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THE NORTH VIETNAMESE ROLE IN LAOS

Although the main stream of Vietnamese expansion has proceeded south along the Vietnamese coast -- first against the Cham and then against the Khmer -- the Vietnamese have historically exerted an influence in Laos. The communist militancy of the current North Vietnamese regime has reinforced this historical phenomenon and, particularly since the end of World War II, Hanoi has played a heavy political and military role in Laos.

Lao Communist Movement Founded in North Viet-Nam

When the Viet Minh movement was formed toward the close of World War II under Ho Chi Minh's leadership, Ho also provided advisors and funds through Prince Souphanouvong to what was originally the essentially nationalist Free Lao (Lao Issara) movement. When the majority of Lao nationalist leaders settled for independence within the French Union in 1949, and returned to Vientiane to participate in the semi-independent government, the Viet Minh-directed elements refused to join them. The Free Lao Front (Neo Lao Issara), later renamed the Lao Patriotic Front (Neo Lao Hak Sat, NLHS), was formed under North Vietnamese auspices in communist territory in North Viet-Nam in 1950. Its military arm was called the Pathet Lao.

Hanoi Controls Lao Communists

The ostensible NLHS leader was, and remains, Souphanouvong. The important members of the Lao communist movement, however, were members of the Indochinese Communist Party and of the Workers' Party (Lao Dong Dang) which succeeded it. The ranking Lao in the secret People's Party of Laos (Phak Pasason Lao, PPL), which was established in 1955, has apparently been the ethnically half-Vietnamese Kaysone Phomvihan. The PPL is subordinate to the Workers' Party in Hanoi. The North Vietnamese control, supply, and encadre the Lao communists, particularly the military forces.

Viet Minh Invasion of Laos

During the 1953 Viet Minh invasion of Laos, Radio Hanoi claimed that Lao communist forces were in the vanguard, but supported

by Viet Minh "volunteers." Reliable reports indicated, however, that there were no more than 300 Lao among the 5,000 to 8,000 invading troops. A Viet Minh general signed the cease-fire agreement with the French in Laos. At the April 1955 Bandung Conference, the North Vietnamese Prime Minister illustrated the propinquity of their relationship by representing the Lao communists when conferring with the representatives of the Royal Lao Government (RLG) on internal Lao matters and Laos/North Viet-Nam relations.

North Vietnamese Forces Entrenched in Laos

In 1956-58, the Lao communists attempted briefly to augment their strength through political rather than military means, but their ministers were expelled from the cabinet and imprisoned when one of their battalions resisted integration into the regular forces. North Vietnamese troops in December 1958 occupied several areas in southeast Laos near Sepone in Savannakhet province. They have remained there ever since to consolidate their hold over the Ho Chi Minh Trail leading to South Viet-Nam and direct and support Lao communist troops in southern Laos. Beginning in mid-1959, North Vietnamese troops made permanent incursions into the two northeastern border provinces of Houa Phan and Phong Saly. They have never given up their hold there but, on the contrary, have enlarged their geographical area of control.

Communist Gains in Laos in 1960-61

Following these events, and particularly after the 1960 elections which returned an anti-communist National Assembly responsive to the military strongman, Phoumi Nosavan, the communists increased their military operations in Laos, with significant North Vietnamese Army (NVA) participation in supply, cadre and even occasional main force units. The Neutralist coup of Kong Le in 1960 provided them with a chance to gain an ally in Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma, and to obtain Soviet military supplies earmarked for the legitimate Souvanna government.

North Viet-Nam Violates Geneva Agreements of 1962

Following the signing of the Geneva Agreements of 1962, no North Vietnamese troops -- only some 40 civilian "advisors" -- were withdrawn through the International Control Commission (ICC) checkpoint. Although the North Vietnamese quietly made a modest reduction in the number of their troops in Laos in 1962/63, they nonetheless intervened in several crucial battles, particularly those in the spring of 1963 against Souvanna's Neutralist forces. The NVA subsequently increased its strength in Laos, and by mid-1964 the RLG was able to present the first of many NVA prisoners to the ICC, which in Report 35 of September 16, 1965 relayed this North Vietnamese violation to the Co-Chairmen of the Geneva Conference. The North Vietnamese became even bolder in 1965,

however, and were severely beaten in two successive attacks, one in March at Dong Hene in Savannakhet province and the other in November near Thakhek. Government forces killed and captured an important number of NVA soldiers in both engagements.

