


Journal of Southeast Asian Studies, 55(1), pp 76–102 March 2024.

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Unvarying Indochinese idea, evolving Indochinese strategies: The Vietnamese thirty-year revolution in Laos, 1945–75

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This article seeks to trace the evolution of North Vietnam's strategy in Laos from 1945 to 1975. I have three points to argue. First, the Vietnamese dealt with Laos on the basis of the Indochinese idea, not only during the immediate anticolonial period as scholars have argued, but also in the decades of struggle against the United States. Second, while the Indochinese idea treated North and South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia as an interconnected entity, different priorities were attached to each component; revolutionary efforts differed from country to country. Third, the Vietnamese communists were flexible in translating this idea to adapt to the changing realities over three decades, from armed to political struggles, or a combination of both at different times.

Scholarship about the Indochinese conflicts is voluminous but characterised by disproportionate attention to the wars in Vietnam. Despite the recent tendency of bringing the various communist sides into the story, the focus has still remained with Vietnam. This remains the case, too, for studies of the First Indochina War. These studies have failed to reveal the Indochinese nature of the conflicts, historiographically. On the other hand, scholars of Lao studies have offered an adequacy of details of Vietnamese communists' activities in pre- and post-1945 Laos and have argued their dominant role in sustaining revolution there,¹ yet few have discussed the strategies which kept the Vietnamese in Laos for such a long period. As is known, revolution in Laos was not purely a Lao-participated issue but under Vietnamese supervision, a supervision based not only on the idea of communist

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1 For example, Joseph J. Zasloff, *North Vietnam and the Pathet Lao: Partners in the struggle for Laos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970); MacAlister Brown and Joseph J. Zasloff, *Apprentice revolutionaries: The communist movement in Laos, 1930–1985* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1986); Geoffrey C. Gunn, *Political struggles in Laos (1930–1954): Vietnamese communist power and the Lao struggle for national independence* (Bangkok: Editions Duang Kamol, 1988).

internationalism but, more importantly, on the idea of Indochina, which this article argues should be in the foreground.

Historian Arthur Dommen has narrated a history of the Indochinese wars, but from Western perspectives.² Christopher Goscha is by far the most important scholar writing about the Indochinese wars from the communist angle. Unlike the traditional focus on revolution inside Vietnam, he has shifted our attention to its overseas revolution centred in Thailand.³ The more pertinent piece to the present study is his examination of how the Vietnamese (of various political stripes) came to embrace the Indochinese idea, and how the Lao and Cambodians detested that same idea.⁴ The Indochinese idea laid emphasis on the indivisibility of the anticolonial struggle in each Indochinese country, which explains why the Vietminh made such concerted efforts in Laos.⁵ According to Goscha, the Vietnam Workers' Party (VWP) leaders 'had to let go of their longstanding idea of Indochina' at the 1954 Geneva Conference.⁶ For this reason, he used 'the Indochinese internationalist model' in another article to explain the logic behind the ICP/VWP's policy in Laos before and after 1954.⁷ This term tried to justify the self-imposed idea of 'international responsibility' based on the Vietnamese perception of their advanced level of revolutionary civilisation, which makes sense but fails to capture the fundamental impulse in the minds of the Vietnamese communists. There are two questions here. First, did the Indochinese idea end in 1954? The present article argues that it did not end with the defeat of the French. Second, the Indochinese idea cannot fully explain how the Vietnamese communists dealt with changing situations through three decades, from the end of the Second World War to communist victory in all three Indochinese countries in 1975, thus it merits a closer look.

This article draws on a variety of newly released archival and party documents, memoirs and official histories to examine the Vietnamese communist regime's Indochinese strategy in Laos. It is too ambitious to include everything; I focus rather on Vietnamese revolutionary policies, which can be divided into six periods. The first was alignment with Lao nationalists in the first two postwar years, followed by the strategy of building an Indochinese communist revolution after 1948. The third stage pursued a neutral Laos between the 1954 and 1961–62 Geneva conferences as part of the Indochinese peace. The subsequent failure of this policy led to the fourth

2 Arthur J. Dommen, *The Indochinese experience of the French and the Americans: Nationalism and communism in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

3 Christopher Goscha, *Thailand and the Southeast Asian networks of the Vietnamese Revolution, 1885–1954* (Richmond: Curzon, 1999); Christopher Goscha, *The road to Dien Bien Phu: A history of the First War for Vietnam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022), chap. 3.

4 Christopher Goscha, *Vietnam or Indochina? Contesting concepts of space in Vietnamese nationalism, 1887–1954* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 1995); Christopher Goscha, *Going Indochinese: Contesting concepts of space and place in French Indochina* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2012).

5 Christopher Goscha, 'Une guerre pour l'Indochine? Le Laos et le Cambodge dans le conflit Franco-Vietnamien (1948–1954)', *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains* 211, dossier: Diên Biên Phủ (2003): 29–58.

6 Christopher Goscha, 'Geneva 1954 and the "de-internationalization" of the Vietnamese idea of Indochina', paper presented at the conference on New Evidence on the 1954 Geneva Conference on Indochina, Cold War International History Project 2006, Washington, DC, 17–18 Feb. 2006, pp. 1–47.

7 Christopher Goscha, 'Vietnam and the world outside: The case of Vietnamese communist advisers in Laos (1948–62)', *South East Asia Research* 2 (2004): 141–85.

stage, or ‘the special war’ in Laos, which was subordinate to the Vietnam War. The fifth was to restore neutrality as part of the struggle for an Indochinese settlement (1969–73). The last was to move towards the seizure of power in Indochina after 1973. I argue that the Vietnamese were guided by the Indochinese idea to deal with Lao affairs throughout the three decades, but implemented multiple ‘Indochinese’ strategies depending on the evolving situations.

Alliance with Lao nationalists for Indochinese independence, 1945–47

Nine months after its formation in January 1930, the Vietnamese Communist Party was renamed the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP), disregarding the insistence of some Party members that the name change should come only after Laos and Cambodia had their own parties.⁸ The name was an order from Moscow, but a communist pamphlet in 1931 provided two justifications only. First, ‘Vietnam’ did not match with the Party’s ‘revolutionary responsibility’ as it contained only three of the five parts (Cochinchina, Tonkin, Annam) of Indochina. Second, each part of Indochina was connected politically and economically and hence would be unable to accomplish revolutionary success alone; this was also due to the interconnected nature of French colonial rule, so the revolution had to be an ‘Indochinese’ one.⁹ From the outset, the Vietnamese regarded it as an Indochinese revolution, which is evident in the origins of communism in Laos. Hoàng Văn Hoan, a future senior party leader, had worked in northeast Thailand since the mid-1920s and built party cells in Lao towns; Hồ Chí Minh also encouraged his associates to do the same during his trips to Thailand.¹⁰ After the Nghệ Tĩnh uprising (1930–31) failed, a number of communist refugees fled to Thailand and organised the Indochinese Assistance Section. Its leaders, Lê Mạnh Trinh and Nguyễn Chính Giao, presided over the founding meeting of the Lao Regional Committee (Xứ ủy Ai Lao) in September 1934, but this party branch was weak, and available records show no significant role for ethnic Lao in it.¹¹

When Hồ Chí Minh returned home in 1941 after his long sojourn abroad the new communist leadership realised that it was necessary to seek Lao (and Cambodian) allies, at least at the policy level. At the Eighth Plenum in May 1941, the ICP redefined its revolution, which scholars have understood as a shift in the Vietnamese revolution,¹² but I will demonstrate that this was an Indochinese shift.

8 ‘Thư gửi Trung ương Đảng Cộng sản Đông Dương’ [Letter from the ICP Central Committee], 20 Apr. 1931. Đảng Cộng Sản Việt Nam [Communist Party of Vietnam, hereafter ĐCSVN], *Văn kiện Đảng toàn tập* [Collections of Party documents, hereafter VKĐ], vol. 3, p. 131.

9 *Công nông binh*, 6 Feb. 1931, cited in Trần Huy Liệu, *Lịch sử tám mươi năm chống Pháp, Quyển thứ hai, Tập Thương* [History of 80 years’ resistance against France, part 2, vol. 1] (Hà Nội: Ban nghiên cứu Văn Sử Địa, 1958), pp. 35–6.

10 Hoàng Văn Hoan, *A drop in the ocean: Hoang Van Hoan’s revolutionary reminiscences* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1988), parts 1 and 2. For convenience, this article uses ‘Thailand’, rather than its old name Siam.

11 Tổng cục chính trị [Political General Department], *Đảng lãnh đạo quân tình nguyện và chuyên gia quân sự Việt Nam làm nhiệm vụ quốc tế (1930–1975)* [Vietnamese volunteers and military experts under the Party’s leadership to fulfil international responsibility, hereafter ĐLDQTN] (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Quân đội nhân dân, 2008), pp. 12–3.

12 Húynh Kim Khánh, *Vietnamese communism, 1925–1945* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), pp. 259–63; Tuong Vu, ‘From cheering to volunteering: Vietnamese communists and the coming

This plenum argued that colonial rule prevented exchanges among Indochinese peoples and caused a deep sense of Lao and Cambodian grievance against Vietnam, so the Party had to gather all available manpower, regardless of class or country. The ICP imagined that the future Indochinese state could be a federated democratic republic or three separate states (a democratic Vietnam plus Laos and Cambodia adopting a system of their choice). As the revolution was called ‘a national liberation’, not a ‘bourgeois-democratic’ struggle as before, the ICP created and assigned the Vietminh to help form similar leagues for the other two, to form an Indochinese Independence League—though this plan was never realised. Clearly, the ICP sought to end colonialism not solely on its own strength, but through cooperation with potential nationalist allies.¹³

This decision guided the Vietminh leaders in the ensuing years, especially when they prepared for what they called an Indochinese uprising after the Japanese overthrow of the French in March 1945.¹⁴ In June, Nguyễn Chính Cầu, a senior overseas party member, was sent to Thailand to deliver the party’s plan for taking power. The Overseas Vietnamese (*Việt kiều*) communities had just set up a unified organisation to monitor operations in Thailand and Laos and build contacts with Free Lao leaders, a group of moderate anticolonial nationalists living in Thailand.¹⁵ Upon receiving the instruction, Việt kiều leaders formed the Lao-Thai Special Party Committee (SPC) and decided to join forces to take power in Laos and send its senior leaders Trần Đức Vịnh and Dương Chí Trung for the historic meeting at the Vietminh base in Tân Trào,¹⁶ which concluded that the opportunity of a power vacuum after the Japanese surrender was an opportune moment to take power.¹⁷ Hồ Chí Minh told them to exploit the situation by taking power into Indochinese hands before the Allies’ arrival. He warned, however, that the French would still return, and the Vietminh forces should exploit the Allied presence and fight alongside anticolonial elements of Laos.¹⁸ Vịnh immediately returned to Laos with this instruction.

At the practical level, the ICP’s Lao-Thai SPC took part in the struggle for Laos’ independence by seeking cooperation with Lao nationalists in three towns. In Vientiane, Prince Phetsarath received a message from Hồ Chí Minh on 13 September, which expressed Vietnamese sympathy for the Lao anticolonial movement

of the Cold War, 1940–1951’, in *Connecting histories: Decolonization and the Cold War in Southeast Asia, 1945–1962*, ed. Christopher E. Goscha and Christian F. Ostermann (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center; Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 178.

13 ‘Trung ương hội nghị lần thứ tám Đảng cộng sản Đông Dương’ [The ICP’s 8th Plenum]. ĐCSVN, *VKD*, vol. 7, pp. 111–36.

14 See also Bruce M. Lockhart, ‘Narrating 1945 in Lao historiography’, in *Contesting visions of the Lao past: Laos historiography at the crossroads*, ed. Christopher E. Goscha and Søren Ivarsson (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2003), pp. 129–63.

15 Tổng cục chính trị, *ĐLĐQTN*, pp. 24–6.

16 Viện Lịch sử Quân sự Việt Nam (Bộ Quốc Phòng) [Academy of Military History, Ministry of Defence of Vietnam], *Lịch sử quân tình nguyện Việt Nam trong cuộc kháng chiến chống thực dân Pháp tại Lào* [History of Vietnamese volunteers in Laos during the resistance against French colonialism, hereafter *LSQTNCP*] (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất bản quân đội nhân dân, 2002), p. 47.

