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## **Vietnam's Sole Military Ally**

**The country's longstanding ties with its neighbor Laos constitute an alliance in everything but name.**

By Khang Vu

Does Vietnam have a military ally? The country's famous "Three Nos" defense policy – no military alliances, no foreign military bases on Vietnamese territory, and no reliance on any country to combat others – says that it does not. Indeed, since the end of the Cold War, Vietnam has embraced a multi-vector diplomacy: trying to improve relations with the major powers and participating in multilateral institutions while shunning signing Cold War-style military alliances in a bid to avoid abandonment.

While scholars pay much attention to Vietnam's eastern flank – the South China Sea – many forget that Vietnam's western flank is also key to its national security. It is also home to Vietnam's sole military ally in the post-Cold War era. Vietnam signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation with Laos in 1977, around the same time that Vietnam inked another Treaty of Amity and Cooperation with the Soviet Union in 1978. The Vietnam-Laos Treaty is still in effect today and on its 35th anniversary in 2012, the Central Propaganda Department of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) described the pact as a "defense treaty." Three years later, Vietnam's Ministry of Defense referred to the Treaty as a "mutual defense pact." The existence of Vietnam's sole military alliance contradicts the argument that Vietnam will not join an alliance because it wants to preserve its leeway under the "Three Nos" policy. Hence, it is important to dissect why the Vietnam-Laos alliance has survived the end of the Cold War and continues to be important today.

### **The Story of an Alliance**

The Communist ties between Vietnam and Laos dated back to the Vietnam War years, when North Vietnam assisted the communist Pathet Lao in its armed struggles against the Kingdom of Laos. In return, the Pathet Lao gave North Vietnam access to its territory in order to transport armed forces and military supplies via the Ho Chi Minh trail to South Vietnam. The Pathet Lao victory in Laos's civil war came in large part thanks to North Vietnam's assistance. The two countries grew closer after 1975 and Vietnam helped Laos set up a Communist government and provided economic aids.

The Treaty was thus beneficial to both sides. For Laos, the country still struggled with the Central Intelligence Agency-trained and China-backed Hmong Army and other insurgents. For Vietnam, Hanoi needed to secure its western flank by having Laos under its tutelage in the context of deteriorating ties with China. Despite the fact that the Treaty does not contain a clause explicitly pointing to a military alliance, its second clause states that "both sides pledge to cooperate closely in order to increase defense capability, to protect independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity." The treaty was initially valid for 25 years (1977-2002), with periodic automatic 10-year renewals unless either side signaled its desire to abolish the treaty by documents one year before its expiration date.

Although the two countries did not describe the treaty as a defense pact at the time, it paved the way for Vietnam to station between 40,000 and 60,000 troops on Lao soil to help protect the fledgling Pathet government and to balance against China's influence in Northern Laos. In the words of Vietnam's then-CPV Secretary Le Duan, the treaty signified that the two countries would be "bound together forever in the cause of socialist construction and national defense." The treaty put Laos strictly under Vietnam's shadow, allowing Hanoi to tell Laos to sever its ties with China in the late 1970s even though such a move hurt Lao national interests. Vientiane also recognized the Heng Samrin government that Vietnam installed in Cambodia after its overthrow of the murderous Khmer Rouge regime in 1979.

In more recent times, the treaty has continued to form the backbone of the Vietnam-Laos relationship. Mutual defense cooperation has fallen under the purview of the treaty. Hanoi has also helped Laos train its Party cadres and provided it access to the South China Sea. During the 2009 Southeast Asian Games in Laos, Vietnam even sent in crews to help Laos successfully host the event. Many Vietnamese call Laos a "brother country" and Vietnamese netizens often use the informal name "Eastern Laos" to refer to Vietnam. Vietnam's security forces have helped Laos maintain domestic stability on several occasions, namely after the 2000 terrorist attacks in Vientiane and the 2003 rebellion in Houaphan Province. Importantly, Vietnam has considered its alliance with Laos a success in prevent threats from arising in the western border and in defending the country from afar. Hanoi calling the Treaty a mutual defense pact in 2015 is a reminder of how important the alliance has been to Vietnam's security for the past 40 years.

### **What Makes the Alliance so Successful?**

There are two major factors that can explain the continuity of the Cold War Vietnam-Laos alliance in the post-Cold War world: shared security interests and common political values. Hanoi perceived Vientiane not simply as a security partner but also a comrade-in-arms. The treaty stated clearly that the alliance was rooted in "the spirit of proletarian internationalism" and "Marxism-Leninism" with the goal of contributing to the joint construction of socialism. Shared ideological values tend to bind allies together, for they are more likely to trust each other not to undermine their respective domestic political orders. Such ideological trust was even more important for both Vietnam and Laos after the disintegration of the Soviet bloc. It is natural that the two nations have affirmed their party-to-party ties as much as the military relationship.

The ideological factor is the key feature that is missing in the Vietnam-United States relationship. Although Washington and Hanoi share security interests in the South China Sea, the two countries embrace different political values. The Trump administration's frequent condemnations of the Chinese Communist Party has put the U.S.-Vietnam relations at odds. President-elect Joe Biden's emphasis on a "summit of democracies" among U.S. allies can alienate and trigger Hanoi's enduring suspicion of hostile forces stoking a color revolution.

While it is clear that Vietnam does not want to be a U.S. military ally since it is afraid of causing unnecessary feuds with China, it is also true that differences in political values play a role in facilitating mutual trust beyond common security interests. The case study of the Vietnam-Laos alliance shows that Vietnam is open to forming military alliances only if it is sure that such an alliance will not undermine its domestic political authority. The exception to the "Three Nos" policy might just be a state that shares both security interests and ideological values with Vietnam.

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