

Evaluating the Changes in Vietnam's Influence on Laos' Diplomatic Attitude Towards China Under BRI Using GDELT

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Abstract. This article evaluates the extent to which Laos' diplomatic preferences towards China have been influenced by Vietnam's attitudes towards China over the ten years (2014-2023) since the Belt and Road Initiative (hereafter BRI) was implemented. As a small state in the Southeast Asian region, the Lao People's Democratic Republic's (hereafter Laos) diplomatic choices are influenced by both extra-regional powers and sub-regional power structures. Vietnam, as a sub-regional power, has successfully influenced Laos' diplomatic policy towards China several times in the past. China's BRI provides Laos with more flexibility in its diplomatic choices between China and Vietnam. This paper tests the above hypotheses based on the GDELT database. It is assessed that since the BRI was proposed, the Laos' diplomatic attitude towards China has maintained a rising trend in a spiral. Laos has gradually become more independent in its diplomatic choices, while Vietnam's influence over it has weakened modestly. Therefore, it can be considered that Vietnam's attitude towards China does not currently pose a sufficient threat to Laos' diplomatic attitude towards China.

Keywords: GDELT; sub-region; asymmetry; small states diplomacy.

1. Introduction

In recent years, China's influence in Southeast Asia has gradually recovered and expanded and become the largest trading partner of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (hereafter ASEAN) [1]. Most ASEAN countries have a relatively neutral foreign policy towards China. They keep the diplomatic choice between China and the United States as unbiased as possible. However, the competition between China and the United States is becoming increasingly intense in South-East Asia. Increasing pressure from both the United States and China is narrowing the options for ASEAN countries and pushing them to a point where they may have to choose sides. Laos is one of the countries which have shown a slight inclination towards China. Nevertheless, a new survey published by a Singaporean think-tank shows that Laos' attitude towards China seems to be shifting. China's influence in Laos' domestic is gradually decreasing [1].

Diplomatic choices of small countries are key factors in determining the impact of the international status of large states [2]. Therefore, China, as the most influential economic power in Southeast Asia, needs to pay more attention to the diplomatic alternatives of small countries in the Southeast Asian region. The Forum of Small States (FOSS) defines a small state as a country whose population size is up to 10 million [3]. According to the official website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, the population of Laos was 7.58 million as of January 2023. Accordingly, Laos can be regarded as a small state in South-East Asia. In addition, Laos is the only land-locked country in the whole Southeast Asian region, whose geographic location has great limitations and peculiarities. Overall, it is significant to examine Laos' diplomatic choices towards China. The BRI is a key step in increasing Laos' autonomy and promoting the development of relations between China and Laos. This paper thus selects the decade since the BRI was proposed (2014-2023) as the time period for the study, and uses GDELT to analyse the cooperation/conflict degrees and emotional perceptions of Laos or Vietnam towards China. Further, it compares and analyses the extent to which China-Laos relations will be affected by China-Vietnam relations since the implementation of the BRI, providing data support for China to measure its future diplomatic strategy with Laos.

2. Reviews of Laos' Relations with China and Vietnam

2.1. Overview of China-Laos Relations

The relationship between Laos and China is not always friendly. China and the Laos formally established diplomatic relations in 1961, with relations worsening in the 1970s and 1980s and gradually returning to normal state in 1989 [4]. Entering the 21st century, the relations between China and Laos have shown stability, friendship, trust and cooperation for a long time [4]. In 2013, China proposed an initiative to co-construct the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. The Belt and Road Initiative (hereafter BRI) has been particularly significant for Laos, further promoting relations between China and Laos.

The landlocked countries are often challenged by their geographical location and the geopolitical relations of their neighbouring countries in terms of trade development. Far away from the sea makes it difficult for them to open trade exports. The types of trade are extremely limited. Meanwhile, the trade development of landlocked countries is highly easily hindered by neighbouring countries, intentionally or unintentionally, from trade exchanges and integration with countries in the region or around the world [5]. The importance of the BRI for Laos is to promote the transformation of Laos from a land-locked country to a land-connected country. China has invested huge sums of money in Laos to build the China-Lao Railway linking Kunming with Vientiane, the capital of Laos. With the help of the China-Lao Railway, Laos breaks through its existing geographic limitations and becomes a regional transport hub, completing the rapid growth of exports. However, the BRI has also been condemned as 'China's Debt-Trap Diplomacy' [6]. This view has influenced some domestic Lao people and increased their negative impression of the BRI and China. China's confidence and influence in Laos has declined [1].

