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**The Hmong-CIA Relationship as a Case Study of
an Effective Ethnic Proxy Relationship**

By Andre Roland Altherr

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Faculty Advisor: Austin Carson
Preceptor: Manuel Cabal

Introduction

In 2012, as the Obama administration was wrestling with the issue of how deeply the United States should involve itself in the Syrian Civil War, importantly the question of whether to arm and train the rebel and ethnic militias that were fighting the Assad regime, the CIA completed a review of previous agency experience with arming irregular groups. The study found that on the whole, previous attempts to arm irregular groups in conflicts had little impact on the overall course of the struggle in question, particularly when there were no US forces engaged on the ground.¹ Such concerns about the efficacy of arming irregular groups would appear to be vindicated by the war itself, as the United States would find it difficult to control the ethnic and anti-Assad groups that it trained and armed over the subsequent years, with many frequently coming into conflict with each other despite their shared backer.² Despite the intuitive appeal of supporting irregular ethnic proxies as a relatively low-cost means of influencing conflicts of interest, there appears to be little in the way of recent cases to suggest that such relationships are productive from the perspective of the United States, and little faith amongst the intelligence communities that they are workable.

A notable exception to this history of uninspiring proxy relationships is that between the Central Intelligence Agency and the Hmong people in the Laotian Civil War. Between 1960 and 1973, the CIA maintained a strong relationship with the Hmong, referred to at the time as the Meo, a tribal ethnic group residing in northern Laos and neighboring states. In return for provisions of weapons and limited air support, the Hmong undertook the defense of northern

¹ Mark Mazzetti, "C.I.A. Study of Covert Aid Fueled Skepticism about Helping Syrian Rebels," *The New York Times*, October 15, 2014. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/15/us/politics/cia-study-says-arming-rebels-seldom-works.html>.

² Nabih Bulos, W.J. Hennigan, and Brian Bennett, "In Syria, Militias Armed by the Pentagon Fight Those Armed by the CIA," *Los Angeles Times*, March 27, 2016. <https://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-cia-pentagon-isis-20160327-story.html>

Laos, particularly the approaches to Vientiane and Luang Prabong along the strategically located Plain of Jars. The Plain of Jars (PDJ) is a flat expanse of territory covering a good portion of northern Laos and ringed by mountains along its northern and western ends, in which many Hmong tribes dwelled. Just beyond the mountains to the west lay the cities of Vientiane and Luang Prabong, the royal capital and political capital of the Kingdom of Laos, respectively. Throughout the Laotian Civil War, the PDJ and the surrounding mountains would therefore serve as the critical battlefield, as the government-aligned forces fought to keep the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) from breaching the mountain barrier and, hopefully, to push them out of the PDJ altogether.³ At the relationship's height, there were over 40,000 Hmong soldiers⁴ serving what has since come to be called the CIA's "Secret Army." The Hmong's involvement with the CIA was ultimately to end in tragedy, as the American withdrawal from the region and the eventual fall of the Laotian Monarchy to the Pathet Lao led to the widespread persecution of the Hmong, forcing a significant portion of the Hmong to flee to other parts of Laos and abroad.

For the purposes of this paper, success is considered from the strategic outlook of the patron. While a proxy relationship may be mutually beneficial, and requires at least some alignment of interests between the patron and the proxy, it exists in order to serve the larger goals of the patron. In the Hmong case, the relationship's ability to hinder the progress of communist forces in northern Laos such that the country remained outside of communist control until after the withdrawal of American assets from the region after 1973, qualifies it as a success from the American perspective. Almost as important was the low level of investment necessary to maintain it. Near the peak of the Hmong's success in 1970, it was estimated that for under 500

³ James E. Parker Jr., *Battle for Skyline Ridge: The CIA Secret War in Laos* (Havertown, PA: Casemate, 2019), xii.

⁴ William P. Head, "Dirty Little Secret in the Land of a Million Elephants: Barrel Roll and the Lost War," *Air Power History* 64, no. 4 (2017): 14. www.jstor.org/stable/26571062.

million dollars per year, the United States was tying down multiple NVA divisions and valuable equipment that could otherwise have been utilized against American troops in South Vietnam. As the American ambassador in Vientiane described it, the United States was able to get a “bigger bang for a buck in Laos than anywhere else.”⁵

While tragic in a moral and humanitarian sense, the ultimate collapse of the Hmong position in the years following the American cessation of involvement agreed to at the Paris Peace Accord in 1973 is not a factor in consideration of success under this framework. The Laotian project, from an American perspective, was always subordinated to and served the interests of American involvement in South Vietnam, and the American withdrawal from Vietnam marked the functional end to the usefulness of the relationship with the Hmong for the United States.

The success of the Hmong case in contrast with the prevailing sentiment regarding proxy groups raises the questions of what specific aspects of the situation, Hmong themselves, and the aid provided made the Hmong such an effective proxy for the United States in the war against the Pathet Lao and NVA in Northern Laos. Based on the answer to this, can we form any generalizable lessons on how future proxy relationships with ethnic groups might be established and maintained with the greatest chance of success?

Although the relationship was overall a success from the strategic perspective of the United States, there were nonetheless periods of both success and failure for the Hmong and CIA in northern Laos. The seasonal nature of the conflict, whereby advances by either side were highly dependent upon the beginning and end of the annual monsoon season, aids in establishing clear start and termination dates for the cases to be evaluated. The first analytical section of this

⁵ Central Intelligence Agency, *Ambassador Godley's Comments on Developments in Laos*, LOC-HAK-508-2-11-3 (August 5, 1970), 4. <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/loc-hak-508-2-11-3>

paper therefore looks at three distinct periods of the war during which the proxy relationship produced different outcomes; the extremely successful 1969 Kou Kiet offensive, the serious reverses suffered in the 1970 NVA offensive, and the costly defense of the base of Long Tieng from 1970-1971. The purpose of analyzing this spread of cases is twofold; to avoid presenting an overly rosy picture of the war by focusing only on the high points of the campaign, and to use the less successful periods of the relationship to discern what key factors in the proxy relationship made the difference between success and failure on a strategic level.

From this first part of the analysis, this paper derives a theory suggesting the necessity of an intersection of proxy demographic strength and provision of the patron's comparative advantage in order for the proxy to meet with consistent military success. It broadens the United States' provision of airpower into the broader concept of the patron's comparative advantage, describing those direct means of military intervention, usually including but not strictly limited to airpower, that the patron is in a position to supply on a regularized basis. As this paper attempts to demonstrate through the case studies, when either demographic strength or the patron's comparative advantage are found to be lacking, the ethnic proxy's capabilities will be notably impaired, significantly reducing the value of the relationship to the patron. Additionally, as demographic strength only tends to decrease across the length of a conflict, prospects for success decrease as the campaign wears on.

One factor without variation in the case studies is the effect of able leadership on tactical outcomes throughout the period, which, although held in central importance in both the primary and secondary source literature on the Hmong, cannot be presented as the key determining factor due to its lack of correspondence with tactical outcomes. This paper will also attempt to point out this explanatory flaw through a dive into the glowing reports on General Vang Pao during the

course of the war compared to the variance in Hmong battlefield success. It should be noted that there is no completely objective method by which success can be measured in this case, but for the purposes of this section, evaluations of overall campaign success are based upon considerations of territory, manpower, and initiative. This section's classification of each case on a success metric takes into account the capture or loss of strategically important positions, manpower losses incurred by either side, and the effects of the campaign on the immediate course of the war in northern Laos.

The second part of the analysis departs from the case study framework in order to examine factors that influenced the campaign in northern Laos on a more constant scale. While the campaign case studies are able to pinpoint those factors which could be highly variable and were of largely immediate tactical importance, they are not as effective for identifying factors whose effects were largely strategic or were constant across the majority of the CIA's relationship with the Hmong. This section will therefore draw more broadly from the available primary and secondary sources in order to consider the effects of geography, American advisors, and Hmong policy objectives on the overall success of the Hmong as an American proxy in Laos during this period.

