



# Defense and Security Cooperation between Vietnam and Laos in the New Context

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**Abstract:** Defense and security cooperation constitutes a foundational and inseparable pillar of the special relationship between Vietnam and Laos. This cooperation has consistently been recognized as essential for safeguarding independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity, and for maintaining political and social stability in each country. The current regional and international context, characterized by complex dynamics, intensifying strategic competition, and the rise of non-traditional security challenges, necessitates a comprehensive and in-depth evaluation of this strategic cooperation. This article pursues two primary objectives: first, to analyze and assess the state of defense and security cooperation between the two nations in the modern era (from 1986 to the present) through a multidimensional lens; and second, to propose systemic and feasible solutions to strengthen and enhance the effectiveness of this cooperation in the new context. The study affirms the strategic importance and the imperative need to continuously develop this cooperative pillar for the stability and development of each nation, as well as for regional peace.

*Keywords:* defense cooperation; security cooperation; special solidarity and comprehensive cooperation; Vietnam's foreign policy; Laos' foreign policy.

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## 1. Introduction

The Vietnam-Laos relationship is a unique model in contemporary international relations, often described by the leaders of both countries as a "great friendship, special solidarity, and comprehensive cooperation" (Central Propaganda Department 2017).

Within this comprehensive framework, defense and security cooperation serves as a foundational pillar, reflecting strategic trust and holding key significance in safeguarding the independence, sovereignty, and socio-political stability of each nation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2017). However, the regional strategic landscape is undergoing profound shifts, shaping a complex new context. The intensification of great power competition, particularly between the United States and China, is complicating the Asia-Pacific security environment and

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challenging ASEAN's centrality. Concurrently, non-traditional security (NTS) challenges are becoming increasingly severe and transnational. Prominent among these are the surge of organized cybercrime and online scam operations based in areas of weak governance within the region, including Laos; challenges to Mekong River water security; and the complex situation of drug trafficking across the shared border (Ministry of Public Security 2024).

This new context demands the continuous strengthening and innovation of Vietnam-Laos defense and security cooperation. Although numerous studies exist on the bilateral relationship, in-depth, updated analyses that compare multiple perspectives against practical implementation in the current period remain limited. Therefore, this article addresses the following research questions:

1. How has Vietnam-Laos defense and security cooperation been implemented to adapt to the new strategic context?

2. What differences exist in the assessment of this cooperation's effectiveness and challenges from multiple perspectives (Vietnamese, Lao, and international), and how do these perspectives relate to the reality of the cooperation?

## 2. Literature Review and Research Methodology

To understand the dynamics and challenges of this cooperation, it is necessary to analyze existing literature and the dominant viewpoints shaping policy and academic discourse. Research on Vietnam-Laos defense and security relations can be categorized into three main streams: the official insider perspective (from Vietnam

and Laos), the pragmatic international perspective, and specific functional studies.

The primary stream of research comprises policy documents, official statements, and historical reviews from both Vietnam and Laos. This body of literature consistently emphasizes the special nature, historical depth, and strategic necessity of the relationship. Both nations view the relationship through a lens of deep historical and ideological ties, originating from their combat alliance. Official documents regard this relationship as an "invaluable asset" built on absolute strategic trust (Central Propaganda Department 2017). Based on this perception, both identify the consolidation of this relationship as a top strategic priority (Ministry of Defense Vietnam 2019). Vietnam's perspective mainly emphasizes the role of this cooperation in its strategy of "protecting the Fatherland from early, from afar." A stable, friendly Laos is a key factor for the security of Vietnam's western flank, helping to ensure border stability and deter hostile forces. Conversely, Laos's perspective views cooperation with Vietnam as having vital significance. The term "special relationship" (*phan phua phi set*) is considered a law of existence and development for the Lao revolution (Xayasane 2018). The 1977 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation remains the cornerstone of Lao security policy (Stuart-Fox 1980). More importantly, this relationship is seen as essential for the regime security of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP), with Vietnam still regarded as a crucial political and security patron (Hoo and To 2025: 81).

However, the Lao perspective also reflects a pragmatic need to diversify relations. The demand for economic development requires attracting resources from multiple partners, especially China, the largest investor and a key partner for

infrastructure projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Storey 2012; Thayer 2010). Therefore, while strengthening the special relationship with Vietnam, Laos actively pursues a balanced foreign policy, which requires a "cautious and calibrated approach" to manage asymmetry and maintain autonomy (Hoo and To 2025: 78). Although this body of literature provides a crucial foundation for understanding the official viewpoint, it often focuses on positive aspects and rarely delves into a critical analysis of limitations or the impact of shifting geopolitical pressures.

