

**HEALING THE PAST: U.S.-LAO RELATIONS AND
HEALTH COOPERATION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA**

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Alone, we can do so little; together, we can do so much.

— Helen Keller, early 1920s

Abstract

The arrival of U.S. COVID-19 vaccines in Laos in 2021 marked a pivotal shift in a relationship once marred by conflict. This chapter examines how sustained U.S. health cooperation over two decades, culminating in the pandemic response, has fostered trust and transformed the U.S.-Lao dynamic. By prioritizing Laos' needs, providing unconditional aid, and collaborating on health initiatives, the United States has become a valued partner, exemplified by the significant improvement in public perception. This case study serves as a model for U.S. engagement in Southeast Asia, highlighting the effectiveness of non-transactional partnerships in fostering lasting relationships and promoting regional stability and prosperity.

**A New Era of Partnership:
From Fear to Hope**

On July 16, 2021, a wave of excitement swept across social media in the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Laos). Despite its limited healthcare infrastructure, the small Southeast Asian nation had successfully navigated the initial 16 months of the COVID-19 pandemic, reporting only around 3,500 confirmed cases and less than ten confirmed deaths among its 7.5 million citizens.¹ However, 35% of those cases had been recorded in the previous two weeks, and the threat of new variants and concerns about vaccine efficacy cast a long shadow of uncertainty.

The arrival of a million doses of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine from the United States marked a turning point. This single-dose regime promised to simplify the vaccination process, particularly for remote communities. This pivotal moment offered a glimmer of hope and a chance to examine how Laos had prepared for the pandemic, the challenges it faced, and the path to recovery that lay ahead.

The U.S. Embassy in Vientiane broadcasted the vaccine arrival on Facebook Live, showcasing a collaborative spirit between the two nations. The response was unprecedented. Thousands of comments flooded the embassy's Facebook page, revealing a profound shift in public sentiment. One comment, in particular, poignantly captured this transformation: *“In the past, when we heard American planes, we ran and hid. Now, when we hear American planes, we stand quietly, full of hope.”*²

This powerful statement encapsulates the complex history between Laos and the United States, marred by conflict and mistrust. It also highlights the transformative potential of this newfound partnership, signaling a shift from fear to hope. To understand the full significance of this moment, we must briefly delve into the historical context that has shaped the relationship between Laos and the United States.

Historical Context:

From the Secret War to a Partnership Forged in Health

The U.S. covert support (1964-1973) to the Lao royal government in its civil war with the eventually victorious Communist forces left deep-seated mistrust toward the United States and a devastating legacy of unexploded ordinance that produced thousands of post-war civilian casualties. However, in recent decades, the United States has made a concerted effort to rebuild relations with Laos, emphasizing partnership and mutual respect.

Health cooperation has been a cornerstone of this effort. Initiatives led by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) have bolstered Laos' capacity for disease surveillance and response. Consistent engagement over nearly 20 years, centered on addressing Laos' self-identified needs, has gradually fostered greater trust and paved the way for a stronger partnership, most notably during the COVID-19 pandemic.

A Case Study for U.S. Engagement in Southeast Asia

The evolving U.S.-Lao relationship offers valuable insights into a broader strategy for U.S. engagement in Southeast Asia. This approach posits that prioritizing assistance in addressing the self-determined needs of Southeast Asian countries in times of both crisis and stability, instead of focusing on competition with the People's Republic of China (PRC), can establish the United States as a preferred partner across the region.

The COVID-19 pandemic provided a unique opportunity for the United States to showcase this approach. The United States provided critical assistance and vaccines to Laos, saving lives and strengthening bilateral ties. This act of solidarity in a crisis underscored the value of dependable partnership. This analysis is grounded in the principles of cooperative security and mutual interdependence, which emphasize long-term trust-building relationships over transactional, competitive engagement.

My first-hand experience as the U.S. Ambassador to Lao PDR during the pandemic provides a unique perspective on the impact of U.S. health assistance on the ground. This experience and a broader understanding of U.S. foreign policy objectives inform the analysis presented in this chapter, offering insights into how sustained engagement based on mutual respect and shared interests can foster lasting partnerships in the region.