2.2. Special Relationship Between Laos and Vietnam

The relationship between Laos and Vietnam has been very special with its roots dating back to the 16th century when Vietnam ruled Lancang. In the 18th century, Laos strengthened its connections with Vietnam in order to free itself from Siamese control. In 1950, the Pathet Lao was founded and allied with Vietnam against France. In the 1960s, Laos was involved in the Cold War because of Vietnam and suffered the most severe bombings in its history. In April 1975, with the help of North Vietnam, the Pathet Lao government took control of Laos. In December of the same year, the Laotian communists established the Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR), which was closely allied with the Vietnamese communists. In 1827 and 1977, under the rivalry between two sub-regional powers, Thailand and Vietnam, Laos sided with Vietnam rather than China when faced with the threat of Thailand [7]. In 1979, during the Sino-Vietnam War, Laos chose to stand on Vietnam's side against China. The Ho Chi Minh trail provided important help to the Vietnamese communist forces with the support of Laos [8]. Because of the historical factors, the relationship between Laos and Vietnam is more than an ordinary strategic partnership. Vietnam refers to this relationship as a 'special strategic partners', which means Laos has always been Vietnam's most trusted friend [8, 9].

As the most powerful country in the Indochina region during the French rule, Vietnam has maintained its traditional sphere of influence over Laos and Cambodia. However, China's growing influence in Southeast Asia constantly challenges Vietnam's dominance in Laos, bringing about disagreements between Laos and Vietnam [8, 9]. Vietnam controls Laos' sea access. This has kept Laos voluntarily under Vietnam's control for a long time in case Vietnam completely cuts off its sea-going trade routes. The construction of the China-Lao Railway has provided Laos with a new option to become a land-linked hub connecting to the wider region, and has increased its confidence in its diplomatic options. In addition, despite Vietnam's opposition, Laos constructed a hydro-power project along the Mekong River funded by China's loan. This project turned Laos into the 'battery of Asia' [9]. The hydropower sector has become one of the key factors driving economic growth in Laos [10].

China and Vietnam, which already have a complex history of disputes, have maintained a delicate relationship for a long time. Since the normalization of diplomatic relations between China and Vietnam in the 1990s, there has been a mixture of cooperation and conflict over trade. Vietnam is full of concern and resentment over these two significant projects. They are eager to peacefully get Laos back on Hanoi's side, which may intensify the conflict in Vietnam-China relations [9]. As Laos has turned to Vietnam in history, it is reasonable to worry about whether the historical event of 'the deterioration of Laos-China relations as a result of the tensions in Vietnam-China relations' will happen again.

3. Literature References

3.1. Studies on China-Laos Relations by Chinese and Foreign Scholars

The majority of domestic and international studies on China-Laos relations by scholars are qualitative studies based on case analyses. There are few quantitative studies. Some scholars have analyzed Laos' diplomatic choices. Yining Pan argues that Laos adopted a neutral foreign policy in the context of the Cold War [11]. Yun Fang also argues that Laos has been pursuing the principle of neutral, non-aligned foreign relations [12]. Yet, China has always been the most important part of Laos' foreign relations [12]. Mei Jin outlined four factors affecting Laos' diplomatic choices towards China, concluding that China-Laos relations are generally positive [13]. Yuthavan Thavone, for his part, mentions that the 'Belt and Road' strategy fits well with the interests of both China and Laos. But the obstacles to deeper cooperation between the two countries also remain [12]. While analysing the diplomatic choices of Laos, most of the studies aim at exploring the choices of Laos under the competition between China and the United States. Laos' diplomatic choices between Vietnam and China have been less discussed.

3.2. Use of GDEL Database by Chinese and Foreign Scholars

The GDEL database is a free and open database of global news events. It helps people to learn about the development of global events and emotional trends by analysing and coding the data [14]. The amount of data is so large that it can be used as a good source of data to study geopolitical relations.