The second stream of research, primarily from international scholars and think tanks, analyzes the relationship through a more pragmatic lens, focusing on geopolitics, strategic interests, and regional power competition (Stuart-Fox 1980; Storey 2012; Thayer 2010; Hoo and To 2025; Nguyen Viet Xuan 2021). This group often situates the Vietnam-Laos relationship within the context of broader regional dynamics, particularly the rise of China. International analysts recognize Laos's geostrategic position as a "buffer zone" or "strategic crossroads." The Vietnam-Laos defense and security relationship is seen as a stabilizing factor and part of Laos's complex multilateral diplomacy (Nguyen Viet Xuan 2021). However, this perspective strongly emphasizes structural challenges. The capability asymmetry (economic, military) between Vietnam and Laos raises questions about the true balance of the relationship. Most importantly, China's growing influence in Laos through trade, investment, BRI projects, and the Mekong-Lancang Cooperation (MLC) mechanism is considered the greatest structural challenge, raising concerns about the potential decline of Vietnam's influence and Laos's ability to maintain an independent, balanced policy (Nguyen Viet Xuan 2021). The limitations

of resources for defense modernization and the adaptability of traditional cooperation mechanisms to new NTS threats (such as cyberspace) are also common points of analysis. This stream of research offers critical insights into external factors but can sometimes fail to fully capture the "special" nature and deeply intertwined internal interests that continue to drive the cooperation.

The third body of research delves into specific functional aspects of the cooperation (e.g., border management, training). These studies provide detailed data but often lack a comprehensive view of the strategic dynamics within the broader geopolitical context (Pongvongsa et al. 2012; Dwyer et al. 2016; Phan Xuan Dung 2025). This overview highlights a significant gap. There is a disconnect between the official discourse emphasizing "special solidarity" and international analysis focusing on structural challenges. Very few studies systematically analyze, based on diverse evidence, how practical Vietnam-Laos defense and security cooperation is navigating the new strategic context, or critically compare these multiple perspectives with empirical outcomes. This article aims to address this absence.

Regarding the research methodology, this study employed a qualitative approach, primarily using documentary analysis and a comparative method. Data were collected from diverse sources to ensure objectivity, including: (i) primary source documents (treaties, protocols, defense white papers, official government reports); (ii) academic research by domestic and international scholars; and (iii) analytical reports from reputable think tanks. The analysis is based on clarifying two key concepts:

- The "special relationship": In international relations theory, this term refers to bilateral relationships with a

superior level of strategic trust, institutionalized cooperation, and shared core interests. In the Vietnam-Laos case, this concept is also rooted in ideological affinity, a history of combat alliance, and geostrategic interdependence.

- The “multiple perspectives” approach: As presented in the literature review, this approach involves analyzing and comparing different viewpoints (official Vietnamese, official Lao, and those of international observers) on the same issue. This study employs this approach as an analytical tool to compare these perspectives against the actual state of cooperation (analyzed in subsequent sections), thereby providing a balanced view of the underlying dynamics and effectiveness of the relationship.

### **3. The Historical Background of Vietnam-Laos Defense and Security Cooperation**

The defense and security cooperation relationship between Vietnam and Laos today is not a random phenomenon or merely based on temporary geopolitical interests. It is inherited from and developed upon an extremely special and profound historical foundation, namely the combat alliance formed and tested throughout the 30 years of the national liberation war (1945–1975). Exploring this historical background is the key to understanding the essence, depth, and enduring vitality of the defense and security cooperation between the two countries today.

#### **3.1. *The Combat Alliance (Pre-1975) - The Genesis of Strategic Trust***

The defense and security cooperation between Vietnam and Laos is inherited from the profound historical foundation of the combat alliance formed and tested during the 1945–1975 period. An enduring

foundation of this cooperation is the alliance forged during armed resistance to French colonial rule and, subsequently, American intervention. This alliance arose from historical necessity, as both nations shared a common struggle for national liberation. Its ideological underpinnings can be traced to the establishment of the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) in 1930, which advocated for the unity of the peoples of Indochina. A Lao military official affirmed that "From the very founding of the Indochinese Communist Party, under the leadership of President Ho Chi Minh, the Vietnamese and Lao revolutions were closely bound, advancing side by side on the path to national liberation" (Nhan Dan Newspaper 2025). During this revolutionary struggle, a powerful sense of solidarity and strategic coordination developed between the two peoples, becoming an important factor in the victory of both countries. During the resistance against France (1945–1954), the fates of the two nations were closely linked. Following a request from the Lao Issara provisional government, Vietnam began providing direct assistance to the Lao revolution. First armed units of the Lao revolution were supported by Vietnam, leading to the formation of Lao-Vietnamese Joint Forces that fought across Lao battlefields. On October 30, 1949, the Standing Committee of the ICP formally decided to organize Vietnamese military forces operating in Laos under the official name of “volunteer troops” (National Defence Journal 2024; Ministry of Defense Vietnam 2024). These units and military experts were guided by President Ho Chi Minh’s principle of “helping our friends is helping ourselves” (To Lam 2025) and were tasked with assisting Laos in building its armed forces, establishing base areas, and expanding

liberated zones. Close combat coordination in major campaigns, such as Upper Laos (1953) and Central Laos (1954), made a significant contribution to the victory at Dien Bien Phu and the signing of the 1954 Geneva Accords.

