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Source: *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 1980, (1980), pp. 191-209

Published by: ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27908403>

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## LAOS The Vietnamese Connection

*Martin Stuart-Fox*

For the last thirty years, the course of the Lao revolution has been closely tied to events in Vietnam. As Lao Prime Minister and Secretary General of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP), Kaysone Phomvihan, has on more than one occasion explicitly recognized, Vietnamese aid and advice have been deeply influential in bringing the present régime to power in Laos. These close ties were formalized in the Lao-Vietnamese Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation signed in July 1977, which has since provided not only directions for Lao foreign policy, but also the basis for Vietnamese involvement at all levels of Lao political and economic life. Throughout 1979, a constant flow of delegations on everything from agricultural co-operatives to public works construction moved between the two countries. Following the formation of the Lao Front for National Construction, a delegation of the Vietnamese Fatherland Front visited Laos. Vietnamese provincial delegations toured Namtha and Oudomxay provinces in June and October, as part of Vietnamese moves to supplant Chinese influence in northern Laos after the Chinese road gangs had been withdrawn.

The close relationship with Vietnam, while of benefit to the present Lao régime, is also of considerable importance to Hanoi. From the Vietnamese point of view, it has always been essential that the country's long and vulnerable western border be adequately protected by the presence of friendly forces in Laos. But while the relationship may have been mutually beneficial, it has never been an equal one. On the diplomatic front, Vientiane's client relationship with Hanoi was evident in the support Laos provided for every Vietnamese policy statement from the justice of Hanoi's points for negotiation with Beijing (Peking) to the Vietnamese position on the refugee question. No attempt was discernible to forge Lao policies which differed from those of Vietnam, except in the special case of Thailand where that was in Hanoi's best interests. Vietnamese perceptions of their country's security and national interests have formed the parameters which have limited the independence of decision-making of the LPRP. Nowhere has this been more evident than when the security of Vietnam was believed by the leadership in Hanoi to rest upon decisions by their Lao comrades. At such times Lao freedom of action has been severely curtailed, to the point where decisions taken may not always have been in the best interests of the LPRP (as opposed to the ruling élite within the party), the Lao people, or the welfare and security of the nation. Nineteen seventy-nine was arguably such a time for, by taking sides with the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) in its dispute with the People's Republic of China (PRC), the Lao leadership may well have placed the long term security of their country and even of their régime in jeopardy.

As Vietnamese relations with the Pol Pot Government in Kampuchea continued to deteriorate during the course of 1978, so too did Hanoi's relations with Beijing. The Vietnamese leaders were well aware that their fateful decision to invade Kampuchea, made as early as mid 1978, would greatly exacerbate the situation. They turned, therefore, to the Soviet Union: a Treaty of Friendship was signed between the SRV and

the USSR in November 1978. But the Vietnamese also moved to consolidate their position in Laos. This they did by persuading the Lao not only to come out clearly on the Vietnamese side in Hanoi's growing dispute with Beijing, but also to counter Chinese influence in northern Laos.

There is evidence to suggest, however, that some Lao, including at least one member of the politburo, were unhappy at the turn events were taking. Signals do appear to have been sent to Beijing during the second half of 1978 to indicate that the government was less than wholehearted in its condemnation of the Chinese as "international reactionaries". The mildness of the Chinese reaction would suggest that the message was received.

Vietnam's invasion of Kampuchea in deliberate defiance of Beijing, and the subsequent Chinese border war with Vietnam sealed the divisions between China and Vietnam. Bitter invective testified to the deeply felt hostility between them. Under such circumstances neutrality became virtually impossible. Yet given the geographical position of Laos bordering both states, and Lao weakness and vulnerability, some attempt at evenhandedness would appear to have been the wisest course open. And there is reason to believe this is what Vientiane would have preferred to do. Not until the third week of the Chinese invasion, and then in response to considerable Soviet and Vietnamese pressure including claims of Chinese military threats to Laos itself, did the Lao join Vietnam in harsh and open denunciation of Beijing.

The immediate result was as might have been expected. The Chinese condemned the government in Vientiane as a creature of Hanoi, and an enemy of the PRC. It is too soon to be certain what the Chinese intend to do about Laos; but if the distinctly cool Chinese response to later Lao overtures for improved relations is anything to go by, Beijing may have concluded that there is nothing to be gained thereby. An alternative course open to the Chinese is to back antigovernment insurgents in Laos with a view to "liberating" the country from the Vietnamese. If they should decide to do this, and there is corroborative evidence to suggest that it is an option the Chinese are seriously considering, Laos faces the prospect in the 1980s of becoming involved in a new conflict, one in which two of its neighbours fight out a proxy war on Lao soil.

The purpose of this article, therefore, is twofold: to indicate how the "special relationship" Laos has with Vietnam led it in 1979, against its better interests, into conflict with its most powerful neighbour and influenced Lao relations with other states; and to indicate the extent to which internal developments also reflected priorities imposed by external relations.

## External Relations

### *Kampuchea*

Relations between Laos and Kampuchea during 1978 and 1979 strikingly illustrate the way in which relations with Vietnam shaped Lao foreign policy during this period. However, the importance of the Vietnam connection lay not so much in the influence it had upon Lao-Kampuchean relations *per se*, but on the way in which Lao acceptance of the Vietnamese position on Kampuchea led to a serious deterioration in relations between Laos and the PRC.

At the end of December 1977, the Pol Pot régime in Kampuchea withdrew its diplomatic representation in Hanoi, and border fighting between the two states flared again. Barely two weeks previously, however, Lao President Souphanouvong had paid a state visit to Phnom Penh during which he proclaimed fraternal solidarity between the Lao and Khmer peoples. Even if the Lao were acting as emissaries or mediators for the Vietnamese, as seems likely (no joint communiqué was issued at the conclusion of the visit), the fact that the visit took place at all would suggest that the Lao still had some

room to manoeuvre in the growing conflict between Vietnam and Kampuchea.

Lao attempts to maintain a semblance of neutrality between the two sides continued during the first half of 1978. Vientiane issued a categorical denial that Vietnamese units had crossed Lao territory from Vietnam to take part in the border fighting early that year, though no mention was made of Vietnamese troops previously stationed in Laos. Reports of Vietnamese troop movements were "designed to create division and misunderstanding among the Lao, Vietnamese and Kampuchean people," the official Lao news agency Khaosan Pathet Lao (KPL) declared. Laos did support Vietnamese insistence upon negotiations between the two sides, but this could be explained as adherence to a general principle. It was not until the first anniversary of the signing of the Lao-Vietnamese Friendship Treaty that Kaysone committed Laos clearly to the Vietnamese side, not only in its dispute with Kampuchea, but also in the developing battle of words between Vietnam and China. Both the timing and the occasion of this statement are of interest, for both reflect increasing Vietnamese influence over Lao foreign policy at a time when Vietnam's growing dispute with China was being seen in Hanoi as a threat to the nation's security.

From July 1978 on, Lao relations with Kampuchea tended to be eclipsed by the widening rift with Beijing. The authorities in Vientiane continued to call for negotiations between Vietnam and Kampuchea along the lines suggested by Hanoi, but the Vietnamese decision to invade Kampuchea had already been taken, and the Lao could only follow in the Vietnamese wake. Lao relations with the Khmer régime steadily deteriorated. Incidents on the Kampuchean frontier with Laos became more frequent. In one clash, several Lao soldiers were killed. The Lao claimed that Kampuchea had also seized more than twenty small islands in the Mekong that the Lao considered theirs. Yet the Lao seem to have gone out of their way to reduce tensions to a minimum by not reacting to provocation, though by their own later admission they had no sympathy for the mass killing in Kampuchea they then knew to be going on.