Prime Minister Souvanna has repeatedly stated to the press and before the United Nations General Assembly that there are North Vietnamese troops permanently stationed on Lao soil. During a July 25, 1969, press conference in Paris, the Prime Minister stated there were 60,000 of them in Laos at that time. Over ninety North Vietnamese prisoners of war have been captured in Laos since 1964. They are currently being held in Vientiane and the press has interviewed them on several occasions.

Hanoi Tightens Grip on Laos

During 1966, the NVA was less active in Laos and government forces were able to make important advances, particularly when the rainy season impaired North Vietnamese logistics. In 1967, however, the North Vietnamese gradually tightened a noose around the Nam Bac valley in northern Laos, which RLG troops had retaken in the summer of 1966. In January 1968, the NVA overran Nam Bac, killing or capturing almost all government troops there and effectively eliminating the Lao Army's reserve force. In the south, the NVA similarly exerted pressures which resulted in NVA control over much of the important Sedone valley, but NVA troops refrained from taking the provincial capitals of Saravane and Attapeu.

During the 1968/69 dry season, NVA troops besieged and forced government withdrawals from a district town leading to the strategic Bolovens plateau. A particularly ominous development was the increase of North Vietnamese-directed subversive activity in the Laos/Cambodia/Thailand triborder area. Shortly after the beginning of the rainy season in June 1969, the North Vietnamese launched an unprecedented offensive which drove neutralist troops out of their position at Muong Soui on the northwestern edge of the Plain of Jars. In September RLG forces successfully counter-attacked the over-extended NVA supply lines, causing the North Vietnamese to pull back from the entire Plain of Jars area. However, by mid-February 1970 the NVA had reoccupied the Plain of Jars, including Muong Soui.

New Importance of Southern Laos

A steadily growing number of North Vietnamese troops remained in Laos in flagrant violation of the 1962 Geneva Agreements. They climbed to 33,000 in 1967, 46,000 in 1968, 55,000 in mid-1969, 67,000 in mid-1970. Today they are at an all-time high of some 100,000 men.

In the spring of 1970, southern Laos became critical for Hanoi because allied operations in Cambodia deprived it of the port of

Sihanoukville and the border sanctuaries. It was therefore necessary for North Vietnamese forces to broaden their base of operations in southern Laos and to secure the western flank of the Ho Chi Minh Trail from government attacks. Hanoi moved swiftly in May and June 1970 to seize two provincial capitals which it had never before occupied. Between September 1970 and February 1971, North Viet-Nam increased its forces in southern Laos by more than 30,000 and intensively built up its logistics network.

For years southern Laos had been vital to Hanoi's operations in northern South Viet-Nam; at the end of 1970 it was becoming the hub and crossroads of Hanoi's campaign throughout Indochina. Almost all of Hanoi's men and supplies were flowing through this area. The strategic principles that had applied to the enemy bases in Cambodia had become valid as well for southern Laos, and in February 1971 elements of the South Vietnamese armed forces entered this enemy-occupied area to attack North Vietnamese forces and military supplies assembled in sanctuaries near the border of South Viet-Nam. The objective of the operation, limited in time and area, was to disrupt communist preparations to launch a new attack against South Viet-Nam and to intercept the flow of supplies and men designed for use farther south on the Ho Chi Minh Trail in South Viet-Nam and Cambodia.

Laos Victim of North Viet-Nam

North Viet-Nam does not confine its ambitions for expansion to South Viet-Nam. Laos, almost since the end of World War II, has been a major victim of North Vietnamese designs on Southeast Asia. That is why President Nixon, in presenting his major new initiative for peace on October 7, 1970, included Laos and Cambodia, as well as South Viet-Nam, as areas where North Vietnamese aggression must end before lasting peace in Southeast Asia can be achieved: "The war in Indochina has proved to be of one piece; it cannot be cured by treating only one of its areas of outbreak." The President has reaffirmed that the Geneva Agreements of 1962 remain valid as a basis for settlement of the conflict in Laos.