

CHAPTER 2

Laos' Perspectives on National Security

Thieng Bouppha

Laos never went through political and military turbulence for it had a prolonged period of foreign dominance and interference of almost 200 years by feudalists and colonists. During this hardship, the Lao multi-ethnic people could not live peacefully and a nightmare faced them whenever their eyes closed. This was due to the fact that in the 19th century, Western powers sought to expand their colonization over countries in the Southeast Asia region, stemming from industrial development and capitalism, which led to their search for labor, raw materials, and so on, in order to strengthen their countries and enable them to compete for superiority. After the end of World War II, world political conflicts changed from occupation by colonization and imperialism expansion among the major powers to ideological conflicts. A bipolar world order dragged countries in the region to select capitalism or socialism. Laos chose the path of socialism which could not escape from the circle of anti-communism expansion in the Southeast Asia region. Laos could not resist foreign invasion as it was the least populated, was the least economically developed power and had the least capable military forces. On the contrary, foreign aggressors had an array of newly conventional weapons and war technology.

Fortunately, under the clear-sighted leadership of the Communist Party of Indochina (1930) and the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (1955), the people of three Indochinese nations—Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam—harmoniously intensified their patriotism and upheld the ostensible spirit of fighting to wage a battle against the foreign aggressors who for almost 30 years sealed the fate of national salvation and independence of each country.

The Lao national liberation, for which the multi-ethnic people had impatiently waited, reached its climax and came to the starting point when three strategic operations were applied to corner the right-wing Government by increasing political, military and social pressure. These operations can be explained as follows: (1) the strength of the Lao People's Army was on the offensive position, seizing more than half of the national territory, (2) the uprising of the Armed Force within the right-wing

Government against their commanders, and (3) the uprising of the whole population in the enemy's occupied territory was mounted. Finally, the Lao People's Liberation Army took control of the whole country bloodlessly under the above-mentioned strategy. The national liberation achieved its political goal and finally seized power.

By drawing on the valuable lessons from the past, it can be said that the victory seized by the multi-ethnic people who then became the masters of the country, was due to the Party stalwart who constituted the decisive factor of the victory and has remained the leading nucleus of the political system in Laos. Many heroes sacrificed their lives and many remained handicapped persons for the noble task of ensuring the security of the country. Their sacrifice stems from the fact that the country had long been colonized by foreign aggressors whose yoke remained an unbearable oppression. Inevitably, it is thanks to friendly countries which provided material and moral support and expressed sympathy during hard times with the Lao multi-ethnic people who were about to leave from the atrocity of the cruel war of 30 years.

After Laos gained independence and proclaimed "Lao People's Democratic Republic" in 1975, the Lao Government emphasized the implementation of two strategic tasks: (1) preserve the fruit of revolutionary achievements, and (2) develop the country and heal the wound of the war. The proclamation of national independence was a new milestone of great victory of national democratic revolution, and the Lao People's Revolutionary Party and the Front for Patriotism took the lead in fighting for such a noble goal. Consequently, the Lao multi-ethnic people jointly made utmost efforts to implement the two above-mentioned tasks in parallel with the implementation of the Party's comprehensive principle of New Concept Reform or the so-called New Economic Mechanism (NEM) which was adopted in 1986. The NEM aims to implement economic reform, transforming the centralized economy into a market economy, decentralizing economic decision making and allowing the private sector to take an active role.

Having witnessed the atrocity caused by wars, peace and security have always been valued and cherished by the Lao multi-ethnic people, with security being a matter of priority. The essential apparatus of security task players in Laos includes the Lao People's Army (LPA) and the public security (police) force. The LPA comprises of regular, recruited, local and militiamen forces. According to the Lao National Constitution, all the armed forces are directly under the leadership of the Lao People's

Revolutionary Party. The forces in the army are the main forces, which undertake the task of defensive military operation and assist to maintain peace and safeguard the nation's sovereignty and territorial integrity from outside aggression in the case of war. While the public security forces have the duty to maintain internal peace, stability and social order, the militia forces are responsible for combat readiness support, defensive operation and helping to maintain internal social order.