During the resistance against America (1954–1975), as U.S. intervention in Indochina escalated, the Vietnam-Laos combat alliance was elevated to a new level. In response to requests from the Lao revolution, Vietnam dispatched a new contingent of volunteer troops and military expert groups (such as Groups 959, 463, and 565) to assist the Pathet Lao in its armed struggle against the Kingdom of Laos. In return, the Pathet Lao granted North Vietnam access to its territory to transport forces and supplies via the strategic Ho Chi Minh Trail to South Vietnam (Nguyen Viet Xuan 2022). The Ho Chi Minh Trail became a powerful symbol of the Vietnam–Laos combat alliance, serving as a strategic supply route whose protection by the Lao people and armed forces was vital to the war effort in South Vietnam (Nguyen Viet Xuan 2022). Battlefield coordination was further demonstrated through major joint campaigns, including the Plain of Jars–Xiang Khouang (1969–1970) and Route 9–Southern Laos (1971), which disrupted key U.S. military operations. These joint efforts, culminating in Vietnam’s 1975 victory, created a favourable historical opportunity that, as General Secretary To Lam and President Kaysone Phomvihane have highlighted, directly contributed to the success of the Lao revolution that same year<sup>1</sup> (To Lam 2025).

<sup>1</sup> “President Kaysone Phomvihane affirmed that in every success of the Lao Revolution, there has been the direct contribution of the Vietnamese Revolution”. To Lam. (2025, December 1). *50th anniversary of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic: Courage, wisdom, and achievements bearing the imprint of the times*. Nhan Dan Online. <https://en.nhandan.vn/50th-anniversary-of-the->

Throughout these 30 years, the spirit of selfless assistance, encapsulated in the principle of “helping friends is helping oneself,” forged an absolute strategic trust that became the solid foundation for the special relationship thereafter. The formation of the alliance was inseparable from the role of predecessor leaders such as President Ho Chi Minh, President Kaysone Phomvihane, and President Souphanouvong, who painstakingly built, led, and nurtured this relationship. The strategic vision and exemplary personal relationships among the leaders enabled the alliance to overcome challenges, laying the groundwork for comprehensive cooperation after 1975.

### ***3.2. Cooperation Framework in Peacetime (1975–1985)***

The 1975 victory opened a new development phase in Vietnam-Laos relations, with both countries sharing the goal of national construction and defense. This period, however, was marked by complex regional challenges and internal difficulties, as each country faced the tasks of healing war wounds, restoring its economy, and countering subversive activities (Central Propaganda Department 2017). In this context, strengthening the special relationship through a solid legal framework became an urgent requirement. Responding to this requirement, on July 18, 1977, in Vientiane, the leaders of the two countries signed two foundational legal documents:

- The Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation: This strategic document, for the first time, formalized and affirmed the special solidarity and comprehensive cooperation in the new period, clearly

stating the basic principles (respect for independence and sovereignty, non-interference, equality, mutual benefit, mutual assistance) and long-term cooperation directions across all fields, including defense and security (Central Propaganda Department 2017).

- The Treaty on National Border Delimitation: This treaty fundamentally resolved historical border issues. While it established the crucial legal foundation, the technical process of demarcation and marker plantation was a prolonged effort that continued for decades, with both countries officially completing the process in 2016.

The signing of these treaties established a comprehensive and solid international legal framework for the relationship. This event marked the transformation of the relationship's nature from a wartime combat alliance to one of comprehensive cooperation, expanding into political, economic, and social aspects. A subsequent Defense Treaty was also signed on September 22, 1977. This legal architecture provided the basis for the continued presence of 40,000 to 60,000 Vietnamese troops in Laos, who remained to assist the new government in consolidating power and ensuring stability. Therefore, defense and security cooperation in this period was not only an inheritance of the wartime spirit but was also a core component guided by this new legal framework, aimed at protecting national sovereignty and combating hostile forces.

### ***3.3. The Concept of "Special Relationship" and the Pivotal Role of Defense and Security Cooperation***

The term "special relationship" is used by Vietnam and Laos to designate the bilateral relationship bearing its own significance and weight, surpassing conventional partnership

frameworks. This is a political-diplomatic concept recognized by both countries, reflecting its core, unique characteristics. From the perspective of bilateral political diplomacy, this concept encompasses uniqueness and singularity; profound historical origins in the fighting alliance; a shared ideological foundation based on the leadership of the two Marxist-Leninist Parties; comprehensiveness in cooperation across all fields; and characterization by trust, loyalty, fidelity, and the proletarian internationalist spirit expressed through selfless assistance (Xayasane 2018). This viewpoint is consistently reaffirmed by Lao officials, who describe the relationship as a "partnership marked by loyalty, purity, and a commitment to mutual preservation" and an "enduring principle of their survival and development."

From an international academic viewpoint, however, the relationship is also analyzed through a lens of pragmatic geopolitics. Scholars such as Martin Stuart-Fox (1980: 191) have characterized it as a relationship that, while mutually beneficial, has "never been an equal one," suggesting that Vietnamese perceptions of its own security have historically defined the parameters for Lao foreign policy. More contemporary analysis describes it as functionally equivalent to a "military alliance commitment" (Hoo and To 2025: 96). The continuous emphasis on this term in political discourse serves several important functions: legitimizing the depth of cooperation, especially in sensitive fields; differentiating and affirming the absolute priority status of this relationship compared to other partners; connecting history, and strengthening emotions and the sense of responsibility; and sending a foreign policy signal about the durability of the Vietnam-Laos strategic alliance.

