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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Unlikely Allies: Lao Insurgent Perspectives of Armed Group Transnational Collaboration in the Emerald Triangle Region during the Third Indochina War

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Abstract

During the Third Indochina War (1979-1991), the ideological alignments of involved parties differed from those during the Second Indochina War, also known as the Vietnam War. Whereas the Second Indochina War pitted communists squarely against non-communists and anti-communists, the Third Indochina War was more complicated and less ideological or political, with communists often fighting against other communists due to the Sino-Soviet ideological split. The enemy of one's enemy was frequently viewed as a friend, often leading to unlikely alliances not rooted in ideological or political similarities. In this article, I argue that it is important to consider the unlikely alliances that emerged during the Third Indochina War by focusing on the particular cross-border interactions and conflicts between communists and non-communists that occurred in the Emerald Triangle, the tri-border region between Laos, Cambodia and Thailand. Focusing particularly on the Lao insurgent perspective, I consider how Lao anti-communist insurgents, the Khmer Rouge, the Communist Party of Thailand, other armed groups, and the Thai military participated in transnational collaboration in this region during the Third Indochina War. In particular, based largely on Lao-language interviews with key figures in the Lao insurgency conducted for over a decade, I examine how Lao insurgents interacted with Khmer Rouge to oppose a common enemy, communist Vietnam and their allies, the People's Republic of Kampuchea and the Lao People's Democratic Republic, and how the Thai military supported them, but only insofar as it enabled them to maintain control over security inside Thailand.

Keywords: Insurgency; Thailand; Laos; Cambodia; communist; borderlands

Introduction

In February 1979, a short but bloody and destructive war broke out along the international border between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. The PRC intended to "teach Vietnam a lesson" through a time-limited one-month military campaign inside Vietnam. There were heavy losses of life and materials to both sides. In the end, it was unclear who taught whom a lesson (Chanda 1986; Guan 2013; Morain 2021). Less than two months earlier, over 250,000 Vietnamese soldiers crossed the border and entered Cambodia, where they attacked the Khmer Rouge. Soon, the Vietnamese had taken control of most of Cambodia, a move that particularly angered the PRC, which was also unhappy with how the government in Vietnam was treating the ethnic Chinese population, especially in Ho Chi Minh City (Baird 2020; Brown and Zasloff 1986; Funston 1979; Nguyen-vo 1992; Vu 2020).

The regional geopolitical circumstances involving Vietnam and the PRC were significantly linked to an accelerating political rift between Maoist thought from the PRC and Marxist-Leninist thought from the Soviet Union – the so-called Sino-Soviet split. These circumstances affected political and material relations throughout the Communist world and considerably impacted political alliances in other

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parts of Southeast Asia, including Laos, Cambodia and Thailand. Crucially for this article, on the one hand, the Pathet Lao communists, who controlled the government of the Lao People's Democratic Republic, strongly sided with the Vietnamese, as did the newly established People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) government in Cambodia. On the other side, the Khmer Rouge, other right-wing and royalist anti-Vietnamese communist groups, the anti-Lao PDR insurgency, anti-Vietnamese communist groups and the government of Thailand sided with the PRC, as did the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the United States and Western Europe (Chanda 1986; Goscha 2006; Southgate 2015). Conflict between these two groups particularly emerged in the Emerald Triangle, the tri-border zone between Thailand, Laos and Cambodia (see Figure 1), an understudied borderland and the main geographical focus of this article.

This article explores the unlikely alliances that emerged beginning in the late 1970s between Lao anti-communist insurgents and the Khmer Rouge in the Emerald Triangle area during the late 1970s and early 1980s, primarily through the lens of Lao anti-communist insurgents. I also examine how anti-communist ethnic Lao insurgents in southern Laos became militarily aligned with the staunchly pro-PRC communist Khmer Rouge. My main argument is that the Third Indochina War led to complicated alliances, some of which might have seemed implausible or even impossible just a few years earlier, considering the wide ideological differences between allies. I also contend that the borders between the three countries were crucial for why the various armed groups in the Emerald Triangle were able to operate. I intend to contribute to a better understanding of how these unlikely alliances between hardline communists and anti-communists emerged in a heavily militarised, remote and multilingual borderland region.

This research is based on detailed semi-structured interviews conducted in the Lao language by the author with former anti-communist Lao insurgents and former Khmer Rouge soldiers, presently living in northeastern Cambodia, northeastern Thailand and the United States, between 2008 and 2023. I was gradually, over many years, introduced to the different people interviewed for this research. These connections and introductions allowed me to gain their trust. Still, parsing out which interview accounts are credible has been difficult, requiring years of corroborating facts in as many ways as possible and analysing interviewees' accounts. While oral histories present various challenges associated with memory and political positionality, especially in the history dealt with here, detailed written records of these events do not exist. Thus, I have tried to verify interviewee accounts in as many ways and from as many sources as possible, although this article is largely written from the perspective of a number of anti-communist insurgents from southern Laos.

The rest of the article is organised as follows. First, I briefly provide some background about the Third Indochina War, how it developed, and the kinds of unlikely alliances that emerged. I then discuss how the Lao resistance and the Khmer Rouge first met each other and how that relationship gradually expanded and shifted. The Lao resistance in southern Laos eventually created an umbrella organisation under exiled right-wing Lao military leader General Phoumi Nosavan, who was based in Bangkok. I then explain how the partnership was organised until the Vietnamese attacks. I discuss how the Khmer Rouge provided additional support to the Lao resistance. I then explain how Vietnamese attacks in the Emerald Triangle area reduced the power of the Khmer Rouge and the Lao insurgency. Phoumi Nosavan suddenly died soon after these attacks. I cover how the Thai military's disagreement with the Khmer Rouge directly arming the Lao insurgency led a Lao group of insurgents to move farther into Laos rather than return to Thailand. It also led the Khmer Rouge to stop supporting the Lao insurgency. Finally, I provide an analysis of the interview content and end with concluding remarks.

The PRC-Lao PDR Split in 1978-79

One of the key issues that affected political and military opposition to the Lao PDR government after 1975 related to the PRC split with the Lao PDR in the late 1970s. In Laos, this resulted in a rift in the communist Pathet Lao, with Kaysone Phomvihane siding with the Vietnamese and the member of the Luang Prabang royal family, Chao Souphannouvong, the Red Prince, being sympathetic to the PRC (Baird 2018). Indeed, as already touched upon above, the split was a consequence of the Sino-Soviet split, a major rift in the communist world that began in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Later, the Sino-Vietnamese split divided the PRC and Vietnam (Chang 1983; Evans 2002; Pao-Min 1985).

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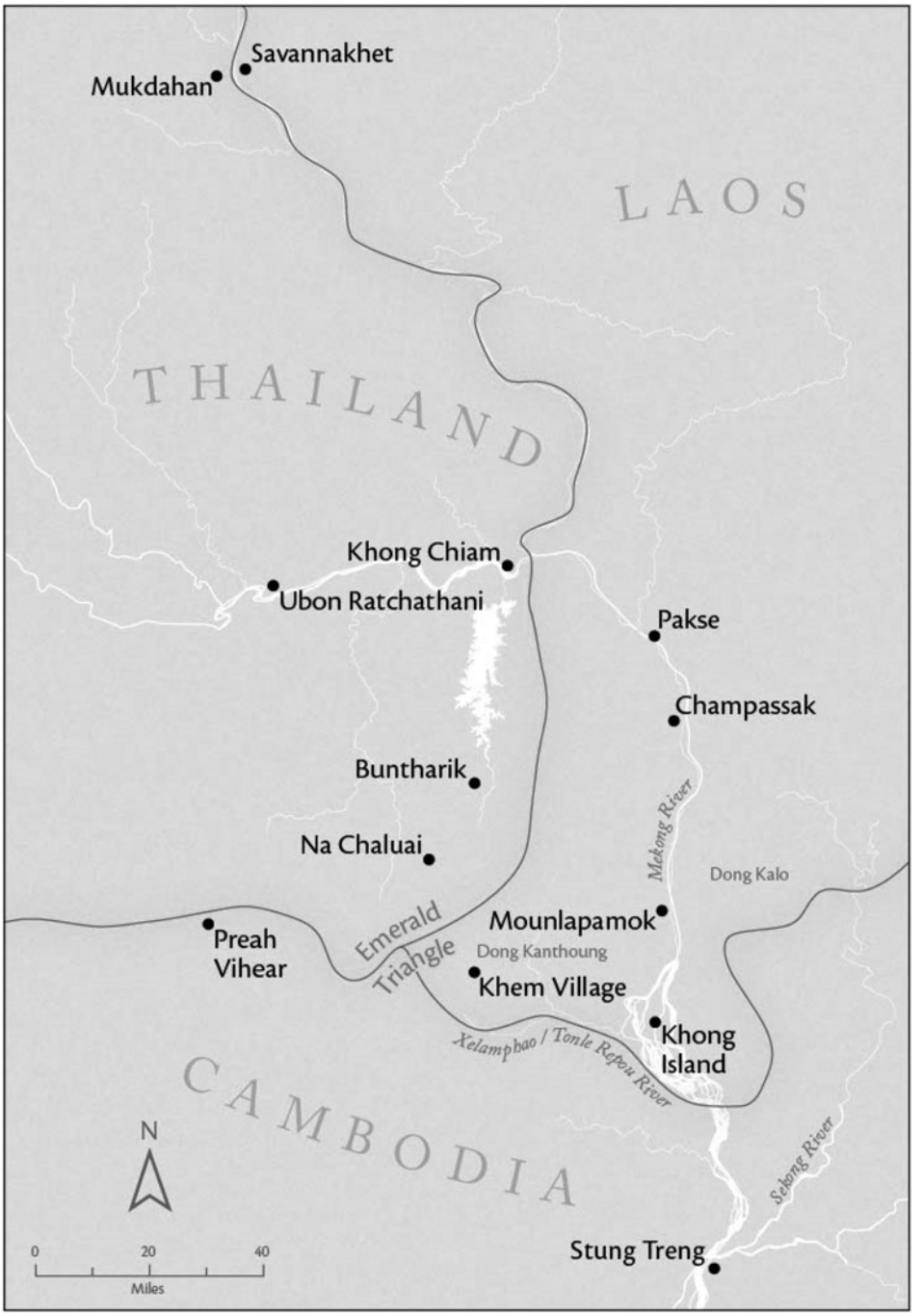