Looking Ahead: Sustainable Partnership for Mutual Benefit

To secure or maintain a position as a preferred partner in Southeast Asia, the United States must remain committed to long-term engagement with Laos and other Southeast Asian countries and convince them of that commitment. By prioritizing partner needs over time, the United States can foster enduring relationships that transcend geopolitical rivalries and contribute to regional stability and prosperity. This approach benefits both the United States and Southeast Asia, promoting a more secure and collaborative future for the entire region.

Early Cooperation Efforts

In recent decades, the United States has sought to demonstrate respect and partnership with Laos, even amid initial Lao reluctance and suspicion. This has manifested most clearly in health cooperation.

Beyond addressing the legacies of war, such as recovering missing soldiers and clearing unexploded ordinance, health emerged as a key area of collaboration. The U.S. Navy Advanced Medical Research Unit Two (NAMRU-2) signed an initial memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the Lao Ministry of Health in 1994 to “promote health security through capacity building.”³ This was followed by the establishment of a U.S. CDC office in Vientiane in 2006.⁴

Global avian flu outbreaks catalyzed the CDC’s presence in Laos. CDC support focused on enhancing Laos’ capacity to monitor and treat various influenza strains, including novel ones that often emerge in Southeast Asia. With robust U.S. technical support and a committed effort by the Lao government, Laos became, in 2011, the first low-income country to build the policy base needed to move from simply administering donated influenza vaccines to a capability for national procurement and delivery of the vaccine.⁵

Health Engagement as a Bridge to Stronger Ties

In 2009, the CDC launched Laos' Field Epidemiology Training (FET) program.⁶ This initiative provided advanced, practical training to Lao epidemiologists, who were then deployed across the country, forming the first line of defense against infectious disease outbreaks. The FET program has proved to be a crucial capacity-building effort for pandemic preparedness, with a particularly significant impact during the COVID-19 crisis.

The CDC's commitment to strengthening Laos' capacity to identify and report emerging viruses was instrumental in paving the way for the return of USAID to Laos in 2011 after a 36-year hiatus. USAID's initial focus on virus surveillance and pandemic preparedness evolved into a broader development program, culminating in the official opening of a country office in 2016.⁷

These early health initiatives served as a bridge, fostering trust and laying the groundwork for a broader partnership between the United States and Laos. By addressing Laos' critical health needs and demonstrating a sustained commitment to its well-being without reference to any competitor, the United States gradually overcame historical barriers and established itself as a reliable partner. This foundation of trust proved invaluable during the COVID-19 pandemic, enabling a swift and effective collaborative response.

Health Cooperation and COVID-19

When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, the United States was the first to assist Laos publicly,⁸ donating personal protective equipment in early February 2020. This swift response set the stage for a robust collaboration involving USAID, CDC, and the U.S. DoD medical arm. Their combined efforts resulted in over \$16 million in COVID-19 aid to Laos,⁹ encompassing material donations and financial support through the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), not counting millions of donated vaccine doses.¹⁰ These efforts were complemented by the

tireless work of FET-graduated Lao epidemiologists who spearheaded disease surveillance efforts nationwide.

The impact of this collaboration on U.S.-Lao relations has been significant. Expressions of gratitude to the U.S. ambassador for COVID-related and other health assistance became commonplace in high-level meetings and provincial visits. However, the lasting impression went beyond mere appreciation for help during a crisis. The Lao government and people recognized that the United States had not opportunistically targeted the health sector simply to compete with China. Instead, the United States had amplified its already longstanding support for Laos' health sector in response to an urgent need.

This shift in perception is reflected in Gallup's annual poll of international attitudes toward various countries' leadership. In the 2022 survey (of 2021 attitudes), Laos showed the most significant increase in positive views of the United States among all Asian countries polled.¹¹ These numbers decreased slightly in the 2023 survey and then rebounded in the 2024 survey. The approval rate remains notably higher than pre-pandemic levels, indicating a sustained improvement in how the United States is viewed in Laos.¹²

Lessons From Laos for ASEAN Partnerships

The U.S.-Lao relationship exemplifies how persistent efforts at partnership, such as in the health sector, can gradually overcome profound mistrust and strengthen bilateral ties. Despite Laos' close political and ideological relations with China, the United States has successfully cultivated a more cooperative relationship by focusing on providing Laos with additional options for development rather than trying to pull Laos away from PRC influence. This increased engagement began well before the public U.S. "pivot" or "rebalance" to Asia, underscoring the importance of sustained, long-term commitment to building trust and cooperation.

