

Military activity. 1973

[s.l.]: [s.n.], 1973

<https://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/BKWLMXZVENTE48Q>

This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17, US Code).

For information on re-use see:

<http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/Copyright>

The libraries provide public access to a wide range of material, including online exhibits, digitized collections, archival finding aids, our catalog, online articles, and a growing range of materials in many media.

When possible, we provide rights information in catalog records, finding aids, and other metadata that accompanies collections or items. However, it is always the user's obligation to evaluate copyright and rights issues in light of their own use.

LAOS 1973: WARY STEPS TOWARD PEACE

by

MacAlister Brown
and
Joseph J. Zasloff

Submitted to Asian Survey
for February 1974 issue

LAOS 1973: WARY STEPS TOWARD PEACE

by

MacAlister Brown and Joseph J. Zasloff

NEGOTIATING THE AGREEMENT

As the year 1973 opened, negotiations between the Royal Lao Government (RLG) and the Pathet Lao (PL) for a cease-fire were already seriously underway in Vientiane on the basis of an expanded version of the Five Points which the Pathet Lao originally announced in March 1970. Weekly sessions began on October 17, and made good progress even during the snags in the Paris Talks on Vietnam. Both sides produced draft peace agreements, differing principally on the method of reconstituting the government following a cease-fire. The Pathet Lao proposed that, pending general elections, a Coalition Council be appointed as a quasi legislature, and a Provisional Government be formed on a tripartite basis of PL, rightists and its own allied "patriotic neutralist" faction. The Government insisted that the Pathet Lao either return to the existing tripartite government which they had abandoned in 1963, or join a new tripartite cabinet in which Souvanna Phouma's followers would continue to be recognized as the neutralists.

The achievement of the Paris Agreement and Protocols on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam, on January 23, 1973, cast a new light on the Laos situation. Article 20 of the Paris Agreement calls for the participating parties to abide by the 1962 Geneva Agreements on Laos and to respect the Lao people's rights to independence, sovereignty, unity, territorial integrity and neutrality. In his press conference after the Agreement, the chief American negotiator Henry A. Kissinger indicated that it was "clearly understood that North Vietnamese troops are considered foreign with respect to Laos and Cambodia." It was his "firm expectation that within a short period of time there will be a formal cease-fire in Laos which, in turn will lead to a withdrawal of all foreign forces from Laos and, of course, to the use of Laos as a corridor of infiltration." He specified that his confidence in this matter was based upon exchanges that had taken place which he could not elaborate, but that there were no secret formal obligations.

Some of this confidence was shortly vindicated with the signing, in Vientiane on February 21, 1973, of the Agreement on the Restoration of Peace and Reconciliation in Laos. The Agreement retained most of the flavor of the Pathet Lao's draft, both in its terminology ("Patriotic Forces side" versus "Vietiane Government side") and its provisions. These included scrupulous application of the 1962 Geneva Agreements, particularly cessation of bombing and termination of foreign-supported "special forces" and all other military activities by foreign countries and the Lao factions. The Agreement also called for withdrawal of all foreign military personnel and installations within 60 days of the establishment of the Provisional Government and the National Coalition Council. Both sides were required to return all prisoners, regardless of nationality, as well as those imprisoned for cooperating with the other side within the same time period, and then to gather and report information on those missing in action (which includes over 300 Americans).

The political arrangements followed the Pathet Lao draft for the most part, but the details remained to be set down in a protocol. Within 30 days of the Agreement (a deadline far too short for so delicate an operation), a Provisional Government of National Union (PGNU) and a National Coalition Political Council (NCPC) were to be formed under special procedures utilizing the King. Pending elections to be arranged, "both sides will preserve their own zones of temporary control" (a de facto administrative partition), but promote normal relations of travel and economic exchange.

Thus a frame work for national peace and political accommodation was agreed upon, but negotiation of a protocol and its implementation would require much more mutual trust. The Pathet Lao had given up their previous insistence on a political settlement before a military cease-fire, and they had not specifically abolished the National Assembly (rather they rendered it redundant), nor loaded the provisional government in their favor. Nevertheless, the Agreement left them jubilant.