Figure 1. The Emerald Triangle, the border area between Thailand, Laos and Cambodia.

In October 1974, the provisional government in Laos signed an economic cooperation agreement with the PRC (*Vientiane News* 1974), suggesting that relations were good. However, once the Pathet Lao gained full control of the country in 1975, they firmly sided with Vietnam, causing relations with the PRC to cool (Vang 1996). Indicative of the political shift, after Lao PDR was officially established on 2 December 1975, all the new currency that was expected to be used in Laos was initially printed in the PRC. However, in 1976, the Lao PDR government decided to burn all the new PRC-printed currency,

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indicating that serious tensions had emerged. The Lao PDR ended up printing the new currency in East Germany (Interview with King Souvannakane 2016).

Even as late as December 1976, Laos was still expressing its gratitude to Vietnam, the Soviet Union and the PRC for helping the revolution succeed. However, in mid-1977, because of the Pathet Lao's close relationship with Vietnam, the Pathet Lao decided to make the Soviet Union its main supporter, a positon that the PRC had previously held. In mid-1977, Kaysone Phomvihane asked Hua Guofeng if the PRC could provide more aid to the Lao PDR. When they refused, the Lao PDR began shifting closer to Vietnam and the Soviet Union (Vang 1996). By mid-1978, however, relations had soured significantly, in parallel with Vietnam's relations with the PRC.

As Jacqui Chagnon (1980), who worked for the non-government organisation Quaker Services Laos in Laos during the late 1970s and 1980s, wrote,

> "Until mid-1978, Chinese Lao relations were marked by 'a spirit of solidarity,' but after that time the relation soured rapidly. Indeed, on August 1, 1978 the Lao asked the Chinese Embassy to close their consulate in Oudomxay Province, the only one outside of Vientiane. At least initially, the Chinese ignored the request. Then on March 6, 1979, the Lao government asked the last 600 Chinese construction workers in Laos to "totally suspend" their northern road work and return to China 'for their security'" (Chagnon 1980).

In April 1979, the Lao PDR government provided the clearest statement related to the PRC that it had made to date,

> "The Chinese powerholders are pursuing a counterrevolutionary policy of regional hegemony and big-nation expansionism … are ruthlessly carrying out schemes to swallow up our country as well as Vietnam and Kampuchea so as to proceed with annexing other countries in Southeast Asia… We must maintain high vigilance against the adventurous warmongering schemes of the Chinese powerholders" (Bedlington 1981: 106).

Indeed, in 1979, the Lao PDR declared China to be their "No. 1 enemy" (Becker 1979), and this deterioration of relations is crucial for understanding the circumstances that developed in the Laos-Cambodia-Thailand borderlands.

It was not until early 1987 that relations between the PRC and the Lao PDR showed signs of improvement. In particular, the PRC's Deputy Foreign Minister, Liu Shuqing, visited Vientiane, the first high-level diplomatic exchange between the PRC and Laos since relations between the two countries deteriorated in 1978. However, the Lao government remained sceptical, especially since the PRC was still refusing to hold talks with its close ally, Vietnam. They wanted Vietnam to withdraw its troops from Cambodia before engaging in such talks. However, the PRC treated Laos differently and did not demand that Vietnamese troops be withdrawn from Laos (Hiebert 1987).

The Lao PDR government initially tried to stay out of the Sino-Soviet conflict, which was based on doctrinal differences between Maoism and Soviet Marx-Leninism, but was eventually forced to choose sides and openly support Vietnam, thus entering into tense political relations with the PRC. Their support of Vietnam is hardly surprising, given that the Pathet Lao came to power due to Vietnamese support. In March 1979, the PRC threatened the Lao PDR government and warned it to "exercise restraint," which the Vietnamese media interpreted as a coded message to Laos to not become involved in the war between the PRC and Vietnam (*BBC* 1979a). In June, the Lao PDR government accused the PRC of arming and training "reactionaries" in Laos, amassing 50,000 soldiers along the China-Laos border, and trying to sabotage the Lao PDR government (*BBC* 1979b). Later, in 1980, the PRC heavily criticised the Lao government for being a puppet of Vietnam and the Soviet Union. They also accused Vietnam of sending 60,000 soldiers into Laos to militarily control key locations across the country (*BBC 1980*). When Chao Khamlouang Nokham, who had been a neutralist colonel with the Royal Lao Police before 1975, was confined to a re-education camp in Viengxay District, Houaphanh Province, in northern Laos in late 1979, he heard Lao students who had studied in the PRC arguing about ideology with Lao students who had studied in the Soviet Union. The hostility was evident (Interview with Khamlouang Nokham 2008).

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Once the Vietnamese had secured control of most of Cambodia, in early 1979, the government of Thailand became increasingly concerned that the Vietnamese might attack them next from both Laos and Cambodia, thus fulfilling the long prophesised domino theory (Dommen 2001; Kerdphol 1986; *Xinhua* 1981). The concern of a Vietnamese led attack on Thailand resulted in complex political entanglements: the PRC supported the Khmer Rouge along the Thailand-Cambodia border and, in turn, for access through Thailand, agreed to stop materially supporting the Maoist Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) (see Marks 1994).

On 8 November 1980, it was reported that in October, over 200 people, referred to as "international reactionaries" – a code word for 'Chinese' at the time – had been arrested in Vientiane, and that over 500 people had been arrested across the country (Barang 1980). These arrests indicate that tensions between the Lao PDR and the PRC government had escalated.

Some Lao PDR officials, including Khamsengkeo Sengsathit, a senior Lao PDR official in Vientiane, had already fled to the PRC from Laos in 1979 (Baird 2018). The PRC soon recognised the political party that Khamsengkeo joined, the Lao Socialist Party (see below), based in France, and before long, the Soviet Union denounced the PRC for supporting the party (*Moscow Radio* 1979). In a short period, the political landscape in mainland Southeast Asia had been transformed, with new and unlikely alliances emerging, many of which had transnational elements.

This background is crucial because the falling out between the PRC and the governments in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia was the underlying reason why the PRC became willing to provide arms and other forms of support to the Khmer Rouge, other anti-Vietnamese Cambodian groups, and the anti-Lao PDR Lao insurgents operating in the Emerald Triangle, the focus of this article.

First Encounter between the Khmer Rouge and Lao Insurgents

According to a few sources, Khamvixay Vayphachit was probably the first ethnic Lao anti-Lao PDR insurgent to make meaningful contact with the Khmer Rouge in the Emerald Triangle area during the tumultuous year of 1979, although Lao and Khmer Rouge had interacted before 1975. Born in southern Laos in a small village on Khong Island, Khamvixay's parents moved with him to Cambodia when he was a child. There, he received instruction at school in the Khmer language, so he became bilingual in Lao and Khmer. Later, before 1975, he returned to Laos' Khong Island, where he was eventually ordained as a Buddhist monk. However, in 1975, he crossed into Thailand as a refugee, disrobed, and joined the Lao anti-communist insurgency (Interview with Khamvixay Vayphachit 2022).