Within the framework of this “special relationship,” defense and security cooperation has always been identified by senior leaders of both countries as an “indispensable pillar” and “solid foundation” for the existence and development of the overall relationship (Xuan Tu, & Van Phien 2026). The cooperation is formalized through regularly signed five-year protocols and annual plans, such as the Defense Cooperation Protocol for the 2025-2029 period. This pillar originates from the historical roots of the combat alliance, which forged deep strategic trust, and continues to be an essential requirement for protecting the national security and political stability of each country.

This cooperation is evident in concrete actions. In the security domain, the two sides cooperate closely to combat transnational crime. In 2024 alone, the functional forces of eight border provinces of both countries coordinated to detect 4,559 cases involving 6,103 individuals related to drug trafficking, maintaining mechanisms of 70 annual talks and 101 bilateral patrols to ensure border security. In the defense domain, cooperation goes beyond dialogue to include substantive capacity building. For example, Vietnam has provided technical and financial support for significant projects, such as building the headquarters for Lao Border Guard Company 214 and constructing a drug rehabilitation center in Vientiane. This deep level of cooperation is the highest expression of strategic political trust between the two parties and states, creating momentum for collaboration in other fields. Due to its foundational history, practical necessity, and strategic importance, defense and security cooperation remains the core pillar ensuring the longevity of the great friendship, special solidarity, and

comprehensive cooperation between Vietnam and Laos.

#### **4. Vietnam-Laos Defense and Security Cooperation from 1986 to the Present**

Entering the mid-1980s, particularly from 1986 onwards, the Vietnam-Laos defense and security cooperation relationship, as well as the entirety of the special relationship between the two countries, entered a new developmental period with new characteristics and requirements. This development took place against the backdrop of profound, transformative changes, strongly impacting the domestic and foreign policies as well as the defense and security policies of both Vietnam and Laos.

##### ***4.1. The Context of Reform and Adjustments in Cooperation***

The modern period of Vietnam-Laos defense and security cooperation, initiated in 1986, has been shaped by three primary drivers: domestic economic imperatives, the restructuring of the post-Cold War international order, and the emergence of a complex contemporary security environment.

The impetus for reform in both nations fundamentally altered the prioritization of national resources. The decisions to initiate the *Đổi Mới* (Renovation) process in Vietnam and the *Chintanakan Mai* (New Economic Mechanism) in Laos (both in 1986) marked a critical shift towards socio-economic development and open-door policies (Central Propaganda Department 2017; Bounsavang Xayasane 2018). Both ruling parties increasingly recognized that economic performance was crucial for maintaining regime legitimacy (Hoo and To 2025). This required the defense and

security sectors to adjust, aligning their activities not only with traditional defense tasks but also with supporting economic development—a concept formalized in Laos as the military's "dual mission" of defense and development (Dwyer et al. 2016: 209).

The end of the Cold War introduced significant geopolitical realignments. The collapse of the Soviet Union removed a crucial strategic and economic support base, compelling both Vietnam and Laos to adjust their foreign policies toward diversification and multilateralization. While the foundational 1977 Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with Vietnam remained the bedrock of Lao security policy, providing the basis for deep Vietnamese involvement (Stuart-Fox 1980: 191), Vientiane increasingly sought broader international engagement. This included normalizing relations with China in 1988 (Hoo and To 2025) and initiating a gradual rapprochement with the United States, beginning with MIA/POW cooperation in 1985 (Thayer, 2010). The regional shift “from battlefields to marketplaces” (Dwyer et al. 2016: 207) and integration into ASEAN (Vietnam in 1995, Laos in 1997) further embedded both countries in regional norms and multilateral security mechanisms (e.g., ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting, ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting-Plus).

More recently, cooperation between the two countries has had to adapt to an increasingly complex context defined by intensified strategic competition and acute NTS challenges. The region has become a focal point for U.S.-China rivalry, posing significant challenges for both Vietnam and Laos in maintaining independence and a balanced foreign policy. China's rising influence, driven by proactive defense diplomacy (Storey 2012) and extensive economic engagement through the BRI, has

significantly altered the strategic landscape. While offering economic opportunities, this growing dependence also generates anxieties regarding strategic autonomy (Phan Xuan Dung 2025). While Vietnam seeks to maintain its paramount influence, Laos attempts to balance its deep ideological and strategic reliance on Vietnam with its growing economic dependence on China, pursuing a calibrated approach to avoid over-dependence on any single power (Hoo and To 2025: 86).

Furthermore, NTS challenges have become defining features of the modern security landscape, demanding innovative bilateral cooperation. These include:

- Transnational crime: The shared border remains a hotspot for drug trafficking originating from the Golden Triangle. In the first six months of 2024 alone, Vietnamese authorities uncovered over 14,000 drug-related cases, noting the increased use of cyberspace by criminal networks (Ministry of Public Security 2024; People’s Public Security Newspaper 2025). Moreover, the rise of organized cybercrime and online scam operations, often located in weakly governed special economic zones in the region, including Laos, presents a new, sophisticated threat linked to human trafficking and money laundering (Stimson Center 2025).

