



International Boundary Study

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China – Laos Boundary

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CHINA - LAOS BOUNDARY

I. BOUNDARY BRIEF

From the Burmese tripoint in the west to the Vietnamese in the east, the China - Laos boundary, with but one exception, follows water divides of the Yunnan Plateau. At approximately 101° 13' East and 21° 24' North, the north-flowing Nan-jun Ho, a tributary of the Nan-la Ho, crosses the frontier. The water divide in the southwest represents a minor parting between tributaries of the Mekong. However, in the northeast, the true divide between the Mekong and the Black River systems is utilized.

The boundary measures 263.8 miles¹ in length and has been demarcated. The locations of the pillars are shown on sheets No. 8 and 16 of Indochine - Carte de la Frontiere du nord-ouest, 1:200,000 published in 1946 by the Service Geographique de l'Indochine. No disputes currently exist concerning the precise location of the boundary.

II. BACKGROUND

A. Geographical

In the China - Laos frontier region, the general trend of both rivers and ridges is northeast - southwest. Even the Mekong exhibits this alignment. Topographically, the region comprises a series of broad sandstone plateaus interspersed with broad river valleys. In certain areas, older rocks, in particular limestone, project through the plateaus in steep and jagged peaks. Elevations in the immediate frontier zone average between 1,000 meters (3,280 feet) and 1,500 meters (5,000 feet), although individual peaks attain heights of 1,900 meters (6,300 feet).

Climatically, the region is dominated by the seasonal monsoons so typical of southeast Asia. The temperature regime is essentially sub-tropical to tropical with the hottest month occurring in June (c. 85° F.) and the coolest (c. 64° F.) in January. Secondary maxima and minima do not develop. Average daily ranges in temperature approximate the average annual range. The rainy season commences in April and lasts into November. Maximum precipitation occurs in July and August with more than 20 inches falling in both months. In both May and June, between 8 and 20 inches are received while over 2 inches is registered monthly during the remainder of the rainy period. Even in the dry season, no month is completely without precipitation as a result of winter cyclonic activity. In total the annual rainfall averages between 80 and 120 inches.

The southwestern and central sectors of the boundary are covered with dense stands of rain forest. The typical forest is evergreen, although prolonged drought or porous soils may

¹ Measured in the Office of the Geographer on the Army Map Service 1:250,000 map series and on the cited French 1:200,000 maps.

result in local deciduous stands, multilayered and easily penetrated. Normally, the rain forest seldom has areas of pure stands; rather multiple species abound. As a result of rather widespread practice of "slash and burn" cultivation, primary or true rain forest may be restricted to isolated or remote areas. A secondary or modified rain forest, which resembles the original vegetation but lacks the valuable and slow-growing hardwoods, now dominates much of the area.

In the northeast, near the basin of the Black River (Li-hsien Chiang) the original natural vegetation cover has been removed for cultivation.

B. Ethnographical

The China - Laos frontier region is inhabited almost entirely by ethnic minorities. Four distinct groups are involved with a great deal of intermingling: a) Tibeto-Burman--Akha and Ha-ni; b) Highland Mon--Khmu (Kha) and Moi; c) "Ethnic or Minority" Tai--the Lu; and d) Miao-Yao--Yao-Man.

The Akha - Ha-ni inhabit the sector to the east of the Mekong, projecting into Burma, China and Laos. In addition, a second segment is found to the east separated from the first group by intrusions of Mon Khmu and Yao. With the exception of the valley of the Nan-jun Ho, where local population densities reach as high as 50 inhabitants per square mile, this entire western sector is lightly inhabited. Most areas have fewer than one person per square kilometer, although in the Mekong valley the density is slightly greater.

To the east of the Meng-la salient, the highland Mon peoples--Kha and Moi--straddle the frontier for approximately forty miles before being replaced by Yao-Man tribes. Further to the east, the intermingling of peoples continues with Tai (Lu), Tiberto-Burman (Ho Ha-ni and Yi) in the uplands and Han Chinese in the larger valleys. The dispersion is very complex with a vertical as well as lateral intermingling of peoples.

Paddy rice economy has developed in the major river valleys away from the immediate border area. The limited concentrations are found in the Nan-jun Ho, the Nan-la Ho, the Lo-so Chiang as well as in the valleys tributary to the Black River and the Nam Hou. Elsewhere, the "slash and burn" type of shifting cultivation predominates based on upland rice, sweet potatoes, corn and to a certain degree opium. Small plots are cleared in the forest by slashing, burning and/or girdling of trees. The ash resulting from the fires and the rotting vegetation form the only fertilizers. After several years, soil fertility is depleted and the fields are abandoned to return to their natural state. When all of the suitable land in the neighborhood of a village is used up, it is abandoned and a new site is sought. Hunting, fishing and gathering supplement the villagers' diet.

C. Historical

A region with sparse Lao and Han Chinese settlements, the China - Laos frontier has been isolated from the developments of both Laos and of China until recent time. The Lao kingdoms which developed in the 14th century were centered on the middle and lower Mekong valley and scarcely extended their influence into the northern hill country. Resistance to Lao and, for that matter, Han Chinese influence has been continued by the tribal groups into modern times.