MANEUVERING TOWARD THE PROTOCOL

In the negotiation of the Protocol to the peace agreement, Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma believed that the PL's commitment to Lao nationalism was stronger than the ties to their North Vietnamese allies, or to Marxism-Leninism, and that they could be drawn back into the Lao community. The PL, negotiating from a stronger military and political position than in 1962, were ready for an accommodation which would speed the American departure and bring them into a government in which they would control half of the ministries, participate in some administration of the RLG zone, and acquire a legitimate presence in the administrative and royal capitals of the country. Both sides were encouraged to reach a compromise by the U.S. and North Vietnam, as well as by the other Great Powers. The Soviet military attache, for example, after consultation with his U.S. counterparty, gave a dinner party with relaxing vodka to ease tensions between PL and RLG generals.

Within his own community Souvanna met opposition, particularly from right-wing army officers and powerful political families such as the Sananikones. In late August the oft-predicted coup was attempted by Thao Ma, a former Royal Lao Air Force chief of staff living in Thailand since his earlier abortive coup attempt in 1966, with a small band of perhaps 20 co-conspirators. They apparently expected to be joined by Air Force and other FAR officers disaffected by Souvanna's moves toward accommodation. U.S. Charge d'Affaires John Dean plunged rapidly into the fray at the Vientiane airfield, attempting to persuade Ma, who in earlier years had enjoyed abundant American support, to abandon his scheme. Unsuccessful in this effort, Dean vigorously advised FAR officers not to support the coup. It died within a day with Thao Ma and several leaders summarily shot by Army officers, leaving a mystery as to whether other Lao rightists or Thais had helped plan the effort. Paradoxically, the

coup bolstered the weary Souvanna's position, as the reluctant FAR, and the entire diplomatic community, expressed support for his personal role. The cabinet opposition which had blocked an accord in July was now gradually isolated and exhausted, and Souvanna arranged the official signing ceremony for September 14. PL spokesman have hailed it as a "great victory for the Lao people."

The Protocol includes the following provisions:

1. A Premier (whom all agreed would be Souvanna) is to head a government composed of a Vice Premier and five ministers from each side and two more ministers chosen by mutual consent. Each minister will have a vice-minister from the other side with whom he must work on the basis of unanimity.

2. The PNUG is to function on all important matters by unanimity. However, each party is responsible for the ministries under its charge, and even a minister's temporary absence is to be filled by his own party, rather than by the other party's Vice Minister.

3. The NCPC, composed of 42 members (16 from each side plus 10 more chosen by common agreement), will be chaired by a PL member and operate on the principle of unanimity. It will meet once every 6 months (for not more than one month), functioning between sessions through an equally balanced Standing Committee.

4. The PGNU and NCPC are "two independent and equal organs... cooperating in the handling of state affairs, under... the king." (The Council will share in preparing for general elections "as soon as possible," but otherwise its role seems less than equal. If the PNUG should not agree with the Council's recommendations, the PNUG must simply give clear and "sufficient" explanation.)

5. Each side will contribute an equal number of troops for security duties and personnel for a joint police force to insure neutralization of Vientiane and Luang Prabang. All other armed forces must withdraw under the direction of the Central Joint Commission for the Implementation of the Agreement (CJCIA).

6. The CJCIA, composed of 7 members from each side, will operate, with small joint mobile teams, in close collaboration with the ICC, which will supervise withdrawal of foreign troops and investigate cease-fire violations by foreign forces. Twenty-seven cease-fire landmarks will be designated, and in a few places the CJCIA may position troops of one side in areas controlled by the other.

7. Refugees may choose freely to remain or return to their native villages and should be assisted.

The Pathet Lao's demands were limited to the extent that refugees are not required to return to their village, cease-fire markers do not constitute an undeviating line of demarcation and some government officials are authorized to travel freely in either zone. The Pathet Lao's deputy premier is not unique or superior to the other side's and, contrary to PL wishes, the date of general elections is not fixed.

