TRaNS: Trans -Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia (2026), **14**, 30–52
doi:10.1017/trn.2025.10001

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Enemy of My Enemy is My Friend: Transnational Ethnic Khmu Anti-Lao PDR Insurgents during the Late Cold War

Ian G. Baird

Department of Geography, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, WI, USA
Email: ibaird@wisc.edu

(received 6 April 2025; revised 6 April 2025; accepted 1 July 2025)

Abstract

The Cold War is often depicted in binary terms: communists against anti-communists, the left against the right, or the free world versus the communist world. However, during the latter part of the Cold War, particularly following the 1979 war between China and Vietnam, earlier Cold War binaries no longer applied, and new alliances were established. These alliances often brought people with the same enemies together, despite having little in common ideologically. This article examines the historical circumstances and Cold War geographies of ethnic Khmu anti-Lao PDR and anti-Vietnamese insurgents, including their alliances with right-wing governments in Thailand and the communist People's Republic of China (PRC). As neutralists, these Khmu occupied a political space rarely discussed in relation to the Cold War. Although the PRC provided training, weapons, and supplies to the neutralist Khmu between 1979 and 1983, later their political leader, General Kong Le, had a falling out with the Chinese, and the PRC stopped supporting his largely ethnic minority soldiers. However, up until 1989, the Thai government continued to allow the Khmu to maintain bases in Thailand for launching military operations inside Laos, until the Thai government adopted the "Battlefield to Marketplace" policy. Some Khmu continued resisting inside northwestern Laos during the early 1990s, but with declining numbers of soldiers and decreased outside support, armed resistance ended in 2003. It is critical that the geographies and alliances of the later Cold War be differentiated from those of the earlier years of the Cold War. This transnational insurgency deserves attention.

Keywords: China; Cold War; insurgency; Laos; Thailand; Vietnam

Introduction

The Cold War is often depicted in binary terms: communists opposing anti-communists, the left versus the right, or the free world against the communist world. However, during the latter part of the Cold War, particularly during the so-called Third Indochina War, which is considered to have begun with the 1979 short but intense border war between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) (Chang 1983; Chanda 1986), earlier Cold War binaries shifted dramatically, and new and sometimes surprising political and military alliances were established (see, for example, Baird 2025c). These alliances often brought people with the same enemies together despite having little ideologically in common.

Laos became a communist country in 1975 when the Pathet Lao communists took over the government. The King of the constitutional monarchy of the Kingdom of Laos was forced to abdicate, and on December 2, 1975, it was announced that the Lao Peoples' Democratic Republic (Lao PDR)

© The Author(s), 2025. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of Institute for East Asian Studies. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2025.10001 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Figure 1. Bokeo and Luang Namtha Province, northern Laos and adjacent areas.

had been established as a one-party Marxist-Leninist state (Goldston 2009). Transnational resistance to the Lao PDR government and its strong ally, Vietnam, quickly emerged, particularly along the border between Laos and Thailand.

This article considers this transnational anti-Lao PDR and Socialist Republic of Vietnam resistance, and particularly the role of ethnic Khmu insurgents operating along the Laos-Thailand border, particularly in Bokeo (formerly Houa Khong) and Luang Namtha Provinces, in northwestern Laos (Figure 1). These insurgents, were initially under the neutralist banner after 1975, but eventually adopted a more pragmatic position, and received support from other groups and donors as well. Some authors prefer Kmhmu or Kammu, but Khmu is the best-known contemporary spelling for this ethnic group. It is argued that during the Third Indochina War, many of the political and military alliances that developed were much more varied and pragmatic than is sometimes imagined, and that it is important to understand the unique geographies that emerged in different circumstances.

One important aspect of northwestern Laos is its high level of ethnic and linguistic diversity. Sage (1973a) reported that there were 17 major ethnic groups living in Houa Khong District in the early 1970s, including various sub-groups of Khmu, Akha, Lahu, and Hmong, and other groups such as the Samtao, Bit, Lue, Tai Dam, Lamet, Iu-Mien, and other groups.

After outlining the methods used in this study, the article presents a brief history of Khamsene Keodara, a key Khmu military leader before 1975. The next important character, Chanh Souk, is

https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2025.10001 Published online by Cambridge University Press

then introduced. He was also a Royal Lao Army officer before 1975, but later sided with the communist Pathet Lao, before finally becoming a fierce enemy of the Pathet Lao after 1975. The article then turns to consider how Chanh Souk and other Khmu established an anti-Lao PDR insurgent army beginning in 1975. The situation changed dramatically in 1979, due to the eruption of the Third Indochina War. Later, however, China stopped supporting the insurgency, and the United Lao National Liberation Front (ULNLF), or the *Neo Hom Pot Poi Xath* in Lao, became involved in assisting the Khmu insurgents. However, tensions between Chanh Souk and Khamsene complicated matters, as did later tensions between Chanh Souk and Vong Kham, another Khmu insurgent leader. The last Khmu insurgent leader was killed in 2003. Finally, concluding remarks are provided, with the goal of theorizing the implications of this story for understanding the later Cold War period during the Third Indochina War.

Methods

This article represents a small part of a larger project bent on studying the transnational anti-Lao PDR resistance movement following the Pathet Lao takeover of Laos in 1975. The research began in 2008, and since then, over 800 interviews have been conducted on the topic of political and military resistance to the Lao PDR government since 1975. Lao language interviews were conducted in the United States, France, Canada, Australia, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos over many years. However, I have also used written sources when available. Still, there are only a few relevant documents. Either they were never produced, have been destroyed, discarded, or otherwise damaged and lost, or they are not available to the public.

There are certainly limitations to primarily using oral histories for research like this. Memories fade and are invariably selective, either unintentionally or intentionally. Interviewees tend to focus on certain aspects and not on others, and people make mistakes when recollecting from long ago. On the other hand, however, sometimes oral accounts years later are more accurate than oral or written sources from the time of the events, as some topics can be very sensitive and secretive soon after they occur, but then become much less so later, thus allowing informants to recount events that they would never have spoken or written about in the past, or would have previously lied about. This story fits well with this scenario, as all sides previously wanted to keep the story told here secret, albeit for different reasons. It is also true, as in this case, that there are no other options but to rely mainly on oral sources.

In any case, to try to increase the accuracy of the accounts included here, research was conducted for many years, so as to allow relationships with informants to develop, but also to provide time for triangulating various oral and other sources. Attention to detail and corroboration has undoubtedly helped improve the quality. However, there are undoubtedly still some mistakes, but hopefully, many fewer than there would have been if the research had been conducted over a shorter period and in a less critical manner.

Khamsene Keodara – the Khmu Military Leader of the Secret War

To understand how the ethnic Khmu insurgency in northwestern Laos emerged in 1975, we need to consider the role of Major Khamsene Keodara, a key Special Guerilla Unit (SGU) commander based at Nam Nhou, in present-day Bokeo Province, northwestern Laos, during the Second Indochina War. Born in 1926 in Phou Thi Village, Vieng Phou Kha District, Luang Namtha Province, Khamsene did not attend school. However, in 1947, he began working with the district chief in Chiang Khong District, Chiang Rai Province, on the Thai side of the border across the Mekong from Houay Xay. In 1949, he returned to Laos and became a French-Indochina soldier. He fought as a special black operations commando against the Viet Minh communists at Nam Bak in northern Luang Prabang Province. He was one of the only three of the 15 who parachuted into the battle to

https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2025.10001 Published online by Cambridge University Press

survive. Afterward, he was promoted to Sergent (Interview with Khamsene Keodara and Bountha Choulaphanh 2009).

Later, the French leader of the company he was in was killed in battle along with many other soldiers, and the company fell apart. Another Khmu Master Sergent (*nai cha*) was also killed. Therefore, Khamsene had to take command of those who remained, thus making a name for himself. However, after the French were defeated at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 and were forced to withdraw from Indochina (see Dommen 2001; Evans 2002), Khamsene stopped being a soldier and returned to live in his village of birth (Khamsene Keodara and Bountha Choulaphanh interviewed 2009).

In 1963, however, an American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) case worker who had grown up with Christian missionary parents and various upland ethnic minorities in northern Burma, Bill Young, heard of Khamsene and recruited him to join an irregular anti-communist military unit that he was trying to assemble (Khamsene Keodara and Bountha Choulaphanh interviewed 2009).

Initially, this unit did not have a permanent camp or any war weapons, just single-shot village homemade guns (*peun kep*). Bill gave them potash soils to make *din phai* bullets. He also provided money to buy gunpowder. Later, he supplied them with 100 M-1 carbine rifles. Some ethnic Lamet were also recruited, and in 1964, a small landing strip was constructed so that Pilatus PC-6 Turbo Porter planes could deliver supplies. Meanwhile, ethnic Iu-Mien (Yao) units were also organised in Sing District, Luang Namtha Province, and were later based at Nam Keung, where Chao Mai and Chao La Sisongfa, the Iu-Mien military leaders, stayed. However, they launched operations in various areas. The Lahu were also separated into different military units. In 1965-66, a headquarters for the Khmu and Lahu units was established at Nam Nhou, where Khamsene was based (Khamsene Keodara and Bountha Choulaphanh interviewed 2009).

