

## **The Laotian Issue of 1950-1960's: Prospects for Studying**

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**Abstract:** The researchers attempted to determine the basic areas in the study of Laotian problem of 1950-1960's in the international relations. Analysis of the available sources and literature resulted in four aspects of issues requiring an additional comprehensive study involving new archival materials.

**Key words:** International relations in Indochina, Laotian problem, geopolitical plans of the USSR and the USA, Cold War

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Today, Laos is a small country situated in Southeast Asia, on the Indochinese Peninsula. From the position of the international community's perception, it is of little interest. Information about the events in the country is available mostly from the mass media and a few articles of professionals involved in the study of the Southeast Asian history.

However, in the second half of the 20th century news about the situation in Indochina (in this case, the concept of "French Indochina", i.e., Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia is meant) were constantly in the periodical press.

Since the end of 19th century, Laos was under French colonialism being a part of the Indochinese Union in the status of protectorate with the monarchical form of government. In March 1945, under the influence of Japan Laos for the first time declared its independence (officially the year of independence is considered to be 1949) but only in 1954, at the end of the First Indochina War, it was recognized by the international community.

Generally speaking, the Laotian problem in the historiography and journalism was most commonly regarded only in the context of Indo-Chinese issues in general. However, in our opinion, it is a somewhat simplistic approach, since it does not always take into account the specific features of the political development of Laos after the country's independence. For this reason, it is quite logical to define the main lines allowing a complex review of the Lao issues in the period under consideration.

### **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

In order to prove the suggested hypothesis, the principles of historicism and objectivity have been used when considering the events of international relations. To recreate the overall picture of what was happening and to identify the areas of studies, methodological techniques of systemic, comparative and functional analyzes and a geopolitical approach have been used. They have been applied for identifying the relationships and comparing the events occurred during the study period in Laos and around it with the general tendencies in the global affairs.

Before the state that gained a new status in the 1950-1960s, acute questions of the future way of development and choice of allies arose in the Cold War confrontation between two systems.

As a result of political differences, the Laotian elite was divided into three parts the right-wing forces focused on an alliance with the USA; the left-wing forces who saw the prospects of an alliance with the Soviet Union and China as well as the centrists who wanted the country's neutrality in the international arena and maintaining relations with the former metropolitan country. The system that emerged from such domestic situation was called a "tripartism".

The external forces did not stay indifferent to the situation in the country and tried to encourage their supporters in Laos. It became especially evident after 1954 when the unification of neighboring Vietnam actualized and the search for allies began both for the communist North and the capitalist South Vietnam.

Foreign and domestic experts presented in their general works on the history of international relations, foreign policy and diplomacy that appeared in the 1950-1980's (Dommen, 1971; Toye, 1968) the first analysis of the situation in Laos. They did not contain any original conclusions and reproduced the official estimates given by party and state leaders. In the context of major international problems, Soviet diplomats and historians of international relations Lavrishchev (1965), Kadymov (1966), Mikheev and others addressed the issues concerning the situation in Laos in their works. Some materials on Soviet assistance to Laos in 1954-1976 were first published therein. The official Soviet historiography included the idea that one of the main tasks of the USSR was to provide to this state various assistance necessary to confront the Western countries trying to drag it into the aggressive SEATO bloc.

Modern domestic researchers do not highlight a separate Laotian problem either; they study it in connection with the problems of Indochina as a whole. In the foreign historiography, various issues of the contemporary history in Indochina (and Laos in particular) were of great importance, however there are only few on the studied issue, as a majority of experts in international relations pays the most attention to various aspects of the US military actions in South Vietnam. The situation around Laos during the Geneva Conference of 1954 was investigated in the general context prevailing at that international situation in the works by Cable (1986) and Randle (1969) as well as in the work of the Polish international lawyer.

To date, this lack is challenged with a vast range of available sources which primarily include the materials from the funds of the central Russian archives such as the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RSASPH), the Russian State Archive of Contemporary History (RSACH) and the Foreign Policy Archive of the Russian Federation (FPARF).

The source base available to historians allows considering the Laotian issue as an independent research topic to date.

The main areas in which the Laotian issue of 1950-1960 can be studied will be identified. First of all, the examination of internal political processes taking place in Laos in the context of participation of external forces therein is of scientific interest.

