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14 Lao Foreign Policy

Martin Stuart-Fox

As the smallest and weakest of the three states of Indo-China, and the only one without access to the sea, Laos faces severe constraints in the formulation and pursuit of foreign policy. The Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR) is economically underdeveloped, socially fragmented and its military weakness is reflected in the presence for most of its existence of substantial foreign forces on Lao territory. Yet even given such limitations, opportunities do exist for the pursuit of specifically Lao national interests – notably preservation of the Lao state, development of a Lao national identity, and maximization of internationally provided resources for economic development.

The abolition of the 600-year-old Lao monarchy and proclamation of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR) on 2 December 1975 marked an abrupt restructuring of Lao foreign policy (Holsti, 1982). Despite the formation of three nominally neutral coalition governments (in 1957, 1962 and 1974) the foreign policy of the Royal Lao government (RLG) had, since Lao independence was achieved in 1953, been predominantly pro-Western. Throughout what the present government terms the '30-year struggle' from 1945 to 1975, the RLG was a major recipient of American aid, advice, and political pressure. Its foreign policy was tailored accordingly. In 1975, however, the LPDR became a member of the Communist bloc, with a stated foreign policy of close alignment with Vietnam and the Soviet Union.

This radical re-direction of Lao foreign policy initially has left the country even more economically dependent and less autonomous than it had been previously. As the government of a nominally neutral state, the RLG had at various times drawn upon aid from both the Soviet bloc and the West. After 1975 American and other Western aid all but dried up, and the new regime found itself heavily dependent on the Soviet bloc for aid and advice. There were, however, compensations. The former *de facto* division of the country into spheres of influence – Chinese in the north, Vietnamese in the east, and Thai and American in the population centres along the Mekong River – gave way to a unitary Lao state in which for the first time since independence the entire population shared in a single

traced their origins to the same Indochinese Communist Party (Langer and Zasloff, 1970).

Since the declaration of the LPDR at the end of 1975, this historical relationship has continued to exert a major influence on Lao foreign policy – not through sentiment, nor from a sense of gratitude, but through reinforcement of institutional ties which were already in place.

THE LAO COMMUNIST REGIME AND THE FOREIGN POLICY PROCESS

Laos is a People's Republic, modelled along classical Communist lines. Despite the enlargement of the LPRP Central Committee at both the Third and Fourth Party congresses, the governing élite remains remarkably small. There is a notable overlap, especially at the upper levels of power, between personnel in the Party, the government, the army and mass organizations (Stuart-Fox, 1986a: 81–4). Political power is thus highly concentrated: decision-making tends to take place primarily at the highest level of the party; that is, by the Politburo and the party secretariat. This is the case particularly where foreign policy is concerned, for a number of reasons. The first is that almost all foreign policy decisions are political; few are of a technical nature that could be safely left to Ministry officials. A second reason is that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is the only Lao government department which by mutual agreement and respect for Lao sensitivities has had no Vietnamese advisors attached to it. In theory, Vietnamese influence on Lao foreign policy is exercised by the same means as those open to other nations, through official representation from the Vietnamese ambassador and his staff, or from visiting Vietnamese delegations. In practice, however, such influence is rarely exerted because the Vietnamese enjoy much more effective access to the upper echelons of the LPRP. The Lao Ministry of Foreign Affairs thus tends to be by-passed since all major decisions, even down to provisions of visas for visiting scholars, are routinely referred to the party secretariat.

The figure primarily responsible for foreign affairs in the LPDR is Phoune Sipaseuth, sixth ranking member of the LPRP Politburo, member of the party secretariat, member of the Inner Cabinet of the Council of Government, and Minister of Foreign Affairs. Below him in the Ministry stand five vice-ministers, the first of whom,

Thongsavath Khaykhamphithoune, often stands in for the frequently ailing Phoune. Thongsavath is a member of the Party Central Committee, so also is Inpong Khaignavong, who serves as vice-president of the Committee's Foreign Affairs Commission. None of the other three vice-ministers are Central Committee members. The five vice-ministers are each nominally responsible for one of the five departments into which the Ministry is divided.

Foreign policy decision-making in the LPDR takes place within the context of a clearly defined ideological framework. All members of the LPRP Politburo are committed Communists, all veterans of the 30-year struggle. During that struggle they learned the importance of receiving assistance from the Communist Bloc – from the Soviet Union, from China, but most of all from Vietnam. Proletarian internationalism is more to Lao leaders than high sounding rhetoric: it is the only guarantee they have that their country in a time of peace will continue to receive from 'fraternal Socialist states' the greater part of the economic assistance the country requires to pursue its development goals. But the Lao recognize that in return for such assistance they must be prepared to pay more than lip-service to the concept of international Socialist solidarity. They have faithfully endorsed every foreign policy initiative emanating from Moscow or Hanoi.