The analysis resulting from this second section suggests an interaction between the aims of the ethnic proxy within their state and the strength of proxy leadership. Based off the Hmong experience negotiating the delicate politics as an empowered minority ethnic group within a larger state, and the advantages gained from their limited goals as an ethnic unit, this paper proposes a necessary intersection of strong leadership and limited ethnic ambitions in order for the critical cooperation of the larger state to be maintained for the duration of the proxy relationship. This analysis operates under a narrower scope condition than the other section of

analysis, as it pertains particularly to those cases in which the patron has relatively good relations with the larger nation in which the proxy is situated, and where the proxy is combatting a foe other than the state.

This paper provides two central dynamics that should be considered when evaluating a potential ethnic proxy relationship from the point of view of the patron state, derived from the successful example of the Hmong case. The first, derived from the within-case variation between the case study campaigns within the conflict in northern Laos, suggests an interplay between proxy demographic strength and the provision of the patron's comparative advantage in determining campaign-level success, with able leadership as a necessary precondition for success. The second, derived from a broader examination of the dynamics of the conflict and a brief comparison with the case of Kurdish cooperation with the United States following the 2003 invasion, puts forth an interplay between leadership and ethnic group goals as critical in determining the ability of the relationship to operate with the critical cooperation or acquiescence of the host nation. It should be noted that there are a number of factors not accounted for here which seemed to matter to the effectiveness of the Hmong as an American proxy, but which either do not explain their unusual level of success compared to other cases, as with geography, or require deeper, individual-level research unfortunately outside the scope of this paper, as with foreign advisors.

Though the days of the Cold War, with its ideological proxy conflicts between the USSR and United States spanning the globe, are gone, the question of the potential effectiveness of ethnic proxies remains a potent one. Civil wars such as those in Syrian and Libya will continue to arise, and, like those conflicts, will continue to offer both danger and potential to the great powers. All of these conflicts have posed, and continue to pose, questions of whether it is worth

supporting a proxy in the conflict at all, and if so, what are their prospects for success and how much support should we provide them in order to augment these prospects. The models derived from this thesis suggest that, not only are ethnic proxies a potentially potent force for achieving the geopolitical goals of great powers, but that there are a number of key factors that should be considered before initiation and key contributions the patron can make. For any power hoping to simultaneously cooperate with an ethnic group and the national government, the aims of minority groups such as the Kurds must be considered, and the reservoir of demographic strength possessed by the group must be weighed against the dangers of a drawn-out struggle that might sap that strength. The demographic implications also suggest that, for greater chance of proxy success, provision of the patron comparative advantage, whether it be airpower, training, or weaponry, be provided at greater levels at the onset of involvement, while demographic strength is still high, rather than slow escalation which may seem more politically palatable. Though this thesis does not presume to provide any definite answers, it suggests that support for ethnic proxies remains a valuable foreign policy tool, provided it is properly vetted and supported.

Literature Review

Though there are a number of extant works detailing the history of the Hmong's relationship with the CIA in Laos either in whole or in part, they are, for the most part, purely historical works that make relatively few claims about the broader implications of the relationship for future US covert relationships going forwards. A number of these works do, however suggest their own key claims as to why the Hmong were so successful, or strongly suggest such conclusions. In addition, over the course of this paper, a number of different characteristics and factors that may have contributed to the success of the Hmong-CIA

relationship will be identified and discussed, specifically: leadership, airpower, geography, and advisors. There is a large body of political science literature that provides a number of theories regarding the impact of each of these factors, albeit not always in a proxy relationship context. This section will therefore provide an overview both of the theories suggested in the literature on why the relationship with the Hmong was so successful in addition to theories provided in the literature on the impact of certain characteristics and factors relevant to the Hmong experience.

The single greatest contributor to the success of the Hmong described across the literature was the presence and leadership of the Hmong leader, Vang Pao. Though his work on the topic is largely historical rather than policy focused, Hamilton-Merritt emerges from the literature as one of Vang Pao's most ardent cheerleaders. He repeatedly points to the high esteem in which Vang Pao was held by his men, the Hmong elite, the Laotians, and the Americans alike,^{6, 7} and paints him as an everyman who was able to effectively serve as both the political and military leader of the Hmong during this most difficult period.⁸ This sentiment is echoed by James Parker in his work on the critical battle of Skyline Ridge, which emphasizes the role of Vang Pao's prescient troop deployments and daring special operations in preventing the fall of the de facto Hmong capital of Long Tieng during the 1970-1971 siege.⁹ Keith Quincy's work suggests a more complicated evaluation of Vang Pao's effectiveness, noting difficulties with his temperamental personality, yet similarly ascribes to him a central place in determining the outcome of Hmong campaigns, both for good and ill.^{10, 11} Though criticisms of Vang Pao do emerge in the literature,

⁶ Jane Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains: The Hmong, the Americans, and the Secret Wars for Laos, 1942-1992* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 96.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 145

⁸ *Ibid.*, 202

⁹ Parker, *Battle for Skyline Ridge*, 174.

¹⁰ Keith Quincy, *Harvesting Pa Chay's Wheat: The Hmong and America's Secret War in Laos* (Spokane, Wash.: Eastern Washington University Press, 2000), 344.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 281.

there appears to be a general consensus on his centrality to the success of the Hmong during this period, both militarily and politically.

The other common theme that emerges in the literature is the significance of airpower in aiding the Hmong. Parker places a great deal of emphasis on the role of US air support in destroying large numbers of NVA troops, massed in easily targeted valleys by Hmong resistance, sapping their strength and morale and disrupting key attacks. It further attributes the Hmong failures of the year prior to the absence of American air support, doubling down on the critical role of air support in allowing for Hmong success.¹² Quincy's writing operates under a similar line of thought, arguing that the liberalization of rules of engagement for the air war under the Nixon administration was critical to improving tactical outcomes for the Hmong.¹³ In their study of counterinsurgency failure, Paul, Clarke, Grill, and Dunigan suggest an increasing reliance upon air support, in addition to more conventional Thai support units, on the part of the Hmong, particularly after 1969.¹⁴ A more ambiguous position is staked out by William Head's writings on the American air operations in Laos, arguing that while there were notable contributions made by airpower to the Hmong's fight, the overall impact of airpower is difficult to assess, owing in part to the tendency of all accounts to exaggerate its impact.¹⁵

When considering the impact of group demographics upon ability to wage war, there is unfortunately a dearth of literature, particularly when considering relatively small ethnic groups such as the Hmong, though there are nonetheless illuminating inquiries. Davis, Organski, and Sauvy opined that Hendershot's investigation of the relationship between population, military

¹² Parker, *Battle for Skyline Ridge*, 173-4.

¹³ Quincy, *Harvesting Pa Chay's Wheat*, 311.

¹⁴ Christopher Paul, Colin P. Clarke, Beth Grill, and Molly Dunigan, "Laos, 1959–1975: Case Outcome: COIN Loss," in *Paths to Victory: Detailed Insurgency Case Studies* (Santa Monica CA: RAND Corporation, 2013), 152.

¹⁵ William P. Head, "Dirty Little Secret in the Land of a Million Elephants: Barrel Roll and the Lost War," *Air Power History* 64, no. 4 (2017): 26. www.jstor.org/stable/26571062 2.

power, and antinatalism noted a clear connection between population size and military power, which he centers around absolute military size.¹⁶ Kelly builds off Hendershot's work through the examination of Singer and Small's *Wages of War*, arguing that increasing population size increases the likelihood of victory in warfare, albeit with diminishing returns after a point. This result is found to be relatively consistent across recent history, though the findings are limited to interstate wars that pass a certain size threshold.¹⁷ Libicki, Shatz, and Taylor provide a useful framework for considering the relationship between military power and demographics, particularly with regards to factors which can affect the impact of base populating level upon recruitment potential. Policies and conditions such as removing restrictions on the recruitment of certain groups, raising age limits, low levels of debilitation, higher education level, and higher general willingness to serve can all work to reduce the percentage of a country that must be recruited.¹⁸ Though there is a general paucity of sources on the effects of demographics on war making ability, one can observe a general agreement amongst the literature, as common sense might dictate, that availability of recruits stemming from population size is an important contributor to military potential. Though none explicitly delve into it, it is implied across the board that the inability of a military to supply itself with needed manpower is a disastrous outcome which must be avoided.

