Lao-Vietnamese relations extends to relations between both countries and the People's Republic of Kampuchea. Article II of the Agreement on Economic, Cultural, Scientific and Technical Co-operation signed between Laos and Kampuchea in March 1979 specifies the areas of co-operation between the two

countries: "industry, agriculture, forestry, fishing, commerce, communications, postal services, the press, culture, education, fine arts, radio broadcasting, television, films, physical education, health, science, technical (matters) and other sectors".[14] Clearly, however, the assistance which Laos can offer in all these fields is limited, and the burden of assistance must fall upon Vietnam.

In the declaration accompanying the signing of the Agreement between Laos and Kampuchea, Presidents Souphanouvong and Heng Samrin "expressed their determination to reinforce the militant solidarity and the great, pure and healthy friendship between Laos, Kampuchea and Vietnam".[15] Solidarity between all three nations is seen as essential to their economic progress and the building of socialism in all three. As an editorial in *Sieng Pasason* later expressed it:

> "The ties between Laos, Vietnam and Kampuchea constitute a factor in, and an objective law for the existence and development of these three nations sharing common frontiers and the same common destiny . . ."[16]

But this solidarity is also seen by the Lao as strengthening Vietnamese capacity to resist Chinese blandishments.[17] The Lao regard their solidarity with Kampuchea and support for the Vietnamese position on recognition of the Heng Samrin regime as contributing to the strength of the Indochinese bloc as a whole. Thus the Vietnamese military presence in both countries does not, in Lao eyes, constitute a one sided commitment. Lao support is just as vital for Vietnam as Vietnamese support is for Laos in the face of what is seen as the Chinese threat to both Lao and Vietnamese independence and national sovereignty.

Relations with the People's Republic of China

The view of China held in Vientiane might be characterized as one of concern and bewilderment — concern over what the Lao authorities perceive as Chinese antagonism towards them; bewilderment about the motivation underlying Chinese actions and the real intentions of China's leaders. Whereas the Lao have publicly adopted a pro-Vietnamese stance and accepted the logic of Vietnam's "White Paper" entitled "The Truth about Vietnam-China Relations over the Last 30 Years",[18] privately they question what it is that the Chinese really want. From their own ideological position the Lao seem to have as much difficulty in understanding the present Chinese world-view as the Vietnamese had in understanding the politics of Pol Pot during the period from 1975 to the end of 1978.

The picture which emerges in Vientiane of Chinese actions towards Laos is one of subtle and relentless menace aimed at undermining the security and viability of the state. China is believed to be training a "division" of between 6,000 and 7,000 men (named the Lanna division, though who by is not clear) somewhere in Yunnan composed of a collection of dissident montagnard tribesmen (mainy Hmong and Yao, with some Lao Theung), Lao exiled reactionaries and disgruntled pro-Chinese Pathet Lao defectors.[19] This force is

supposedly being held in readiness to be sent back into northern Laos when Beijing gives the word. In the meantime the Chinese are also training and equipping propaganda teams and sabotage units which are already operating in northern Laos in areas previously under *de facto* Chinese control, particularly in Phongsaly and Luang Namtha provinces. The Chinese propaganda effort is aimed mainly at the mountain tribes with a view to undermining support for the Vientiane administration. Much is made of the failure of the Lao government to provide the basic consumer goods which the tribal peoples previously obtained from southern China. This the Chinese have interpreted as evidence of the Lao government's lack of interest in the welfare of the hilltribes and its broken promises, in contrast to Chinese concern for the tribes. Chinese agents are said to smuggle presents to tribal leaders on special occasions, or provide beasts for sacrifice at important village festivals in order to demonstrate the difference between what the Chinese and Lao governments will do for them. Much propaganda is also directed against the Vietnamese presence in Laos, and the burden the Lao people must shoulder in supplying Vietnamese troops with rice and other foodstuffs. The impression given in Vientiane is of a well planned insurgency, admittedly only in its early stages, aimed at overthrowing the present Lao regime and forcing the withdrawal of Vietnamese forces from Laos.[20]