While the revolutionary leadership in Laos proclaims its belief in the inevitable victory of Socialism, it is acutely conscious of the opposing forces ranged against it. These take the form of an unholy alliance between US imperialism, Chinese 'great power hegemonism', and Thai militarism. In order to resist this combination the Lao have accepted the Vietnamese position on the need for especially close relations among the states of Indochina. In the Lao view, without such solidarity, the Indochinese states severally could not hope to withstand the threats posed to their respective revolutions. Indo-Chinese solidarity is therefore described as a 'law' of the revolutions of all three states, without which none could succeed. Together the above factors constitute the 'ideological imperative' (Gunn, 1980) underlying Lao foreign policy.

DOMESTIC RESOURCES AND CONSTRAINTS

Actual foreign policy formulation in the LPDR, while it seeks within the ideological context outlined above to pursue the broad objectives

of national security and Socialist construction (Stuart-Fox, 1981c), does so within the constraints imposed by domestic resources and the prevailing external environment. In the case of Laos, the domestic resources available to promote either broad objective are quite inadequate to ensure its realization. Laos has the resources neither to ensure its national security nor to carry through its desired program of Socialist construction. Both require international assistance to an extent that places particular demands on Lao foreign policy.

To ensure national security requires, from the point of view of the present regime, both defense of existing frontiers and maintenance of the regime itself. However, the Lao People's Army (LPA) is small in size, numbering some 50 000 poorly equipped, poorly trained, and poorly motivated. Under no circumstances could the LPA withstand major sustained incursion into Lao territory by any of its more powerful neighbors. Neutrality on the Swiss or Swedish model backed by convincingly powerful defense forces is not an option for Laos (Stuart-Fox, 1982b).

It is even doubtful whether the LPA could effectively contain anti-government insurgents supported by neighboring states without Vietnamese military presence in Laos. The weakness of political and administrative institutions, combined with a high degree of *de facto* provincial autonomy, does little to enhance the legitimacy of the regime in much of the country. Nor does it provide an effective basis for containing resistance forces. Thus, Vietnamese troops were stationed on Lao territory not only to defend the LPDR from external threat, but also to defend the regime from internal challenge, until improvement of relations between Laos and its neighbors permitted their withdrawal by early 1989.

The weakness of LPDR leadership control in some areas derives from the ethnic composition of the Lao population, and the strategic location of minority groups (as noted above). Difficulties in communication, shortages of trained personnel, and lack of consumer necessities, all contribute (especially in the far north along the border with China) to limit central Lao government authority. Under such conditions, the regime has no real option but to compromise on questions of sovereignty – not over territory, but over people, their movements and contacts.

Poor administrative control over mountainous regions makes it difficult for the regime to legitimize its exercise of state power (Stuart-Fox, 1983). Where the government provides next to no services, it has little on which to base claims for allegiance. Where

attempts are made to interfere with traditional life styles, to abolish 'superstitious' religious practices or modify agricultural methods considered destructive of national resources, the government is even less likely to gain the support of tribal minorities (Wekkin, 1982; Lee, 1982). Foreign policy has thus to assist in creating conditions in border regions which reduce threats to the security of the regime, and reinforce its political legitimacy.

Economic weakness is another internal constraint. Laos is one of the least developed countries. *Per capita* income amounts to only about US$ 140 per annum at free market rates of exchange. Less than 1 per cent of the population is employed in the industrial sector, which accounts for only 7 per cent of GDP (Stuart-Fox, 1986a: 119–20). And Laos is even more economically dependent than it is poor. Hydro-electricity accounts for at least half of all Lao exports. All is sold to Bangkok. So important is this trade to Laos that Vientiane cannot afford to use it as a bargaining counter with Bangkok. Even when Thai-Lao relations were at their nadir during the 1984–85 'three villages' dispute, and Thailand was holding up transshipment of fully 273 categories of Lao imports said to be of strategic importance, the flow of Lao electricity to northeast Thailand continued. Meanwhile other exports – notably tin, gypsum, timber, and various forest products – are becoming increasingly tied up in barter agreements with Vietnam and the Soviet Union in return for basic consumer commodities, petroleum products, and to meet the cost of 'aid projects' in Laos. These arrangements limit Lao borrowing from the West by reducing the LPDR's ability to repay interest in convertible currency. They thus limit Lao capacity to purchase Western technology.

