

The Struggle for Influence in Laos between Vietnam and Siam during the First Half of the 19th Century

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Abstract - This article analyzes the power struggle and geopolitical competition between the Nguyen Dynasty (Vietnam) and the Chakri Dynasty (Siam) over the Lao territories during the first half of the 19th century. Drawing upon official historical records and contemporary academic research, the study elucidates the process by which these two regional powers asserted their influence over the Lao principalities, most notably the Kingdom of Vientiane. The findings indicate that the initial period of diplomatic amity during the reign of Emperor Gia Long rapidly transitioned into intense confrontation under Emperor Minh Mang, culminating in the Chao Anouvong rebellion. This rivalry was characterized not merely by territorial expansion but also by strategic efforts to establish security "buffer zones" and validate political legitimacy within the Southeast Asian regional order. The research underscores the profound impact of this Sino-Vietnamese-Siamese contest on the demarcation of administrative boundaries and the regional geopolitical structure prior to the extensive intervention of Western colonial powers in the Indochinese Peninsula.

Keywords - Vietnam, Siam, Laos, Nguyen Dynasty, Hegemonic competition, Geopolitics.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the early 19th century, the geopolitical landscape of mainland Southeast Asia was primarily governed by the power dynamics between the Nguyen Dynasty of Vietnam and the Chakri Dynasty of Siam. This was a classic period of regional hegemony between two native powers just before the actual intervention of the Western colonial forces. In this strategic framework, the Lao regions, based in the critical basin of the Mekong River, became the main point of conflict. It was not just a territorial acquisition crusade but a basic conflict of regional governance philosophies: the Sinicized, bureaucratic administrative system of the Nguyen Court as opposed to the more flexible "Mandala" system.

During the early 19th century, under the reigns of Emperor Gia Long (1802–1819) and King Rama I, Vietnam-Siam relations were characterized by a state of "cold peace" based on mutual respect. This stability was however short lived and was mainly based on personal commitments among the respective monarchs. When the region passed into the eras of Emperor Minh Mang (1820–1841) and King Rama III, the two countries were at the peak of their state strength, and the former freedom of tolerance in relation to buffer zones was slowly replaced by strict policies of direct intervention. The Lao principalities notably Vientiane, Luang Prabang, and Champasak found themselves precariously caught between these two regional giants. Controlling Laos was vital not only for economic reasons via trade routes but also as a critical factor for national survival regarding border security. In particular, to the Hue Court, Laos served as a western "fence" to safeguard the backbone of the nation; whereas, to Bangkok, it was necessary to create hegemony on the Lao muang to counter the influence of Vietnamese on the Chao Phraya basin.

The most significant flashpoint in this competition was the rebellion of Chao Anouvong (the King of Vientiane) in 1827. This incident compelled the two courts to clearly expose their strategic intentions and military

strengths. Although the Siam applied the policy of "scorched earth" and caused migration in draining the resources of the competitor, Nguyen Dynasty tried to establish the administrative units, i.e., Tran Ninh and Lac Bien, to provide direct governance. The role of the Nguyen Court in the Anouvong incident went beyond a mere act of assisting a friend; it was an attempt to establish anew its position of "Son of Heaven" in the regional pecking order. However, the realities of battlefields and geographical reasons led to a stalemate that was quite long and drained the human and material resources of both nations.

Furthermore, this confrontation unfolded simultaneously as Western powers, particularly Britain and France, began to eye the Indochinese Peninsula. The resources that were depleted in the course of these battles over Laos and Cambodia unintentionally undermined the total ability of Vietnam and Siam to defend themselves against the emerging wave of colonialism. The conflict over influence in Laos of the time under consideration helps to comprehend in more detail the diplomatic intrigue and geopolitical considerations of the Hue Court under Minh Mang a monarch who was constantly striving to prove the status of the superpower of Dai Nam.

Utilizing primary sources such as the *Dai Nam Thuc Luc* (Veritable Records of the Great South), the *Kham Dinh Dai Nam Hoi Dien Su Le*, and Siamese royal chronicles, this article elucidates three core aspects:

"First, the strategic position of Laos within the overarching security frameworks of Vietnam and Siam ; * Second, the transitional phases from diplomatic dialogue to direct military confrontation ; * Third, the long-term consequences of this rivalry for the geopolitical structure of Laos and the broader Southeast Asian region."

Ultimately, this research provides a multi-dimensional perspective on a complex historical chapter wherein small principalities were often forced to navigate the perilous choice between survival and dependency on their powerful neighbors.

A. Literature Review

The struggle for influence between Vietnam and Siam in Laos during the first half of the 19th century has remained a subject of profound interest for generations of domestic and international scholars. Scholarly investigations have gone beyond accounts of military actions to profound analyses of geopolitical processes and power politics in the region. The present literature review divides the currently existing research into three major scholarly streams, namely official dynastic historiography, Western scholarly perspectives and modern Vietnamese and Thai scholarship.