But threats and interference in northern Laos are not all that the Chinese are doing to "destabilize" the present Lao regime, according to Vientiane. In addition Beijing is believed to have been instrumental in arranging for different Lao resistance groups to form a united front in southern Laos, and to coordinate their operations with both the Khmer Rouge in the Thai-Lao-Kampuchean border area, and with dissident tribal groups in Vietnam. The Chinese are also seen as being behind Thai support for Lao resistance groups, as well as for the Khmer Rouge. Chinese arms and even advisers are believed to be reaching Lao guerrillas operating out of Thailand, and the Lao are convinced of Chinese-Thai complicity in provoking border conflict between Thailand and Laos.[21]

Chinese machinations, it is claimed in Vientiane, also extend to the economic area. Beijing is said to have set up a commercial sabotage unit across the Mekong in Nongkhai which, through the manipulation of Chinese merchants in Thailand, causes sudden shortages and fluctuating prices of basic consumer goods in Vientiane. Even popular criticism of the government's economic policies, and complaints about high prices, poor standards of living, or low salaries are interpreted as subtle attempts by Chinese agents in Vientiane to undermine support for the Party and government, particularly the policy of close co-operation with Vietnam. Rumours of policy changes or disputes and factionalism within the Party are similarly treated as Chinese inspired attempts to destroy both internal solidarity and the fraternal relationship with Vietnam.

The subtlety of Chinese methods, especially when compared with the Americans, is stressed by Lao spokesmen when Chinese responsibility for some of these activities is questioned. The impression given is that the Lao

prefer Americans as their opponents. For whereas Washington made no secret of its policy towards Indochina, Beijing is much more circumspect. In a sense, the Lao have a respect for the Chinese which they never felt for the Americans. In Lao eyes the cleverness of the Chinese, their masking of their intentions, makes them a far more dangerous enemy than the Americans.

In part this Lao view of their most powerful neighbour has been influenced by acceptance of the logic of the Vietnamese White Paper on Vietnam-China relations. There the Machiavellian pursuit by Beijing of China's long term strategic interests at the expense of the nations of Indochina is relentlessly argued from a Vietnamese nationalist point of view. But frequent mention is made of Laos, and the Lao have begun asking themselves why the Chinese *really* did some of the things they did. Points mentioned which are of deep concern to the Lao include why the Chinese set up autonomous regions abutting the Lao border; why they seemed so keen to extend their influence among the tribal peoples of northern Laos; why Chinese aid to Laos took the form of the construction of a road network of more strategic use to Beijing than to Vientiane. Some of these questions betray a lack of appreciation of historical circumstances, but they lead the Lao to suspect Chinese intentions. Perhaps, the Lao suggest, the 1954 map referred to in the White Paper,[22] which showed Laos and other parts of Southeast Asia as part of Chinese territory (and not the many maps published since which *don't*) *is* really indicative of China's secret goals in the region.

All this generates a suspicion of the People's Republic of China which is pervasive and apparently deeply held. This has been illustrated in recent statements in the Lao media, especially with reference to suspected Chinese-Thai collusion over the build up of tension along the Kampuchean and Lao borders with Thailand. For example, the Lao daily *Sieng Pasason,* official organ of Party and government, accused the Chinese in an editorial of being "vampires" through support of the bloodthirsty regime of Pol Pot. The paper lumped together the leaders of the Khmer Rouge, right-wing extremists among the Thai ruling clique, and the Chinese "international reactionaries" as "Satan and Company", and warned that "when these sad demons can no longer overthrow Kampuchea and all Indochina they will turn against Thailand" in order to "devour her entrails".[23]

By the end of 1980 this kind of abusive language had been toned down, but before the United Nations in October, Lao Foreign Minister Phoun Sipraseut summed up the Lao case against China in the following terms:

> "The leaders of Beijing have for some time been pursuing a policy openly hostile to the three countries of Indochina, aimed at sabotaging peace and the building of socialism in these countries, at dominating them and using them as a bridghead in their expansionist aims in Southeast Asia. In order to realize their black designs, they have tried, through conniving with the imperialists and other reactionaries, to turn other countries in Southeast Asia, in particular Thailand, against the three countries of Indochina, to divide the Lao, Kampuchean and Vietnamese nations, and to sow discord and division among each of these three peoples."[24]