In regards to the impact of leadership on the military and political success of groups, there are a number of different models and traits that are used to predict and explain the behavior of leaders. One of the most prominent techniques for explaining leadership decisions is

¹⁶ Gerry E. Hendershot, "Population Size, Military Power, and Antinatal Policy," *Demography* 10, no. 4 (1973): 522. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2060879>.

¹⁷ William J. Kelly, "Comment on G. Hendershot's 'Population Size, Military Power, and Antinatal Policy,'" *Demography* 11, no. 3 (1974): 534. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2060444>.

¹⁸ Martin C. Libicki, Howard J. Shatz, and Julie E. Taylor, "The Impact of Demographic Trends on Military Power Projection," in *Global Demographic Change and Its Implications for Military Power*, 91-2. RAND Corporation, 2011. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/mg1091af.14>.

consideration of leadership background and experiences. Horowitz, Stam, and Ellis examine a number of key experiences that help to determine the likelihood of a leader engaging in military conflict, namely: military service, rebel experience, age, education,¹⁹ family background, birth order, and gender.²⁰ They find that military experience,²¹ prior rebel experience,²² age,²³ and childhood exposure to wartime trauma,²⁴ increase the willingness of democratic leaders to take risks. Krcmaric, Nelson, and Roberts similarly focus on experiences and background as a predictors for leader behavior, albeit with a broader focus than just risk, examining the socializing experiences of education, military experience, class, and political experience and the ascriptive character traits of gender, race, ethnicity, religion, and age.²⁵ Hermann, Preston, Korany, and Shaw provide a model of leader style centered around how responsive they are to constraints on their actions and their openness to new information.²⁶

It should be noted that most of the literature in this area is concerned with formalized political leaders at least somewhat disconnected from immediate military actions, are largely concerned with leaders prior to entry into conflict rather than behavior once conflict has initiated, and are often largely concerned with more typically western backgrounds. These models cannot therefore be directly applied to the Hmong case, given that the Hmong leader, Vang Pao, was simultaneously his people's political leader and their primary military decisionmaker on a very personal level, nor smaller proxy groups for the same reason. They nonetheless suggest certain

¹⁹ Michael Horowitz, Allan C. Stam, and Cali M. Ellis, *Why Leaders Fight* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 129.

²⁰ Horowitz, *Why Leaders Fight*, 149.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 134

²² *Ibid.*, 138

²³ *Ibid.*, 144

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 155

²⁵ Daniel Krcmaric, Stephen C. Nelson, and Andrew Roberts "Studying Leaders and Elites: The Personal Biography Approach," *The Annual Review of Political Science* 23, (2020): 133. doi:10.1146/annurev-polisci-050718-032801.

²⁶ Margaret G. Hermann, Thomas Preston, Baghat Korany, and Timothy M. Shaw, "Who Leads Matters: The Effects of Powerful Individuals," *International Studies Review* 3, no. 2 (2001): 95. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3186566>.

key leadership characteristics and behaviors to look for in both the Hmong case and in a generalized ethnic proxy.

One important consideration is why a country might choose to rely on covert military action or involvement, such as support for an ethnic proxy, to achieve foreign policy objectives in the first place. A case for the centrality of leaders as the determining factor in when and how states make use of military action internationally is proposed by Saunders. She suggests a divide between leaders focused on transforming the internal politics of foreign areas of interest and those who simply seek speedy resolution to the issue in question.²⁷ O'Rourke, on the other hand, when considering intervention in the form of regime change, both covert and overt, provides a more consistent basis for interest in foreign intervention. Rather than being at all dependent upon the specific type of leader currently in power, she argues that there are three central rationales for such intervention, namely offensive, which targets perceived military threats,²⁸ preventative, which aims to prevent a state from altering the status quo, and hegemonic, which seeks to establish regional hegemony.²⁹

Dealing more specifically with covert international intervention, Cormac and Aldrich argue that the deniability benefits of covert action are generally overstated, but that such operations provide the ability to both skirt around issues of constitutional authority while also benefitting from the benefits of public knowledge of successes.³⁰ Berkowitz and Goodman also place more stock in deniability where covert interventions are concerned, and argue that

²⁷ Elizabeth N. Saunders, "Transformative Choices: Leaders and the Origins of Intervention Strategy," *International Security* 34, no. 2 (2009): 120-1. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40389215>.

²⁸ Lindsey A. O'Rourke, *Covert Regime Change: America's Secret Cold War*, (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), 36. <https://search-ebscohost-com.proxy.uchicago.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xna&AN=1728018&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

²⁹ O'Rourke, *Covert Regime Change*, 38-9.

³⁰ Richard J. Aldrich and Rory Cormac, "Grey is the New Black: Covert Action and Implausible Deniability," *International Affairs* 94, no.3 (May 2018): 478-9. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iyy067>

covertness is only necessary when either secrecy is a prerequisite to the operation's success or if it necessary to avoid retaliation from another power.³¹ Though there is no subsection of the literature that deals exclusively with the use of proxies over other forms of covert intervention, it is nonetheless relevant for our greater understanding of American aims in regards to their relations with the Hmong.

Much has also been written regarding the complicated and dubiously successful proxy relationship between the United States and Iraqi Kurds that serves as a useful point of comparison to the experience with the Hmong. O'Connell and Pirnie's report on the situation in Iraq from 2008 ascribes the central tensions between the Kurds and the Iraqi government as one of differences in identity. While both were utilized and supported by the United States government for the purposes of fighting insurgents in the country, the Kurds only saw fit to remain in the Iraqi state for as long as it was convenient, emphasizing their rejection of the Iraqi identity.³² Jawad further emphasizes the independent-mindedness of the Kurds within Iraq, suggesting that the weakness of the Iraqi central government in the many years following the US invasion in 2003 led the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) to undertake their own military, economic and security policies without regard for the Iraqi state. This led them to act in a manner that engendered little love for them within Baghdad and encouraged them to demand a rather extensive form of federalism that the central government found unacceptable.³³ Though estimations of blame vary, the literature is largely in agreement that the crux of the Kurdish clash

³¹ Bruce D. Berkowitz and Allan E. Goodman, "The Logic of Covert Action," *The National Interest*, no. 51 (1998): 39-40. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42897083>.

³² Edward O'Connell and Bruce R. Pirnie, "Armed Groups in Iraq," in *Counterinsurgency in Iraq (2003-2006): RAND Counterinsurgency Study--Volume 2*, 22. RAND Corporation, 2008. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/mg595-3osd.10>.

³³ Saad Naji Jawad, "The Kurdish Question in Iraq: Historical Background and Future Settlement," *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 1, no. 1 (2008): 35. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48599521>.

with the Iraqi government stems from the former seeking more autonomy than the latter was willing to grant.

Methods

When examining sources, there were a number of criteria that were used to establish a level of hierarchical reliability for the purposes of this investigation. Most importantly this work relies on declassified government materials whenever possible, both in the interest of promoting some level of theoretical independence from previous works and in establishing a direct link to primary sources. In regards to the evaluation of these documents, greater evidentiary weight was given to those documents which discussed those factors which mattered in the view of policymakers at the time. Therefore, although no document was neglected, greater reliance was placed on those which were signed off by officials at multiple levels of the American government, as the credence they were given at the time adds an extra level of validity to their viewpoints and at the very least suggests that the findings they contain were more likely to have influenced American policymaking in regards to the Hmong. In addition, factors which appeared multiple times across a variety of documents were given greater credence than other possible explanations for success or failure. Though direct analysis of Hmong primary sources, mostly in the form of interviews, was unfortunately beyond the resources of this work, those sections of secondary sources which integrated them were given a greater level of review, in part as a means of providing tests of any conclusions which may have been overly reliant on American viewpoints.

