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## **In Rare Three-Party Conclave, Vietnam Pushes Back Against Growing Chinese Influence**

**Hanoi is becoming increasingly unnerved by the growing Chinese influence over its longstanding clients, Cambodia and Laos.**

By Sebastian Strangio

On September 26, leaders of the ruling parties of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos held a rare conclave in Hanoi, reaffirming the historic links forged during their Cold War-era struggles in the shadow of China's growing power.

The meeting included Nguyen Phu Trong, the general secretary of the Vietnamese Communist Party, Hun Sen, president of the Cambodian People's Party, and Thongloun Sisoulith, the chief of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party.

Reports in the three nations' tightly controlled media were short on details and long on sunny generalities, but the general gist is that the three leaders reaffirmed their parties' traditional solidarities and apprised each other of their present challenges, including the fight against COVID-19. According to the state-backed Vientiane Times, "The three Party leaders discussed their cooperation in recent years and directions for the future, and agreed on the importance of the traditional relations, solidarity and friendship among the three parties and countries."

The rare meeting of party heads (Thongloun and Hun Sen are also their nations' heads of state and government, respectively) shone a light on the unique form of "party-to-party" relations that still bind the world's remaining communist states. Vietnam has especially close historical, political, and ideological ties to its two "fraternal" western neighbors, which it helped to power in the 1970s and with which it has retained close relations ever since.

The Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP), made up of "apprentice revolutionaries" who came to power with strong Vietnamese military and political backing in December 1975, continues to have an umbilical relationship with its Vietnamese patron. Hun Sen's Cambodian People's Party, meanwhile, was installed in power in early 1979 after the Vietnamese army drove out another communist regime, the Khmer Rouge, which also enjoyed Vietnamese patronage before turning against it in the early 1970s.

Despite jettisoning communist ideology at the end of the Cold War, a by-product of the international peace settlement that introduced multiparty elections in 1993, the CPP retains both the structure of a communist party and the tradition of party-to-party relations with its counterparts in Vietnam and Laos.

The unusual meeting of party heads speaks to the rising concern in Hanoi that its two erstwhile clients are being drawn slowly into China's widening orbit. In recent years, Laos and Cambodia have become magnets for Chinese capital and business people of varying degrees of probity, who have established interlocking relationships with the two countries' respective ruling elites. This has been franked by increasingly close ties with the Chinese government, which have lavished Cambodia and Laos with "no-strings" financing and infrastructure developments.

Sunday's meeting of party heads likely reflected a Vietnamese attempt to renew and strengthen the country's long-standing relations with Laos and Cambodia at a time of ascendant Chinese power and growing friction between Hanoi and Beijing.

During the latter part of the Cold War, communist-ruled Cambodia and Laos became the subject of a bitter struggle between Vietnam, backed by the Soviet Union and its allies, and China, then in a marriage-of-convenience partnership with the United States and the anticommunist Association of Southeast Asian Nations. In Cambodia's case, this manifested as a 12-year civil war that rehabilitated the murderous Khmer Rouge and prolonged the country's recovery from their arguably genocidal rule.

Things remain far from the situation of the 1980s, despite all the talk of a "new Cold War." But a parallel alignment now appears to be emerging, as the U.S. and Vietnam establish a closer partnership in order to resist the expansion of Chinese power in the South China Sea, while Beijing woos the corrupt elites of Vietnam's former Indochinese satellite states away from their firm Vietnamese embrace.

How these new alignments ultimately play out is hard to discern. But it is a reminder that while many nations in the Asia-Pacific face increasing pressures in their attempts to balance their relations with the U.S. and China, for the governments of Laos and Cambodia a possibly more important aim is to maintain an astute balance of dependencies between their two communist patrons.

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