This was described as a "monstrous plot" which the Lao believe can only be foiled by maintaining a "monolithic solidarity" between the three peoples of

Indochina. The Lao see themselves as standing shoulder to shoulder with the Vietnamese in curbing Chinese ambitions to extend their influence in Southeast Asia to encompass at a minimum all those powers once tributary to Beijing. Thus this stand has importance for the whole of Southeast Asia, and the ASEAN states in particular. Thus according to the foreign ministers of the three Indochina states:

> "The perfidious policy of China is to create problems between the three countries of Kampuchea, Laos and Vietnam, and China, and problems between these three countries and Thailand, to set the countries of ASEAN against the countries of Indochina in order to weaken the three countries of Indochina and render unstable the countries of ASEAN, thus permitting Beijing to realize its expansionist and hegemonist aims in Southeast Asia, and threaten the peace and security of Asia and the world."[25]

But while openly subscribing to this essentially Vietnamese view of Chinese ambitions, some Lao at least question long-term Chinese intentions and aims. Clearly a Laos allied to Beijing could be useful to China as a strategic check to Vietnamese ambitions, though this would not be to argue that China wants to "absorb" Laos entirely. It is not clear to the Lao, however, what kind of relationship Beijing is prepared to accept with Vientiane (and thus what kind of relationship between Vientiane and Hanoi is acceptable to the Chinese), nor how far China is prepared to go to achieve whatever goals her leaders have set themselves.

In part this perplexity stems from the Lao ideological position and the LPRP's adherence to the principles of proletarian internationalism and the world communist revolution. The Lao have freely admitted the assistance given to their revolution by the international communist movement, especially via Vietnam. They are also aware that as a small and under-developed country Laos is totally dependent upon aid from the Socialist Bloc, led by the Soviet Union, to develop the nation's economy. "Proletarian internationalism" therefore has for the Lao a very positive content. It is essential to the carrying out of the socialist revolution in Laos, and to the strengthening of national defence. In return the Lao recognize that their country has an historic role to play in furthering the world communist revolution — once suitable objective conditions are present. To the Lao, therefore, the Chinese (despite their adherence to Marxism-Leninism) appear to be the odd man out — "international reactionaries" in that in their relations with the states of Southeast East Asia they apparently want to re-establish earlier patterns of tributary dependence. Such relations, however, cannot be reconciled with the Lao view of their country as an advance post in the world revolution.

The Lao conclude that China represents the greatest present threat to the security of their state, government and Party, for the Chinese are seen as the moving force behind a *de facto* alliance between China, Thailand and the US aimed at all three states of Indochina. In particular, the Chinese are believed to be manipulating the present leadership in Bangkok in ways which can only be detrimental to the best interests of both countries.

Relations with Thailand

The Lao believe that only the baleful influence of the Chinese is preventing the improvement of relations between Vientiane and Bangkok and re-establishment of the friendliness that prevailed with the previous Thai regime. The Lao point to the fact that in the five years since the Lao People's Democratic Republic was formed on 2 December 1975, there have been four governments in Bangkok. And since the Lao policy of neighbourly coexistence with Thailand has not altered during that period, the Thai alone have been responsible for the changing state of Thai-Lao relations. Briefly these have varied from wary acceptance of the new Lao regime by the government of Seni Pramoj, to antagonism on the part of the Thanin Kraivixian regime, reconciliation under Kriangsak Chamanand, and renewed hostility by the Prem Tinsulanond government.

According to the Lao the two joint communiques signed by Kriangsak and Lao Prime Minister Kaysone Phomvihan during exchange visits to Vientiane and Bangkok in January and April 1979 form the proper basis for a cordial and co-operative relationship between the two states. These communiques stated in part that bilateral relations should be based upon strict respect for the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of each state, and for the right of each country to its own existence free from foreign interference and aggression. More important the two sides pledged that neither would permit anyone "to utilize their territory as a base for interference, threats or aggression against the other, or to carry out subversive activities against each other of whatever form".[26] The Mekong was to become a "river of peace". Disputes were to be settled amicably by regular meetings of frontier delegations from both sides. Trade between the two countries was to be encouraged, and the transport of Lao goods through Thailand facilitated.