In regards to the connection of the evidence to this piece's central arguments, the process began with the identification of clearly distinguishable dependent variable cases. The task of

finding within-case variations that could be easily separated and classified based on outcome was aided by the seasonal and varying nature of the war during the Nixon administration. Possible factors contributing to success were then identified, based largely off the claims made or hinted at in the sources. Attempting to connect the factors to the cases and create a link between them and the outcome variation could not be done through data, given source restrictions, but a causal chain could nonetheless be constructed. This involved a few steps, most importantly: finding evidence that the factors were impactful in larger Hmong case, establishing their presence or absence in the sub-cases, and finding evidence of their impact in the sub-cases. Establishing broader significance of the factors was largely done through declassified documents and evaluations of the secondary source literature, which broadly suggested that certain factors played at least some role in the conflict. Establishing their presence, or lack thereof, in the sub-cases could also be done through examination of the sources, looking in particular for frequency of references to the involvement of those factors in the specific episodes, such as battles or smaller engagements, within the sub-campaigns. Having established the degree to which these factors were present in each sub-case, finding evidence of their impact was more difficult, given the vagaries of warfare and the lack of available large-scale studies of the engagements. It was nonetheless done through qualitative judgements based largely on comparisons between sub-cases. When certain factors were absent or lacking, examining how well they functioned in the other, similar sub-cases allowed for hypothesizing on how their presence might have altered smaller-scale outcomes, whereas when factors were present, they were frequently commented on in testimonials and intelligence evaluations, allowing for a much more direct causal link to be established.

Empirics

Background

When Laos was given its independence in the 1954 Geneva Agreements, the Pathet Lao, communist allies of the Viet Minh in Vietnam, were left in effective control of two northern provinces. Although the state was initially relatively stable, over the next few years the Pathet Lao would be strengthened by aid from the North Vietnamese, leading to reciprocal funding of anticommunist groups by the United States.³⁴ After a few years of conflict between the neutralist and rightist factions of the Laotian government that saw the NVA attack government positions in the name of the Pathet Lao and the establishment of a brief ruling coalition under another Geneva Agreement, fighting resumed in 1963.³⁵ Although American forces were not able to intervene in the conflict due to the technical neutrality of the country, the CIA provided significant support and training to the Laotian government and the far more capable Hmong. The Hmong were highly successful in their use of guerilla tactics against the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese Army, although the situation would deteriorate somewhat upon the introduction of thousands of new NVA troops in early 1968. Most of the fighting would center around the strategic Plain of Jars, which tended to change hands with the seasons, with the less mobile NVA launching offensives during the dry season while the Hmong under general Vang Pao were able to act far more effectively during the rainy season.³⁶

The war was, however, proving increasingly costly for the Hmong, who began to suffer from manpower shortages beginning in 1970.³⁷ After an NVA offensive which pushed to the

³⁴ Christopher Paul et al., "Laos, 1959–1975: Case Outcome: COIN Loss." In *Paths to Victory: Detailed Insurgency Case Studies*, 147-148. RAND Corporation, 2013. www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/j.ctt5hhsjk.23.

³⁵ Christopher Paul et al., "Laos, 1959-1975," 150-151.

³⁶ William M. Leary, "The CIA and the "Secret War" in Laos: The Battle for Skyline Ridge, 1971-1972," *The Journal of Military History* 59, no. 3 (1995): 506-507, doi: 10.2307/2944620.

³⁷ Leary, "The CIA and the "Secret War," 508.

very edge of the Hmong headquarters of Long Tieng was stopped by a combination of tenacious Hmong resistance, American airpower, and the injection of some Thai volunteers,³⁸ Vang Pao launched a counteroffensive which pushed the NVA entirely out of the Plain of Jars in Operation About Face.³⁹ Late in the year, however, the NVA counterattacked with brutal effectiveness, pushing once again to the gates of Long Tieng and even declaring its capture before once again being forced back to the Plain of Jars, where the frontlines would remain until the American withdrawal in 1973.⁴⁰ Following the withdrawal there was a brief period in which it appeared as though there might be hope for the survival of a neutral Laos, but in December 1975, the Pathet Lao overthrew the monarchy and established the Laotian People's Republic. Around 50,000 Hmong immediately fled abroad, while thousands more were internally displaced by the brutal persecutions of the new communist government.⁴¹ General Vang Pao was forced into exile in the United States, and would not be present to lead his people through the chemical attacks and mass flight that followed for those who had not already departed.⁴²

Within-Case Analysis of Tactical Successes

Kou Kiet Offensive: March – September 1970

The situation facing the Hmong and their American backers in Northern Laos in early 1969 was not ideal, with continuous communist advances across the PDJ generating fears amongst both parties that the situation might be heading towards disaster. In response, Vang Pao drew up plan Kou Kiet, which called for an offensive into the PDJ and the interdiction of

³⁸ Leary, "The CIA and the 'Secret War,'" 509-510.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 513.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 525-516.

⁴¹ Head, "Dirty Little Secret in a Land Full of a Million Elephants," 24-25.

⁴² Jane Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains: The Hmong, the Americans, and the Secret Wars for Laos, 1942-1992* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 379.

vulnerable NVA supply lines.⁴³ In preparation for the offensive, Vang Pao requested a loosening in American rules of engagement over Laos to remove restrictions on civilian targets, in which NVA troops were often shielded,⁴⁴ which the United States granted in mid-March, initiating a significant bombing campaign of the PDJ.⁴⁵ The offensive, launched in July, benefitted greatly from continued American air support, which, under the revised rules of engagement, launched 145 sorties a day against NVA positions and logistics.⁴⁶ Suffering from supply shortages and, sometimes, starvation NVA troops were rapidly overrun by the Hmong attack, which drove east and retook over half the PDJ by the middle of September, including the provincial capital of Xieng Khouangville, as well as dozens of vehicles, 3 million rounds of ammunition and 150,000 gallons of gasoline. He requested, and was granted, further relaxation of the rules of engagement, reducing the size of the protected areas and allowing for the destruction of large supply dumps filled with undelivered NVA supplies.⁴⁷ Having trapped and mauled retreating NVA forces, Vang Pao eventually found himself in command of the entirety of the PDJ by the end of September, though it had been thoroughly depopulated by the fighting and forced resettlement by both sides.⁴⁸

In this respect, the offensive appears to have worked almost exactly as intended, succeeding in removing the NVA from their advanced positions in dangerously close proximity to Luang Prabang and Vientiane by taking advantage of their overextension in the PDJ.⁴⁹

⁴³ Parkrer, *Battle for Skyline Ridge*, 53-54.

⁴⁴ Quincy, *Harvesting Pa Chay's Wheat*, 309

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 310-11.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 318.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 319.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 320

⁴⁹ Central Intelligence Agency, *General Vang Views on Future of PDJ Area and Lao Politics*, CIA-RDP72-00337R000200020070 (January 14, 1970), 1. <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp72-00337r000200020070-8>.

The scale of the victory was well appreciated by US policymakers, with CIA Director Helms informing President Nixon that the ammunition captured exceeded the amount expended by the NVA and Viet Cong in South Vietnam in the entirety of 1967, costing them approximately twelve million dollars.⁵⁰ The offensive, the brainchild of Vang Pao, succeeded beyond expectations, benefitting both from the ability of Hmong troops, but particularly from increased American air support, which was able to operate without the previous loopholes generated by restrictive rules of engagement. The sheer success of the offensive, however, would work against the Hmong, spurring the NVA into further efforts in 1970.

NVA Dry Season Offensive: November 1969 – February 1970

Even before the NVA offensive began, there was a general expectation within US policy circles that it would be highly difficult for the Hmong to hold onto the PDJ areas, and that they might potentially be pushed back even farther. An October 1969 memorandum from CIA Director Helms to President Nixon, written shortly after the successful conclusion of Kou Kiet, noted the exhaustion of the Hmong, their growing numerical disadvantage, and the resulting likelihood of an enemy breakthrough in the future, including the possible necessity of a siege of Long Tieng,⁵¹ a forecast which would prove prescient.