Many domestic scholars have begun to study and analyse the geopolitical relations between China and other countries using GDEL in recent years. Xiaoqiang Chen et al. used the GDEL to conduct a complementary quantitative study of geopolitical relations between China and its neighbouring countries with GDEL [15]. Qiaoqiao Lin et al. also pointed out the advantages of data analysis based on GDEL which is to fill up the problems of information insufficiency and lag in traditional study methods [16]. Bing Li et al. divided geopolitical relations into cooperation and conflict based on the GDEL database and studied the evolution of geopolitical relations between China and Southeast Asian countries [17]. Wei Cao used five databases, including the GDEL database, to build a dynamic panel system GMM regression model to analyse small state strategy and diplomacy in the context of great power strategic competition [2].

Foreign scholars use the GDEL database to study international relations with a more pluralistic subject. Pascal Abb and Georg Strüver used Goldstein's annual means to examine a range of potential factors affecting China-Southeast Asia bilateral relations [18]. Sotaro Sada et al. used GDEL's bilateral event data to create and analyse an Asian political distance network [19]. Trajanov et al. used GDEL data to quantify global political processes and reveal the intertwined nature of economics and politics [20].

4. Research Design

In this paper, the data for the whole decade (2014-2023) of China's BRI are obtained from the GDEL 2.0 database. The database derives its data from the collation of worldwide news reports

updated in real time. The GDELT 1.0 database includes yearly data on news media from 1979-2013. The GDELT 2.0 database updates more frequently to every 15 minutes, containing all data from 2014 to the present in days.

CAMEO Version 1.1b3 taxonomy is currently used for GDELT. Each piece of GDELT data has 58 fields. Five fields are selected in this paper: Actor1Code, Actor2Code, GoldsteinScale, AvgTone and NumMentions. These fields are further explained below.

The fields Actor1Code and Actor2Code represent the complete CAMEO raw code for Participant 1 and Participant 2 [21]. The code combinations for both Participants 1 and 2 are chosen as countries or official government organisations in order to simplify the measurement of data on country-to-country relationships. For example, the code combinations for China are CHN, CHNGOV, CHNEDU, etc.

The fields GoldsteinScale and AvgTone can be used to measure relations between countries and threat perceptions of small countries [2]. The Goldstein score can measure the degree of the intention of actor 1 to cooperate or conflict with actor 2; values range from -10 to 10, with positive values being cooperation, negative values being conflict, and 0 representing neutrality [2]. The AvgTone score, on the other hand, can measure actor 1's emotional perception towards actor 2; values range from -100 to 100, with 100 being positive, -100 being negative, and 0 indicating neutrality [2].

NumMentions is the total number of times that an event is mentioned in all source documents [21]. The Goldstein and AvgTone indexes used in this paper are annual weighted means. Calculating the weighted mean of the two indexes using NumMentions as weights can minimize the interference of media subjectivity [22]. In summary, the research design of this paper is to select Laos or Vietnam as Participant 1 and China as Participant 2 respectively, download and clean the corresponding data, and analyse the degree of cooperation or conflict and emotional perception of Laos or Vietnam towards China in each year during 2014-2023 based on Goldstein and AvgTone indexes.

5. Data Analysis

5.1. Analysis of the Degree of Laos’/Vietnam’s Cooperation/Conflict towards China

The analysis of the degree of cooperation/conflict is based on Goldstein’s annual weighted averages, as shown in Figure 1. The data shows that since the BRI was put forward, Laos and China have maintained a continuous cooperative relationship with a spiralling upward trend. During 2014-2017, the trends in political relations between Laos and China and Vietnam and China are almost consistent. Between 2017-2020, Laos’ diplomatic choices towards China followed an opposite trend to Vietnam. From 2020 to the present, both countries have maintained a certain upward trend in their relations with China.

