



VIETNAM'S SECURITY AND POLITICAL RELATIONS WITH LAOS AND CAMBODIA DURING THE PERIOD 2007-2022

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Abstract:

The Vietnam-Laos-Cambodia relationship during the period 2007–2022 played a crucial role as a pillar in the foreign policy of the three countries. Based on historical and logical methods, this article clarifies the development process, cooperation content, and changes in Vietnam's security and political relations with Laos and Cambodia. The results show that, despite certain limitations, the relationship between the three countries has been maintained, gradually adapting to the changing regional and international context.

Keywords: Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia

1. Introduction

Vietnam's security and political relations with Laos and Cambodia have long been considered important components of Vietnam's traditional sphere of influence. These relationships have been formed and developed based on geographical, historical, cultural, and social factors, as well as the traditional friendly neighborly foreign policy among the three countries. Since 2007, marking the 45th anniversary of Vietnam-Laos relations and the 40th anniversary of Vietnam-Cambodia relations, significant progress has been made in bilateral relations. Over the past 15 years, up to 2022 – the 60th anniversary of Vietnam-Laos diplomatic relations (1962–2022) and the 55th anniversary of Vietnam-Cambodia diplomatic relations (1967–2022) – security and political cooperation among the three countries have achieved many outstanding results.

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However, Vietnam's relations with Laos and Cambodia have also undergone changes. Stemming from historical factors, the emphasis on national interests, along with the impact of external factors, has influenced the development of this relationship.

This article contributes to clarifying the process and changes in the cooperation model between countries with similar political, historical, and strategic interests, considering national interests as well as the changes in the global and regional situation after the Cold War.

2. Literature Review

Studies on Vietnam-Laos relations include "*History of the special relationship between Vietnam and Laos, Laos and Vietnam (1930–2007)*" which has clarified the formation and development of the special relationship between the two countries in politics, military, and foreign affairs. However, this research is mainly historical and a summary [1]. Besides, "*55 years of Vietnam-Laos diplomatic relations: Looking back and forward*" has summarized the relationship between the two countries since the establishment of diplomatic relations (1962), emphasizing the special and loyal nature, making an important contribution to protecting the regime, maintaining political stability and security [3]. "*Vietnam-Laos: A bond across time*" by Nguyen Phuong Lien has summarized the Vietnam-Laos relationship on a long historical basis, emphasizing the political, security and cultural bond. [10]. The article "*Factors Affecting Laos - Vietnam Relations (1986 - 2016)*" by Nguyen Viet Xuan clarifies the factors influencing Laos - Vietnam relations over 30 years, from historical foundations, political similarities, economic factors and regional environment [14].

Studies on Vietnam-Cambodia relations include Tran Xuan Hiep's work "*Vietnam-Cambodia Relations from the Cold War to the Present*", which analyzes the relations between the two countries in the new context, emphasizing the process of policy adjustment and expanding cooperation in the fields of politics, economics, and defense and security [8]. Le Dinh Chinh's work "*Vietnam-Cambodia Special Relations (1930-2020)*" emphasizes the special nature and close ties in the struggle for national liberation and post-war cooperation [4]. Vu Tuyet Loan's article "*40 Years of Vietnam-Cambodia Relations: Looking Back and Prospects*" emphasizes the role of political-security cooperation in maintaining stability and consolidating strategic trust [12]. Nguyen Minh Tam and Ho Quynh Huong's article "*Vietnam-Cambodia Relations in the period 2011-2021: Achievements and Prospects*" emphasizes the results achieved in the fields of politics, economics, and defense and security [9].

Studies on trilateral relations between Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia include the work "*Ethnic, religious, and cultural aspects in the Vietnam-Laos-Cambodia Development Triangle*" by Pham Duc Thanh and Vu Cong Quy, which analyzes the role of ethnic, religious, and cultural factors in the security, political, social stability, and cooperation between the three countries [13]. Tran Xuan Hiep in the article "*Vietnam's security-political relations with Laos and Cambodia from 1991 to the present*" emphasizes the process of

expanding security-political cooperation between Vietnam and its two neighbors in the post-Cold War context [7]. Nguyen Khac Giang's research shows that Vietnam's strengthening of relations with Laos and Cambodia contributes to maintaining political stability, enhancing strategic trust, and helping Vietnam minimize risks from competition between great powers [6]. The work *"Religious Relations - The Basis for Developing Friendship Between Vietnam and Two Neighboring Countries, Laos and Cambodia"* (2022) shows that religious similarities have created a common cultural foundation, contributing to strengthening political and social cohesion between the three countries [11]. The work *"Vietnam - Laos - Cambodia: Friendly Cooperation and Development"* by Nguyen Duy Dung emphasizes the solidarity relationship between Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, not only strengthening strategic trust and mutual support in protecting the political regime of each country but also ensuring regional security stability [5].