In the short term it is unlikely that Lao exports will significantly increase. Mineral resources will be difficult to exploit commercially. Timber provides opportunities for increased exploitation, but access to valuable stands is limited by difficult terrain and poor communications. Thus whereas in the long term, the favourable ratio of population to resources should enable Laos to improve living standards and raise GDP, in the short term the LPDR is entirely dependent on foreign aid to finance even the most basic economic development. Put another way, budgetary receipts in Laos barely meet present administrative costs. Thus even minimal improvements in medical, educational, agricultural or administrative services have to be financed by foreign aid. Lao economic dependency is thus all but absolute.

So fragile is the Lao economy that it is particularly vulnerable to all forms of economic pressure, by Thailand through unilateral closure of the Thai-Lao border and disruption of important cross-border trade, or by China with similar effect. Alternative access via Vietnam to some extent is now able to alleviate closure of the Thai border, but the cost of transportation via Vietnam to the Lao Mekong towns remains high, and the same range of consumer products is not available.

THE RECENT EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT

Just as it proved impossible to extricate Laos from the Vietnam War, despite the Geneva Conference of 1962, so it has proved impossible for the LPDR to isolate itself from the tensions which have convulsed the region since 1975, particularly the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, and China's border war with Vietnam (Stuart-Fox, 1980). The withdrawal of the United States between 1973 and 1975 opened the way for Soviet-Chinese rivalry for influence over the new Communist states of Indo-China. Through no fault of its own, Laos had by 1979 become entangled in this conflict, and had (perhaps a little reluctantly) followed Vietnam into the Soviet camp.

Fully half of all annual economic assistance in the LPDR comes from the USSR. So too does all more advanced military equipment (such as its single squadron of 20 Mig-21s, its transport aircraft, anti-aircraft guns, and SA-7 surface-to-air missiles). The Soviet Union has as many as a thousand political, military, and economic personnel in Laos at any one time, advising Lao ministries, maintaining equipment, and working on aid projects. Soviet experts are responsible for drawing up the Lao five-year plans, for running the television station, for maintaining communications. More than a thousand Lao students are studying in the Soviet Union (Stuart-Fox, 1986a).

The high Soviet profile in Laos worries the Chinese. Beijing has criticized the installation of Soviet military communications and radar facilities at Vientiane, and the construction of a military airfield at Phongsavan on the Plain of Jars in northern Laos. However, the Chinese are not in a position to do much about it. When the Lao government called for the withdrawal of Chinese road construction teams from northern Laos in 1979, Beijing complied. Subsequently the Chinese made some half-hearted moves to destabilize the government through the training and infiltration of Lao insurgents from

southern China back into Laos (Stuart-Fox, 1981b). By 1983, however, the Chinese appear to have decided on an alternative longer-term policy – one which sought to restore Chinese influence in northern Laos by more traditional means, through reducing tensions along the border and encouraging cross-border contacts. In June 1988 Laos and China raised their diplomatic relations to ambassadorial level. The friendly relations subsequently prevailing along the Lao-Chinese border thus contrast with the tension along the Vietnamese-Chinese border – a difference officially interpreted in Vientiane as part of a subtle Chinese plot to drive a wedge between Laos and Vietnam (Stuart-Fox, 1986a: 190).

Another external constraint on the present Lao regime has been the continued hostility of Thailand. Much of this hostility has been ideologically based and exacerbated by resentment over the extent of Vietnamese influence in Vientiane. The Thai authorities have taken every opportunity to punish Laos – by holding up delivery of imports, by limiting the number of border crossing points, or by closing the border entirely after some incident on the Mekong. Only briefly during 1979 did Bangkok attempt to improve relations with Vientiane with the aim of increasing Thai influence in the LPDR. But with the overthrow of General Kriangsak Chomanond, author of this alternative approach, Thai policy reverted to its former hostility. Thai military occupation of three disputed border villages in 1984 brought relations to a new low, and renewed ancient Lao fears of pan-Thai irredentism (Ngaosyvathn, 1985; cf. Viraphol, 1985). An even more serious border conflict from December 1987 to February 1988 left hundreds of casualties, but rather surprisingly, much friendlier relations developed once a cease-fire was arranged.