Khamvixay initially served under Sergeant Syfong Kongkeo, who had previously been a Pathet Lao communist soldier before defecting to the Royal Government in the late 1960s. However, after approximately one year, he joined the resistance group led by Lieutenant Pang Latamany Lao, a former Royal Lao Army soldier. In 1979, Khamvixay was manoeuvring a paddle boat up the Xelamphao River, which marked the border between Laos and Cambodia, with four other insurgents, when they suddenly met another paddle boat coming from the other direction. There were seven Khmer Rouge in the boat. Both sides had guns, and they initially pointed them at each other. However, neither side dared to fire. When Khamvixay realised that they were Cambodians, he spoke Khmer to ask what they were doing in the area. One of them responded that they were fighting the Vietnamese. Khamvixay replied that his group was doing the same thing. Tension subsided, and the standoff ended. Initially, the Lao were not sure who the Cambodians were, as they referred to themselves as *ongkan*, or the organisation. They asked Khamvixay who his leader was. He said that Pang Latamany at Nong Dong was his commander. The two sides finally went their separate ways (Interview with Khamvixay Vayphachit 2022).

A few months later, some Thai military officers came to look for Khamvixay at the Nong Dong camp in Buntharik District, Ubon Ratchathani Province, northeastern Thailand. The Khmer Rouge, particularly its brutal military general and political leader, Ta Mok, had requested his presence when he was in Bangkok after recently crossing the border area. They wanted Khamvixay to meet a group of newly arrived Khmer Rouge at a place on the Thai side of the border named Phalan Seua, near 8 Oom. Previously, this group of Khmer Rouge had contacted Samat Barami (code name), a Thai military intelligence officer, and asked him to arrange a meeting with Khamvixay. Therefore, Khamvixay led a small group of seven Lao insurgents to meet the Khmer Rouge. On the way, they encountered 30 Khmer Rouge

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soldiers in the forest. However, the Khmer Rouge were afraid and fled. Khamvixay's group was eventually reportedly able to meet one Khmer Rouge who had previously spoken with Khamvixay. Later, they were able to coordinate for the Khmer Rouge in the forest to return to meet Khamvixay's group and their Thai minders. Ta Mok also showed up with his Thai military minders, and they all ate lunch together in the forest. The Thais finally agreed to allow the Khmer Rouge to establish a camp on Thai soil (Interview with Khamvixay Vayphachit 2022) following the resolution of one key issue. However, the Thais insisted that they would only allow them to stay on Thai soil if they agreed not to provide any support to the CPT. The Khmer Rouge agreed to this condition (Interview with Oudone Rattanasengchanh 2022). They reportedly abandoned their fellow Maoists to ally with a right-wing government in Thailand so that they could resist the pro-Soviet Vietnamese, Lao and Cambodians.

Contacting Syfong Kongkeo and Sisaveuy Neophondeua

Later in 1979, the PRC began providing weapons (such as AK-47s), equipment and training to insurgent groups fighting against the Lao PDR government. As Gunn (1983: 319) put it, "Clearly China is the pivot on which the resistance to the Vietnamese in Indochina turns."

Sergeant Syfong Kongkeo was the first to receive guns from the Khmer Rouge. Later, Captain Sisaveuy Neophondeua, a former Royal Lao Army officer, joined Syfong. They commanded several hundred people, including one of the largest groups of Lao insurgent soldiers in the deep south of Laos at the time. They were based at Houay Mak Yap, near the Emerald Triangle, on the Lao side of the border in a forested area known as Dong Kanthoung (see Figure 1) (Interview with Oudone Rattanasengchanh 2022).

The Khmer Rouge initially contacted the Lao insurgents in Dong Kanthoung because they were facing difficulties due to Vietnamese military advances from the south. A Lao Khmer named Uncle Soeum, who was Sisaveuy's assistant, reportedly introduced the Khmer Rouge to Syfong and Sisaveuy in June 1979 (Interview with Oudone Rattanasengchanh 2022). An ethnic Khmer colonel in the Khmer Rouge, named Toep, was apparently based near Kampong Sralau (Tha Peuay), on the Cambodian side of the Cambodia-Laos border in Preah Vihear Province. He encouraged ethnic Lao villagers on the Cambodian side of the border to contact Syfong for help. They did, and Syfong agreed to assist them. Both Syfong and the Khmer Rouge were fighting against the Vietnamese, so they had a reason to support each other. Syfong met Toep in Cambodia and brought him across the Xelamphao River from Cambodia to Laos with his 280 soldiers, in addition to their families. Some female Khmer Rouge carried guns, as was the case for Syfong's soldiers. A man named Tat was Toep's commander. He was later killed by a land mine. Toep commanded a battalion when he first started working with Syfong. At that time, Toep's troops lacked basic supplies, including clothing and medicine. They spent almost a year together, even though Toep only spoke a little Lao (Interview with Syfong Kongkeo 2009).[1]

After Syfong and Sisaveuy came to know Toep, Toep reportedly asked them for help defending their northern flank against a possible Vietnamese attack from Laos. Toep offered to give the Lao 600 older guns if they assisted. The Lao appear to have agreed. The Khmer Rouge initially provided photos of the guns, and then they recruited soldiers to carry them from Cambodia to Laos. Forty people walked three or four days to the border to obtain the guns. The Lao were also paid 20,000 Thai baht to medically treat some Khmer Rouge who were ill. Later, in June-July 1979, the Khmer Rouge gave Syfong's group many AK-47s and one B-40 (Interview with Mai Phanhphainha 2009). It is widely agreed that these troops were the first Lao insurgents to obtain weapons from the PRC via the Khmer Rouge (Interview with Oudone Rattanasengchanh 2022). Burgess (1980) reported that the arms were given to the Lao insurgents with the consent of the PRC.

Ta Saveuan, who originally came from Svay Rieng Province in southern Cambodia, reportedly became a key Khmer Rouge military leader along the border in 1979, once the Khmer Rouge had regrouped there from other parts of Cambodia. He is said to have appointed a Khmer Rouge military leader named Moeun, who was grew up in either Kampong Thom or Kampong Speu, to be responsible for maintaining relations with the Lao insurgents. Moeun could not speak any Lao but later learned some from the Lao

[1]The Khmer Rouge designated Syfong's group as Division #24, reportedly to fool the PRC into supporting them. There were three battalions in the Division, with about 100 soldiers in each. A Lao-Khmer man named Sinouan commanded Battalion #1, Somphone Khounboliboun sak was in charge of Battalion #2, and, a former villager, Bouakham Savangsy led Battalion #3.

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insurgents with whom he interacted. Ta Saveuan was based at a camp at the headwaters of the Xelamphao River in the tri-border area (Interview with Khamvixay Vayphachit 2022). After 1979, Son Sen reportedly became the head of the Khmer Rouge military in the area, with Ke Pauk as second in command (Interview with Steve Heder 2022).

Approximately three months after first making contact with the Khmer Rouge, Syfong and Sisaveuy called in Captain Oudone Rattanasengchanh, a former Royal Lao Army officer and a Lao insurgent leader in Salavan Province, to join a committee that they were establishing to manage the weapons and other supplies provided by the Khmer Rouge. Oudone reportedly came to the border area and met Moeun and a translator (Interview with Oudone Rattanasengchanh 2022).

At the end of the meeting, Moeun gave Oudone just one day to decide whether he wanted to join the group. Oudone decided to consult with Chao Iang and Chao Sak, Champassak royals, in Ubon Ratchathani, before making a final decision. However, to his surprise, Chao Iang yelled at him and Syfong when they told him about the opportunity, and Chao Iang did not agree to cooperate with the Khmer Rouge. In retrospect, Oudone believed that Chao Iang may have lost face and become angry because the Khmer Rouge did not contact him first (Interview with Oudone Rattanasengchanh 2022). However, Chao Iang's negative response did not deter Oudone, Syfong and Sisaveuy, who started working with the Khmer Rouge anyway.

Syfong and Sisaveuy connected with a Khmer Rouge soldier named Sone. He spoke Lao. They established a committee to receive the weapons. In 1980, the following seven people were committee members:

1. Oudone Rattanasengchanh – soldier
2. Sisaveuy Neophondeua– economics
3. Bounthong Bounnhalith – politics
4. Syfong Kongkeo – Head of Military Region 4
5. Symuang Chantharangsy – Head of Military Region 3
6. Dr. Vorachit Keomany
7. Pa Kao Her (Hmong; However, he obtained guns via the PRC) (Interview with Oudone Rattanasengchanh 2022).