17 ‘Nghị quyết của toàn quốc hội nghị Đảng cộng sản Đông-Dương’ [Resolution of the ICP’s national conference], 14–5 Aug. 1945, ĐCSVN, *VKD*, vol. 7, p. 424.

18 Viện Lịch sử Quân sự Việt Nam (Bộ Quốc Phòng), *LSQTNCP*, p. 50.

and proposed mutual support.¹⁹ The former endorsed it but felt uncomfortable with the Việt kiều presence and asked the Japanese to contain them.²⁰ In towns whose population was dominated by Việt kiều communities, however, the SPC won the cooperation of Lao nationalists. Singkapo Chounramany, a Vietnam ally and the Lao Pen Lao representative in Thakhek, persuaded his uncle, the province's governor Khamsing Chounramany, to work with the SPC.²¹ Oun Sananikone, a militant serving in the Thai Royal Army, returned to Savannakhet. As the town was full of Vietnam, he chose to work with the Vietnamese, though reluctantly.²²

Prince Souphanouvong, who had spent his youth in Vietnam and married a Vietnamese ICP sympathiser, played a crucial role in furthering Vietnamese–Lao cooperation.²³ Shortly after the Second World War ended, he arrived in Hà Nội, and was promised to have the Vietnam support.²⁴ He departed for Laos in late September and accepted the position of commander-in-chief of the uprising forces after arriving in Savannakhet in early October.²⁵ On 12 October 1945, the Lao Issara (LI) cabinet was formed to continue the struggle against the Lao King and the French. This regime was recognised by the newly established Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) with Trần Đức Vịnh as the liaison, who arrived in Vientiane on 16 October and obtained a promise of anticolonial cooperation from the LI. The day after Souphanouvong's arrival in Vientiane on 29 October, Vịnh signed a convention with the LI.²⁶ The Prince's role as the main Lao liaison with the Vietnam has long been recognised.

The convention officially acknowledged the presence of Vietnam units in Laos and stipulated how the two sides would cooperate.²⁷ A Vietnamese–Lao mixed command was formed in Vientiane, Thakhek and Savannakhet, each filled with a number of Vietnam advisers,²⁸ marking the formation of their anticolonial alliance, a remarkable progress of the May 1941 policy. The joint Vietnam–Lao units achieved a series of military successes in expelling the French out of several towns in late 1945.²⁹ The other side of story, however, was the widespread distrust among Lao nationalists (none of whom had communist sympathies) towards the Vietnamese, as Tran Van

19 Geoffrey C. Gunn, *Political struggles in Laos*, pp. 141–2.

20 Michel Caply, *Guérilla au Laos* (Paris: Presses Pocket, 1971), p. 251; Jean Deuve, *Le Laos 1945–1949: Contribution à l'histoire du mouvement Lao Issara* (Montpellier: Université Paul Valéry, 2000), pp. 20–1.

21 Viện Lịch sử Quân sự Việt Nam (Bộ Quốc Phòng), *LSQTNCP*, pp. 59–68.

22 3246, *Lao Issara: The memoirs of Oun Sananikone*, tr. John B. Murdoch (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program, Dept. of Asian Studies, Cornell University, 1975), pp. 23–4.

23 For the life of Souphanouvong, see Trần Đương, *Chủ tịch Hồ Chí Minh với Hoàng Thân Xuphanuvông* [Chairman Ho Chi Minh and Prince Souphanouvong] (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Thông tấn, 2007).

24 Trần Đương, *Chủ tịch Hồ Chí Minh với Hoàng Thân Xuphanuvông*, p. 35.

25 Tran Van Dinh, 'The birth of the Pathet Lao Army', in *Laos: War and revolution*, ed. Nina S. Adams and Alfred W. McCoy (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), pp. 424–31.

26 Viện Lịch sử Quân sự Việt Nam (Bộ Quốc Phòng), *LSQTNCP*, p. 71.

27 For its text, see Jean Deuve, *Le Laos 1945–1949*, pp. 324–6; Uthit Pasakhom, 'Beyond a Soviet–Vietnamese condominium: The case of Laos', *Indochina Report*, Jan.–Mar. 1985, p. 4.

28 Jean Deuve, *Le Laos 1945–1949*, pp. 326–9; Geoffrey C. Gunn, *Political struggles in Laos*, pp. 157–8.

29 Jean Deuve, *Le Laos, 1945–1949*, chap. 5.

Dinh, who escorted the young Souphanouvong to Laos, recalled, most Lao leaders looked at them ‘with great suspicion’.³⁰

As the French completed preparations for the reoccupation of Laos, by early 1946, the Vietminh-Lao unit quickly lost the initiative. The French swept through central Laos and seized the two capitals (Vientiane and Luang Prabang) by May, forcing the LI forces into exile. Some, including forces of Hmong leader Faydang Lobliayao and the influential Thao O, fled to Vietnam. In October 1946, they formed the Eastern Lao Liberation Committee chaired by Nouthak Phoumsavan. The DRV set up the External Affairs Office (directed by Vĩnh and renamed the Border Affairs Office in April 1947) to supply them.³¹ According to official history, this committee dissolved in late 1948.³² French-captured documents explain that the dissolution decision came from the Vietminh, who intended to place the unit under Phetsarath for ‘a unified leadership’, lest the division within the Lao resistance played into French hands.³³ Another reason was to bring Phetsarath on board, which could hopefully prevent the Lao Issara from giving up the struggle.

Most of the Lao exiles fled to Thailand, including their cabinet and forces, however. They were demoralised by the lack of funds and arms. A heavier blow was the overthrow of the Free Thai government, a main supporter of the Indochinese resistance, in the coup of November 1947,³⁴ after which Lao anticolonial activities were severely curtailed. Between 22 and 28 April 1948, the LI held a conference on how to deal with the situation and decided to negotiate with France for independence, but its leaders stressed that they only accepted Laos as part of the French Union, but not of the Indochinese Federation, as stated in the August 1946 *modus vivendi*. In order not to undermine the negotiations, the LI decided to cease guerilla activities,³⁵ which amounted to the end of its resistance. The negotiation resulted in the signing of the Franco-Laotian Agreement in July 1949, endorsing Laos as an Associated State within the French Union, paving the way for the LI’s dissolution on 24 October, following which most of its leaders returned and joined the Royal Lao Government (RLG). The Vietnamese had begun to seek new allies of Laos by this point.

Building an Indochinese Communist Revolution, 1948–54

By pivoting around what happened in and outside of Vietnam, Tuong Vu has demonstrated how the ICP’s return to its ‘true colours’ took place in 1948 and

30 Tran Van Dinh, ‘The birth of the Pathet Lao Army’, p. 429.

31 Viện Lịch sử Quân sự Việt Nam (Bộ Quốc Phòng), *Lịch sử các đoàn 81, 82, 83, 280 quân tình nguyện Việt Nam tại Lào, 1945–1954* [History of Volunteer Regiments 81, 82, 83 and 280 of Vietnam in Laos 1945–54] (hereafter *LSCDQTN*) (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất bản quân đội nhân dân, 2004), pp. 18–9; Viện Lịch sử Quân sự Việt Nam (Bộ Quốc Phòng), *LSQTNCP*, pp. 114–6.

32 Viện Lịch sử Quân sự Việt Nam (Bộ Quốc Phòng), *LSQTNCP*, p. 128.

33 ‘A/S: unification des Forces de Liberation de Laos sous l’égide d’un Gouvernement unifié, 22.6.48’, 2HCI82, Archives nationales d’outre mer (ANOM), Aix-en-Provence; ‘A/S dissolution du comite central laotien, 16.8.48’, 2HCI82, ANOM.

34 On Thai support for postwar Indochinese anticolonialism, see Eiji Murashima, ‘Thailand and Indochina 1945–1950’, in *Vietnam-Indochina-Japan relations during the Second World War: Documents and interpretations*, ed. Masaya Shiraishi, Nguyen Van Khanh and Bruce M. Lockhart (Tokyo: Waseda University Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, 2017), pp. 155–95.

35 ‘Note: activites Lao-Issaras au Siam’, 8 June 1948, 2HCI 82, ANOM.

concluded that this was a radical turn of Vietnamese politics.³⁶ This section, however, will focus on the Vietnamese experience in Laos to show how this was an Indochinese turn.

After moderate anticolonial partners in Laos moved away from cooperation with the Vietminh in 1947, at an expanded central meeting, the ICP commented that as few communist cells had been developed in Laos (and Cambodia), the ‘Indochina’ in its name did not reflect revolutionary realities.³⁷ Even worse, the ICP argued that Laos was being used by the French as a stepping stone to reoccupy Vietnam. For example, one French unit, which had fled to China after the Japanese coup in March 1945, returned to Vietnam via northern Laos; another unit returned from central Laos.³⁸ The DRV’s first national military conference in January 1947 placed maximum emphasis on control of the northern and central sections of the Vietnam–Laos border.³⁹ Soon, several battalions and companies were sent to open the Western Advance Front (*Mặt trận Tây tiến*) for a short period.⁴⁰

The critical moment came in August 1948 when the ICP introduced the concept of a ‘New Democratic Revolution’ at the Fifth Central Cadres’ Conference.⁴¹ Again, this should be interpreted in Indochinese terms. First, equal priority was given to anti-imperialism and anti-feudalism. Failure in one sphere could not guarantee success of the other. Simply put, class background was used to identify foes such as Emperor Bảo Đại in Vietnam, and the monarchy in Laos, though implicitly. Second, probably for the first time, the Party now introduced the idea of Indochina as ‘one fighting unit’, and so an eventual victory was possible if a second battlefield opened in Laos and Cambodia.⁴²

Most importantly, this conference adopted a new political programme, which elaborated the Indochinese idea. First, it argued that Indochina was ‘one unified bloc’ in geographic, economic, political and strategic terms, so a Federation of People’s Democratic Republics (*Liên bang cộng hoà dân chủ nhân dân*) was the common goal, but this does not mean equal priority or the same political system for each country. The programme pinpointed their different levels of social development and set different goals for each of them. The struggle in Laos (and Cambodia) was to be a national liberation led by a broad front to create ‘a constitutional monarchy in form but a new democracy in substance’, not a socialist republic like the DRV. The

36 Tuong Vu, ‘“It’s time for the Indochinese Revolution to show its true colours”: The radical turn of Vietnamese politics in 1948’, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 40, 3 (2009): 519–42.

37 ‘Nghị quyết hội nghị trung ương mở rộng’ [Resolution of Expanded Central Conference], 15–17 Jan. 1948, *ĐCSVN, VKĐ*, vol. 9, p. 47. The ICP announced its dissolution in November 1945 but this was a nominal move involving a change of name, the party was still working.

38 Viện Lịch sử Quân sự Việt Nam (Bộ Quốc Phòng), *LSCĐQTN*, pp. 316–9; Trình Muu, ed., *Lịch sử kháng chiến chống thực dân Pháp của quân và dân liên khu IV* [History of resistance of army and people in Interzone V against French colonialism] (Hà Nội: NXB Chính trị quốc gia, 2003), pp. 91–3.

39 Trình Muu, ed., *Lịch sử kháng chiến chống thực dân Pháp của quân và dân liên khu IV*, p. 135.

40 For an official account see Viện lịch sử quân sự Việt Nam, *Các đơn vị vũ trang Tây Tiến, 1945–1950* [Armed Western Advance Forces, 1945–1950] (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Quân đội nhân dân, 2011).

41 Trương Chinh, ‘*chúng ta chiến đấu cho độc lập và dân chủ*’ [We fight for independence and democracy], speech at the 5th Central Cadres’ Conference, 8–16 Aug. 1948, *ĐCSVN, VKĐ*, vol. 9, pp. 185–98.