- Mekong water security: The proliferation of upstream hydropower projects, particularly in China and Laos, poses severe risks to the Mekong Delta, threatening Vietnam's food security and environmental sustainability (Phan Xuan Dung 2025). This issue tests the ability of the "special relationship" to manage conflicting national development interests.

- Border management: Managing the remote, forested border areas remains crucial for preventing illegal migration and smuggling, addressing health security

(Pongvongsa et al. 2012), and maintaining stability among ethnic minority populations (Dwyer et al. 2016). This is facilitated through mechanisms like the Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam Development Triangle (CLV-DT), established in 1999.

In response to these shifts, the foreign and defense policies of both countries emphasize the goal of protecting independence, sovereignty, and the political regime, while maintaining a peaceful environment for development. Both advocate building modernized armed forces while promoting international integration and defense diplomacy. Cooperation between the two Ministries of Public Security, for example, continues to be highlighted as a pillar of the overall bilateral relationship. Vietnam's defense policy, characterized by its “Four Nos” principle (Ministry of Defense Vietnam 2019: 25), aims to position itself as a reliable partner and responsible member of the international community, having established Strategic Comprehensive Partnerships with all five permanent members of the UN Security Council. Laos actively expands relations, including developing a Comprehensive Partnership with the U.S. (Hoo and To 2025), while consistently affirming the special relationship with Vietnam as its top strategic priority (Bounsavang Xayasane 2018).

#### **4.2. Main Fields and Forms of Cooperation**

In the period of reform and integration, Vietnam-Laos defense and security cooperation has been characterized by increasing institutionalization and a broadening scope of activities, adapting its mechanisms to the evolving strategic context across several key fields. These include:

##### *Strategic exchanges, policy dialogues, and multilateral coordination*

This high-level cooperation channel plays a guiding role, strengthening strategic trust through regular visits by senior leaders and maintaining important policy dialogue mechanisms. The institutionalization of cooperation has been reinforced through long-term agreements, recently renewed with the signing of the Protocol on Defense Cooperation for the 2025-2029 period and a specific cooperation plan for 2025 (VGP News 2024). Further institutionalization occurred with the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding on cooperation in military and defense law in December 2024 (VGP News 2024). Regular mechanisms, such as the Deputy Minister-level Defense Policy Dialogue (planned for Q1-2025 in Laos) and the annual Ministerial-level Security Cooperation Conference (People's Army Newspaper 2024b; Central Propaganda Department 2017), serve to unify perceptions and coordinate positions. The two countries also enhance consultations and coordination at regional and international forums (ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting, ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus, ASEAN Regional Forum, Interpol, etc.).

##### *Capacity building (including training, experience-sharing)*

Vietnam continues to be an important partner in supporting Laos in training military and security human resources through receiving trainees and deploying experts (Ministry of Defense Vietnam 2024). While specific figures on defense training are rarely publicized, this cooperation extends across various sectors, including specialized areas such as ethnic affairs management (Le Thi Huyen and Le Thi Thu Thanh 2023a). The two sides regularly share information and experiences

in force building, party work, and political work. Initiatives to foster future cooperation include the planned "*Giao lưu sĩ quan trẻ*" (Young Officers Exchange) in 2025 (People's Army Newspaper 2024b).

#### *Border management and territorial security assurance*

This field has achieved outstanding results with the completion of border delimitation, marker planting, and the signing of legal border documents in 2016 (Nguyen Viet Xuan 2021). Functional forces closely coordinate in border and checkpoint management. Cooperation between military regions and border provinces is formalized through mechanisms such as the Vietnam–Laos Border Defense Friendship Exchange, whose second iteration was held on 22–23 October 2024 in Son La (Vietnam) and Houaphanh (Laos) (People's Army Newspaper 2024b; Government Portal 2024). These activities include joint patrols, twinning arrangements, and support for socio-economic development linked to defense and security. A major focus is combating transnational crime, particularly drug trafficking originating from the Golden Triangle. The scale of the challenge is significant; Vietnamese authorities reported uncovering 14,461 drug-related cases nationwide in the first six months of 2024 (Ministry of Public Security 2024). Cooperation is robust, utilizing mechanisms such as the annual anti-drug border meeting involving eight provinces from both sides (External Information 2025). Joint operations have yielded concrete results; for example, in June 2025, a coordinated effort between Dien Bien province and Northern Lao provinces successfully dismantled a major trafficking ring, seizing 67 bricks of narcotics in U Dom Xay province, Laos (People's Public Security Newspaper 2025).

#### *Material-technical support and cooperation in addressing new challenges*

Vietnam continues to support Laos in logistics, military technical support, equipment repair, and exploring defense industry cooperation within capabilities. Cooperation in military medicine has been identified as a "bright spot" in the relationship. For example, in June 2024, Vietnam provided medical equipment to support Laos during its ASEAN Chairmanship (People's Army Newspaper 2024a). There is also nascent cooperation in the defense industry, with Vietnam proposing that Laos support high-tech defense products manufactured by Viettel (People's Army Newspaper 2024b). The two countries also expand cooperation in addressing non-traditional security challenges (natural disasters, pandemics, cybersecurity, water security, etc.). This includes not only established areas like disaster response and health security (Pongvongsa et al. 2012) but also emerging threats such as cybersecurity and the rise of organized cybercrime and online scams operating in the region (Stimson Center 2025; Ministry of Public Security 2024). Addressing the complex issue of Mekong water security also remains a critical, albeit challenging, area of dialogue (Phan Xuan Dung 2025).