Other southern Lao insurgents, including the former Pathet Lao defectors to the Royal Lao Army, Boualiene Vannaxay, Thit Tanh Douangmala and Bouasay Senthip (Baird 2025b) chose not to take guns from the Khmer Rouge (Interview with Phra Khou Sounthone Nhai 2010). The ULNLF – United Laos National Liberation Front or the *Neo Hom Pot Poi Xat*, led by the Hmong former Royal Lao Army Major General Vang Pao, also did not take arms from the PRC. Initially, it appeared that the *Neo Hom* would welcome aid from China. Indeed, in June 1981, the cofounder of the *Neo Hom,* Sisouk Na Champassak, was quoted as saying that they would "attach the Lao wagon to the Khmer Rouge locomotive" (Chanda 1981). Later, however, they reportedly became suspicious of receiving support from the PRC and changed their mind (Interview with Khammeung Manokoune 2009).

After Syfong received guns from the Khmer Rouge, Sisaveuy and Oudone arranged to receive guns from the Khmer Rouge in Dong Kanthoung in 1980, 1981, and 1982. However, Syfong claimed that the guns he received came directly from the PRC through Thailand and did not come via the Khmer Rouge as later weapon supplies would. He claimed that there were 280 Khmer Rouge assigned to help him after he received the weapons, and that is why he was able to obtain guns directly from the PRC, as they were destined for the Khmer Rouge, not the Lao. He also reported that his group received some clothing that was donated as humanitarian aid and was also earmarked for the Khmer Rouge (Interview with Syfong Kongkeo 2009).

In 1979, Mai Phanhphainha, who was previously a Pathet Lao soldier who had defected to the Royal Lao Army in the early 1970s, like Syfong, became the commander of the second so-called "battalion" in the Dong Kanthoung area, while Syfong joined with Sisaveuy and continued to command the other battalion[2]

[2]Mai used the code "75". Other leaders also used codes. For example, Sinouan was 71, Bouakham Savangsy was 72, Lt. Pho was 73, Cha Nhou was 74, Choum Sayachak was 76, Khamfanh was 77 and Siprasit Keomoungkout was 78. Mai was with Choum's group of soldiers at the time. Mai's group also received weapons from the Khmer Rouge (Interview with Mai Phanhphainha 2009).

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(Interview with Mai Phanhphainha 2009; Interview with Oudone Rattanasengchanh 2022). Indeed, key Lao insurgents had different political backgrounds and sometimes were connected in seemingly contradictory ways (Baird 2021).

Mai Phanhphainha had an idea to lie to Chao Iang, saying that he had access to large pieces of ivory but that he needed money to acquire them. He asked for 25,000 baht in advance. Sisaveuy also helped spin the tale. Finally, they got the money, but they used it to buy medicine to treat sick Khmer Rouge along the border instead of getting the ivory. Syfong Kongkeo had previously worked as a medic and also helped. After the Khmer Rouge were treated, they paid the money back to the Lao, and it was reportedly returned to Chao Iang (Interview with Mai Phanhphainha 2009). Syfong took on the role of being a key contact with the Khmer Rouge because he had previously been a Pathet Lao communist before defecting in the early 1970s (Interview with Oudone Rattanasengchanh 2022) (see, also, Baird 2021).

According to Syfong Kongkeo, rival insurgents sometimes reported to Thai authorities that Syfong was trading in stolen livestock and wood and that he was the recipient of Khmer Rouge guns. However, Syfong only acknowledged receiving the guns and disputed the other claims. (Interview with Syfong Kongkeo 2009). In addition, Syfong's underlings were accused by the Thai military of selling their old guns in Thailand because they had obtained better guns from the Khmer Rouge. This may have been true, but Mai Phanhphainha did not believe that they had sold any of the Khmer Rouge guns (Interview with Mai Phanhphainha 2009). Initially, Sisaveuy Neophondeua did not want to give guns to Bouakham Savangsy, Thit Tanh Douangmala and Pang Latamany, but Oudone Rattanasengchanh urged him not to block guns from going to them. Eventually, Sisaveuy reportedly changed his mind and supplied the guns (Interview with Oudone Rattanasengchanh 2022).

The Thai military learned that Syfong was the first to receive guns from the Khmer Rouge and apparently ordered that he be apprehended. Therefore, Syfong had to go to Bangkok to explain the situation to those higher up in the Thai military, after which the situation reportedly improved (Interview with Syfong Kongkeo 2009), at least for a period.

The Khmer Rouge Support Expands

About one year after Khamvixay Vayphachit and his colleagues had first encountered the Khmer Rouge on the Xelamphao River, the Khmer Rouge came to directly look for Pang Latamany's insurgent group, this time without Thai minders. The Khmer Rouge wanted to connect with Khamvixay's group, the first group they had encountered under Pang's command months earlier (Interview with Khamvixay Vayphachit 2022). The two sides met at Houay Xang Tai, on the Lao side of the border, near Buntharik District, Ubon Ratchathani Province, Thailand (Interview with Oudone Rattanasengchanh 2022). Soon after the meeting, the Khmer Rouge reportedly provided 200 weapons to Pang and Khamvixay's group, including AK-47s, CKCs, B-40s, B-69s and landmines, as well as military uniforms and a significant amount of rice. They apparently received guns and supplies based on the number of active soldiers they had working with them. The weapons and supplies were given without any strings attached (Interview with Khamvixay Vayphachit 2022).

Khampheo Latamany, Pang Latamany's younger brother, explained how his brother ended up receiving support from the PRC via the Khmer Rouge. According to Khampheo, a man named Deng played an important role in coordinating between the Lao insurgents and the Chinese Embassy in Bangkok. The Khmer Rouge's arming of Lao insurgents with Chinese backing was not publicised. However, many living in the Emerald Triangle area soon became aware that this was occurring (Interview with Saveng Vongsavath 2009) (see Figure 2).

By 1982, Pang had already been working closely with the Khmer Rouge for a few years. Pang's camp was located on the Lao side of the Emerald Triangle, near an adjacent Khmer Rouge camp on the Cambodian side of the border. Pang frequently entered Thailand. The Khmer Rouge reportedly provided Pang's group with rice and AK-47 machine guns. Deng visited Dong Kanthoung in 1982 (Interview with Saveng Vongsavath 2009). Dawson (1981) reported that the Khmer Rouge was supporting a "pro-Chinese group in southern Laos which has yet to show much effectiveness in its own resistance."

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Figure 2. Lao resistance leaders dressed in Khmer Rouge uniforms. Far left, Tat; second from the left, Khamvixay Vayphachit; second from the right, Pang Latamany; far right, unknown. Emerald Triangle, 1984-85 (photo compliments of Khampheo Latamany).

Making General Phoumi Nosavan the Leader

One of the key political leaders of the insurgency after 1975 was General Phoumi Nosavan. However, unlike other Lao leaders, he had already been living in Thailand for over a decade because he was accused

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of trying to orchestrate a coup d'état in February 1965 and was forced to become a political refugee in Thailand.[3] In 1973, Phoumi had a large house built on Soi Chaiyapheuk, near Ekamai Road in Bangkok. He called it Ban Champa. Phoumi remained an important political figure during the late 1960s and early 1970s. After 1975, he became a key insurgency political leader. However, Phoumi spent most of his time in Bangkok and worked through a number of underlings, including his son Phoumano Nosavan and Lt. Col. Chit Sourisak in Mukdahan, Thailand (Interview with Phoumano Nosavan 2016) (see Figure 3).

By 1979, Oudone Rattanasengchanh, who was leading insurgents in Salavan, came to meet Symuang, another former Royal Lao Army soldier and an insurgent leader in Savannakhet Province, farther to the north, to tell him that the Khmer Rouge had guns to provide to them. Therefore, Symuang took some of his soldiers to the border with Cambodia to obtain support. Sisaveuy Neophondeua, who was a former soldier under General Phoumi Nosavan, met them along with Uncle Soeum, an ethnic Khmer operative from the Ban Khem/Ban Po area in Dong Kanthoung. Sisaveuy and Soeum were the main contacts with the Khmer Rouge at the time. They introduced Symuang and others to a Khmer Rouge leader who was approximately 70 years old.[4] Soeum guided them through minefields to meet him. Only people who knew the way could safely bypass the land mines. The commander could not speak Lao, so Soeum translated (Interview with Symuang Chantharangsy 2016, 2021).

