

Doctoral Dissertation

**Perilous Steps towards US-Lao Rapprochement: The Case of Joint
Accounting of POW/MIA, 1975-2016
(Summary)**

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This study examines the history of the current bilateral cooperation between the governments of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR) and the United States (US) to resolve post-Vietnam War's issue of US Prisoner of War/Missing in Action (POW/MIA). It has two purposes. The first is to trace the origin of the joint accounting efforts, which will help understand the reason behind the LPDR's decision to provide support to the US to resolve the POW/MIA issue. The second related purpose is to examine how the joint efforts contributed to the development of bilateral cooperation between the two States and whether the three-decade cooperation allows the LPDR to improve its adversary perceptions towards the US.

The current state of knowledge on the first joint accounting effort, which was started in 1985 and lasted for over three decades in the LPDR, lacks a Lao perception-based study on how it started. It needs the introduction of a Lao voice in the discussion on the resolution for the POW/MIA issue. Given the purposes of the thesis, this dissertation addresses two research questions. The primary research question is: Why did the LPDR provide cooperation in the joint accounting efforts to the US? The second research question is: Have the joint accounting efforts contributed to improving the perception of the LPDR's bilateral ties with the US? Taking into account the asymmetric nature of the relations between the US and the LPDR, this research seeks the guidance from a power asymmetry framework. The framework provides a focus from a viewpoint of the weaker state, the LPDR. The framework suggests that a set of directional relations of stronger-to-weaker and weaker-to-stronger are different when the disparities, for instance, military power between the two sides, are profound. The weaker side, in managing bilateral ties, gives deference, not submission, to the more powerful state in an exchange for the stronger state's recognition of the weaker state's autonomy or sovereignty.

This study sheds light on the relationship between the LPDR's need to safeguard its sovereignty and its decision to work with the US in the joint efforts while approaching it from the Lao viewpoint. The sovereignty ground had two implications: the first were domestic security concerns caused by the perceived threat of violence arising from US-sponsored subversive activities conducted by anti-LPDR resistance groups based in Thailand, which included a private group illegally searching for alleged live POWs inside the country. The second were diplomatic factors interwoven with the country's aspiration to have the US respect its autonomous foreign policymaking vis-à-vis its ally, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV). This research demonstrates that the LPDR wanted to use a joint accounting cooperation, which was finally implemented in 1985, as leverage to end US support to both anti-LPDR resistance groups and private searches for alleged POW. For the LPDR, POW/MIA negotiations with the US were used to reaffirm its sovereignty vis-à-vis the SRV.

Since the joint accounting effort commenced in 1985, it has provided an opportunity for the LPDR to improve its relation with the US that led to the expansion of bilateral cooperation, which has assisted with the country's nation building. Not only did the joint effort allow a relaxation of a ban of US aid on the LPDR, but also a lifting of several legislative sanctions

against the LPDR. For instance, a high tariff against Lao exports to the US would be applied if the country did not have Normal Trade Relations (NTR) with the US. More importantly, the efforts allowed the LPDR to have access to US assistance to cope with the post-war humanitarian impact that was caused by unexploded ordnance (UXO), not limited to, but resulting from heavy bombardment by the US during the secret war.

In Lao view, a decision to work with the US in joint accounting efforts was regarded as a humanitarian response to be reciprocated with the same gesture in a give-and-take diplomacy or what the LPDR called a “principle of reciprocity”.

The LPDR’s leadership continues to take perilous steps towards improving relations with the US. However, despite improved bilateral relations, the perception of the American threat remained within the circle of the LPDR’s leadership both before and after their cooperation in the accounting for the POW/MIA. This research showed that the leadership was, at any time, obsessed with the idea of US malicious intentions and believed that the US had set up and steered a peaceful means. For instance, an advocacy for electoral democracy and human rights to push for a political transition to a multi-party regime. Their perceptions were that the US was still in collusion with the anti-LPDR resistance in exile, behind the scenes in acts of defamation against LPDR leaders, disinformation about the leadership, and incitement of political disorder to ultimately undermine the regime of the Lao government.