The Vietnamese invasion of Kampuchea launched on Christmas Day 1978, followed by the collapse of the Pol Pot Government less than a fortnight later, in one sense marked an abrupt change in Lao policy towards Kampuchea for Vientiane immediately recognized the Vietnamese backed Heng Samrin régime. In a more important sense, however, in so far as Lao foreign policy consisted in following the Vietnamese lead, recognition of the Heng Samrin Government marked no change in Lao thinking.

Just prior to the fall of Phnom Penh, Vietnamese Foreign Minister Nguyen Duy Trinh stopped off in Vientiane to explain Vietnamese actions. The communiqué marking his brief visit made no mention by name of Kampuchea, or of the Vietnamese invasion, but Lao Vice Premier Nouhak Phousavan did welcome certain unspecified "brilliant successes" of Vietnam which he considered "an important and active contribution to the reinforcement of friendly relations, co-operation, understanding, peace and stability in this part of the world." Nouhak also praised Vietnamese foreign policy, which he said was based upon "respect for the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of each country, on non-aggression, non-interference in internal affairs, the equality of reciprocal advantages and pacific co-existence." Three days later, Phnom Penh fell to an invasion by more than 100,000 battle-hardened Vietnamese troops.

The first official Lao recognition that anything had happened in Kampuchea came on 8 January in the form of a government telegram to the Central Committee of the Kampuchean Front of National Union for National Salvation (FUNKSN). It is doubtful whether this delay reflected a reluctance to endorse the Vietnamese action. More likely Vientiane preferred to wait for the successful outcome of the invasion. Once this was assured, however, the Lao did not hesitate. In a declaration the following day, the Lao Patriotic Front welcomed the overthrow of the "Pol Pot-leng Sary clique" as "not only a

glorious victory won by the Kampuchean people, but equally a victory for the peoples of the three nations of Indochina", tacit confirmation if that was needed of the worst of Kampuchean fears and suspicions of Vietnamese intentions.

Despite Chinese displeasure over events in Kampuchea, Laos moved quickly to establish full diplomatic relations with the Heng Samrin Government. A Lao ambassador was named within a week of the fall of Phnom Penh, and a government and party delegation left for the Kampuchean capital. Popular demonstrations in support of the new régime were organized in a number of Lao towns. An editorial in the official Lao party newspaper *Sieng Pasasonh* demonstrated the perfidy of the former régime by revealing that, before retreating from Phnom Penh, Pol Pot's soldiers had aimed a burst of machine gun fire at the Lao embassy. Lao foreign policy, the paper proclaimed, was to strengthen the "special solidarity" existing between Laos, Vietnam and the new Kampuchea. Denunciations of the Pol Pot régime were published in the Lao press. An interview with Heng Samrin published by KPL suggested that the greed and cruelty of Pol Pot and clique were due to having "acted blindly on the orders of their Peking masters." On 1 March, it was announced that Souphanouvong would pay a state visit to Kampuchea.

The visit of Souphanouvong to Phnom Penh at the end of March 1979, and the return visit of Heng Samrin to Vientiane the following August, cemented the third link in the Vietnamese forged chain binding the three peoples of Indochina. On 18 February Vietnam had rather hurriedly signed a Friendship Treaty with the new régime similar to that between Vietnam and Laos. No such treaty was initialed between Laos and Kampuchea, though a renewable five year agreement was signed covering economic, cultural, scientific and technical co-operation. Souphanouvong's toasts of support for and solidarity with the Heng Samrin Government came only fifteen months after his remarkably similar toasts to Lao solidarity with the former régime. What was new was the strong denunciation of China, both for Beijing's support for the "dictatorial fascist régime" of Pol Pot, and for threats against Laos and interference in its internal affairs. The March communiqué stressed the need for "fighting solidarity" between Laos and Kampuchea in the face of threats of Chinese aggression, and of being "swallowed by Great Han hegemonism", as part of Beijing's policy of expansionism in Southeast Asia. Demands for the withdrawal of Vietnamese forces from Kampuchean territory were denounced as "deceitful manoeuvres" designed to camouflage Chinese expansionist aims. In the August communiqué, however, the presence of Vietnamese forces in both Laos and Kampuchea was specifically recognized. Assurances were given that these presented no danger to any other country: they were there according to the provisions of the Friendship Agreements each country had signed with Vietnam to preserve the security and independence not only of Laos and Kampuchea but, interestingly, of Vietnam too.

Throughout 1979, the Lao continued to be outspoken in their support of the Vietnamese position on Kampuchea both by publicizing and denouncing the crimes of the Pol Pot régime, and by castigating continued Khmer Rouge guerilla resistance to the Vietnamese and their Kampuchean allies. A Lao delegation attended the public trials in Phnom Penh in August which condemned leading figures in the previous régime to death in absentia. The Lao Government also provided what assistance it could to the new régime. Both at the time of Souphanouvong's visit to Phnom Penh, and when Heng Samrin came to Vientiane, the Lao announced separate grants of one million dollars in commodity aid. Tools and utensils have also been sent from Champassak province into northern Kampuchea. In addition, Lao cadres are said to be assisting in the administration of mountainous areas of northeast Kampuchea inhabited by minority hill tribes, and Lao forces are co-operating with the Vietnamese in mopping up Khmer Rouge guerrillas along the Lao-Kampuchea border.

By the end of 1979, Lao relations with Kampuchea were just what the Vietnamese wanted them to be. However, the importance of the development of those relations lay not in the bilateral contacts involved, but in the way in which, as a product of Vietnamese relations with both states, they influenced the course of Lao relations with the PRC. From the Lao point of view, it was the deteriorating relationship between the SRV and the Pol Pot Government which, by forcing Vientiane to side with Hanoi, made it increasingly difficult to maintain a neutral position between Hanoi and Beijing. Just how crucial Vietnamese decisions on Kampuchea were to Lao relations with China will be brought out through an examination of those relations from July 1978 on. The serious effect the deterioration of Lao-Chinese relations seems likely to have on the internal security of Laos over the next few years makes it important to follow the course of that relationship in some detail.

#### *China*

From July 1978, when Kaysone first denounced the Chinese as "international reactionaries", until March 1979 when Laos at last joined Vietnam and the Soviet Union in harsh, open criticism of the Chinese by name, there is an unaccountable ambiguity in Lao policy towards Beijing. On the one hand, an active effort was made to discredit the PRC and to eliminate Chinese influence in northern Laos: on the other there seems to have been some attempt to let the Chinese know that Vientiane was unhappy with the turn events had taken. If, as seems likely, this ambiguity reflected differences within the Lao politburo, these were not sufficient to destroy the cohesion and solidarity that has characterized the upper echelons of the Lao ruling élite since the formation of the LPRP. There have been no defectors from Laos of the stature and standing of former Vietnamese politburo member Hoang Van Hoan in Vietnam.

One thing seems clear: in July 1978 the Lao took the decision to back Vietnam over Kampuchea, in the full knowledge that this would lead to seriously strained relations with Beijing. Differences in the Lao politburo seem to have arisen over whether it might be possible to mitigate the effects of this decision. One alternative was to maintain the friendliest possible relations with Beijing while only repeating Vietnamese criticism of the PRC in the hope that the Chinese would conclude that the Lao were being forced to follow a Vietnamese line they did not agree with. The other alternative was to accept that the relations with Beijing could only deteriorate, and to counter in advance any ill effects this might have, especially in northern Laos. Even though there was sufficient concern over how the Chinese might retaliate to convince the Lao to sit on the fence for as long as possible, the pro-Vietnamese majority on the politburo eventually opted for the latter course.

