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VIETNAM AND LAOS A RECENT HISTORY OF MILITARY COOPERATION

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As economic necessity forces Vietnam to adopt some elements of a market economy, to maintain an "open-door" policy towards the west and to withdraw its forces from neighboring Laos and Cambodia, an elaborate effort also appears to be underway to portray its client regimes in Vientiane and Phnom Penh as independent of Hanoi. Lao Deputy Foreign Minister Souban Salithilat declared before a foreign reporter last February that the idea of a federation of Indochina was "gone forever" and suggested that Vietnam must "adjust" to growing nationalism in Vientiane and Phnom Penh. The Laotians themselves have been expanding their economic and other relations with Thailand in an effort to nurse their ailing economy back to health. But those who would deduce from the public burials of the concept of an Indochinese federation, from the reduction in the Vietnamese troop presence in Laos and from Laos' expanding relations with neighboring Thailand that the era of Lao dependence on Vietnam is over tend to ignore the underlying reality — that the Laotian regime is deeply indebted to Hanoi. Ever since the Pathet Lao was created *ex nihilo* by the Vietminh in 1945, the Vietnamese have always been almost entirely responsible for the training of the Laotian army. And although the bulk of Vietnam's troops will have eventually been withdrawn from Laos, Vietnamese "advisers" will almost certainly continue to be attached to all levels of the command structure of the Lao army. In this issue of *Indochina Report*, KENNETH J CONBOY, an Indochina specialist, reopens a chapter in the history of military cooperation between Laos and Vietnam to expose the Pathet Lao's dependence on the Vietminh for the creation of the Lao People's Democratic Republic. As the Laotian Communist Party rewrites its history in a forthcoming official publication to suggest that the Pathet Lao magnanimously delayed their takeover of the country by two years so that Hanoi could continue to use the Ho Chi Minh Trail, Mr Conboy delves into little known details of Laotian history to prove that the ineffectual Pathet Lao could not have achieved victory themselves even if circumstances had been different. ■

Contrary to the general perception, the war in Laos was not bloodless compared to the battles elsewhere in Indochina

INTRODUCTION

During the course of the Second Indochina War, world attention remained focused on the battles fought in and over North and South Vietnam. In contrast, the media rarely covered the fighting in neighboring Laos. This was for several reasons. First, the widespread US involvement in South Vietnam kept most news reporters in that country. Second, the fighting in Laos did not get heavy until 1968, well after fighting in Vietnam had already captivated people's attentions. Third, the "secret" nature of foreign involvement in the Laotian war inhibited the access of foreign journalists to the battlefield.

The resultant lack of accurate media reporting in Laos led to serious misperceptions being offered both during and after the war. In May 1975, for example, as Pathet Lao revolutionaries marched victoriously through the sleepy Mekong towns of Vientiane, Savannakhet and Thakhek, the western media was quick to point out that, unlike the brutal final offensives of the North Vietnamese against Saigon and the Khmer Rouge against Phnom Penh, the Pathet Lao had used near-bloodless political maneuvering and intimidation to overwhelm and slowly defeat their pro-western coalition partners in a two-year old tripartite government in Vientiane.

The notion that the war in Laos was a relatively bloodless affair, however, was far from true. Laos did, in fact, suffer tremendous losses during years of heavy fighting, rivaling many of the most publicized battles elsewhere in Indochina.

Significantly, while the communist forces in Laos suffered thousands of casualties in the battlefield, the Pathet Lao can only be credited with a minor supporting role during the key years of combat. By 1968, in fact, Pathet Lao military participation was little more than a footnote to the larger campaign being waged against Vientiane by the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN). This stands in stark contrast to the "official" Pathet Lao statements made during and since the war, which spotlight their own involvement in fighting while downplaying the role of Vietnamese "volunteer" elements.

I

The long history of communist Vietnamese involvement in neighboring Laos started as World War Two was coming to an end. Eager to forestall a return of colonial rule to Indochina, Ho Chi Minh's Vietminh movement began assisting anti-French Laotians attempting to take over the capital of Vientiane in October 1945.¹

Vietminh assistance to the fledgling anti-French movement in Laos increased during the late 1940s to include material assistance as well as guerrilla training. By the early 1950s, the Vietminh had detailed four battalions to work closely with leftist Lao revolutionaries, by then called the Pathet Lao, at jungle camps concentrated in Sam Neua province near the Vietnamese border.²

In late 1952, with Pathet Lao forces still only capable of limited harassing operations, the Vietminh decided to launch their own offensive against the light French defenses covering northern Laos. After months of quiet planning, the Vietminh poured across the border in April of the following year. The Vietminh's 316 Division, composed primarily of T'ai hilltribesmen, overwhelmed the government garrison of Sam Neua and pursued the fleeing defenders towards French defensive lines along the strategic

Plain of Jars. At the same time, the Vietminh 148 Independent Regiment, another hilltribe formation, departed its base area near Dien Bien Phu with the mission of capturing the city of Luang Prabang, the seat of the Laotian monarchy. A third Vietminh division, meanwhile, began moving west towards the Plain of Jars, with plans to link up with the 316 Division.