Eventually, battalion-size units were established, including seven battalions of Khmu and others at Nam Nhou and at least two Iu-Mien battalions at Nam Keung. A smaller number of Lahu Shi (Kouy) and Lue were integrated into the Khmu battalions at Nam Nhou (Figure 1). There was also one Hmong battalion (Khamsene Keodara and Bountha Choulaphanh interviewed 2009). The military units were relatively small and largely organised on ethnic grounds.

Khamsene became the commander of the predominantly Khmu battalions (Figure 2), while Chao Mai, and later Chao La Sisongfa, were responsible for the two Iu-Mien units in Sing District, Luang Namtha Province. Khamsene initially had the same rank as Chao La, but later, he was promoted to be one rank above Chao La. Sengfou Saechao, also Iu-Mien, became one of Chao La's ranking officers at Nam Nhou (Khamsene Keodara and Bountha Choulaphanh interviewed 2009).

Over the years, Khamsene led his troops into many fierce battles. However, high-ranking officers often did not like Khamsene, as he went to the frontlines more than they did. Therefore, he felt justified to complain to them. Although he was only a Master Sergent third class (*cha tri*), Khamsene's success resulted in him being chosen to be commander of the Khmu at Nam Nhou (Khamsene Keodara and Bountha Choulaphanh interviewed 2009).

In 1973, when the SGUs, which were US-funded, in Military Region 1 in northern Laos were being dismantled and integrated into the regular Lao military. Following the signing of the Vientiane Treaty in February 1973, it was proposed that Khamsene be made the District Chief of Pak Tha District, in what was then in Luang Prabang Province. However, Khamsene felt insulted by what he saw as a too lowly position and refused to take it. There was a heated argument with officials in Houay Xay, resulting in a decision to appoint Khamsene as the District Chief of Senamone in the centre of the province (Sage 1973b). However, Khamsene was still angry about the initial offer (Khamsaeng Keosaeng interviewed 2011).

Chanh Souk - The Houay Xay Rebellion

In late 1974, an ethnic Khmu Captain named Chanh Souk also became disenfranchised when the SGUs were being disbanded. Many soldiers were integrated into the Forces Armées Royales (FAR)

https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2025.10001 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Figure 2. Khamsene Keodara in Bangkok, 1965-66.

(Touane Baccam interview 2018). Chanh Souk's Batallion d'Infanterie (BI) 102 was particularly unhappy about the underrepresentation of Khmu in the FAR and the withholding of pay (Conboy 1995: 413). More crucially, Chanh Souk wanted to maintain his rank of Captain. However, because he did not have any formal education, the FAR thought that he should only have the rank of a First Class Private (*sip ek*). This upset Chanh Souk (Touane Baccam interviewed 2018). In addition, a decreased rank would mean less pay. He was also going to be demoted to company commander (Conboy 1995: 413). These circumstances motivated Chanh Souk to lead his troops to rebel, first in October 1974 and then three months later in late December 1974.

It is worth considering the memoir of Pathet Lao leader, General Sisavath Keobounphanh (2015), although not uncritically. He later held many of the highest political positions in the Lao PDR, including Prime Minister and Politburo Member. Sisavath claimed that in July 1974, Chanh Souk protested and brought 64 soldiers from his Company to stay in Poung Village, which was just on the Royal Lao government side of the demarcated boundary between territory controlled by the Pathet Lao and the area under the Vientiane government. The demarcation boundary divided the Pathet Lao and Royal Lao Government areas. According to Sisavath, the Central Party Pathet Lao urgently met, and it was decided that Sisavath should travel from Vientiane to oversee negotiations (Sisavath 2015: 144-145).

According to Sisavath, during his negotiations, it was agreed that Chanh Souk did not have enough troops to take over Houay Xay. Therefore, since the rebellion was just emerging, and people were unaware of it, Chanh Souk ordered more uniforms, which could then be used to disguise Pathet Lao soldiers. Once received, the communist soldiers from two small battalions and a special commando company dressed as FAR soldiers supported Chanh Souk's troops to take control of Houay Xay. However, soon after they entered the town, they learned that a battalion of Thai troops had assembled along the Mekong River in Chiang Khong, across from Houay Xay, and that they were poised to take Houay Xay back. There was a Thai consulate in Houay Xay, and the Thais wanted to protect it. The rest of the account is somewhat vague, but Sisavath Keobounphanh wrote that Chanh Souk's troops managed to negotiate to obtain three months of salary that had not been paid to them.

https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2025.10001 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Sisavath reported that the mission was a success (Sisavath 2015: 148-152). However, much of the story of the negotiations between the Pathet Lao and Chanh Souk was not mentioned by Sisavath since it would not have made the Pathet Lao look good. Furthermore, it seems quite likely that Sisavath may have wanted to demean Chanh Souk since, by the time his memoir was written, Chanh Souk had become his political enemy.

By Monday, October 7, reports confirmed that Chanh Souk and two companies from his BI 102 had left their position at Poung Village and were heading to Houay Xay. By early evening, M-2 rifles were passed out to civilian officials in Houay Xay, and preparations were made to defend the town (William Sage interviewed 2022).

The first shots were fired about 3 a.m. (this would be a.m. Tuesday, October 8) at the Houay Xay airport, which the insurrectionists took over. By daybreak, Chanh Souk had stationed soldiers in several locations around the town, including the boat landing on the Mekong River, to prevent anyone from crossing over to Chiang Khong. Vehicles were not allowed to move around town, and boats were prohibited from crossing the river (William Sage interviewed 2022).

The rebellion ended later in the day, when Col. Khamphay Saignasith, who commanded Bataillon Volontaire (BV) 18, was confronted about the pay grievances and agreed to pay what was owed, resulting in Chanh Souk and his troops returning to Poung Village (Conboy 1995: 413) (William Sage interviewed 2022). However, one ethnic Lao observer reported that Chanh Souk actually wanted to control a battalion and, therefore, attacked BV 18 at Houay Xay in October 1974 to try to gain control of it, although he was unsuccessful in taking command (Anonymous interviewed 2012). Whatever the circumstances, this was not the end of the story.

Later, Chanh Souk's two companies from BI 102 reportedly increased their collaboration with the Pathet Lao's Battalion 408 and together again attacked Houay Xay in December 1974 (Conboy 1995: 413). However, it is unclear whether the "Pathet Lao" soldiers were Lao or Vietnamese. One soldier claimed that Chanh Souk actually mobilised 700-800 Vietnamese soldiers (not Pathet Lao soldiers, as Sisavath Keobounphanh reported) to reinforce his positions and then attack BV 18 (Anonymous interviewed 2012).

In any case, the rebels and their Pathet Lao allies attacked Houay Xay, forcing BV 18 troops to retreat to the Mekong River toward Xieng Lom. Chanh Souk's troops reportedly entered the town after the Pathet Lao forces, with Chanh Souk later admitting that he had lost control of the operation. In any case, 19 Americans and nine Filipinos working for USAID were forced to stay in their compound and were essentially put under house arrest (Conboy 1995: 413).

According to the *Vientiane News* (1975b), two battalions of government forces rebelled in Houay Xay on December 24, 1974. It was also reported that two battalions of Pathet Lao soldiers joined the rebels. Together, they demanded that the 18-point political program agreed upon in February 1973 be adhered to. They also demanded the immediate dissolution of the 7th Legislative Council (the National Assembly), the strict enforcement of the peace agreement, the neutralisation of Houay Xay, and the abolition of laws prohibiting the planting of opium (*Vientiane News* 1975b: 3).

A few days later, it was reported that the rebels had ten demands, including that the government should 1) follow the 18-point plan and abolish the National Assembly, 2) punish and condemn extreme rightists, 3) stop threatening force against the rebels, 4) confirm that people involved with the uprising will not be transferred elsewhere, 5) allow the rebels to temporarily take command of the military region, 6) open road links between Houay Xay and Luang Prabang and Houay Xay and Namtha, 7) establish more economic relations with the Pathet Lao, 8) ensure that Thailand and the US will not interfere with the Houay Xay incident, 9) give justice and proper care accorded to soldiers, and 10) allow the old governor to return, but transfer many other officials (*Vientiane News* 1975d). It is possible that left-wing students may have helped to prepare for these demands (William Sage interviewed 2025).

According to *Vientiane News* (1975c), there was considerable confusion in Houay Xay during the five-day rebellion. It was suspected that the Pathet Lao communists had instigated the unrest. The

https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2025.10001 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Americans with USAID were subjected to various forms of threats and harassment by the rebels and were prohibited from leaving Houay Xay and crossing into Thailand until December 28 (*Washington Post* 1974). The rebels wanted to negotiate directly with the Prime Minister, Souvanna Phouma, and the Pathet Lao leader, Souphanouvong, the co-called Red Prince (*Vientiane News* 1975d). Despite accusations, the Pathet Lao denied any involvement, but during fighting on December 25, there were reportedly three Pathet Lao soldiers killed and one wounded (*Vientiane News* 1975d).

