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Conflicts in Indochina and Lao PDR's Entry into ASEAN (1975-1997)

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Abstract. The article examines the policy of the Lao PDR in connection with the conflict in Cambodia and the Sino-Vietnamese conflict, the influence of the Lao-Vietnamese alliance on Vientiane's relations with ASEAN. The author emphasizes that the reduction of conflict in Indochina at the end of the Cold War was the main prerequisite for Laos' accession to ASEAN.

Keywords: Laos, Vietnam, ASEAN, Chinese-Vietnamese conflict, alliance between Laos and Vietnam

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Научная статья

Конфликты в Индокитае и вступление Лаосской народно-демократической республики в АСЕАН (1975–1997 гг.)

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Аннотация. Цель статьи – выявление основных тенденций становления внешней политики ЛНДР в период камбоджийского и китайско-вьетнамского конфликтов в контексте отношений Вьетнама с АСЕАН. Опираясь на официальные документы, периодическую вторую половину 1970-х – 1980-х гг. и исследовательскую литературу, автор анализирует контекст формирования внешней политики ЛНДР, отношения Вьетнама с Ханоем, Пекином и Бангкоком, первые попытки Лаоса наладить отношения с АСЕАН и, наконец, его вступление в эту региональную организацию.

Краеугольным камнем внешней политики революционного Лаоса был союз с Вьетнамом. Нейтралитет не являлся для Лаоса жизнеспособным вариантом, поскольку был чреват риском превращения страны в арену борьбы за влияние между соседними государствами. Однако на начальном этапе союз с Вьетнамом сохранял для Лаоса значительную свободу действий, позволяя Вьетнаму поддерживать рабочие отношения с Китаем и Таиландом. Вмешательство Вьетнама в камбоджийский конфликт и китайско-вьетнамская война 1979 г. повысили зависимость Лаоса от Вьетнама. Отношения ЛНДР с Китаем и Таиландом приобрели враждебный характер. АСЕАН стала воспринимать Вьетнам как угрозу региональной безопасности, распространив это видение и на Лаос. Отдельные приграничные районы тайско-лаосской границы стали зонами военных столкновений, иногда описываемых в литературе как пограничные войны.

Конец холодной войны и экономический кризис во Вьетнаме заставили Ханой вывести войска из Камбоджи и проявить готовность к решению камбоджийской проблемы путем переговоров. Лаос также начал рыночные реформы и политику привлечения иностранных инвестиций. Страна нормализовала отношения с Китаем и Таиландом. Граница с Китаем была открыта для торговли и пересечения гражданами.

После того как Парижские соглашения 1991 г. определили параметры политического урегулирования камбоджийского конфликта, АСЕАН запустила проект «Единой Юго-Восточной Азии». На сингапурском саммите 1992 г. АСЕАН провозгласила формирование нового регионального порядка, объединяющего все нации Юго-Восточной Азии в мире, прогрессе и процветании, и взяла обязательство сформировать более тесные отношения с государствами Индокитая. Вьетнам и Лаос подписали Договор 1976 г. о дружбе и сотрудничестве, основополагающий документ АСЕАН, после чего Ханой и Вьетнам получили статус наблюдателей в Ассоциации. В 1995 г. Вьетнам вступил в АСЕАН, вступление Лаоса последовало в 1997 г.

Автор приходит к выводу, что окончание холодной войны явилось благоприятным для Лаоса, позволив стране начать получать выгоды от развития регионального сотрудничества. Членство в АСЕАН сделало страну частью широкого восточноазиатского сообщества, а не глубоко периферийным государством, замкнутым в Индокитае. При этом союз с Вьетнамом остался постоянным элементом внешней политики Вьетнама, обеспечивая Лаосу гарантии безопасности, но ограничивая его пространство для маневра.

Ключевые слова: Лаос, Вьетнам, АСЕАН, китайско-вьетнамский конфликт, лаосско-вьетнамский союз

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Historically, Laos was a buffer state located between Vietnam and Thailand. This position changed after the 1975 Revolution. In the context of the Cold War and the Sino-Soviet rivalry, neutrality was an unsustainable option for Laos. For the sake of national consolidation and survival as a sovereign state, it had to be aligned with one of the three powers, China, Thailand or Vietnam. Otherwise, it would have been ripped apart into zones of influence. The common revolutionary history and shared ideological values predetermined the forging of the union with Vietnam.