In April 1953 the Vietminh launched a multi-divisional attack against the French forces in Laos

The Vietminh invasion succeeded in slicing deep into northern Laos and forcing hundreds of French reinforcements to be rushed to the battlefield. The 316 Division managed to push up to the edge of the Plain of Jars, completely demolishing the remnants of the three government battalions that had been defending Sam Neua. On the Luang Prabang front, the 148 Regiment advanced to within a few kilometers of the city before French forces stabilized the defensive line.

After three weeks of fighting, the Vietminh slowly began to withdraw, apparently convinced that it would be unwise to allow the approaching monsoon season to leave them bogged down in Laos and vulnerable to the more maneuverable French forces. However, while they had failed to capture either Luang Prabang or the Plain of Jars, the invasion of Laos was a tremendous boost to the morale of the Vietminh, proving to themselves that they were entirely capable of coordinating a multi-divisional attack in foreign territory.

Following the Lao invasion, the Vietminh shifted their attention to the isolated French garrison at Dien Bien Phu, ultimately defeating the French forces in May 1954 after a prolonged, bloody siege. The Vietminh, however, had not completely withdrawn from Laos. As late as the Indochina ceasefire in August 1954, for example, French/Lao forces were battling Vietminh guerrillas near the Mu Gia Pass in the upper Laotian panhandle.

II

Two months after the August ceasefire, the Vietminh, now called the PAVN, had helped move the Pathet Lao's "Officer Candidate School" from Phu Quy in Nghe An province into the jungles of Sam Neua province. Twenty PAVN advisors remained attached to the school. An additional 300 Vietnamese military and political instructors belonged to Doan (Group) 100, a PAVN advisory unit that oversaw assistance to the Pathet Lao.

Although the PAVN is believed to have officially disbanded Doan 100 by 1957 — in anticipation of Pathet Lao integration into a coalition government — Pathet Lao defectors and prisoners later confirmed that limited Vietnamese training continued throughout the second half of the 1950s.

By 1959, after friction between the pro-western Royal Laotian Government in Vientiane and the Sam Neua-based Pathet Lao had frustrated hopes for the formation of a coalition, the Pathet Lao's sole battalion fled across the border into North Vietnam and began a short period of retraining and refitting. By mid-year, the Pathet Lao, augmented by limited PAVN artillery and ground support, pushed into Sam Neua province and captured several government-controlled border villages. The government was later able to retake the lost territory with only minor casualties.³

During the same year, PAVN created two groups responsible for operations in Laos. At the end of May, the Military Commission of the Party Central Committee in Hanoi issued a resolution officially creating Doan 559 to organize a travel route through Laos

In early 1961, the Royal Laotian Government obtained its first proof of PAVN intervention in Laos: prisoners-of-war

into South Vietnam and oversee the sending of people, supplies and weapons to the southern front. In later years, this supply path would be known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Doan 559 also would be responsible for all logistical and defense units spanning the trail.

During September, the Central Committee in Hanoi and the Central Committee of the Pathet Lao agreed to organize Doan 959, a delegation of Vietnamese military specialists assigned to "work side-by-side with the Military Commission of the Supreme Command of the Laotian People's Liberation Army [Pathet Lao]". The Doan 959 rear headquarters was at Gia Lam, four kilometers from Hanoi; the group's forward headquarters was co-located with the Pathet Lao command in Sam Neua.

In August 1960, the government's 2 Para Battalion rebelled and took over Vientiane. Captain Kong Le, leader of the mutinous paratroopers, became a self-proclaimed Neutralist and promptly invited both the Royalists and the Pathet Lao to form a coalition government. The Royalists, who vastly outnumbered Kong Le's Neutralists, refused to cooperate and began planning a counter-revolution from their stronghold in Savannakhet. The Pathet Lao, however, exploited the opportunity and quickly sent volunteers from Sam Neua to augment Kong Le's paratroopers in Vientiane.

Soon after the Pathet Lao entered Vientiane, PAVN offered its support. By November, five PAVN 105mm howitzers and gun crew had been flown into the capital and were awaiting the Royalist counter-attack. When the Royalists pushed back into Vientiane the following month, the artillery crews withdrew with Kong Le towards the Plain of Jars.

During the opening months of 1961, the Royal Laotian Government obtained its first concrete proof of PAVN intervention in Laos: prisoners-of-war. Prisoners who were interrogated said that PAVN cadres were sent through the border town of Nong Het to bolster recently-formed Pathet Lao battalions on the Plain of Jars and along Highway 13 linking Vientiane and Luang Prabang. For example, a Vietnamese prisoner taken on January 31 at Vang Vieng, 70 km north of Vientiane, was a member of the PAVN 335 Division seconded to the Pathet Lao 17 Battalion. By the year's end, additional Vietnamese military specialists were posted at Phongsavanh in the middle of the Plain of Jars.