According to the *Vientiane News* (1975e), following the rebellion, negotiations occurred between the government and the rebels in Houay Xay, and on December 29, a communique was released announcing a resolution (*Vientiane News* 1975d). The government agreed to follow the Political Council's 18-point program, enforce provisions related to democratic rights, and the replacement of the commander and deputy commander military commanders in Houay Xay. It was also agreed that a committee would be established to investigate allegations of corruption by public servants. The rebels agreed to hand over all the arms that they distributed to the population in Houay Xay, clear up the airport so that flights could resume, and release foreigners detained during the rebellion (*Vientiane News* 1975e).

According to Khamsaeng Keosaeng, a Khmu soldier who worked closely with Chanh Souk, Chanh Souk went to meet Khamsene Keodara during preparations for the rebellion, as both were feeling aggrieved. They agreed to rebel together (Khamsaeng Keosaeng interviewed 2011). To make matters even more complex, the Pathet Lao reportedly promised Chanh Souk that if he rebelled, they would make him a general (Khamsaeng Keosaeng interviewed 2012) and put him in charge of Military Region 1. Not surprisingly, General Sisavath Keobounphanh of the Pathet Lao makes no mention of such an agreement in his memoir (Sisavath 2015).

The Establishment of an Insurgent Khmu Militant Force

After the rebels agreed to cease their revolt in late December 1975, Chanh Souk travelled to his home in Vieng Phou Kha (Khamsaeng Keosaeng interviewed 2011, 2012). According to an ethnic Khmu leader, Thongsoun Phouthama, Sisavath Keobounthanh initially convinced Chanh Souk to rebel when they met in Luang Namtha. However, later after Chanh Souk rose up, Sisavath reportedly had a change of heart, which caused tensions between the two (Thongsoun Phouthama interviewed 2009). A few months later, once the Pathet Lao had gained control of the government, the Pathet Lao planned to arrest Chanh Souk and send him and his soldiers for political re-education. But someone tipped off Chanh Souk, and he was able to cross into Thailand with 14 soldiers (Khamsaeng Keosaeng interviewed 2011, 2012). Chanh Souk felt betrayed since the Pathet Lao did not honour their initial agreement with him (Thongsoun Phouthama interviewed 2009).

Khamsene also felt betrayed by the Pathet Lao, but he chose not to leave like Chanh Souk. As he put it, "The Pathet Lao made me the head of the district and provincial government in 1975, but then I was sent to die" (Khamsene Keodara and Bountha Choulaphanh interviewed 2009). Indeed, Khamsene would spend five years in the Bang Yo re-education camp in Phongsaly Province, in the far north (Thongsoun Phouthama interviewed 2009).

By late 1975, the anti-Lao PDR insurgency was developing (CIA 1975), and before long, there were various groups of anti-Lao PDR insurgents operating, especially along the border between Laos and Thailand (Gunn 1983; Quincy 2000; Singto 2010; Morrison 2023). A man nicknamed Piak played a particularly important role in developing the Lao insurgency in Chiang Khong District, Chiang Rai Province, northern Thailand. He had worked for the Americans in Laos before 1975 and so had some connections to the country. He also had strong ties with the Royal Thai Army, as his father was an important Thai army general. Thus, Piak was able to use his father's influence to establish a military force on the Thai side of the Mekong River, using Thai military funding. The main goal was to fight against the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT), but since the military units assembled were made up of mainly political refugees from Laos, the plan was also to fight against the

https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2025.10001 Published online by Cambridge University Press

new Lao PDR government since they were believed to pose a serious security risk to Thailand. One of the first people whom Piak worked with was a former FAR Colonel, Khamphay (Phay) Vilayphanh, who was ethnically Lue from Luang Prabang (Piak interviewed 2014). Chanh Souk also set up his own anti-communist insurgent group. Khamsaeng Keosaeng, another Khmu soldier, had more formal education than most and became Chanh Souk's secretary (Khamsaeng Keosaeng interviewed 2011).

By 1976, Piak was working closely with Col. Phay Vilayphanh, Chanh Souk, Chao La, and others who wanted to resist the new Lao PDR government (Khankham Vilaikam interviewed 2009). The Thais also wanted the insurgents from Laos to collect military intelligence in Laos. Phay was able to get many people to join him, including some from Ban Vinai and other refugee camps in Thailand, and they were able to buy weapons with their own money (Piak interviewed 2014).

According to Anonymous (1979), in March 1976, 16 people attended the group's first meeting, and the Northern Free Lao Liberation Movement or the *Sing Dong* (Forest Lions) in Lao was established. Its executive committee included:

1) Col. Khamphay Vilayphanh (ethnic Lue) – Chairman
2) Maj. Chao La Sisongfa (ethnic Iu-Mien) – Vice-Chairman
3) Phya Noy (ethnic Lue) – resettled to the USA in 1979
4) Lo Kao (ethnic Hmong) – resettled to France in 1978
5) Kong Keo (ethnic Khmu, representing Chanh Souk)
6) Poh Chai (ethnic Lahu Shi - Kouy)
7) Tong Van Hoy (ethnic Tai Dam)

Soon after, a larger meeting was organised, in which 38 leaders attended. A short training regarding "Liberation Policy" and how to conduct operations inside Laos was also organised. "Ethnic operational teams" were established, and by 1976, they were conducting missions into Houa Khong Province in Laos. The initial plan was to establish connections with the people in Laos. The teams were reportedly well received, and the missions were deemed successful (Anonymous 1979).

According to Boualy Thanonglith, an insurgent leader who was mainly known as Amin, between 1976 and 1978 the key people in the *Sing Dong* were Chanh Souk (Khmu), Chao La Sisongfa and Sengfou Saechao (Iu-Mien), Phen Cha (Akha), Lt. Khamphy (Lue) and Chang Chong Pao (Hmong) (Boualy Thanonglith interviewed 2009). Most of Chanh Souk's soldiers were Khmu Kven, but there were also some Khmu Krong, Lamet, and Lao with him (Siengtheut Lakthanasouk and Khankham Vilaikam interviewed 2009). Chanh Nhou (Laoised name) led a large group of Lahu insurgents, although he later became dissatisfied with the insurgency and stopped fighting. The Thai government was not providing any support. The Lahu in Nam Keung and Nam Nhone were reportedly particularly supportive of the insurgency, whereas the response from Khmu villages was mixed. Therefore, the Khmu insurgents often worked in the Lahu areas. According to Kong Kham, himself a Khmu insurgent, over the years, he learned how to speak Lahu. Another Khmu insurgent, Dome, married a Lahu woman when he was in the forest as an insurgent. He ended up learning to speak Lahu, and his wife had five children in the forest. Sengfou worked with the Iu-Mien villages in the Nam Nhone area (Kong Kham and Dome interviewed 2017). At his peak, Chanh Souk commanded 700 soldiers, while Col. Phay Vilayphanh had about 100 (Siengtheut Lakthanasouk and Khankham Vilaikam interviewed 2009).

Phay Vilayphanh and Chanh Souk had different politics and did not get along well when they were both in the military in Laos. In the insurgency, Chanh Souk also became frustrated with Phay, as he was mainly focused on collecting military intelligence for Piak, while Chanh Souk wanted to focus on the insurgency in Laos (Khamkheua Sayavong interviewed 2012).

https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2025.10001 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The Attack on Vieng Phou Kha and Na Le Districts

Chanh Souk probably reached his peak as an anti-Lao PDR insurgent in July 1977, when he led his group of mainly ethnic Khmu insurgents to attack and take over the district centre of Vieng Phou Kha. Chanh Souk's men attacked Vieng Phou Kha, while Captain Keo Noi Chitaphanh, another Khmu insurgent leader, attacked Ngeun Village, where a Pathet Lao army camp was located. The district centre of Na Le was also overrun (Chanhthong Vilaysak interviewed 2009). Many Pathet Lao died during the fighting, along with a smaller number of insurgents (Khamthong Nyommarath interviewed 2009). Just 30 insurgents from their base in Thailand attacked each of the three targets (Khamsaeng Keosaeng interviewed 2012). However, the insurgents were able to catch the Pathet Lao off guard. More importantly, they were able to convince some Pathet Lao soldiers in Vieng Phou Kha to rise up and support them. This group actually ended up outnumbering the initial insurgent force (Khamsaeng Keosaeng interviewed 2012).