In sum, the Protocol builds logically on the Agreement, even though the chances of the political mechanism ever moving out of the garage remain problematical. The two documents are replete with safeguards against submission to the preferences of merely one party, and a western democrat can easily scoff at their requirements of unanimity. The PL has moved from a representation of 2 ministers in 1957 to 1/3 of the ministries (including a vice-premier) in 1962, to 1/2 of the ministries and vice-ministries (including a vice-premier) in 1973. The territory "temporarily" under their control now comprises 3/4 of the country, and elements of their forces are stationed in the "neutralized" capital cities. On the other hand, an explicit partition has been avoided and there has been progress toward national concord.

THE MILITARY PICTURE, 1973

The movement toward an agreement in both Vietnam and Laos prompted increased hostilities in Laos in late 1972 and early 1973. Both sides, encouraged and supported by their external allies, the U.S. and North Vietnam, sought to secure control of territory and people before a cease-fire, as well as to apply military pressure on the negotiators. The Pathet Lao emerged from the cease-fire in 1973 with distinct gains in territory over the position they had achieved in 1962. The PL now controlled about 3/4 of the total land area, although less than half of the population, principally hill tribes, while the RLG dominated the Mekong River valley areas populated largely by lowland Lao.

Shortly after the cease-fire, military activity flared again as both sides moved in selected areas to consolidate positions and to establish clearly discernible demarcation lines. Two engagements during this series appeared especially serious, one at Pak Song on the Bolovens Plateau in south Laos in late February and another at Tha Vieng, just south of the Plain of Jars, in mid-April. The U.S. renewed bombing raids against these sites, and spokesmen for President Nixon, despite heavy criticism within Congress, warned that the U.S. would continue to respond positively to RLG requests for air strikes if such major violations continued. Despite violent charges and counter-charges on both sides, the hostilities abated with only minor local adjustments in territorial control. Although both sides maintained their forces in place, at the end of the year, contrasted with South Vietnam and Cambodia, the cease-fire was holding well.

The following table shows the military strength of the two sides, as estimated by U.S. government sources, shortly following the cease-fire and at the end of the year.

Military Forces in Laos¹
(according to U.S. Government estimates)

	<u>March 31, 1973</u>	<u>December 1973</u>
<u>Royal Lao Government Side:</u> ²		
Royal Lao Army (Forces Armees Royales, FAR)		
Infantry	38,500	
Air Force	2,050	
River Flotilla	330 ³	
Irregulars	18,000	
Other		
Neutralists	5,800	
	<u>68,180</u>	<u>60,000</u>
Thai Irregulars	17,330	5,000-7,000
	(27 Infantry Battalions 3 Artillery Battalions)	(approximately 10 Battalions)
<u>Communist Forces:</u> ⁴		
Pathet Lao		
In North Laos	24,000	
In South Laos	11,000	
	<u>35,000</u>	<u>30-40,000</u>
		(includes Patri- otic Neutralists)
Patriotic Neutralists		
All in North Laos . . .	2,000	
North Vietnamese		
In North Laos	10,000	
In South Laos	60,000	
	(including 55,000 supply, transport and defense forces along the Ho Chi Minh Trail)	
	<u>70,000</u>	<u>55-70,000</u>
		(includes at least 50% assigned to Ho Chi Minh Trail)
<u>Chinese Road Project:</u>		
Chinese Forces	30,000	10-20,000 or 30,000 ⁵

1. Principal sources: Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam: April 1973
A Staff Report Prepared for the Use of the Subcommittee on U.S. Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad of the Committee on Foreign Relations, U.S. Senate, June 11, 1973. This report was prepared by James G. Lowenstein and Richard M. Moose. As staff members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, they were given official U.S. government estimates by the U.S. Mission in Vientiane and by officials of the executive branch in Washington. This report will hereafter be referred to as the Lowenstein-Moose Report.
Interviews by the authors with U.S. government officials in Washington in April, September and December, 1973.
2. These figures, provided to Lowenstein and Moose, were general estimates by the U.S. Army Attache's office which advises that they may be inflated by as much as 10%.
3. These irregulars were formally integrated into the FAR on February 20, 1973.
4. An alternate set of estimates given to Lowenstein and Moose for the March 1973 period showed totals of 27,760 PL, 1,725 Neutralists and 61,610 North Vietnamese troops in Laos.
5. One U.S. Government agency cited 10-20,000 Chinese troops; another retained the 30,000 figure.