#### *Humanitarian cooperation and addressing historical issues*

The work of searching, exhuming, and repatriating the remains of Vietnamese volunteer soldiers and experts who died in Laos is a touching expression of special solidarity, always receiving the attention of leaders and the coordination and assistance of various levels of Lao authorities, armed forces, and people.

Thus, defense and security cooperation between Vietnam and Laos in the modern period demonstrates significant breadth and adaptability. The relationship is characterized by a high degree of institutionalization through long-term protocols and regular dialogue mechanisms. Cooperation is not limited to high-level contacts but strongly extends to operational levels, particularly in joint border management and combating transnational crime, yielding measurable results. While rooted in historical solidarity, the cooperation is proactively expanding to address complex non-traditional security challenges. This multifaceted engagement affirms the role of defense and security cooperation as a foundational pillar of the bilateral relationship in the new context.

### **4.3. Evaluation of Cooperation Outcomes (1986–Present)**

An assessment of the period from 1986 to the present (as of 2025) indicates that Vietnam-Laos defense and security cooperation has been continuously strengthened, achieving significant outcomes that reinforce its role as a strategic pillar in the bilateral relationship. However, the cooperation process also faces substantive limitations and increasing challenges stemming from the evolving strategic environment.

The primary achievement of the defense and security cooperation has been its contribution to maintaining political stability and ensuring national security in both countries, thereby creating a conducive environment for socio-economic development (Central Propaganda Department 2017). The regularization of high-level exchanges and the institutionalization of cooperation through long-term agreements, such as the recently signed Protocol for 2025-2029 (VGP News

2024), have continuously consolidated the special strategic trust between the two parties, states, and armed forces. The completion of the border marker enhancement project and the signing of foundational legal documents in 2016—the “Protocol on the borderline and national border markers” and the “Agreement on the regulations for the management of the border and border gates”—represent a historic achievement (Ministry of Defense Vietnam 2019: 18; Nguyen Viet Xuan 2021). This legal framework facilitates effective coordination, including joint patrols (Ministry of Defense Vietnam 2019: 29), contributing to a peaceful and developmental border. Cooperation in combating transnational crime, particularly drug trafficking, has yielded measurable results. Joint operations, such as the successful dismantling of a major trafficking ring in June 2025 resulting in the seizure of 67 bricks of narcotics (People’s Public Security Newspaper 2025), demonstrate effective coordination between functional forces. Furthermore, Vietnam has made practical contributions to enhancing Laos’ defense and security capabilities through training, experience sharing, and technical support. Tangible support, such as the provision of medical equipment to assist Laos during its 2024 ASEAN Chairmanship, highlights the substantive nature of this cooperation (People’s Army Newspaper 2024a). Moreover, effective coordination of positions at multilateral forums (ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting, ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting+, ASEAN Regional Forum, etc.) has elevated the international standing of both countries.

Despite these achievements, the cooperation faces several limitations and increasingly complex challenges in the new context. As both countries prioritize economic development, the resources

invested in defense cooperation remain constrained. Vietnam's defense budget, for instance, remains relatively modest (2.36% of GDP in 2018) (Ministry of Defense Vietnam 2019: 40). This affects the scale and modernization of cooperative activities. Furthermore, asymmetries in capacity and resources can sometimes limit the realization of the cooperation's full potential. The intensification of major power competition and the significant increase in China's economic and strategic influence in Laos present a complex dynamic. While Laos seeks to balance its relationships, its growing economic dependence on China (Hoo and To 2025) inevitably impacts the strategic calculus and potentially alters the exclusive nature of the Vietnam-Laos "special relationship." The rise of sophisticated NTS challenges requires continuous innovation in cooperation methods. Emerging threats like organized cybercrime and online scam operations, which exploit regional governance gaps (Stimson Center 2025), demand advanced technical capabilities and intelligence-sharing mechanisms that are still developing.

Another limitation stems from differing development interests. Strategic issues such as Mekong water security highlight potential complexities. Many observers note that Laos has articulated an ambition to become the "battery of Southeast Asia" by exporting hydropower, a strategy that has raised concerns among Vietnamese analysts about potential environmental impacts on the Mekong Delta (Le Hong Hiep 2020; Danello 2017; Phan Xuan Dung 2025). Balancing these national development priorities within the framework of the special relationship remains a significant challenge. In Laos, the military's significant role in the economy and the potential invocation of the "security exception" to

manage or bypass certain governance efforts (Dwyer et al. 2016) can sometimes complicate the transparency and implementation of cooperative initiatives.