Primarily, the official records of the Nguyen and Chakri dynasties serve as the foundational primary sources. *Dai Nam Thuc Luc* (Veritable Records of the Great South) of the Royal Historical Bureau of the Nguyen Dynasty indicates the attitude of the Hue Court, considering Laos as an essential security buffer and seeing Vietnamese military actions as a "protection" of vassal states against Siamese encroachment (Quoc su quan trieu Nguyen, 2002). On the other hand, the *Dynastic Chronicles of the Bangkok Era* depict Siam as a major power that tries to recover ancestral lands and preserve traditional tributary relations in the context of Vietnamese expansionism (Thiphakorawong, 1978). This historiographical dichotomy highlights the need to cross-reference in a multi-dimensional manner to determine historical truths.

The second current of research stems from Western scholars who situate the Vietnam-Siam confrontation within the broader context of Southeast Asian history. Tsuboi (1987), in his study of the Vietnamese Empire's relations with France and China, argued that the wars in Laos and Cambodia were part of Emperor Minh Mang's endeavor to construct a Vietnam-centric regional order. Meanwhile, Woodside (1971) highlighted the variations in the models of governance: Vietnam used the Confucian-style direct administrative rule, and Siam kept the model of the "Mandala" model central authority dissipated toward the periphery. The conflict between these two models in the Lao territories was a root cause of a long-standing conflict. In recent decades, Vietnamese academia has produced numerous profound works on this issue. Dinh Thi Dung (2001) provided a detailed analysis of the Nguyen Dynasty's diplomatic policies, asserting that relations with Siam were Hue's top foreign policy priority in the early 19th century. The author highlighted the pragmatism in Minh Mang's policies when faced with the Chakri Dynasty's ambitions. Notably, the most recent research by Nguyen Van Luan (2024) offers

a comprehensive view of Vietnam-Siam relations from the perspective of regional political structural transformation.

Nguyen Van Luan argued that the confrontation in Laos was not just a clash of military might but a Nguyen Van Luan thought that the confrontation in Laos was not only a military force battle but a "sophisticated diplomatic chessboard" with small states such as Vientiane trying to use the contradictions between the two powers to secure their survival. Regarding economic and commercial grounds, Nguyen Van Luan (2010) also indicated that the struggle of influence could not be independent of the interests in the trade routes along the Mekong River and in the resources in Laos. Political control went hand-in-hand with establishing commercial monopolies, which both Hue and Bangkok sought to dominate. Also, in his analysis of the Nguyen economy and society Nguyen The Anh (1970) reported that the excessive spending on military campaigns in the western borderlands had been a heavy burden on national economy indirectly influencing subsequent ability to resist colonialism.

In general, while significant research has been conducted, clarifying the transition from dialogue to direct confrontation in specific Lao localities requires further detailed analysis. Most studies agree that the Chao Anouvong rebellion (1827) was a decisive turning point that fundamentally altered the attitudes of both courts (Luu Van Loi, 2007). Nevertheless, the effects of this competition in the development of modern boundaries between Laos, Vietnam and Thailand are still a potential area of future research. This article builds upon these established achievements while focusing more deeply on archival data to elucidate the tactical calculations of the Hue Court in responding to Siam's "eastward expansion" strategy.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

A. Theoretical Framework

To decipher the essence of the struggle for influence between Vietnam and Siam in Laos during the first half of the 19th century, this study employs a multi-layered theoretical framework that integrates classical Realism in international relations with indigenous Southeast Asian political models. This framework explains why the Lao territories turned out to be the center of conflict and how the two neighboring powers theorized their power.

First, Realism in international relations provides a critical lens through which to analyze the behavior of the Nguyen and Chakri dynasties. According to this theory, states are rational actors that constantly strive to maximize power and ensure security within an anarchic system (Waltz, 1979). In mainland Southeast Asia, the simultaneous rise of two powerful political entities in Hue and Bangkok created a "security dilemma." Any increase in influence by one party in Laos was perceived by the other as a direct threat to its national survival. As Nguyen Van Luan (2024) research suggests, military campaigns in Laos were not only expansionist but were also attempts at strategic positioning to create "buffer zones" in order to avoid conflicts with other incursions into core national territories.

Second, the study utilizes the Mandala Politics model to explain the region's specific power structures. In contrast to the contemporary ideas about national borders, the Mandala system considers power as emitted out in concentric circles around the main capital, decreasing in the periphery (Wolters, 1999). In this model, Lao principalities like Vientiane or Luang Prabang often functioned as "dual vassals," paying tribute to both Vietnam and Siam so that their independence could be preserved (Thiphakorawong, 1978). There was warfare when the two regional giants attempted to convert these loose tributary relationships into actual administrative jurisdiction- a display of the tension between the new Western-style thinking of Western territories and the traditional Mandala order.