In conformity with the spirit of these communiques the Lao authority began to implement early in 1979 the agreement by providing the cadres of the Maoist lead Communist Party of Thailand two choices: departure from Laos to CPT bases inside Thailand or in China; (b) stay and integrate with the Lao revolution. In return the Thai authorities were supposed to control the counter-revolutionary Lao guerrilla groups based in Thailand. Though there was some reduction of these Thai-based resistance activities, the Lao were critical of Thai failure to prevent cross-Mekong raids. However, during 1979 Thai-Lao relations were the friendliest they had been for some years.

More than anything else, events in Kampuchea have been responsible for the deterioration in relations between Laos and Thailand during 1980. When a shooting incident in June led to the death of a Thai naval officer, the Thai demanded an apology. As the incident had involved an attack by Thai "bandits" on a Lao village, and the subsequent intrusion, according to the Lao, of a Thai patrol boat into Lao waters close to the east bank of the Mekong, the Lao government refused to apologize on the grounds that its troops had opened fire in legitimate self defence.[27] The alleged incursion by Vietnamese troops into Thai territory from Kampuchea later in the month led the Thai to see a

connection between the two incidents. Attitudes hardened on both sides, and the Thai government reacted by unilaterally closing the border with Laos early in July. Not until the end of August did Thailand reopen the border at Nongkhai, opposite Vientiane, while still keeping it closed elsewhere.

Lao reaction to these events was to accuse the Thai of deliberately increasing tension along the border in collusion with the Chinese. Thailand was charged with becoming a springboard for the Chinese in their threatened destruction of the independence and sovereignty of Laos, Kampuchea and Vietnam.[28] These accusations were formally stated in the declaration of the Foreign Ministers of Laos, Kampuchea and Vietnam which followed their conference in the Lao capital on 18 July 1980. The three ministers warned that

> "a certain number of persons in Thai governing circles are once again dangerously aligning themselves with the United States in collusion with China in opposition to the peoples of the three countries of Indochina."[29]

However suggestions that differences between the Indochina nations and Thailand should be resolved through a series of non-aggression treaties together with demilitarization of a zone along the Thai-Kampuchean frontier were rejected by Bangkok.

Lao suspicions of Thai collusion with China now run deep, particularly in the light of recent reports of Chinese involvement in the resistance movement in Southern Laos, something which could only be possible given active Thai co-operation. Thai support for Lao resistance groups has been a major point of contention between Laos and Thailand since 1975. Up until 1979 raids were sporadic and posed only a minimal threat to the Lao regime. The resistance groups were disorganized and politically divided, and received little assistance from the Thai — almost none in the form of weapons or military supplies. During 1980, however, there has been some evidence of greater co-ordination between resistance groups in the south, and of Chinese interest in promoting armed insurgency in Laos.[30] This is a major reason why the Lao would like to re-establish friendly relations with Thailand on the basis of the Kriangsak-Kaysone communiques with their stipulations against support for guerrillas by either side.

The problem posed by Lao resistance groups for the improvement of Lao-Thai relations depends in part upon the problem of refugees. The total number of Lao refugees who have crossed into Thailand over the past five years is hard to determine, but a recent estimate placed the figure at around 300,000.[31] They include not only ethnic lowland Lao, but also Chinese, some Vietnamese and members of hilltribes people, particularly Hmong and Yao. Many have already been accepted by third countries such as France, the United States or Australia, but thousands still remain in sprawling camps near Nongkhai, Ubon Ratchathani, and Loei. These camps serve as sources for recruitment of guerrillas by the *kou sat* (resistance). Many young men in these camps have not sought acceptance in a third country, preferring to remain to fight. Others responded to a Chinese offer to take up to 10,000 Lao refugees for resettlement in southern China, in the belief that they would soon be returning to Laos.[32] The Lao authorities in Vientiane believe that only when all Lao

refugees now in Thai camps are accepted by third countries, and the further flow across the Mekong is stopped, will the recruitment of guerrillas be terminated.