Some of those who joined the insurgents after the attack were Khmu Kven village militiamen (*kone lone*) led by Khamla Chanthalasak. The Pathet Lao had taken over his village in Vieng Phou Kha in 1972. At that time, Khamla was the village head. He initially got on well with the Pathet Lao, and in 1976, he became the first deputy sub-district chief, responsible for the village militia. He commanded three *mouat* (about 30 people each), but they only had 38 guns. However, Khamla had a relative named Khamsouk who had worked with the CIA and wanted to resist the Lao PDR government. Khamsouk was able to convince Khamla to join him by telling him that the Thai and CIA would help, which turned out to be a lie. In any case, Khamla was able to bring many of his militia soldiers over to support Chanh Souk (Khamla Chanthalasak interviewed 2012).

One of the biggest motivations of the Khmu to join Chanh Souk was that the Lao PDR government was trying to force them to give up their animist customs. Khamla reported that many people died because there was not enough medicine and that, for political reasons, animist rituals could not be used to cure health ailments. This led Khamla and many of his soldiers to conclude that the Pathet Lao's banning of rituals warranted armed resistance (Khamla Chanthalasak interviewed 2012). Another Khmu former insurgent close to Chanh Souk also reported that the most important motivation for rising up was religious restrictions. Indeed, the socialist revolution in Laos was not simply economic; it also significantly affected social and cultural aspects (see High 2021). For example, water buffaloes could not be sacrificed for religious purposes. It was reported that people started getting sick, and before long, much of the population was attributing the prohibitions by the new government to increased serious illness and death. Furthermore, the new government banned opium smoking and destroyed the people's smoking bongs (Khamsaeng Keosaeng interviewed 2012).

In addition, the government had begun internally resettling people from the mountains to the lowlands, particularly the Lahu Hpfu (Mouseu Khao, White Lahu). Many people died due to illnesses that they had not previously encountered in the uplands. Indeed, these sorts of health-related problems associated with the resettlement of villages from the uplands to the lowlands in Laos have often been associated with a lot of illness and high mortality rates (Evrard and Goudineau 2004; Baird and Shoemaker 2007). People became particularly angry, especially when they were ordered not to rely on rituals to cure their illnesses (Khamsaeng Keosaeng interviewed 2012).

In addition, some ethnic Lao Pathet Lao military staying at a military base at Vieng Phou Kha joined Chanh Souk's troops. One of those was Chanhthong Vilaysak, who had been a SGU soldier between 1969 and 1973, but had later switched sides and, in 1976, had become one of the Pathet Laos's sub-district committee members in Vieng Phou Kha (Chanhthong Vilaysak interviewed 2009).

During the Vieng Phou Kha attack, Chanh Souk's soldiers captured a Khmu man named Kong Kham. Chanh Souk told Kong Kham that if he stayed with him, he would be fine, but if Kong Kham went back with the Pathet Lao and Vietnamese, Chanh Souk would have to kill him. Kong Kham was afraid, and he stayed with Chanh Souk (Kong Kham and Dome interviewed 2017).

https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2025.10001 Published online by Cambridge University Press

But, of course, not everyone agreed to join Chanh Souk. Once Chanh Souk and his men had taken over Vieng Phou Kha District Centre, Ngeun Village, and Na Le District Centre, the insurgents killed some captured Pathet Lao who refused to cooperate (Kong Kham and Dome interviewed 2017). For example, Mr. Kou, a Tai Dam official and military officer, was uncooperative. His strong opposition led the insurgents to feel that they had no choice but to kill him, which they did (Khamthong Nyommarath interviewed 2009).

Although Chanh Souk's operation was initially successful, other insurgent leaders did not herald it. In particular, Col. Phay had ordered Chanh Souk not to undertake the attack, as he felt that the operation was premature and that it would be better to win over the hearts and minds of the people first. However, Chanh Souk was stubborn and proceeded anyway (Piak interviewed 2014).

The insurgents were only able to hold Na Le for a few days before Pathet Lao reinforcements arrived to retake the town. However, Chanh Souk and his men were able to hold Vieng Phou Kha for almost a month. Finally, however, the Pathet Lao's 28th Battalion arrived from the capital of Luang Namtha Province and attacked them. The Pathet Lao were also supported by forces from Meung District (Khamsaeng Keosaeng interviewed 2011, 2012). When Chanh Souk's troops left Vieng Phou Kha, they vandalised some of the large weapons that they could not take with them by removing important breechblocks. They also blew up three armories (Khamsaeng Keosaeng interviewed 2012).

After Chanh Souk's forces had withdrawn from the district capital, they stayed in the forest for a few months, until November 1977, when they organised a big meeting and decided to go back to Thailand. They were running low on ammunition. Chanh Souk was also interested in improving his contacts with Thai government officials and supporters from other foreign countries (Khamsaeng Keosaeng interviewed 2011).

The Thais initially wanted the Khmu insurgents to stay at an enclosed refugee camp. However, Chanh Souk's men refused to stay at Ban Tong camp outside of Chiang Khong and said that they were resistance soldiers, not refugees. Therefore, they initially slept outside of the camp (Khamsaeng Keosaeng interviewed 2011).

Developing an Insurgency with Limited Resources

Soon, the priority of the Khmu insurgents was to generate income to support themselves and their families. For example, Khamsaeng Keosaeng and others went to work at a tobacco curing operation where Khamsaeng had previously worked before crossing into Laos to attack Vieng Phou Kha. Some also got involved in small-scale agriculture. The Khmu insurgents and their families stayed at various places. Many received UN refugee rice allowances even though they were living outside of an official camp. Still, the families had very limited income (Khamsaeng Keosaeng interviewed 2011). The kinship of the Khmu is patrilineal (Suwilai 2002), unlike the Lao who are matrilineal, although with considerable flexibility based on actual circumstances (Baird and Soukhaphon 2025). This does not mean that men were not influenced by their wives and other relatives, but none of the Khmu men I interviewed said that the women in their lives strongly influenced them to make important decisions related to their insurgent activities. Still, the difficult lives their families experienced undoubtedly influenced their decisions.

During this time, Piak began working with Phay Vilayphanh's son-in-law, a Chinese Thai named Charoen. Charoen had a construction company that was contracted to build new roads into CPT stronghold areas, which was part of the Thai military's plan to weaken the CPT (see Baird 2021; Khamsaeng Keosaeng interviewed 2011; Piak interviewed 2014). Prior to 1975, Charoen had been a timber trader in Vientiane and Xayaboury in Laos (Khamsaeng Keosaeng interviewed 2011). A plan emerged to hire the insurgents from Laos to help guard Charoen's roadbuilders. Some of the income would be used to buy guns to support the insurgency in Laos (Figure 3) (Khamsaeng Keosaeng interviewed 2011). Piak arranged for rice to be provided to the insurgents. They used the revenue to buy 100 guns from people in Ubon Ratchathani (Piak interviewed 2012).

https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2025.10001 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Figure 3. Khamsaeng Keosaeng (middle) and other Khmu insurgents guarding the strategic road being built against the CPT in Sakoen, Songkwae District, Nan Province, 1980.

There was a lot of risk associated with guarding the roadbuilding teams in northern Thailand, and Khamsaeng remembers being told that dependents of insurgents killed during an operation would receive 15,000 baht. Indeed, four died in action. One was killed by a sniper, and others died after stepping on land mines (Khamsaeng Keosaeng interviewed 2011). In addition, in 1979, Col. Phay Vilayphanh was in the Doi Pha Ji area of Phayao Province overseeing roadbuilding guards when he stepped on a land mine and lost a leg (Bouaphanh Vilayphanh interviewed 2018). Many more Thais were killed. The Chinese Kuomintang (KMT) similarly helped guard road teams, together with Lao and Khmu insurgents, and many were also killed by snipers and landmines (Hung and Baird 2017; Khamsaeng Keosaeng interviewed 2011).

Once the insurgents were in a more stable situation, although still underfunded and under-resourced, the Thais started helping to develop their military capacity. For example, in 1979 thirty-two ethnic minorities (Khmu, Lahu, etc.) originally from Laos were sent to Lak Thai 1 and 2 in Phitsanulok Province in the lower north of Thailand for military training. After getting some more ammunition and weapons from Piak, as well as some additional training in the Chiang Khong area, Chanh Souk's resistance fighters returned to Laos (Khamsaeng Keosaeng interviewed 2009).

China Provides Support

In 1978 and 1979, the relationships between China and Vietnam and Laos rapidly deteriorated, leading the PRC to invade Vietnam in February 1979. After heavy fighting and serious losses on both sides, the PRC withdrew from Vietnam after declaring that its punitive measures against Vietnam for invading Cambodia and removing the Khmer Rouge from power had been accomplished (Funston 1979; Chang 1983; Chanda 1986). Soon after, the PRC started plotting against Vietnam and its close ally, the Lao PDR government, which had sided with Vietnam during the Sino-Vietnam war. In particular, the PRC decided to begin materially supporting the insurgency in Laos (Baird 2025b). During this period, the PRC also recruited General Kong Le and his political organisation, *Le Mouvement de la Resistance Revolutionnaires du Peuple Lao Neutralist* (MORREPLAN) in France to support the

https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2025.10001 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Figure 4. Chao Vorasan (Iu-Mien), Kong Le, Chanh Ian (child of Van Sieu) and below, Chao Vorasan's wife, Khampheuy, Chanh Souk, and Sengfou in China (Complements of Khambang Sibounheuang).

insurgency from China (Baird 2018: 748), and in late May 1979, the Chinese transported Kong Le to China for that purpose (Kong Le interviewed 2009).