Overall, the period since 1986 has been a transformative phase for Vietnam-Laos defense and security cooperation. The achievements attained are significant, directly strengthening defense potential and maintaining socio-political stability. However, for this strategic cooperative relationship to remain effective and adapt to the new context, it is necessary to candidly recognize and thoroughly analyze the remaining limitations and emerging geopolitical and NTS challenges. This forms the basis for both sides to jointly implement effective solutions to address shortcomings, thereby ensuring that the cooperation remains substantive and sustainable in the next developmental phase.

## 5. Discussion

Analyzing the perspectives from Vietnam, Laos, and the international community, and comparing them against the empirical evidence of defense and security cooperation, reveals critical areas of convergence and divergence. This comparison helps bridge the gap between official rhetoric, academic analysis, and the reality of the relationship on the ground.

### 5.1. Convergence: Strategic Importance and Tangible Outcomes

There is a fundamental consensus across all three perspectives regarding the strategic importance and the historical depth of the Vietnam-Laos relationship. This is not merely rhetoric; it is empirically validated by the institutionalization and durability of the cooperation.

The perspective held by both Vietnam and Laos—that this cooperation is vital for national stability and regime security (Hoo and To 2025)—is strongly supported by practical outcomes. The successful establishment of a stable border regime (Nguyen Viet Xuan 2021), characterized by completed delimitation and effective joint patrols (Ministry of Defense Vietnam 2019), directly translates the strategic priority into tangible security benefits. Furthermore, the regularization of high-level dialogues and long-term agreements, such as the 2025-2029 Protocol (VGP News 2024), demonstrates an operational commitment that aligns with the official discourse of maintaining a "special relationship." International observers also recognize these practical benefits, viewing the cooperation as a stabilizing factor in the immediate sub-region.

## **5.2. Divergence: Interpretation, Effectiveness, and External Challenges**

Significant divergences emerge, however, in the interpretation of the relationship's nature, the assessment of its effectiveness, and the impact of external factors. These divergences help explain the limitations and complexities observed in the actual state of cooperation.

- *Interpreting the "special" nature (ideology versus pragmatism):* Vietnam and Laos consistently emphasize ideological solidarity, historical sacrifice, and mutual trust as the foundation (Nhan Dan Newspaper 2017). In practice, this is reflected in cooperation areas that yield high political value but perhaps fewer material benefits, such as extensive political cadre training and symbolic activities (e.g., the search for martyrs). While official narratives present these as proof of "specialness," the international perspective tends to view the relationship through a lens of pragmatic

interests, geopolitical necessity, or even historical dependency (Stuart-Fox, 1980). This pragmatic view better explains Laos's concurrent efforts to diversify relations (Thayer 2010; Storey 2012), suggesting that while the relationship is special, it is not exclusive.

- *Assessing effectiveness and limitations:* There is a notable gap between the bilateral assessment of outcomes and the international view. Vietnam and Laos tend to highlight achievements, such as successful joint operations against transnational crime (People's Public Security Newspaper 2025), framing the cooperation as "comprehensive" and "effective." However, as analyzed earlier in section 3.3, the actual cooperation faces significant limitations. International perspectives, focusing on capabilities and modernization, frequently point to resource constraints (e.g., Vietnam's modest defense budget [Ministry of Defense Vietnam 2019]) and capability asymmetries. The reality on the ground validates this skepticism. While cooperation is effective in traditional domains (e.g., border control), it struggles to adapt to sophisticated NTS threats, such as organized cybercrime (Stimson Center 2025), which require advanced technical capacities that are still developing. Thus, the reality reflects a mixed picture, suggesting that the official rhetoric sometimes overstates the depth and modernization of the cooperation.

- *The structural challenge of external influence (China):* The most significant divergence concerns the impact of China. While Vietnam and Laos officially affirm the independence of their special relationship, international analysis overwhelmingly identifies China's growing economic and strategic influence as the greatest structural challenge (Hoo and To 2025). In practice, this tension is manifest in

Laos's complex balancing act. The empirical evidence shows that while defense cooperation with Vietnam remains a priority, Laos's significant economic dependence on China (through BRI projects) inevitably shapes its broader strategic environment and introduces potential constraints. The practical challenge for the Vietnam-Laos cooperation is maintaining its relevance and exclusivity in the face of competing influences - a dynamic readily identified by international observers but often understated in bilateral communiqués.

- *Transparency and evaluation:* The inherent sensitivity of defense cooperation leads to differing views on transparency. Vietnam and Laos view the non-public disclosure of details as normal within the framework of special trust. However, this lack of public information, as observed in the difficulty of accessing detailed operational data (section 3.3), hinders independent international evaluation. Consequently, international assessments often rely on analyzing broader geopolitical shifts rather than specific military agreements, which can sometimes lead to generalized or speculative conclusions about the relationship's dynamics.

Thus, comparing these perspectives reveals that while the official Vietnam-Laos view aligns with the reality of a close, institutionalized relationship, it often understates the significant structural challenges and operational limitations identified by international analysis. Fully recognizing this gap between the rhetoric of "special solidarity" and the realities of resource constraints, evolving threats, and geopolitical competition is essential for analyzing the challenges and proposing adaptive solutions for the future.

