made by Brezhnev himself, and in a context only slightly removed from that of the Gulf. During the Vienna summit of June 1979, Brezhnev replied to President Carter's complaint that the Soviet-Cuban action in Angola and elsewhere in Africa had violated *détente*.

Brezhnev emphasized with perfect frankness that "our appraisals of political regimes in various countries sometimes differ strongly from the appraisals made by certain circles in the U.S. . . . We believe that every people has the right to decide its own destiny. Why then pin on the Soviet Union the responsibility for the objective course of history and, moreover, use this as a pretext for worsening our relations?"[9]

In Soviet doctrine, therefore, notwithstanding any formal agreement with the West and Japan over "zones of peace" in the Indian Ocean region, the U.S.S.R. would be still free to instigate and install pro-Soviet revolutionary regimes in the Gulf. To the West, such a development would in effect outflank its maritime forces in the region and no doubt eventually change the entire economic balance of power in the world. But in Brezhnev's words, such a development would be the "objective course of history" which would take priority over any purely inter-state agreement signed by the U.S.S.R.

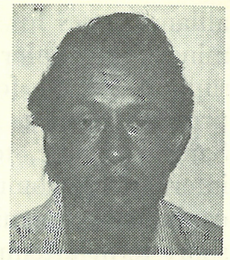
It is perhaps in this context that the current thrust of Soviet policy in the Gulf and the Indian Ocean must be assessed. For there can be little doubt that the ambiguity of Soviet policy, backed by the Russian presence in Afghanistan and Aden, adds immeasurably to the strategic problems of the defense of the region.

NOTES

1 *Daily Telegraph*, London, February 19, 1980.
2 *Time*, September 22, 1980.
3 *The Times*, London, November 12, 1980.
4 *Daily Telegraph*, London, August 27, 1980.
5 *The Times*, London, November 12, 1980.
6 *Daily Telegraph*, London, December 1, 1980.
7 Lord Chalfont, "How Mr. Reagan Would Handle the Decade of Danger," *The Times*, London, October 7, 1980.
8 Details in *The Times*, London, December 11, 1980.
9 *Pravda*, June 17, 1979.

LAOS IN CHINA'S ANTI-VIETNAM STRATEGY

By Martin Stuart-Fox



TWO events in 1979 have set the stage for interstate relations in mainland Southeast Asia during the decade of the "eighties." Both reverted to patterns and revived fears prevalent in an earlier, pre-colonial era. But whereas one—the Vietnamese invasion and occupation of Kampuchea—was immediately successful in what it set out to achieve, the other—the Chinese border war against Vietnam—appears to have failed in most of its aims.

While the Vietnamese have re-established the dominant influence in Kampuchea which they exercised in the early 19th century, the Chinese have not succeeded in obtaining the recognition of regional paramountcy once accorded Beijing by the court of Hue. What is more, while the Vietnamese have successfully used their Friendship Treaty with the Soviet Union to break free of their traditional subservience to the Chinese, the Kampucheans failed in their similar bid to use the Chinese to secure their independence from Vietnam. In two ways, therefore, the Chinese have suffered an humiliation they are clearly prepared neither to forgive nor to forget.

The People's Republic of China (P.R.C.) is now faced with a new security threat on the country's southern frontier. Deepseated ethnic Vietnamese suspicion and dislike of the Chinese have been compounded by an orchestrated program of anti-Chinese nationalism, not to say chauvinism, which has resulted in both the flight of hundreds of thousands of Chinese refugees from Vietnam, and the cementing of an implacable national determination to resist all forms of Chinese "hegemonism." More serious, however, from the Chinese point of view has been the growth of Soviet influence in Vietnam, with the possibility that this will result in the establishment of a permanent Soviet military presence should Hanoi lease bases to the Russians in return for increased military and economic aid. Vietnamese hostility and the threat that the Soviet-Vietnamese

alliance poses for the P.R.C. is something the Chinese are determined to counter both in the short and long term. Continued support for the forces of Pol Pot in Kampuchea and diplomatic pressure against recognition of the Vietnamese installed Heng Samrin regime, together with efforts to isolate Vietnam in the international community and attempts to prevent Hanoi obtaining capitalist economic aid, all should be seen as part of China's short term attempts to force Hanoi to adopt a less intransigent attitude towards Beijing. Should these attempts fail, however—and there are indications that a number of countries are becoming increasingly reluctant to continue to ostracize Hanoi and recognize the Khmer Rouge—then China will be faced with the long term need to ensure the security of her southern borders. As a minimum requirement the Chinese would like Hanoi to agree to keep the Soviets at a proper distance. But this would require a Chinese *quid pro quo*, and it is here that Laos may play a role in Chinese strategic thinking.

This article will trace Chinese relations with Laos over the past five years, and indicate some of the implications of recent Chinese actions. The strategic importance of Laos to both China and Vietnam will be examined. Finally the role of Laos in China's long term anti-Vietnam strategy will be discussed and assessed. It will be argued that traditional patterns of Chinese relationships with the states of mainland Southeast Asia provide a clue to possible Chinese strategies for dealing with Vietnam. While it is evident that Beijing's relations with the regime cannot now conform to those of an earlier Confucian world order, it will be maintained that Chinese actions in Laos since 1978 can be seen as part of a long term strategy to pressure Vietnam into reverting to a relationship with China which re-establishes some structural aspects of traditional Chinese relations with Southeast Asia. Furthermore it will be suggested that such a relationship may provide an acceptable compromise resolution of present tensions in the region.

CHINESE-LAO RELATIONS 1975–1980

The founding of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (L.P.D.R.) in December 1975 was welcomed by Beijing; however, the Chinese also made it clear that they were concerned over the possibility that the Soviet Union might come to wield undue influence in Vientiane. When Lao Prime Minister and Secretary-General of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) Kaysone

Phomvihan visited Beijing in March 1976, China's Chairman Hua Guofeng warned him bluntly against the "superpower that hawks '*détente*' while extending its grabbing claws everywhere."[1] The warning was apparently taken to heart, for over the next two years the Lao did make some attempt to play an even hand between Moscow and Beijing. Lao delegations visited both the U.S.S.R. and the P.R.C., while Laos welcomed both Soviet and Chinese sporting and cultural groups, and aid missions. The Lao media balanced news from the Soviet Union against praise for Chinese achievements.