Thus, research on Vietnam's relations with Laos and Cambodia is quite extensive, reflecting many aspects of the trilateral relationship, but most studies still focus on the historical political solidarity, while lacking in-depth analysis of this relationship in the context of strategic competition and new security challenges. This article will further clarify the development of the trilateral relationship from 2007 to 2022, contributing to a deeper understanding of both achievements and limitations in the new context.

3. Material and Methods

This article utilizes joint statements, speeches during official visits between leaders at bilateral and multilateral conferences, and cooperation documents between countries. Additionally, it references research on Vietnam-Laos-Cambodia relations.

The article employs a historical approach to clarify the development of Vietnam's relations with Laos and Cambodia from 2007 to 2022, following a continuous chronological sequence, in relation to international, regional, and national events. Using a logical approach, the relations between the three countries are examined in a general sense, aiming to uncover the nature and inevitable trends of events within these relationships.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Factors affecting Vietnam's security and political relations with Laos and Cambodia

Historically, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia all originated from the former French Indochina region. The three countries have been closely linked in their struggle for independence against French colonialism and American imperialism. In the 1980s, they cooperated to resolve the "Cambodian issue." In the 1990s, with Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia joining ASEAN, relations between the three countries expanded within the framework of the organization's cooperation. Geopolitically, Vietnam shares borders with Laos and Cambodia, and all three are located on the Indochina Peninsula, serving as a bridge between mainland Southeast Asia and the South China Sea. Economically and

culturally, the three countries share a common starting point as poor nations, thus prioritizing economic development and cooperation. They also share a common agrarian civilization rooted in rice cultivation and have experienced cultural exchange with India, China, and Western nations.

The global and regional situation during the period 2007–2022 also profoundly impacted relations between Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. The world continued to move along major trends such as globalization, the information explosion, and the scientific and technological revolution. Hegemonic ambitions persisted, making international relations both cooperative and competitive. Furthermore, global security and politics remained fraught with potential conflicts such as regional wars, religious and ethnic conflicts, and border disputes. Non-traditional security challenges were increasing. In Southeast Asia, ASEAN became a community in 2015 to build a region for peace and development. However, Southeast Asia still faced many uncertainties. Religious and cultural diversity, the intermingling of communities, unclear borders, and disputes in the South China Sea became increasingly complex. Competition between major powers like the US and China also poses many challenges for countries in the region. This situation compels Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia to strengthen security and political cooperation in order to create an environment for sustainable development.

Regarding the interests and cooperation needs of each country, Vietnam considers Laos and Cambodia as neighboring "brother" countries with special relations, closely linked to its own stability and development. Because Laos and Cambodia occupy a large part of the land border, Vietnam needs to maintain friendly relations to ensure border security, especially in the context of concerns related to the Chinese factor. A stable Indochina in the West is an important "security belt" for Vietnam. Relations with Laos and Cambodia are also linked to the legitimacy of the Communist Party of Vietnam. Contributions in the resistance wars and ideological ties, especially with Laos, are important political and ideological bases for Vietnam [6]. Laos and Cambodia also have strategic reasons to have close relations with Vietnam. With Laos, Vietnam provides the most convenient route to the sea, while Cambodia benefits from economic proximity with Vietnam. Furthermore, China's involvement has made Laos and Cambodia dependent, so Vietnam plays a balancing role, contributing to shaping a stable cooperation structure among the parties.