### 5.3. *The Strategic Priorities for Strengthening Cooperation*

While the Vietnam-Laos defense and security cooperation is underpinned by deep political trust and robust institutional mechanisms, the evolving strategic landscape demands targeted innovation rather than generalized intensification. The current cooperation model faces critical tests from intense geopolitical competition—particularly the structural pressure of China's influence—the rapid escalation of sophisticated NTS threats, and inherent resource constraints. To adapt effectively and ensure the relationship remains a preeminent pillar of bilateral ties, this article proposes prioritizing three strategic areas focused on concrete, actionable initiatives:

- *Enhancing strategic synchronization amid geopolitical competition:* The primary structural challenge is managing the influence of major powers while preserving strategic autonomy. Deep economic engagement by third parties (e.g., through BRI and various Mekong cooperation frameworks) creates pressures that necessitate proactive coordination rather than reactive consultation. The two countries should establish a dedicated, high-level "joint strategic assessment mechanism." This mechanism should focus specifically on analyzing the security implications of major power initiatives and large-scale infrastructure projects. Crucially, it must move beyond information exchange to facilitate "joint risk assessments" and the synchronization of negotiating positions *before* commitments are made to external partners. This proactive coordination is essential to mitigate risks of excessive dependency and ensure external engagements do not undermine bilateral security interests.

- *Operationalizing cooperation against high-tech transnational threats:* The proliferation of organized cybercrime, online scam operations, and high-tech drug trafficking outpaces the capacity of traditional cooperation methods. Cooperation must shift from general capacity building to operational integration and technological modernization. This involves piloting initiatives in key border provinces to deploy integrated surveillance technologies (drones, sensors) and establishing joint data analysis centers for real-time monitoring. The establishment of a Joint Task Force on Cybercrime (JTF-C) should be prioritized, as this specialized unit would focus on intelligence fusion and joint operations to disrupt transnational criminal networks. Critically, efforts must also focus on harmonizing legal frameworks for the mutual recognition and handling of digital evidence to facilitate successful cross-border prosecutions.

Finally, to address resource limitations and the risk of fading awareness of the special relationship among the younger generation, cooperation needs to demonstrate practical efficiency and future relevance. Both governments should prioritize “dual-use” investments and optimize resource mobilization by focusing on projects in border regions that integrate defense objectives with socio-economic development (e.g., infrastructure, communication networks). This maximizes the impact of limited budgets and demonstrates the tangible benefits of the defense and security relationship. There should also have innovative programs for youth engagement that focus on both traditional historical education and practical, forward-looking joint programs for young officers and security personnel. This should include joint technology training, NTS response exercises, and environmental

security initiatives that foster tangible connections and shared skills relevant to future challenges. The synchronized implementation of these focused initiatives, rather than a broad diffusion of effort, is essential for elevating the substance and effectiveness of Vietnam-Laos defense and security cooperation in an increasingly complex era.

## 6. Conclusion

This study has systematically analyzed the defense and security cooperation between Vietnam and Laos, affirming its role as the indispensable pillar of the “special relationship.” The analysis reveals a relationship at a critical juncture, where historical solidarity must be augmented by pragmatic innovation to navigate an increasingly complex strategic environment. The most profound achievement of this cooperation is the successful institutionalization of strategic trust. Forged through shared history and ideological alignment, this trust is tangibly manifested in the establishment of a stable, legally defined, and effectively managed border regime—a cornerstone for the national stability and regime security of both nations. However, the study identifies critical tensions that define the contemporary challenge. The primary structural challenge lies in the friction between the political-security exclusivity inherent in the “special relationship” and the economic necessity for diversification, particularly in light of China's expanding regional influence. This geopolitical pressure tests the relationship's strategic autonomy. Concurrently, a significant operational gap exists, as traditional cooperation methods prove increasingly inadequate against the sophistication of modern NTS threats, such

as organized cybercrime and high-tech trafficking.

Thus, maintaining the vitality and relevance of the defense and security pillar requires targeted adaptation rather than generalized intensification. To navigate this complex reality, this study concludes that three strategic priorities must be recommended and implemented:

1. Enhancing strategic synchronization: Moving beyond reactive consultation by establishing a dedicated “joint strategic assessment mechanism.” This is crucial for proactively coordinating responses to major power initiatives and ensuring external economic engagements do not undermine bilateral security interests.

2. Operationalizing cooperation against high-tech threats: Shifting focus towards technology-driven solutions, such as implementing “smart border management” initiatives and establishing specialized joint task forces, to effectively counter transnational NTS threats.

3. Ensuring long-term sustainability: Optimizing resources through “dual-use” investments that link defense with development, and innovating youth engagement programs focused on future challenges rather than solely on historical education.

Ultimately, the resilience of the Vietnam-Laos special relationship will be measured not merely by celebrating a shared past, but by its capacity to evolve. The future depends on the proactive development of practical, institutionalized forms of cooperation capable of meeting the concrete demands of the 21st-century strategic landscape.

## Declaration of AI Use

In this article, Gemini (Google) was used to enhance the clarity, grammar, and flow of this manuscript. The authors thoroughly reviewed and edited the content to ensure

academic accuracy and take full responsibility for the final text.

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