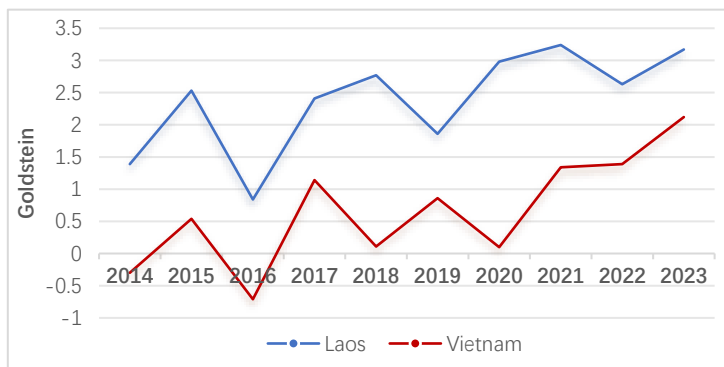


Fig. 1 The degree of Laos’/Vietnam’s cooperation/conflict towards China [14]

As this paper focuses on studying whether negative changes in Vietnam-China relations affect Laos-China relations, the negative values on the figure are particularly noteworthy. A negative Goldstein weighted mean means that the relationship between the two countries is more conflictive than cooperative in that year. According to the figure, Vietnam’s relationship with China declined to

a higher conflict level in 2014 and 2016. Laos' cooperation intentions towards China also declined in 2014 and 2016.

Two factors may have led to the lowest point in Lao-China relations in 2016. In April 2016, the construction of the entire Yuxi-Mohan railway line began. In December of the same year, the opening ceremony of the entire China-Lao Railway was held in Luang Prabang. The China-Lao Railway project stirred discontent in Laos by incurring huge debts and distant compensation for many Laos' families [23]. The project was also seen not as a collaboration but as facilitating China's further expansion into Laos and the rest of Southeast Asia [24]. Moreover, as the China-Lao Railway was not officially completed and opened to traffic until 2021, the transformation of Laos into a land-connected country was not yet visible in 2016. Laos still maintained a cautious mindset towards Vietnam. Laos' relations with China suffered when China-Vietnam relations deteriorated due to the conflict in the South China Sea, which is the second factor.

Nevertheless, Laos' cooperation intentions towards China increased rather than decreased when Vietnam's cooperation intentions towards China decreased significantly in 2018 and 2020. It can be seen that after 2016, the impact of Vietnam-China political relations on Laos has weakened to some extent.

5.2. Emotional Perceptions of China in Laos or Vietnam

Emotional perception is analyzed by using the annual weighted mean of AvgTone, as the line graph shown in Figure 2. The negative AvgTone weighted mean represents that China is perceived negatively by a country. The image shows that Laos displays mostly positive emotional perceptions of China, suggesting a positive foreign policy. Vietnam, however, is almost exactly the opposite of Laos. The AvgTone values of Laos towards China are nearly all negative, confirming the long-term delicate state of China-Vietnam relations.

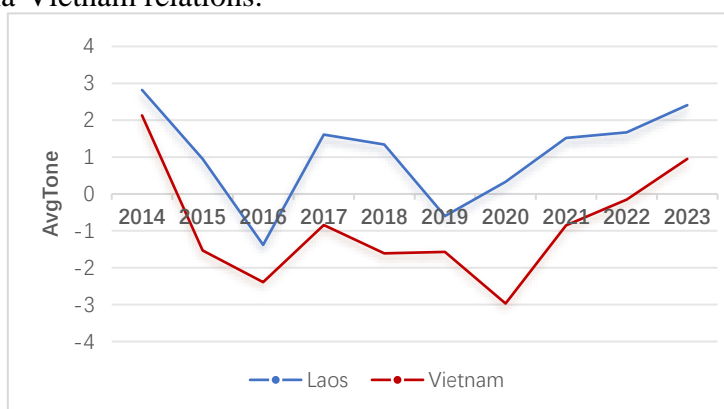


Fig. 2 The emotional perceptions of China in Laos or Vietnam [14]

During the period 2014-2018, the trends of emotional perception about China in Laos and Vietnam move almost in the same direction. Between 2018-2020, Laos' emotional perception of China shows an opposite trend to that of Vietnam. And from 2020 to the present, both countries have maintained a certain upward trend in their relationship with China.

The years that Vietnam's negative perception of China intensified are 2015, 2016, 2018, and 2020. Similar to the results on Figure 1, Vietnam's negative perception of China influenced the positivity of Lao-China diplomacy to a certain extent before 2018. Whereas, after 2018, the autonomy of Laos' emotional perception of China increased to some extent.