42 Võ Nguyễn Giáp, ‘*kiểm thảo mùa hè và chuẩn bị thu đông năm 1948*’ [Review work in the summer and preparations for autumn and winter 1948], speech at the 5th Central Cadres’ Conference, 8–16 Aug. 1948, *ĐCSVN, VKĐ*, vol. 9, pp. 247–8.

programme then criticised three ‘incorrect tendencies’. The first was the plan to form a Central Committee for Lao National Liberation proposed by the ICP’s Lao branch, which misunderstood the immediate task and would antagonise Lao nationalists. The second was to put Vietnamese interests above Laos (and Cambodia), a mindset prevalent among those Vietnamese who had a mistaken idea of the relations among the three nations. The third were (Cambodian and) Lao nationalists who misunderstood the three countries’ revolutionary relations and feared Vietnamese annexation and a communist takeover. The programme concluded that the only path for Indochinese liberation was to advance together on the new democratic road under the ICP’s banner.⁴³

If the preceding programme laid down key but overall principles on how to start a new sort of Indochinese revolution, Hoàng Văn Hoan went to Thailand in June 1948 as the ICP’s representative and completed a report, titled ‘Programme for Lao and Cambodian Revolution’, which analysed how the previous efforts to win the LI had failed and how to rebuild the Lao revolution. The fundamental failure in his view was the LI’s weak leadership who had no place to go but exile, so it was crucial to have a firm base and a leadership that was truly committed to anticolonialism but not necessarily to communism; the Vietnamese would assist in various aspects of material support, human resources, and revolutionary advice and persuasion. In his view, the goal of the Lao revolution could be in the form of a state in a federation with Vietnam, a separate democratic republic or a constitutional monarchy, but its leaders had to work loyally based on policy unity, and that the immediate work was to help create a revolutionary government, a force, a base and a party,⁴⁴ a clear roadmap the Vietnamese would follow for the next few years.

The first task was to find like-minded Lao allies as the basis of a future Lao party. The first group were new recruits such as Kaysone Phomvihane, a student activist in Hà Nội who had a Vietnamese father and a Lao mother.⁴⁵ In mid-1948 he was introduced to Võ Nguyên Giáp, who promised him Vietnamese support after their conversation.⁴⁶ It is important to note that Kaysone appeared on the scene at the point of building an ideologically oriented revolution. In this respect, he had a more critical role than Souphanouvong as the public face of the future Lao revolution. The second group consisted of the LI’s radical elements who had returned to Indochina from Thailand in 1948. For example, Phoumi Vongvichit went to Xayaboury (Laos) to

43 Trường Chinh, ‘Chính cương của Đảng Cách mạng dân chủ mới ở Đông Dương’ [Political Programme of the New Democratic Revolution in Indochina], 10H620, Service historique de la Défense (SHD), Paris. Original in Vietnamese without diacritics.

44 Hoàng Văn Hoan, *A drop in the ocean*, pp. 261–7; ‘Báo cáo tại Hội nghị cán bộ Lào, Miên’ [Report at the Conference of Cadres in Laos and Cambodia], 15 Feb. 1949. Đảng Nhân dân Cách mạng Lào, and Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam [Lao People’s Party and Vietnamese Communist Party], *Lịch sử Quan Hệ Đặc Biệt Việt Nam-Lào, Lào-Việt Nam, 1930–2007* [History of the Vietnamese–Lao Special Relations, hereafter *LSQHĐBV*], Văn Kiện II [Document, hereafter *VK*] (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Chính trị quốc gia-Sự thật, 2012), pp. 24–50.

45 For an official biography of Kaysone, see Đức Vương, *Cayxôn Phômvihân, tiểu sử và sự nghiệp* [Kaysone Phomvihane: Biography and career] (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Chính trị quốc gia, 2008).

46 Võ Nguyên Giáp, *Chiến đấu trong vòng vây: hồi ức* [Besieged fighting: A memoir] (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Quân đội nhân dân, 1995), pp. 234, 342–3.

work with the Vietminh and Khamtay Siphandon left for Interzone (*Liên Khu*, LK) 4.⁴⁷ Most importantly, Souphanouvong was invited to Vietnam in November 1949.

The second step was to send the Battalion for Armed Work in the Western Front (*Đoàn Võ trang công tác miền Tây*) to Laos in September 1948, which was composed of regular Vietminh forces from LK 3 and gradually replaced the Việt Kiều to dominate the Vietnamese participation in Laos. This battalion was organised as three sub-zones A, B and C in early 1950, and augmented as three *Đoàn* in April 1951: *Đoàn* 80 in Phong Saly and Sam Neua; *Đoàn* 81 in Xieng Khoang; *Đoàn* 82 in Luang Prabang and Houay Xai. Two other fronts were operated by *Đoàn* 83 (mostly from Thailand) in Vientiane and *Đoàn* 120 (*Đoàn* 280 since May 1950) in central Laos.⁴⁸ They were officially called the Volunteer Army (*Quân tình nguyện*) in October 1949. While not yet posing a serious threat to the French, it is evident that the ICP was actively integrating Laos into its revolutionary system.

As more ‘volunteers’ moved in, the third step was to create three Committees for Cadres (*Ban Cán Sự*, BCS). The upper Lao BCS directed *Đoàn* 80, 81, 82 and 83 and was directly under the ICP’s Central Committee; the other two in central and southern Laos were subordinated to LK 4 and 5, respectively.⁴⁹ Each BCS advised a regional counterpart of Laos. For example, the upper Lao BCS was formed in May 1949 as an advisory group to Kaysone, who had just created the Laxavong unit in January in Xieng Kho—a development seen as the foundation of future revolution.⁵⁰

The fourth task took place after the arrival of Souphanouvong at Vietminh headquarters. The ICP was cautious about France’s new intention to divide the Indochinese resistance by creating an associated Indochina, and repeated that Vietnam had no way to be independent if Laos and Cambodia were under imperialist domination.⁵¹ The ICP decided to build its revolutionary kind of an ‘associated’ Indochina by forming alternative regimes.⁵² The Pathet Lao (PL) resistance government and the Neo Lao Issara (NLI) front were formed in Tuyên Quang months later, relocating to Thanh Hoá in late 1950, Nghệ An in early 1952, and finally to the Lao province of Sam Neua in April 1953.⁵³

The fifth development came as the Cold War divided local politics in Indochina and accelerated the war after 1950. The Vietnamese felt it increasingly inappropriate to call the party ‘Indochinese’ since first, the three countries had developed a strong sense of national consciousness but were at ‘different levels’ of social development; second, the continuous use of Indochina in the party’s name would only legitimise

47 Viện Lịch sử Quân sự Việt Nam (Bộ Quốc Phòng), *LSQTNCP*, pp. 133–4, 169–70; Đảng Nhân dân Cách mạng Lào and Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam, *LSQHĐBV* (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Chính trị quốc gia-Sự thật, 2011), pp. 131–4.

48 Viện Lịch sử Quân sự Việt Nam (Bộ Quốc Phòng), *LSQTNCP*, pp. 177–80, 198–202, 229–30. Some scholars translate *đoàn* as group or battalion. In fact, there were numerous *đoàn* in Laos during the 30 years’ revolution and they varied radically in terms of size and level, it is hard to find a fixed English translation.

49 Đảng Nhân dân Cách mạng Lào, and Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam, *LSQHĐBV*, p. 153.

50 Viện Lịch sử Quân sự Việt Nam (Bộ Quốc Phòng), *LSQTNCP*, p. 145; Đảng Nhân dân Cách mạng Lào and Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam, *LSQHĐBV*, p. 175.

51 Võ Nguyên Giáp, ‘Nhiệm vụ quân sự trước mắt chuyển sang tổng phản công’ [Immediate military tasks in shift to a general counter-offensive], 21 Jan.–3 Feb. 1950, *ĐCSVN, VKĐ*, vol. 11, pp. 114–5.

52 Goscha, *Going Indochinese*, p. 147.

53 Đảng Nhân dân Cách mạng Lào, and Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam, *LSQHĐBV*, pp. 180, 193–5.

imperialist attacks and make ‘patriotic’ Lao and Cambodian revolutionaries fear Vietnamese chauvinism. While acknowledging the necessity of dividing the ICP, the Vietnamese wanted to keep ‘the Indochinese unity’ so that the (Cambodian and) Lao revolutions would not fall out of their sphere of influence. For this purpose, three approaches had been designed: to form a special commission under the Vietnam Workers Party (VWP); to hold regular meetings; and to create an Indochina-wide front.⁵⁴ This is what the VWP did in practice. First, Giáp had been assigned to direct activities assisting the Lao revolution since 1948. Second, the VWP had frequent exchanges with its Lao counterpart. The first such meeting was held in September 1952 when the conflict expanded to the Vietnamese-Lao border. Third, an Indochinese front was formed in March 1951.

So when the ICP declared its division in February 1951, the VWP confirmed its role as a sponsor of Lao revolution and the Indochina federation as the endpoint in its political programme.⁵⁵ A separate programme for Laos (and Cambodia) was adopted to sustain the Indochinese connection,⁵⁶ and Lao attendees like Souphanouvong expressed unreserved confidence in the Vietnamese guidance.⁵⁷ Against this context, a Lao leadership was badly needed. In early 1950, the Vietnamese communists felt it urgent to form a ‘core group’; Souphanouvong wrote to Hồ Chí Minh that he had the needed dedication and loyalty.⁵⁸ After dividing the ICP, the VWP reorganised communists in Laos: the previous BCSes were converted into VWP’s delegations in March; Lao communists formed the ‘Loyal Group’ in November as, with Vietnamese backing, the future real power holder.⁵⁹

Having found it difficult to achieve a quick win in the Red River Delta, the Vietminh expanded the fight from Tonkin to Laos.⁶⁰ Hồ Chí Minh spoke at the Fourth VWP Plenum in early 1953 that a completely liberated Vietnam required concurrent liberation of Laos (and Cambodia), or better known as ‘helping friends is helping oneself’ as he said to encourage his soldiers.⁶¹ This was the logic behind the Sam Neua battle, which led to Western anxiety that Tonkin was no longer ‘the bolt to the door to Southeast Asia’ for so-called communist aggression.⁶² The VWP

54 ‘Thông cáo của Ban Chấp hành Trung ương Đảng Cộng sản Đông Dương về việc đề nghị đổi tên Đảng’ [Announcement of the ICP Executive Committee regarding proposed name change of the Party], July 1950, ĐCSVN, VKĐ, vol. 11, pp. 362–74.

55 Allan W. Cameron, ed., *Vietnam crisis: A documentary history, vol. I: 1940–1956* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1971), p. 174. Note that the officially-published text does not mention this ‘federation’, see ĐCSVN, VKĐ, vol. 12, pp. 441–2.

56 ‘Báo cáo tình hình Miền, Lào tại Đại hội lần thứ II Đảng cộng sản Đông Dương’ [Report about situation in Cambodia and Laos at the ICP’s 2nd National Party Congress], Feb. 1951, Đảng Nhân dân Cách mạng Lào, and Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam, *LSQHĐBV, VK II*, pp. 223–43.

57 Đảng Nhân dân Cách mạng Lào, and Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam, *LSQHĐBV, VK II*, pp. 210–1.

58 ‘Thư của Hoàng thân Xuphanuvông gửi ngài chủ tịch Hồ Chí Minh, chủ tịch Nước Việt Nam Dân chủ Cộng hòa’ [Letter from Prince Souphanouvong to the DRV’s chairman Hồ Chí Minh], 6 Feb. 1950. Đảng Nhân dân Cách mạng Lào, and Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam, *LSQHĐBV, VK II*, p. 125.

59 Đảng Nhân dân Cách mạng Lào, and Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam, *LSQHĐBV, VK II*, pp. 215–7.

60 See Shu Quanzhi, ‘From armed revolution to neutralism: China and the Indochinese Revolution in Laos, 1950–54’, pp. 136–41.

61 Đảng Nhân dân Cách mạng Lào, and Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam, *LSQHĐBV, VK II*, pp. 247, 253.