Sporadic fighting between Royalists and Pathet Lao/Neutralists continued through early 1962, generally dividing the country into two equal areas of military control. During February, heavy fighting erupted around the northwestern garrison of Nam Tha. Radio communications intercepted in the vicinity of Nam Tha indicated that the enemy was not Pathet Lao, but rather PAVN forces with Chinese logistical support. By May, Nam Tha had been captured by the PAVN, sending the government garrison fleeing south across the Mekong and into Thailand.

Although a ceasefire went into effect in 1962 and a tripartite coalition government was formed, low-intensity fighting persisted in the countryside. Over the next three years, the PAVN continued to provide advisors for Pathet Lao forces in the Plain of Jars and Pathet Lao headquarters located in the caves near Sam Neua City.

III

In early 1966, the North Vietnamese government made the decision to significantly expand its military involvement in Laos. Unlike previous years, when the PAVN sup-

ported Pathet Lao insurgents in the field, Vietnamese forces were now to dominate certain specific military operations.

This new strategy of escalated involvement first became apparent when elements of the 168 Regiment of the PAVN 316 Division departed Phu Yen, North Vietnam, on February 15, and overwhelmed the important government outpost at Na Khang two days later. The 168 Regiment then captured nearby bases at Muong Hiam and Muong Son. During the attacks, the only Pathet Lao unit in the vicinity, the 705 Battalion, played only a minor supporting role.

By mid-1966, with the onset of the rainy season, the PAVN forces withdrew towards communist-controlled territory around Sam Neua City and allowed government forces to reclaim all of the garrisons lost during the opening months of the year. This became a familiar pattern: select PAVN forces spearheaded the communist drive during the dry season and allowed Vietnamese/Pathet Lao forces to occupy terrain until the onset of the rains, then withdrew to Sam Neua during the rainy season.

To provide a permanent core of PAVN combat units to serve in northeast Laos, Hanoi formed the four-battalion Doan 766 in July 1966 under the administrative control of the PAVN Northwest Military Region. Doan 766 battalions guarded major Pathet Lao bases in Sam Neua, provided instructors for Pathet Lao units and were used in combat operations. At the same time, PAVN created another four-battalion group, Doan 565, in southern Laos to handle operations in the panhandle.

In late 1967, Hanoi once again decided to escalate its involvement in Laos, this time by completely casting aside the ineffectual Pathet Lao figleaf and committing unprecedented numbers of PAVN regulars to the battlefield. This decision coincided with plans for the Tet Offensive in January 1968.

1968 ...

The first evidence of the new PAVN focus on northeastern Laos came in the first week of January 1968 when the PAVN 335 Independent Regiment,⁴ elements of the 316 Division and the Pathet Lao 409 Battalion overran the major government garrison at Nam Bac, north of Luang Prabang, after a prolonged siege. PAVN prisoners captured before Nam Bac fell claimed that Hanoi's goals were to divert attention away from the Ho Chi Minh Trail in southern Laos and to demolish the government's best parachute battalions which had been sent to bolster the garrison.

The dust at Nam Bac had not yet settled before PAVN launched its next major drive in Laos, this time against a key government garrison perched atop Phou Pha Thi mountain in Sam Neua province. Phou Pha Thi's garrison, also known as LS 85, held a vital US Air Force TACAN (tactical air navigation) site used to guide aircraft to and from bombing missions in Laos and North Vietnam. Although the site was close to the Vietnamese border, Phou Pha Thi's huge cliffs offered the garrison an "impregnable" defense.

The PAVN assault on Phou Pha Thi followed an intensive reconnaissance mission by a handpicked commando company from the PAVN 305 Dac Cong Command. The Dac Cong, often misleadingly translated as "sappers" in the west, were highly trained special operations teams.⁵

Hanoi decided to escalate its involvement in Laos in late 1967, committing unprecedented numbers of PAVN regulars to the battlefield

One of the greatest factors hindering the Pathet Lao was its severe manpower shortage

Following recommendations from the Dac Cong company, Hanoi in November dispatched three North Vietnamese AN-2 biplanes to straff and bomb the TACAN site.⁶ This was the first time the North Vietnamese Air Force was used on an offensive mission outside its borders.

By the first two months of 1968, three battalions from Doan 766 had infiltrated into the jungles around Phou Pha Thi, and slowly began to overrun surrounding outposts. Then, on March 9, PAVN performed one of the most spectacular operations in the entire Second Indochina War. While elements of Doan 766 were infiltrating around three sides of the mountain, a team of Dac Cong commandos scaled Phou Pha Thi's 5,600-foot cliffs at night and overwhelmed the TACAN site. Thirteen Americans at the site were killed, some of their bodies allegedly thrown from the cliff.⁷

With the summit of the mountain secured by the commandos, the 923, 927 and 623 Battalions of Doan 766 overran the remaining government defenders around the base of the site. By March 11, the North Vietnamese were in control of Phou Pha Thi.