There are, however, a number of problems to be overcome. For political reasons priority has been given by third countries to acceptance of "boat people" from Vietnam held in camps in Malaysia and Indonesia. There is some reluctance to take Lao from Thailand because it is widely believed that many Lao-speaking Thai from the northeast of Thailand have slipped into the camps and are passing themselves off as Lao in order to migrate to the US or elsewhere. In the case of the Hmong, adverse reports of conditions in America from those already there have led many to refuse to leave Thailand. Also there has been no sign during 1980 of a slow down in the rate at which refugees are leaving Laos.

What there has been, however, is a change in the kind of refugee leaving and their reasons for doing so. Whereas those who left during 1976 and 1977 did so mainly for political reasons, and many during 1978 and 1979 said they were opposed to the Vietnamese presence, those crossing in 1980 mainly did so for economic reasons. These are for the most part lower ranking civil servants and technicians who have worked for the new regime for five years, but who find their own living standards still unacceptably low (lower than they knew before 1975), and who see no immediate prospects for much improvement. Such people, however, the Lao regime can ill afford to lose. Already it is desperately short of trained personnel to administer government policies and aid projects, since literally almost all the educated middle class has left. For the future welfare of the country, therefore, the authorities in Vientiane are eager to put a stop to this exodus. The problem is how?

Most of the blame for the present situation is placed on Thai and American refugee policies, abetted by France (with whom Laos has not yet resumed diplomatic relations, broken when the Lao accused French embassy personnel of encouraging people to leave the country). The Lao believe they have done what they can to stem the flow, both by encouraging the population patriotically to accept the present difficult economic conditions in order to build a new Laos, and by the economic changes introduced in the Party's Seventh Resolution adopted in December 1979.[33] This radical change of direction, justified by reference to the Soviet example (Lenin's New Economic Policy), reintroduced a degree of private ownership and enterprise into the Lao economy. This has led to the provision of a wider range of food and consumer goods in Vientiane's markets, though some benefits were lost when prices were forced up by Thai closure of the border. The Lao authorities point to the freedom now enjoyed by the people, the quiet shelving of many restrictive regulations on private trade and movement, fewer political seminars, more freedom of religious worship, and so on, to justify their claim that there is no reason for people to leave. They are leaving not because of repressive measures in Laos, but because of Thai and American policies which encourage them to do so.

Foremost among the influences shaping these policies is the belief that

anyone who wants to flee from any communist regime, for whatever reasons, should be encouraged to do so. This rests upon an ideological anti-communism which is unable to see anything beneficial in a socialist system. For the Thai the continual flow of refugees can be pointed to as proof of the failure of communism to compete with capitalism in promoting modernization and economic development. It represents an important propaganda weapon for the Thai regime. Equally important, the Lao believe, is that Thai policy towards refugees forms an inextricable element in the hard-line position adopted by the military faction in power in Bangkok. Refugee policy is therefore a factor in the power play within the Thai political and military hierarchy.

A further reason for the continual flow of refugees is what the Lao call the "snowball" effect. Almost every cadre working for the present government has either relatives or friends living abroad in one of the Western democracies. These write letters to their relatives urging them to leave, pointing out that the unemployment benefits they receive are sufficient to support a higher standard of living than they can expect in Laos. The good life awaiting Lao refugees in the West is constantly extolled by broadcasts over Voice of America and Thai radio. Even the rations a family receives from the UN High Commission for Refugees in Thai camps for doing nothing compare favourably with what a man can obtain by working in Laos.

The Lao authorities are therefore eager to see a change in Thai policy towards Lao refugees. This is particularly so since the liberalization following from the Seventh Resolution made it easier in 1980 for Lao to cross the Mekong. Thus the paradoxical effect of the relaxation of constraints upon the population has been to increase the flow of refugees. As the Lao point out: "We have no Berlin wall along the Mekong". What the Lao want, and what the Thai appear to be increasingly prepared to do (following pressure from third countries which see no end to what has become a controlled migration programme), is for Lao citizens who cross the Mekong without official permits to be classed as illegal immigrants and repatriated to Laos. This, the Lao government believes, would very soon reduce the movement of refugees to a manageable trickle and result in people in Laos knuckling down to work for the welfare of their country without constantly entertaining the thought of trying a new life elsewhere.