The principal external constraint on Lao foreign policy, however, has been neither the Soviet presence, nor Chinese displeasure, nor Thai hostility, but rather the 'special relationship' that binds Laos closely to Vietnam. Under the terms of the 1977 25-year Lao-Vietnamese Treaty of Friendship and Co-operation, not only can Vietnamese forces be stationed in Laos, but Vietnamese assistance is provided in everything from party organization and cadre training, to economic development and internal security. The very multiplicity of Vietnamese relationships with Laos makes it impossible for the Lao to disregard Vietnamese interests when formulating their foreign policy. Meetings of the foreign ministers of Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam expressly formulate common policy for all three Indo-Chinese states.

The Vietnamese influence in Laos extends far beyond regular meetings of foreign ministers, however. It is exercised on a series of interlocking levels – party to party, government to government, army to army, and even local administration to local administration through the twinning of Lao and Vietnamese provinces (Stuart-Fox, 1987). Add to these channels the influence of Vietnamese advisors attached to the security apparatus of the Ministry of the Interior, and it is at once evident why the present Lao regime cannot but take account of Vietnamese wishes. Party to party relations are particularly close at the highest level, but are consolidated by the exchange of delegations, and by Vietnamese involvement in training Lao cadres. The need for 'unity with Vietnam' has been proclaimed by LPRP Secretary-General Kaysone Phomvihane as the primary criterion for 'fostering the revolutionary qualities of all party members' (*Tap Chi Cong San*, March 1985). All Lao cadres are taught that solidarity between the three states of Indochina constitutes a 'law of history' which no one can oppose. Not surprisingly, no one does.

The importance of the Vietnamese connection as the principal external constraint on the formulation of Lao foreign policy derives from Vietnamese perceptions of the strategic importance of Laos for the defense of Vietnam. The persistence displayed by the Vietnamese in building up a close and enduring relationship with the Lao revolutionary movement throughout the '30-year struggle' provides ample evidence of Vietnamese determination to exercise a dominant influence in Laos. The Vietnamese were not prepared to settle for a neutral Laos, nor even a Communist Laos neutral in the Sino-Soviet dispute once Vietnam had opted for the Soviet side (Stuart-Fox, 1980). Hanoi is determined that Laos will remain a close and faithful ally. There is limited opportunity for the LPDR to do otherwise.

OUTPUT: OBJECTIVES AND STRATEGIES OF LAO FOREIGN POLICY

As noted above, since the present Lao regime came to power in 1975, it has encountered some difficulty in establishing its legitimacy to succeed the Lao monarchy. Not only is the regime administratively and politically weak, but insurgent forces based for the most part in Thailand have directly challenged its authority. Not surprisingly,

therefore, maintenance of the regime itself has been a primary objective of Lao foreign policy. Efforts have been made to persuade both Thailand and China to deny the use of their territory to Lao insurgents. At the same time LPDR leadership has cemented relations with its most consistent and determined foreign backer – the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. The closeness of the Lao relationship with Vietnam has therefore to be seen in the light of the regime's need for strong support in the face of continuing threats to its legitimacy and stability. Should these threats diminish, reliance on Vietnam would be less essential.

The alliance with Vietnam has also been of importance in ensuring the security of the state, and the inviolability of its frontiers. To this end some compromise on demarcation of the Lao-Vietnamese border proved necessary, and not too painful. Availability of Vietnamese forces deters not only internal dissent, but also any attempt by what the Lao perceive as a hostile and potentially expansionist Thai state to seize Lao territory (as happened during the Second World War).

The presence of Vietnamese troops in Laos was, however, more of a provocation than a defense where the Chinese were concerned. Deterrence against a possible Chinese thrust through Laos in the event of renewed Chinese-Vietnamese hostilities is of more importance for the defense of Vietnam than of Laos. As the Lao well recognize, the security of the Lao state is better ensured by maintaining, if not cordial then at least correct, relations with Beijing. For this reason, the Lao have encouraged contact with local Chinese authorities across their common border, even while echoing Vietnamese criticism of Chinese attitudes and intentions – a ploy which relies on Chinese willingness to distinguish rhetoric from reality (Stuart-Fox, 1986b). Its success was confirmed by steady improvement in Lao-Chinese relations in the late 1980s.

Recognition of the need to maintain friendly relations with neighboring states has been a constant feature of Lao foreign policy. Lao leaders are acutely aware that a separate Lao political entity survived more through geopolitics (its juxtaposition between Thailand, China and Vietnam; the intervention of the French) than through any capacity of the Lao to defend their state as defined by its present frontiers. As in the case of Cambodia, preservation of the state itself is thus a primary goal. But in the longer term two other factors are essential to ensure the survival of a Lao political entity: national economic development which serves to strengthen the state itself;

and growth of a new sense of Lao national identity. Together these constitute the next most important objectives of Lao foreign policy.