The Khmer Rouge commander asked the Lao if they had an organisation. They did not, but after that meeting, they realised that they needed one (Interview with Symuang Chantharangsy 2016, 2021). Thus, soon after, 20-30 leaders of resistance groups along the border between northeastern Thailand and southern Laos met. They agreed to ask General Phoumi to be their political leader. However, Chao Iang Na Champassak did not attend the meeting, as he was still angry with Syfong Kongkeo, who organised the meeting. Phoumi himself also did not attend (Interview with Syfong Kongkeo 2009). At the end of the meeting, Phoumi Nosavan was appointed leader, even though he was unaware that the organisation even existed (Interview with Symuang Chantharangsy 2016, 2021).

Soon after the insurgents agreed for Phoumi Nosavan to lead them, Symuang Chantharangsy, Sisaveuy Neophondeua, Oudone Rattanasengchanh and Bounthong Bounnhalith, a leading insurgent in Savannakhet, went to Ban Champa to invite Phoumi to lead them. At that point Phoumi was beginning to engage more in politics but had not yet fully engaged. In any case, Phoumi agreed to lead the insurgency in the south (Interview with Symuang Chantharangsy 2016, 2021).

Organising the Tri-Border Insurgency

Phoumi Nosavan's armed insurgent group was named the Lao Freedom Fighters (LFF), or *Neo Pot Poi Xat Lao* in Lao. In 1981, General Sai Sommuan, with the Royal Thai Army, started working to facilitate Phoumi to travel to the Thailand-Cambodia border to meet with Khmer Rouge leaders (Interview with Phoumano Nosavan 2016).

Phoumi apparently originally hoped to meet the Khmer Rouge leader, Khieu Samphan, as they had been in the forest together during the post-WWII Lao Issara anti-French colonialism period. However, Khieu Samphan was busy. Therefore, Ke Pauk attended the meeting at 8 Oom. There was a Khmer Rouge base nearby on the Cambodian side of the border (Interview with Oudone Rattanasengchanh 2022; Interview with Symuang Chantharangsy 2016). Son Sen, Ke Pauk's boss, was also reportedly at the meeting, as was the Salavan insurgent leader, Oudone Rattanasengchanh (Interview with Oudone Rattanasengchanh 2022).

When the two sides met on Cambodian soil near 8 Oom, Symuang Chantharangsy took photos of the meeting between Symuang, Oudone and Sisaveuy and the Khmer Rouge leaders Son Sen and Ke Pauk, although Ke Pauk reportedly did not say anything during the meeting. They stayed with the Khmer

[3]According to his son Phoumano, Phoumi Nosavan was not behind the coup d'état attempt in 1965, but that Kouprasith Abhay and others accused him of attempting to organize a coup, which he apparently did not do. According to Phoumano, the US government wanted Phoumi out of Laos because he was trying to negotiate for peace with the Chinese and Vietnamese (Interview with Phoumano Nosavan 2016). Rebecca Weldon told me that her father, Doc Weldon, also did not believe that Phoumi Nosavan was behind the alleged coup attempt in 1965 (Interview with Rebecca Weldon 2016).

[4]His name was Set Jeuan.

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Figure 3. General Phoumi Nosavan visiting the Laos-Thai border in Mukdahan Province, 1983 (photo compliments of Phoumano Nosavan).

Rouge for one night. The Khmer Rouge emphasised that they wanted to support the Lao to fight against the Vietnamese. Following this initial meeting, three people, including Symuang, travelled to Bangkok to meet Phoumi at his residence, Ban Champa. Then, 10-20 days later, they reportedly took Phoumi back to the border with them to meet the Khmer Rouge again. His son, Phoumano, reportedly did not come along. The Khmer Rouge prepared food for them, but the Chinese representative expected to participate in the meeting was not ready and, thus, did not show up (Interview with Phoumano Nosavan 2016; Interview with Symuang Chantharangsy 2021). The meeting occurred on November 3-4, 1980. The *Front Uni de Lutte des Races Opprimées* (FULRO), the anti-Vietnamese upland minorities from Vietnam, were also represented at the meeting (Burstein 1981; Gunn 1983; McBeth 1980), as was the Khmer Rouge, who had created an alliance with them (Dawson 1981). Phoumi had the stature to

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meet the Khmer Rouge leaders, and the Lao insurgents generally respected him, and were glad from Phoumi to represent them (Interview with Oudone Rattanasengchanh 2009). Some of the Khmer Rouge were reportedly drunk at this meeting, but they agreed to help the Lao nonetheless (Interview with Symuang Chantharangsy 2021).

Phoumi reportedly asked one of the Khmer Rouge leaders if the Khmer Rouge was willing to expand the war to Laos, but the leader refused to answer. However, the Khmer Rouge wanted the Lao insurgents to watch supplies coming from the PRC through Thailand, and they would be allowed to keep some of the arms and other supplies if they helped. However, the Thais apparently did not approve of this proposal and ordered that the Thais, not the Lao insurgents, be paid to watch the incoming supplies (Interview with Phoumano Nosavan 2016).

During the meeting, the Khmer Rouge reportedly agreed to provide Phoumi's forces with guns. Phoumi and Son Sen signed an agreement that was drafted in French. Immediately after, the Khmer Rouge started providing weapons and uniforms. However, the provisions were initially insufficient. Small arms were not initially provided, but some land mines were given, along with other explosives and uniforms, including hats, shirts and pants. Symuang took some of these back with him when his troops walked back to Mukdahan Province in northeastern Thailand before crossing the Mekong River to Savannakhet, Laos (Interview with Oudone Rattanasengchanh 2022; Interview with Symuang Chantharangsy 2016). However, later, in 1982, the Khmer Rouge provided 800 guns to Lao insurgents in Dong Kanthoung. They also provided rice (Interview with Saveng Vongsavath 2009). However, Bedlington (1982: 94) reported that Phoumi Nosavan had said that after March 1981, the Khmer Rouge had slowed down providing arms supplies because they were unhappy that Phoumi's forces had been closely cooperating with Son Sann's anti-communist Khmer resistance forces, the Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF), even though both the Khmer Rouge and Son Sann were opposed to the PRK. The third significant anti-PRK Cambodian political and armed group was the royalist National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia (FUNCINPEC), led by Prince Norodom Sihanouk (Chanida 1986).

Phoumi reportedly wanted to go to the PRC to meet the leadership there, but the Thai government would not allow him to go. If he left Thailand, he might not be allowed back in, he was warned. The Thais also reportedly wanted all the money for the insurgency to pass through them (Interview with Inpanh Manivong 2011).

Oudone Rattanasengchanh accompanied Son Sen from the border area to meet the Ambassador of the PRC. Son Sen was not able to meet the Ambassador, but he spoke to his secretary. The secretary reportedly said that the Chinese agreed for the Khmer Rouge to come into Thailand, but he confirmed that the Khmer Rouge needed to be very careful not to support the CPT. Son Sen apparently agreed. The CPT's exact response is unknown, but they must have felt like they had been betrayed by the PRC, especially after sacrificing their relationship with Laos and Vietnam to side with the PRC. In any case, soon after, the CPT base in Na Chaluai District in Ubon Ratchathani Province was closed (Interview with Oudone Rattanasengchanh 2022).

Phoumi reportedly wanted Syfong to be responsible for what was previously Military Region 7 in Laos, which covered west of the Mekong River in southern Laos (Interview with Pha Saymonti 2015) (see Vongsavanh 1981). Phoumi designated Thit Tanh Douangmala, Pang Latamany and Syfong Kongkeo as the main Lao contacts with the Khmer Rouge. However, Syfong reportedly did not want to be the commander of the military (Interview with Pha Saymonti 2015).

When arrangements were being made to provide guns to the Lao insurgency, the Chinese insisted that the guns not pass through Thailand, as that would anger the Thai government. There reportedly were 3,000 guns allocated. However, initially, there were not enough insurgents for that many guns, so 1,500 were given to the Lao insurgents along with other equipment, by Son Sen and Men Keov, a senior Khmer Rouge military leader in northeastern Cambodia in the 1980s (Baird 2020: 220). The other 1,500 were reportedly stored in a remote cave on the Cambodian side of the border. They were apparently never sent to Lao insurgents. The Khmer Rouge are believed to have only provided a substantial quantity of guns to Lao insurgents once (Interview with Oudone Rattanasengchanh 2009, 2022; Interview with Somphone Khounbolibounsak 2010).