Moreover, European influence was not exerted until the end of the 19th century. In the last half of the 19th century, France began seriously to expand its influence into the Indochinese peninsula in search of an access to Chinese markets and products. While the major pressures were exerted eastward into Tonkin and southward in the Mekong valley, conflict with Siam (Thailand) soon led to the establishment of a protectorate over the Lao kingdom in the Mekong. This expansion and the pacification of Tonkin brought France into contact with the fringes of the Chinese empire. The mutual boundary between French Indochina and China was delimited by agreements in 1887 and 1895. Demarcation followed.

D. Political

At present no boundary problems, per se, exist between China and Laos. The boundary has long been in use and is generally accepted. Furthermore, there has been no official correspondence concerning the boundary or proposed changes since Laos became independent in 1949 or since the establishment of control by the mainland regime.

Laos, however, has assumed a strategic importance in recent years as a consequence of political developments in southeast Asia. Bordering on every nation in the peninsula except Malaysia, the internal difficulties of the new nation affect the futures of each of the remainder. Pathet Lao and insurgent neutralist forces control most of the Lao frontier with China, effectively isolating the region from the control of the central government. Furthermore, the Chinese communists have commenced an extensive program of road building in southern Yunnan. Their engineers have been engaged in the construction of a road from Meng La in Yunnan southward to the boundary near Nam Tha. Furthermore, this road has been projected southwestward to Houei Sai on the Thai border. The strategic value of this road should be immense for it would tie together the Chinese network with the main road system of northern Thailand. A second road has been constructed eastward from Meng La to the important provincial capital of Phong Saly.

Numerous communist-inspired internal disturbances have occurred in Laos since the end of World War II. Many of them have involved inhabitants of the border areas of northern Laos who belong to various ethnic minorities common to both China and Laos. So far, the Chinese communists have overtly assumed a passive role, leaving the Pathet Lao and north Vietnamese forces to exert most of the pressure on Laos.

III. ANALYSIS OF BOUNDARY ALIGNMENT

In the west, the China - Laos boundary originates on the Mekong and passes eastward for approximately five miles along the minor watershed between the Nan-la Ho and an unnamed tributary of the Mekong situated to the south. The boundary then turns southward to continue along the minor watershed for approximately 13 miles before crossing the Nan-jun Ho (river) near the village of Meng-jun. The sinuous line of the frontier continues southward for an additional 20.7 miles along the ridges forming the watershed. The boundary then trends generally eastward (51.3 miles) and northward (80.9 miles) to leave the entire drainage basin of the upper Nan-la Ho in China. Continuing generally northward for an additional 57.2 miles, the boundary coincides with the major divide between basins of the Black and Mekong rivers. The same divide is followed eastward for the final 35.9 miles to the Vietnamese tripoint, situated at approximately 22° 24' North and 102° 08' 30" East.

Thus with the single exception of the crossing of the Nan-jun Ho, the entire boundary is delimited by major and minor watersheds. It has been demarcated, according to the official French maps, by approximately 15 pillars, a very small number considering the length of the boundary and the complexity of the physical landscape.

IV. TREATIES

The following Sino-French treaties have served to delimit the Laos (and Viet-Nam) China boundary:

A. **Treaty of Tientsin between France and China concerning the delimitation of the Franco - Chinese Frontier**, signed on June 9, 1885 with ratifications exchanged on November 28, 1885. (Hertslet China Treaties 1:296).

By the terms of this treaty France and China agreed to appoint commissioners to determine the frontier.

B. **Convention relative to the Frontier between China and Tonkin** (between China and France) signed on 26 June 1887 after an Exchange of Notes dated June 23, 1887. (Hertslet op.cit. 1:314 and BFSP 85:747).

Article III delimits, in detail, the boundary between China and Tonkin from the China Sea to the Black River. The act did not, in effect, delimit the Laos boundary.

C. **Convention bearing on the delimitation of the frontier between France and China...** signed on June 20, 1895. (Hertslet op.cit. 1:332).

The boundary east of the Black River (Tonkin) was modified and the Laos boundary was delimited by watersheds and the territory of Muong-mang (Meng-mang) and Muong-jouen (Meng-jun), which adhered to China, and the Pa-fa-thai (salt springs), which remain in Indochina. Certain other villages are also mentioned.

D. Nanking Convention between France and China signed May 16, 1930 with ratifications exchanged July 20, 1935.

The convention was concerned only with relations between Indochina and the south Chinese provinces of Yunnan, Kwangsi, and Kwangtung. The alignment of the boundary was not altered.

V. SUMMARY

The 263.8 mile-long boundary between China and Laos is delimited by international acts and demarcated by a limited number of markers. No disputes exist along the boundary, although the Laotian side, at least, is not completely under the control of the national government. The presence of minority peoples along the entire length, with tribal allegiances stretching across the frontier, could produce incidents in the future. The alignment of the boundary is shown correctly on the Army Map Service 1:250,000 series and on the sheets of the French-produced Indochine - Carte de la Frontiere du nord-ouest 1:200,000. Chinese maps delineate the boundary in the same manner.

This International Boundary Study is one of a series of specific boundary papers prepared by the Geographer, Office of Research in Economics and Science, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Department of State, in accordance with provisions of Bureau of the Budget Circular No. A-16.

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