Soon after, Chanh Souk and many of his soldiers prepared to travel to China by foot to receive training and arms, and by 1980, Chanh Souk was the first to lead a company of his soldiers to China for military training in Mengla County, Yunnan Province (Figures 4-6). Khamsaeng Keosaeng and a group of insurgents departed soon after, on February 8, 1980; Khamsaeng also travelled there a second time, arriving in China on December 12, 1981 (Khamsaeng Keosaeng interviewed 2011). Chanh Souk and Khamsaeng's groups walked through Laos to reach China, but some groups travelled to China via Burma (see Figure 1) (Piak interviewed 2014). Although the vast majority of insurgents were male, some of Chanh Souk's soldiers were women. Four Khmu women went to China to receive military training, and even higher numbers of Iu-Mien and Lahu women went for the same reason (Siengtheut Lakthanasouk and Khankham Vilaikam interviewed 2009).

Although Chao La was not personally involved with combat, the former Iu-Mien leader at Nam Nhou was a key player in the insurgency. He lived in Chiang Khong and often stayed at the refugee camp there, but supported Sengfou from the safety of his house (Wang Neng (Richard) interviewed 2015). Sengfou was under Chao La's control, as were other Iu-Mien in the area. Sengfou reportedly commanded about 360 insurgents. Initially, 60 of them went to China with him. Seventy went up the next time. Eventually, almost all 360 made the trip (Lao Lou or Kao interviewed 2009).

Another allied group that also went to the PRC to receive arms and other support during this period was the Hmong *Chao Fa*, which formally called itself the Ethnic Liberation Organisation of Laos (ELOL) or *Ong Pot Poi Thouk Son Xath Nai Pathet Lao,* in Lao. Pa Kao Her and Moua Nhia Long

https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2025.10001 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Figure 5. Kong Le and Chanh Souk in China, 1980.

led the ELOL (Baird 2013, 2014). The *Chao Fa* was a millenarian group inspired by the teaching of the Mother of Writing, Shong Lue Yang (Smalley et al. 1990).

Another Khmu insurgent, Siengtheut, travelled back and forth between Thailand and Laos several times as one of Chanh Souk's insurgent soldiers. Later, however, the Thai military's Strategic Operations Command became more dominant along the border, and Siengtheut was compelled to focus more on providing the Thais with military intelligence. He also engaged in various firefights in Laos. Siengtheut went to China twice. When he first went, in 1982, he studied in Mengla County, near the border with Laos. There was a camp in the forest where they trained. He went there with 50-60 other insurgents. They received military training for one month before returning to Laos. He went to the same place a second time in 1984 and studied for 25 days. He then returned to fight in Laos (Siengtheut Lakthanasouk interviewed 2009).

Some insurgents went to China many times over the years. For example, Kong Kham went five times. Each time, he spent between 15 days and two months there. He would walk to Boten, on the border between Laos and China, and then secretly cross into China near Muang Sang Yon, which is adjacent to Luang Namtha Province (see Figure 1) (Kong Kham and Dome interviewed 2017).

After Chanh Souk returned from China, he mainly stayed in Laos (Figure 7), although he spent a couple of months in Huai Kok Village, one of the communities in Chiang Khong established for the families of Khmu insurgents to live in (Siengtheut Lakthanasouk interviewed 2009). The women, elderly people, and children stay in Thailand in this and a few other villages in the Chiang Khong area.

After the Khmu and Iu-Mien went to China in 1979, an Iu-Mien man named Van Sieu, who worked together closely with Sengfou, became the head of the group's headquarters in Mengla County in China, near the border with Laos, as he could speak Chinese (Siengtheut Lakthanasouk and Khankham Vilaikam interviewed 2009). Van Sieu was a relative of Sengfou and was born in Laos. He reportedly eventually died of illness in China (Lao Lou or Kao interviewed 2009).

According to Khmu former insurgents in California, Sengfou Saechao was popular with Iu-Mien villagers. Iu-Mien people would often welcome Khmu insurgents if they told them that they were with Sengfou, they pointed out (Siengtheut Lakthanasouk and Khankham Vilaikam interviewed 2009;

https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2025.10001 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Figure 6. Khmu and other ethnic minorities at a camp in Mengla County, Yunnan, China visited by Kong Le.

Khamsaeng Keosaeng interviewed 2009). Khamsaeng worked with Sengfou for almost 15 years and spent time with him in Laos, Thailand, and China. According to him, villagers were generally not afraid of Sengfou, and he never heard of Sengfou stealing from villagers (Khamsaeng Keosaeng interviewed 2009). Lao Lou, Sengfou's younger brother, also reported that Sengfou got along with the villagers and that he could enter villages from the north to the south of where Iu-Mien people lived (Lao Lou or Kao interviewed 2009). This contradicts what Jonsson (2009) reported. It is, however, possible that Sengfou was popular with villagers early on, but that later some people turned against him.

In any case, as Khamsaeng explained, the insurgents could not force the villagers, or the villagers would report them to the Lao PDR government, and that would prevent the resistance fighters from operating in the area. Therefore, the resistance often did things to assist the villagers to win them over, such as helping them in their swidden lowland paddy fields. They mainly worked in Lahu Hpfu (Mouseu Khao), Lahu Aka/Lahu Na (Mouseu Dam), and Lahu Shi (Kouy) villages. Sometimes, they also brought salt to villagers to improve relations (Khamsaeng Keosaeng interviewed 2009). Indeed, the insurgents needed to win over hearts and minds (Chong Lor Her interviewed 2012). Chank Souk even practised traditional swidden agriculture in a remote area inside Laos (Khamkheua Sayavong interviewed 2012).

The Khmu insurgents with Chanh Souk did not engage in any heavy fighting between 1981 and 1986. They mainly operated in remote upland areas of Vieng Phou Kha District. They would enter villages and distribute propaganda against the Lao PDR government and the Vietnamese. They received

https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2025.10001 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Figure 7. Chanh Thong, Chanh Souk, Khamsaeng Keosaeng and another insurgent in the forest in Laos, 1982.

food from villagers. Some villagers supported them, and some did not. The insurgents sometimes entered certain Khmu villages, but they could not stay long. It was easiest in Lahu villages. They had allies in the Lahu villages who would watch over them and inform them when the Vietnamese were coming. Therefore, the Khmu insurgents came to trust the Lahu (Siengtheut Lakthanasouk interviewed 2009).

During this period, the insurgents did not attack the Lao military, as they did not have enough soliders or arms. They used their weapons to defend themselves. They mainly travelled in small groups of four or five people so that they could not be easily tracked and detected. They removed their shoes sometimes when walking, which also helped conceal their travel. However, they occasionally attacked the Lao military guerilla style when they noticed weak points. The Khmu insurgents generally did not attack Pathet Lao soldiers if villagers were with the Pathet Lao. They also only launched attacks outside of villages to ensure that villagers would not be accidentally caught in the crossfire. Strategically, the insurgents realised that if villagers were hurt in these sorts of operations, it would be impossible for them to ask for more rice from them (Khamsaeng Keosaeng interviewed 2009).

The Return of Khamsene and the Rise of the *Neo Hom*

In 1980, after five years in a re-education camp, Khamsene Keodara, the Khmu military leader from the Second Indochina War, was released from detention in Oudomxay Province, where he had been sent after leaving Phongsaly. After his release, Khamsene travelled to Houay Xay, the capital of Bokeo Province (Bountha 2008; Khammeung 2008). The Pathet Lao transported Khamsene in a Russian airplane. Others had to walk, but Khamsene was ill, as he did not have enough to eat when in re-education. When incarcerated, prisoners mainly ate old rice and cassava, recounted Khamsene many years later (Khamsene Keodara and Bountha Choulaphanh interviewed 2009).

Soon after, Khamsene obtained money from his wife's parents and travelled to Vientiane to meet his three children. He then took the opportunity to cross from Vientiane to Nong Khai. Khamsene spent a month at Nong Khai Refugee Camp (Figure 8) before going north to Huai Kok and Huai Too villages, near Chiang Khong, where he ended up staying for years (Khamsene Keodara and Bountha

https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2025.10001 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Figure 8. Khamsene Keodara and his wife and children at Nong Khai Refugee Camp, 1980.

Choulaphanh interviewed 2009). Khamsene joined with Chanh Souk and the other Khmu insurgents working with Piak. He engaged in some resistance activities in Laos in the Nam Nhou area, but he was not there for long (Khamkheua Sayavong interviewed 2012). Khamsene mainly stayed on the Thai side of the border, while Chanh Souk led the insurgents operating in Laos (Piak interviewed 2014). According to Piak, Khamsene only worked ten percent of the time. In contrast, he claimed that Chanh Souk was active (Piak interviewed 2014).