It should be pointed that the Laotian issue represents in the international relations of 1950-1960s a fairly complex interweaving of interests of the world and regional powers acting at that time in the Southeast Asian region. It was important for the USA to find a new ally in Indochina in a confrontation between two Vietnams (North and South)

which led to a direct US military intervention in the affairs of South Vietnam in 1961 and the beginning of the second Indochina war.

On the part of the Soviet leadership headed by N.S. Khrushchev, special attention to the "non-socialist" "Third World" countries was due to the need to build a new structure in the system of international relations. The USSR established formal diplomatic relations with Laos only in October 1960, on the eve of the Geneva International Conference for the Resolution of the Laos Issues. However, it did not mean that there were no contacts between two countries. The USSR provided military assistance through Vietnam and China to the left forces that united in the Lao Patriotic Front in 1956.

Communist China sought to play a special role in Laos; Chinese leaders planned to establish hegemony over the whole Southeast Asia. In this regard, Laos seemed to be an important geopolitical reference point for further penetration into the Southeast Asian region.

As a former metropolitan country, France did it best to preserve its economic and cultural influence in Laos but it clearly surrendered the initiative to the USA in these issues. Only the neutralists who did not have any decisive influence on the course of political processes in the country sympathized to it, especially after Charles de Gaulle came to power in France in 1958.

Among the regional powers, pro-American Thailand and communist North Vietnam manifested the greatest interest to Laos. Through the Laotian territory, the North Vietnamese laid the so-called Ho Chi Minh Trail that provided material and military aid to their supporters in the South. Regular military divisions of North Vietnam repeatedly appeared on Laotian territory on various pretexts that led to protests of the Lao government, right-wing forces and neutralists.

Studying any of the presented area characterizing a connection between the internal political processes in Laos and interests of other countries may, in turn, represent an additional range of problems allowing, at a more detailed examination, to explain certain actions of the country's leadership.

The second area of studying the Laotian issue can be defined as an objective consideration of the US power circle's responsibility for the retraction of Laos in the Indochinese conflict as an ally. After completion of the Geneva Conference of 1954, during which the Royal Government of Laos announced on the future country's neutrality in international affairs, the US leaders initiated the establishment in the Southeast Asian region of a military-political bloc known as SEATO which declared that it takes Laos under its "protection". Such developments caused a negative reaction of the left-wing

forces and neutralists who believed that it was interference in the internal affairs of the Kingdom of Laos.

In this period, the USA continued to interfere in the Laos' internal affairs and provided large-scale economic assistance which amounted to two-thirds of the country's national budget. In addition, they created a special mission to identify the military needs of Laos so that the security could be provided. As a result, supplies of American weapons started in Vientiane. The US military instructors began to arrive there after them. The Phoui Sananikone's government acted in accordance with recommendations of the US Embassy: the Laotian police intensified its persecution of patriotic national elements and Laotian army resumed military operations against units of the Lao Patriotic Front. Nevertheless, these actions did not resolve the fundamental task-destruction of the national liberation movement.

At first glance, it seemed that the pro-American forces reached their goal. However, on August 9, 1960 as a result of another military coup d'etat but supported by the country's patriotic forces the pro-American rulers were removed from power. Neutralist Souvanna Phouma was appointed the Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Laos; he said that his government would respect the Geneva Accords of 1954, cooperate with the LPF and lead the country "towards peace and neutrality". On top of that, the Souvanna Phouma government established diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. Souvanna Phouma might have completely satisfied the Soviet leadership, direct proof of that is sending two squadrons of Soviet military transport aircraft and some other types of military assistance to Vientiane at the end of 1960.

This policy did not suit the USA. With Americans, Phoumi Nosavan could gather his supporters to form an alternative government together with other right-wing activist Prince Boun Oum. Their organized rebellion resulted in a civil war. The USA has started to prepare a collective intervention against Laos and developments in Laos threatened to escalate into a new international local conflict.

In this situation, on November 16, 1960 Souvanna Phouma accused the USA of support provided to the right-wing forces in Laos, sent his representatives to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and People's Republic of China and directly addressed the USSR for help.

The subsequent course of events allows specifying another line in studying the Laotian issue namely, determining the role of the Geneva Conference on the Peaceful Settlement of the Laotian Question of 1961-1962. Attempts of military pressure on Laos led to the organization, with the active participation of the Soviet

Union and France of an international meeting on Laos, during which the country received its neutrality guarantees.