As for the U.S. military presence in Laos, in early April there were plans to phase out the CIA paramilitary advisers and support personnel and to scale down U.S. Army and Air Force advisers, to reduce the Requirements Office (which administers U.S. military assistance in Laos) and to terminate the Air America contract. Although some of these reductions took place (both as a token of good faith and as economy measures), full implementation of these plans will await North Vietnamese performance in keeping the Lao agreements.¹ The U.S.-supported Thai irregulars have apparently been reduced to 10 battalions by the end of the year, and officials in Washington indicate that the U.S. will continue to support these forces until the disposition of the North Vietnamese forces within Laos becomes clear. Since the cease-fire and protocol called for the withdrawal of all foreign forces "within 60 days at the latest" after the formation of the PGNU, both sides are apparently bargaining for the withdrawal of their adversary's foreign troop support by retaining some foreign troops on their own side.

IMPLEMENTING THE PROTOCOL

The most important sign that accommodation was taking place at the end of 1973 was the arrival of PL troops in the capitals, about 1500 airlifted by the Soviet Union to Vientiane and about 1,000 by the Chinese People's Republic to Luang Prabang. Souvanna Phouma had personally pushed ahead with the airlifts soon after the signing of the Protocol, but more cautious elements within the FAR brought suspension of the flights in mid-October until the CJCIA was organized and prepared to regulate arrival of military equipment. The flights resumed after several weeks delay and by the year's end, PL troops were practically all at their new stations. The local populations have accepted the newcomers, who live much to themselves, with equanimity and customary Lao goodwill, and the newly-arrived "country boys" ogle the big city.

Prospects are good that the new government will be formed some time in 1974. The Pathet Lao, recalling the threats to their leaders and the military coups of the 1960s in Vientiane, have insisted first upon the full neutralization of the two capitals. The FAR are constructing a base outside Vientiane, unlikely to be completed before the spring of 1974, to which their non-capital duty troops are to be moved. Membership of the PGNU has not been announced, but informed speculation brings forth the following probabilities:

next page.....

1. Lowenstein-Moose Report, op.cit., p.17. The total U.S. mission in Laos was reported to be 1,174 as of February 1, 1973.

Premier - Prince Souvanna Phouma (incumbent)

From the Vientiane Side

Vice Premier: Leum Insisienmay, current Minister of Information, rightist
Defense: Sisouk of Finance and acting Minister of Defense, rightist.
Finance: Ngon Sananikone, current Minister of Public Works, neutralist
Interior: Pheng Phongsavan, incumbent, neutralist
Health: Khamphay Abhay, former Minister of Health, rightist; or Prince Sisou/mang, nephew of King Savang Vatthana
Education: Leum Insisienmay

From the PL Side

Vice Premier: Prince Souphanouvong, half brother of Souvanna Phouma, Deputy Premier in 1962 Tripartite Government
Foreign Ministry: Prince Souphanouvong or Phoumi Vongvichit
Economy and Planning: Khamsouk Keola, neutralist aligned with PL; or Prince Souphanouvong
Information: Phoumi Vongvichit or Khamsouk Keola
Religion: Maha Kou Souvannamethi or Maha Khampha, both neutralists aligned with the PL
Public Works: Prince Souk Vongsak

For the Ministries of Post, Telephone and Telegraph, and of Justice, to which personalities agreeable to both sides are to be appointed, Tay Keolongkut, a former Minister of Health, has been spoken of as the RLG candidate, but the PL candidate remains undisclosed.

For Chairman of the NCPC, the PL are expected to appoint Nouhak Phongsavan.

Pending the general elections, a loss of Souvanna Phouma, who has been indispensable to the compromise, could prove fatal. The Protocol does not give the post of Premier to either party and requires cabinet unanimity, but customarily in Laos the principle of age prevails, which would give 64-year-old Souphanouvong the presumption over Leum Insisienmay, and might preserve the fabric of reconciliation.