During this period, however, Laos' "special relationship" with the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (S.R.V.) was taking shape. This was sealed by the signing in July 1977 of a 25 year Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation between the two nations. Inevitably, therefore, as Vietnam's relations with China deteriorated, a pro-Soviet bias became increasingly evident in Vientiane. Soviet aid was stepped up, including military aid, and Soviet advisers far outnumbered Chinese. This developing Soviet-Lao relationship was symbolized by the visit to Vientiane early in 1978 of Soviet Deputy Minister of Defense and Commander-in-Chief of ground forces General Ivan Pavlovsky. The visit was seen as a response to China's support for Kampuchea, and a warning to Beijing not to carry that support too far. But coming as it did on top of the arrival of Soviet MIG-21s the previous September, and construction of an airport and radar facilities on the Plain of Jars, the promise of further military assistance for the Lao army carried with it the ominous threat for Beijing of an increased Soviet military presence along her southern border. Interestingly enough, soon after these events the first evidence surfaced of Chinese anti-government agitation among the hill tribes of northern Laos close to the Chinese border. "Thieves and bandits" were reported creating "disturbances" in Phong Saly, an area under close communist control since before 1954 and one where such activities would hardly be expected.[2]

As relations between China and Vietnam deteriorated further with the expulsion of ethnic Chinese from Vietnam, the Lao at first attempted to maintain their neutrality. However, the first anniversary of the Lao-Vietnamese Friendship Treaty provided Kaysone, himself staunchly pro-Vietnamese, with the occasion to commit Laos to the Vietnamese side in the S.R.V.'s growing dispute with China. Bejiing was asked to close down its unofficial consulate

at Oudomxay, the administrative center for Chinese aid to northern Laos. At the same time reports began to circulate of Chinese complicity in supporting anti-government insurgents in Laos, especially the remnants of the former CIA-trained Hmong (Meo) army of General Vang Pao. Rebel emissaries were reported to have made their way to China, apparently to request Chinese assistance.[3]

The Lao were fully aware of the potential danger of taking sides against China. A new note of urgency is evident in calls for improved military training and national defense during the latter part of 1978. In August before a joint session of the Supreme People's Assembly and Council of Ministers, Kaysone accused the P.R.C. of entering into collusion with the U.S. against Laos.

"The blind ambition of the imperialists and the international reactionaries is boundless. Their tricks and maneuvers are extremely ferocious and relentless."[4]

By the end of 1978 this condemnation had become commonplace. The Chinese were always referred to by the Vietnamese term of abuse as "international reactionaries," and were increasingly portrayed as constituting the primary threat to Laos security.[5] Chinese reaction, however, was muted. Not until the Lao began accusing the Chinese by name in March 1979 in the wake of China's invasion of Vietnam did Beijing respond in kind. The Lao government was warned over taking "grave anti-China steps," while Vietnam and the Soviet Union were accused of "enslaving the Laotian people."[6] Meanwhile at the request of the Lao government China began withdrawing her road construction teams and experts from northern Laos, a move that was completed by April 5.[7]

In the escalating war of words which followed charges that Chinese forces were massed along the Lao border and had actually crossed in two places, Beijing issued a thinly veiled call for Lao resistance to Vietnamese domination. "Criminal" Vietnamese schemes of intensifying control over Laos only invited "stronger opposition from the Lao people," according to a commentator in *Renmin Ribao*.[8] Vientiane responded by claiming that "the Chinese rulers have long worked to overthrow Laos" by conniving with Lao reactionaries to destroy the country's internal security.[9] Beijing called for the withdrawal of the estimated 50,000 Vietnamese troops stationed in Laos under the terms of the Lao-Vietnamese treaty. At the same time it was revealed,

perhaps prematurely, that the Chinese were prepared to take a step further in setting up a Lao Socialist Party (LSP), presumably based in southern China, dedicated to liberating Laos from Vietnamese domination. The LSP was described in a broadcast over Radio Democratic Kampuchea, as the "spokesman of true Lao patriots who are waging a struggle against the Vietnamese aggressors and Vietnam's Lao stooges."[10]

At first the Lao authorities ignored the existence of the LSP, but in October in a speech to the 34th session of the United Nations General Assembly, Lao Acting Foreign Minister Khamphay Boupha referred openly to the new party. Khamphay condemned the Chinese for

"sending spies and pirates into Laos to continually provoke trouble and lead subversive activities aimed at sowing division among Lao ethnic minorities, and of assembling all Lao reactionary exiles around the so-called Lao Socialist Party which they have created out of nothing."[11]

Lao concern over Chinese actions and intentions had risen as a result of the capture of documents, weapons and equipment from Hmong guerrillas which the Lao claimed proved they were receiving Chinese aid. This was said to confirm that the P.R.C. was bent upon expanding her own territory and "exterminating" Laos. As a result the Lao requested Beijing to reduce its embassy staff to twelve (on a par with the United States), and not to include a military *attaché*.

Chinese activity in northern Laos continued to center upon the successful recruitment of tribal peoples, especially those ethnically and culturally akin to the Chinese and whose traditional lands extend into southern China. The withdrawal of Chinese construction workers and closure of the border cut the supply of basic consumer goods, which, despite their good intentions, the Lao authorities have been unable to replace. Vietnamese troops who moved into northern Laos on the heels of the Chinese (though remaining some distance from the Chinese frontier) are suspicious of the tribesmen and have minimal rapport with them. Even Yao and Hmong who had previously been pro-Pathet Lao or neutral are reported to have taken up arms against the government;[12] and appeals by government and tribal leaders for an end to internal division and anti-government insurgency have proved ineffective.