In 1981, Mai Phanhphainha started working with Phat, a Khmer Rouge leader, along the Xelamphao River. He also worked with the Khmer Rouge farther inside Laos in the Khem Village area (Interview

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with Mai Phanhphainha 2009). Crucially, the Khmer Rouge helped the Lao insurgents take control of much of the Dong Kanthoung area (Interview with Pha Saymonti 2015).

Other insurgent group leaders who received guns from the Khmer Rouge were Symuang Chantharangsy and Oudone Rattanasengchanh in Savannakhet and Salavan, respectively, and Sat, who worked with Chao Sanhprasith (Sith) Na Champassak, the insurgent leader in Ubon Ratchathani, in Khong Chiam District (Baird 2025a). Although Chao Sith reportedly received some guns from the Khmer Rouge, the ULNLF did not agree to take arms from the Khmer Rouge (Interview with Khamvixay Vayphachit 2022).

Some Lao resistance fighters who cooperated with the Khmer Rouge in the early 1980s believed that the Vietnamese, not the Khmer Rouge, killed many Cambodians and then blamed the killings on the Khmer Rouge (Interview with Phiane Sayarad 2009). The extent of the anti-Vietnamese hatred is one of the key issues that united the Khmer Rouge and the Lao insurgents.

Syfong Stops Fighting

Sometime in 1980, the Vietnamese military approached the tri-border area from Laos and Cambodia and attacked Syfong and Sisaveuy's troops. The Lao insurgents reportedly could not effectively resist and so fled to Thailand, abandoning warehouses of weapons and rice on the Lao side of the border. However, the Khmer Rouge were able to protect the warehouses. Later, they contacted Pang Latamany's soldiers and asked them to come and take control of the warehouses. Pang's troops reportedly first proved themselves worthy by fighting together with the Khmer Rouge against the Vietnamese, and then the Khmer Rouge handed the warehouses over to Pang (Interview with Khamvixay Vayphachit 2022).

According to Oudone, once Sisaveuy and Syfong lost the warehouses to Pang Latamany, they could not work together anymore (Interview with Oudone Rattanasengchanh 2022). The Khmer Rouge reportedly wanted Syfong to return to the area, but he dared not face the Khmer Rouge (Interview by Khamvixay Vayphachit 2022). In any case, Syfong decided to stop his involvement in the insurgency and enter the Ubon Ratchathani refugee camp. Before leaving, he transferred one "battalion" of soldiers to Bouakham Savangsy and the other to Sinouan (Interview with Pha Saymonti 2015).

Once Syfong had left for the United States, Sisaveuy became the deputy of Oudone Rattanasengchanh in Dong Kanthoung, with Sisaveuy being responsible for "economics". Earlier, Sisaveuy had been Syfong's deputy (Interview with Oudone Rattanasengchanh 2022). However, Symuang Chantharangsy claimed that Syfong had been Sisaveuy's deputy (Interview with Symuang Chantharangsy 2021). Syfong himself reported that Sisaveuy was made the leader because he had a higher rank than Syfong before 1975 (Interview with Syfong Kongkeo 2009). Confirming which account is correct is difficult.

More Support for Lao Insurgents

In 1981, Symuang Chantharangsy and other Lao insurgents based on Done Sanh Island started receiving weapons from the Khmer Rouge. There were reportedly over 400 Lao insurgent soldiers at Done Sanh, plus some Khmer Rouge forces. Symuang and Oudone especially wanted to attack a military ammunition dump near Mounlapoumok, but Sisaveuy reportedly dared not attack. Together, they also planned to attack the Mounlapoumok District Center because few Vietnamese were there at the time. They reportedly took Saphang and Souyhong Villages, near the district centre, and were poised to attack the district. However, when the Khmer Rouge came to support them from Attapeu, they apparently could not contact each other. By the next morning, the Lao insurgents decided to retreat, as they felt that it was too late because the Pathet Lao had reinforced the district centre. Meanwhile, the Khmer Rouge did not have boats and had to swim across the Mekong from the east side to the west side of the river. The Pathet Lao apprehended many of them, although some made it back to Done Sanh (Interview with Symuang Chantharangsy 2016; 2021). Thus, the plan was not effectively implemented and ultimately failed.

With regard to villages in Mounlapoumok District, the resistance generally did not attack them but would surround them with the Khmer Rouge. Then, they would send doctors in to provide medical support to the villagers. Villagers initially refused to give them rice but later agreed. They may have had little choice. No shooting was allowed, and they told the village militia (*kong lone*) not to shoot. They

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reportedly told them that if they fired, they would burn down their village. The people who entered the village did not carry any weapons. In one case, villagers asked about buffalo and cow theft. Symuang Chantharangsy responded that some did steal livestock, but that his group did not. Over 300 Khmer soldiers and over 100 Lao resistance fighters reportedly participated in that operation. The whole group included about 450 soldiers in total (Interview with Symuang Chantharangsy 2021).

In 1982, Mai Phanhphainha moved to Dong Kanthoung. Before then, he operated north of Nong Te Village, near Soukouma District, and in the Done Talat area of Champassak District. Mai was close to Phoumi Nosavan and his son Phoumano (Interview with Mai Phanhphainha 2009). Moeun, the Khmer Rouge commander and Mai worked together to fight the Vietnamese near Khem Village in the Dong Kanthoung area in December 1982 (see Figure 1). The Khmer Rouge had heavy weapons, as well as RPG-82s and RPG-86s. They attacked the Khem Village area all day long to try to force the Vietnamese to leave. They finally succeeded, and the Vietnamese withdrew the following night (Interview with Mai Phanhphainha 2009; Interview with Symuang Chantharangsy 2016).

According to Mai, the Khmer Rouge wanted the "White Lao" (anti-Vietnamese) to stop the Vietnamese from attacking them from the north. The Chinese provided them with guns, and they gave some to the Lao, as the Khmer Rouge reportedly did not have enough soldiers. They called the Lao on their north flank "Division 2." In 1982, there was heavy fighting between the Lao and the Vietnamese near Khem Village in Dong Kanthoung. The Lao had about 200 soldiers in the area (Interview with Mai Phanhphainha 2009).

In 1983, the Vietnamese reportedly attacked Pang Latamany's troops in Dong Kanthoung. They particularly targeted a joint Khmer Rouge-Lao resistance camp near the Xelamphao River on the border of Laos and Cambodia. Mai Phanhphainha and his troops were north of Dong Kanthoung at the time, so they did not see much fighting (Interview with Mai Phanhphainha 2009).

Symuang stayed in Savannakhet until 1984, when he decided to relocate to stay near Phu Siyaek, in Buntharik District, Ubon Ratchathani Province, near the tri-border area (see Figures 1, 4). Between 1981 and 1985 Symuang coordinated between the Khmer Rouge, PK 33 (a Thai intelligence agency), and Phoumi Nosavan in Bangkok. PK 33 sent one Lao doctor to provide medical support for the Lao resistance under their oversight. Many people died from malaria during this time (Interview with Thonglao Sananikhom 2016).

Symuang moved back and forth between Ubon Ratchathani and Mukdahan (Interview with Symuang Chantharangsy 2016). Some insurgents estimated that approximately 10,000 resistance fighters were operating along the border or in Laos between Military Regions 3 and 4 during the early 1980s (Interview with Khong 2019). This estimate might be high, but there were certainly many resistance fighters at the time (see Figure 5).

The Vietnamese were particularly interested in attacking Dong Kanthoung to prevent Phoumi Nosavan's government-in-exile, which was established in 1982, from establishing a stronghold in Lao territory in Dong Kanthoung (Interview with Mai Phanhphainha 2009). This is not surprising, as in September 1982, Phoumi told the press that his new government would be based in Dong Kanthoung, which was described as a "Vietnamese-free" zone secured with the help of the Khmer Rouge (*The Asia Record* 1982).

Captain Sisaveuy Neophondeua's Suicide

As should be already clear, Captain Sisaveuy Neophondeua was a key insurgent leader in the Dong Kanthoung area. He had 500-600 soldiers under his command, mainly ethnic Kuy and Khmer insurgents originally from Champasak Province (Interview with Long Wilanan 2019) (see, also, Baird 2022).

However, Sisaveuy killed himself in 1982 when he was at a resistance camp in the forest near a remote village. His soldiers were reportedly lining up for roll call in the morning when a shot rang out and startled them. Sisaveuy had shot himself in a small hut nearby. After he died, his soldiers split up into different groups (Interview with Long Wilanan 2019). One of Sisaveuy's deputies, Khong, who came from Khem Village in Dong Kanthoung and had been with Sisaveuy since he started fighting in 1975, was nearby when Sisaveuy killed himself. He explained that Sisaveuy did not agree with the way that Chao Sith Na Champassak was leading the insurgency and that he did not think that Chao Sith could lead

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Figure 4. Symuang Chantharangsy (facing photographer) and other Lao resistance soldiers at a base in the forests of Buntharik District, Ubon Ratchathani Province, early 1980s (photo compliments of Symuang Chantharangsy).