After capturing LS 85, a total of eight PAVN battalions pressed southwest towards the Plain of Jars, sweeping aside all government outposts in their path.

Further south, Doan 565 became more active in the panhandle. Controlled by the PAVN 4th Military Region, the group consisted of the 927 Battalion operating near Saravane, the 2 Battalion around Lao Ngam, the 3 Battalion around Attapeu, and the 4 Battalion north of Saravane. Other PAVN units were used in Laos for short-duration missions. For example, the 4 Company, 3 Battalion, PAVN 47 Regiment, attacked the southern town of Thateng in July 1968.

As PAVN assumed full control on the front line, the Pathet Lao increasingly sank back to the rear echelon. In northeastern Laos — the scene of the heaviest fighting in the country — the Pathet Lao did little more than provide security and logistic units in and around the Pathet Lao headquarters at Sam Neua. Despite propaganda claims to the contrary, those Pathet Lao formations that ventured towards the Plain of Jars usually operated in bands of only platoon strength, and rarely engaged the government forces. This was true also of the Pathet Lao presence in the rest of the country.

One of the greatest factors hindering the Pathet Lao was manpower shortages. Not only was the Laotian population small to begin with, but the Pathet Lao had been forced to recruit from the most sparsely populated regions of the country. So thin were the Pathet Lao ranks that by 1968 prisoners were being pressed into service. The 235 Transportation Battalion in Sam Neua, for example, was composed of 500 prisoners captured at Nam Bac.

In late 1968, the government parted from the standard flow of the war and decided to launch a major operation to recapture Phou Pha Thi. The operation, codenamed PIGFAT, began with a massive outpouring of US airpower to soften up the elements of Doan 766 dug into the side of the mountain. Government forces then stormed the sides of the mountain and were able to get a toehold at the base by early December.

Despite early advances, PIGFAT soon bogged down. The three Doan 766 battalions, ordered not to surrender, refused to relinquish any ground. In the process, half of the 927 Battalion was wiped out. At the end, only 480 Vietnamese out of the original 1,500 defenders survived the onslaught of ground assaults and airstrikes.

By late December, PAVN had dispatched two fresh regiments to Phou Pha Thi, including the entire 148 Regiment of the 316 Division.⁸ PAVN continued to take heavy casualties, including an estimated 128 dead from the 148 Regiment, but was able to maintain its grip on the strategic mountain. In doing so, Hanoi had demonstrated its will to absorb tremendous losses in the Laotian battlefield. Hanoi had also shown that

PAVN formations would be dominating the Lao battlefield from then onwards; the Pathet Lao would be conspicuous by their absence.

Hanoi showed great resilience in spite of its battle losses

1969 ...

In early 1969, PAVN launched its most ambitious dry season offensive into north-eastern Laos. With Doan 766 too small to handle PAVN's growing needs in north-eastern Laos, Hanoi ordered the 148 Regiment from Sam Neua to attack the government outpost at Na Khang. In previous years, PAVN had approached the garrison from along the treeline; US airpower always anticipated this line of attack and had handed the Vietnamese excessive casualties. This time, the 148 Regiment approached through an exposed expanse of elephant grass, a completely unanticipated direction that caught the garrison by surprise and allowed PAVN to overwhelm the post before aircraft could begin to react.

After capturing Na Khang, PAVN moved the 316 Division onto the Plain of Jars. The 316 Division was a light division, composed of three 1,500-man regiments — the 148, 174 and 176 — plus some anti-aircraft and other support units. Following normal PAVN deployment doctrine, two thirds of the division was committed to the battlefield, with one third held in reserve. For the remainder of the war, this usually translated into the 148 and 174 Regiments committed to Laos, with the 176 Regiment held across the border in the Northwest Military Region.

By May 1969, the 316 Division, along with token Pathet Lao forces around Xieng Khouangville and Phongsavanh, were in control of the area surrounding the Plain of Jars. In contrast to previous years, however, Hanoi had decided to keep the division on the plain during the rainy season. The reason for this departure from tradition was that a new route was being constructed directly west from Vinh through Nong Het to the plain, which would simplify resupply missions and allow PAVN forces to be supported even during the rains.

Once the rains began in July, however, PAVN's plans began falling apart. A concerted US Air Force bombing campaign turned existing supply trails from Sam Neua into ribbons of impassable mud. The new route from the North Vietnamese border, meanwhile, was not finished in time to carry sufficient supplies to the 316 Division on the plain. As a result, government forces were able to inflict an embarrassing rout of PAVN, sending the half-starved 316 Division fleeing back towards North Vietnam.

Amazingly, despite the identification of hundreds of Vietnamese bodies and the capture of several dozen PAVN prisoners by Laotian government forces, Hanoi still adamantly denied the presence of any North Vietnamese armed units fighting in Laos.

Hanoi did not spend long lamenting its losses on the Plain of Jars. Even as the last remnants of the 316 Division were crossing the border into North Vietnam, replacements were already flowing back in the other direction. By September, the 141 Regiment of the 312 Division was moving west along Route 7 towards the town of Ban Ban, immediately east of the Plain of Jars.