The U.S.-Lao experience offers valuable insights into how the United States can also effectively engage with other Southeast Asian nations. By fostering trust and cooperation through sustained, needs-based partnerships, the United States can strengthen its position in the region and provide a viable alternative, or at least a complement, to PRC influence. The following sections explore these lessons in more detail, highlighting the importance of long-term commitment, collaboration, and respect for the self-determination of partner nations.

The U.S. Health Engagement in Southeast Asia: A Legacy of Partnership

The United States has been a committed public health partner in Southeast Asia for decades. The CDC's FET program, initiated in Thailand in the 1980s, then expanded to other Southeast Asian states, equipping local experts with essential disease detection and response skills. The United States has also invested in laboratory capacity and infectious disease surveillance systems, particularly in response to avian influenza outbreaks. These efforts, often conducted in collaboration with the WHO and the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), have demonstrated the United States' commitment to regional health security.

Beyond Crisis Response: The Value of Sustained Engagement

While providing aid during crises is crucial and appreciated, lasting partnerships are forged through sustained engagement. This involves proactively helping build national capacity before crises occur, assisting during emergencies, and supporting recovery and further development afterward. This approach is particularly important for partners where trust is initially lacking, as it demonstrates a genuine and sustained U.S. commitment to their well-being and development that goes beyond immediate crises.

The U.S.-Lao experience highlights the importance of focusing on the partner's needs and priorities rather than solely on geopolitical competition. This approach can and should be applied beyond health cooperation to other areas, such as combating transnational crime, addressing climate change disruption, and fostering economic development. By consistently showing up and focusing on the partner's wants and needs, the United States can build trust and foster collaborative partnerships that transcend short-term instrumentality.

The U.S. and PRC COVID Assistance Contrasts

China also dedicated substantial resources to pandemic assistance and held a significant early advantage, shipping COVID-19 vaccines to Southeast Asian neighbors more than six months before the United States. This initial swiftness earned China considerable goodwill in the region. Surveys conducted during and soon after the pandemic showed that most Southeast Asian countries, excluding Vietnam, regarded China as the primary provider of pandemic aid,¹³ even in cases where the United States was the major vaccine donor.¹⁴ This perception persisted despite U.S. vaccines being widely regarded as more effective.¹⁵

This narrative of rapid response and substantial assistance contrasted with the initial slowness of the U.S. vaccine rollout in the region. While the United States eventually surpassed China in the number of vaccines delivered to Southeast Asian countries, with a significantly higher proportion being donated, this initial lag in vaccine distribution allowed China to solidify its own image as a reliable partner in times of crisis.

Comparative Analysis: U.S. vs. PRC Pandemic Assistance Strategies

China's narrative surrounding its pandemic assistance has centered on the message: "We were there with vaccines when you needed us

most; the United States was not.”¹⁶ This refrain, and the logistical advantage of Chinese vaccines not requiring ultra-cold storage, initially resonated strongly within Southeast Asia. However, the actual impact of the PRC’s “vaccine diplomacy” on the region’s overall perception has been more complex and mixed.¹⁷

While the PRC’s early vaccine delivery certainly garnered goodwill, its continued aggression in the South China Sea during the pandemic undermined those initial soft power gains. Additionally, reports of the PRC’s transactional approach to aid, including attaching political strings to assistance and prioritizing its citizens living in other countries for vaccination in some instances, have raised concerns about its true motives and reliability.¹⁸ The dissonance between the PRC’s soft power messaging and hard power actions has tempered the initial positive impact of its vaccine diplomacy.

This transactional approach is characteristic of the PRC’s broader foreign policy, offering investment and trade incentives to countries that align with its policies and imposing economic penalties on those that challenge or criticize it. The pattern of China penalizing partners’ policy choices is evident in its interactions with numerous countries, with prominent examples including Lithuania,¹⁹ Australia,²⁰ South Korea,²¹ the Philippines,²² and Norway.²³

The threat of economic coercion for perceived slights or disagreements creates an environment of caution and self-censorship among China’s partners. While this strategy may be effective in the short term for deterring partner actions that China deems unfavorable, it ultimately undermines the foundation and goodwill necessary for sustained and mutually beneficial partnerships.