LAOS'S DEFECTORS

In mid-1979 the Lao authorities began a new series of purges of cadres suspected of being either too openly pro-Chinese or anti-Vietnamese. This led to the flight of at least two second echelon Pathet Lao officials, both long-term members of the LPRP who had spent many years in China. The highest ranking political defector was Bounlob Phonsena, *chef de cabinet* in the Planning Directory. The other official was Sisanan Saignanouvong, editor of the official party journal *Sieng Pasason* and director of *Khaosan Pathet Lao*, the government news agency.[13] Both have reportedly made their way to China together with a number of lesser officials who fled at about the same time to avoid arrest or being sent for re-education in Vietnam or remote areas of Laos.

The next Chinese move came with an offer to accept up to 10,000 Lao refugees from camps in Thailand for resettlement in China. The offer was gratefully accepted by the Thai, and it was announced that more than the specified quota had volunteered to go.[14] At the end of November a Chinese delegation visited the Thai refugee camps, to shrill criticism from the Lao, who accused Beijing of recruiting saboteurs and guerrillas to fight in Laos.[15] Reports from the camps indicated that many young ethnic Lao and Hmong who volunteered for resettlement in China left with the firm belief that they would be back in Laos fighting the Vietnamese before too long.[16]

In their propaganda and in agitation against the Lao government, the Chinese have consistently played upon anti-Vietnamese feelings which are deep and widespread in Laos. A high-ranking Pathet Lao defector claimed in August 1979 that as many as 90 per cent of the 23,000 members of the LPRP were unhappy over the ubiquitous Vietnamese presence.[17] Vietnamese troops stationed in Laos far outnumber the Lao regular army. Clashes have been reported between Lao and Vietnamese units, and up to 3,000 Pathet Lao soldiers have joined anti-government insurgents. Some 6,000 Vietnamese civilian officials and technicians influence all major decisions taken by the Lao authorities, and Vietnamese settlers are reported to have moved into parts of Laos. Whereas most refugees who crossed to Thailand in 1975 and 1976 feared being sent to re-education camps, many who fled during 1977 and 1978 did so because of the Vietnamese. Many of these later refugees

were initially sympathetic to the Lao revolution, but maintained that Laos should build Lao socialism independently of Vietnam.

The defection of Pathet Lao officials and recruitment of potential guerrillas among refugees in Thailand and pro-Chinese tribal minorities in Laos have provided the Chinese with the means, should they decide to use them, of promoting a full scale anti-government insurgency in northern Laos. The formation of the LSP provides the organizational basis for such an insurgency. It was with this in mind that Kaysone admitted in his report to the Supreme People's Assembly at the end of December 1979, that the poor state of relations with China was a cause of "great concern." Laos, in fact, was engaged in a new "war of national defense" against a power which sought to overthrow the state. "The acts of the Chinese side threaten the independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity and political security of our country," Kaysone told the assembled delegates.[18]

"We are facing dangerous enemies who maintain a close alliance with various imperialist forces and other reactionaries as well as with the exiled reactionaries and reactionary remnants in the country. The enemies have colluded in implementing many subtle, brutal schemes and tricks in the economic, political, military, cultural, ideological and other fields. They have combined schemes of spying . . . and psychological warfare with schemes aimed at disrupting the unity in the country and at sowing division between Laos, Vietnam and Kampuchea. They have misled and bought off Lao cadres into serving them while infiltrating . . . our offices, organizations, enterprises and mass organizations with a view to sabotaging, destroying and controlling the economy, creating disturbances, inciting uprisings, carrying out assassinations and subversive activities in the country, putting pressure on and weakening our country in order to proceed to swallowing up our country in the end."[19]

During 1980 Laos was drawn further into confrontation with China as a result of the situation in Kampuchea. Continued resistance to the Vietnamese backed government of Heng Samrin on the part of forces loyal to Pol Pot led to increasing tension along the Thai-Kampuchean border. Thai attempts to repatriate Khmer refugees led to Vietnam's cross-border incursion on June 23, aimed at refugee camps in Thailand, and supply routes channelling Chinese and Thai aid to the insurgents. Beijing quickly promised to assist Thailand in the event of a full scale

Vietnamese attack, while the government of General Prem Tinasulanonda in Bangkok adopted a tough anti-Vietnamese stance. Attitudes hardened on both sides: the Vietnamese became convinced of Thai-Chinese collusion, while the Thai concluded that Vietnam, backed by the Soviet Union, exercised such comprehensive control in Kampuchea and Laos that both were no more than instruments of Hanoi.

This reasoning led the Thai to interpret an earlier shooting incident on the Mekong between Lao soldiers and a Thai gunboat as part of a Vietnamese co-ordinated plot to bring military and political pressure to bear on Thailand. Refusal of the Lao to apologize for the death of a Thai sailor on the grounds that the Lao action was legitimate self-defense, led the Thai to close the border between the two countries. Subsequent talks in Bangkok failed to resolve the issue and the Thai claimed that "Laos is dancing the steps dictated by those manipulating it."[20] The Lao countered by charging that the "Thai reactionaries of the extreme right" were "well known valets of the clique of reactionary power holders in Beijing."[21]

This was, for the Lao, the crux of their allegations. What was seen as the new Thai intransigence was directly attributed to collusion with the Chinese. Thus China was accused of being behind not only closure of the Thai frontier with Laos and Thai rejection of proposals to solve the Kampuchean problem agreed upon by the foreign ministers of Vietnam, Laos and Kampuchea in Vientiane in July, but also coordinated efforts to step up Lao resistance to the Vientiane government.

