

# Soviet Builds Influence in Laos As a Rival of Hanoi and Peking

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VIENTIANE, Laos, Oct. 1—With the era of American dominance in Laos ended by the Pathet Lao take-over last spring, the Soviet Union has moved rapidly to enlarge its influence here.

It is estimated that 300 to 500 diplomats, pilots, engineers and technicians are doing everything from flying Pathet Lao officers and cargo around this mountainous country to surveying for minerals and building a city of 200,000 on the devastated Plain of Jars.

Recently the Russians even erected a large bronze statue of the father of King Savang

Vatthana in Vientiane and, for uncertain reasons, donated 430 cases of vodka.

Some of the Soviet pilots live in houses once occupied by pilots of Air America, the airline backed by the United States Central Intelligence Agency that played a key role in the American war effort. Other Russians can be seen driving cars that diplomats believe were stolen when students and Pathet Lao soldiers seized an American housing compound and the large quarters of the United States Agency for International Development last June.

The Soviet Union's build-up is part of intense competition

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for influence in Laos between it and North Vietnam and China.

The North Vietnamese are resumed to enjoy a predominant position because their troops bore the brunt of the fighting here and because the senior Pathet Lao leaders have long had close personal ties with them.

The only serviceable road leading from Samneua, the Pathet Lao's headquarters in the north, goes east to Hanoi. The Pathet Lao radio station, though it says it broadcasts from Samneua, is believed by

intelligence specialists to be near Hanoi.

In what analysts regard as a significant statement last week, the Pathet Lao broadcast a 30-year history of the Communist movement in Laos, tracing its origin to the Indochinese Communist party founded by Ho Chi Minh. The Communist party of Laos, the radio disclosed was founded in 1955, "pursuing the spirit of the Indochinese Communist party."

The outcome of the competition for influence is important not only for Laos but also for neighboring Thailand. Since the end of the war in Vietnam last April, knowledgeable diplomats report, the number of North Vietnamese troops in the southern panhandle of Laos near Thailand has increased and the flow of Communist weapons to Thai insurgents has been noticeably stepped up.

### Intentions Still Obscure

Hanoi's intentions in Thailand remain unclear. Both North Vietnam and the Pathet Lao have been denouncing the Thais, accusing them of everything from harboring Vietnamese and Laotian refugees to plotting an invasion of Laos.

The interests of Laos in Thailand would appear to differ from North Vietnam's in the long run, for this undeveloped, landlocked country is heavily dependent on the Thais for much of its rice, meat and vegetables and all of its oil, which comes by truck. That includes new shipments of oil donated by the Russians and the Chinese.

In the view of some diplomats, the Pathet Lao's relations with Bangkok may be a good

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A Soviet family shopping in Vientiane, Laos. A Chinese representative said, "The Russians are trying to replace the Americans in Laos, but the Lao people will never let the tiger in through the back door while kicking the wolf out the front gate."

indication of how independent the Laotian Communists are of North Vietnam and how seriously they mean their oft-stated intention of ending foreign domination.

Another uncertainty is China's role. The Chinese are clear-

ly anxious about the growing Soviet presence here on their southern flank, adding another link in what they regard as an attempt to encircle them.

"The Russians are trying to replace the Americans in Laos," a Chinese representative in

Vientiane remarked. "But the Laotian people will never let the tiger in through the back door while kicking the wolf out the front gate." He was quoting a stock characterization of Soviet expansion in Southeast Asia.