Reluctance by the Thai to introduce such a change is seen as proof of colusion with "Yankee imperialism" designed to weaken Laos as part of an overall plan to undermine all three Indochinese states. It is, the Lao believe, all part of a plot to destroy the Lao revolution and prevent the building of socialism in Laos. Thai refugee policy is linked with the Mekong incident and subsequent closure of the border as indicative of essential Thai hostility towards the Lao regime. While decrying Thai actions, therefore, the Lao profess to have learnt an important lesson from the border closure — no matter what agreements may be signed with Bangkok, Vietnam is the only real friend Laos has. The Lao conclude that the security of the Lao state and the future development of socialism in Laos are dependent above all upon Indochinese solidarity and the

support of the Soviet Union and other socialist states. Thus events during 1980 have had the effect of leading the Lao to rely ever more completely upon their "special relationship" with Vietnam.

The Logic of Lao Foreign Policy

The Lao view of the world which emerges from published statements and background discussion in Vientiane is one of hostile powers aligned against the LPDR together conspiring to weaken the state by preventing the building of socialism, and eventually to overthrow the present pro-Vietnamese regime. It is a view which borrows heavily from Vietnamese perceptions, or at least shares much in common with Hanoi's view of the world. It is also a view which has led inexorably to an ever greater Lao dependence upon Vietnam within an Indochinese "unity bloc". It remains therefore to examine the logic of continued adherence to this view, and of its translation into policy decisions affecting Laos' relations with its neighbours.

First, however, it is necessary to canvas the possibility of an alternative foreign policy orientation, that of neutralism. This is not something the Lao are willing even to discuss as a viable alternative, for any move in this direction would involve relaxing the present close ties with Vietnam. To suggest such a possibility would be taken as anti-Vietnamese, something no Lao Party cadre can now risk being labelled. But in any case it can be argued that Laos is too weak, and of too much strategic importance to her ideologically antagonistic neighbours to be able to preserve a genuine neutrality along Swiss or Swedish lines . A neutral Laos would in effect be no more than a front for a Laos divided, as previously, into uneasily coexisting spheres of interest — Chinese in the north, Vietnamese in the east, Thai along the Mekong valley. The alternative is a Laos sufficiently closely aligned with one powerful neighbouring state to prevent such a *de facto* division of the country. The benefits of such close alignment are that the country can be administered as a unit, and that a government in Vientiane has the opportunity to generate a sense of national unity and purpose among the country's diverse ethnic groups. The danger equally inherent in such an alignment is that Laos will fall so completely under the control of its protector as to lose its own national identity. In large measure the future of Laos depends upon how effective the country's leaders are in exploiting the benefits of their present reliance upon Vietnam while guarding against the dangers.

Foreign policy has a role to play in this regard. For given the fact, from the Lao government point of view, acceptably close relationship with Vietnam which gives Hanoi protector status in return for a unified Laos, foreign policy can be used to the benefit of *both* states. For example, Lao initiatives in developing friendly relations with Thailand would assist the Lao economy by cutting transportation costs (which are far higher on goods coming via Vietnam) and lead to a reduction of guerrilla activity, thus promoting the nation's goals of national integration and construction. At the same time it would lead to improved Vietnamese-Thai relations with all that might flow from that — perhaps even the withdrawal of some Vietnamese troops from Laos. The point

is that the close Lao-Vietnamese relationship as formalized in their Treaty of Friendship and Co-operation does not preclude the exercise of an effective Lao foreign policy in the nation's own interest.

However, at present the global strategic environment does have the effect of minimizing Lao options. These broader considerations, therefore, are worth examining. Despite ritual references to American imperialism, Soviet-American relations have few direct implications for Laos. Vientiane and Washington still have diplomatic relations which might one day be of importance in negotiations between the US and Vietnam, but the Americans have very little interest in Laos these days. Only in terms of continuing American antagonism towards Vietnam does American policy directly impinge upon Laos. Far more important of course is the position of China. But again despite Lao claims of Chinese-US collusion in opposition to the LPDR, there is no evidence that this extends to such action as, for example, joint support for Lao insurgents. This does not alter the fact that ideologically the United States represents for the Lao that aggressive imperialism against which Marxism-Leninism must never cease to struggle.