62 Philippe Devillers and Jean Lacouture, *End of a war: Indochina 1954*, trans. Alexander Lieven and Adam Roberts (London: Pall Mall, 1969), p. 33. Fredrik Logevall, *Embers of war: The fall of an empire and the making of America’s Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 2012), p. 345.

had anticipated Western reactions and told its propagandists to highlight the PL Resistance Government only, believing that it was better ‘to do more and speak less or none’.⁶³ Out of the same logic, the DRV has never admitted its intervention in Laos. After this battle, Nguyễn Khang, who had introduced Kaysone to Giáp in 1948, was appointed as the head of the BCS. He, along with Lao revolutionaries, selected a number of qualified Lao communists to organise a mobilisation commission as a preparatory step towards a proper party. Official sources indicate that this commission was made up of 20 members with Kaysone as its head.⁶⁴ By now, the Vietnamese had created a small force, a resistance government, an embryonic party and a base for Lao revolution, a basis for communist demands in Geneva.

Waging Indochinese peace through neutralism, 1954–62

In order to understand the DRV’s strategy after 1954, it is crucial to recount what was agreed at the 1954 Geneva Conference. Originally, the DRV negotiator tried to introduce an Indochinese proposal, with Chinese and Soviet backing, demanding French recognition of the sovereignty and independence of each Indochinese country. But the non-socialist countries did not accept this demand on the same terms. In order to prevent the United States’ attempt to prolong the war, the DRV accepted a neutrality guaranteed by the nine participant powers to solve the Lao (and Cambodian) issue, according to which the PL forces would regroup in Sam Neua and Phong Saly to wait for negotiations with the RLG to form a coalition.⁶⁵

Acceptance of neutrality for Laos and Cambodia did not mean their complete separation from Vietnam. The DRV leaders saw neutrality for the other two Indochinese countries and the temporary partition of Vietnam as a necessary compromise to restore what they called ‘the Indochinese peace’. They reasoned that there would be no long-term peace if it was only restored in one country but not secured in the other two. At the party meeting in mid-July 1954, Trường Chinh clarified that the DRV would maintain solidarity with Laos and Cambodia to restore peace. This was not an easy task since the revolutionaries’ strength in Laos was far weaker than that of their enemies, whose forces would overwhelm the PL if the Vietnamese ‘volunteers’ withdrew quickly.⁶⁶ The subsequent struggle was a revolution of waging an Indochinese peace. The VWP made it clear again in early 1955 that it intended to help the PL preserve the regroupment provinces, as leverage to negotiate a neutral Laos.⁶⁷

63 ‘Chỉ thị của Ban Bí Thư Trung ương Đảng Lao Động Việt Nam về việc tuyên truyền Chiến dịch Thương Lào’ [Decree of the VWP Secretariat on propaganda of the Upper Laos Battle], 4 May 1953. Đảng Nhân dân Cách mạng Lào, and Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam, *LSQHĐBVL, VK II*, pp. 339–400.

64 Đảng Nhân dân Cách mạng Lào, and Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam, *LSQHĐBVL*, pp. 268–70.

65 On how the communists negotiated along Indochinese line at the 1954 Geneva Conference, see Shu Quanzhi, ‘From armed revolution to neutralism’, pp. 141–9; Goscha, ‘Geneva 1954 and the “de-internationalization” of the Vietnamese idea of Indochina’, pp. 1–47.

66 Trường Chinh, ‘Để hoàn thành nhiệm vụ và đẩy mạnh công tác trước mắt’ [To complete tasks and push immediate work], speech at the VWP’s 6th Plenum, 15–18 July 1954, *ĐCSVN, VKĐ*, vol. 15, pp. 210–3.

67 Đảng Nhân Dân Cách Mạng Lào, Đảng Cộng Sản Việt Nam, *LSQHĐBVL, Biên niên sự kiện* [chronological events, hereafter *BNSK*] (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Chính trị Quốc gia-Sự thật, 2012), pp. 354–6.

The VWP adopted a dual approach to turn the 1954 Geneva agreement into a reality in Laos. On the one hand, before withdrawing its ‘volunteers’ in November 1954, the VWP sent in advisory Đoàn 100, a small but strategic unit led by the senior commander Chu Huy Mân. This group not only revamped the PL defence system but helped form the Lao People’s Party (LPP) in March 1955 and the Neo Lao Hak Xat (NLHX, Lao Patriotic Front) to replace the defunct NLI in January 1956.⁶⁸ In the next decades, the latter was the public face of the former under Souphanouvong’s leadership. At the same time, the DRV supported international diplomatic efforts to neutralise Laos. At the Bandung Conference in April 1955 and during the visit of the RLG’s prime minister Souvanna Phouma in August 1956, North Vietnam promised twice not to export its revolution. The first Coalition Government of Laos was eventually formed in November 1957, with the PL handing over its bases and forces, and Đoàn 100 soon left the country.⁶⁹ Following this, legal struggle became the primary means to advance revolution, which reflected the emphasis in the Socialist bloc at the time that violence was not the only path to socialism; peaceful means could be an alternative option, which was accepted by both the CCP and VWP.⁷⁰

This experiment was a failure, however. First, Souvanna, whom the communists respected as a neutralist prime minister, stepped down in May 1958 under pressure from the conservatives. Then, the International Control Commission (ICC), a supervising mechanism of the 1954 Geneva accords, ceased its work in July, which freed the Lao conservatives’ hands to repudiate neutral policies in the coming months. Third, the NLHX largely lost its voice in the administration and the Assembly. Consequently, as Hugh Toye has argued, it was not difficult to imagine why the communists turned to violence.⁷¹ Nicholas Zeller has further argued that the return to armed revolution exemplified the trend of the broader radicalisation of Asian communist politics.⁷²

Resuming the armed line was a slow process, however. In August 1958, the LPP held a meeting in Vientiane to review the situation, at which some leaders proposed a partial or complete revival of covert activities. It concluded that those leaders with legal positions in the RLG should stay but all the remaining leaders were to go back to the previous bases.⁷³ Two months later, the LPP proposed to restart violence but Hà Nội rejected it as all legal means for restoring neutrality had not been

68 See further Christopher Goscha, ‘The Revolutionary Laos of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam: The making of a transnational “Pathet Lao Solution” (1954–1956)’, in *The failure of peace in Indochina (1954–1962)*, ed. Christopher Goscha and Karine Laplante (Paris: Les Indes savantes, 2010), pp. 61–84.

69 *Viện Lịch sử Quân sự Việt Nam (Bộ Quốc Phòng), Lịch sử quân tình nguyện và chuyên gia quân sự Việt Nam tại Lào trong cuộc kháng chiến chống Mỹ, 1954–1975* [History of Vietnamese volunteers and military experts in Laos in the resistance against the United States, hereafter *LSQTNCGCM*] (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất bản quân đội nhân dân, 2005), pp. 78–81.

70 I am referring to the Moscow conference attended by 12 communist parties in November 1957, which published a joint declaration. See *Mosike xuanyan, Mosike shengming* [The Declaration and Statement of Moscow] (Beijing: Renmin Ribao chubanshe, 1963).

71 Hugh Toye, *Laos: Buffer state or battleground* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 124–5.

72 Nicholas R. Zeller, ‘Return to armed revolution: The Pathet Lao and the Chinese Communist Party on paths to national liberation’, in *Experiments with Marxism-Leninism in Cold War Southeast Asia*, ed. Matthew Galway and Marc H. Opper (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2022), pp. 239–69.

73 Đức Vương, *Cayxôn Phômvihản, tiểu sử và sự nghiệp*, pp. 154–5.

exhausted.⁷⁴ Only after a border clash in Huong Lap in December, when the RLG toughened its anticommunist stance and intended to forcibly integrate the PL forces into the government's army in May 1959, did Hà Nội finally resolve to intervene militarily.⁷⁵ The DRV viewed its support for the Lao revolution as not just a vital international task but also crucial for Vietnam's struggle for national consolidation and unification.⁷⁶ One can see that the Indochinese idea echoes here. Ang Cheng Guan has also noted that the DRV's shift to armed struggle took place concurrently in Laos and South Vietnam, and hence should be called 'the Indochinese conflict'.⁷⁷

North Vietnam took swift measures to protect the Lao revolution by establishing two institutions on 6 July 1959. The first was the Lao Working Team (*Ban công tác Lào*), or CP31 in Hà Nội, responsible for monitoring Lao developments and reporting back to the VWP. The second was the Western Working Group (*Đoàn công tác miền Tây*), or *Đoàn 959* led by Major General Lê Chuông as the LPP's adviser.⁷⁸ Chuông prepared a policy document adopted as the LPP's Resolution 1, which formally marked the shift from legal to armed struggle.⁷⁹ It is important to note that while the communists intended to restore the Geneva Accords by recapturing Phong Saly and Sam Neua to balance the rightward politics, they were anxious to avoid US or SEATO intervention, and hence the resolution sanctioned a limited use of violence. North Vietnam began military operations in July 1959 and used its forces under the cover of PL's Battalion 2, which had escaped from the RLG's encirclement and arrived at the DRV border.⁸⁰ This triggered strong international reactions. The RLG accused the DRV of invasion and asked the United Nations to investigate; no evidence for an invasion was found,⁸¹ but neither did the DRV achieve its goal of retaking the two provinces until sometime later.

The coup by neutralist Colonel Kong Le in August 1960 provided the communists with an opportunity to not only restore their previous bases but gain an ally, even if temporarily. On 30 September, a DRV battalion and the PL recaptured Sam Neua, marking a strong recovery for the communists. Due to the inflexible anti-communist stance of the rightist faction (headed by Phoumi Nosavan) and its external sponsors, the neutralists were gradually pushed to the left, especially after Phoumi's capture of Vientiane in early December, ending the neutralist cabinet and forcing its prime minister Souvanna to flee to Cambodia. His aide Quinim Pholsena promised cooperation with the NLHX and communist nations to re-establish the Souvanna government. Souvanna's supporter Kong Le worked with the NLHX on the Plain of Jars (PDJ) and began to receive aid from communist countries.

74 Ilya V. Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam Soviet policy towards the Indochina conflict, 1954–1963* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center; Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 131.

75 Đảng Nhân Dân Cách Mạng Lào, Đảng Cộng Sản Việt Nam, *LSQHĐBVL, BNSK I*, pp. 440–1.

76 Tổng cục chính trị, *ĐLQTN*, pp. 256–7.

77 Ang Cheng Guan, 'The Huong Lap and Phu Loi incidents, and the decision to resume armed struggle in South Vietnam (January–April 1959)', *South East Asia Research* 4, 1 (1996): 3–22.

78 Đảng Nhân dân Cách mạng Lào, and Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam, *LSQHĐBVL, VK III*, pp. 33–6.

79 Viện Lịch sử Quân sự Việt Nam (Bộ Quốc Phòng), *LSQTNCGCM*, pp. 86–7.

80 *Ibid.*, pp. 88–93. SEATO, short for Southeast Asian Treaty Organisation, was established in Manila in September 1954 to prevent the so-called communist expansion in the region.

81 Bernard B. Fall, *Anatomy of a crisis: The Laotian crisis of 1960–1961* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969), pp. 123, 141–2.