Laos has always pursued the national defense and security policy of public comprehensiveness. This is the precondition of national security—national independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity. The policy aims to ensure political, economic and socio-cultural stability which are the strategic tasks of defense and security forces as well as all Lao multi-ethnic people. All the multi-ethnic people are directed to effectively implement two strategic tasks: (1) to preserve people's democratic power, and (2) to heal the wounds of war, rehabilitate production, expand the economy and culture of the new regime, and stabilize and improve the material and spiritual living condition of the people.

Laos has also pursued the policy of self-defense. Laos adopted a comprehensive approach to security which enhances the capacity to deal with existing and emerging challenges, resolves differences and disputes by peaceful means, avoiding all forms and threats of force or the use of force. To ensure peace and security in the country, it is imperative to build self-confidence and self-restraint, solve problems through peaceful dialogue and negotiations, and respect national sovereignty and territorial integrity of one another.

The Lao Government has been paying more attention to the building and development of national defense and security forces, gradually turning them into modern and stronger forces in order to defend and safeguard the nation's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity and to ensure basic political stability and social order. The central security and defense sectors have the role of extending guidance and assistance to local forces in implementing their duties as well as in building and strengthening the militia and self-defense forces to be the pillar of the nation.

The Party and Government of the Lao PDR have paid special attention to enhancing the capacity and steadfastness of the forces involved in internal protection, narcotic drug control and supervision and safeguarding economic infrastructure. At the same

time, increasing attention is paid to ideological and political education to make cadres and combatants honest, loyal to the Party, wholeheartedly serve the nation and people, commit to strict disciplines, have know how to mobilize for political grassroots activities, help people in developing their localities and build up on-site logistics for self-sufficiency.

In order to ensure security in the daily life of its population, the Government has carried out the policy and regulatory framework to conserve the environment aimed at improving the livelihood of the Lao multi-ethnic people, strengthening the rule of law in all areas, continuing policy reform which is an integral part of the Government's commitment to improving governance, ensuring efficient public service delivery through improved organizational structures and procedures, and creating a productive and motivated professional civil service, adhering to high ethical standard. In addition, improved governance is an integral part of the Government's effort to strengthen the overall environment for growth and development.

In December 2015, the National Assembly approved, for the second time in 24 years, a constitutional amendment in which public governance, including the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of power, and local administration were improved and opened up. Among the notable changes included the establishment of local people's councils (provincial councils) with a view to empowering the local people and enhancing their participation in public affairs.

The Lao Government has attached great significance to improving the judicial sector in order to promote effectiveness, transparency, accountability, equity and justice in governance and public administration. The Lao Government has embraced the vision to be a state of the rule of law by 2020 in order to fully ensure equal rights of its peoples before the law and the court, due process of law and fair trial in accordance with local and international laws. The rights related to fair trial and the independence of the judiciary are enshrined in the justice system, especially in the Law on Criminal Procedure, Law on Civil Procedure, Law on People's Courts, Law on People's Prosecutor, Law on Lawyer, among others. In addition, the Lao Government takes into account prevention and combat against corruption through the implementation of the Law on Anti-corruption and other related laws and legal documents, especially the Decree on Asset Declaration for Government Officials at all levels.

The Government has attached importance to balancing rural and urban development. The Resolution of the 9th Congress of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party states that "To secure the people a democratic state, people shall implement three building policies: (1) build the province as a strategic unit, (2) build the district as a comprehensive strength unit, and (3) build the village as a development unit which includes 109 target villages in 51 districts of 17 provinces nationwide. In addition, the Resolution emphasizes that "The strategic measure that shall further actively be implemented with continuation and grassroots inclusiveness is to build up state security, starting from strengthening the grassroots level (village) along with village development".