The Sino-Soviet dispute is now the major influence limiting the options for Lao foreign policy. Chinese suspicions of Soviet intentions in Indochina, and concern for the security of the country's southern frontier, together led to the rapid deterioration of relations with Vietnam after 1975. It was above all Soviet ideological influence on the Vietnamese Communist Party and increasing military assistance to Vietnam which determined China's attitude towards Hanoi. Lao attempts to seek a balance between the two sides finally collapsed with the Chinese-Vietnamese border war early in 1979. As attitudes hardened as a result of the failure to resolve the problem of Kampuchea, Lao foreign policy options have become progressively restricted. As Lao dependence upon Soviet bloc aid and Soviet influence in Laos has increased, so has the likelihood of Chinese retaliation.

Lao relations with the Soviet Union, after being largely an adjunct to Soviet-Vietnamese relations until 1975, have become of importance in their own rights. The USSR provides Laos with the bulk of its economic and military aid, while Soviet planners have been largely responsible for formulating Laos's first five year plan.[34] Indeed there are indications that Moscow may be building up a bilateral relationship with Vientiane which is independent of Soviet relations with Hanoi, and which could thus withstand any cooling of Soviet-Vietnamese friendship. Kaysone spent three weeks in the Soviet Union in September 1979, and returned again in August 1980. The Lao have hailed the blossoming of Lao-Soviet co-operation, feted the anniversary of the October Revolution, and enthusiastically celebrated the 20th anniversary of Lao-Soviet relations.[35] This warm Lao response may represent an attempt to develop a separate identity within the Soviet bloc as a balance to dependence upon Vietnam. This may be the only latitude open to the Lao in their foreign relations at present, but it does not make relations between Vientiane and Beijing any easier.

The Lao are the first, of course, to realize their predicament. But there is lit-

tle they can do about it. No Lao initiative towards China is possible without Vietnamese support. There is, however, a general belief in Vientiane that some kind of accommodation should be possible with Bangkok, providing the Thai do not allow themselves to be manipulated by Beijing. It would be in Vietnam's interest to encourage accommodation with Thailand; and it is essential for Laos to come to an agreement with the Thai which, among other things, would stem the flight of refugees across the Mekong.

Vientiane has already made some moves to improve relations with Bangkok. The vituperative language used in radio broadcasts by both sides has been toned down following partial reopening of the Thai border. So too has Lao criticism of Beijing, and some quieter diplomacy is underway. But there are limits to the likely effectiveness of any such moves while what amounts to a conspiracy theory of foreign relations holds sway in a number of capitals in the region. A careful rethinking of national priorities and regional relationships would seem to be needed before the Lao can hope to exercise their limited options more explicitly in their own interest.

Footnotes

1. While Party to Party relations are close at the leadership level, lower echelon Lao cadres are reported by defectors to be unhappy over the degree of Vietnamese influence in Laos. Cf. *Far Eastern Economic Review* (FEER), August, 24 1979.
2. Cf. Kaysone Phomvihane, *La Révolution Lao* (Moscow: Editions du Progrès, 1980), p.184.
3. Kaosan Pathet Lao, *Bulletin Quotidien* (KPL/BQ), March 22, 1979, p.2.
4. Letter pledging Lao support for Vietnam in its opposition to China, KPL/BQ, May 8, 1979, p.6.
5. Kaysone Phomvihan writing in *Hoc Tap*, November 1975, p.42, as translated by Joint Publications Research Service, Translations on South and East Asia No.609, 21 January 1976, p.30.
6. See editorial in *Sieng Pasason* marking 32nd anniversary of Vietnam's national day, as broadcast over Radio Vientiane, September 3, 1977, in Foreign Broadcasts Information Service (FBIS), September 7, 1977.
7. For example, *Sieng Pasason* editorial, Radio Vientiane, September 16, 1977 (FBIS September 18, 1977); Lao military attache Chanmian Bounleut writing in the Vietnamese Army paper *Quan Doi Nhan Dan* as carried by FBIS, January 23, 1978.
8. Souphanouvong, Speech to the Non-Aligned Conference, Havana, as carried by Radio Vientiane, FBIS, September 19, 1979.
9. Cf. interview given by Lao Minister of Information, Sisana Sisane to AFP, December 7, 1979, FBIS, December 7, 1979.
10. For Chinese accusations see *Beijing Review*, December 7, 1979; also December 15, 1980.
11. *New York Times*, July 20, 1977. *FEER*, July 29, 1977.
12. *Voice of the Nation* (Bangkok), 4 September, 1976.
13. Cf. Kaysone Phomvihane, *La Révolution Lao, op.cit.*, pp.200-210.
14. KPL/BQ, March 24, 1979, p.11.
15. *Ibid.*, p.10.
16. Editorial in *Sieng Pasason*, KPL/BQ, August 15, 1980, p.5.
17. Cf. Souphanouvong's speech at the banquet in honour of the delegation of the Vietnamese Fatherland Front, Vientiane, August 10, 1979 (KPL/BQ, August 14, 1979, p.6).
18. Roneod English translation distributed by the Embassy of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, Canberra.
19. Interview with spokesman for Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Vientiane, December 4, 1980.