North Vietnam continued to take a dual approach to grapple with the Lao crisis in 1961–62. On the one hand, its leaders vocalised continuing support for Lao neutrality. An example was during Souvanna's trip to communist countries in April 1961, during which the DRV spoke of its support for Souvanna and was willing to provide material support.⁸² Its negotiators worked with allies (China and Soviet Union) to negotiate a neutral Laos at the second Geneva conference. On the other hand, the DRV had to balance its support between its long-time ally the NLHX and its new neutralist allies. First, Hà Nội distrusted the latter and saw them as temporary allies. Before Chu Huy Mân left for Vientiane to help in early December 1960, he was instructed to control Kong Le and take precautions against his possible betrayal.⁸³ Second, the DRV wanted the NLHX to grow strong enough to control the neutralists, for which the VWP drew up a five-year aid plan to assist the NLHX.⁸⁴ Evidence indicating North Vietnam's priorities was the distribution of communist countries' aid through its hands. Kong Le received less and poorer-quality aid, weakening the PL's alliance with Souvanna, for which Chu Huy Mân was severely criticised by Phạm Văn Đồng, although Mân's priorities were supported by VWP General Secretary Lê Duẩn.⁸⁵ At a meeting of the communist parties of China, Soviet Union, North Vietnam and Laos in September, the VWP attributed such aid imbalances to the long distances, poor road conditions and limited transportation, but not its policy,⁸⁶ and more aid continued going to the NLHX.⁸⁷

The dual approach revealed the kind of neutrality North Vietnam really desired. Publicly, the DRV (and China) proposed that Lao neutrality should be decided by the Lao themselves, not direct foreign intervention. At the exchange with Chinese foreign minister Chen Yi on 11 June 1961, Souvanna spoke of his acceptance of a neutrality not in the Austrian style, meaning neither imposed by foreign powers nor supervised by international bodies. He asserted that the NLHX and neutralists accepted a 'recognised' neutrality, not a 'guaranteed' one as before.⁸⁸ Privately, the LPP contended in October 1960 that it must not cooperate again with the RLG to the degree that it had the first time around, and that it had to retain the PL bases and forces whatever happened, a lesson from the 1957–59 experience.⁸⁹ The DRV leaders held a similar view. Lê Duẩn told Kaysone in July 1961 that in order to foil US intervention, the Geneva

82 Hồ sơ 352, phòng Bộ Giáo dục, Trung tâm Lưu trữ quốc gia III, Cục Văn thư và Lưu trữ nhà nước [Document 352, dossier Ministry of Education, National Archives Center 3], repr. in Đảng Nhân Dân Cách Mạng Lào, Đảng Cộng Sản Việt Nam, *LSQHĐBVLT, BNSK I*, pp. 512–13.

83 Viện Lịch sử Quân sự Việt Nam (Bộ Quốc Phòng), *LSQTNCGCM*, p. 115.

84 Đảng Nhân dân Cách mạng Lào, and Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam, *LSQHĐBVLT*, p. 376.

85 Chu Huy Mân, *Thời sôi động* [Turbulent years] (Nhà xuất bản Quân đội nhân dân, 2004), pp. 361–4, 368–73.

86 Ung Văn Khiêm's speech at the quadripartite conference on aid to Laos, 23 Sept. 1961, see Đảng Nhân dân Cách mạng Lào, and Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam, *LSQHĐBVLT, VK III*, pp. 53–62.

87 Marek Thee, *Notes of a witness: Laos and the Second Indochinese War* (New York: Random House, 1973), pp. 193–4.

88 'Chen Yi waizhang zai zhaodai fuma he sufanufeng liang qinwang qiangdiao laowo de Zhongli ying-gaishi laowo renmin ziji chuangzao de' [Foreign Minister Chen Yi stresses to the two Princes Phouma and Souphanouvong at the banquet that Lao neutrality should be created by the Lao people themselves', *Renmin ribao* (People's Daily, hereafter *RMRB*), 13 June 1961.

89 Viện Lịch sử Quân sự Việt Nam (Bộ Quốc Phòng), *LSQTNCGCM*, p. 105; Đảng Nhân Dân Cách Mạng Lào, Đảng Cộng Sản Việt Nam, *LSQHĐBVLT, BNSK I*, p. 467.

negotiations had to strive for a unified Laos, but without clearly demarcated zones of control among the three factions. The establishment of a union government, he added, was a tool to consolidate victories and create favourable conditions for communist growth.⁹⁰

The North Vietnamese played a key role in re-establishing the second neutrality as before. When the Geneva negotiations and the three-prince meetings (Souphanouvong, Souvanna, and the rightist Boun Oum) met an impasse in late 1960, Hà Nội prepared a plan to capture Nam Tha with its forces (assisted by Chinese supplies). Due to this victory, Phoumi conceded to terms with the patriotic forces (NLHX and the neutralists) to organise the second Coalition Government, recognised by the Geneva participants. The DRV withdrew its armed forces, but continued to monitor events in Laos by creating Office 962.⁹¹

Another increasingly important front was in southern Laos as the supply corridor between the two Vietnams. Võ Bẩm, a senior communist cadre evacuated from the South in 1954, was appointed to supervise Đoàn 559 to open a corridor. As this Đoàn was created on Hồ Chí Minh's birthday in 1959, this corridor was known as the Hồ Chí Minh (HCM) Trail. The trail initially stretched across the DMZ between the two Vietnams but moved into Laos in early 1961 after the impediment by the Republic of Vietnam, South Vietnam. So when Đoàn 959 worked in the north, Đoàn 559 was in the south to first seize three strategic roads—Routes 8, 9 and 12, and second, to link them by Route 129 in November.⁹² As tensions continued to escalate in South Vietnam, this network of trails would become increasingly strategic.

A special war as an extension of the Vietnam War, 1963–68

North Vietnam believed that the key to sustaining the second coalition was a stronger NLHX and making Souvanna more like Cambodia's Sihanouk.⁹³ But the assassination of the prominent neutralist Quinim Pholsena in April 1963 made the political mood tense. Souphanouvong immediately left Vientiane (he did not return until years later), marking the effective end of the coalition. Even worse, hostility on the PDJ between the neutralist Kong Le and the pro-NLHX Deuan Sunnalath seemed out of control.⁹⁴ There was a widespread anger in the NLHX about Kong Le's betrayal, internal discussions intended to push him out of the PDJ, and the LPP leader Nouhak Phoumsavan even spoke to Vietnamese advisers that the LPP 'had reached its limits' of tolerance with Kong Le.⁹⁵ Hà Nội restored its 'volunteer'

90 Tổng cục chính trị, *DLĐQTN*, pp. 315–23.

91 Viện Lịch sử Quân sự Việt Nam (Bộ Quốc Phòng), *LSQTNCGCM*, pp. 148–51, 161–2.

92 Bộ tư lệnh công binh [Command of Engineering Corps], *Lịch sử Công binh 559: đường trường sơn* [History of Engineering Corps 559, Truong Son Road] (Hà Nội: Quân đội nhân dân, 1999), pp. 34–42. See also Võ Bẩm, *Những nẻo đường kháng chiến: hồi ức* [Road to resistance: A memoir] (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Quân đội nhân dân, 2006).

93 Lê Duẩn's speech at the welcome banquet for LPP leaders, 2 Sept. 1962; see Tổng cục chính trị, *DLĐQTN*, pp. 349–51.

94 Charles A. Stevenson, *The end of nowhere: American policy towards Laos since 1954* (Boston: Beacon, 1973), pp. 189–90; Arthur J. Dommen, *Conflict in Laos: The politics of neutralisation* (New York: Praeger, 1971), pp. 245–50.

95 Nguyễn Bình Sơn, *Những ngày ở Cảnh Đòng Chum: hồi ức* [Days on the PDJ: A memoir] (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Quân đội nhân dân, 1997), pp. 31–3.

units. Two advisory units Đoàn 463 and Đoàn 5 were formed to defend the PDJ; MR Northwest and MR4 were called in to command forces in northern and central Laos.⁹⁶ But the NLHX still lost PDJ in the summer.

Concurrently, the NLHX was encouraged to talk with Souvanna. Kaysone told his counterpart during a visit to Hà Nội in April 1963 that the communist goal was to preserve neutrality, primarily through political struggle.⁹⁷ Souphanouvong met Souvanna four times in one month but failed to put out the fire. During another visit to Hà Nội on 20–24 July, Kaysone contended that the tripartite coalition had become bipartisan as the neutralists had split into the pro-NLHX and ‘pro-Phoumi’ (that is, Kong Le) groups, but Lê Duẩn rejected the idea of any change in the current policy. At the tripartite conference among the CCP, VWP and LPP in September, he repeated that the Lao revolutionary path was through peace and neutrality, but would be based on strength; efforts should be made to win Souvanna but not trust him.⁹⁸ It is useful to note that the situation in South Vietnam was worsening simultaneously with the climax of the Buddhist crisis in the summer and the assassination of Ngô Đình Diệm in November. North Vietnam clearly paid more attention to events there, and an escalation of the Lao conflict would have undermined its efforts in South Vietnam.⁹⁹

Neutrality appeared almost restored after Souvanna recruited support from the United States and Soviet Union during his visits there in the fall of 1963. The prince was even promised by the NLHX during his visit to Sam Neua in December, and by China and the DRV during his visit there in April 1964, that the communists were willing to see a neutral Laos. But the rightist generals Kouprasith and Siho Lanphouthakoul reversed that course by staging a coup on 19 April, a warning to Souvanna that he must consult with the right wing more frequently on how to deal with the PL,¹⁰⁰ and a strong signal compelling the communists to believe that the rightists and their outside supporters desired an anticommunist Laos.¹⁰¹

Given the precarious political balance, Hà Nội increased its military efforts to create a ‘talking and fighting’ situation. On the one hand, after months’ of preparations, the DRV used its and PL forces to launch Campaign 74A (named after Roads 7 and 4) and succeeded in driving Kong Le’s forces out of the PDJ by mid-May, a radical shift of military balance. An immediate consequence was the merging of the rightist and Kong Le’s neutralist faction under the nominal leadership of Souvanna. Two months later, Đoàn 664 was created to replace Đoàn 959 to command all DRV forces in northern Laos. Its head Nguyễn Trọng Vĩnh worked as the LPP’s adviser and answered to the VWP.¹⁰² On the other hand, the DRV tried to materialise two-way negotiations by

96 Viện Lịch sử Quân sự Việt Nam (Bộ Quốc Phòng), *LSQTNCGCM*, pp. 166–72, 177.

97 Đảng Nhân Dân Cách Mạng Lào, Đảng Cộng Sản Việt Nam, *LSQHĐBVL*, *BNSK I*, pp. 580–1.

98 Tổng cục chính trị, *ĐLĐQTN*, pp. 371–4, 382–5.

99 There was a policy debate in Hà Nội, see Pierre Asselin, *Hanoi’s road to the Vietnam War, 1954–1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), chap. 6.

100 Oudone Sananikone, *The Royal Lao Army and U.S. army advice and support* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1981), p. 118.

101 Reply of Xuân Thuỷ and Chen Yi to Souphanouvong on 2 and 13 May; see *RMRB*, 7 and 14 May 1964.

102 Viện Lịch sử Quân sự Việt Nam (Bộ Quốc Phòng), *LSQTNCGCM*, pp. 185–200, 202–9. In Nov. 1964, Đoàn 664 was renamed again as Đoàn 959.

supporting internal talks among the Lao factions and welcomed the French proposal of holding a third 14-nation Geneva conference. Amid the rising confrontation after the Tonkin Gulf Incident, the tripartite meeting (held in Paris in August 1964) failed to narrow the differences among the Lao factions, and the chance for peace was dashed. The superficial reason was US obstruction,¹⁰³ but the real factor was that the turmoil in Laos had taken a back seat to the developments in Vietnam. As Charles Stevenson argued, US decisions related to Laos had become part and parcel of its strategy for preventing the collapse of the Republic of Vietnam.¹⁰⁴ The same can be argued for Hà Nội, which wanted to use southern Laos as part of its efforts in the South. Đoàn 763 was created in July 1963 to defend the HCM trail.¹⁰⁵ Around the time of the previous Campaign 74A, the Campaign 128 (Routes 8 and 12) was launched to strengthen this corridor; as Route 129 was also extended, tons of weapons and thousands of soldiers had arrived in MR5 by late 1964.¹⁰⁶

If in 1964, the NLHX still explored peace based on strengthening its military position, the years after 1965 turned to an all-out war. In an article published in the VWP's theoretical journal *Học Tập*, a senior cadre justified why revolution in Laos and Vietnam were 'the special relations'. He argued that the independence and sovereignty of Vietnam was not guaranteed as long as Laos was under the US imperialist threat; and that the Lao revolution would encounter difficulties if the Vietnamese revolution did not succeed completely. So North Vietnam had to treat the Lao revolution as its own with unconditional and all-out support.¹⁰⁷ In other words, Hà Nội reaffirmed its commitment to an Indochina-wide conflict. Politically, it wanted a neutral Indochina free from US intervention through cooperation with the NLHX and Sihanouk. Highlights of this effort included the meeting of three communist delegations (NLHX, DRV and the National Liberation Front, NLF) and Sihanouk in Beijing in October 1964 and the holding of the Indochinese People's Congress in Phnom Penh in March 1965. Militarily, the VWP stated in December 1963 and 1965 that it was fighting two types of wars in Indochina: limited war (*chiến tranh hạn chế*) and local war (*chiến tranh cục bộ*). A key differentiation between them was who played a main role in the battlefield. If the US dominated the battles as in South Vietnam, it was a limited war; if local forces such as the RLG and Hmong forces in Laos were the main enemies, it was a local or special war.¹⁰⁸

Within the North Vietnamese strategy, there were two separate theatres in Laos. The first was in the north, in the PDJ especially, where the 'special war', according to

103 Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing war: The lost chance for peace and the escalation of war in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p. 225.