From the outset, the fundamental characteristic of Lao PDR's foreign policy was its alliance with Vietnam. In July 1977 Laos and Vietnam signed a 25-year Treaty on Friendship and Cooperation officially establishing the "special relationship" between the countries [1. P. 8]. The Treaty is renewed every ten years and has protocols on joint defense and on economic cooperation.

However, in 1975–1978 the Laotian leadership tried to pursue a balanced foreign policy within the confines of the "special relationship". It successfully avoided conflicts with China and even maintained diplomatic relations with the US. But in December 1978 the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia provoked by the Khmer Rouge regime became a disaster for the relations between Laos and China. Initially, Laos was in no hurry to condemn China's retaliatory incursion into Vietnam. However, in March 1979, under pressure from Hanoi, it issued a harsh condemnation of China. The border with China was closed. Beijing was requested to withdraw all its construction workers and reduce the Embassy staff to twelve, the same number that the US Embassy had. Ambassadors were withdrawn [2. P. 195–196]. Unsurprisingly, relations with Thailand whose government supported China deteriorated sharply.

A contingent of 50 000 Vietnamese troops, more than the whole of Laotian national army, was moved into the country by 1980, precluding China from opening a second front in the Sino-Vietnamese conflict [3]. It was only in 1987–1988 that the Vietnamese troops were withdrawn as Hanoi and Beijing agreed to de-escalate tensions.

On the whole, Vietnamese advisors and technicians made an enormous contribution to the economic development of Laos helping the country to build bridges, roads, a pipeline from Vinh to Vientiane, to develop iron ore deposits [4. P. 212]. In the late 1970s–1980s, Vietnam had advisers at all the Laotian ministries with the exception of Ministry for Foreign Affairs. Laotian army largely depended on Vietnam for training, and Vietnamese advisers were attached to the staff of most Lao Army units at battalion level. However, the Lao-Vietnamese special relationship never implied the subordination of Vientiane to Hanoi. It is a relationship of "consultation, cooperation, coordination and reciprocal influence" [5. P. 170], and Laos often acted independently of Vietnam.

In March 1979, Laos signed the Agreement on Economic, Cultural, Scientific and Technical Cooperation with Kampuchea. Tripartite cooperation of Vietnam, Laos

and Cambodia (Kampuchea) began, with regular meetings of foreign ministers and joint economic planning. Laos was also developing close ties with the Soviet Union. At the same time Hanoi expressed strong displeasure at Vientiane's cautious steps to improve relations with the US undertaken in 1982–1984, and Laos stepped back [2. P. 201–202].

In the late 1970s - early 1980s, Vientiane saw China mostly as a threat, especially in light of the Chinese support of anti-government activities of the Hmong and Yao tribes in the mountain regions bordering China. China also helped Lao insurgents acting from Thailand. From the Laotian perspective, one of Beijing's objectives was to instigate conflicts between ASEAN nations and the states of Indochina.

Relations between Laos and Thailand were uneven, with Vientiane blaming the Chinese influence on Bangkok for the Thai hostility. The two border conflicts between Laos and Thailand happened in the 1980s. The first broke out in mid-1984 over the possession of three border villages in Laos Sayaboury province [6. P. 114–115]. In 1987–1988 Thailand and Laos fought a three-month war over another disputed area. The conflict ended in a stalemate, leaving 103 dead on the Thai side and 340 dead on the Laotian side [2. P. 203–204].

The second outbreak appears to have been sparked by trade disputes, in particular by differences over logging operations. A ceasefire was arranged, but diplomatic talks were stalled by differing interpretations of the Franco-Siamese treaty of 1907 defining the Thai-Laotian border. At the same time, the normalization of relations with Thailand was necessary for Laos for economic reasons, to facilitate trade and reduce transportation costs.

The Vietnamese intervention in Cambodia effectively blocked the relations between Laos and ASEAN. While Hanoi initially saw ASEAN as an imperialistic ploy, in 1976–1977 Vietnam and Laos started showing a more benevolent attitude toward ASEAN. The Vietnamese foreign minister visited all ASEAN countries except Singapore in December 1977 – January 1978 and called for Southeast Asia becoming an area of "peace, independence and neutrality" [7. P. 184]. However, Vietnam's intervention into Cambodia resulted in Southeast Asia splitting into two antagonistic groups, ASEAN and the three Communist Indochinese states. In the words of Amitav Acharaya, Vietnam's ambitions for leadership in Indochina even "provided ASEAN with a new sense of unity and purpose" [Ibid. P. 181].