The Protocol's stipulation that elections be held "as soon as possible" seems unlikely to be fulfilled until there is a clearer resolution of the struggle for power. Elections seem destined to serve more as a process to ratify conditions which have been accepted by the leaders rather than as a contest to determine who will rule. The RLG seem the least likely to press for early elections. Members of the RLG National Assembly are unlikely to favor an election which will retire them from office prior to the expiration of their mandate in 1977. Moreover, RLG leaders are fearful of electoral competition with the PL who possess, unlike the RLG, cohesive leadership, a unified party and front, zealous cadres and a doctrine of political mobilization.

The notion of ministries jointly administered by political enemies may seem impossible to the Western mind, but it is not inconceivable in Laos. It appears likely that each party will dominate

its own ministries, and do its best to block inimical actions in the other's, with a result that only the most consensual activities will be possible at the national level. To the extent that Laos can remove itself from the arena of Great Power contention and can insulate itself from the struggle for control of Vietnam, this low level of national administrative initiative might permit a measure of stability in a localized and economically undeveloped society. Whether administrative integration of the country can grow through gradual extension of governmental services, such as post and telegraph, roads, or public health on a nation-wide basis remains very much in doubt. Yet this remains the gleam in the eye of Laotians who care about national unity first and remain open-minded about socialism as a political creed for their country.

The major social issue facing the new government will be to deal with the 370,000 current refugees, and perhaps an equal number of people who have settled in RLG territory. The economic problems raised by their return or resettlement will be burdensome, and both sides will vie to control them, since their numbers are politically important.

Even a more stable peace is unlikely to alter Laos's heavy dependency on external aid to maintain solvency. Assuming that military expenditures (now about 50% of the RLG budget) can be reduced, and the resultant inflationary pressures subside (RLG prices rose approximately 30% in 1973), it is possible that aid could be shifted from budgetary support to development. The chief instrument for controlling inflation since 1964 has been the Foreign Exchange Operations Fund (FEOF) to which donor countries (the principal one being the United States) make contributions of foreign exchange. PL officials have spoken favorably about the continuation of FEOF, and it is likely that they would wish for aid from the United States and other Western countries. Whether the conditions for the granting of aid will be politically suitable to both parties in Laos, as well as to the donor countries, particularly the U.S., remains an important question.

The road network under construction by the Chinese in Northwest Laos was expanded during 1973, and work is likely to continue throughout 1974. Once the 60-day deadline for foreign troop exit begins, with the formation of the PNUG and NCPC, it would not be surprising to learn that the Chinese troops engaged in the construction and security tasks had exchanged their uniforms for mufti and were designated members of a technical assistance mission. The North Vietnamese might adopt a similar strategy for their personnel servicing the Ho Chi Minh Trail in south Laos.

Since the cease-fire, the North Vietnamese have been vigorously expanding the Ho Chi Minh Trail system. In addition, they have rapidly developed another road network within South Vietnam which pierces the DMZ and moves south through the central highlands. This second system, with a different rainfall season than the first, has, according to U.S. and South Vietnamese sources, contributed significantly to heavy infiltration of personnel and supplies from the

north during the past year. Since the area in southern Laos is sparsely populated by hill tribes, RLG officials have continued their tacit policy of regarding the Trail's use to be problem of the South Vietnamese and the U.S., recognizing that they have little ability, in any case, to alter the situation. U.S. spokesmen object publicly to the North Vietnamese violation of Lao territory, but with U.S. forces out of Vietnam, there is little now that the U.S. is willing to do to restrict North Vietnamese use. Despite the Protocol's prohibition on "espionage by air and ground means", the U.S. continues its reconnaissance flights over Lao territory to monitor the other side and register its own continuing position in the military contest.

As for unresolved military issues, withdrawal of the remaining North Vietnamese and Thai troops and American military advisers from Laos, in compliance with the Agreement's stipulations, would provide strong reinforcement to the wary steps toward concord in Laos. Although it is true that troops could be reintroduced in a matter of days, particularly from neighboring North Vietnam and Thailand, their withdrawal would have an important symbolic effect, further encouraging the Lao to settle their differences among themselves. The PL are likely to continue voicing their objection to the integration of the Lao irregulars into the FAR, but if the U.S. terminate its special relationship with these irregulars, the issue is not likely to be of critical importance. In fact both a stable peace and political reconciliation depend upon the willingness of the external powers to disengage from their injurious intrusion in Laos.