Following their defeat in Kou Kiet, the NVA high command, particularly overall commanding general Vo Nguyen Giap, took a direct interest in Laos, providing the NVA in the area with a new commander, two new divisions, an armored regiment, and four special forces battalions, launching an assault into the PDJ in November 1969. Though American air support remained highly effective when brought to play, regularly overcast skies left American planes

⁵⁰ Central Intelligence Agency, *CIA Memorandum on Vang Pao's Victory in Laos*, LOC-HAK-287-3-20-8 (October 23, 1969), 5. <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/document/loc-hak-287-3-20-8>.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

unable to contribute to most engagements, leaving the Hmong to fight alone from their trench defenses.⁵² Facing intense pressure from the enemy and ordered to withdraw from the PDJ by American Ambassador Godley as a result of domestic political pressure, Vang Pao ordered a fighting retreat that would eventually see the NVA in control of most of the PDJ by mid-February 1970.⁵³

The 1970 NVA offensive was a disastrous episode for the Hmong, not only driving them off the so recently secured PDJ, but also providing such momentum to the NVA that they would shortly hereafter launch a campaign to seize Long Tieng and thereby strike at the heart of the Hmong war effort. Perhaps just as important to the long-term prospects of the Hmong were the manpower losses suffered over the course of the campaign. A President's Briefing dated February 12, 1970, near the end of the campaign's fighting, reported that the Hmong, who made up almost all of the government troops in the area, were outnumbered 6,000 to 17,000 by the NVA and Pathet Lao, a situation somewhat balanced in the report's eyes by the now-ready availability of air support for the Hmong. It further noted the grievous losses suffered by the Hmong over the course of the war so far and the impact it was having on their combat ability, pointing to the loss of many of Vang Pao's best troops and the insufficiency of making up for these losses with refugee recruits.⁵⁴ A report from National Security Advisor Dr. Henry Kissinger's office from August 1970, noted that Hmong forces had been so heavily depleted by the fighting that they had been forced to recruit from non-Hmong populations, with formerly entirely Hmong forces now approximately 40 percent Lao.⁵⁵ The losses of the campaign had

⁵² Quincy, *Harvesting Pa Chay's Wheat*, 325-6

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 327.

⁵⁴ Central Intelligence Agency, *The President's Daily Brief: 12 February 1970*, CIA-RDP79T00936A008000100001-7 (February 12, 1970), 4-5.
<https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/0005977295>.

⁵⁵ Central Intelligence Agency, *Ambassador Godley's Comments*, 3.

clearly exacerbated the already extant recruiting difficulties of the Hmong, and the loss of unit ethnic homogeneity hardly boded well for a proxy military as dependent upon intra-community ties as the Hmong were. Though there is little direct mention in later available sources of the effects of the ethnic dilution of Hmong forces upon their future performance, it would, at the very least, have had a deleterious effect upon unit cohesion and morale amongst the non-Hmong.

First Siege of Long Tieng: March 1970 – April 1971

Following the success of their Dry Season Offensive, the NVA began preparing for an assault on the de facto Hmong capital of Long Tieng, which they would launch later in the year. As described by a White House Ad Hoc Group convened in March 1970, the capture of Long Tieng would not only lead to the loss of the much valuable equipment and area's sole airfield, a critical part of ensuring the continued provision of airpower, but also potentially necessitate the withdrawal of the Hmong population away from their settlements that served as the only real buffer between the PDJ and Vientiane, a scenario that American advisors urged Vang Pao to actively prepare for.⁵⁶ The Americans were prepared to maintain roughly the same high level of air support witnessed during Kou Kiet, with the aforementioned Ad Hoc Group noting that planning at the time called for 140 sorties per day and maintaining the ability to temporarily boost this through within-theater diversions, a level they judged sufficient to hit all "meaningful targets."⁵⁷ Owing to decreases in the visibility of the battlefield caused by the intensity of the fighting around Long Tieng, Vang Pao asked for and received B-52 raids from the United States, which directed "maximum air support" from its Seventh Air Force at the campaign's critical juncture. Even with this aid, Kissinger opined at the time that Hmong would be unlikely to hold,

⁵⁶ Central Intelligence Agency, *March 12 Ad Hoc Group Meeting on Laos*, LOC-HAK-174-2-3-3 March 14, 1970), 2. <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/loc-hak-174-2-3-3>.

⁵⁷ Central Intelligence Agency, *March 12 Ad Hoc*, 2.

writing to President Nixon about the need for possible new sites for Hmong relocation.⁵⁸ In the event, these contingencies would prove unnecessary, as the combination of American air support, brutal fighting, and leapfrogging tactics interdicting NVA supply lines, despite the growing reliance on child soldiers by the Hmong,⁵⁹ succeeded in driving the exhausted NVA back to the PDJ,⁶⁰ having come close to total defeat.

Following the repulse of the campaign, Vang Pao was able to lead Hmong forces in rolling back many of the gains made by the NVA the year prior, with the general lack of initial resistance indicating the disarray of opposing forces, taking back a good portion of the PDJ⁶¹ and stabilizing the situation for the moment. However, the sheer degradation of Hmong capabilities by this point in the conflict can be seen in a memo penned by future Agency Director William Colby, which notes, writing in early 1972, that the Hmong are “largely finished as a fighting force” and “incapable of defending MR-II” (the Hmong areas around the PDJ). He goes on to call the purported size of the Hmong forces available “grossly inflated,”⁶² suggesting a Hmong inability to gain new recruits. Though the battle ultimately left the Hmong in a more secure strategic situation, the battle was a close-run thing, and the severe manpower losses suffered would be hard to replace, leaving the future uncertain for Vang Pao and the Hmong.

Demographic strength is a necessarily nebulous concept, largely case-specific and dependent upon the military needs of the type of the conflict in question. That being said, for the purposes of this paper, demographic strength can be considered the ability of the ethnic group to fulfill the manpower needs of the armed conflict in question. When the ethnic group is no longer

⁵⁸ Central Intelligence Agency, *Deteriorating Situation in Laos*, LOC-HAK-289-3-11-6 (March 17, 1970), 2. <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/loc-hak-289-3-11-6>.

⁵⁹ Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains*, 256-257.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 258.

⁶¹ Central Intelligence Agency, *General Vang Pao's Current Operation on the Plain of Jars, Laos*, LOC-HAK-15-2-5-7 (July 15, 1971), 2. <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/document/loc-hak-15-2-5-7>.

⁶² Central Intelligence Agency, *Untitled*, 8.

reliably able to provide trained soldiers in numbers sufficient to reliably challenge the enemy or significantly disrupt his progress, it may be considered depleted demographically. The largest likely source of variation in the classification of demographic strength across cases will depend upon the ability and willingness of the ethnic group to draw deeply from their population base. In the Hmong case, teenagers and children were increasingly deployed by Vang Pao to replace casualties. However, there is little evidence of significant consideration being given to the possibility of systematically drawing upon Hmong women to fill manpower gaps. Another consideration in this regard is the suitability of such recruits for combat, which imposes necessary limits on the extent to which the recruitment pool can be deepened. Hmong forces around 1970, by which time a large percentage of the forces were made up of teenagers or children, continued to perform admirably against the NVA, but the effectiveness of child soldiers cannot likely be relied upon in the long-term. Similarly, while the suitability of women for frontline warfare is not up for consideration here, the effect of their removal, at least on a large scale, from the home, may be ruinous in many societies. In the Hmong case, women are described as forming the new backbone of many Hmong communities in the absence of the majority of the fighting-age male population, taking up many of the critical farming and household tasks without which Hmong society could not long have functioned.⁶³

It should also be noted that the depletion of manpower need not result exclusively from battle-related casualties, but can often result from population disruption stemming from the war. In the Laotian case, so many Hmong left the army and the area around Long Tieng to tend to families threatened by war, that American observers on the ground were led to describe the Hmong as being “virtually out of the war” by late 1970.⁶⁴ Even larger-scale disruptions would

⁶³ Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains*, 250.

⁶⁴ Central Intelligence Agency, *Ambassador Godley's Comments*, 3.

result from the siege of Long Tieng, with a February 1971 CIA memorandum highlighting the critical effects upon recruitment of the relocation of approximately 80 percent of the most reliable Hmong communities to other areas of the country.⁶⁵ Especially when the fighting is taking place in and around their homelands, as one would expect with many ethnic proxies, the long term effect of fighting upon available demographics is even more pronounced than casualty figures might suggest.

Whereas comparative advantage provision may vary greatly at different stages of the relationship, there is necessarily a negative trend over time where demographic strength is concerned. There is the potential for a proxy to unlock a new source of recruitment, as with the Hmong recruitment of increasingly younger males after mid-1969⁶⁶ or the possible expansion of recruitment to women, but even such measures can only temporarily halt the onset of outcome decline as a result of manpower shortages. The necessary implication of this temporal direction is that, on the whole, proxy relationships will have the greatest potential for decisive impact closer to the point of initiation.