It is appreciated that under the wise leadership of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party and the Lao Government in the past 42 years, Laos has enjoyed firm political stability, security and social order, and the Lao multi-ethnic people have enjoyed solidarity and harmony with increasing confidence in the prosperous future of the country. Many areas of focus including foreign affairs, the economy, socio-culture, health, infrastructure, education, tourism, information, investment, and law have been expanded and developed in parallel with the development of the country.

Among the country's key achievements since the revolution has been the improvement and expansion of the economy. The national economy has developed robustly and rapidly with continued Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth. In 2015, the Lao PDR was able to achieve a GDP per capita of USD 1.857, a sixteen-fold increase compared to that of 1985. Poverty has been alleviated to a great extent, with the number of poor households falling to 6.59% of total households in the country. According to the Economist Intelligence Unit, Laos is one of ten countries across the globe which continues to enjoy high economic growth prospects. Moreover, infrastructure has been developed rapidly across the country. People living in urban and rural areas have access to better roads and clean water, and people in almost every corner of the country now have access to electricity. The nation's multi-ethnic people have a better standard of living than ever before.

In addition, Laos has striven to build its foreign policy around the principles of peace, independence, friendship and cooperation. Laos now has a prominent role on the international stage as well and the country regularly hosts international and regional meetings. Laos has established close economic relationships with more

than 50 countries in the world. As a result, foreign investment in the country has been increasing year by year. Laos has established diplomatic relationships with 139 nations around the world and 39 Lao representative offices, 26 embassies, 3 permanent representative offices and 9 general consulates as well as honorable consulates in 17 countries. In 1975, Laos had diplomatic relations with only 43 countries and 12 embassies.

On regional defense and security affairs, Lao PDR has independently maintained external and diplomatic ties to strengthen military relationships and strategic links aimed at creating a favorable environment for renovation tasks. It has proceeded to engage in exchanges among military delegations to strengthen cooperation with Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Myanmar, Russia, Thailand, USA and Vietnam. These countries have established Defense Attache Offices in Laos, and Laos has also opened offices of Defense Attaches in these countries. Laos also maintains military relations with Australia, France, Japan, North Korea, South Korea, Cuba, the Philippines and India. Laos will continue to strengthen military relations and cooperation with other countries on the basis of the five principles of peaceful coexistence.

Laos' international security cooperation aims to, firstly, preserve national independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity and the fruit of revolution as well as the legitimate interests of the Lao multi-ethnic people. In this regard, Lao People's Army attaches importance to political, security, military and diplomatic cooperation with neighboring ASEAN and outside-ASEAN countries in order to achieve the strategic goal of the Government. Secondly, it aims to promote understanding and enhance the friendly relationship with neighboring ASEAN and outside-ASEAN countries in order to jointly contribute to the promotion and maintenance of peace, political stability and security in the region and in the world in accordance with ASEAN principles and the UN Charter. Thirdly, it aims to seize opportunities and snatch capital, techniques, technology, lessons and advanced management mechanisms from overseas. And fourthly, it aims to disseminate and propagate the national and foreign policy of Laos to neighboring countries.

Laos adheres to the policy of settling conflicts through dialogue and consultation on the basis of mutual understanding and creative confidence. Laos has actively participated in the activities of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and strongly supported political and security cooperation within ASEAN and the