During mid-December, the PAVN began to exert pressure against the government forces garrisoned in the middle of the plain. On December 17, two Dac Cong companies, including one that had participated in the attack on LS 85 the previous year, hit L 22, a key government base and airstrip near the town of Phongsavanh. The government successfully defended the base.

In 1970, Hanoi lost its logistical conduit through Cambodia owing to the fall of the Sihanouk government

1970 ...

On January 12 of the following year, PAVN resumed its push on the Plain of Jars. Charging the garrison at Phou Nok Kok on the northeastern rim of the plain, Dac Cong commandos, armed with mortars and flamethrowers, overran the government forces.

Once Phou Nok Kok was under their control, PAVN brought forward the 148 Regiment of the 316 Division, which had returned briefly to North Vietnam for refitting. Together with the 141 Regiment, both units were ordered to recapture the Plain of Jars, as well as the regional headquarters of government forces at Long Tieng, located southwest of the plain.

During the first week of February, several hundred Dac Cong commandos, augmented by a handful of PT-76 amphibious tanks, surged out from Phou Nok Kok across the plain. Government troops at L 22 held back two tank assaults, but, after a Vietnamese rocket ignited the garrison's ammunition dump, the base defenders crumbled during a third attack.

By April, PAVN was in complete control of the plain, though its concerted attacks against Long Tieng had been frustrated by timely government reinforcements from other military regions. During the entire operation, not a single major Pathet Lao formation had been involved.

Elsewhere in Laos, PAVN units were similarly engaged against the Vientiane government. The 335 Independent Regiment, which had participated in the 1968 capture of Nam Bac, was still operating north of Luang Prabang.

Meanwhile, PAVN operations in southern Laos had taken on new significance after the change in governments in Cambodia had suddenly deprived North Vietnam of its important logistical conduit through the Cambodian port of Sihanoukville. As a result of the loss of Hanoi's Cambodian conduit, the Ho Chi Minh Trail became the only means of resupplying communist forces fighting in South Vietnam.

To protect the Ho Chi Minh trail, PAVN immediately began to expand its area of influence, slowly pushing the Laotian government forces towards the Mekong. To coordinate its campaign in the southernmost region of Laos, PAVN disbanded Doan 565 and replaced it with the larger Front X, consisting of the 9 Independent Regiment and supporting units seconded from Doan 559.

During the onset of the rainy season in mid-1970, PAVN pulled back most of its forces from the Plain of Jars, consciously avoiding the mistakes it had made the previous year. The government forces, however, were so weakened that they were unable to significantly expand their area of influence.

By November, PAVN was gearing up for its next offensive on the Plain of Jars. Because Route 72, the new route which connected Vinh with Ban Ban and bypassed the old interdicted Route 7, had finally been completed, PAVN was able to vastly improve its resupply effort into northeastern Laos.

The new supply route also allowed PAVN to shift the logistical command for its Plain of Jars operation from the Northwest Military Region based in Son La to the Fourth Military Region based in Vinh. PAVN operations in southern Laos also came under the command of the Fourth Military Region, putting all major PAVN campaigns under one administrative command.

1971 ...

During December, PAVN was easily able to reoccupy the Plain of Jars with elements of the 312 and 316 Divisions. By March 1971, PAVN had deployed the greatest number of troops to date around the plain, with the 148 and 174 Regiments of the 316 Division around the key government base of Long Tieng; the 165 and 209 Regiments of the 312 Division along the western rim of the plain; the 866 Independent Regiment also west of the plain; and the 766 Independent Regiment⁹ along the northeastern corner of the plain.¹⁰ Again, Hanoi had ordered the capture of Long Tieng, but again the government defenders were able to hold back the Vietnamese.

During April, in anticipation of the upcoming rainy season, PAVN withdrew the bulk of its forces northeast of the Plain of Jars; only the 148 Regiment of the 316 Division remained in the vicinity of Long Tieng.

In the south, PAVN had renamed Front X — their campaign to expand the Ho Chi Minh Trail — to Front Y. Under Front Y, the 9 Independent Regiment launched a surprise attack in the middle of the year against the key government garrison at Paksong, in the center of the Bolovens Plateau. The regiment occupied Paksong until a government heliborne counter-attack retook the city in September.

PAVN efforts to expand the Ho Chi Minh Trail were vital to their war effort in South Vietnam, especially after the March 1970 loss of its Sihanouk Trail logistics route. Doan 559, which oversaw the Ho Chi Minh Trail network, was divided into Binh Trams (BT), or regional stations that controlled logistics, administration and defenses along a specific sector of the trail. For example, BT 32 was northwest of the major transshipment town of Tchepone; BT 31 was in Khammouane province; BT 30 was in Savannakhet province; BT 35 was near Saravane; and BT 37 was near Attapeu. The number of PAVN troops assigned to each BT fluctuated according to the threat to that particular BT. In addition, BT combat units were occasionally sent west to fill the ranks of the 968 Division.