4.2 Current situation of Vietnam's security and political relations with Laos and Cambodia

The Vietnam-Laos relationship is built on a foundation of traditional friendship and is increasingly strengthened through high-level visits. These visits contribute to enhancing mutual trust and creating unity in each country's strategic direction as well as on international issues. In 2007, on the occasion of the 45th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Vietnam and Laos, the visits of Vietnamese President Nguyen Minh Triet (February 2007) and National Assembly Chairman Nguyen Phu Trong (April 2007) left a profound impression. From the Lao side, the visit of Vice

President Bounnhang Vorachith (July 2007) affirmed the commitment to continue nurturing this special relationship. Since then, high-level visits have continuously taken place. On the Lao side, General Secretary and President of Laos Choummaly Sayasone visited Vietnam in 2009 and 2012. On the Vietnamese side, General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong visited Laos in 2011. Particularly in 2015, the relationship between the two countries was further promoted with the visit of Vietnamese President Truong Tan Sang to Laos from March 23 to 25, 2015; followed by the visit of Lao National Assembly Chairwoman Pany Yathotou to Vietnam from March 28 to April 4, 2015; and then the visit of Lao Vice President Bounnhang Vorachith (July 2015). In April 2016, when General Secretary and President of Laos Bounnhang Vorachith visited Vietnam, Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc affirmed: "*The Party, State and people of Vietnam always prioritize the special relationship with Laos as a precious heritage that needs to be preserved and promoted for future generations*" [10; p.54]. On the occasion of the 55th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Vietnam and Laos (1962 - 2017), when the President of the Lao National Assembly, Pany Yathotou, visited Vietnam (March 5-6, 2017), General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong affirmed that "*Vietnam always strongly and comprehensively supports the process of renovation, development and protection of Laos*" [3; p.46]. In 2021, despite the Covid-19 pandemic, Vietnam and Laos still cooperated closely. On June 28, 2021, the General Secretary and President of Laos, Thongloun Sisoulith, visited Vietnam, and both sides affirmed that this relationship is an invaluable asset, playing an important role in the development of both countries [11]. Subsequently, in December 2021, the President of the Lao National Assembly, Xaysomphone Phomvihane, visited Vietnam, creating conditions for cooperation between the two legislative bodies. In 2022, the 60th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Vietnam and Laos was celebrated. Following the establishment of diplomatic relations, when Lao Prime Minister Phankham Viphavanh visited Vietnam (January 8-10, 2022), the two countries launched the "*Vietnam-Laos, Laos-Vietnam Friendship and Solidarity Year 2022*," marking a significant turning point in the cooperative relationship between the two nations.

People-to-people foreign relations between Vietnam and Laos have also been promoted through the Vietnam-Laos Friendship Association and the Peace and Solidarity Committees, which are operating increasingly effectively, developing cultural and educational exchange programs and sharing experiences between different strata of the people.

Regarding security, in the period 2007-2022, Vietnam and Laos have effectively coordinated in curbing and handling increasing security challenges such as drug trafficking, human trafficking, transnational crime, and combating the "peaceful evolution" plot. The Lao Ministry of Security and the Vietnamese Ministry of Public Security regularly exchange information, strengthen the exchange of experiences and coordinate in combating reactionary forces, espionage and protecting internal affairs [10; p.61].

Regarding defense cooperation, Laos is currently one of Vietnam's few military allies in the post-Cold War era. Therefore, defense cooperation between the two countries is increasingly effective. Based on the Defense Cooperation Protocol and the annual cooperation plan between the two Ministries of Defense, from 2007 to 2022, defense cooperation between the two countries was strengthened through various activities: exchange of delegations; training of personnel; searching for, collecting, and repatriating the remains of Vietnamese volunteer soldiers and experts who died in Laos; coordination at military forums, especially within the framework of ASEAN. The Deputy Minister-level Defense Policy Dialogue channel is always highly valued by both countries.

To contribute to the long-term stability of Vietnam-Laos security and political relations, border demarcation is a crucial task. On August 26, 2008, the Treaty defining the intersection point of the border between Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos was signed. Based on that, the two countries have coordinated the implementation of the Master Plan to strengthen and upgrade the border marker system, and implemented the Government-level Agreement on resolving issues of free migration and unregistered marriages in border areas, signed in 2013. In 2016, Vietnam and Laos signed the "Protocol on the border line and border markers" and the "Agreement on the management regime of borders and border gates," contributing to the completion of establishing a common border.