". . . Beijing itself, . . . is in the process of abusing Thai soil as a center for recruitment and the formation of military units, of supporting exiled Lao reactionaries, sending them afterwards to destroy the Lao revolution, and disturb Lao-Thai relation. . . ."[22]

WAR OF WORDS

Behind all these moves, according to the Lao, lay Chinese attempts to "divide and rule" the nations of Southeast Asia by first undermining the solidarity existing between Vietnam, Laos and Kampuchea, and turning them against the Soviet Union. Only the "natural resistance of the block of monolithic solidarity of the three peoples of Indochina" had stood in the way of the Chinese hegemonistic and expansionist policies being applied to all Southeast Asia.[23] Beijing was accused of using Thailand, in

collution with American imperialism, as a springboard for opposition against the three nations of Indochina. This was most apparent in Kampuchea where *Sieng Pasason*, official journal of the Lao government and Party, accused the Chinese and Thai ("Satan and Company") of "nourishing the hope of swallowing up . . . the four million or so surviving Kampucheans" not yet slaughtered by Pol Pot. But, warned the paper, "when these sad demons can no longer overthrow Kampuchea and all Indochina they will turn to Thailand. . . . Possessed by the demonic Chinese (spell), Thailand swims in a complete diabolic trance, unconscious that Satan and Company are about to devour her entrails."[24]

This was extraordinary language, especially coming from the Lao. Since this outburst the vituperative war of words has been toned down, but the Lao returned to the attack at the United Nations in October when Foreign Minister Phoun Spiraseut accused the Chinese, in close collaboration with the imperialists and Thai reactionaries, of "mounting a vast plot against the peoples of Indochina."

"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 bridgehead 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 particularly 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."[25]

Further details flesh out the "plot" which the Lao authorities believe the Chinese are hatching against them. Beijing is said to have set up a commercial sabotage organization in Nongkhai, across the Mekong river from Vientiane, to work through Chinese middlemen to create artificial shortages and raise prices in the Lao capital. Anti-government insurgents in southern Laos, as well as in the north, are believed to be now receiving Chinese military assistance. Chinese advisers "dressed in civilian clothes" are reportedly co-ordinating operations between Pol Pot forces, Khmer Serei groups and Lao guerrillas in southern Laos. Radio Beijing has taken to quoting reports carried by Radio Democratic Kampuchea or Western news agencies of attacks by Lao resistance forces on Vietnamese troops. And the Chinese have hailed

the formation on September 15 of the Lao People's National Liberation United Front, bringing together four anti-Vietnamese resistance groups operating in southern Laos. In its manifesto the new Front claimed to be fighting "for the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops, and the disbanding of the Vietnamese colonial administration" in Laos.[26]

In Yunnan, the Lao claim, the Chinese have trained and equipped a "division" of troops (the so-called Lanna division) numbering some 6,000 to 7,000 men ready to fight in Laos.[27] The existence of such a unit seems inherently unlikely, however, as it could hardly hope to prevail against Vietnamese forces in northern Laos in conventional warfare. What seems more likely is that the Chinese have readied a sizable force of guerrillas to be infiltrated back into Laos when the time is ripe. To date, however, they appear still to be concentrating upon anti-government propaganda and organizing among the hill tribes. Armed clashes between northern guerrillas and Laos security forces are infrequent, and Vietnamese troops holding key road and communications centers have not been subject to attack. What the Chinese appear to be doing in Laos, therefore, is to lay the groundwork for an insurgency should they wish to launch one. Chinese actions thus pose a very real threat for the future internal security of the country, but a threat and no more as things stand at present. What then do the Chinese intend to do in Laos? What do they hope to achieve? Despite their frequent denunciations of Beijing, these are questions the Lao profess to be unable to answer. Nor have the Chinese themselves forecast their intentions in Laos. Some indication of Chinese thinking may be obtained, however, from an assessment of the strategic significance of Laos for both China and Vietnam, taking account of past Chinese reactions to events in Laos.

STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE OF LAOS

Since 1949 the P.R.C. has pursued a two-pronged policy aimed at ensuring the security of her southern frontier. This has consisted on the one hand of consolidating central government control over minority groups in Guangxi and Yunnan provinces abutting northern Vietnam, Laos and Burma; and on the other of encouraging friendly or at least neutral regimes in those states with which China shares a common frontier. In addition, however, where possible Chinese influence has been extended among

selected groups inside these bordering countries. This policy may be variously described: as one of "moving the buffer zone which was once inside (China's) boundaries to encompass states adjacent to her;" or as extending China's sphere of influence in Southeast Asia with the aim of constructing a ring of dependent states similar to that existing in Eastern Europe.[23]

China's minorities policies have actively contributed to furthering frontier security; for far from permitting the kind of genuine autonomy to minority tribes which might lead to a weakening of central government control, the setting up of regional autonomous areas "has facilitated both the integration of the two provinces (of Yunnan and Guangxi) into the developmental process being carried forward elsewhere in the country and the establishment of the central government's authority in the border region."[29] Furthermore, the policy of tight control under the guise of partial autonomy combined with the encouragement of minority cultures was designed to appeal to allied ethnic groups in neighboring countries. The free movement of minority groups across the mountainous frontiers back and forth into northern Vietnam and Laos enabled these peoples to compare for themselves conditions of life on either side of the frontier, while the limited flow of consumer goods from the Chinese side built up a fund of goodwill for China in the border regions.

Chinese support for the Viet Minh against the French in a war which drew heavily upon the support of tribal minorities led to the establishment in 1954 of a friendly communist state in North Vietnam. This could be seen as furthering Chinese security along the southern border. Indeed it has been suggested that after 1954 the border regions abutting North Vietnam were no longer treated as "frontier" areas by the Chinese.[30]

Laos was a different matter. The growing American presence after 1954 was seen by the Chinese as a threat to their security, and Beijing reacted swiftly both to the Lao crisis of 1961–62 and to the U.S. backed South Vietnamese invasion of southern Laos early in 1971.[31] Four steps in Chinese policy towards Laos can be identified.[32] An initial period of peaceful coexistence from 1954 to 1957 was followed by a policy of active pressure and support for the Pathet Lao from 1958, when the U.S. encouraged Lao rightist Prime Minister Phoui Sananikone to subvert the provisions of the Geneva agreements, to 1960, when Kong Le's *coup d'état* returned Souvanna Phouma to power. This was followed

by a third period during 1961 and 1962 leading up to the second Geneva Conference on Laos when the Chinese appeared ready to support an internationally guaranteed neutralization of Laos. Once these agreements too broke down, the Chinese returned to a more militant posture of overt support for the Pathet Lao. This continued until eventual Communist victory in 1975, though the Chinese were not entirely happy with the Pathet Lao decision in 1973 to accept to Vietnamese advice, agree to a ceasefire and take part in a provisional government of national union on an equal basis with the royalist Right.

