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CSEAS COMMENTARY

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CSEAS Commentary #46/May 2025

Beyond Symbolism: Cambodia and Laos at Vietnam's 50th Reunification Anniversary

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Vietnam's 50th anniversary of the liberation of the South and national reunification on April 30, 2025, was not merely a national celebration but also a strategic display of special solidarity. The presence of military contingents from Cambodia and Laos, marching alongside Vietnamese armed forces in Ho Chi Minh City was a grand gesture that underscored the historical solidarity among the three nations. Yet, beneath the surface, it also reflected Hanoi's efforts to assert its leadership role within the evolving trilateral relationship. Cambodia and Laos's participation in the ceremony highlight the potential strategic reaffirmation of Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam (CLV) ties and Vietnam's strategy to uphold regional cohesion amid growing external engagement.

Behind the agenda: Vietnam's Strategic Move

Vietnam's invitation to Cambodian and Lao military contingents to join its national parade reaffirms Hanoi's leadership within the CLV framework, re-emphasizing CLV relations as "Special Solidarity". This draws its roots from decades of shared revolutionary struggle, particularly during the Indochina Wars. This historical bond, shaped by common ideological and strategic interests, has long served as the foundation of their cooperation.¹

¹ "Communist Party of Vietnam 5th National Congress, Political Report: Lê, Duẩn, 1907-1986 : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive." 2023. Internet Archive. 2023.
<https://archive.org/details/cpv5thcongresspoliticalreport/page/100/mode/2up>.

Yet, recent shifts in the regional landscape suggest that this unity is no longer as straightforward. Cambodia's withdrawal from the CLV Development Triangle Area (CLV-DTA) in 2024 marked a reorientation from one of the group's flagship cooperation platforms.² At the same time, Cambodia is actively diversifying and shifting beyond Vietnam, reducing its reliance on Hanoi and signaling growing public sentiment over the country's overreliance on Vietnam, while deepening its economic and diplomatic engagement with China. Infrastructure development³ Military collaboration and bilateral agreements with Beijing have raised concerns in Hanoi about the gradual erosion of its traditional influence.

Similarly, Laos has also moved closer to China. Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative has greatly benefited Laos, funding over 800 projects worth more than US\$16 billion.⁴ The China-Laos railway alone, valued at US\$6 billion, has transformed the country's connectivity but also deepened its debt, with China now holding around 65% of Laos' GDP in loans.⁵ Chinese firms dominate energy exports and hydropower development, while local concerns grow over sovereignty, environmental damage, and social disruption.⁶ Although the Lao People's Revolutionary Party maintains strong ties with the Vietnamese Communist Party, the scale of China's economic footprint signals a quiet strategic drift. For Hanoi, this rising dependency threatens to weaken Vietnam's long-held position as Laos' closest political ally.

These changes reflect a broader shift in both Cambodia and Laos' foreign policy, one that prioritizes strategic flexibility. For Vietnam, however, such realignments carry strategic implications, especially within its immediate neighborhood. Hanoi sees the growing Chinese presence not only as a regional power play but also as a challenge to its historical leadership in Indochina. Against this backdrop, the inclusion of Cambodian and Lao troops in the parade can be

² "Cambodia Withdraws From CLV-DTA to 'Put Out Fire'," n.d., <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/cambodia-withdraws-from-clv-dta-to-put-out-fire->.

³ David Hutt, "Vietnam Warily Weighs a China Base in Cambodia," *Asia Times*, July 5, 2022, <https://asiatimes.com/2022/06/vietnam-warily-weighs-a-china-base-in-cambodia/>.

⁴ Asean Briefing, "2023 Foreign Investment Opportunities in Laos," ASEAN Business News, July 26, 2022, <https://www.aseanbriefing.com/news/2023-foreign-investment-opportunities-in-laos/>.

⁵ Toru Takahashi, "Ambition, Concern Drive Lao-China High-speed Rail Project," *Nikkei Asia*, January 14, 2023, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Belt-and-Road/Ambition-concern-drive-Lao-China-high-speed-rail-project>.

⁶ Lee Poh Onn, "2023/55 'Changing Perceptions in Laos Toward China' by Joanne Lin - ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute," ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, July 19, 2023, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/posts/2023-55-changing-perceptions-in-laos-toward-china-by-joanne-lin/>.

seen as a deliberate act of reassurance and reinforcement. By staging this symbolic moment of trilateral unity in a highly publicized national event, Vietnam demonstrates that it remains a key player in regional affairs. It also sends a message domestically that the Communist Party of Vietnam continues to uphold its legacy of regional leadership and enduring partnerships.⁷ This gesture forms part of a broader effort to tighten Hanoi's ties with its neighbors, especially amid the shift in regional diversification.

Strategic Balancing by Cambodia and Laos

For Cambodia and Laos, participation in Vietnam's 50th reunification celebrations serves multiple strategic ends. On the surface, their presence underscores the enduring nature of the CLV relationship and pays tribute to a shared revolutionary past. However, beneath the symbolism lies a more calculated approach to regional positioning.