Once the rains began to fall in northern Laos, the government decided that, unlike previous years, it would heavily defend the Plain of Jars and make PAVN pay heavily to regain territory. Several dozen 105mm and 155mm howitzers were airlifted onto the plain, along with eight light infantry battalions and an equal number of irregular Groupement Mobiles.¹¹

As soon as the rains ceased, PAVN began planning for its biggest Plain of Jars campaign to date. Because of the increased government defenses on the plain, Hanoi appointed Major-General Le Truong Tan to head the operation. General Tan had been PAVN deputy chief-of-staff and was in charge of the Route 9 defenses during the South Vietnamese incursion into southern Laos in early 1971, giving him ample experience in heading multi-divisional campaigns.

On December 20, the battle for the Plain of Jars began. Taking advantage of the superior range of its 130mm artillery pieces, PAVN shelled the Lao government positions on the plain with impunity. General Tan next ordered a wave of PT-76 amphibious tanks, T-34 medium tanks and Chinese-made armored personnel carriers, followed by the 174 Regiment of the 316 Division. Within three days, the elaborate government defenses on the plain were in ruins and the PAVN were knocking on the doors of Long Tieng.

In the south, PAVN was busy with another campaign, this one designed to capture the entire Bolovens Plateau. In the forefront of the operation was the 9 Regiment, which had previously been operating in an independent role. In late December,

Owing to the loss of the Cambodian conduit and the consequent need to protect the Ho Chi Minh Trail, PAVN's operations in southern Laos took on a new significance

For the first time in the war PAVN began to use 130mm artillery and MiG-21 aircraft

however, it was joined by the new 39 Regiment to form the core of the 968 Division.¹² During the last week of December, both regiments stormed Vientiane's forward defenses at Paksong and sent the government forces reeling back to Pakse.

1972 ...

By January 1972, PAVN was in full control of the Bolovens Plateau, with the government's front lines stabilized only 21 kilometers east of Pakse.

In the north, PAVN had succeeded in moving two regiments of the 312 Division to the mountain ranges immediately north of Long Tieng. Documents found on dead Vietnamese bodies stated that Long Tieng base was to be captured at all costs.

Meanwhile, two more regiments of the 316 Division were holding the high terrain between the Plain of Jars and Long Tieng, while the 766, 866 and 335 Independent Regiments held positions to the north and east of the plain. In addition, PAVN was pounding Long Tieng with its 130mm artillery, marking the first major use of 130mm artillery in the Second Indochina War. For the first time in the war, the PAVN also benefited from occasional bombing and reconnaissance support from MiG-21 jets.

After a month of relentless attacks, the government removed all dependents and sensitive equipment from Long Tieng in anticipation of its imminent collapse. However, while some PAVN patrols were able to infiltrate into the base at night, Long Tieng refused to fall.

By March, after the 312 Division was withdrawn to participate in the Easter Offensive in South Vietnam, Long Tieng was reinforced and the siege was lifted. PAVN, however, still had the 148 and 174 Regiments of the 316 Division located between Long Tieng and the Plain of Jars, plus the 866 Independent Regiment south of the plain, the 766 Independent Regiment east of the plain, and the 335 Independent Regiment northeast of the plain.

When the rains began at mid-year, Hanoi still had a firm grip over the battlefield. So high was their confidence that when Vientiane launched a counter-attack in late August, PAVN remained extended across the plain and demolished the government forces. This was the first time that PAVN had remained deployed in northeastern Laos and engaged a multi-regimental government force during the height of the rainy season.

In southern Laos, the 968 Division showed equal determination, and was even able to seize the town of Khong Sedone during mid-year in the so-called "Three Nations of Indochina Begin Firing Their Weapons at the Same Time" campaign. In the second half of the year, however, the 968 Division was extremely understrength as a result of heavy airstrikes. The division even had to resort to using cooks, medics and Doan 559 logistical personnel to beef up its combat regiments.

By the year's end, the government was able to sufficiently weaken the tired 968 Division and expel the Vietnamese from all key towns on the Bolovens Plateau.

Elsewhere in Laos, the PAVN had assigned the 8 Independent Regiment to harass Luang Prabang, and replaced the 335 Independent Regiment which had been sent to operate around the Plain of Jars. In the northern panhandle, PAVN had created Front R at Tchepone, composed of the 29 Regiment. Front R was tasked with protecting the

major Ho Chi Minh Trail transshipment point at Tchepone and conducting operations against Laotian forces along Route 9.

By late 1972, the Pathet Lao's manpower shortages forced it increasingly to turn to women and prisoners to fill frontline transportation units

IV

During these years of heavy fighting, the Pathet Lao was noticeably absent from the battlefield. Around the Plain of Jars, Pathet Lao and Deuanist Neutralist¹³ battalions roamed the mountains north of the plain, the Ban Ban valley to the east and the town of Xieng Khouangville to the south. But apart from an occasional platoon from the Patchay Battalion¹⁴ operating in a reconnaissance and psychological warfare role alongside PAVN forces, no Pathet Lao formation participated in any of the Plain of Jars offensives, sieges or defensive actions.