The P.R.C. did not formally establish diplomatic ties with Laos until the establishment of a neutral government in Vientiane in June 1962. Already, however, an agreement had been signed for construction of a road from the Chinese frontier to the Pathet Lao held provincial capital of Phong Saly. The Chinese road building program in northern Laos permitted Beijing to extend its influence across the frontier, particularly among the minority mountain tribes through whose territory the network extended. These roads were of strategic importance for the P.R.C. as they provided Beijing with the means of swift deployment of troops should the occasion warrant it. They could be used to counter U.S.-backed forces pressing too near the Chinese frontier or to funnel supplies and cadres in support of the pro-Chinese insurgents of the Communist Party of Thailand. But the stepped up Chinese road program after 1968 suggests that already the Chinese presence in northern Laos had another strategic motive: to "gain leverage over Hanoi."[33] By 1968 relations between China and North Vietnam had lost much of their earlier warmth. The Chinese were critical not only of North Vietnam's growing dependency upon the Soviet Union, but also of Vietnamese tactics and strategy in prosecuting the war in the south. Increased Chinese influence in northern Laos exploiting pro-Chinese sentiments among the Pathet Lao had the effect of curbing Vietnamese ambitions while at the same time enhancing Beijing's strategic potential in the region (for example, in supporting the Thai insurgency).

China's perception of Laos during the period of American involvement in Indochina was at all times colored by her national security interests. Once it was clear that the U.S. intended to withdraw from the region, China was faced with the need to rethink her foreign policy towards Southeast Asia. By this time,

however, relations with Vietnam had deteriorated badly, and China's previous tacit recognition that Laos fell primarily within Vietnam's sphere of interest had cleared the way for Hanoi to cement a close relationship with Vientiane. As a result Beijing was faced by the end of 1978 with two, rather than one, increasingly unfriendly states on her southern borders, in each of which her arch enemy, the Soviet Union, wielded overwhelming political and military influence.

But if Laos is of strategic importance to the P.R.C., it is doubly so to the S.R.V. Any power poised along the Lao frontier is in a position to threaten the narrow coastal plains of central Vietnam. During the Vietnam war, protection of the Ho Chi Minh trail through eastern Laos was essential for the prosecution of Hanoi's policies in the south. But Hanoi's victory over Saigon in 1975 did not reduce the need to maintain a Vietnamese presence in Laos. For as Ho Chi Minh himself was quoted as saying:

"Laos must be kept out of the hands of the imperialists at all costs: if not, Vietnam can never stay independent. Hostile forces cannot be tolerated the length of the borders of Tonkin."[34]

And what was true for hostile imperialists is equally true for hostile international reactionaries.

Since in the long term Laos has been seen as holding the key to the defense of Vietnam, the Vietnamese have expended every effort to establish a hold over eastern Laos. Vietnamese cadres and troops organized and defended the supply networks that made up the Ho Chi Minh trail with extraordinary tenacity in the face of massive and continuous air attack over a number of years. Unstinting support was given to the Pathet Lao, especially in developing an effective rapport with minority groups along the border. What the Chinese did in the north of Laos, the Vietnamese did in the east and south. By 1975 as much as 80 per cent of the Lao People's Liberation Army was made up of Vietnamese trained and supplied mountain tribesmen, and many Vietnamese were almost as familiar with eastern Laos as they were with their own land.

It must be concluded, therefore, that Laos is of crucial strategic significance to both China and Vietnam: to China in maintaining the security of her southern frontier and in pursuing her foreign policy designs in Southeast Asia; to Vietnam in defense of her long and potentially vulnerable western border. While China and Vietnam were on good terms with each other both these interests

could be accommodated by means of the kind of *de facto* division of influence in Laos which prevailed until 1978, in which Vietnam exercised military control over the eastern region while China held sway in the north. It was a division which was maintained at first even after the Pathet Lao accession to power in 1975, for it was one which the Lao themselves were prepared to live with. But with the Vietnamese invasion of Kampuchea, and the outbreak of hostilities between China and Vietnam, it was a division which could no longer be preserved. Vietnam held all the cards, and the Chinese were forced to withdraw. Subsequent Chinese actions towards Laos have been taken therefore in the light of a new Chinese strategic imperative—containment of Vietnamese, and thus of Soviet, influence in mainland Southeast Asia.

CHINA'S ANTI-VIETNAM STRATEGY

How to deal with Vietnam now presents the Chinese with their most pressing foreign policy problem in regard to Southeast Asia. Though it is possible, some would say probable, that the xenophobic Vietnamese will eventually lose their affection for their Soviet mentors, this is not something the Chinese can bank upon. For Hanoi even the insensitivity and arrogance of the Russians may continue to be preferable to a more subtle but equally objectionable hegemonism exercised by the Chinese. An essential Chinese foreign policy goal in the 1980s must be to establish what is to the Chinese an acceptable relationship with the states bordering her southern rim in Southeast Asia, i.e., one that at least poses no threat in Chinese eyes to the nation's national security. Chinese policies towards other states in the region, therefore, will be decided in the light of Beijing's concern over Vietnam and the Soviet presence there, and must be understood accordingly. Chinese material support for the forces of Pol Pot in Kampuchea and Chinese diplomacy on behalf of continued international recognition of the government of Democratic Kampuchea as the legitimate representative of the Kampuchean people are both aimed at weakening Vietnam. Chinese strategy is to prevent the Vietnamese from consolidating either their revolutionary gains in the south or their position in Laos and Kampuchea. Chinese relations with the ASEAN bloc are conducted with this constantly in mind, and any assessment of Chinese actions in Laos must begin from the same point.