Khamsene acknowledged that the Khmu insurgents he worked with were initially neutralists under Kong Le, but after a few years they started receiving support from Vang Pao's ULNLF (Khamsene Keodara and Bountha Choulaphanh interviewed 2009). This shift happened for two main reasons. First, after 1983, Kong Le was not able to directly support them from the PRC after he had a falling out with the Chinese and was expelled from China and forced to return to France. This reduced his influence over the frontline soldiers. Second, after the ULNLF (*Neo Hom Pot Poi Xath*) was first established in 1981 (ULNLF 1981), it was able to convince the Thai government to give them the right to manage all the insurgents from Laos operating along the border (Baird 2025a). Therefore, at around the same time as Kong Le was no longer able to direct much support to them, the influence of the ULNLF was expanding along the border, resulting in various groups becoming assimilated into the ULNLF. It was believed that Chanh Souk and Khamsene Keodara were the main insurgent leaders in the northwest of Laos since the Iu-Mien under Sengfou were reportedly less active (MacAlan Thompson interviewed 2011).

In 1983, Kong Le sent an ethnic Lao man named Khamphone from France to work with Chanh Souk and other insurgents in the Chiang Khong area. Khamphone particularly coordinated with one of Chanh Souk's deputies, Khamkhit. Khamphone also contacted Japanese donors and provided the insurgents in Laos with walkie-talkies, to improve communications. He also coordinated the distribution of various other supplies provided by the Japanese. However, tension emerged as Kong Le, who was in the process of moving from China to France, insisted on approving all Japanese support provided and did not agree with Khamphone accepting aid without Kong Le's approval. Kong Le reported that he was wary about being used as a tool by others (Kong Le interviewed 2009).

https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2025.10001 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Chanh Souk remained officially aligned with the neutralists, as did Sengfou (Khamsene Keodara and Bountha Choulaphanh interviewed 2009). However, according to Khammy Vang, a Hmong leader who himself was mainly aligned with the ULNLF, Chanh Souk would say that he was with Kong Le, but in reality, he would accept support from anyone offering it. Khammy admitted that he, too, accepted support from anyone. He received some support from Vang Pao and the ULNLF, but not enough to support his many soldiers (Khammy Vang and Sao Mee Yang interviewed 2016).

Khamsene considered that he was under the ULNLF (Khamsene Keodara and Bountha Choulaphanh interviewed 2009), and at one point, he reportedly tried to convince Chanh Souk to join too, but Chanh Souk disagreed, and his soldiers ended up shooting at Khamsene (Khammeung Manokoune interviewed 2009). Khamsene acknowledged that his relationship with Chanh Souk was tense. Khemsene claimed that Chanh Souk chose people to work with him who did not want to listen to others, and that this created problems. He also believed that Chanh Souk was jealous of him from when Khamsene was appointed district and provincial (possibly deputy?) governor before 1975. Khamsene also claimed that when Chanh Souk still had good relations with the Pathet Lao, he supported sending Khamsene for re-education. Khamsene reported that insurgents working with Chanh Souk tried to assassinate him three times. However, Khamsene claimed that he survived the attacks because he was impenetrable (*khong* in Lao) and that bullets could not pierce his skin (Khamsene Keodara and Bountha Choulaphanh interviewed 2009).

When Khamsene was staying in Chiang Khong, he claimed that he did not receive the support from China that Chanh Souk and others received and that he only obtained a small amount of food from them. He claimed that he mainly received support from Christian organisations, the Thai commander of Military Region 3, Sudsai Hatsadin, who was with the Thai Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC), and some in the Thai Ministry of Defense. Later, he also received assistance from the ULNLF (Khamsene Keodara and Bountha Choulaphanh interviewed 2009), as did other groups aligned with the ULNLF but not formally part of it (Baird 2025a). However, only about 20 of his former soldiers at Nam Nhou worked directly under Khamsene, much fewer than were under Chanh Souk (Khamsene Keodara and Bountha Choulaphanh interviewed 2009). Chanh Souk had about 200 soldiers when Khamsene first came to Thailand, but later this number declined. Some died; others became discouraged due to a lack of Chinese support after 1983 and became political refugees abroad (Khamsene Keodara and Bountha Choulaphanh interviewed 2009).

The tensions between Chanh Souk and Khamsene eventually resulted in Khamsene ceasing his direct involvement in the insurgency. Khamsene acknowledged that he was afraid that Chanh Souk or one of his soldiers would kill him (Khamsene Keodara and Bountha Choulaphanh interviewed 2009).

At this time, Khamphone and Khamkhit thought about separating from Kong Le. Vong Kham, a Khmu insurgent originally from Vieng Phou Kha District (Kong Kham and Dome interviewed 2017), joined with Khamphone in a plan to separate from Chanh Souk (Khamsaeng Keosaeng interviewed 2011).

In December 1984, the PRC completely stopped supporting the insurgents from Laos, including Chanh Souk's soldiers, Sengfou's Iu-Mien contingent, and Pa Kao Her's Hmong *Chao Fa* soldiers (Khamsaeng Keosaeng interviewed 2011). At this time, there were reportedly about 300 insurgents still under Chanh Souk (Khamsene Keodara and Bountha Choulaphanh interviewed 2009).

Once the PRC had stopped supporting Chanh Souk and Sengfou—due to a falling out between Kong Le and the Chinese, leading to Kong Le's departure from China—and Chanh Souk and Sengfou were returning from the Chinese border, they signed an agreement in the forest to continue cooperating with each other (Figure 9). They were not ready to give up the fight yet.

After Chinese Support Ends

In around 1985, the Khmu insurgent leader Vong Kham and Khamphone went to meet General Vang Pao, who was secretly visiting Thailand. During that meeting, they agreed to join the ULNLF, as

https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2025.10001 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Figure 9. Sengfou Saechao and Chanh Souk shaking hands after signing an agreement to continue cooperating after the PRC withdrew support for them in late 1984.

they needed new support since the Chinese had stopped providing assistance. However, not all the insurgents agreed with this new strategy. Some ended up joining the ULNLF, while others did not. Chanh Souk was in Laos at the time, so he was not involved in discussions. However, once he learned what had happened, he refused to enter the ULNLF. He vowed to remain loyal to Kong Le's neutralists, reportedly because they had both rebelled against corruption back in 1960 when Kong Le launched a successful coup d'etat in Vientiane (Khamsaeng Keosaeng interviewed 2011). Tensions between Chanh Souk and Vong Kham increased, and some insurgents, such as Khamsaeng Keosaeng, felt that Vong Kham and Khamphone had double-crossed Chanh Souk's group both by joining the ULNLF without consulting with Chanh Souk and by taking things provided to the neutralists and giving them to the ULNLF (Khamsaeng Keosaeng interviewed 2009).

There were also tensions associated with their respective leadership styles. According to the Khmu insurgent, Kong Kham, Chanh Souk was too strong with his underlings. Kong Kham also thought that Chanh Souk said too many bad things about other people, whereas Vong Kham was kinder to those under his command. This is one of the reasons why Khamphone supported Vong Kham to separate from Chanh Souk and join the ULNLF (Kong Kham and Dome interviewed 2017).

Sengfou was eventually arrested by ethnic Wa soldiers in Burma at the request of the Chinese while he was on his way to China (Siengtheut Lakthanasouk and Khankham Vilaikam interviewed 2009). The Chinese were reportedly angry with Sengfou for selling Viet-Lao guns that the PRC had provided

https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2025.10001 Published online by Cambridge University Press

(Kong Kham and Dome interviewed 2017), although it is unclear if he actually sold the guns or not. In any case, after the Wa delivered Sengfou to the Lao authorities, Sengfou was incarcerated for over ten years in Luang Namtha Province (Siengtheut Lakthanasouk and Khankham Vilaikam interviewed 2009). At one point, Sengfou stayed in a large house in Luang Namtha, where he eventually died. He was apparently not treated badly when he was imprisoned (James Chamberlain interviewed 2017).

By the mid-1980s, Piak had stopped working with insurgents, but the Khmu still occasionally saw him around. But by that time, the Strategic Operations Command of the Thai military had taken responsibility for managing the insurgents from Laos. This limited what the Khmu insurgents could do in Thailand (Khamsaeng Keodara interviewed 2011).

In 1986, Khamsene decided to fully stop his involvement in the insurgency (Khammeung 2008), and in 1987 he left Huai Too Village and officially entered Napho Refugee Camp in Nakorn Phanom Province, northeastern Thailand. He spent six months there and then spent another six months or more at Bataan Camp in the Philippines. He finally arrived in Seattle as a political refugee on March 2, 1989 (Khamsene Keodara and Bountha Choulaphanh interviewed 2009). MacAlan Thompson met Khamsene in Chiang Khong before he left for Napho. According to him, Khamsene did not want to leave Thailand but claimed his wife did and that he had succumbed (MacAlan Thompson interviewed 2016).