Patron comparative advantage refers to a means of support provided to the proxy by the patron which grants them with a material advantage over their opponents. While there may, and likely will be, a number of significant means by which the patron provides support, the aim of this independent variable is to isolate the most important contribution. While the identification will necessarily be subjective, a few criteria can be enumerated. Firstly, the comparative advantage must provide a military edge that could not otherwise be easily procured by the proxy, ensuring that an actual advantage is being provided. Secondly, it must give some form of

⁶⁵ Central Intelligence Agency, *25 February Meeting of the 'Indochina Steering Group,'* CIA-RDP79B01737A001200020014-5 (February 25, 1971), 2. <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp79b01737a001200020014-5>.

⁶⁶ Quincy, *Harvesting Pa Chay's Wheat*, 308.

advantage over the proxy's direct opponents, as with the provision of airpower in Laos. In the case of the Hmong, the comparative advantage took the form of airpower, and it is certainly one of the more potent forms of patron comparative advantage, given its high level of impact and relatively low human cost to the patron. However, it is possible for patrons to provide other advantages, such as direct special forces intervention or large-scale material aid, though the former suffers from the inevitable danger of mission creep while the latter can be logistically difficult.

Based off the Hmong example, one can form a theoretical interaction between the demographic strength of the minority group in question and the presence of the patron's comparative advantage that can help to predict battlefield outcomes. The unambiguous success witnessed in the Kou Kiet Offensive can be seen as the intersection of both a high level of American air support and what was, perhaps, the peak of Hmong demographic strength. With the aid of Vang Pao's leadership, relatively well-trained and motivated Hmong forces were able to secure, in full, the entirety of the PDJ while severely damaging the NVA war effort in the area. Where the failure for the Hmong in the 1970 NVA lies is slightly more ambiguous, owing to the lack of regularly updated demographic data for the Hmong and the variance in the quality of air support during the campaign. Nonetheless, the great disparity in force levels between the Hmong and NVA and the fact that the former were already lowering their recruitment age suggests that they were already beginning to suffer from demographic depletion by the time the campaign began. Similarly, though airpower provision by the Americans would increase near the end of the offensive, interruptions resulting from unusually inclement weather appear to have seriously hampered Hmong efforts in the critical early stages of the campaign. Finally, the Siege of Long Tieng was a Hmong success, but only as the result of a good deal of exceptional leadership and

not inconsequential amount of luck, and, though it left the Hmong with the initiative for the moment, it also cost them dearly in terms of manpower depletion. Here, we may attribute a good deal of this mixed outcome to the confluence of the severe demographic depletion the Hmong were suffering from at that point, leaving them with undertrained and understrength units, and dedication US airpower, which wreaked havoc among the NVA soldiers massed for the siege.

The theoretical model resulting from this would suggest that the confluence of demographic strength and provision of patron comparative advantage is one of the prime determinants of battlefield outcomes for the proxy. Where there is both demographic strength and high levels of comparative advantage provision, the success likelihood is high, as with Kou Kiet. Where there is both demographic depletion and the periodical absence of patron comparative advantage, as, perhaps with the 1970 offensive and certainly following the American withdrawal, the likelihood of failure is high. Where there is either demographic strength but absence of patron comparative advantage, as was likely with the early portion of the 1970 offensive, or demographic depletion and the presence of patron comparative advantage, the prediction is far more mixed, with the outcome less likely to be unambiguously successful or unsuccessful, but with the exact outcome highly subject to external factors such as leadership quality, troop quality, and luck. The involvement of the demographic element provides a general temporal frame to the model, with ethnic minority demographics tending to trend towards depletion as prolonged conflict and the casualties and displacements associated with it wear on. It should be noted that this model does not presume to predict outcomes in their entirety, but rather to suggest which outcome is more likely. As seen with the Siege of Long Tieng, there are a great deal of unpredictable and unquantifiable factors involved in all aspects of warfare, and

small decisions made by figures both important and relatively inconsequential can make a great deal of difference.

	Heightened Patron Comparative Advantage	Lessened Patron Comparative Advantage
Demographic Strength	Proxy Success	Proxy Mixed Outcome
Demographic Depletion	Proxy Mixed Outcome	Proxy Failure

The Leadership Explanation

Worth some investigation is the question of how much of a role leadership played in the Hmong case and its worth in evaluating the potential success of proxies. If there is one central story that emerges from the American primary sources, it is that Vang Pao was the critical asset that kept the Hmong going and provided them with their edge on the battlefield. No better indication of the high opinion in which the American government held Vang Pao can be provided than to quote from a memorandum from Dr. Kissinger to President Nixon, stating that, thus far, “Vang Pao’s presence is the major factor in the Meo victory. Without him, the Meo forces seem to lack initiative and judgement; with him, they fight well.”⁶⁷ There is an appealing simplicity to this sentiment, which would pin the ultimate success or failure of the Hmong upon the actions taken at each turn by Vang Pao. This theory lacks in greater explanatory value, however, as, unlike demographic strength and patron comparative advantage provision, it lacks within-case variation.

⁶⁷ Central Intelligence Agency, *CIA Memorandum on Vang Pao’s Victory*, 1.

One of his greatest assets in this regard, at least from an American policy perspective, was his ability to effectively operate and formulate plans independent of American direction while simultaneously taking American concerns into account when relevant. In a memorandum to Kissinger, CIA Directory Helms assured the National Security Advisor that, in response to their voiced concerns about the potential for a Hmong offensive in July 1971, that Vang Pao would not make any significant moves “without our endorsement.” In the long-run, Helms also planned to arrange a meeting between Vang Pao and the local CIA Chief of Station to “fix outer perimeters for succeeding operational efforts.”⁶⁸ Despite his previous successes acting on his own initiative, Vang Pao was continually communicative and open to his American backers, maintaining the necessary trust for a good working relationship between the two sides.

He was also known for inspiring heroics which, in small-scale yet critical fighting, could be decisive. The President’s daily brief from the CIA on December 21, 1969, describes how Vang Pao’s promise of rewards to volunteers in the fight to retake the important radar post of Pha Ti led directly to the clearing of the otherwise formidable NVA defensive emplacements, deciding for the Hmong and their American allies what the briefing described as a “literal cliff-hanger.”⁶⁹ While the fight’s inclusion in the relatively succinct confines of the daily brief can be attributed to the former radar position’s aforementioned importance to American bombing efforts, the detail in which the fight is described, and the importance it places on Vang Pao, is notable. Other reports from the same year similarly mention his personal handling of artillery pieces during battle⁷⁰ and his ability to keep his troops focused in the face of available plunder.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Central Intelligence Agency, *Military Moves by Vang Pao*, LOC-HAK-15-1-29-2 (July 20, 1971), 4. <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/document/loc-hak-15-1-29-2>.

⁶⁹ Central Intelligence Agency, *The President’s Daily Brief: 21 December 1968*, CIA-RDP79T00936A006600280001-4 (December 21, 1968), 3. <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/0005976525>.

⁷⁰ Central Intelligence Agency, *CIA Memorandum on Vang Pao’s Victory in Laos*, 1.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

This high opinion of Vang Pao's leadership skills was clearly held at the very highest levels of US policymaking as well, with a 1969 memorandum from Dr. Kissinger to President Nixon noting that much of Vang Pao's success as a leader, in the estimation of US sources, rested on a mixture of his own personal example and the type of encouragement⁷² highlighted by the Pha Ti engagement. One memorandum from 1972 makes the bold statement that none of the other states in the area would be likely to "produce a Meo leader in the near future who could compete with Vang Pao."⁷³ The praise for Vang Pao is glowing across the years with little relation to how well the Hmong were faring in their fight against the NVA and Pathet Lao. American policymakers held the general in as high esteem in 1969, when the Hmong were flush with victory, as in 1972, shortly before their ultimate collapse upon the American withdrawal from the region.