What happens in Laos, therefore, will depend on the state of Chinese-Vietnamese relations. If these improve, so too will Laos internal security. What are the prospects of this occurring? In the short term there seems little chance of the desultory Chinese-Vietnamese talks registering much progress. The border dispute and the question of sovereignty over the Spratly and Paracel Islands have become major issues which will be difficult to resolve. Chinese suspicion of Soviet intentions complicates every move, and has had the effect of driving Vietnam ever deeper into the Russian embrace. In the shorter term, therefore, it would seem that only improved Chinese relations with the U.S.S.R. could lead to a change of attitude on the part of Vietnam, though it is difficult to see what the Chinese could offer in return for a reduction of Soviet support for Vietnam's policies of antagonism towards China and regional hegemony in Indochina.

In the longer term the Chinese position is far stronger. China has embarked upon a policy of modernization which carries with it prospects for China's growth as a major industrial and military power. Hanoi on the other hand is likely to be forced to the realization that even massive Soviet aid will not be sufficient for Vietnam simultaneously to maintain a hostile confrontation with China (with all that requires in the mobilization of manpower and resources), and pursue a policy of industrialization and rapid economic development. Also the Soviet Union may well discover, as the United States did before her, that Southeast Asia is not an area vital to that nation's security—especially if problems closer to home, in Afghanistan, or Eastern Europe, become more pressing. By contrast, Southeast Asia must become of increasing importance to the Chinese. In the long term, therefore, Vietnam may conclude that it is in her national interest to come to terms with China, even to adopt China's policy of looking to the West for the finance and technology for modernization.

It is in China's interest to force this realization upon the Vietnamese by whatever means possible. Hanoi must be brought to recognize that in the long term Moscow represents an insufficient guarantee for the pursuit of Vietnamese national frontiers; that whatever influence Vietnam wishes to exercise in Southeast Asia, especially in Indochina, must be with Beijing's consent.

If this smacks of traditional Chinese attitudes, this is not surprising. The Chinese think in historical terms to an extent

hardly conceivable in the West. Policy goals are thus more likely to be conceived both in the long term and in the light of historical precedent. This does not mean that the Chinese are not prepared to take advantage for tactical reasons of immediate and changing situations. But it does mean that the Chinese contribution in creating conditions under which tactical moves become possible should be understood not simply in terms of immediate advantage to be gained by such moves, but also in relation to longer term strategic goals. In this regard, the Chinese are more likely to be influenced by traditional attitudes towards those states with which Beijing has had long historical associations than towards those in other parts of the world. Thus while in international forums China may act as another nation state, albeit an important and powerful one, in relations with recalcitrant states along her southern frontier her behavior is likely to reflect more traditional patterns.

HISTORIC RELATIONSHIP

At this point it might be well to remind ourselves of the conceptual basis for those traditional relationships between China and the countries of Southeast Asia. The Chinese conception of world order was based upon the distinction between the Middle Kingdom whose civilization was culturally superior and normative, and those "barbarian" regions which failed to adopt the essentials of the Chinese system of government. Foreign relations were in this respect hierarchical and nonegalitarian, symbolized by the presentation of tribute in return for trade concessions and a degree of protection—from Chinese interference as much as against external enemies. However, as the Chinese cultural area extended, tributary states faced the possibility of eventual absorption. As John K. Fairbank has remarked: "Typically, as the area under Chinese rule extended, the tendency was for exterior vassals of one period . . . to become interior vassals of a later period."[35] And he gave the example of the former Nan-yueh kingdom in South China.

While the continuing consolidation of Chinese control over tribal minorities in Guangxi and Yunnan since 1949 can be seen as the latent stage of this process of gradual sinicization at the expense of independence or any real autonomy, the case of Vietnam provides the exception which proves the rule. After a thousand years of administration as a Chinese province, the Vietnamese

gained, in return for acceptance of a tributary relationship, that independence which gave them the freedom to drive south at the expense of another Chinese tributary state, now disappeared, the kingdom of Champa.

Two points should be made about this traditional Chinese world order. The first is that the more sinicized a peripheral state had become, the more it was likely to be absorbed into the Middle Kingdom, and the more frequently tribute had to be given to stave off such an eventuality. (Thus though the Maoist version of communist internationalism can hardly be equated with former orthodoxies, perhaps the Vietnamese now feel happier with some ideological distance between themselves and Beijing.) But perhaps more importantly Chinese policies with respect to foreign states has depended not simply upon hierarchical principles, or the Chinese myth, so zealously promoted, of cultural superiority, but was predicated also upon the eminently practical concerns of national security. Thus when China interfered in the relations between Southeast Asian states, she did so in order to preserve a balance of power that would not threaten Chinese interests. This did not mean, however, that the Chinese felt compelled to formalize relations between all tributary states. These were free in large measure to work out their own pecking order, provided they secured Chinese acceptance of the results. Thus Vietnam destroyed Champa and expanded south at the expense of Kampuchea. And both Vietnam and Thailand were able to demand tribute from lesser powers, even while these, as in the case of the Lao principality of Luang Prabang, were already paying tribute to Beijing. Thus despite the concerns expressed by present Chinese leaders over Vietnamese pretensions to regional hegemonism, it may be suggested that had the Vietnamese agreed to pay lip service to Beijing's ideological position (while keeping the Russians at a proper distance), the Chinese may well have been prepared to accept Hanoi's dominant influence in both Laos and Kampuchea. For it is not Hanoi's influence *per se* in Vientiane and Phnom Penh to which the Chinese object, but that that influence is exercised without reference to and in defiance of the principal power in the region, instead of with Chinese consent.

In support of this argument it should be remembered that the People's Republic of China was prepared from its founding until the early seventies to concede that Laos fell within a Vietnamese sphere of influence.[36] But that was while the Chinese saw Vietnam

as an ideologically fraternal state with whom differences could be discussed and resolved, and which therefore posed no threat to China's security. It was enough, it should be noted, that the Hanoi leadership, and the Pathet Lao, maintained an ideological balance between Moscow and Beijing: the Chinese did not demand slavish conformity. Also China agreed to the neutralization of Laos in 1962: it did not seek Chinese control. It is the Vietnamese-Soviet position in Laos which is now unacceptable, just as the American position was during the decade after 1963.