In his report on internal security to a joint sitting of the Supreme People's Assembly and the Council of Ministers in July 1978, Kaysone charged that "imperialists and international reactionaries" were sowing dissension among ethnic minorities in Laos, and warned that "their tricks and manoeuvres are extremely ferocious and relentless." Almost immediately thereafter, reports began to circulate in Vientiane of Chinese assistance to antigovernment insurgents, especially among the hill tribes of northern Laos. Remnants of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) trained Meo army of General Vang Pao were said to be receiving Chinese AK-47 assault rifles, and Vang Pao himself was even rumoured to have visited Beijing. Also, in July, the Chinese were requested to close down the office of their Economic Counsellor (really an unofficial consulate) in the northern provincial capital of Oudomxay, centre for the current stage of the Chinese road construction programme. Under protest, Beijing complied, but in retaliation cut back work on the vital Nam Bac to Luang Prabang section which would have linked Vientiane with the northern road network.

The initial evidence in support of Lao charges of Chinese complicity in promoting

antigovernment insurgency in Laos was surprisingly flimsy, and could surely have been suppressed if the Lao had been intent upon maintaining more cordial relations with Beijing. That this was not done suggests that, as of July 1978, the Lao had set out to discredit Beijing, and to reduce China's influence in the north of the country. But why, in view of the probable repercussions of such a move, was the decision taken when it was?

It is always possible that the Lao were by that time genuinely concerned over the Chinese presence in northern Laos, and their intentions in the region. But successive Lao Governments far less cordial towards Beijing than the present régime had managed to live with the Chinese road programme since 1962. It seems more likely, therefore, that the Vietnamese, rather than the Lao, were concerned over the Chinese presence. But why more so in July 1978 than previously? One possible explanation is that by July the Vietnamese had already decided to invade Kampuchea. In view of the likely Chinese reaction, they would have wanted to take every possible precaution to prevent, or at least limit, Chinese retaliation. Vietnam's northwest frontier could be made somewhat more secure by getting the Lao to expel the Chinese from northern Laos to deny them use of their own road network. But while the Lao, who may or may not have been privy to Vietnamese thinking, were prepared to go along with Hanoi's demands that they do something about the Chinese, there is evidence to suggest that at the same time they wanted to avoid attracting Chinese ire upon themselves.

Throughout the second half of 1978, Chinese reaction to Lao criticism was muted. As late as December, a Chinese friendship delegation visited Vientiane (to be followed a few days later by a similar Soviet mission). The Chinese media refrained from applying the same savage denunciations to Laos as they reserved for Vietnam. One reason for this was probably that Beijing believed the Lao were only acting under duress from Hanoi. Also the Chinese probably drew the same conclusions as Western observers: that the differing signals coming from Vientiane reflected policy differences in the Lao politburo on how to react to the Vietnam-China dispute. This was certainly the implication to be drawn from Souphanouvong's speech on 12 October, the thirty third anniversary of Lao Independence Day, when he told a restricted meeting of civil servants that certain reactionaries and bad elements had recently

spread the rumour that Lao traitors in exile who in the past received aid only from the U.S., France, Japan, Thailand and Australia, now have a new supporter, that is great China, and that China would attack Vietnam and then Laos .... This is very wicked and dangerous propaganda aimed at sowing bedevilment and anxiety among our people to make them lose confidence in the line and policies of our party and state, to sow division between the Lao people and the Chinese people, and finally to sabotage our revolution (*Foreign Broadcast Information Service*, 18 October 1978, pp. 13-4).

This seems an extraordinary statement, given Kaysone's speech to the Supreme People's Assembly in July. It can only be assumed that Souphanouvong personally disagreed with prevailing Lao policies towards China: The most likely explanation for publication of the speech was at the time thought to be that the Lao Government was deliberately sending a signal to Beijing. However, it was later revealed that no authorization to publish the text had come from either a member of the politburo or the government: the decision was taken by Sisanan Saignanouvong, then editor of both KPL and *Sieng Pasasonh*, who in mid 1979 fled Laos and made his way to China. A week after deplored Lao policy towards China, Souphanouvong was quoted as encouraging a visiting Vietnamese delegation to overcome all difficulties caused by the "international reactionaries".

By the end of 1978, Lao use of this Vietnamese term of abuse for the Chinese had become commonplace. The Chinese were habitually lumped together with the "imperialists" as constituting the primary threat to Lao security. In an interview with

*Pravda* in December 1978 on the third anniversary of the founding of the LPRP, Kaysone numbered among the primary tasks facing Laos "the struggle against interference, aggression and the expansionist policies of the imperialists and international reactionary forces" (*Bulletin Quotidien of Khaosan Pathet Lao*, hereafter *KPL. BQ*, 5 Dec. 1978, pp. 8-13).

By mid February 1979, in the wake of the Vietnamese invasion of Kampuchea, border tensions between China and Vietnam were intensifying to the point of war. On 16 February, the day before the Chinese invasion, a commentary in *Sieng Pasasonh* came out in support of Vietnam's appeal to the U.N. Security Council calling for negotiations to resolve differences between Hanoi and Beijing. The commentary concluded,

The Lao people constantly support the just position of the government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam ... and consider that the principles proposed by the government of the SRV [for the solution of Sino-Vietnamese differences] are just and conform to the aspirations [of the peoples of the two countries] (*KPL. BQ*, 16 February 1979, p.2).

Coincidentally, but ironically, the following day, as Chinese armies began their thrust into Vietnam, the lead item in the daily *KPL. BQ* reported the handing over of a Chinese built weaving factory in the northern Lao province of Oudomxay. The factory, capable of producing 300,000 square metres of cloth, a year was built in less than a year under the 1974 Chinese-Lao aid agreement. It was named the Chinese-Lao Friendship Weaving Factory.

It took Vientiane only a day to react to the Chinese attack against Vietnam. However, for the next two weeks the Lao were careful not to provoke Beijing in any way. In its carefully worded statement on 18 February, the Lao Government refrained from either condemning China outright, or of making play with its support for Vietnam. The statement called only for the withdrawal of Chinese forces and resolution of differences between the two states by means of peaceful negotiations. On a note of real concern the statement read, in part,

Laos, Vietnam and China are neighbouring countries; the Lao, Vietnamese and Chinese peoples are friends; they have established good relations, and lent each other aid and support in their long and difficult revolution. So the Lao government and people feel great anxiety with respect to this new and undesirable situation (*KPL. BQ*, 19 February 1979, p.1).

The Lao went out of their way to maintain a balanced position by pointing to the need "to normalize the situation which prevailed at the frontier between the two countries, to respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of each." This, despite the fact that it was clearly the Chinese who had attacked. A later communiqué stated,

The Lao people will continue to develop their traditional solidarity with the people of Vietnam and Kampuchea, and to make common cause with the Chinese people and the peoples of Southeast Asia and other countries with a view to contributing to the restoration and safeguarding of peace and stability in Indochina, Southeast Asia and the world (*KPL. BQ*, 22 February 1979, p. 1).

And the government called upon all countries to help prevent any spread of the conflict into Indochina or Southeast Asia.