104 Stevenson, *The end of nowhere*, p. 199.

105 Viện Lịch sử Quân sự Việt Nam (Bộ Quốc Phòng), *LSQTNCGCM*, pp. 179–80;

106 Đức Nhuận Hoàng et al., *Hỏi đáp về đường Trường Sơn đường Hồ Chí Minh* [Q&A about the Truong Son–HCM Road](Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Quân đội nhân dân, 2009), p. 21; Viện Lịch sử Quân sự Việt Nam (Bộ Quốc Phòng), *LSQTNCGCM*, pp. 179–83.

107 Jun Yue (Tuấn Việt), trans. Xu Shanfu, 'ershi nian lai laowo geming de juda shengli' [Great victories of Lao Revolution in the past two decades], *Dongnanya yanjiu ziliao* 2 (1966), pp. 27–36.

108 'Nghị quyết của Hội nghị lần thứ chín Ban chấp hành trung ương Đảng' [Resolution of the VWP Central Committee's 9th Plenum]. Dec. 1963, ĐCSVN, *VKD*, vol. 24, pp. 820–21; Lê Duẩn, 'Phân khởi tiến lên, đem toàn lực của nhân dân hai miền đánh thắng đế quốc Mỹ và bè lũ tay sai' [Strive and resist with full efforts of the people in two parts of Vietnam against the US imperialists and their puppets], speech at the VWP 12th Plenum, ĐCSVN, *VKD*, vol. 26, p. 581.

communist propaganda, started roughly in the spring of 1965. In the first years, Hà Nội did not want to escalate beyond this level by taking measures to ‘clear out bandits, resist land-grabbing activities and safeguard liberated zones’.¹⁰⁹ The American embassy in Vientiane also agreed that the DRV did not intend to threaten Laos so severely as to draw in US ground forces.¹¹⁰ As scholars have argued, in Laos, the Vietnamese communists not only formulated military strategy at the top but dominated the battles at ground level.¹¹¹ The previous CP31 (in Hà Nội) and Đoàn 959 (in Sam Neua) were merged as the Lao Working Group in April 1966.¹¹² Two new units Đoàn 766 (Sam Neua) and Đoàn 866 (PDJ) (after the founding month and year) were formed.¹¹³ That said, some Chinese sources indicate that there was a small group in the LPP who disliked the Vietnamese dominance, though a lack of sources prevent us from digging deeper into this issue.¹¹⁴ The second theatre was the HCM Trail, which became more important as the war in South Vietnam intensified. In May 1965, Đoàn 565 was formed to protect the trail;¹¹⁵ and Đoàn 559 was upgraded to the level of a Military Region, which extended and divided the trail into three segments; and redivided it into six fortified posts in February 1966 and nine in July 1967.¹¹⁶

After three monsoons, North Vietnam moved from defensive to offensive posture and again designed this as an Indochina-wide shift. At his meeting with Kaysone in May 1967, Lê Duẩn used the old slogans ‘helping Laos was helping oneself’ and ‘the special relations’ to encourage the LPP to draw up a two- or three-year plan.¹¹⁷ Amid the Tết Offensive of early 1968, communist assaults also started in Laos, notably the Nam Bac battle in January and the attack on Phou Pha Thi in March.¹¹⁸ Additionally, Đoàn 565 split one part to form Đoàn 968 in June to reinforce protection over the HCM Trail. By late 1968, the DRV had formed a strong defence system in Laos. At the top were advisory groups: Đoàn 959 (Sam Neua), Đoàn 463 (PDJ) and Đoàn

109 Hồ sơ Cục Cơ yếu, phòng Bộ Tổng Tham mưu, Trung tâm Lưu trữ Bộ Quốc phòng Việt Nam [Document from Department of Cryptography, dossier General Staff, Archives of National Defence Ministry of Vietnam], repr. in Đảng Nhân Dân Cách Mạng Lào, Đảng Cộng Sản Việt Nam, *LSQHĐBV, BNSK I*, pp. 691–2.

110 Telegram From the Embassy in Laos to the Department of State, 23 Mar. 1966, in *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1964–1968, vol. XXVIII (Laos)* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1998), p. 449.

111 Langer and Zasloff, *North Vietnam and the Pathet Lao*, pp. 127–8.

112 Hồ sơ 487, Trung tâm Lưu trữ Bộ Quốc phòng Việt Nam [Document 487, Archives of National Defence Ministry of Vietnam], repr. in Đảng Nhân Dân Cách Mạng Lào, Đảng Cộng Sản Việt Nam, *LSQHĐBV, BNSK I*, pp. 676–7.

113 Viện Lịch sử Quân sự Việt Nam (Bộ Quốc Phòng), *LSQTNCGCM*, p. 247.

114 See Shu Quanzhi, ‘Vietnam–Laos communist relations and China, 1949–1975’ (PhD diss., National University of Singapore, 2021), pp. 242–50.

115 Viện Lịch sử Quân sự Việt Nam (Bộ Quốc Phòng), *LSQTNCGCM*, pp. 220–1.

116 Bộ tư lệnh công binh, *Lịch sử Công binh 559*, pp. 93–101, 125–6, 170–2; Võ Bẩm, *Những nẻo đường kháng chiến*, pp. 200–2.

117 Hồ sơ 537, phòng Quân uỷ Trung ương, Trung tâm Lưu trữ Bộ Quốc phòng Việt Nam [Document 537, dossier Central Military Commission, Archives of National Defence Ministry of Vietnam], repr. in Đảng Nhân Dân Cách Mạng Lào, Đảng Cộng Sản Việt Nam, *LSQHĐBV, BNSK I*, pp. 706–7; Tổng cục chính trị, *ĐLĐQTN*, pp. 470–7, 479–82.

118 Viện Lịch sử Quân sự Việt Nam (Bộ Quốc Phòng), *LSQTNCGCM*, pp. 268–80; Timothy Neil Castle, *At war: In the shadow of Vietnam: U.S. military aid to the Royal Lao Government, 1955–1975* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. 94–5.

565 (HCM Trail). Đoàn 559 fought along the HCM Trail but fell outside of this advisory system; below them were volunteer units: Đoàn 335 (northern Laos), Đoàn 766 (Sam Neua), Đoàn 866 (PDJ) and Đoàn 968 (HCM Trail).¹¹⁹ This system was a good example of Hà Nội's Indochinese mindset, but its efforts there were appended to the more important struggle in South Vietnam.

Re-establishing neutrality as part of an Indochinese Settlement, 1969–73

The beginning of the Paris Peace Talks between the DRV and the United States in 1968 ushered in the 'fighting while negotiating' stage. In this context, Hà Nội encouraged its Lao ally to search for a solution, which aimed at—by agreement between the VWP and the LPP in December 1968—restoring neutrality based on a position of strength through military and political offensives.¹²⁰ In the next few years, the communists were oriented toward gaining an advantageous military position for negotiations.

Militarily, the focal point still remained the PDJ, whose control witnessed a seesaw transfer. In August 1969, Vang Pao, the commander of the CIA-supported Hmong irregular army, seized the PDJ through Operation About Face, or Ku Kiat campaign as the communists called it, a rare victory.¹²¹ Though Thai battalions were introduced to fight on the RLG side, the communists still recaptured the PDJ in February 1970 with Battle 139.¹²² In the next dry seasons, they did not repeat a second loss by exerting immense pressure on the RLG and Vang Pao. Southern Laos became more important as Cambodia was no longer a secure sanctuary for North Vietnam especially after the Lon Nol coup on 18 March 1970. The DRV used Đoàn 559 to open a shorter 'contiguous strategic corridor' to Cambodia and South Vietnam by taking Attapeu and Saravane in the spring of 1970.¹²³ South Vietnam's unsuccessful military incursion into southern Laos in February 1971 marked the climax of the tussle for control over this supply corridor, but North Vietnam prevailed.¹²⁴ By late 1971, Hà Nội had upgraded its efforts in Laos, the PDJ (Front 31) and southern Laos under Đoàn 559, both of which answered to the VWP.¹²⁵

The above campaigns in Laos were synchronised with the communist offensives in South Vietnam, an indication that Laos was further dragged into the conflict in

119 Viện Lịch sử Quân sự Việt Nam (Bộ Quốc Phòng), *LSQTNCGCM*, pp. 282–3, 291.

120 Tổng cục chính trị, *ĐLĐQTN*, pp. 502–6; Đảng Nhân Dân Cách Mạng Lào, Đảng Cộng Sản Việt Nam, *LSQHĐBVL*, *BNSK I*, pp. 739–41.

121 Roger Warner, *Back fire: The CIA's secret war in Laos and its link to the war in Vietnam* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), pp. 266, 268–9; Jane Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic mountains: The Hmong, the Americans, and the secret wars for Laos, 1942–1992* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 217.

122 Viện Lịch sử Quân sự Việt Nam (Bộ Quốc Phòng), *LSQTNCGCM*, pp. 307–12.

123 *Ibid.*, pp. 314–8; Memorandum for the President's file by the President's Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Haig), 21 Oct. 1970, in *FRUS, 1969–1976, vol. VII (Vietnam, July 1970–January 1972)* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 2010), p. 140.

124 Viện Lịch sử Quân sự Việt Nam (Bộ Quốc Phòng), *LSQTNCGCM*, pp. 330–2; Military History Institute of Vietnam, trans. Merle L. Pribbenow, *Victory in Vietnam: The official history of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954–1975* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), pp. 271–8.

125 Hồ sơ 763, phòng Quân uỷ Trung ương, Trung tâm Lưu trữ Bộ Quốc phòng Việt Nam [Document 763, dossier Central military commission, Archives of National Defence Ministry of Vietnam], repr. in Đảng Nhân Dân Cách Mạng Lào, Đảng Cộng Sản Việt Nam, *LSQHĐBVL*, *BNSK I*, pp. 830–32.

Vietnam, as some US officials recognised that Laos and Cambodia had been increasingly attached to the success of Vietnamisation.¹²⁶ The VWP similarly observed that the United States intended to erect a strategic line from Saigon, Phnom Penh, Vientiane to Bangkok, and hence adopted a counter-strategy to assist revolution throughout Indochina, which had four parts: South Vietnam was 'strategically the most important', Cambodia 'the weakest point', Laos 'an important theatre' and the DRV the major bulwark for the others. Its key objective was to create a liberated zone in the Indochinese heartland covering the Central Highlands, southern Laos and eastern Cambodia. An official document consciously stresses that this Indochinese strategy began in the anticolonial period.¹²⁷

The Indochinese idea was demonstrated in the manner in which the Vietnamese and Lao Communists pursued peace in Laos, in tandem with the 'fighting and negotiating' phase in Vietnam. In May 1969, the NLHX tried to contact Souvanna unsuccessfully.¹²⁸ On 6 March 1970, shortly after retaking the PDJ, the NLHX released its first peace proposal through its office in Hà Nội.¹²⁹ There was no positive response from Vientiane, nor did the formal negotiations start until October 1972. Instead, Laos was first introduced into the Paris negotiations by the North Vietnamese in early 1970. At the 21 February session, Special Adviser of North Vietnamese delegation Lê Đức Thọ accused the United States of trying to crush the PL units and coordinate military pressure in Laos and Vietnam.¹³⁰ This turned into a debate at the next sessions over who was responsible for the escalation of war in (Cambodia and) Laos.¹³¹ By early April, Special Adviser of US delegation Henry Kissinger stated explicitly that the DRV was trying to 'establish a clear link between the conflicts in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, though they did not indicate any readiness to negotiate with us on Laos or Cambodia at this time'.¹³²

Subsequently, US president Richard Nixon proposed an Indochina initiative at a national address on 7 October including an in-place, a supervised ceasefire throughout the three nations, an Indochina peace conference based upon the essential elements of the previous two Geneva Accords and the other points pertaining to South Vietnam.¹³³ The NLHX rejected it since an in-place ceasefire would legitimise

126 Henry Kissinger, *Ending the Vietnam War: A history of America's involvement in and extrication from the Vietnam War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), pp. 188–98.