transformation of ASEAN into a zone of peace, freedom and neutrality (ZOPFAN) and a Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ), along with its stability and development. In recent years, Laos has actively engaged in the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM), ADMM+Plus, ASEAN Chief of Defense Force Informal Meeting (ACDFIM), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), Air Force Meeting, among others. In addition, armed forces are sent to over 35 domestic and international workshops and trainings annually. However, Laos underwent a number of challenges to national defense and internal security, stemming from internal and external landscapes. The most serious internal security issue is the effects of a prolonged war in Laos. During the Indochina War from 1964-73, some 3 million tons of UXO were dropped on Laos, including about 270 million sub-munitions from cluster bombs and about 4 million aircraft bombs. Laos is responsible for a significant number of cluster munition victims and survivors of other explosive remnants of war (ERW), as well as landmine survivors, who are in need. In 2015, 42 casualties were caused by UXO accidents across the country, which instantly devastated dozens of families. The presence of unexploded ordnances slows development in the fields of agriculture, forestry, mining, tourism, hydro-electric power, transport, education and health and poses a threat to the people's lives. However, Laos has made commitments to provide victim assistance through the Convention on Conventional Weapons Protocol V and has victim assistance obligations under the Convention on Cluster Munitions. Laos ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) on 25 September 2009.

The border issue is one of the serious challenges, a concern that threatens internal security and the daily lives of the people along the border. Territorial tension between Laos and its neighboring country, Cambodia, emerged when the Lao side witnessed road construction conducted by its Cambodian neighbor since early February 2017 in an area where the two sides had agreed to leave as a friendly pending issue. In fact, Laos shares a border of about 535 km with Cambodia to the south. To date, the two neighbors have achieved 86% of the border demarcation. Laos has always adhered to the approach of solving problems through diplomatic dialogue, negotiation and consultations based on historical evidences, the previous generation's speeches, and French-made and international laws.

Another challenge is that in a highly competitive society, people are trying to find shortcuts for earning more incomes to better their livelihoods. In Laos, particularly

in the capital city of Vientiane, there are a number of illegal companies actively raising funds and providing high interest deposits and other forms of financial services or investment which directly harm the social order in Laos. Many people are too naive and easily become victims. Two such companies that are renowned are ASEAN FACE and P.S. In ASEAN FACE's case, in 2011, it advertised to the public that those who invest with ASEAN FACE would be paid a dividend of 9% per month and the cost would be eliminated within 2 years. This is suitable for people who want to deposit money as a fund for themselves and their families. Within 3 years, the amount of funds raised reached over USD 10 Million. The company then became unable to provide the dividend it had promised. People then complained and the director escaped overseas. In the P.S's case; the company started its business in 2012 by running an advertisement that sought to interest people by offering a high dividend within a short time (dividend of 6-10% per month). The people earned money via the mechanism of the company until the end of 2016. From 2017, P.S could not pay the dividend it had promoted for many reasons, including a notice received from the bank of the Lao PDR. This caused a serious conflict between the members and the company's directors in September 2017. As a result, two directors of the company and their nominees were arrested, and the litigation is now in process. Overall, more than 30,000 people were affected, and P.S incurred a total cost of over 800 trillion kip or USD 100 Million.

Social media has been often utilized to defame the government and incite social disorder. The Internet has become an important part of the urban people's lives nowadays; it works 24 hours a day and has made the world smaller in communication terms. Nevertheless, it has both advantages and disadvantages for the users. In this regard, online social media is another national security threat since some adversaries, within and outside the country, criticize the government beyond the country's leaders by posting critical content on Facebook and other social media sites in order to spread their perception of regime change.

Laos has also confronted non-traditional security threats, for example, transnational crimes such as drug trafficking, illegal trade and migration along the Mekong River and border lands shared with neighboring countries, Vietnam, China, Cambodia, Myanmar and Thailand. Apart from these, illegal drug trade, trafficking in persons, terrorism and natural disaster have also posed negative impacts on internal stability and security.

The continued complex development of the regional and international situations has posed a negative impact on internal security. In particular, Laos is facing difficulties on the South China Sea issue because its two friendly countries, China and Vietnam, which are involved in the conflict have pushed Laos into the middle of the tug of war. Analysts have noted that Laos, which was perceived to be drifting into China's sphere of influence, appears to be gradually depending on China, while maintaining its traditional closeness to Vietnam. Yet as Vietnam is a strong counterforce to China and it is seen as a trusted friend, Laos has always walked a tightrope.