In March-April 1961, Souvanna Phouma made a tour to a number of countries in Asia and Europe, he also visited Moscow. On April 1, 1961 the Soviet leadership launched an initiative to decide on the exact date of international meeting on Laos.

Representatives of Laos, Burma, the United Kingdom, Democratic Republic of Vietnam, India, Cambodia, Canada, the People's Republic of China, Poland, the USSR, the USA, Thailand, France, South Vietnam attended the meeting that was held intermittently in Geneva from May 16, 1961 to July 23, 1962. The agenda included one question-international aspects of the settlement of the Laotian problem. During this meeting, two lines were defined: The Soviet Union and other socialist countries-participants of the meeting-made suggestions aimed at a peaceful settlement in Laos; the USA, with the support of its allies, sought the retraction of Laos in military blocs.

On behalf of the Soviet government, Gromyko, Head of the Soviet delegation, submitted for consideration to the participants of the Conference two draft documents the Declaration on the Neutrality of Laos and the Agreement on Withdrawal from the Territory of Laos of Foreign Troops and Military Personnel and a Mandate of the International Commission. The suggestions contain therein included the need for Laos to maintain a policy of neutrality, non-participation in military blocs, prevention of establishment of foreign military bases on its territory (Collection of the basic documents on political settlement in Laos (1954-1969), 1969 (Sergeev, 2007)).

The participants' commitment to respect the neutrality of Laos, its independence and territorial integrity should have been clearly stated.

In his speech, the Head of the US delegation Dean Rusk tried to prove that the only "legitimate government" of Laos was the right-wing leadership overthrown shortly before the meeting and that without the participation of its representatives the meeting would be doomed to failure.

The USA always used such tactics when they were not sure of a positive result for themselves. Other participants of the meeting did not support the US position and the resulting resolutions rested on the proposals made by the Soviet Union and a number of other socialist countries. The Declaration on the Neutrality of Laos and Protocol thereto were adopted.

The signatories of the Declaration agreed not to take any actions that violate the independence, neutrality,

unity and territorial integrity of Laos, not to involve Laos into military alliances, not to introduce foreign troops and not to create foreign bases on its territory.

The USA was not satisfied with such resolutions. They qualified involvement in the Lao government of representatives of the main political groups as an act "which inevitable consequence would be the overthrow" of this government. As "the most appropriate compromise", they put forward an old project of dividing Laos into two parts. It was intended to create a separate state in the South of Laos, a kind of corridor for the US troopers between Thailand and South Vietnam and a pro-American "neutralist" regime to the north of it. To accomplish this project, the USA offered to increase its assistance to the right-wing forces and the pro-Western neutralists.

Results of the Meeting and subsequent events related to the situation around Laos allow highlighting another area in the study of the Laotian issue-defining the role of the USSR in strengthening positions of the left-wing forces and neutralists in Laos. But not everything is obvious here either.

After the Geneva Conference on Laos, the coalition government of Laos appealed to the USSR for economic and technical assistance in November 1962. On November 21, this issue was discussed at the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). N.S. Khrushchev criticized the position of the Pathet Lao supporters seeking to strengthen their position in the country through the USSR. He stated explicitly: "the main thing is peace. The peace was made without losers and winners" and the following phrase concerned the Laotian left-wing forces afterwards: "if you want to wage a war this is your internal affair. We've all done".

An indirect confirmation of the fact that the USSR has unofficially sympathized with Souvanna Phouma is the fact that in the period of 1961-1963 translations of his articles from foreign publications have regularly appeared in the Soviet press, for example: "Neutral Laos-factor of peace"; "The USA should stop interfering"; "Laos after Geneva".

The resolutions on Laos did not clearly satisfy the US power circles; they tried to change the situation by any means. Numerous agents of various US services and especially the CIA, arranged in 1963 a series of political assassinations of prominent Laotian leaders who advocated the strict observance of the Geneva Accords of 1962. Gradually, a split was being caused in the ranks of naturalists.

In these circumstances, leaders of the Soviet Union lost interest (and the ability) to expand their influence on

Laos and almost entirely concentrated on the Vietnam issue. Nevertheless, delivery of military supplies and sending of military experts (according to some data, there were 113 people there by 1970) continued from the USSR through Democratic Republic of Vietnam to support the LPF.