Figure 5. Symuang Chantharangsy provides training to Lao insurgents in the Dong Kanthoung area in the early 1980s (photo compliments of Symuang Chantharangsy).

the common villagers. Instead, he reported that the Khmer Rouge provided guns in exchange for being able to use Lao land along the border. Initially, the group apparently received 300 guns (Interview with Khong 2019).

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Khong explained that the Thai military initially supported Sisaveuy but later changed their position and supported Chao Sith after he escaped from a re-education camp in early 1981. Khong thought the Thais made a significant mistake by backing Chao Sith. Some of Sisaveuy's men went with Chao Sith. Others stayed with Sisaveuy and his allies (Interview with Khong 2019).

The reason Sisaveuy committed suicide remains somewhat unclear, and the exact cause or causes may never be known. One issue that may have affected Sisaveuy was a personal conflict that he had with another insurgent named Captain Phai, who apparently did not like him. Captain Phai was reportedly planning to kill Sisaveuy, and Sisaveuy asked Thong Xaysongkham, Syfong Kongkeo's older brother[5], for help. Thong, in turn, asked Syfong to take Sisaveuy to Dong Kanthoung, where he would be safe. Syfong obliged (Interview with Syfong Kongkeo 2009). According to this theory, the tensions between Captain Phai and Sisaveuy contributed to Sisaveuy's suicide.

Phra Khou Sounthone Nhai, a pro-insurgent Lao Buddhist monk who later immigrated to Canada, had another theory. He thought that the Thai and Phra Khou Chanh Ly, a militant right-wing Buddhist monk from southern Laos (see Baird 2012), were putting pressure on Sisaveuy and that this contributed to Sisaveuy killing himself. Chanh Ly reportedly instigated a conflict between Sisaveuy and Pang. Chanh Ly apparently wanted Pang to be the only leader in the Dong Kanthoung area and did not want Sisaveuy there (Interview with Phra Khou Sounthone Nhai 2010).

Perhaps more importantly, the Khmer Rouge reportedly told Sisaveuy not to take any of the guns they provided to Thailand. However, he did not listen and tried to do exactly that. However, the Thai military saw the guns and confiscated them. This event may have angered the Khmer Rouge. These circumstances may also have contributed to the pressure put on Sisaveuy (Interview with Saveng Vongsavath 2009; Interview with Symuang Chantharangsy 2016). According to Lt. Col. Saveng Vongsavath, a former Royal Lao Army officer and another insurgent leader, the Thais confiscated the weapons taken by Sisaveuy to Thailand and admonished the Khmer Rouge for giving weapons to Lao insurgents. As a result, the Khmer Rouge reportedly stopped giving weapons to the Lao insurgents to avoid problems with the This (Interview with Saveng Vongsavath 2009).

Khamvixay believes that Sisaveuy committed suicide because he was under pressure from the Thai military. Sisaveuy had reportedly previously given Barami, a Thai military intelligence leader in Ubon, 40 guns to take to Savannakhet. Sisaveuy reportedly later asked Barami many questions about where the guns had gone, and this apparently annoyed Barami, who was reportedly contemplating having Sisaveuy killed. Tensions were reportedly high (Interview with Khamvixay Vayphachit 2022).

Pang Latamany reportedly urged Sisaveuy to leave Thai soil and cross into Laos, where Pang's troops were based. Sisaveuy considered doing this, but his soldiers did not want to to be based in Laos. Finally, Khamvixay and others with Pang Latamany went to Sisaveuy's camp to try to convince him to bring his troops back to Laos with them. However, they did not realise at the time that Sisaveuy's troops had already refused to go. Khamvixay believes that Sisaveuy lost face because he could not convince his troops to follow him, so he decided to kill himself (Interview with Khamvixay Vayphachit 2022).

According to Symuang Chantharangsy, Sisaveuy was not certain what to do and was not forward-thinking enough to deal with the different pressures put on him. Symuang believes that Sisaveuy was under a lot of pressure when he ended his life. Symuang met Sisaveuy and said, "You look like you are going to die." Sisaveuy reportedly responded that Prem Tinsulandonda and General Athit Kamlang-ek, the Prime Minister and military chief in Thailand, respectively, were competing and that Sisaveuy was caught between them. Athit reportedly had a plan to eliminate Prem. The Thai soldiers allegedly said they wanted a B-41 and two other guns from Sisaveuy to kill Prem. However, when Symuang heard what was being planned, he told Sisaveuy that if he gave the guns to the Thai military, he might end up being killed himself. Symuang advised Sisaveuy to stay with the Khmer Rouge (Interview with Symuang Chantharangsy 2016, 2021).

According to Somphone Khounbolibounsak, another Lao insurgent leader, Sisaveuy was under pressure from various people. Somphone claimed that he consulted with Sisaveuy about his circumstances and that Sisaveuy feared being killed. Somphone encouraged Sisaveuy to stop his insurgency activities for a while. However, Sisaveuy ended up shooting himself two weeks later (Interview with Somphone Khounbolibounsak 2009).

[5]He reportedly used a different last name so the Thais would not know they were brothers.

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Whatever the reason or reasons for Sisaveuy killing himself, after he died, Pang Latamany took his 60-70 soldiers to Dong Kanthoung inside Laos, and Mai Phanhphainha took over Sisaveuy's group of fewer than 100 soldiers, and the 800 weapons they had, including B-40s, B-41s and AK-47s. Pang's and Mai's troops reportedly stayed together in Dong Kanthoung (Interview with Saveng Vongsavath 2009).

Vietnamese Increase Attacks

Beginning in the dry season of 1983, Pang Latamany's forces in Dong Kanthoung fought against the Vietnamese almost every day. By that time, Pang and his men were operating throughout the Siphandone area, which included present-day Khong District, Champassak Province. In an attempt to win the villagers over to the resistance side, Khampheo Latamany advised his brother not to kill villagers but rather to just educate them and release them. Pang apparently did as Khampheo suggested. However, Pang did kill soldiers who attacked his group. At his peak, Pang reportedly commanded a group of over 600 resistance fighters (Interview with Khampheo Latamany 2009).

In 1984 and 1985, the situation worsened for the Lao resistance. The Vietnamese initially attacked the Khmer Rouge but later also turned their attention to the Lao resistance. In early December 1984, the Vietnamese successfully took Bak Sey, the key Khmer Rouge camp in the tri-border area. Eight hundred Lao troops also reportedly supported the Vietnamese who led the attack. About 10 Vietnamese artillery shells reportedly landed on Thai soil during the fighting but caused no casualties (*Washington Post* 1984). However, the Vietnamese only used artillery along the border with Thailand to a limited extent, probably to avoid problems with the Thai military. In any case, many Vietnamese soldiers and Lao insurgents reportedly died during the fighting (Interview with Mai Phanhphainha 2009; Interview with Symuang Chantharangsy 2016). The Khmer Rouge-aligned *Front Uni de Lutte des Races Opprimées* (FULRO) forces, made up of anti-Vietnamese ethnic minorities from the Central Highlands of Vietnam (see Hickey 1982), were also attacked. Everyone fled from camp #57, where Khmer Rouge, Lao and FULRO stayed, near the headwaters of the Xelamphao River (Interview with Khamvixay Vayphachit 2022).

Prior to this attack, the Vietnamese were reportedly struggling to gain ground from the Lao insurgency, led in Dong Kanthoung by Pang, so they sent some Vietnamese troops into Thailand to attack the Lao insurgents from behind. Symuang Chantharangsy believes that the Thais allowed them to cross into Thailand and that the Vietnamese might have paid off the Thai military for access, but he did not know for sure, and there is no direct evidence that this happened. However, his claim indicates the level of distrust that some Lao insurgents had of the Thai military. Regardless, this advantage allowed the Vietnamese to push through. The Khmer Rouge had to blow up a large quantity of weapons as they fled. These circumstances further complicated Sino-Thai relations because the Chinese supported the Khmer Rouge (Interview with Symuang Chantharangsy 2016; 2021). In any case, the Vietnamese inflicted a heavy blow on their enemies in the Emerald Triangle area, marking a significant setback for the Khmer Rouge and the Lao resistance.