In northwestern Laos, extended lines of supply and thick jungles impaired Pathet Lao activity. When any noteworthy communist military activity did occur, such as the February 1973 capture of Nam Yu, PAVN forces were in the forefront.

On the Bolovens Plateau, the Pathet Lao were similarly uninvolved in combat. Much of their inactivity resulted from a November 1970 incident involving the death of General Phomma, a Pathet Lao regional military leader. When it became known that Phomma died of a battle-related injury at PAVN 968 Division medical facilities, the Laotian government launched a psychological warfare operation aimed at inciting friction between PAVN and Pathet Lao forces by starting rumors that Phomma had been "executed" by the Vietnamese.

So successful was the operation that the Pathet Lao 11, 12 and 25 Battalions rallied to the government. Information from the defecting Pathet Lao resulted in a massive airstrike being launched on a PAVN regional headquarters. Relations between the Pathet Lao and PAVN in southern Laos remained strained for the remainder of the war.

Pathet Lao relations with the Vietnamese in the upper panhandle also were strained at times. So bad was one local feud that a senior Vietnamese advisor was kidnapped and turned in by rallying Pathet Lao guerrillas at Paksane.

Pathet Lao performance was further constrained by chronic manpower shortages. So severe was this problem that by late 1972 the Pathet Lao had been increasingly forced to turn to women and prisoners to fill frontline transportation units. The 5 Transportation Company at Nong Het, for example, was sixty percent female; the remainder were prisoners. The 368 Transportation Company at Xieng Khouangville and the 769 Transportation Company at the same location were both composed of females.

V

By January 1973, with the signing of a ceasefire imminent, both government forces and PAVN made last-minute efforts to grab territory. On the Plain of Jars, the government's Operation PHOU PHIANG III was pushed back by the 316 Division without making any progress. In the south, the 9 and 39 Regiments succeeded in push-

The war in Laos gave the PAVN invaluable experience in handling counter-insurgency operations and the opportunity to fieldtest new weapons

ing back into Paksong, precipitating a withdrawal of government forces from key cities on the plateau. In the northern panhandle, the 29 Regiment stuck out from Muong Phalane and hit government targets at Thakhek and Seno.

When the Laotian ceasefire went into effect on February 22, 1973, the communists — in the form of the PAVN — were in full control of the Plain of Jars and the Bolovens. The 29 Regiment, meanwhile, held the territory up to Muong Phalane on Route 9, with instructions to seize everything up to Dong Hene if the Laotian government reacted strongly before scheduled inspections by the International Control Committee.

For the remainder of 1973, PAVN forces, having completely broken the back of the government armed forces, were under orders to begin intensive training programs for Pathet Lao units. By the year's end, most of the 316 Division was able to return home, leaving behind residual PAVN units plus the Pathet Lao to fill their vacuum. During the following year, the 968 Division departed the Bolovens Plateau and was similarly replaced by the Pathet Lao.

CONCLUSION

By early 1975, the Pathet Lao was easily able to overcome its larger but demoralized opponents. Although Hanoi was careful not to publicize its deserved credit for the victory — in fact, the Pathet Lao still only admits vaguely to fraternal assistance provided by PAVN "volunteers" during the War of Liberation — PAVN could take heart in the fact that it had gained much from its Laotian experience.¹⁵

First, the war in Laos provided the PAVN invaluable experience on how to conduct counter-insurgency operations. Until that time, PAVN had always played the role of the insurgents themselves. In Laos, however, the tables were turned: PAVN operated as a conventional infantry force complete with artillery, armor, and even air support, while the government army often acted as irregular guerrilla units. To help it better fight insurgent forces in the future, the PAVN Senior Military Academy focused on the 1969-1971 campaigns on the Plain of Jars and developed the lessons from those battles into a training tool for its students. Given PAVN's mixed performance in Cambodia against resistance forces, however, it is questionable as to how much attention Hanoi is actually paying to its own lessons learned in Laos.

Second, because of the close distances involved (compared to the South Vietnamese battlefield), PAVN used Laos as a platform to fieldtest new weapons. For example, point-detonating mercury-tipped ammunition, apparently used on an experimental basis, was discovered on PAVN bodies around the Plain of Jars in 1971. Also found were new chemical decontamination kits. PAVN's use of MiG-21 jets in a ground support role, as well as the combat use of Il-28 bombers, which apparently were deployed on October 9, 1972, against the Boumlong garrison, were also tested in Laos. PAVN also used Laos for extensive first-time combat use of the 130mm gun.

Last, and most important, PAVN's experience in Laos allowed it to develop total control over the Pathet Lao. By 1975, not only was the Pathet Lao leadership indebted to Hanoi for its past assistance, but the Pathet Lao military forces were totally dependent on PAVN advisory assistance and logistical support.