Two days later, the Vietnamese Ambassador to Laos, Nguyen Xuan, called on Kaysone to put the Vietnamese case. Yet Lao denunciations of the Chinese invasion remained mild. The first public declaration of the Lao Front for National Construction (LFNC) stated that it believed all problems between China and Vietnam should be settled in a peaceful manner.

The Chinese side must cease its attack against the territory of Vietnam and must withdraw all her armed forces from Vietnamese territory. Only thus can the necessary conditions be created for negotiations between the two sides (*KPL. BQ*, 28 February 1979, p. 2).

However, the LFNC did call for "fighting solidarity with the fraternal Vietnamese people."

Even milder was the joint declaration issued by the Nationalities Committee and the Central Committee of the Lao Federation of Trade Unions, which described the Chinese attacks as "undesirable", and "a danger threatening friendly international relations". "In the face of these incidents, the governments and peoples of the world have demanded that the Chinese side cease its aggression against Vietnam. We think that the Chinese governing [party] cannot remain indifferent with respect to these requests." The harshest criticism came from the Lao Popular Revolutionary Youth organization which called upon the Chinese to "cease these extremely grave and flagrant acts of aggression."

Not until early March did the Lao succumb to pressures to adopt a more overtly anti-Chinese position. This followed Soviet and Vietnamese reports detailing supposed Chinese military threats to Laos. Here the sequence of events is particularly revealing, as the Chinese commentator in *Renmin Ribao* scornfully pointed out. On 2 March 1979, the Soviet Government released a statement reporting the movement of Chinese troops towards the Lao border, and the stepping up of Chinese subversion in the frontier region. Two days later, the Vietnamese Government released a similar statement in which the "concentration of Chinese forces" had become "numerous Chinese divisions" which were moving towards the Lao border with aggressive intent. On 6 March, KPL reported both statements without comment. On the same day, that is, fully four days after the initial Soviet accusations against Beijing, and the day after the Chinese announced they were withdrawing from Vietnam, an emergency meeting was called of the Lao Council of Ministers and the Supreme People's Assembly to discuss the Chinese "threat". At this meeting the decision was taken to call for the withdrawal of all Chinese construction workers in northern Laos, and to come out more forcefully on the side of Vietnam.

The Lao statement following the meeting, however, still retained a cautious tone. It began by stressing the long tradition of solidarity, friendship and mutual assistance between the Lao and Chinese people. It then repeated the Vietnamese accusations regarding Chinese troop movements near the Lao border, and the sending of spies into Laos, adding the by then familiar complaint that Beijing was

sowing trouble and discord among the multinational population [of Laos] ... and struggling against the political line of the government of the Lao People's Democratic Republic.

These acts constituted interference in internal Lao affairs which seriously threatened the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Laos. The statement also blamed the Chinese for the progressive deterioration of Lao-Chinese relations. By so doing, despite its relatively mild tone, the statement did constitute an escalation in what was to become a war of words between Beijing and Vientiane.

In a note to the Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs, Huang Hua, dated 7 March, the Lao acting Foreign Minister, Khamphay Boupha, politely expressed the "profound thanks" of the government and people of Laos for Chinese aid in constructing a road network in northern Laos, but pointed out that, according to the agreement of 3 October 1974, this work was almost completed. And the Lao note continued:

Because of the difficult and complex situation in this region, the government of the LPRP requests the government of the People's Republic of China to suspend this

construction work, and at the same time to withdraw all Chinese construction units as soon as possible. This is to ensure the safety of these workers and to safeguard the ancient tradition of friendship between the Lao and Chinese peoples. When the situation has improved, the governments of Laos and China will consult each other on the resumption of aid. I hope that Your Excellency will appreciate our best wishes (KPL, BQ, 12 March 1979, p. 1).

The almost apologetic tone of this note is in marked contrast to the statement issued the next day by the politburo which described the "adventuristic and bellicose policies" of the Chinese power-holders as "most dangerous and full of execrable crimes". The statement accused the Chinese authorities of conniving with imperialism to launch "a ferocious and very barbarous" large scale offensive designed "to swallow" the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in pursuance of "great Han hegemonist policies". Total support was given to the Vietnamese who would defeat the forces of aggression "with the solidarity of the close fighting alliance of the three peoples of Indochina" and with the firm support of the Soviet Union and other socialist countries and progressive peoples "including the Chinese people and authentic Chinese revolutionaries". For the first time, the Lao authorities promised "resolutely to accomplish their assigned tasks under the Lao-Vietnamese Agreement of Friendship and Co-operation of 18th July 1977", thus reciprocating the earlier Vietnamese promise to defend Laos. The LPRP and the Lao people would stand side by side with the Communist Party and people of Vietnam "despite the obstacles, the danger and the situation produced" — a danger perhaps somewhat mitigated by the previously announced Chinese withdrawal.

This statement of 8 March marks an important shift in the Lao position. The decision to come out firmly on the side of Vietnam was taken under strong Soviet and Vietnamese pressure by the politburo, the stronghold of pro-Vietnamese sentiment in Laos. Undoubtedly, the decision reflected the views of the majority of its members, though it is not known how other ranking members of the LPRP and the government felt about it. It should be noted, however, that the decision was taken in the absence of Phoumi Vongvichit, Vice Premier and Minister for Education, Sport and Religion, and reportedly the most pro-Chinese member of the politburo. Phoumi was in Eastern Europe on a rest cure during the two crucial months of February and March during which Lao policy towards China and Vietnam was determined.

The Chinese response to the Lao change of attitude was predictable. Lao accusations "viciously attacking China" were rejected as fabrications, and the Chinese accused the Lao authorities of "unilaterally tearing up" the road construction agreement.

The Chinese Government feels great indignation at the acts of the Lao side poisoning the relations between the two countries, and hereby lodges a strong protest with the Lao Government.

But then the Chinese Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs was quoted as saying

Owing to a set of circumstances, Laos has for some time taken a number of unfriendly actions against us, but we have always showed understanding for the difficulty it was in and exercised restraint even when Laos went so far as to attack China by innuendo in its open statements. Now, acting under pressure from certain quarters, the Lao Government has taken grave anti-China steps and blamed the Chinese side for the deterioration of relations between China and Laos (*Beijing Review*, 16 March 1979, p. 22).

The Chinese advised the Lao Government "to value the fundamental interests of the Chinese and Lao peoples." The commentator in *Renmin Ribao* went further. His conclusion that

the shameless slanders of the Vietnamese and Soviet authorities [who instigated and pressured the Lao into their anti-Chinese position] only serve to further reveal their

criminal schemes of intensifying their control over Laos and invite stronger opposition from the Lao people (my emphasis, *ibid.*, p.23).

carries more than the hint of a call for Lao resistance to Vietnamese domination. This was made explicit in the caption to a photo of Lao porters carrying cases of ammunition which appeared in *New China News*. It read: "Laotian people who heroically fought for their liberation will fight again against Vietnamese overlords."

At a time when the Chinese were not only withdrawing their forces from Vietnam, but also their construction gangs from northern Laos (completed by 5 April, according to Beijing), the Lao continued to whip up anti-Chinese feeling. Rallies were held in a number of provinces, including Phong Saly and Oudomxay, both former centres of Chinese influence in northern Laos. In a note dated 15 March from the Lao Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Vientiane accused Beijing not only of massing regular troops, tanks and heavy artillery along the frontier, but also of penetrating Lao territory to a depth of two or three kilometres in two places, and of arresting two Lao cadres who went to make contact with the invaders. The note also claimed that China had connived with Lao reactionaries, including "thousands" of the followers of Meo general Vang Pao and former neutralist Kong Le to carry out acts of sabotage and destroy Lao internal security.