Vietnam and Laos also cooperate closely in the search for and repatriation of martyrs' remains. From 2011 to 2016, thanks to the support of Laos, Vietnam collected 2,504 martyrs' remains, raising the total number of remains of Vietnamese volunteer soldiers and experts in Laos to nearly 34,000 [3; p.74]. In 2019, Vietnam recovered an additional 230 martyrs' remains.

Regarding Vietnam-Cambodia Relations, Vietnam and Cambodia always prioritize this relationship since they recognize each other's strategic roles. This spirit was clearly demonstrated by the meeting between Vietnamese President Nguyen Minh Triet and high-ranking leaders of the Kingdom of Cambodia on March 1, 2007. Both sides affirmed that the political foundation had been firmly consolidated through regular visits and exchanges between leaders of both sides. Difficult and problematic issues will be resolved through frank and open dialogue [12]. In 2009, a notable event was the visit of Vietnamese General Secretary Nong Duc Manh to Laos in December 2009. Both sides affirmed their determination to strengthen the relationship; expand cooperation between legislative and executive bodies, people's organizations and local governments [2]. Since 2010, in the context of increasing competition among major powers in the region, the two countries have continuously strengthened bilateral relations. In June 2010, Cambodian King Norodom Sihamoni visited Vietnam, followed by a visit by Vietnamese President Nguyen Minh Triet to Cambodia (August 2010). The highlight was the visit of General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong to Cambodia (December 6-8, 2011), further deepening the traditional friendship. From 2017 to 2022, Vietnam-Cambodia relations continued to be strengthened through high-level visits. On the Vietnamese side, there were visits to Cambodia by Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc (2017), General Secretary and President

Nguyen Phu Trong (2017, 2019), and Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh (2022). On the Cambodian side, there was a visit to Vietnam by Prime Minister Hun Sen (2017). The central focus of these visits was reaffirming the commitment to respecting border treaties and maintaining the principles of long-term, stable, and equal cooperation.

Furthermore, people-to-people dialogue channels between Vietnam and Cambodia continue to develop positively through the Civil Society Alliance for Human Security, the Vietnam-Cambodia Friendship Association, the Joint Committee on Economic, Cultural, and Scientific and Technical Cooperation, and the Conference on Development Cooperation of Border Provinces.

Security and defense cooperation between Vietnam and Cambodia is also an important pillar of bilateral relations. In 2015, the two countries initiated the Deputy Minister-level Defense Policy Dialogue. Since then, until 2022, the two countries have held five dialogues. The two countries have also intensified efforts to search for and repatriate the remains of Vietnamese volunteer soldiers and experts who died in Cambodia. The police forces of the two countries regularly coordinate and exchange information to prevent the activities of reactionary and terrorist forces; combat transnational crime; and control illegal border crossings. Cambodia has fulfilled its commitment signed with Vietnam, not allowing the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to establish refugee camps for border crossers. They also disagreed with the proposal to grant citizenship to the Khmer people of Southern Vietnam under the "Khmer Cambodian Krom Community" [4].

Regarding border and territorial issues, Vietnam and Cambodia have achieved many important results. During the period 2007–2010, both sides actively implemented on the ground and established coordination mechanisms. In 2009, the two sides identified 49 border markers and in 2010, 83 markers. In October 2019, the two countries signed a Supplementary Treaty and Protocol to determine the demarcation and placement of approximately 84% of the land border. By 2022, the two countries had demarcated and placed approximately 1,045 km of land border with 2,047 border markers already placed [11; p.19].

In the trilateral relationship between Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, Vietnam has always regarded Laos and Cambodia as a "three-legged stool," equal partners maintained on the basis of respect and mutual benefit. Vietnam has significantly increased trilateral cooperation with Cambodia and Laos through four channels: Party-to-Party, Government-to-Government, Parliament-to-Parliament, and people-to-people exchanges. In terms of relations between the Parties, the Communist Party of Vietnam focuses on promoting relations with the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) and the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP). A prime example is the trilateral summit held in Hanoi on September 26, 2021, attended by General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong, Prime Minister Hun Sen, and President Thongloun Sisoulith. This was the first summit since the Cold War to include leaders from the three ruling parties. At the government level, the Prime Ministers and heads of state of the three countries regularly meet, both in privately organized events and on the sidelines of regional conferences. At the end of

2022, the parliaments of the three countries signed an agreement to establish a mechanism for a biennial high-level conference between the leaders of the three legislative bodies. People-to-people exchanges are increasingly strengthened. In border areas, Vietnamese mass organizations also mobilize local people to participate in regular cultural and sports activities with Cambodians and Laotians [6].