Currently, Vietnam's military and economic links with Laos remain strong. In large part because of the close relationship Hanoi developed with Vientiane during the war years, Vietnam feels confident that it can now withdraw virtually all of the 50,000 PAVN troops that remained in Laotian garrisons for a decade after the war. Other reasons for the PAVN withdrawal include an attempt by Hanoi to portray itself as less threatening in the region, a drop in tensions with China (Vietnam had stationed troops in Laos in part to protect its northwest flank from Chinese attack), a decrease in Laotian resistance activity and an improved performance in the Laotian Liberation Army.

Lao-Vietnamese relations are likely to remain close as Vietnam has been the primary political and military force behind the Pathet Lao since its inception

While Vietnamese forces may soon be leaving Laos, the Vietnamese-Laotian relationship is likely to remain close. Vietnam has been the primary political and military force behind the Pathet Lao since its inception, resulting in the creation of Vietnam's most dependable ally in the region. And although Vientiane's slow attempts to formulate an "open door" policy with the west and its expanding relations with ethnically-related Thailand may result in what appears to be an independent economic and foreign policy course, the underlying principles guiding Laotian economic and foreign policy will — for the foreseeable future — probably not stray far from the fraternal advice emanating from Hanoi.

* Kenneth J Conboy is the deputy director of the Asian Studies Center of the Heritage Foundation, USA.

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NOTES

1. See *Indochina Report*, No.1, Jan-Mar 1985.
2. Vietminh advisory units were drawn from the 316 Division and the 148 Independent Regiment.
3. Reports at the time that several PAVN regiments had participated in the Sam Neua "invasion" appear to have been greatly exaggerated. Captain Kong Le of the 2 Para Battalion, which was rushed to the Sam Neua front, reported that he found only token Pathet Lao resistance in the villages he recaptured.
4. The 335 Independent Regiment was a hilltribe unit which had elements in northern Laos since 1966.
5. The 305 Dac Cong Command, which drew many of its members from the disbanded PAVN 305 Airborne Brigade, was based at Xuan Mai, North Vietnam. The Command had administrative control over PAVN special operations units.
6. The biplanes were armed with machine gun pylons and had specially-aparted belly dispensers designed to drop mortar rounds. One of the planes was shot down. A second crashed into a mountain.
7. A Dac Cong member who participated in the raid and was later captured claimed that the Dac Cong commander was later court-martialled for throwing the bodies off the cliff.
8. The 148 Regiment, a hilltribe formation, had previously been an independent unit during the First Indochina War. Put under the control of the 316 Division, it saw more service in Laos than any other PAVN regiment.
9. Previously known as Doan 766.
10. The 766 and 866 Independent Regiments were composed largely of hilltribe minorities.
11. The Groupement Mobiles were light infantry regiments under the command of the famed Hmong hilltribe commander, General Vang Pao. Though earlier known as "Special Guerrilla Units", by 1971 they were identical in training, organization and doctrine to light airmobile regiments composed of four battalions each.
12. The 968 Division, which was augmented during the following year by the 19 Regiment, was tasked solely with operations against the Royal Laotian Government in the southern panhandle.
13. The Deuanist Neutralists were a splinter group from the Kong Le Neutralists and completely controlled by the Pathet Lao. By 1971, they maintained three understrength infantry battalions and one transportation battalion.
14. The understrength Patchay Battalion was based near Nong Het and composed of Hmong tribesmen. Although it was praised in Pathet Lao literature as an example of minority support for the communist movement, members of the battalion revolted against the government in 1977. The battalion was subsequently disbanded.
15. Hanoi did single out the 316 Division, 312 Division and 174 Regiment of the 316 Division for their participation in the war in Laos, giving each of these formations the Victory Medal. The reasons for the awards, however, were not made public.

Owing to the closed nature of the political system operating in Vietnam, decision-makers, scholars and businessmen who study or deal with Vietnam and its leaders have labored under gross misconceptions, often bordering on ignorance, about the workings of the system, the mindset of Hanoi's leaders, the state of its economy, the character of its society and the nature of its links with its Soviet patrons. Conditions in Vietnam's client states, Laos and Cambodia, are even more grossly misunderstood.

The first report on Indochina to be ever published in Asia, *Indochina Report* fills this gap in the outside world's knowledge of the arcane world of Indochinese politics. Each issue of this quarterly publication looks behind signal developments in one of the three countries to discern key trends, explain events and assess their implications for the rest of Southeast Asia. It is hoped that the insights that *Indochina Report* presents will contribute in a small way to the efforts at building equilibrium and peace in Southeast Asia. Contributors to *Indochina Report* are specialists on Indochina largely based in the region and who have had extensive firsthand experience and knowledge of the three Indochinese countries. Occasionally, respected emigres write invaluable "insider" accounts of the processes at work in these societies. Launched in 1984, *Indochina Report* is now read by, among others, government leaders, senior foreign policy analysts, diplomats, academics, journalists, students of Indochinese affairs, and even policy-makers in Hanoi.

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