Public Perception and Soft Power Dynamics

While China's early vaccine diplomacy garnered attention, the United States initially lagged in vaccine distribution abroad, instead prioritizing domestic supply. While understandable, this approach was criticized in Southeast Asia and other developing regions. However, by the end of 2021, the United States had significantly ramped up its vaccine donation efforts, nearly doubling China's vaccine deliveries to Southeast Asian countries.²⁴

The overall impact of U.S. COVID assistance on Southeast Asian perceptions of the United States has been positive, though not decisive in any competitive sense. The 2024 edition of the annual "State of Southeast Asia" survey by the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute actually indicated for the first time a slight preference among surveyed countries for China as a strategic partner if forced to choose.²⁵ However, this result requires nuanced interpretation.

Firstly, the same survey showed Southeast Asian respondents overwhelmingly prefer not to align exclusively with either power, highlighting the region's desire to maintain strategic autonomy and avoid becoming overly reliant on a single partner.²⁶ Secondly, the survey also found that respondents trust the United States much more than China to uphold the system of international law that has led to global peace and prosperity.²⁷

The survey results suggest that while some Southeast Asian nations perceive China as a more robust economic and political force in their region, the United States maintains a significant soft power advantage regarding trust and perceived commitment to the rules-based international order.

The Importance of Non-Transactional Partnerships

The contrasting approaches of the United States and China during the pandemic underscore the importance of non-transactional partnerships in fostering genuine trust and sustainable cooperation.

While the PRC's transactional model frequently involves quid pro quo arrangements and economic leverage may yield short-term gains, it can also foster resentment among partners who feel pressured to comply with Chinese demands.

Conversely, the U.S. commitment to providing aid without political conditions, as demonstrated in its COVID-19 response in Laos, cultivates a more equitable and respectful partnership. This approach is both ethically considerate and should prove strategically advantageous in the long run. By prioritizing mutual respect and shared interests, the United States builds trust and goodwill that can endure political fluctuations and lay the foundation for deeper collaboration across multiple sectors.

In the context of U.S.-Lao relations, health cooperation has been pivotal in building trust and moving beyond the legacy of war. The pandemic served as a litmus test, showcasing the United States as a reliable and invested partner in Laos' well-being. This approach resonates with the broader U.S. engagement strategy in Southeast Asia, where health cooperation has been one consistent and integral component of multifaceted partnerships. By emphasizing mutual respect, shared interests, and the self-determined needs of partner countries, the United States can forge resilient relationships that withstand the challenges of time and contribute to a more stable and prosperous Southeast Asia.

Conclusion: Charting a Path to Enduring Partnerships in an Era of Strategic Competition

China's reintegration into the global economy has brought many economic benefits worldwide. However, its attempts to reshape the international order and exert dominance in East Asia challenge the rules-based system that has long fostered peace and prosperity.

China's geographical proximity, economic influence, and transactional diplomacy give it undeniable advantages in Southeast Asia. Yet, this same strength also presents opportunities for the

United States, as the desire to counterbalance China's growing influence creates a demand for alternative partners. The United States, with its reputation for reliability and resolve and many longstanding partnerships in the region, is well-positioned to meet this demand.

To further enhance its appeal, the United States must prioritize addressing the needs and concerns of its partners through sustained engagement that does not appear transaction-based. By working to foster collaborative rather than hierarchical partnerships, United States efforts will better resonate with Southeast Asian nations that seek a partner who respects their autonomy and sovereignty.

This requires consistent engagement with governments and people in the region, demonstrating a commitment beyond mere competition with China. Such an approach not only strengthens ties with Southeast Asian nations but can also potentially influence China's behavior over time, encouraging it to adopt more collaborative and less coercive practices than at present.

While a complete realignment of Southeast Asia toward the United States is unlikely, given China's proximity and economic power and widespread desire in the region to avoid dependence on any superpower, sustained U.S. engagement can profoundly shape the geopolitical landscape. It can solidify relationships with countries wary of the PRC's assertiveness while fostering cooperation even with those more closely aligned with Beijing. This requires a long-term commitment to consistently demonstrate the value of partnership and offer attractive alternatives to the PRC's model, as exemplified by the evolving U.S.-Lao relationship.

Ultimately, the United States can most effectively navigate the complexities of great power competition in Southeast Asia by leveraging its strengths in building genuine partnerships based on mutual respect, shared interests, and demonstrated commitment to the region's well-being and prosperity.

Endnotes

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