With these provisos in mind, let us turn to the possible strategic role of Laos in Chinese thinking. In geopolitical term Laos can be seen as the key to attempt to counter Vietnamese ambitions while at the same time extending Chinese influence in Southeast Asia. If China were in a position to replace Vietnam as the dominant foreign power in Laos, the P.R.C. would be strategically situated both to exert pressure on Vietnam along that nation's long and vulnerable western frontier, and to influence events in Kampuchea and Thailand by providing the Chinese with direct lines of communication and supply to both countries, something Beijing does not now possess. Laos has a small and divided population with a weak sense of national unity and identity, factors which, as the Vietnamese discovered, make it easier for a foreign power to establish its influence. The backward economy of Laos and dependency upon foreign aid also operate to the advantage of a foreign power bent upon gaining influence in Vientiane, since no Lao government is in a position to meet the demands of the country's 68 ethnic groups for improved living standards from its own resources. Given that China is in a better position than is Vietnam to assist Laos economically, and that China too shares a common frontier, it would be perfectly possible, had historical circumstances been otherwise, for China now to wield dominant foreign influence as "protector" of Laos. There is every reason for Beijing to wish this was indeed the case.

NEUTRALIZING SECURITY THREAT

Not only would a friendly Laos reduce by 400 kilometers the presence of potentially hostile powers along China's southern borders, but it would enable the Chinese to neutralize to a large extent any threat posed to her security by Soviet-allied Vietnam. Chinese forces "invited" into northeastern Laos would be in a

position to threaten Vietnam with a massive "pincer" attack should a "second lesson" become necessary—an adequate threat to make the Vietnamese more amenable to Chinese persuasion. Vietnamese reinforcement of border defenses makes the option of a thrust through Laos even more attractive. Control over Laos would also permit the P.R.C. to continue supplying Pol Pot forces in Kampuchea for as long as it took for the Vietnamese to sue for peace. Finally China would be in a position virtually to decide the fate of Thailand.

Despite Vietnam's apparently unshakable hold over the Lao government and party machine, the above scenario might be thought sufficiently attractive for Beijing actively to pursue. And yet there are few signs that the Chinese have done more than make certain preparations. Why is there not a new guerrilla war raging in Laos? The answer could be that the Chinese do not consider that they have yet prepared the ground sufficiently. Agitation and propaganda, especially among the northern ethnic minorities, continues, and the Lao are clearly concerned over the security threat that mounting dissatisfaction among tribal groups poses. But it may be that, given the ruthless Vietnamese destruction of the remnants of the CIA trained Hmong army, the Chinese do not feel that guerrilla forces in northern Laos are as yet well enough organized, motivated or equipped to take on the Vietnamese.

On the other hand, the Chinese may consider that a full scale Chinese-backed insurgency in Laos could be counter-productive. It would provide the Soviet Union, and the present Lao regime with an important anti-Chinese propaganda weapon which would immediately awaken fears of Chinese supported insurgencies in other states of the region. On the other hand a Chinese-backed insurgency in Laos might be seen by ASEAN as keeping Vietnam occupied, thus decreasing Hanoi's ability to support national liberation movements further afield—notably in Thailand. At present Beijing probably believes that there is more advantage to be gained by continuing on its present path of isolating Hanoi diplomatically in Southeast Asia. But there are signs that some countries, including the United States and members of the ASEAN bloc, are having second thoughts about this course of action. If moves are made to patch up relations with Vietnam, recognize Vietnam's *de facto* position in Kampuchea and open up Western sources of finance to the Hanoi government, then China may

decide that more direct measures are called for to weaken Vietnam. Only if the insurgency in Kampuchea showed signs of dying down would it be necessary to kindle a new anti-Vietnamese guerrilla war elsewhere—and where else but Laos?

A Chinese-backed insurgency in Laos, for which, as this article has argued, the Chinese have already laid most of the necessary groundwork, would have the effect of tying down large numbers of Vietnamese troops and draining further Vietnam's limited resources. The present pro-Vietnamese leadership in Laos would risk becoming even more isolated than at present from the Lao people, while Vietnamese and Chinese fought out their proxy war. Such a development would be a catastrophe for Laos, but it would enable the Chinese to carry on a war of attrition against Vietnam for as long as it took to convince the Vietnamese that they should come to some kind of *modus vivendi* with the P.R.C. The prospect of a long drawn out guerrilla war in Laos similar to that in Kampuchea would not force the Vietnamese to withdraw their forces, for too much is at stake for Hanoi. But it might bring the S.R.V. to the realization that while the Soviet Union may be a useful ally in limiting Chinese ambitions, Vietnam can never avoid having China as a neighbor!

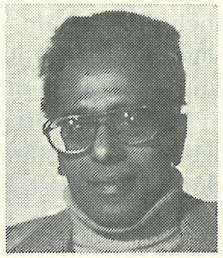
In their determination to avoid any relationship with Beijing which suggests the humiliating pattern of traditional tribute, the Vietnamese have failed to take account of Chinese perceptions of their essential interests. It is ironic that this should have occurred at the very time when Vietnam was reasserting its own traditional position of influence in both Laos and Kampuchea. The Vietnamese are playing for stakes in a multipolar world of nation states which they are exploiting to the full. Yet it may be that a partial return to earlier patterns of interstate relations in the region would in the long run be more advantageous, in terms of national security and economic progress for all. Relationship with Beijing which went some way towards acknowledging the greater importance of China than the Soviet Union in the affairs of mainland Southeast Asia could well lead to tacit Chinese acceptance of Vietnam's strategic need to exercise a dominant role in Laos and Kampuchea. Just such a compromise might eventually be acceptable to Beijing—a compromise between Chinese and Vietnamese security requirements, and between traditional and modern views of the proper relationship between states. If such a compromise should eventuate, it will be through whatever pressure the Chinese can bring to bear on an as yet intransigent Vietnam. One such pressure is the present threat of insurgency in Laos—though perhaps more than the threat will be required. In either case, however, it is here that Laos fits into China's anti-Vietnam strategy.

