

Laos Still Beset by International Rivalries

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VIENTIANE, Laos — Despite the end of the war and the drive of the new Laotian Communist rulers for self-reliance, this small country remains embroiled in the rivalries of larger outside powers.

In place of France and the United States, which once used Laos as a buffer state for their own interests, North Vietnam now appears to exercise a predominant, if shadowy, role. In the opinion of diplomats here, Hanoi has been using this leverage to keep up friction with Thailand, its major opponent in Southeast Asia.

An emergency North Vietnamese airlift to relieve critical food and fuel shortages in Vientiane is only the most obvious example of Hanoi's growing role here. The shortages were a result of the closing of the Thai border after a Pathet Lao attack on a Thai patrol boat on the Mekong River on Nov. 17.

Close Personal Ties

Hanoi officials also have unusually close personal ties with the senior Communists who assumed the top positions in the newly formed People's Democratic Republic of Laos. North Vietnamese troops did most of the heavy fighting in the war in Laos. And for unclear reasons, North Vietnam is still estimated to have 30,000 troops in the southern panhandle of Laos near Thailand.

In addition to Hanoi, the Soviet Union has also moved swiftly to expand its influence here, as the end of the war in the spring removed the restraints on the Chinese-Soviet conflict in Indochina.

There are now reportedly 500 or more Russian diplomats, pilots, engineers and technicians in Laos, doing all sorts of things from flying Laotian Communist leaders and cargo around this mountainous country to surveying for minerals

and building a city for 200,000 on the devastated Plain of Jars.

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. Russians are regularly seen shopping for new suits, Japanese radios or French wine in Vientiane's few remaining stores.

Outcome In Question

How much influence the Laotian Communists will be willing to allow the North Vietnamese and Russians in the long run is problematical. Americans earlier misjudged the force of nationalism in Vietnam and Cambodia.

As for the American role here, it remains tenuous.

In the spring prolonged anti-American demonstrations organized by the Pathet Lao forced the closing of the onerous mission of the Agency for International Development. The United States Embassy remains open, the only American diplomatic mission left in Indochina. But no one on the small staff of 27—it numbered 1,200 a few years ago—is sure how long he will be here.

The Communists have frozen the embassy's two local bank accounts, worth about \$250,000, since early September, because they insisted the money belonged to the A.I.D. office and therefore should be Laotian property along with the A.I.D. compound. As a result, the embassy has nearly exhausted its operating funds.

Complicating the embassy's problems, its Laotian employees have left in large numbers in the last few weeks, perhaps under Communist pressure.

Echoing a North Vietnamese claim, the Laotians have continued to demand that Washington provide postwar aid under

a presumed obligation incurred in the 1973 Paris peace agreement on Vietnam. In an interview recently, the new Minister of Propaganda and Information, Sisana Sisan, said he welcomed good relations with the United States. But he charged that Washington was still plotting with Laotian rightists in Thailand to invade the country.

Whatever the embassy's fate, its large parking lot remains crowded with vehicles of Americans forced to leave Laos unexpectedly in the summer. It looks like an unprofitable used car lot, a mute reminder of better days.

The two other apparent losers in the Communists' take-over here are the French and the Chinese. The French, who ruled Laos as a sleepy colony for over half a century, have been ordered to close their military mission here by year's end. Incongruously, it somehow survived all the years of the American presence and the 1973 Vientiane peace agreement.

Most of Vientiane's remaining small French community—teachers, shopkeepers and restaurateurs—are also waiting for what they assume will be the order to leave, since the Communists have announced a drive to eradicate foreign influence.

Low Chinese Profile

In contrast with the Russians' quick build-up, the Chinese have maintained a low profile, sending in only a small cartographic team under United Nations auspices and holding discussions on finishing a road they began years ago in northwestern Laos.

It is uncertain whether China's low-key approach is deliberate or a result of Hanoi's predominant role and pressure to keep the Chinese out. But given the geographic position of Laos on China's southern border, Peking can hardly be ignored.

In an editorial congratulating the Laotian Communists on their new Government, the official Peking paper, Jenmin Jih Pao, sounded a veiled warning. "U.S. imperialism has suffered a defeat in Indochina," the paper said. "The other superpower, which is ambitious and trying its utmost to penetrate into and expand its influence in the area, will also be doomed to failure."

Peking has been hinting since the summer that it believes Moscow and Hanoi are colluding against China.

Ties Go Back Decades

Hanoi's ties to the Laotian Communists go back at least to the beginning of the Pathet Lao movement here after World War II. Kaysone Phomvihane, the new Prime Minister and secretary general of the Laotian People's Revolutionary Party, is half Vietnamese and was educated in Hanoi, where he became friends with Ho Chi Minh. Both Prince Souphanouvong, the titular President of the new Government, and Neuhak Phounsavan, the First Deputy Prime Minister, are married to Vietnamese women who are reportedly Communists.

If Hanoi can succeed in its emergency airlift to Vientiane, and a truck convoy using the old Ho Chi Minh Trail complex, it could mean a fundamental realignment of the Laotian economy. For in the past Vientiane depended on Thailand for most of its food and all its fuel, not to mention other consumer goods.

Hanoi has kept up a constant barrage of accusations against Thailand since the end of the war in Vietnam, charging Bangkok with failing to return planes flown to Thailand by escaping South Vietnamese and plotting with the United States to attack Laos. In addition, the North Vietnamese have insisted that all United States bases and military personnel must be withdrawn from Thailand before they will agree to establish diplomatic relations with Bangkok.

Thailand and the United States have announced plans to close the bases by next spring.