The Chinese rulers' actions constitute a planned and positive implementation of its antagonistic policy against Laos. Cleverly concealing their nature of devils in saints' clothing, they have stubbornly denied and distorted facts, blamed Laos for taking a major anti-Chinese step and openly accused Laos of being instigated by and of following the Soviet Union and Vietnam (FBIS, 16 March 1979, p.11).

And the note went on to charge that by supporting so-called "patriotic Lao people" Beijing was in fact encouraging reactionaries. "The Chinese rulers have long worked to overthrow Laos," the note claimed.

The accusation that Chinese troops had actually invaded Lao territory was repeated in an appeal to the country on the twenty fourth anniversary of the founding of the LPRP (22 April), and in a note to U.N. Secretary General Kurt Waldheim. But perhaps the harshest denunciations of China were contained in the joint Lao-Kampuchean communiqué issued at the end of Souphanouvong's visit to Phnom Penh, the shrill tone of which took the war of words to a new level of intensity.

On the Chinese side, attention was concentrated upon the estimated 30,000 to 50,000 Vietnamese troops in Laos, and what *Beijing Review* called "the mounting discontent and opposition in Laos in regard to Soviet-Vietnamese control [of the country]." The Vietnamese had moved tens of thousands of troops into Laos to reinforce their military occupation, thereby creating a heavy burden for the Lao people who had to feed them. Hanoi's "undisguised domination", the paper said, "has given rise to widespread resentment among the Lao people." The Chinese also criticized the ubiquitous presence of Vietnamese and Soviet advisers. In the U.N., China called for the withdrawal of foreign troops from Laos, a point also stressed in peace negotiations in Hanoi in April.

The Lao response drew attention to what they claimed was the continued occupation of a portion of Lao territory (Muang Nam village, Luang Namtha province) by Chinese troops. In a letter to Waldheim, the Lao acting Foreign Minister, Khamphay Boupha, defended the presence of Vietnamese troops in Laos as coming within the framework of treaties between the two countries, and as in conformity with the U.N. Charter. Chinese calls for their withdrawal were designed to mask Beijing's own policy of aggression.

Relations between Laos and China reached a new low with the indirect revelation of the setting up, presumably in South China, of a new revolutionary party, the Lao Socialist Party (LSP), dedicated to liberating Laos from the Vietnamese. First word of the new party came on 17 May over the Voice of Democratic Kampuchea, mouthpiece

of the former Pol Pot régime, believed to be broadcasting from Yunnan. The radio relayed the text of a message of congratulations on the fourth anniversary of the founding of Democratic Kampuchea purporting to come from one Metai, who was identified as the Secretary General of the Central Committee of the LSP. The broadcast described the LSP as "the spokesman of true patriots who are waging a struggle against the Vietnamese aggressors and Vietnam's Lao stooges" (that is, "the Kaysone Phomvihan clique"). References to Soviet hegemonism and Vietnamese regional hegemonists, together with praise for "the great Chinese people", left no doubt as to the LSP's ideological affiliations.

In May, KPL published the text of letters exchanged between Nguyen Van Hieu, Vietnamese Minister of Culture and Information, and Sisana Sisane, Lao Minister of Propaganda, Information, Culture and Tourism, in which the former detailed the damage wrought by the Chinese invasion. In his reply Sisana condemned "the barbaric and savage actions" of the Chinese, and their "black designs to swallow the three countries of Laos, Vietnam and Kampuchea".

Lao radio returned to this same theme that China aimed to expand its territory and "exterminate" Laos when reporting in June that documents captured from Meo guerrillas in the Phou Bia massif proved they were receiving Chinese aid. Meo captives also reported receiving assistance from China, the radio said, thus confirming what it described as "the Peking rulers' dark and extremely cruel schemes against Laos." These revelations were followed by a request to Beijing to reduce the staff of the embassy in Vientiane to twelve, on par with the U.S. The Lao also told the Chinese not to include any military personnel in the embassy staff.

Lao denunciation of the PRC appeared to slacken off in July and August. Laos condemned China by name at the Non-Aligned Nations Conference in Havana in September, but in what was by then little more than a routine condemnation. No mention was made of Chinese support for the LSP. The reason for the reduction in rhetoric became apparent in October when the Lao released the text of their congratulatory telegram to the Chinese for the thirtieth anniversary of the PRC. The surprisingly cordial tone of this note could only be interpreted as an attempt by Vientiane to improve relations with Beijing.

After stressing the importance for China of the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, the Lao telegram praised "the invaluable aid and support" the Chinese had given to the Lao revolution. "The Lao people recall this kindness of the Chinese people and consider the Chinese people for all time as intimate friends who have shared their joys and sorrows, and [the Lao people] has [sic] always and constantly felt good will towards the Chinese people." And the note continued:

The Lao people firmly hope that relations between the two countries will improve in the common interest of both, as well as for the peace and stability of this part of the world. May the Chinese people achieve numerous successes in building their land. Long live the friendship and traditional solidarity between the Lao and Chinese peoples (KPL. BQ, 1 October 1979, p.2).

Two Lao ministers, but no member of the politburo, attended the Chinese reception in Vientiane to mark China's national day. But if the Lao had hoped that the Chinese would respond in a similar fashion they must have been severely disappointed by the excessively brief and formal Chinese reply. Instead of the effusive acknowledgement usual between "fraternal" socialist states, the Chinese note said simply:

Permit us to express to you our sincere thanks for your telegram of best wishes on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. May friendship between the peoples of our two countries gather strength unceasingly (KPL. BQ, 16 October 1979, p.1).

The curt briefness of the Chinese note suggests that Beijing was not interested in improving relations with the present Lao régime. This in turn would indicate either that the Chinese are convinced that the Lao are so firmly under the control of Hanoi that they cannot act independently, or that Beijing has decided that its long term interests can better be served by opposing the government in Vientiane. In other words, the Chinese may have come to believe there was less to be gained by having friendly relations with the Vietnamese dominated régime in Vientiane, than by promoting anti-government insurgency in Laos as part of a long term policy of attrition against Hanoi. The danger for Laos of some kind of proxy war between China and Vietnam fought on Lao soil is certainly evident to the Lao authorities in Vientiane. Hence the desire for cordial relations with the PRC. But the Lao must have concluded that the tone of the Chinese response to Vientiane's thirtieth anniversary telegram precluded any immediate improvement in relations. In his statement to the thirty-fourth session of the U.N. General Assembly in October, Acting Lao Foreign Minister Khamphay Boupha, for the first time drew attention to the existence of the Lao Socialist Party. In his speech, Khamphay accused Beijing of

sending spies and pirates into Laos to continually provoke trouble and lead subversive activities aimed at sowing division among the Lao ethnic minorities, and of assembling all Lao reactionary exiles around the so-called "Lao Socialist Party" which they have created out of nothing (*KPL. BQ*, 15 October 1979, p.11).

A further straw in the wind is provided by the KPL report of a meeting between Phoumi Vongvichit, and Vietnam's Defence Minister, Vo Nguyen Giap, at which Phoumi is reported to have

warmly welcomed the victory of the fraternal Vietnamese people in their struggle against the war of aggression perpetrated by the holders of power in Peking ... and expressed his firm support for the position of Vietnam in the negotiations to resolve the problem of relations between Vietnam and China (*KPL. BQ*, 19 October 1979, p.1).

