

Thai-Laotian Friendship Unravels on the Mekong

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—The historic friendship between the peoples of Laos and Thailand, united by ancient bonds of blood, language and culture, is crumbling along the Mekong River that separates the two nations.

In the last month there have been more than a score of incidents, most involving exchange of small-arms fire. Several deaths have occurred and increasingly heated charges have been exchanged between the two governments.

"There is not a professional military environment along this frontier," remarked one Western military observer after an inspection of the river, "and thus far the incidents have not amounted to much in military terms. But there is no question that they are dangerous and disruptive to peace, good order and discipline."

Action Against Smugglers

Much of the skirmishing has been directed at smugglers, whose activities have increased as the Pathet Lao has closed down the frontier. It has become increasingly profitable to run everything from automobiles, whisky and cigarettes to weapons and ammunition across the river border.

But with the nervous pitch of the naval and army patrols along this frontier, shots fired at smugglers' boats have been drawing more frequent and stronger reaction both in military and diplomatic terms.

Residents of both sides of the Mekong in the northeast are of the same ethnic stock. They speak the same dialect, a blend of Laotian and Thai that is at times almost unintelligible to the urban Thai of Bangkok and the central plains.

For centuries, they have traded across the river, fished on it, intermarried and jealously fought off any interference from outside authority—be it the crown in Luang Prabang or the Government in Bangkok.

"Now the frontier has suddenly been taken out of their hands," said one Western diplo-



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Tension has developed on the Mekong River border of Laos and Thailand.

mat who has served in both Thailand and Laos. "Now there is a military government, the Pathet Lao, in control in Vientiane, and a Government in Bangkok that is sensitive to every breeze from the Communists on their flanks."

A Curious Amalgam

As a result, an amalgam of antique and modern forces and weapons has been arrayed along the Mekong in recent months.

On the Thai side, the Mekong River Patrol Force, a unit of the Royal Thai Navy, has about 30 American-built river patrol boats. They are of shallow draft, steel plated, about 32 feet long and each carries a turret-mounted machine gun.

There are also smaller wood-

border patrol police and customs agents on the Thai side.

The Pathet Lao Navy is substantially older. It consists chiefly of post-World War II French-built patrol boats of the same general style as the Thai vessels but considerably slower, as well as a half dozen L.C.M.'s or American-built, shallow-draft landing craft similar to those used on World War II beachheads but carrying no armaments.

There are also a number of 37-mm. antiaircraft emplacements on the Laotian shore and troops armed with semiautomatic weapons including American-issue M-16 and Soviet-made AK-47 rifles. The Laotians also use "long-tailed boats" — very shallow-draft, low-slung wooden boats that capsize easily and are subject to accidents that almost invariably turn into "engagements" or incidents.

Rumors of Soviet Craft

In recent months there have been repeated rumors and "sightings" of large numbers of Soviet-made river-patrol boats. At one point, the Thai ambassador to Laos reported officially that he had "seen" 70 such craft.

Most military analysts, however, regard the reports as fanciful.

Nevertheless, the existence of the real and the belief in the phantom forces have produced an increasing number of incidents.

Foreign Minister Chatichai Choonhavan of Thailand proposed to fly to Vientiane to deal with the border problems but the Laotian rebuffed his overtures. A week later, the first scheduled meeting of the Mekong River basin's commission since the fall of Indochina was canceled. The committee is designed to regulate the use of the Mekong for agricultural and power development.

Efforts to Avoid Crisis

Thailand has made a number of efforts to defuse the situation. Most recently, a series of secret "rules of engagement" were issued by the Royal Thai Navy. They forbid Mekong pa-

trol boats to train either a gun or fieldglasses on the Laotian shore or to initiate any other "hostile act."

Mr. Chatichai Choonhavan's desire for a border meeting, it was understood, bespoke a wish to redraw the channel boundary to allow each country equal access to the critical waterway and thus prevent accidental boundary violations. It could even establish a joint river patrol unit. Laos has rejected both options.

Last week, the Thai Foreign Ministry issued an unusual six-page statement observing that "Thailand always wants to be a good neighbor of Laos and support Laos' aspirations. It also said it intended to cooperate with and support Laos.

But a Pathet Lao broadcast rejected the statement and restated Laotian demands. If the two countries are to remain on speaking terms, it said, all Laotian right-wing refugees and Meo tribesmen who fled to Thailand must be returned to Laos, together with "planes and other war material" that have found their way across the border.