The Death of Phoumi Nosavan

On 3 November 1985, General Phoumi Nosavan, who was Prime Minister and Finance Minister of the 'Democratic Government of the Kingdom of Laos', suddenly died in Bangkok due to illness (Interview with Phoumano Nosavan 2016). One story that is circulating is that Phoumano lost USD 20,000 of relatives of Lao people trapped inside Laos through gambling. When Phoumi learned of the loss, he allegedly had a heart attack (Interview with Martin Rathie 2009). However, Phoumano himself claimed that he never received money from Lao overseas to help get their relatives out of Laos. Instead, he claims he helped them for free and that some people created these stories out of jealousy because they falsely believed that he received money to smuggle people out of Laos. Phoumano acknowledged that he had to be a bit rough to make money to support his soldiers, but he denies ever cheating anyone (Interview with Phoumano Nosavan 2016). However, many other Lao insurgent leaders do not believe him.

In any case, Phoumano continued to support the Lao insurgency until 1989, albeit with less support than when his father was alive. However, when Chatichai Choonhavan became the Prime Minister of Thailand in late 1988, the Thai government made Phoumano stop his activities (Interview with

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Phoumano Nosavan 2016). In particular, in early 1989, the government of Thailand started implementing the "Battlefields to Marketplaces" policy, which was designed to promote cooperation and trade in the region to reduce Cold War political divisions and increase economic prosperity. This policy partially emerged due to the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Cambodia in 1989, which alleviated the direct threat of a Vietnamese invasion of Thailand, something that the Thais had been very concerned about for years. Fully implementing this policy took some time, but it resulted in the Thais ceasing to support the Lao and Cambodian insurgencies against the Lao PDR and PRK governments, including not allowing them to situate their bases on Thai soil. These political shifts significantly impacted the political circumstances in mainland Southeast Asia (Baird 2022; 2025b; Dommen 2001).

The Khmer Rouge Stop Providing Support

In 1982, Thai military intelligence reportedly heard that the Khmer Rouge were supporting the Lao insurgents and asked Pang Latamany if the Khmer Rouge were, in fact, supporting him. He denied receiving support from the Khmer Rouge, even though he actually was. The Thais wanted the Lao to register their guns with the Thai military, although they promised to return them when the resistance fighters went on missions. The Khmer Rouge, however, told the Lao not to tell the Thais that they were receiving guns from them, as they feared that the Thais would take some of the weapons if they knew. Crucially, the Thais did not want the Lao insurgents to become too powerful. They wanted to control them and mainly use them for collecting military intelligence inside Laos (Interview with Khampheo Latamany 2009).

According to Symuang Chantharangsy, the Thais did not want any fighting in Laos, just in Cambodia. They were reportedly afraid that fighting in Laos would increase the Thai budget too much and that the Communist Party of Thailand and the Lao resistance would join together, although that reportedly never happened (Interview with Symuang Chantharangsy 2021).

Although it took a while, a serious problem emerged when the Thai military received clear evidence that the Khmer Rouge were giving the Lao insurgents weapons. They feared that the Lao insurgents would become powerful and more difficult for the Thais to control. Thus, the Thais insisted that any guns provided to the insurgents must pass through them. However, the Khmer Rouge and the Lao insurgents instead chose to bypass them, which reportedly angered the Thais. The Thais were reportedly especially angry with Pang Latamany, who they now knew had lied to them. As a result, Pang felt that staying in Thailand was no longer viable. Crucially, the Thais told the Khmer Rouge that they would stop supporting the Khmer Rouge if they did not stop supplying Pang's soldiers with guns. This left the Khmer Rouge with few options, since they were heavily dependent on Thailand (Interview with Khamvixay Vayphachit 2022). In 1985, after the Vietnamese launched a major attack on the Lao and the Khmer Rouge in the tri-border area, the Thai military became even stricter and stopped allowing the Khmer Rouge to collaborate at all with the Lao resistance based in Thailand. They were not supposed to contact each other (Interview with Symuang Chantharangsy 2009).

These shifts forced Pang Latamany's group to move deeper into Laos, where he would eventually be killed in late 1987 (Interview with Khamvixay Vayphachit 2022). Mai Phanhphainha was his deputy up to the point when Pang decided to move farther into Laos to avoid the Thai military (Interview with Mai Phanhphainha 2009). Khamvixay reported that he would have gone with Pang, but he stepped on a land mine first and was treated at a Khmer Rouge field hospital along the border, where he lost his leg. Since the Thais were also angry with Khamvixay for previously translating for the Khmer Rouge without their authorisation, he dared not return to Thailand either. The Thais also wanted information that Khamvixay had about Pang. Later, once Khamvixay had recovered somewhat, he decided to join the Khmer Rouge. He lived in Along Veng, the Khmer Rouge stronghold in Preah Vihear Province, Cambodia, until 1999 when the Khmer Rouge finally imploded and ceased to exist (Interview with Khamvixay Vayphachit 2022).

In 1987-88, the well-known right-wing monk Phra Khou Chanh Ly sent word to Oudone Rattanasengchanh to meet him at his temple in Minburi, outside of Bangkok. When they met, Chanh Ly told Oudone that he heard that the Lao People's Army's Division #5, based at Km 13 near Pakse, was planning to rebel. Therefore, Chanh Ly wanted Oudone to join the committee to support the rebellion. However, Oudone declined the invitation because he was sceptical of the claim. However, Chanh Ly

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and others reportedly ended up raising US$200,000 to support the uprising. Some of the money was given to Pang and 40 of his men went from Lameut Stream in Buntharik District into Laos and then across the Mekong River to the east side to Dong Kalo, on the border between Laos and Cambodia. Pang was told to wait there, and that if he heard that there was fighting to the north, he should expect that Pakse would be taken soon after (Interview with Oudone Chantharangsy 2009). There were already some Lao insurgents in the Dong Kalo area when Pang and his men arrived (Interview with Symuang Chantharangsy 2016). However, the Lao military in Pakse did not rebel as planned, and the plan failed.

Pang and his soldiers were reportedly at Dong Kalo, on their way to meet Ky Cheung, another Lao insurgent leader to the north, near Phon Sa-at Village, in Khong District, when they encountered some Pathet Lao soldiers and entered into a long firefight that lasted for a day. According to Oudone Rattanasengchanh, Pang had no bullets when the Pathet Lao advanced toward his position. He was killed, and 20 of his soldiers were apprehended and jailed in Pakse. They were reportedly imprisoned for three years (Interview with Oudone Rattanasengchanh 2009).

Conclusion

There remains much to be learned about the Third Indochina War, as well as the politics and unlikely alliances that emerged during this period. In this article, I have focused on Lao insurgent accounts regarding the tri-border area between Laos, Cambodia and Thailand, the so-called Emerald Triangle. Although I have put considerable effort into corroborating reports, confirming all the key events that transpired during this tumultuous period of transnational cooperation and conflict will probably never be possible. However, these oral histories are all we have, so they certainly deserve some attention.

What is clear is that the tri-border nature of the Emerald Triangle was crucial for facilitating the different armed groups who operated in the area at that time. Indeed, groups could sometimes cross borders to improve their security, but national borders also sometimes caused them problems.

Here, I have striven to contribute to our understanding of the Third Indochina War by demonstrating how unconventional and complex the political and military alliances sometimes were during this period. In particular, some groups became aligned more because they had the same enemy than because they had much in common regarding political ideology. While some of the Lao insurgents who worked with the Khmer Rouge had been Pathet Lao communists in the 1960s before defecting to the Royal Lao Army in the early 1970s, most had been Royal Lao Army soldiers who took up arms against the Lao PDR government in 1975.

The armed Lao insurgency in southern Laos gradually ended after support dried up, with the government of Thailand's change of policy in the late 1980s significantly contributing to their downfall (Baird 2012; Hillmer 2010). The Khmer Rouge, on the other hand, signed the Paris Peace Agreement related to Cambodia in 1991, but later refused to participate in the May 1993 elections in Cambodia. They continued opposing the Phnom Penh-based government after the elections, but internal conflicts eventually resulted in their dissolution in 1999, when the last remaining Khmer Rouge were integrated into the Cambodian military.

It appears that the difficult circumstances that the Khmer Rouge and the Lao resistance groups found themselves in during the 1980s necessitated taking a pragmatic stance and becoming military allies despite their distinctly different ideologies. Thus, the alliances of the Third Indochina War can hardly be compared with those that existed during the Second Indochina War, even though both periods are typically considered to have been during the categorised under the so-called 'Cold War.' Crucially, the political circumstances during these two periods differed dramatically, as did the alliances that arose. This article can hopefully help readers better understand how these circumstances played out in the tri-border Emerald Triangle.

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