Since Phoumi's return from his rest cure abroad there have been persistent rumours that he was unhappy at the deterioration in Lao-Chinese relations. The Thai press even went so far as to claim, completely without foundation, that he had defected to Thailand. The report of his meeting with Giap, coming as it did after the Chinese had rebuffed Lao overtures for better relations, might have been meant to let Beijing know that the Lao leadership would be united in defence of their régime.

If the Chinese do decide to back an antigovernment, anti-Vietnamese insurgency movement in Laos — and there is every indication, as will be demonstrated below, that they have prepared for this possibility — this must be seen as a consequence of the inability of the Lao to distance themselves sufficiently from Vietnam to remain neutral in the Sino-Vietnamese conflict. The close Lao-Vietnamese connection has been of considerable benefit to the present Lao régime, yet Lao relations with Beijing are, in the long term, every bit as important as are relations with Hanoi. For Vientiane, therefore, a restructuring of the relationship with Hanoi would seem to be essential. It is doubtful, however, whether that is still in the power of the present Lao régime to achieve.

#### *Thailand*

While Lao relations with the PRC have clearly been determined by Vientiane's close connection with Hanoi, it has been suggested that Lao relations with Thailand have provided Laos with a means of demonstrating a degree of independence. This would seem to be a doubtful interpretation. The improvement of Lao-Thai relations that took

This is enough to suggest that Lao initiatives towards and responses to Bangkok were being orchestrated in accordance with Vietnamese policies. If Lao relations with Thailand have remained cordial in 1979 while Vietnamese-Thai relations have become increasingly strained, this does not alter the fact that it is still probably in Hanoi's interests for Lao-Thai relations to remain friendly.

The state visit to Laos of Thai Prime Minister General Kriangsak Chomanand eventually took place in early January 1979. Originally scheduled two weeks earlier, it was postponed after a series of bizarre incidents along the Mekong, including the sinking of a Thai gunboat. When the visit did take place, it was while Vietnamese troops were thrusting ever deeper into Kampuchea. Given these inauspicious conditions, the Thai leader's visit might seem surprisingly successful; yet it was certainly in the interests of Vietnam to distract Thai attention from, and to calm any Thai fears raised by, Hanoi's massive invasion of Kampuchea. One way to do this was by demonstrating how friendly and reasonable a country harbouring some 30,000 Vietnamese troops on Thailand's borders could be!

In stark contrast to earlier denunciations of Thailand for supporting antigovernment guerrilla forces in Laos, an editorial in *Sieng Pasasonh* welcomed the Thai delegation by proclaiming the "friendship and close solidarity of brotherly good neighbourliness" that was said to exist between the Lao and Thai peoples. But the most significant development to come out of the visit was undoubtedly the agreement covered in point ten of the joint communiqué

not to permit their territories to be used by anyone as bases for interference, threats, aggression, or to mount subversive activities from one against the other whatever form this might take (*KPL. BQ*, 8 Jan. 1979, p.12).

The Mekong was to become "a river of peace, friendship and true common interest".

Both sides followed up Kriangsak's visit in a number of concrete ways. Delegations from Lao and Thai provinces opposite each other across the Mekong exchanged visits, and discussed common problems. A Lao delegation even attended the Buddhist festival at That Phanom in Northeastern Thailand. In March, a Lao economic delegation visited Bangkok. This show of friendship was climaxed in April by the return visit of Kaysone to Thailand. The joint communiqué signed during this visit reiterated the points made in the January communiqué, but spelled them out even more clearly. The two sides agreed, among other things,

to prevent all the activities of wrongdoers who use the frontier zone as a place of refuge from which to sow trouble and disturb the peace and tranquillity of the people on both sides of the frontier.

The two sides expressed "profound anxiety" over the increased tension in Southeast Asia and threats to the peace and stability of the region, but Lao Information Minister Sisana told Thai journalists that difficult relations between Vietnam, China and Laos would not affect Lao-Thai relations. Kaysone also assured the Thais that "the installation of the new régime in our country represents no danger for other countries and that we will not harm any country", and he committed Laos to help make Southeast Asia "a zone of peace, independence, neutrality, freedom, stability and prosperity."

In improving relations between Thailand and Laos, both sides have held to their commitments to reduce insurgency. The frequent references to Thai based reactionary exiles of 1977 were replaced in 1979, as in the second half of 1978, by criticism of support for these forces by "international reactionaries" (China), and particularly of Beijing's attempts to foment trouble among the Lao hill tribes. From this it can be assumed that Thai based anti-Lao insurgents have been less active, and probably actively discouraged by their Thai hosts. On the other hand, as early as January, the Lao reportedly ordered the removal from Lao territory of the tactical centre of the Communist Party of

Thailand (CPT) controlling the insurgency in Northeastern Thailand. According to Thai intelligence, this has already been relocated in Southern China. Radio Vientiane has reported Lao suppression of Maoist Thai reactionaries in Sayaboury province. The result has been a reduction of CPT activity in Thailand, although this may also reflect internal dissension within the party, and preparations for the overdue CPT fourth Congress.

It has been to the benefit of both Thailand and Laos to reduce guerrilla activity directed at each other during the difficult year of 1979. Both have had too many concerns and problems over and above internal security. But this should not obscure the fact that, as long as the Vietnamese continued their war against Pol Pot forces in Kampuchea, it was in their interest to reduce alarm in Thailand to a minimum. Hanoi has not wanted to involve Bangkok in the Kampuchea conflict, and has worked hard to keep Thailand neutral to prevent too much in the way of supplies reaching the Pol Pot guerrillas. Lao relations with Thailand have assisted Vietnam by eliminating one cause for tension between Bangkok and the states of Indochina. The Lao ultimatum to the pro-Chinese guerrillas has also helped Hanoi in its efforts to temper its image as an aggressive state, and to portray China as expansionist and hegemonic. Finally, improved Lao-Thai relations accord with Soviet policies in Southeast Asia, especially towards the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). However, Vientiane's relations with Moscow should not be seen as a major determining factor in Lao foreign policy: even they are shaped in large part by the Vietnamese connection.

#### *The Soviet Union*

Early in February 1978, in the wake of the Vietnamese invasion of Kampuchea, a high ranking Soviet delegation led by Ivan Arkhipov, Central Committee member of the Soviet Communist Party and Vice President of the Soviet Council of Ministers, paid a visit to Laos. This resulted in the signing of an agreement to set up a joint Lao-Soviet Commission for Economic, Scientific and Technical Cooperation. Public speeches on both sides during this visit concentrated heavily upon the warmth of Lao-Soviet relations, on the state of the Lao economy, and on Soviet economic assistance to Laos. Reference to the international situation and foreign affairs was minimal, except for Soviet recognition that the "victory" of the Kampuchean people (in setting up the Heng Samrin Government) strengthened the position of socialism in the Southeast Asian region. Both sides referred to Laos as "the outpost of socialism in Southeast Asia", though Arkhipov was careful to include Vietnam as part of that outpost.

The Arkhipov visit set the tone and content of Lao-Soviet relations in 1979. Economic considerations were dominant throughout and Moscow seemed content to let Hanoi retain the major political influence in Laos. An economic agreement on the supply of construction materials, spare parts and machinery was signed in April, and another on cultural and scientific exchange followed in July. More significant, a delegation of the Soviet National Planning Committee (GOSPLAN) spent two weeks in Laos from 27 September to 10 October. Details of the visit were not released, except to inform that agreement was reached on long term Soviet economic aid to Laos. It seems fair to assume, however, that the Soviets will play a major part in designing the first Lao five year plan when the current interim three year plan expires in 1980. Vice Premier and Minister of Finance, Nouhak Phoumsavanh, led the Lao delegation to the thirtieth anniversary meeting of the Council for Mutual Economic Aid (COMECON) in Moscow. In his speech to the conference, Nouhak referred to Chinese hostility towards Laos as a major factor causing difficulties for Vientiane, and called for continued aid from both the Soviet Union and COMECON. While Vietnam is a full member of COMECON, Laos has only observer status.