This is not to say that Vang Pao did not have significant failings as a leader of men or a tactician. While the former is not reported on in available government documents from the period, perhaps indicating that it was seen as irrelevant to the outcome of the conflict and therefore not worth reporting, Vang Pao's flaws as a leader are described in secondary sources drawing from firsthand accounts, and therefore cannot be discounted. On a personal level, Vang Pao is reported by some later sources as having been fairly brutal in his use of torture against captured enemies and corporal punishment on his own men, and may have alienated many compatriots in the last years of the war with a growing paranoia.⁷⁴ In regards to his occasional failures as a tactician, those are reported, if only occasionally or by suggestion, in government documents from the period. In a CIA memorandum provided to both the State Department's relevant deputy assistant and the National Security Council, the agency describes the defense

⁷² Central Intelligence Agency, *CIA Memorandum on Vang Pao's Victory in Laos*, 1.

⁷³ Central Intelligence Agency, *Untitled*, 3.

⁷⁴ Joshua Kurlantzick, *A Great Place to Have a War: America in Laos and the Birth of a Military CIA* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2017), 194-5.

plan for the PDJ formulated by Vang Pao in the aftermath of the success of Kou Kiet and in preparation for the expected 1970 NVA offensive. While the tactical soundness of the plan itself cannot be properly investigated here, though it does properly note the importance of terrain, reserves, and the necessity of contingencies in case of a likely NVA breakthrough,⁷⁵ the previously discussed course of the offensive clearly overwhelmed the defense plan. This is not to suggest that an alternate plan could have altered the course of the offensive, especially given the centrality of limited airpower and demographic exhaustion to its outcome, but rather to note that Vang Pao's leadership acumen, however inspired, could never be a panacea for the Hmong in all cases.

The continuing glowing terms with which Vang Pao continues to be described by American official sources throughout the war, regardless of whether the Hmong were victorious or in retreat at the time, works to bely any attempt to attribute ultimate battlefield success to the role of proxy leadership. While the leadership in Vang Pao, and leadership of a proxy more broadly, can hardly be held to be unimportant to battlefield outcomes, it can also not be pinpointed as the key determinant of those outcomes. Vang Pao suffered no observable loss in leadership ability that might explain the losses suffered in the 1970 NVA Offensive, as, indeed, his aforementioned defense plan has no readily observable flaws. He was similarly on form when formulating his plans for Kou Kiet, which succeeded where the 1970 NVA Offensive failed for the Hmong not because Vang Pao was any more brilliant a leader in those months, but rather because of the limitations on the American provision of airpower and the growing weight of demographic depletion amongst the Hmong. The lack of variation of the quality of leadership in the Hmong case suggests that, though undoubtedly important, proxy leadership quality is too

⁷⁵ Central Intelligence Agency, *Current Defense Plan for the Plaine Des Jarres in Operation About Face*, DOC_0005341806 (December 29, 1969), 2. <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/0005341806>.

simple and constant an explanation for proxy battlefield outcomes. Leadership should never be discounted when it comes to considerations of whether a potential proxy has promise as a military force, but it is similarly not the central determinant between success and failure.

Cross-Case Comparison

When looking at the broader course of the Laotian Civil War outside of consideration of individual campaigns, there emerges the potent issue of how relations between the Hmong and the Laotian central government in Vientiane fared as the minority group was increasingly empowered as the key fighting force opposing Communist advances in the northeast. What comes to light is, despite latent tensions and opportunities for significant distrust between the Hmong and the central government, the lack of any real movement amongst the Hmong for much beyond the preservation of the status quo, combined with the personal diplomatic efforts of Vang Pao, served to keep relations positive and maintained a partnership beneficial to the Hmong's success as an American proxy. The contrast with the Kurdish case after 2003, wherein the Kurds under divided leadership clashed repeatedly with the Iraqi central government over autonomy goals, to the detriment of their joint role fighting in accordance with American goals, suggests a model where the ambitiousness of proxy political goals in regards to the central government, with the additional influence of proxy leadership strength, helps determine how well the proxy will be able to function alongside a patron-aligned central government.

There is some disagreement over the extent to which the Hmong were integrated in Laotian society at the time of the civil war. A number of government documents from the period discuss what appears to have been a relatively comprehensive report created by the CIA on the history of the Hmong's relationship with the Agency written in early 1972 titled "The Meo of

Northeast Laos: The Waning of a Tribe” and frequently referred to as the “Meo Memo,”⁷⁶ though unfortunately the report itself does not appear to be available. These documents suggest a certain level of dispute between American officials over certain questions of the position of the Hmong within Laos during the period. Whereas the memo seems to have emphasized the separation between the Hmong and Laotian society and positions of power, the suggested edits highlight the availability of government posts and civil employment to the Hmong, particularly in Xieng Khouang province, and argues that common Laotian opinion of the Hmong was not especially bad.⁷⁷ There is agreement, however, that the Laotian government may not have been entirely comfortable with the idea of an overly empowered Hmong, noting their disapproval of the potential Hmong domination of other tribes in the northeast of the country.⁷⁸ Despite the relative comfort of the Laotian government with men like Vang Pao, the Laotian government, as with any central government, was naturally discomfited by the prospect of a powerful and armed ethnic minority within their borders. One therefore emerges with an image of the Hmong as a clearly distinct, yet not overly discriminated against, minority, who were clearly capable of finding a productive place in Laos. They were neither the favorites nor the targets of the central government, and in return no real movement for separatism ever emerged, placing the relationship on a relatively neutral natural footing.

Despite the already relatively limited aims of the Hmong as a people, Vang Pao would play a critical role in the mediation between the Hmong and the greater Laotian state, in addition to keeping his people’s ambitions in line. One of the most critical aspects of this contribution came in the form of Vang Pao’s personal ties to the Laotian government. State Department

⁷⁶ Central Intelligence Agency, *The Meo Memo*, CIA-RDP80R01720R000700060059-1 (March 1, 1972), 1. <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp80r01720r000700060059-1>

⁷⁷ Central Intelligence Agency, *Untitled*, 1-2.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

documents also describe him falling in behind the neutralist position, advocating for a neutral Laos guaranteed by the USSR and United States, of the Laotian King and Prime Minister following the success of Kou Kiet.⁷⁹ He also went out of his way to soothe Laotian concerns about Hmong power by emphasizing Hmong loyalty to the state and royal family, making a public statement in constructing a Buddhist temple, of little use to the mainly animist Hmong, and royal residence in Long Tieng,⁸⁰ in addition to taking a Lao wife.⁸¹ Though it is of course impossible to prove what the relationship between the Hmong and the central government would have been like had Vang Pao not actively worked to allay their concerns, his public support for the kingdom's political goals and its leadership doubtlessly contributed to the suppression of any possible tensions between the government and their powerful minority. It should, of course, also be noted that positive attitudes on the part of the central government toward the Hmong were likely encouraged by the importance of the Hmong in shielding Luang Prabang and Vientiane from NVA assault. Vang Pao recognized the necessity of defending these seats of the central government, and his agreement early on that their defense should be prioritized⁸² put him in strategic agreement with the interests of the Laotian government. Vang Pao was also central to encouraging the Hmong towards a positive vision of themselves within the larger Laotian state. The commentary on the "Meo Memo" notes Vang Pao's frequent refrain to his people that "only in Laos is it possible for a Meo to be general," compared to their lot in neighboring states.⁸³ His keenness to maintain the Hmong involvement in the conflict was such that it was the source of internal challenges, though he would always eventually win the day.⁸⁴ Although there was never

⁷⁹ Central Intelligence Agency, *General Vang Views*, 2.

⁸⁰ Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains*, 142-143.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 152.

⁸² Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains*, 89.

⁸³ Central Intelligence Agency, *Untitled*, CIA-RDP80R01720R000700040033-1 (February 4, 1972) 2. <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp80r01720r000700040033-1>.

⁸⁴ Quincy, *Harvesting Pa Chay's Wheat*, 331.

any serious attempt within the Hmong community of Laos to act against the state, their unflinching allegiance to the Laotian Kingdom can be attributed, at least in part to the influence and power of Vang Pao within it.

