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Chinese Engagement in Laos: Past, Present, and Incertain Future (Trends in Southeast Asia)

Danielle Tan

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During the colonial period, Laos welcomed the smallest overseas Chinese communities in Southeast Asia, communities that almost disappeared after the communist forces seized power in Laos in 1975. Yet, this landlocked country shares a long history with China and even experienced a Golden Age thanks to the thriving caravan trade between Yunnan and mainland Southeast Asia. The Greater Mekong Subregion programme, launched by the ADB, has revitalized these historical trade routes, causing thousands of Chinese migrants to pour onto the new roads of Laos, channelled through the North-South Economic Corridor linking Kunming to Bangkok. The growing link between Laos and China has alarmed many scholars and development workers, both Lao and foreign; some even speak of a Chinese ""shadow state"" threatening Lao sovereignty and territorial integrity. It is necessary to go beyond the image of Laos regularly depicted as a weak state, a victim of globalization, and of China in particular, to consider a less passive posture. This paper argues that China's growing presence is far from eroding the power of the Lao communist regime. Instead, Chinese engagement allows the Lao state to cope with the challenges of globalization and to maintain its power at the same time. The paper will highlight Chinese engagement in Laos throughout history by emphasizing their recurrent patterns of intermediation. Then, it will describe how Chinese networks have become key partners of the Lao state's development policies. However, rising uncertainties over the neighbouring communist ally's economic potential may push China to revise its development strategy in Laos.

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