Unstable internal situation in Laos where military coups (February 1965 and October 1966) were followed by attempts to create a government of national unity (summer 1965, January 1967 and June 1971) resulted in the country named by Soviet diplomats "a victim of aggression of US imperialism and accomplices thereof". The Note of the USSR Foreign Ministry as of February 22, 1965 indicated that the armed intervention of the United States in the affairs of South Vietnam and Laos had created a dangerous hotbed of international tension. In its statement dated February 26, 1965, the US. State Department reported that the United States could not agree with such allegation: "the current dangerous situation in Southeast Asia is a direct result of intervention and aggression undertaken by North Vietnam against its neighbors. If this aggression had stopped, the international tension mentioned in the Note of the USSR Foreign Ministry would have immediately disappeared" (FPA RF, Fund 79, Series 20, File 2, Folder 21, Sheet 13).

Apart from a direct appeal to the US leadership through the embassy representatives, the Soviet Union tried to bring up for discussion of the international community the situation in this country as part of the declared program "Support to Indochinese Peoples". The situation in Laos was reflected in the statement of XXIII CPSU Congress on the US aggression in Vietnam adopted on April 8, 1966. On behalf of the Soviet Communists, the US actions in the region were condemned: "Involving in their aggression the allies of military blocs, the US imperialists pose an immediate serious threat to the security and sovereignty of other countries, grossly interfere in the affairs of Laos, try to exert military and political pressure on Cambodia and aggravate the international situation". The Congress proceedings stated: "The Soviet people express their solidarity with the peoples of Laos and Cambodia and require strict compliance of the United States of America with the Geneva Accords of 1954 and 1962".

The Soviet side was of the view that the way to solve the issues relating to the situation in Laos and Cambodia should be the strict implementation of the Geneva Accords of 1954 and 1962. Furthermore, during a stay of the party and government delegation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the USSR (April 10-17, 1965) the usefulness of convening such meeting in the future was suggested (Sviridov, 1969).

On January 28, 1969 a statement made by A.A. Gromyko on Laos followed; on behalf of the Soviet leadership he denounced therein an increasingly strengthened US interference in the internal affairs of Laos. It was mentioned in the document: "for a long time the United States is going down the path of violation of the Geneva Accords intending to turn Laos into the theater of war which can be used for its aggressive policy in Indochina". It emphasized that "escalation of US intervention in Laos does not only create favorable conditions for the negotiations on Vietnam in Paris but it also poses a risk of transferring the fire of the US aggressive war in Vietnam to neighboring countries" (FPA RF, Fund 79, Series 24, Folder 35, Sheet 37).

The foreign press of the time often contained such statements: "in accordance with the Geneva Accords, Russia helps Laos to maintain its neutrality and independence in the framework of the tripartite coalition government. Russians are very limited in their ability to influence the procommunist forces of Pathet Lao... Russians will continue to support the agreements only in words but in a longer time lag activation of Soviet involvement and support, including economic, could be expected ("Asian Letter", "Russians in Asia" as of March 11, 18, 25, 1969; FPA RF, Fund 79, Series 24, Case 5, Folder 35, Sheet 122).

In our opinion, these characteristics fully correspond to the actual state of affairs, especially since the Soviet leadership's plans included the political, economic and cultural cooperation with Laos as a part of the Indochinese region.

In contrast to Vietnam, the Soviet Union treated the problems in Laos more carefully and cautiously as demonstrated in specific statements and activities of both the highest Soviet party-state leadership and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. First of all, this state was for the Soviet Union as a territory located close to Vietnam. Therefore, the Soviet Union's benevolence to these countries, as well as the development of mutual contacts in the geopolitical triangle of PRC-USA-USSR depended largely upon the policy of leaders of these countries in an ever more growing Vietnamese crisis.

Consideration of the issues related to the identification of the most important aspects of international relations in Indochina during the Cold War in the context of forming an objective picture of the situation around Laos in 1950-1960s allows highlighting the most important areas for further research. First of all, this is consideration of the external force's impact on the political processes taking place in Laos.

Studying a degree of responsibility of the US power circles for the retraction of Laos in the Indochinese conflict should be mentioned as the second area.

Third, from the point of the international community's impact on settlement of the situation in Laos, it is important to determine the significance of the Geneva Conference on Laos of 1961-1962.

Fourthly, definition of the Soviet Union's role in strengthening positions of the left-wing forces and neutralists in Laos during the period under consideration.

## CONCLUSION

Thus, summing up the review of the prospects for studying the Laotian problem in the international relations during the Cold War, it can be stated that four characterized story, in our opinion, have the best prospects for further scientific development.

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