In order to properly evaluate the impact of the ethnic group's relationship with the central government upon their effectiveness as a proxy, it is important to establish a comparative case against which the Hmong can be measured, in this case, the Iraqi Kurds. On paper and in practice, the Iraqi Kurds, following the 2003 invasion of Iraq, had many of the promising hallmarks of a proxy partner for the United States. The Kurds possessed a clear ethnic identity with a history of fighting in cooperation with American airpower during the 1992 uprising and subsequent enforcement of the no-fly zone and had been intermittently supported by the CIA since 1972.⁸⁵ These advantages would come to manifest themselves in certain ways, and the Kurds proved their usefulness as American ethnic minority proxies in the war against the Iraqi insurgency following the 2003 invasion, providing effective protection for a number of provinces.⁸⁶ Despite their usefulness as an American proxy in northern Iraq, the effectiveness of the Kurds would be hampered by their continuing disputes with the Iraqi central government, a distraction from the larger effort to fight the insurgency and a continuing headache for American policymakers.

A particular point of contention was the dispute over the governate of Kirkuk, which was not only multiethnic, but also the site of a great deal of oil extraction. With the Kurds claiming it rightfully belonged to the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the Iraqi government vehemently disagreeing, it required the continued presence of American forces in the area to

⁸⁵ Jawad, "The Kurdish Question in Iraq," 31.

⁸⁶ Andrew F. Krepinevich, "How to Win in Iraq," *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 5 (2005): 94. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20031708>.

maintain the peace⁸⁷ between its two partners. The dispute would manifest itself through violence in 2017, when the Iraqi army forced the Kurdish Peshmerga out of the city of Kirkuk, which had been under Kurdish control since they wrested control of it from ISIS. It is worth noting that the United States embassy also condemned this clash as a distraction from the larger goal of destroying ISIS, a campaign for whose purposes the United States was once again supporting both the Iraqis and Kurds.⁸⁸ What is important to note here in comparison to the Hmong case is that, though there were mixed ethnic areas and many fell under the control of Hmong forces at various points during, unlike with the dispute over oil-rich Kirkuk, none of these areas were particularly prosperous.

Complicating prospects for an accord was the divided state of Kurdish leadership, with the KRG being split between the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Following a period of conflict between the two groups in the 1990s, a joint governance solution was implemented whereby administrative functions within the KRG were largely split between the two, leaving an unsteady and divided political situation. Though both parties were firmly behind cooperation with the United States and on agitation for federalism within Iraq,⁸⁹ it is worth considering whether the division of Kurdish leadership may have forced the continued adherence to wide-reaching federalism to the detriment of the relationship with the Iraqi central government. With each Kurdish party continually under threat from the other, it would have been politically impossible for either to attempt to compromise with the central

⁸⁷ Ellen Laipson, "Iraq-US Relations in 2010: A Time of Transition," *The Future of US-Iraq Relations* (Stimson Center, 2010), 3. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep10922.6>.

⁸⁸ Bill Chappell and Scott Neuman, "Iraqi Troops Enter Kirkuk, Seeking to Take Oil-Rich Area Back from Kurds," NPR, October 16, 2017. <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/10/16/558006584/iraq-sends-troops-to-take-areas-south-of-kirkuk-back-from-kurds>.

⁸⁹ Jawad, "The Kurdish Question in Iraq," 32-33.

government on the issue of federalism, though it is far from clear whether any such move could ever have occurred given the tensions between the central government and Kurds.

From the comparison between the cases of American proxy relationships with the Hmong in Laos and the Kurds in Iraq, it is possible to lay out a generalized model for interactions between the central government and minority ethnic proxy groups of an aligned foreign power. Potential proxy groups within larger states can be seen along a continuum of objectives in regards to the status quo of the state in which they reside. At one extreme are those groups, which one might term ambitious, who seek complete separation from the larger state, placing their goals in direct conflict. On the other end of the spectrum are those groups, which one might call restrained, who seek the preservation of the larger state as a strong and cohesive entity. It is largely on this side that the Hmong, who demanded relatively little of the Laotian central government other than the status quo, fall. The closer a group gets to the ambitious extreme of the spectrum, the greater the potential for conflict with the host state to the detriment of US policy, as with the Kurds' demand for relatively extensive federalism in Iraq after 2003. The arming and support of an ethnic proxy necessitates the empowerment of that group relative to the central government of the larger state. Regardless of the state's appraisal of the aims of the group, this will necessarily bring concern from elements in the government worried about weakening the central government's power. Tensions will be especially high in the case of any existing areas of dispute between the proxy and central government, in particular areas that both sides would find valuable enough to come to blows over, as with Kirkuk. This in turn has the potential to imperil not only the relationship between the ethnic group and the central government, whose cooperation is important for ensuring ease of continued support for the ethnic group in question but also the long-term relationship between the proxy's patron and the

larger state. This will be a concern no matter what the overall objective of the proxy group is, and has the potential for disastrous results when the ethnic proxy has relatively ambitious goals. In this case, the mission to support the proxy group will be continually imperiled by the danger of noncooperation or active interference from the larger state, the relationship between the state and the patron will be strained, and there is the potential for direct conflict between the proxy group and the state, endangering the patron's goals in the region. It should also be noted that central government cooperation with the proxy and patron can be quite useful in regards to providing comparative advantage support, as with the American use of Laotian facilities to direct its air support, granting a direct impact upon tactical outcomes.

There is of course the issue of divining a group's aims, and it is here that leadership strength comes into play. As demonstrated in the Hmong case by Vang Pao's ability to both assuage Laotian fears of Hmong power and keep his people in line behind the central government, a capable and secure leader is a necessary precondition for ensuring that a restrained group is able to maintain its limited aims. In contrast, a more fractious ethnic group that lacks effective leadership will be more likely to possess internal movements opposed to the larger state, even if significant portions of the leadership are willing to preserve the status quo in some form. Therefore, even a proxy whose leadership is nominally acquiescent to the status quo might create policy ruptures due to their inability to properly control the ideological goals of the population. There is also the case of the Kurds, wherein fractious and insecure leadership amongst the ethnic minority proxy forestalled any chance of a moderation of demands upon the Iraqi central government, ensuring continued enmity to the detriment of the larger effort against the Iraqi insurgency. It is here, rather than on the battlefield, that we see the determinative role of leadership. Though perhaps not as important as the underlying ambitions of the ethnic minority

relative to the central government, stable and united leadership is a necessary contributor towards a positive relationship between the empowered proxy and the central state.

Conclusion

The case of the Hmong's cooperation with the United States during the Laotian Civil War clearly suggests that, under the right conditions, ethnic proxy relationships can be highly useful to the patron party in achieving geopolitical goals. It also suggests, however, that there are certain essential preconditions for tactical success, namely the proper confluence of the patron party's comparative advantage and the proxy's level of demographic strength. In those cases where the central government is a potential partner for either the proxy or the patron, the potential for success is further increased by the limiting of the ethnic group's ambitions within the state and their leadership's ability to keep relations positive.

Forever in the background of any investigation of this topic is the question of the morality of the proxy relationship, particularly in light of the ultimate fate of the Hmong following the US withdrawal from the region. An examination of government documents dating towards the end of the relationship suggests a certain level of division within US policy circles on this very question. One of the memoranda reviewing the aforementioned "Meo Memo" critiques the report for its treatment of the "highly controversial" matter of whether the Agency's operations with the Hmong served to make them more of a target for the NVA, thereby serving to bring about their destruction as a people in Northern Laos.⁹⁰ Another memorandum, written by William E. Colby, argues that the relationship should be seen in a more positive light; that to have failed to work with the Hmong would have been to "leave them to the mercies of the North

⁹⁰ Central Intelligence Agency, *Untitled*, 2-3.

Vietnamese.” He ends with the comment that “Freedom and independence are well worth the costs they involve, not only to the U.S. but also in the case to the Meo.”⁹¹ Perhaps there is truth to this statement, however cold of a comfort it may be, but little can be said to excuse the American abandonment of a desperate and faithful ally when the relationship ceased to be politically convenient. There is much to be said for the usefulness of proxies from the standpoint of the patron, allowing for the achievement of international military goals without the need to endanger their own men, but the calculations involved in utilizing another population for another’s military ends are necessarily morally dubious. Moving forward where ethnic proxies and the fate of minority ethnic groups are concerned, it is equally as vital for policymakers to consider the question of whether we should as the question of whether we can.

⁹¹ Central Intelligence Agency, *Untitled*, 5.

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