Siengtheut claimed that he stopped fighting due to a lack of support and a decreasing number of soldiers. He entered Ban Tong Refugee Camp, outside of Chiang Khong, in 1987. After spending a month there, the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) in Chiang Rai sent him to Chiang Kham Refugee Camp. He then went to Phanat Nikhom Camp in Chonburi Province. He finally immigrated to the United States on June 28, 1991 (Siengtheut Lakthanasouk interviewed 2009).

By the late 1980s, the Lao government was complaining a lot about the Thais harbouring insurgents from Laos, and the Thais decided not to stop secretly supporting the insurgency (Khamsene Keodara and Bountha Choulaphanh interviewed 2009). During this time of uncertainty, Khamsaeng did not have enough food to eat and did not know who to join. Therefore, he decided to enter the Chiang Kham Refugee Camp. There was talk that all the remaining refugee camps for people from Laos in Thailand would be closed soon, so a number of families decided to enter the camps before it was too late. By this time, there were no longer any Iu-Mien on the frontlines (Khamsaeng Keosaeng interviewed 2011).

With the insurgency in decline and the Thai government no longer allowing insurgents to use Thailand as a base, Chanh Souk finally decided to become a refugee and resettle in Richmond, California, in 1990 (William Sage interviewed 2025). Thongsoun Phouthama claimed that too many people had died over the years, and there were few fighters left at the time (Thongsoun Phouthama interviewed 2009).

Although Chanh Souk appears to have been loyal to Kong Le, Kong Le criticised Chanh Souk when he was interviewed in 2009. First, Kong Le claimed that Chanh Souk sold weapons he received from China in Thailand. This reportedly angered the Chinese, who, according to Kong Le, stopped giving more weapons to the insurgency after this incident (Kong Le interviewed 2009). However, Khamsaeng Keosaeng strongly refuted this claim that Chanh Souk sold guns, as he claimed that he worked closely with Chanh Souk and would have known if this had been true (Khamsaeng Keosaeng interviewed 2024).

Instead, Khamsaeng Keosaeng claimed that he was at a meeting in 1983 in Mengla County, Yunnan Province, not far from the border with Laos, when the Chinese decided to stop providing weapons, and that it had nothing to do with anyone selling weapons. Instead, he claimed that the Chinese met with leaders of three anti-Lao PDR groups, including Kong Le, who represented MORREPLAN. There were also representatives of the mainly Hmong-led *Chao Fa* or ELOL, and Lamone represented Dr. Khamsengkeo Sengsathit's revived *Neo Lao Xang Xath* Lao communist political organisation, which was opposed to the Lao PDR. The Chinese reportedly wanted the three organisations to join

https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2025.10001 Published online by Cambridge University Press

together under the PRC's leadership. The leaders of the three organisations asked for some time before deciding how to proceed. They were given three days to consider the proposal and decide what to do. Finally, when they returned, Kong Le and others said that they could not agree to come under China and, particularly the *Neo Lao Xang Xath* Lao communists. The Chinese leaders were reportedly angry with the response. Khamsaeng was there, he reported, and is certain that this is the reason that Kong Le had to leave the PRC (Khamsaeng Keosaeng interviewed 2034). Boualy Thanonglith, who was with the ELOL, also heard that Kong Le objected to a plan to make Lamone the Prime Minister of a new coalition government (Boualy Thanonglith interviewed 2011).

In any case, Kong Le also criticised Chanh Souk and his colleagues, Chanhtome Keola, Captain Phyla, Chanh Ma, and others, for killing Lao people who had gone to China and then returned to Laos. Kong Le also contended that Chanh Souk and his nephew Chanhtome Keola wanted his own territory to make a country for ethnic minorities (Kong Le interviewed 2009). However, in the 1980s, Thanome Soknoi in France was unaware of the criticisms that Kong Le had of Chanh Souk (Thanome Soknoi interviewed 2009), possibly because Kong Le was in China and Thanome was in France and Thailand. However, Thongsoun Phouthama did not believe that Chanh Souk really advocated for a separate nation state for ethnic minorities, as Kong Le claimed (Thongsoun Phouthama interviewed 2009). Other Khmu insurgents also claimed that Chanh Souk did not want to establish a separate country (Siengtheut Lakthanasouk and Khankham Vilaikam interviewed 2009; Khammeung Manokoune interviewed 2009).

Many resistance fighters died over the years. Two Khmu insurgents estimate that over 200 were killed between 1975 and 1987, and more were killed later. Some were killed in firefights. Others were caught and killed in captivity. Some were shot crossing the Mekong River by boat to Thailand to get food. Others died when swimming across the Mekong due to not being strong swimmers. Some were also seriously injured. For example, Khankham, a Khmu insurgent, was next to someone else who stepped on a land mine. Khankham was hit with shrapnel but survived. The one who stepped on the landmine died. It was a large M-16 mine (called *din xang*) (Siengtheut Lakthanasouk and Khankham Vilaikam interviewed 2009).

After Chanh Souk and Sengfou Saechao

After Chanh Souk and Sengfou Saechao were no longer in the insurgency, Vong Kham and Kong Kham continued operating in the Vieng Phou Kha area. They mainly worked with Lahu (Mouseu and Kouy) in Vieng Phou Kha District (Kong Kham and Dome interviewed 2017).

Kong Kham was an insurgent from 1977 to 1994. Over time, the number of insurgents gradually declined, and support from villagers also gradually decreased. In 1994, he crossed into Thailand to provide logistical support to Vong Kham's fighters. He did that until Vong Kham was shot and killed in 1996-1997 by the Lao authorities near Nam Nhone, Bokeo Province (see Figure 1) (Kong Kham and Dome interviewed 2017). Khamphone died with him, as his travel documents expired, so he became trapped there since he ended up being stateless (Khamsaeng Keosaeng interviewed 2024). The last 40-50 insurgents, along with women and children, left the forest after Vong Kham was killed. They either went to Thailand or integrated into villages in Laos.

According to Khamsaeng, in 1994-95, a former Khmu insurgent named Muang, who was staying in Thailand, was told by relatives in Laos that it would be fine for him to return to Laos. He went but was arrested, and his tongue was cut off before he was imprisoned. Later, someone felt sorry for him and got him released. He returned to Thailand. He can speak, but not clearly. He had previously been close to Chanh Souk (Khamsaeng Keosaeng interviewed 2009).

One of Khamsaeng Keosaeng's cousins, Sengdy Keosaeng, refused to leave Laos. He had been a military medic with the FAR beginning in 1968 and had been sent to a re-education camp between 1975 and 1980. After he was released, he returned to his village in Vieng Phou Kha and secretly provided rice to Chanh Souk's group. However, in 1981, when his secret role was revealed, he had no

https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2025.10001 Published online by Cambridge University Press

choice but to join the insurgency. He went to China and later operated in the Nam Nhone, Nam Keung, and Nam Nhou areas. He was finally shot and killed in 2003, and others with him were arrested. That was the end of the Khmu insurgency in Laos (Chanhthong Vilaysak interviewed 2011).

Conclusion

This article has presented a history of the transnational ethnic Khmu anti-Lao PDR and anti-Vietnamese insurgency in northwestern Laos between 1975 and the early 2000s. While the Khmu initially received a limited amount of support from the Thai military, which wanted to use the Khmu to help fight against the CPT and collect military intelligence in Laos, the situation changed dramatically in 1979 when the PRC became the enemy of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and by extension, their close ally, the Lao PDR. Thus, the PRC started training and arming anti-Lao PDR insurgents, regardless of whether they were left-wing, neutralist, or right-wing. Essentially, ideological and political orientation were not particularly important. Instead, the enemy of their enemy was considered their friend.

It is also evident that anti-Lao PDR insurgents were often more flexible in who they affiliated with and received material support from than what formal announcements and affiliations indicated. Because they were often in desperate need of support, insurgents were typically flexible about whom they accepted support from and became allied with. Again, provided that a group was the enemy of their enemy, it could be considered their friend, regardless of political or ideological background. This was often the case during the late Cold War period, and particularly during the Third Indochina War.

Unfortunately, there is a tendency to construct Cold War contestation as binaries, the political left versus the political right, and communism against capitalism. However, when it came to the Third Indochina War and the Khmu insurgency in northern Laos, the political and geographical landscape was dramatically altered, something that this article clearly demonstrates.

Acknowledgements. Thanks to all the people who provided information about the events and circumstances discussed in this article, especially Khamsaeng Keosaeng and William Sage. They also provided comments on an earlier draft. Thanks to Gareth Baldrica-Franklin from the Cartography Lab in the Department of Geography at the University of Wisconsin-Madison for helping to prepare the map. Thank you, also, to the anonymous reviewers who provided comments.