5.3. Diplomatic Attitude and Practical Options of Laos

Although China and Vietnam are not at the same scale of power, both countries are of 'asymmetric attention' to the Lao PDR. Because of its own vulnerability, Laos has flexibility in its diplomatic choices when faced with China, an extra-regional power, and Vietnam, a sub-regional power. For Laos, the best option is to maintain a positive diplomatic attitude with the major powers that can support its development, while maintaining relatively stable relations with the neighbouring sub-

powers. Figure 3 is set up to test the above hypothesis, which is an innovation of this paper. The degree of emotional perception, captured by the AvgTone weighted mean, can be interpreted as the intrinsic attitude of Laos; the cooperation or conflict intention, captured by the Goldstein weighted mean, represents the extrinsic behaviour of Laos.

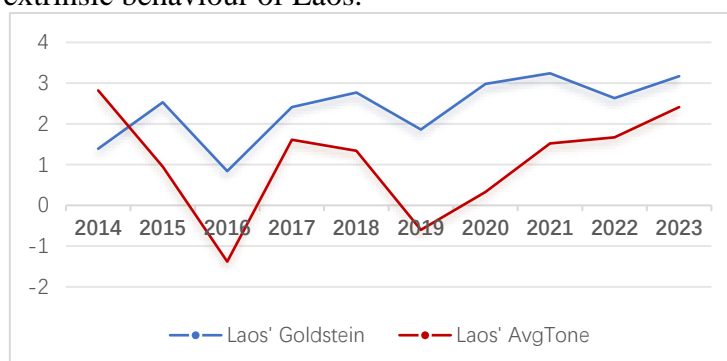


Fig. 3 The diplomatic attitude and practical options of Laos [14]

According to the data, Laos' intrinsic attitudes coincide with its extrinsic behaviors most of the time. For example, in 2015-2016, when Laos' emotional perception of China was more negative, its cooperation intentions towards China declined. On the contrary, Laos' intention to cooperate with China rose in line with its increased positive perception of China during 2016-2017. This proves that Laos' diplomatic discourse is relatively credible. Its diplomatic choices follow its own decisions. It is less likely to make choices deviating from its own attitudes in order to favour Vietnam. It is remarkable that even in 2016 and 2019, when Laos' diplomatic attitude towards China was negative, its outward behaviour was biased towards cooperation with China. Laos-China relations have remained relatively stable and positive in the 21st century.

6. Conclusion

Does Vietnam-China relations affect Lao-China relations to a large extent? Based on the analysis of Goldstein and AvgTone weighted means in the GDELT 2.0 database, this paper finds that: (a) Since the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative, Laos has maintained an upward trend in its cooperative intentions towards China, while the impact of Vietnam's conflicting intentions towards China on Laos-China relations has weakened; (b) While Vietnam has held negative perceptions of China for a long time, Laos still keeps mostly positive perceptions of China, suggesting that Laos has a certain degree of autonomy and independence in its diplomatic attitudes towards China; (c) Faced with the instability and inactivity of Vietnam-China relations, the real attitude and diplomatic behaviour of Laos towards China show a largely consistent positivity, suggesting that Vietnam-China relations are not sufficiently threatening to Lao-China relations.

The data analysis shows that Laos' diplomatic attitude towards China fluctuates, which is normal. Due to the 'asymmetry' of power between large and small countries, the small ones need to ensure a high degree of flexibility in their diplomacy in order to make diplomatic choices between the two powerful or powerful and less-powerful countries in order to maximize their own national security. Because of the 'asymmetric attention', large powers are likely to ignore to a certain extent the demands and negative sentiments of small states, causing unnecessary shifts in their diplomatic preferences. The analysis of the Singapore think-tank report on China's declining influence and credibility in Laos deserves China's attention.

In addition, the United States and Vietnam upgraded their relationship to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2023. It will further eliminate the geopolitical disadvantage of the US, and the US-Chinese rivalry in Southeast Asia is likely to intensify. Therefore, China needs to pay great attention to its own diplomatic strategy in order to avoid asymmetries that could trigger Laos' inclination towards Vietnam, or even the United States.

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