The economic constraints referred to above make Laos entirely dependent on foreign aid for its development program. The Soviet Union and Vietnam provide the bulk of assistance. Other Eastern European states, Cuba, and Mongolia, fund small projects or help by educating Lao technicians. But the LPDR has also actively sought aid from Western donors, notably Japan, Sweden and Australia. Lao policy is to continue to diversify its sources of aid by appealing to other Western donors, particularly the United States and France. It is here, however, that the costs of the Vietnam alliance become evident. For as long as the Cambodia problem remains unresolved, Laos is unlikely to receive substantial American or Western European aid. Nevertheless, the Lao have gone out of their way to improve relations with the US by co-operating in the search for Americans missing-in-action in Laos. In return the US has taken Laos off the list of enemy states. By 1989, therefore, the way was open for a resumption of American aid: only Cambodia remained an obstacle.

A further objective of Lao foreign policy is to create the conditions necessary to build a Lao nation and develop a sense of Lao national identity. The basis for this cannot be ethnic or cultural: there are far more ethnic Lao in Thailand than in Laos, and minority groups cannot be expected to assimilate to the dominant ethnic Lao culture. Nation-building in Laos seeks to include all 60-odd 'nationalities' through the creation of a new socialist culture, free of ethnic prejudice.

For this to occur it is essential for the government to be in administrative control of the entire national territory. Hence the need for a single sufficiently powerful protector to ensure the defense of the state, and to prevent rival powers carving out *de facto* spheres of influence. For the present regime, that protector is Vietnam. The close alliance with the SRV within the 'Indo-China solidarity bloc' both ensures the preservation of the regime itself, and provides it with the opportunity and assistance necessary to build a sense of national identity among the disparate ethnic groups within the frontiers of present-day Laos.

The goal of increasing the sphere of independent action in relations with other states has not been of primary concern to the regime to date – mainly because it clearly conflicts with the above objectives. However, Laos does have diplomatic relations with more than 50

states, 27 of which have representatives based in Vientiane. Also, despite the power rivalries of the post-1975 era, neither the US nor China ever broke off diplomatic relations with Laos. Nor, moreover, did Thailand. This has had the important result of enabling the Lao to keep communications open and thus to maintain a minimal independence of action. Lao negotiations with and policies towards both the US and China since 1983 have differed in small but appreciable respects from those of Vietnam. Laos took the lead over the MIA issue and, as noted above, Lao-Chinese border relations are more harmonious than those between China and Vietnam. In addition, Laos increasingly deals with the Soviet Union outside the context of intra-Indo-China relations.

All the same, it would be a mistake to exaggerate the opportunities Laos has to maximize autonomy in foreign policy decision-making. Important decisions are taken only after discussion at the highest levels of the LPRP with the Vietnamese. Should Lao policies begin to diverge from wider Indo-Chinese (in particular, Vietnamese) interests, strong pressures would be likely to force their appropriate modification. The danger in the longer term to Lao independence comes from progressive institutionalization and integration of Indo-China-wide relations, especially in the fields of communications, commerce, and economic planning and development. The need for financial assistance and advanced technology, neither of which can be supplied by Vietnam, does, however, provide Laos with justification for developing bilateral relations with the Soviet Union, with Western European countries, with Japan, and with the United States. Similarly, the need to minimize friction along the Lao border and eliminate foreign support for anti-government insurgents justifies Lao attempts to improve bilateral relations with both China and Thailand. Fostering the cross-border trade with Thailand that is vital for a developing Lao economy constitutes another important reason to improve relations with Bangkok.

To an appreciable extent, the present Lao regime has successfully pursued its foreign policy objectives. The alliance with Vietnam has served to maintain both the regime and the security of the state. It has also created the necessary conditions for the regime to promote a new Lao national identity. At the same time Laos has been reasonably successful in attracting foreign economic development aid from a range of countries, both Communist and capitalist, and in preparing the way for future programs (notably from the United States). Both the need to ensure sufficient levels of foreign aid, and the need to

minimize the hostility of Thailand and China, have led Laos to seek a degree of autonomy in foreign policy, within the constraints permitted by the Lao-Vietnamese alliance. It seems safe to suggest that the principal strategies for future Lao foreign policy will be to maintain a close political and military alliance with Vietnam and at the same time to develop a lively economic relation with Thailand, while moving towards a more 'neutral' position with respect to regional conflicts and rivalries. This would enable the LPDR to promote its development goals by drawing upon not only aid from both superpowers, but also trading opportunities with neighboring states as well. On the success of this strategy will depend the continued existence of Laos as an independent political entity.

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