NOTES

1 *Beijing Review*, vol. 19, no. 12 (March 19, 1976), p. 6.
2 Radio Vientiane, July 15, 1978 (as monitored by Foreign Broadcasts Information Service, hereafter FBIS, July 16, 1978).
3 Agence France Presse despatch, June 29, 1978 (FBIS, June 30, 1978).
4 Radio Vientiane, August 1, 1978 (FBIS, August 8, 1978).
5 *Beijing Review*, vol. 22, no. 11 (March 16, 1979), p. 22.
6 *New York Times*, March 12, 1979.
7 For a detailed account of these developments, see Martin Stuart-Fox, "Laos: the Vietnamese Connection," in Leo Suryadinata (ed.), *Southeast Asian Affairs 1980* (Singapore: Heinemann, 1980), pp. 191–209.
8 Carried in *Beijing Review*, vol. 22, no. 11 (March 16, 1979), p. 23.
9 Radio Vientiane, March 16, 1979 (FBIS, March 16, 1979).
10 Voice of Democratic Kampuchea, May 17, 1979 (FBIS, May 18, 1979).
11 Khaosan Pathet Lao, *Bulletin Quotidien*, October 15, 1979, p. 11.
12 See Agence France Presse, March 19, 1979 (FBIS, March 20, 1979), and *Far Eastern Economic Review*, December 28, 1979.
13 For these defections see *Far Eastern Economic Review*, December 14, 1979; and Frances L. Starner, "A Crisis of Leadership?" *Southeast Asia Chronicle*, no. 73 (June 1980), p. 28.
14 *Nation Review* (Bangkok), October 12, 1979.
15 Radio Vientiane, December 1, 1979 and December 13, 1979 (FBIS, December 3, 1979 and December 14, 1979).
16 Personal communication. Meo refugees were moved from Hainan Island to Yunnan, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, July 25, 1980.
17 *Far Eastern Economic Review*, August 24, 1979.
18 Kaysone Phomvihan, speech to the Supreme People's Assembly, December 26, 1979, broadcast over Radio Vientiane, December 27, 1979 (FBIS, January 18, 1980, p. 19).
19 *ibid.* (FBIS Supplement, February 8, 1980, p. 1).
20 Thai Foreign Ministry Statement (FBIS, July 21, 1980).
21 Editorial in Sieng Pasason, August 4, 1980, carried in Khaosan Pathet Lao, *Bulletin Quotidien*, August 4, 1980, p. 6.
22 Editorial in Sieng Pasason, July 19, 1980, carried in Khaosan Pathet Lao, *Bulletin Quotidien*, July 19, 1980, p. 8.
23 Editorial in Sieng Pasason, July 22, 1980, carried in Khaosan Pathet Lao, *Bulletin Quotidien*, July 22, 1980, p. 6.
24 Editorial in Sieng Pasason, September 20, 1980, carried in Khaosan Pathet Lao, *Bulletin Quotidien*, September 20, 1980, pp. 4–5.
25 Phoun Sipraseut, speech to the 35th session of the United Nations General Assembly, October 1, 1980, carried in Khaosan Pathet Lao, *Bulletin Quotidien*, October 13, 1980, pp. 8–9.
26 *Beijing Review*, vol. 23, no. 43 (October 27, 1980), p. 11.
27 Interview with spokesman for the Lao Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Vientiane, December 4, 1980.
28 R. A. Scalapino, "Tradition and Transition in the Asian Policy of Communist China," in Edward Szczepanik (ed.), *Economic and Social Problems of the Far East* (Hong Kong, 1962), p. 267, quoted in George Moseley, "The Frontier Regions in China's Recent International Policies" in Jack Grey (ed.), *Modern China's Search for*

a Political Form (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 317.
29 George Moseley, *The Consolidation of the South China Frontier* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), pp. 154–155.
30 *ibid.*, p. 94.
31 Paul F. Langer, "The Soviet Union, China and the Revolutionary Movement in Laos," *Studies in Comparative Communism*, vol. 6 (1973), p. 70, note 6.
32 Based upon Lee Chae-Jin, *Communist China's Policy Towards Laos, 1954–67* (Lawrence Center for East Asian Studies: University of Kansas Press, 1970).
33 Paul F. Langer, *op. cit.*, p. 82.
34 Arthur Dommen, *Conflict Over Laos*, revised edition (New York: Praeger, 1971).
35 John F. Fairbank (ed.), *The Chinese World Order* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), p. 8.
36 Cf. Paul F. Langer, *op. cit.*, pp. 71 nad 85.

THE MYTH AND REALITY OF CHINESE OIL



By Sheikh R. Ali

UNTIL recently China was considered a tightly closed country or a sleeping giant not ready to be awakened. However, its new leadership decided to awaken the most populous nation in the world and mobilize the vast multitude of ill-fed, ill-housed and ill-clothed Chinese through the four modernizations. This places emphasis on developing agriculture, industry, national defense and science and technology and has led to a gradual opening of the country. As a result of freer travel into China and the increase of information about the country from the post-Mao leadership, outsiders are able to get a more balanced and perhaps more sobering picture of contemporary Chinese society.

The country has vast natural resources and a substantial industrial base. However except for the first decade following the establishment of the People's Republic, no detailed industrial and economic figures have been published. Although Chinese economy is already the world's sixth largest,[1] we must accept the fact that China is the first world power to veil its industrial and economic development in secrecy. Because the Chinese do not publish detailed statistics, this makes a reasonably accurate assessment of Chinese oil production, and all other productions, including industrial output, hard to reach. Despite the speculative character of any study on China, it seems worthwhile to attempt to evaluate whatever information is available on Chinese oil because of its growing international importance.

China is the world's oldest oil-producing country: an oil and natural gas field was discovered as early as the second century B.C. The extraction of oil in China through percussion-drilling method with cables dates back to the first century B.C.[2] This field in Sichuan province is still in operation today. Nevertheless, oil development in its modern sense did not take place in China before the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949. The highest annual output of oil before 1950 was about 300,000 tons,