Foreign observers, however, doubt the existence of this unit, and suggest that the Chinese are actually training smaller, more mobile, groups of insurgents.

20. It is an impression the Chinese make little attempt to dispel. See, for example, *Beijing Review*, April 6, 1979. Cf. also Martin Stuart-Fox, "Laos in China's Anti-Vietnam Strategy", *Asia Pacific Community*, Spring 1981.
21. For one example of many such accusations, see editorial in *Sieng Pasason*, KPL/BQ, August 12, 1980, pp.6-8. Also *FEER*, December 5, 1980.
22. "The Truth about Vietnam-China Relations", *op.cit.*, p.5.
23. Editorial in *Sieng Pasason*, KPL/BQ, September 20, 1980, pp.4-5.
24. Phoun Sipraseut, Speech to 35th session of the United Nations General Assembly, October 1, 1980, KPL/BQ, October 13 1980, pp.8-9.
25. Declaration of the Foreign Ministers of Laos, Kampuchea and Vietnam, Vientiane, July 18, 1980, KPL/BQ, July 19, 1980, p.11.
26. Joint Thai-Lao Declaration, January 6, 1979, article 10, KPL/BQ, January 8, 1979, p.12. For the text of the second joint declaration signed at Bangkok, April 4, 1979, see KPL/BQ, April 5, 1979, pp.2-8.
27. For an account of the Lao position see *Asian Wall Street Journal*, August 2, 1980.
28. Editorial in *Sieng Pasason*, KPL/BQ, July 19, 1980, p.8.
29. Declaration of Foreign Ministers of Laos, Kampuchea and Vietnam, Vientiane, July 18, 1980, KPL/BQ, July 19, 1980, p.10. See also *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, document section, Vol.10, No.4 (1980).
30. See report of the resistance front formed in Southern Laos carried in *Beijing Review*, October 27, 1980, p.11.
31. *Bangkok Post*, November 25, 1980.
32. Personal communication from Nongkhai camp.
33. For the text see *FBIS*, January 18, 1980, p.I 1-33 and Supplement, February 8, 1980, pp.1-40.
34. High level planning delegations spent some time in Laos in October 1979 and again in July 1980. KPL/BQ, October 11, 1979, 2 and 5 July 1980.
35. Cf. KPL/BQ, August 18, 1980, September 26, 1980 and October 7, 1980. There have also been frequent reports during the last year of Lao-Soviet "soirées amicales". Cf. KPL/BQ August 28, 1980.

Reviews

The Indian Community in West Malaysia

Michael Stenson, *Class, Race and Colonialism in West Malaysia: The Indian Case*, Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1980, pp.234, $22.00

Students of Southeast Asian political economy will note that to this date there are very few books that have been written on Malaysia from a radical perspective.[1] Within the few radical publications as well as the conventional literature little attention has been paid to the case of Indians in Malaysia, who constitute the bulk of the plantation labourers. Whatever has been written on the Indians, has been confined to the history of Indian emigration and settlement.[2]