Cambodia's foreign policy has increasingly reflected a desire to diversify partnerships and assert greater autonomy while also moving beyond its historical dependence on Vietnam.⁸ While Cambodia continues to emphasize its "good neighbor" diplomacy with Hanoi, its growing ties with China have signaled a shift that complicates Hanoi's traditional influence, as evident in multiple economic and military agreements.⁹ Cambodia's high-profile involvement in the Vietnamese parade serves as a form of strategic reassurance and soft balancing, signaling to Hanoi that, despite diversification of partnerships, especially leaning toward China, its historical relationship with Vietnam remains strong and valued.

Laos, in contrast, retains a structurally embedded relationship with Hanoi. With geopolitical limitations and historical dependency, Laos continues to rely heavily on Vietnam for political,

⁷ Theinvestor.Vn, "Grand Military Parade, Procession to Celebrate Vietnam's 50th Anniversary of National Reunification," theinvestor.vn, n.d., <https://theinvestor.vn/grand-military-parade-procession-to-celebrate-vietnams-50th-anniversary-of-national-reunification-d15501.html>.

⁸ "Mending Fences: Vietnam and Cambodia's Diplomatic Reset | FULCRUM," FULCRUM, March 13, 2025, <https://fulcrum.sg/mending-fences-vietnam-and-cambodias-diplomatic-reset/>.

⁹ Chandarith Neak and Chhay Lim, "Cambodia's Soft but Sure Break From Big Brother Vietnam," *Asia Times*, November 18, 2024, <https://asiatimes.com/2024/11/cambodias-soft-but-sure-break-from-big-brother-vietnam/>.

economic, and infrastructure support, making Vietnam a primary partner.¹⁰ Recent joint investment initiatives and energy cooperation have also reflected the deepening of this dependency.¹¹ Despite China's growing presence, Laos maintains robust party-to-party ties with the Vietnamese Communist Party, engages in sister province arrangements, and conducts monthly high-level visits to Vietnam.¹² Vietnam continues to lead in Laos's diplomatic and defense dialogues¹³ and maintains a dominant presence in Laos's media sphere. These actions reflect a quiet form of soft balancing—anchoring Laos in Vietnam's orbit while moderating Beijing's expanding influence. Laos's participation in the parade reinforces Vietnam's efforts to project unity across the CLV grouping while also allowing Laos to reaffirm its most stable strategic partnership. For both Cambodia and Laos, participating in the celebrations is not merely an act of commemoration, but a calculated gesture to manage Hanoi's expectations while preserving diplomatic flexibility.

Implications and Outlook

The participation of Cambodian and Lao military contingents in Vietnam's reunification parade marks a significant symbolic high point in CLV relations. Yet, it also reveals an underlying unease about the trilateral cohesion, as divergent national interests admit to a volatile global order. In the face of shifting regional dynamics and emerging external engagement, this underscores a deeper strategic move by Hanoi to reaffirm its centrality in the Indochina region.

For Vietnam, extending invitations to its neighbors' armed forces signals a proactive strategy to preserve its central role in the CLV framework. Amid increasing external influences in mainland Southeast Asia, the inclusion of foreign troops in Vietnam's national parade represents a shift toward symbolic diplomacy designed to reinforce regional leadership while stabilizing the

¹⁰“Vietnam, Laos Prime Ministers Co-chair 2025 Investment Cooperation Conference,” THE VOICE OF VIETNAM, n.d., <https://vovworld.vn/en-US/news/vietnam-laos-prime-ministers-co-chair-2025-investment-cooperation-conference-1358277.vov>.

¹¹ Vietnam+, “Vietnam, Laos Strengthen Energy Cooperation,” Vietnam+ (VietnamPlus), February 14, 2025, <https://en.vietnamplus.vn/vietnam-laos-strengthen-energy-cooperation-post309906.vnp>.

¹² To Minh Son, “Navigating Socialism, Security, and China in Laos-Vietnam Relations,” *The Diplomat*, October 7, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/10/navigating-socialism-security-and-china-in-laos-vietnam-relations/>.

¹³ “Vietnam - Laos Hold Defense Policy Dialogue,” n.d., <https://mod.gov.vn/en/detail/sa-en-news/sa-en-news-rela/vietnam-laos-hold-defense-policy-dialogue-2025>.

perception of unity. However, the gesture cannot mask the reality that external pressures and divergent national interests increasingly shape the trilateral relationship.

For Cambodia and Laos, participation in the parade serves as a form of strategic reassurance and a gesture of goodwill in “good neighbor” diplomacy. Cambodia and Laos’ gesture signals that, despite their diversified engagement, especially with China, both countries still value their foundational relationship with Vietnam in a good-neighborly manner. Although these gestures do not eliminate underlying divergences, they open the door for renewed momentum.

Despite all these, the CLV relations continue to offer mutual strategic value. All three countries share interests in border stability, sustainable development, and cross-border trade and connectivity, areas where cooperation has already yielded tangible progress. Looking ahead, the outlook for CLV relations is cautiously optimistic. Rather than being constrained by history, the CLV relations is adapting through reassurance, pragmatism, and flexible multilateralism. In an increasingly intensifying global environment, it remains a platform for cooperation rooted in trust and shared history.

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