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## China usurping Vietnamese influence in Laos

**Vientiane moving moving away from traditional backer as Beijing boosts aid**

BEIJING - ONCE a brother-in-arms with Vietnam in fighting a United States-backed government, Laos is increasingly moving away from its traditional backer and into the arms of its big neighbour China, according to analysts.

Chinese President Hu Jintao will arrive in Laos tomorrow, paying the second visit by a Chinese head of state to the communist-run, predominantly Buddhist country, with which China shares a 500km border.

In recent years, China has stepped up its aid to Laos - fulfilling a role once played by the Soviet Union - building not only hospitals, cement works and cultural centres, but also roads to link China's landlocked south-west with Thailand.

'The Chinese influence has grown tremendously,' said Laos expert Grant Evans, a professor at the University of Hong Kong.

Traditionally, Laotians head to Vietnam for their studies. Many top Laotian officials speak Vietnamese fluently, resulting from ties which go back to before the 1975 communist revolution.

Now, a small but growing number are going to China to study Chinese, Professor Evans said.

They are drawn by Beijing's success at transforming its moribund, state-dominated economy into a global powerhouse, yet without sacrificing political control.

'China's been successful - its model has become an advertisement,' Prof Evans added.

It is a change that China has been encouraging, said Associate Professor Ian Storey of the Asia-Pacific Centre for Security Studies in Hawaii.

'The important thing is that China - as it is with other countries in South-east Asia - is wining and dining these officials, bringing them over to China, putting them through training, as a way to influence the next generation,' said Prof Storey, who specialises in South-east Asian security issues.

'It realises it cannot win with the present generation because their links are so strong with Vietnam, so it is working on the younger generation,' he added.

There are practical reasons for China's interest in Laos.

Beijing is not just trying to out-manoeuvre Vietnam, a country which has historically been wary of China and whose modern relations have been marked by territorial and political disputes.

China also obtains timber and mineral resources like copper and gold to feed its booming economy from Laos, and the country gives China land access to the Thai market and ports.

China's foreign ministry this week declined to give details of the deals Mr Hu may be signing in Laos, aside from 'cooperation agreements' on trade, health and public security.

But it seems certain President Hu has some goodies in his bag, according to Dr Milton Osborne, a South-east Asia expert at Australia's Lowy Institute think-tank.

'These are visits that are greatly valued. To be visited in this way by a very senior Chinese official, he must surely come with a gift or an arrangement for some exchange programme,' Dr Osborne said.

REUTERS