During September, Kaysone spent several weeks on a rest cure in the Soviet Union.

Before leaving Moscow Kaysone had a meeting with Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev during which Brezhnev assured him that the Soviets were closely following the situation in Laos, and would continue to provide aid and support for the socialist construction of Laos in its struggle against the manoeuvres and designs of imperialism and the international reactionaries. In the communiqué issued after the talks the Soviets affirmed their support for Vietnamese policies in Indochina by stressing that

the friendship and fraternal alliance between the countries of Indochina — Laos, Vietnam and Kampuchea — far from threatening the security of any state, was on the contrary a factor for peace in Southeast Asia (*KPL. BQ*, 2 October 1979, p.1).

Any strengthening of Vietnam as a bastion of Soviet influence on China's southern border cannot help but have Moscow's full support.

Thus in the case of the Soviet Union, as in all Lao relations with foreign powers, the Vietnam connection must be seen as the key factor. Relations with Vietnam were particularly important in 1979 as the Sino-Vietnamese conflict forced the Hanoi leadership to take measures to defend their country's national security. Lao relations with the states on its frontiers, with the exception of Burma, all reflected Vietnamese influence. (In October President Ne Win paid a state visit to Vientiane, in return for Souphanouvong's 1977 visit to Rangoon. Predictably, the joint communiqué made no mention of Beijing.)

Only where interstate relations were as bland as those with Burma did Laos not suffer in some way from the effect of its Vietnamese connection — with one exception, Thailand, where Vietnamese policies happened to coincide with the best interests of Laos. Any improvement in relations with the U.S. and Western European countries, not to mention the ASEAN states, was dependent upon resolution of the Kampuchean problem; but recognition of the new régime in Phnom Penh has been generally deferred lest it be seen as condoning Hanoi's actions. Most seriously, however, relations with China have deteriorated to a point where Beijing might even be prepared to countenance the overthrow of the present Lao régime. Not surprisingly, such external difficulties had an important impact upon Lao internal affairs.

### Internal Implications

Internally the effect of the Vietnamese connection was apparent in two principal areas: economically, through the reduced number of major aid donors, and politically, through decisions taken by the Lao Government to further national unity and to counter threatened destabilization by antigovernment insurgents, especially from among minority populations. Both aspects were integrated in the decision of the Central Committee of LPRP to set "protection and socialist construction of the fatherland" as the twofold national goal, a goal stressed with increasing urgency throughout 1979 as the dangers inherent in the international situation became evident.

On the economic front, the immediate effect of the Vietnamese connection was to reduce the amount of foreign economic aid that Laos can expect to receive. Already in 1978, France had terminated its economic and technical assistance to Laos after a series of diplomatic differences. The PRC also cut back on its aid programme to Laos when all Chinese assistance to Vietnam was ended in 1978. This was followed by a total freeze in March 1979 following Lao demands for the withdrawal of all Chinese construction workers. While Chinese aid to Laos was never very great, except for the northern highway network, it did include medium industrial projects such as the Oudomxay weaving factory, consumer goods and technical assistance. As 70% of revenue for the Lao budget derives from foreign aid, Laos can ill afford to lose any donor. In addition, as a direct result of the refusal of the U.S. to recognize the SRV, U.S. relations with Laos remained cool, and American aid nonexistent. Other Western assistance was minimal,

both because of the American position and as a mark of disapproval of the Vietnamese invasion of Kampuchea.

Laos thus became entirely dependent in 1979 upon Soviet Bloc (COMECON) aid. This came principally from Vietnam, the USSR, and Eastern Europe. However, as Laos was only accorded observer status at COMECON meetings, it would seem that other members are loath to admit two more (with Kampuchea) impoverished states. Thus Soviet Bloc aid would appear to have its limitations. The state of the Vietnamese economy is such that there is little to spare for Laos — except manpower. Some 6,000 Vietnamese civilian cadres are attached to all levels of the Lao bureaucracy. And despite the presence in Laos of hundreds of Soviet and Cuban advisers and technicians, it is the Vietnamese who effectively run the country.

Vietnam provides not only the planning but also the economic prototype for Lao attempts to build agriculture and forestry as the base for socialist construction. The exchange of delegations from the Ministry of Agriculture, the Bureau of Cooperatives, and from particular provinces continued throughout 1979, and more than 1,800 new co-operatives were reported established in the first ten months of the year. This brought to 2,696 the total number of new co-operatives begun since mid 1978, but lack of enthusiasm, low productivity and poor management continued to dog the programme, despite Vietnamese direction.

On the political front, Vietnamese influence and the effects of Lao subservience to Hanoi were equally apparent. Lao refugees continued to cross into Thailand, but unlike earlier fugitives who gave fear of being sent to re-education camps as their reason for leaving, many recent refugees said they left because they did not like the Vietnamese. A high ranking LPRP defector estimated that 90% of party cadres were unhappy at the extent of Vietnamese domination of Laos. Hundreds of party members have reportedly been purged for expressing anti-Vietnamese sentiments. Some have joined the scattered and unco-ordinated antigovernment insurgency.

Lao dislike of the Vietnamese and popular dissatisfaction over the ubiquitousness of the Vietnamese presence in Laos was one factor undermining the national unity and purpose the Lao authorities were so keen to create as essential to the internal security of the country. Of even more concern, however, was the potential China has for fomenting dissatisfaction among the tribal minorities in northern Laos — a concern also shared by the Vietnamese, for some of the major tribal groups in northern Laos, such as the Hmong (Meo) and Yao, also inhabit parts of northwestern Vietnam: any tribal insurgency in Laos could spill over into Vietnam.

Both the above tribal groups are extensions of larger communities living in Southern China, and their traditional contacts have been with Yunnan rather than Hanoi or Vientiane. Chinese cadres have been working for years with the ethnic minorities of northern Laos in the vicinity of Chinese road construction projects. Already there have been reports of armed opposition to Lao military patrols along the Chinese frontier. Thousands of tribesmen from both Laos and Vietnam have moved across the border into Southern China. Most recently over ten thousand refugees from Laos in Thai holding camps volunteered for resettlement in China. How many of these are ethnic Chinese, how many of tribal minorities is unclear, but they could provide Beijing with a further reserve of potential recruits.

Some ethnic minorities have reason to revolt. The Meo have suffered grievously at the hands of both the Vietnamese and Lao armies. They resent attempts by the Lao to settle them as lowland rice farmers. All the hill tribes are strongly independent, and have traditionally resisted lowland Lao domination. The probably unavoidable gap between Pathet Lao promises to the hilltribes during the war of liberation and government performance since the régime took power has added to tribal dissatisfaction. Thus the Chinese have all that is necessary to promote antigovernment insurgency in Laos — lines

of communication, arms and supplies, agents, contacts, willing recruits, and even a political organization, the Lao Socialist Party, to assume overall command and direction.