Vietnam also promotes linkages with the two countries not only in a closed manner, but also through integration with regional frameworks, especially ASEAN. Furthermore, mutual support is demonstrated through coordination at forums such as the United Nations, ASEM, the Non-Aligned Movement, the Francophone Community, the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), and the Vietnam-Laos-Cambodia Development Triangle.

4.3 Achievements and Limitations

The regular high-level visits and contacts between Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia have contributed to deepening the cooperative relationship between the three countries. The achievements in security and politics of each country, along with the increasingly substantive results of cooperation among the three countries, have strengthened traditional solidarity, created favorable conditions for economic cooperation, enhanced people-to-people exchanges, and consolidated mutual understanding and trust, while thwarting the subversive plots of hostile forces. On this basis, long-standing issues inherited from history are gradually being addressed, such as the border issue, the Vietnamese community in Cambodia, and the Khmer issue in Southern Vietnam.

However, relations between Vietnam and Laos and Cambodia still have some limitations. Firstly, Vietnam's relations with Laos and Cambodia have been pressured by various factors, especially the increasing influence of China in these countries. In Laos, many loans from China have become a significant part of the public debt structure. In Cambodia, China accounts for a substantial share of total foreign direct investment. Economic dominance has created political influence, causing Laos and Cambodia to adjust their foreign policies towards reducing their traditional dependence on Vietnam and leaning towards China. This is clearly reflected in Laos and Cambodia's stance on the South China Sea issue. During its chairmanship of ASEAN in 2012, Cambodia prevented ASEAN from issuing a joint statement because it did not want to mention the South China Sea dispute. When Laos held the ASEAN chairmanship in 2016, ASEAN's stance on the South China Sea was also adjusted towards a more cautious approach. These developments have limited the strategic linkage between Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia in handling core security issues [6]. Secondly, Vietnam has faced its own challenges in relations with Laos and Cambodia. With Laos, the obstacle in relations with Vietnam is Laos' hydropower development strategy. Vietnam believes that projects on the Mekong River have a negative impact on the ecosystem, and especially the Mekong Delta region [6]. Many hydropower projects in Laos are financed by China, thereby increasing Beijing's influence on strategic infrastructure. With Cambodia, while the historical relationship with Vietnam is no longer clear, sensitive issues such as the status

of the Vietnamese community, remnants of the Fulro terrorist organization, the incomplete border demarcation, and the presence of the Chinese navy at the Ream base (near Vietnam) also increase the complexity in relations with Vietnam. Thirdly, Vietnam's capacity to implement infrastructure development commitments with Laos and Cambodia is limited. While China quickly completed the Laos-China railway line in a short time, projects such as the Vientiane-Vung Ang railway and the Ho Chi Minh City-Phnom Penh expressway are progressing slowly due to financial constraints. This diminishes Vietnam's ability to build influence and strengthen strategic trust in its relations with Laos and Cambodia.

5. Conclusion

Laos and Cambodia have long been considered partners of special importance in Vietnam's foreign policy strategy, linked to traditional spheres of influence and regional security interests. During the period 2007-2022, Vietnam adopted a flexible approach to security and politics with Laos and Cambodia, based on long-standing historical relations, political trust, and people-to-people exchanges. On this basis, Vietnam-Laos relations have continuously strengthened in depth, embodying a "special relationship." Vietnam-Cambodia relations have also been enhanced according to the principle of "good neighborliness, traditional friendship, comprehensive cooperation, and long-term sustainability." However, alongside these achievements, the trilateral relationship still reveals many limitations and shortcomings, especially the impact of China, which has relatively diminished Vietnam's role in relations with these two countries.

Essentially, Vietnam's security and political relations with Laos and Cambodia (2007-2022) affirmed the strategic nature of their ties while also enhancing the autonomy and equality of the nations, and undergoing adjustments within the context of competition among major powers. This reflects the multifaceted and mutually influential impact of these nations in the changing global political landscape after the Cold War.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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