References

Anonymous. 1979. "Formation of the Northern Free Lao Liberation Movement (Singh Dong)." Unpublished report, 5 pp., Dr. Charles L. Weldon Papers (CA004-05), Box 4, Folder 3, University of Texas Dallas Special Collections Archive.

Anonymous interviewed February 2012, Milwaukee, WI.

Baird, Ian G. 2013. "The monks and the Hmong: The special relationship between the Chao Fa and the Tham Krabok Buddhist Temple in Saraburi Province, Thailand." In *Buddhism and Violence: Militarism and Buddhism in Modern Asia*, edited by Vladimir Tikhonov and Torkel Brekke, 120-151. London: Routledge.

Baird, Ian G. 2014. "Chao Fa movies: The transnational production of Hmong American history and identity." *Hmong Studies Journal* **15**(1): 1-24.

Baird, Ian G. 2018. "Party, state, and the control of information in the Lao People's Democratic Republic: Secrecy, falsification and denial." *Journal of Contemporary Asia* **48**(5): 739-760.

Baird, Ian G. 2021. "The Hmong and the Communist Party of Thailand: A transnational, transcultural and gender relations-transforming experience." *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and National Studies of Southeast Asia* **9**(2): 167-184.

Baird, Ian G. 2023. "Developing relationships over many years: Under investigated but important types of qualitative research." In *Palgrave Handbook of Methodological Issues in Social Research*, edited by Nasir Uddin and Alak Paul, 103-119. Palgrave Macmillan.

Baird, Ian G. 2025a. *Champassak Royalty and Sovereignty: Within and between Nation-States in Mainland Southeast Asia*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.

Baird, Ian G. 2025b. "Unlikely allies: Lao insurgent perspectives regarding armed group transnational collaboration in the Emerald Triangle region during the Third Indochina War." *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* **13**: 19–39.

https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2025.10001 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Baird, Ian G. 2025c. "Nationalism first: Complex late Cold War politics through the 'Really Secret War' in Laos." *Asian Studies Review*. https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2024.2443156
Baird, Ian G., and Bruce P. Shoemaker. 2007. "Unsettling experiences: Internal resettlement and international aid agencies in the Lao PDR." *Development and Change* **38**(5): 865-888.
Baird, Ian G., and Akarath Soukhaphon. 2025. "The geographies of Lao spirit mediumship in mainland Southeast Asia." In *Handbook of the Geographies of Religion*, edited by Lily Kong, Orlando Woods, and Justin K.H. Tse, 1031-1050. Springer Nature.
Boualy Thanonglith interviewed August 2009, September 2011, San Diego, CA.
Bouaphanh Vilayphanh telephone interviewed March 2018, Salt Lake, UT.
Bountha Choulaphanh. 2008. "Part of the history of Khamsene Keodara [In Lao]." Seattle: Unpublished, 2 pp.
Chanda, Nayan. 1986. *Brother Enemy. The War after the War*. San Diego, New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovannovich.
Chang, C.Y. 1983. "The Sino-Vietnam rift: Political impact on China's relations with Southeast Asia." *Contemporary Southeast Asia* **4**(4): 538–564.
Chanhthong Vilaysak interviewed September 2009, September 2011, Richmond, CA.
Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). 1975. "*Creation of Anti-Lao PDR Patriotic Front/Pathet Lao Resistance Groups throughout South Laos*," 4 December.
Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). 1981. "*Organization of the Lao Resistance Northern Region*. (DOI: 9 April 1981)," R 121629Z MAY 81, 12 May.
Chamberlain, James interviewed January 2017, Chiang Mai.
Chong Lor Her interviewed January 2012, Madison, WI.
Conboy, Kenneth (**with James Morrison**). 1995. *Shadow War: The CIA's Secret War in Laos*. Boulder, CO: Paladin.
Dommen, Arthur J. 2001. *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans: Nationalism and Communism in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam*. Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press.
Evans, Grant. 2002. *A Short History of Laos, the Land Between*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
Evrard, Olivier, and Yves Goudineau. 2004. "Planned resettlement, unexpected migrations and cultural trauma in Laos." *Development and Change* **35**(5): 937–962.
Funston, John. 1979. "The Third Indochina War and Southeast Asia." *Contemporary Southeast Asia* **1**(3): 268–289.
Goldston, Desley May. 2009. "How the Pathet Lao Seized Power in Laos in 1975." PhD diss, University of Queensland.
Gunn, Geoffrey. 1983. "Resistance coalitions in Laos." *Asian Survey* **23**(3): 316-340.
High, Holly. 2021. *Projectland: Life in a Lao Socialist Model Village*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press.
Hung, Po-Yi, and Ian G. Baird. 2017. "From soldiers to farmers: The political geography of Chinese Kuomintang territorialization in northern Thailand." *Political Geography* **58**: 1-13.
Jonsson, Hjorleifur. 2009. "War's ontogeny: Militias and ethnic boundaries in Laos and exile." *South East Asia Research* **47**(2): 125-149.
Khamkheua Sayavong interviewed September 2012, Richmond, CA.
Khamla Chanthalasak interviewed September 2012, Richmond, CA.
Khammeung Manokoune. 2008. "*Tone neung heng khouam pen ma khong than khamsene keodara* [In Lao] (One part of the time passed by Khamsene Keodara)." Unpublished document, 3 pp.
Khammeung Manokoune interviewed September 2009, Santa Ana, CA.
Khammy Vang, and Sao Mee Yang interviewed October 2016, Kem Village, Pua District. Thailand.
Khamsaeng Keosaeng interviewed September 2009, October 2009, September 2011, September 2012, December 2024, Richmond, CA.
Khamsene Keodara, and Bountha Choulaphanh interviewed December 2009, Seattle, WA.
Khamthong Nyommarath interviewed September 2009, Richmond, CA.
Khankham Vilaikam interviewed September 2009, Richmond, CA.
Kong Kham and Dome interviewed April 2017, Chiang Mai, Thailand.
Kong Le interviewed June 2009, Paris, France.
Lao Lou or Kao telephone interviewed October 2009, Richmond, CA.
Morrison, Gayle. 2023. *Deep Tears: Post-War Hmong Resistance in Laos (1975-1990)*. Monee, Ill: Self-Published.
Piak interviewed July 2012, **May** 2014, Chiang Mai, Thailand.
Quincy, Keith. 2000. *Harvesting Pa Chay's Wheat: The Hmong and America's Secret War in Laos*. Spokane, WA: Eastern Washington University Press.
Sage, William W. 1973a. "Administrative, demographic, ethnic and sociological survey results, Houa Khong Province, Kingdom of Laos." Unpublished paper.
Sage, William W. 1973b. "Monthly report October 1973." Office Memorandum, United States Government, 31 October 1973.
Sage, William interviewed by telephone January 2022, January 2025, New York, NY.
Siengtheut Lakthanasouk interviewed September 2009, Richmond, CA.
Siengtheut Lakthanasouk, and Khankham Vilaikam interviewed September 2009, Richmond, CA.
Singto Na Champassak. 2010. *Mon Destin*. Paris: L'Harmattan.

https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2025.10001 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Sisavath Keobounphanh (General). 2015. *Lolome le teup nhai nai peo fai pativat* [In Lao] (Surround and Expand in the Fire of the Revolution), Vientiane.
Smalley, William, Chia Koua Yang, and Gnia Yee Yang. 1990. *Mother of Writing: The Origin and Development of a Hmong Messianic Script*. Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press.
Suwilai Premsrirat. 2002. "Appropriateness of Khmu culture." *Mon-Khmer Studies: A Journal of Southeast Asian Linguistics and Languages* **32**: 117-129.
Thanome Soknoi telephone interviewed August 2009, Paris, France.
Thompson, MacAlan interviewed July 2011, **August** 2016, Bangkok, Thailand.
Thongsoun Phouthama interviewed September 2009, Richmond, CA.
Touane Baccam interviewed October 2018, Madison, WI.
ULNLF. 1981. "Pacte d'Union Nationale Pour La Libération du Peuple Lao [In French] (Pact of the United Lao National Liberation Front)," 18 June, Paris.
Vientiane News. 1975a. "Two battalions rebellion ends," 31 December- 6 January.
Vientiane News. 1975b. "Two battalions rebelled in Houei Sai," 31 December- 6 January.
Vientiane News. 1975c. "Confusion reigned over Houei Sai," 31 December- 6 January.
Vientiane News. 1975d. "The Houei Sai affair, day by day," 7-13 January.
Vientiane News. 1975e. "Houei Sai rebellion ends: After negotiations with Tiao Souk and Pheng," 7-13 January.
Wang Neng (Richard) interviewed May 2015, St. Paul, MN.
Washington Post. 1974. "Lao rebels agree to release 19 Americans," 30 December.

Cite this article: Baird, Ian G. 2026. "The Enemy of My Enemy is My Friend: Transnational Ethnic Khmu Anti-Lao PDR Insurgents during the Late Cold War." *TRaNS: Trans -Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* **14**(1): 30–52. https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2025.10001

https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2025.10001 Published online by Cambridge University Press