Faced with this potential threat to Lao security the authorities in Vientiane have moved, with the full support of their counterparts in Hanoi, to legitimize and reinforce their control over the country. Innumerable seminars to upgrade the training and political indoctrination of party cadres and civil servants have stressed the need for a national effort to achieve national unity and security. The integration of security with socialist construction was constantly emphasized: not only were the armed forces encouraged to take a leading part in economic production, but all citizens were required to share responsibility for the security of the nation. The staff of ministries in Vientiane took the lead by forming work brigades and security militia.

At the same time, the government made every effort to improve relations with its ethnic minorities. Historically, the Pathet Lao relied heavily for support from ethnic minorities during the long liberation struggle, in the course of which they developed a sophisticated and effective minorities policy. The new concern shown for the economic welfare and political indoctrination of tribal minorities since mid 1978, however, stems directly from fears that the Chinese intend to instigate an armed insurgency among northern Lao hilltribes as part of a long term anti-Vietnam strategy.

In October 1978 the government set up a Nationalities Committee with the standing of a ministry whose task was to defend the legitimate interests of each ethnic group, and to strengthen national unity among the officially estimated one million strong minority population (out of a total put at 3.4 million). The government's priorities were, according to Radio Vientiane, to further progress in the economic, cultural, ideological, military and political fields; and to build a people's democratic administration and strengthen mass organizations in minorities areas.

A major political step was taken in furtherance of the goal of national unity with the setting up in February 1979 of the Lao Front for National Construction (LFNC), which took the place of the Lao Patriotic Front (Neo Lao Hak Sat). Of the seven-member standing committee, three are from minority nationalities, two of them (Faydang Lobliayao and Bolang) being vice presidents. The importance attached to the role the LFNC might play in unifying the disparate ethnic groups in the country was emphasized by placing this first among the activities of the Front covered in article 17 of the statute establishing it. This reads: "to work hard [to develop] polyethnic solidarity and [solidarity] among the [different Lao] nationalities". Point seven of the Front's Action Programme elaborated on the same theme: security in the ethnic minority areas must be emphasized, and the need for minority cadres and intellectuals recognized. The programme also stressed the importance of permitting ethnic minorities to follow their own beliefs and religious practices. Clearly in some respects "the creation of a new socialist man" (point six in the LFNC Action Programme) could be compromised in the cause of national unity.

In September an editorial in *Sieng Pasasonh* called for an improvement of economic conditions especially for minority groups living along the northern frontier between Laos and China. Despite the difficulties involved, the paper reminded its readers, it was necessary to ensure that the tribal peoples had such basic commodities as medicines, cloth and salt — items which they have traditionally obtained through cross border trade with China.

Nowhere was concern over a possible hilltribe insurgency more evident than in the messages addressed to "Meo Patriots" on the occasion of Meo New Year early in November 1979 by President Souphanouvong and Faydang Lobliayao, as Vice President of the Supreme People's Assembly, the highest ranking Meo in the Vientiane régime. Never has any other ethnic minority been officially greeted on behalf of the

Supreme People's Assembly, the government, and the central committee of the LFNC. Souphanouvong called upon the Meo to take note of party recommendations calling for all to practise "self-sustenance, self-sufficiency, austerity and to guarantee security," and without naming China he warned them that those Beijing supported would be defeated. Faydang was more outspoken: he denounced young Meo who had fled Laos only to become mercenaries and return to fight against their country (that is, Laos), and called upon his people not to be seduced by the propaganda of the Chinese who were "deceiving the [Meo] into dying in place of them."

Increasing Lao concern over internal security points up another aspect of the Vietnamese connection — the presence of as many as 50,000 Vietnamese troops in Laos. In some ways, internal security improved during 1979. Vietnamese led forces finally succeeded in breaking the resistance of CIA trained Meo guerrillas operating out of the Phou Bia massif south of the Plain of Jars, though many slipped away to fight again. The agreement with Thailand to prevent antigovernment insurgents using bases in each other's territory led to some fighting with pro-Chinese Communist Party of Thailand cadres in Sayaboury province and southern Laos, as mentioned above, but also resulted in a reduction of cross-Mekong raids by rightwing guerrillas from Thailand. The improved security situation in southern Laos freed Vietnamese units for action in Kampuchea, and allowed Lao troops to co-operate in suppressing Khmer Rouge guerrillas along the Lao-Kampuchean border. However, given the significance both the Lao and the Vietnamese attach to the threat of a Chinese backed insurgency in northern Laos, Vietnamese forces are unlikely to be withdrawn from Laos in the foreseeable future. Thus, as in the fields of economic construction and minorities policy, internal security in Laos is closely dependent upon the Vietnamese connection. The dilemma facing the present Lao régime is that, while Lao dependency upon Vietnam continues to increase, so Chinese opposition is likely to become more intractable; and as Chinese opposition grows, so Laos is likely to become ever more dependent upon Vietnam.

### Conclusion

Through a combination of inherent weakness and historical and geopolitical circumstances, Laos now finds itself inescapably tied to Vietnam. All areas of decision-making from foreign policy to economic planning and military security are dependent upon Vietnamese direction. Under more favourable conditions, a close connection with Vietnam might have been beneficial to Laos in its present stage of political evolution and economic development. But in 1979 the vagaries of Vietnamese policies towards Kampuchea and China led Laos, against its best interests, into a conflict with its most powerful neighbour, the results of which could be serious in the extreme.

Not only is Laos the weakest and most vulnerable state bordering southern China where the Chinese might gain a foothold; it is also the best strategically placed to enable Beijing to curb the ambitions of the Vietnamese. A Chinese armed and supplied tribal based insurgency in northern Laos could be extended across the frontier into north-western Vietnam. Potentially it would tie down thousands of Lao and Vietnamese troops in a costly and drawn-out war of attrition. The form such an insurgency might take has already been foreshadowed by the Voice of Democratic Kampuchea radio broadcasting out of southern China. In a station commentary entitled "the Lao people rise up to free themselves from Vietnamese and Soviet enslavement", the broadcast affirmed that

The struggle of the Lao patriots will certainly be crowned with final victory over the Vietnamese aggressors — expansionists, annexationists and exterminators of the Lao race — and the Soviet international expansionists, if they hold high the banner of great unity of the entire Lao nation and resolutely carry out a people's war based on

guerrilla warfare to wear down and crush the effective forces of the Vietnamese aggression (FBIS, 31 May 1979, p.H4).

Chinese fears of a Soviet military presence in both Vietnam and Laos increase the likelihood that Beijing could support such an insurgency as part of a long term strategy of defence along its southern frontiers. Soviet construction of a major airfield on the Plain of Jars, radio stations, a radar network, and a satellite receiving station, cannot help but be seen by the Chinese as a threat to their security which will have to be countered by whatever means they have at their disposal. Control over Laos would provide the PRC with supply routes to Kampuchea, and place the Chinese in a position to exert considerable influence in Thailand — either through the Communist Party of Thailand, or on the Thai Government.

If such a scenario does eventuate, and, as this paper has argued, at present this must be held a distinct possibility, it is likely to push Laos ever more firmly into the arms of the Vietnamese. From the Lao point of view, any Chinese backed insurgency must be seen as a threat to the political existence of the present Lao régime. From the Vietnamese point of view, loss of Vietnamese control over Laos would threaten the independence and territorial integrity of Vietnam. The outlook for Laos, therefore, is not for a weakening of the Lao-Vietnamese connection whose effects have been largely responsible for the current Lao predicament, but for a strengthening of it. As in 1979, the Vietnamese connection is likely to be the determining factor in what happens in Laos for some years to come.

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