127 'Nghị quyết của Bộ Chính trị số 107/QU về tình hình mới ở bán đảo Đông Dương và nhiệm vụ mới của chúng ta' [Resolution of the VWP Politburo, 107/QU concerning new situation in the Indochinese Peninsula and our new tasks], 19 June 1970, ĐCSVN, VKĐ, vol. 31, pp. 229–30, 238–40, 249–55.

128 Tổng cục chính trị, *ĐLĐQTN*, pp. 510–1; Stevenson, *The end of nowhere*, p. 223.

129 For the full text, see Brian Fegan, 'The Pathet Lao Peace Plan', in Adams and McCoy, *Laos: War and revolution*, pp. 439–43.

130 Memorandum of Conversation, 21 Feb. 1970, *FRUS, 1969–1976, vol. VI*, p. 613.

131 Memorandum of Conversation, 16 Mar. 1970, *FRUS, 1969–1976, vol. VI*, pp. 675–8; Luu Van Loi and Nguyen Anh Vu, *Le Duc Tho–Kissinger negotiations in Paris* (Hanoi: The Gioi, 1996), pp. 126–7.

132 Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Washington, 6 Apr. 1970, *FRUS, 1969–1976, vol. VI*, p. 794.

133 'Address to the Nation about a New Initiative for Peace in Southeast Asia', 7 Oct. 1970, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Richard Nixon, containing the public messages, speeches and statements of the President, 1970* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1971), pp. 825–8.

the presence of US and ‘mercenary’ troops and deprive them of the right to fight back,¹³⁴ but they did not reject the Indochinese approach. Based on this initiative, Kissinger presented a seven-point proposal covering the whole of Indochina on 31 May 1971.¹³⁵ DRV’s chief negotiator Xuân Thủy put forward a nine-point programme as a counter-proposal on 26 June. A comparison between them shows that the two parties had agreed to restore neutrality as the solution to the Laos issue. Lê Đức Thọ even added that the DRV was ready to contribute to a settlement of the Lao and Cambodian wars by discussing it with his allies.¹³⁶ In October, both sides agreed to give impetus to negotiations between the Lao parties, though Hà Nội was reluctant to do the same for Cambodia due to a ‘more complicated situation’ there.¹³⁷

As the DRV and the United States agreed upon general principles for a solution to the Lao issue, negotiations between the NLHX and RLG started in Vientiane on 17 October 1971. Prior to that, the VWP held a special discussion with the LPP. After Lê Duẩn introduced the Paris negotiations, Kaysone specified goals for the third attempt at forming a neutral regime, including US withdrawal, demilitarisation of Vientiane, a tripartite coalition dominated by the NLHX and pro-left neutralists, and no handover of the communist territories.¹³⁸ As the Paris talks met with blocks at the final moment, there was no progress for the negotiations in Vientiane. As Souvanna recognised, there could be ‘no ceasefire in Laos before a ceasefire in Vietnam’.¹³⁹

When the Paris agreements were signed on 27 January 1973, the VWP held another discussion with the LPP in the same month, at which Lê Duẩn stressed the importance of restoring peace and keeping it as long as possible.¹⁴⁰ Kissinger did the same by telling Souvanna during his stay in Vientiane on 9 February that the United States supported an earliest end to the war.¹⁴¹ At the next stop in Hà Nội, he repeated Washington’s intention to observe the Paris Agreement’s Article 20 concerning Laos; and agreed with the DRV to solve the military problem before political one. A crucial point here was that despite its withdrawal promise, the DRV refused to hammer out a timeframe.¹⁴² The Vientiane Agreement was signed on 21 February. A nationwide ceasefire took effect the next day. The Provisional Government of National Union (PGNU) of Laos was to be formed, after which foreign forces were to complete a withdrawal within 60 days.¹⁴³

134 ‘Laowo aiguo zhanxiandang zhongyang fayaren fabiao shengming qianglie qianzhe nikesong de xin changyi’ [Spokesperson of the NLHX Central Committee issues statement strongly denouncing Nixon’s new initiative], *RMRB*, 15 Oct. 1970; ‘Yuenan waijiaobu fabiao shengming qianglie qianzhe nikesong de xin changyi’ [Foreign Ministry of Vietnam issues statement strongly denouncing the new initiative by Nixon], *RMRB*, 16 Oct. 1970.

135 Memorandum of Conversation, 31 May 1971, *FRUS, 1969–1976, vol. VII*, p. 653; Luu Van Lo, and Nguyen Anh Vu, *Le Duc Tho–Kissinger negotiations in Paris*, pp. 168–71.

136 Memorandum of conversation, 26 June 1971, *FRUS, 1969–1976, vol. VII*, pp. 762–3; Luu Van Loi, and Nguyen Anh Vu, *Le Duc Tho–Kissinger negotiations in Paris*, pp. 178–9.

137 Memorandum of conversation, 8 and 11–12 Oct. 1972, *FRUS, 1969–1976, vol. IX*, pp. 14, 19; 76–9.

138 Tổng cục chính trị, *ĐLĐQTN*, pp. 586–91.

139 ‘P.M.: No ceasefire in Laos before ceasefire in Vietnam’, *Vientiane News*, 31 Dec. 1972, p. 1.

140 Tổng cục chính trị, *ĐLĐQTN*, pp. 599–602.

141 ‘Dr Kissinger satisfied by his talks with P.M.’, *Vientiane News*, 18 Feb. 1973, p. 1.

142 Memorandum of conversation, 11 Feb. 1973. *FRUS, 1969–1976, vol. X*, pp. 82–100.

143 For the full text, see Brown and Zasloff, *Apprentice revolutionaries*, pp. 364–9.

All of these developments reflected the consistency of the Indochinese idea in Vietnamese strategic thinking. Militarily, Hà Nội fought in a way that emphasised close coordination across the different theatres. On the diplomatic front, they built a direct link between settlements for Vietnam and Laos and negotiated an Indochinese approach. The logic behind these was the same as the anticolonial period, that is, independence and peace for all the countries of Indochina were tied together.

Communist takeover of Indochina, 1973–75

After decades' of struggle, peace returned in early 1973, but in very different circumstances from 1954. First, the LPP had adopted a new political programme at its second National Party Congress in February 1972, which changed its name to the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) and set out to establish a socialist country through internal unity and external solidarity with North Vietnam as the eventual goal. This programme heavily reflected the VWP's thinking because it was completed by party-to-party discussions; Lê Duẩn contributed his views in February 1970.¹⁴⁴ Second, the VWP summarised its past experiences in June and criticised its previous failure as caused by having too high expectations of the 1954 Geneva Accords and not seeing through the American scheme, which resulted in great losses and formed the basis of its current view that the United States had not changed its nature and still intended to divide Vietnam indefinitely and eliminate revolution in South Vietnam. So revolutionary wars must continue and peace was a respite only; also mutual support and solidarity with Lao allies was a 'guiding principle'.¹⁴⁵

The VWP held a similar suspicion about US intentions in Laos. According to its judgement, the Americans continued to pursue a neocolonial policy to curtail revolutionary development in Laos, which was inseparable from its policy in Indochina and the rest of Southeast Asia. Moreover, the weakness of the Lao revolution increased North Vietnam's uneasiness. According to the head of Đoàn 959, Nguyễn Đôn's briefing to the VWP in March 1973, Lao communist forces were of low and uneven quality; their political influence was weak in the enemy-controlled zone, especially in urban and southern Laos. So the VWP issued a resolution to revamp its military structure in Laos. There were five North Vietnamese organisations supervising the Lao revolution, MR Northwest was responsible for northern Laos, Front 316 (renamed from Front 31 in April 1973) on the PDJ, Đoàn 959 for Sam Neua, Xieng Khoang and Vientiane, MR4 for Bolikhamsai and Khammuon, Đoàn 559 for the south below Savannakhet.¹⁴⁶ This explained why Hà Nội refused to set a time-frame to withdraw its forces. As Dommen correctly pointed out, the DRV did it

144 Tổng cục chính trị, *ĐLĐQTN*, pp. 531–9, 567–70.

145 'Thắng lợi vĩ đại của cuộc kháng chiến chống Mỹ, cứu nước và nhiệm vụ của cách mạng miền Nam trong giai đoạn mới' [Great victory of the resistance against the US for national salvation and revolutionary tasks in the South at the new stage], report at the VWP's 21st Plenum, 19 June–6 July 1973, *ĐCSVN, VKĐ*, vol. 34, pp. 112, 146–7, 189.

146 Hồ sơ 6576 and 6566, phòng Cục Tác chiến, Trung tâm Lưu trữ Bộ Quốc phòng Việt Nam [Document 6576 and 6566, dossier Department of Warfare, Archives of National Defence Ministry of Vietnam], repr. in Quân đội nhân dân Việt Nam, Bộ tổng tham mưu [People's Army of Vietnam, General Staff], *Biên niên sự kiện Bộ tổng tham mưu trong kháng chiến chống Mỹ, cứu nước, 1954–1975, tập IX 1973* [Chronological events of the General Staff during the resistance against the US for national salvation, vol. 9, hereafter *BNSKBTTM*], *tập IX 1973*, pp. 133–6.

this way to not only provide a shield for revolutionary fronts in Laos and South Vietnam but also to manipulate the ongoing negotiations so that the NLHX would emerge in as strong a position as possible in the future coalition.¹⁴⁷

After the signing of the Vientiane Agreement, the next key question was how to translate the ceasefire into reality and create the PGNU. After resuming in March, the negotiations quickly met an impasse, the PGNU failed to form by 23 March 1973, a previously agreed deadline. In May, Lê Đức Thọ met Kissinger to work through the implementation of the Paris Agreements, which reconfirmed their 'strong desire' for an immediate conclusion to the Lao negotiations and the setting up of the PGNU by 1 July. They also agreed upon foreign troop withdrawal within 60 days after the formation of the PGNU.¹⁴⁸ This consensus gave the final push for the signing of the 14 September 1973 agreements, which regulated an equal number of ministers between the NLHX and the rightists, the immediate neutralisation of both capitals (Vientiane and Luang Prabang) and the pullout of foreign troops after the formation of the PGNU and the National Political Consultative Council (NPCC).¹⁴⁹

Given its past experience, the NLHX decided not to return to Vientiane until its conditions for prior neutralisation of both capitals were satisfied.¹⁵⁰ North Vietnam monitored the process closely. NLHX police forces, which entered Vientiane to form a mixed unit as required by the previous agreement, boarded planes in Hà Nội's Gia Lâm airport and brought wireless equipment for close communication with Đoàn 959.¹⁵¹ After the completion of the neutralisation in the spring of 1974, Souphanouvong arrived in Vientiane on 3 April after more than a decade's absence, and the PGNU and the NPCC were formed two days later. It had been 14 months since the signing of the Vientiane Agreement. To explain this victory, Kaysone said that the Vietnamese had given their blood and even their lives to demonstrate how the LPRP and the VWP were 'two offspring of one mother' (*cùng một mẹ sinh ra*).¹⁵² Lê Duẩn, who led a senior delegation to visit Sam Neua in November 1973, replied that geographical and historical reasons had made the two parties now closer than they were during the ICP period.¹⁵³

Early December 1973, when Kaysone led a delegation to North Vietnam, marked the beginning of communist parties' final preparations to take power throughout Indochina. Kaysone brought the idea of taking power in Laos within seven to ten years to the table and asked for military and economic aid, which Lê Duẩn approved.¹⁵⁴ On 26 February 1974, the DRV's Combat Bureau completed a draft about operational directions in Indochina for the coming year, which assessed that

147 Dommen, *The Indochinese experience*, pp. 879–80.

148 Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, 24 May 1973, *FRUS*, 1969–1976, vol. X, p. 288.