In January 1979 ASEAN foreign ministers meeting insisted on respect for Cambodian sovereignty and denounced the change of government in Phnom Penh. ASEAN denied recognition to the Vietnamese-installed government and was the main driving force behind the formation of the Cambodian government in exile. The Organization lobbied successfully for the UN recognition of the government in exile in 1982. Vietnam did not object to discussing ASEAN's security concerns linked with its intervention into Cambodia. It hinted at establishing

the demilitarized zone on the Thailand – Cambodia border and suggested signing non-aggression pacts with ASEAN countries. However, Hanoi adamantly refused the ASEAN members' idea of convening an international conference on Cambodia [8. P. 53–54]. The Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia, with occasional military raids into Thailand where the Khmer Rouge retreated, made Thailand and Singapore see Vietnam as their major national security threat.

The easing of Cold War rivalries brought about a thaw in ASAEN-Vietnamese and ASEAN-Laotian relations. In the end of the 1980s, Malaysia and Indonesia already started discussions of Vietnam's eventual ASEAN membership [7. P. 199]. Economic reforms in Vietnam and Laos and the normalization of Thai-Vietnamese relations were the key factors of rapprochement. In April 1989, Vietnam changed its course on Cambodia. Cognizant of the heavy economic costs of continued military intervention, Hanoi announced that it would pull its troops out of Cambodia by September irrespective of the political resolution of the Cambodian problem [9].

The cooling of Cold War rivalries in the second half of the 1980s allowed Laos to start a gradual return to a more balanced foreign policy. In 1986, a high-profile Chinese delegation visited Vientiane. The trade agreement was signed, and Beijing promised that it would not support Laotian insurgents [2. P. 202]. The border with China was reopened for trade and crossings in 1992.

Meanwhile Laos faced a grave economic crisis in the late 1980s. The small population and country's landlocked position were impediments to industrialization by import substitution and export orientation [10. P. 16–17]. Laos followed Vietnam in starting market reforms while retaining socialism as a strategic objective. In 1986, the New Economic Mechanism was introduced aimed at decentralization, stimulating economic growth and raising low living standards [11].

The 1991 Constitution guaranteed private property and protected foreign investments [12]. The floating exchange rate of Laotian currency, the kip, was introduced. In agri-

culture where 86% of population were employed the market transition was made easier by the fact that collectivization in Laos had never advanced, having been officially suspended as early as in 1979. Most of agricultural cooperatives were later disbanded, as recommended by Vietnamese and Soviet advisors [5. P. 174–176]. In March 1994, Laos passed a law on the promotion of foreign investment [13]. At the same time Laos was a major recipient of official development aid provided by Japan, Australia and the major European countries.

In the final years of the Cold War, Vietnamese and Laotian national security interests grew closer to those of ASE members. What Hanoi now mainly pursued were "appropriately balanced relations with great powers" [7. P. 201]. After the Paris agreements of 1991 had brought a political settlement to the Cambodian conflict, ASEAN launched the "One South East Asia" project.

At the 1992 Singapore summit ASEAN proclaimed "a new regional order that embraces all nations of South East Asia in peace, progress and prosperity" and pledged to "forge a closer relationship with the Indo-Chinese countries" [14]. The 1976 Treaty on Amity and Cooperation, the cornerstone of ASEAN, was signed by Vietnam and Laos, and Hanoi and Vientiane were granted observer status at the ASEAN. In 1995 Vietnam joined ASEAN. Laos and Myanmar followed in 1997 and Cambodia in 1999.

The end of the Cold War, the shifts in the Chinese and Vietnamese foreign policies and the political settlement of the Cambodian conflict allowed for the intensification of subregional cooperation. The Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) concept resulted from the studies conducted by the Asian Development Bank in the early 1990s. The concept emphasized cooperation in trade, investment, transport infrastructures, telecommunications, energy, environmental management, human resource development [15]. Laos is in the very center of GMS as it borders four subregional countries and China. The GMS was finally established in 1995 encompassing Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam and the Chinese province of Yunnan.

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