149 Dommen, *The Indochinese experience*, p. 885.

150 'Bateliao diantai pinglun yidingshu zhixing qingkuang' [The PL Radio comments on the implementation of the protocol], *RMRB*, 22 Oct. 1973.

151 Hồ sơ 1714, phòng Bộ Tổng Tham mưu, Trung tâm Lưu trữ Bộ Quốc phòng Việt Nam [Document 1714, dossier General Staff, Archives of National Defence Ministry of Vietnam], repr. in *BNSKBTTM*, tập IX 1973, p. 389.

152 Kaysone Phomvihane's speech at the VWP-LPRP discussion, 3 Nov. 1973, Đảng Nhân dân Cách mạng Lào, and Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam, *LSQHDBVL*, VK III, pp. 315–7.

153 Lê Duẩn's speech at the VWP-LPRP discussion, 3 Nov. 1973, Đảng Nhân dân Cách mạng Lào, and Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam, *LSQHDBVL*, VK III, pp. 318–20.

154 Tổng cục chính trị, *ĐLĐQTN*, pp. 615–34.

revolutionary forces outmatched the reactionaries in all the Indochinese countries, and predicted that the United States was unlikely to fight another Vietnam war by 1980, but a small or medium war was difficult to avoid. This draft thus proposed to launch a strategic offensive by forcing South Vietnam to implement the Paris Agreement to the communists' advantage, but prepare for a limited revolutionary war there, while maintaining peace in Laos and, if possible, Cambodia.¹⁵⁵ In early August, this bureau submitted a key plan about how to achieve the final victory in the South and renewed its observation about the situation. This plan contended that as Saigon had been weakened considerably since April 1974, if rapid actions were taken to overthrow it, the United States would not step in if it realised that its intervention could not save the regime. This bureau proposed three steps to take power within three years, after which it proposed to help seize power in Laos (and Cambodia if requested).¹⁵⁶

This bold plan was largely accepted by the VWP Politburo in October, and the 'audacious' decision to complete the revolution in South Vietnam and 'help Laos and Cambodia complete liberation at the same time' had been made.¹⁵⁷ Clearly, North Vietnam imagined an Indochina-wide takeover. Notably, Hà Nội had indicated its limited influence over the Communist Party of Kampuchea but still took it into account. So when the DRV initiated what would be its final campaign to control the South in late 1974, its 'volunteers' like Đoàn 565 and Đoàn 968 had left Laos for South Vietnam;¹⁵⁸ Front 31 was downgraded as a division and stayed on in the PDJ as before.¹⁵⁹ During this period, Laos was relatively calm despite the fact that Souvanna's poor health triggered a rumour of a rightist coup attempt.

After the fall of Phnom Penh to the Khmer Rouge on 17 April 1975 and of Saigon to the North Vietnamese two weeks later, it was Laos' turn. The LPRP held two meetings (in late April and early July) with its Vietnamese patron, during which Kaysone proposed an immediate uprising, and Lê Duẩn endorsed it. Thus the Lao stood on the frontline, with Vietnamese support from behind it, to take power through a series of urban-based uprisings.¹⁶⁰ It was a fairly smooth, and less violent process than those of its two neighbours. After both Lao capitals fell into communist hands in August, the crucial issue became how to deal with King Sisavang Vatthana. At the VWP-LPRP meeting on 10–11 July, Kaysone proposed a moderate approach, either give him a symbolic title or abolish the monarchy but appoint him as senior adviser to the new

155 Hồ sơ 6844, phòng Cục Tác chiến, Trung tâm Lưu trữ Bộ Quốc phòng Việt Nam [Document 6844, dossier Department of Warfare, Archives of National Defence Ministry of Vietnam], repr. in *BNSKBTTM, tập X 1974*, pp. 61–3.

156 Hồ sơ 6849, phòng Cục Tác chiến, Trung tâm Lưu trữ Bộ Quốc phòng Việt Nam [Document 6849, dossier Department of Warfare, Archives of National Defence Ministry of Vietnam], repr. in *BNSKBTTM, tập X 1974*, pp. 267–72.

157 'Thư của đồng chí Lê Duẩn gửi Đồng chí Phạm Hùng về kết luận của Hội nghị Bộ Chính trị' [Letter from Lê Duẩn to Phạm Hùng on Politburo's conclusion], 10 Oct. 1974, ĐCSVN, *VKD*, vol. 35, pp. 172–86.

158 Viện Lịch sử Quân sự Việt Nam (Bộ Quốc Phòng), *LSQTNCGCM*, pp. 405, 408.

159 Hồ sơ 6844, Phòng Cục Tác chiến, Trung tâm Lưu trữ Bộ Quốc phòng Việt Nam, repr. in *BNSKBTTM, tập X 1974*, pp. 213–4; Đảng Nhân Dân Cách Mạng Lào, Đảng Cộng Sản Việt Nam, *LSQHĐBV, BNSK I*, p. 398.

160 Hồ sơ 1058, Trung tâm Lưu trữ Bộ Quốc phòng Việt Nam [Document 1058, Archives of National Defence Ministry of Vietnam], repr. in Đảng Nhân Dân Cách Mạng Lào, Đảng Cộng Sản Việt Nam, *LSQHĐBV, BNSK I*, pp. 932–3; Tổng cục chính trị, *ĐLĐQTN*, pp. 657–8.

government. Lê Duẩn encouraged his Lao counterpart to take ‘resolute’ action, however, since the situation had changed, and ‘it would be easy if the King is not there’.¹⁶¹ In December 1975, the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) was formed to replace the monarchy.

Conclusion

Two months after the establishment of the Lao PDR, Kaysone led a senior delegation to Hà Nội. At the welcome rally, Lê Duẩn delivered a speech, where he used the ‘special relations’ between Vietnam and Laos to explain Lao revolutionary success. This term, according to one official history, was invented by Hồ Chí Minh during his exchange with Kaysone in 1969,¹⁶² but the term seems to have appeared as early as 1965. In his speech, Lê Duẩn gave a straightforward way to understand it:

Historical experiences have proven to us that whoever our enemies were, the French colonialists, Japanese fascists or US imperialists, they always adopted the divide-and-rule policy within and between each of our countries; they always used an occupied foothold in one [Indochinese] country to invade another. No nation could live a calm life and work peacefully as long as security and territory of the fraternal nations were threatened or violated by the imperialists.¹⁶³

This is a highly revealing summary of the three-decade-long Vietnamese struggle in Laos. As demonstrated here, the idea that the struggle for independence and peace in all three Indochinese countries as being interconnected had persisted in Vietnamese communist leaders’ minds throughout this period. There are three aspects to understanding this idea.

First, the ICP/VWP repeatedly argued that its Indochinese idea was rooted in geographical, historical, economic, political and ethnic conditions. I would argue that among these factors, the geographic and strategic vulnerability of Vietnam’s S-shaped territory was the most important, which had been frequently exploited by different foreign powers and made it easy for the outflow of violence in Vietnam. As a result, the fates of the Indochinese countries were tied together. It was based on the 1946–47 experiences of the French reconquest that the ICP consciously summarised in 1948 that its declared independence was jeopardised by the threat from Laos. US efforts after 1954 to separate Laos (and Cambodia) from the Vietnamese communists reinforced the perception that the DRV could not be secured if Laos were to be used against it.

Second, to argue the idea that it was an indivisible Indochinese revolution is not to say that each part of Indochina was given the same level of priority and enjoyed the same level of attention. It is vital to note that this idea was a policy principle at best.

161 Tổng cục chính trị, *ĐLĐQTN*, pp. 667–70.

162 Đảng Nhân dân Cách mạng Lào and Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam, *LSQHĐBV*, pp. 742–3.

163 ‘Diễn văn của Đồng chí Lê Duẩn, Bí Thư Thứ nhất Ban chấp hành trung ương Đảng Lao Động Việt Nam tại cuộc mít tinh trọng thể chào mừng Đoàn đại biểu Đảng và chính phủ nước cộng hòa dân chủ nhân dân Lào sang thăm Việt Nam’ [Speech of the First Secretary of the VWP Executive committee comrade Lê Duẩn at the grand rally of welcoming visit of the delegation of Lao PDR’s party and government to Vietnam], 7 Feb. 1976, Đảng Nhân dân Cách mạng Lào, and Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam, *LSQHĐBV*, *VK IV*, p. 12.

Laos received limited attention from the ICP during the colonial period but the ICP/VWP took two initiatives to deepen its involvement. The first time was in 1948 when the LI was about to collapse, and a new programme had been devised to guide the building of a Lao revolution. The second time was the Sam Neua campaign in 1953. Even so, Laos was a secondary front compared to the conflict in Vietnam, and this continued to be the case for the post-1954 period.

Third, to argue that this was an indivisible Indochinese revolution with different levels of priorities for different nations suggests that this multifaceted revolution was not consistently guided by a single strategy. Aware of the uneven social development of the Indochinese nations, the Vietnamese strategists set different goals for each of them and adopted two political lines at the practical level. The first was the nationalist line before the coming of the Cold War in mid-1948, which softened class background to entice non-communist cooperation. The second was the class line after mid-1948, which underlined alliance with internal and external ideological partners, but implemented in a flexible manner. The ICP/VWP made systematic efforts to advance revolution before 1954 for an effectively communist-controlled Laos as part of its Indochina plan. The VWP moderated its pursuits by accepting neutrality in early post-1954 years, but was compelled to increase violence for a pro-communist neutrality from 1959.

Although this article focuses on Laos, a strong case can be made that the Vietnamese communists' strategy remained fully 'Indochinese' in that it consistently included Cambodia as well. It is clear that until 1954 the ICP/VWP viewed Cambodia and Laos more or less in tandem within the framework of its broader strategy. Their respective revolutionary trajectories began to diverge from the time the Vietnamese-trained Khmer Issarak leaders were resettled in the DRV after the 1954 Geneva Conference, which proved to be a fateful step, since it allowed Pol Pot's faction to take control of the Cambodian party.¹⁶⁴ Unlike its policy of sustaining neutrality by consolidating communism in Laos, Hà Nội pressured the Cambodian communists to avoid staging significant resistance against Sihanouk. In other words, the DRV adopted a different strategy in Cambodia; their increasingly tense relations with the Cambodian communists and the resulting loss of their ability to influence events in Cambodia did not in any way reduce Cambodia's significance in their eyes or their Indochina-wide vision and strategy.¹⁶⁵

Hà Nội theorised its experiences in Laos as a 'law' (*quy luật*) of their successful revolution and applied it to future challenges. Amid rising confrontation with Cambodian and China after 1976, Vietnam signed a 'friendly' treaty with Laos in July 1977, providing the legal basis for the special relationship. When its newly liberated south was under threat from Cambodia, Hà Nội took swift actions to remove that

164 See Ben Kiernan, *How Pol Pot came to power: A history of communism in Kampuchea, 1930–1975* (London: Verso, 1985); Thomas Engelbert and Christopher E. Goscha, *Falling out of touch: A study on Vietnamese communist policy towards an emerging Cambodian communist movement, 1930–1975* (Melbourne: Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1995); Stephen Heder, *Cambodian communism and the Vietnamese model: Imitation and independence, 1930–1975* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 2004).

165 This whole paragraph is in response to an issue raised by one of the anonymous reviewers of this article. I am grateful to Bruce M. Lockhart for his contribution to rephrasing some of my ideas.

threat, despite international responses including the accusation that Hà Nội had long entertained an Indochina federation plan. Though this charge has still been under debate,¹⁶⁶ it is surely fair to argue that they were trying to establish their sphere of influence, but the price of maintaining a pro-Vietnam Cambodia forced them to back off in late 1980s and endorse a hopefully neutral Cambodia.

166 Ishtiaq Hossain, 'Controversy over the Indochina Federation question', *Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies Journal (BISS)* 9, 4 (1988): 419–37; MacAlister Brown, 'The Indochinese Federation idea: Learning from history', in *Postwar Indochina: Old enemies and new allies*, ed. Joseph J. Zasloff (Washington, DC: Foreign Service Institute, US Department of State, 1988), pp. 77–101.