Third, the concept of Balance of Power is employed to analyze diplomatic strategies. The Hue Court under Emperor Minh Mang skillfully utilized alliances and military might to counterbalance Siam's "eastward expansion" (Dinh Thi Dung, 2001). The Chao Anouvong rebellion is an ideal case of attempting to restore balance when Siam attempted to upset the status quo in the Mekong basin. This is congruent with Tsuboi's (1987) sentiments of the continued struggle by the Nguyen Dynasty to establish its "Son of Heaven" status in a multipolar but hierarchical regional order.

Additionally, theories regarding the Geopolitics of Resources and Trade serve as a supplementary component. Controlling Laos equated to holding the cross-mountain trade routes connecting the East Sea with the interior of mainland Southeast Asia (Nguyen Van Luan, 2010). The convergence of national security and economic interests formed a two-fold drive of intervention. This was a "geopolitical administrative institutionalization," strategy by the Nguyen Court to transform remote areas into an inseparable element of the national defense system by creating administrative districts in the western borderlands (Quoc su quan trieu Nguyen, 2005).

Finally, this framework considers the impact of Western Colonialism as an external variable. Britain in Burma and France in the East Sea forced Vietnam and Siam to change their actions to face them by more complicated diplomatic calculations aimed at remaining independent (Luu Van Loi, 2007). The combination of these theories enables the article to offer a unified view: the conflict in Laos was a consequence of an encounter between innate hegemonic desires, traditional Mandala systems of power, and geopolitical pressures from global powers.

B. Research Methodology

To investigate the struggle for influence between Vietnam and Siam in Laos during the first half of the 19th century, this article employs a multi-disciplinary methodological framework, integrating historical materialism with concepts from geopolitics and international relations analysis. This approach allows the author not only to reconstruct historical events but also to decode the underlying motives driving the strategic decisions of the two dynasties.

The main approach that will be used is the Historical Method that will allow analyzing the conflicts in Laos as the part of the ongoing development of the 19th-century context of Southeast Asia. The alignment of Vietnam-Siam relationships to the Gia Long period and the Minh Mang period allows determining the transitions between the diplomatic friendliness and the military conflict (Nguyen Van Luan, 2024). At the same time, the Logical Method is incorporated to extrapolate the difference events into an orderly system of principles of interactions between the major powers and the buffer zones, thus eliciting the gist of the regional hegemonic struggle (Dinh Thi Dung, 2001).

A pivotal technique in this study is the Comparative Historical Method. The author conducts a cross-analysis of official history of the Vietnamese (such as the *Dai Nam Thuc Luc*) and Siamese royal chronicles (such as *The Dynastic Chronicles*). This analogy is essential because both sides documented things based on certain political inclinations. An example of this is the Chao Anouvong rebellion, which the Vietnamese perceived as a sign of supporting an ally, but the Siamese viewed as the Vietnamese interfering in its internal matters (Thiphakorawong, 1978). This multi-dimensional comparison assists in distilling historical truth from political rhetoric and elucidating the differences in the power discourse of each side (Luu Van Loi, 2007).

Furthermore, the article employs Documentary Analysis to maximize the utility of archived economic and military records. The information on taxation, trade routes, and military distribution on the western frontier is evaluated to shed light on the practical interests of political ambitions (Nguyen Van Luan, 2010). This method is further supported by a Geopolitical Approach, which identifies the significance of spatial factors, terrain, and the strategic location of Lao muang for the national security of both Dai Nam and Bangkok (Nguyen The Anh, 1970).

The research also places a strong emphasis on an Interdisciplinary Method, borrowing concepts from political science such as the "Security Dilemma" and "Balance of Power" to explain the complex diplomatic behaviors of Emperor Minh Mang. This method enables the article to go beyond the constraints of conventional narrative history towards the more highly theoretical analysis that satisfies the requirements of the high standards of international scholarly journals (Tsuboi, 1987).

In terms of sources, the study is founded on three key pillars: (1) official histories and administrative repertoires of the Nguyen Dynasty; (2) translated Siamese royal chronicles; and (3) the contemporary scholarship of the local and foreign scholars that is published in the high-authority journals (Quoc su quan trieu Nguyen, 2002; Woodside, 1971). The data processing process includes a series of actions: data collection,

classification, critical analysis, synthesis, and drafting. This ensures high objectivity and scientific reliability for the article's conclusions.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. The Shifting Status of Lao Principalities in The Strategies of Vietnam and Siam

The shifting status of the Lao principalities during the first half of the 19th century was not merely a process of territorial reconfiguration but the definitive result of a collision between two indigenous imperial ambitions in mainland Southeast Asia. The Lao political space at this time was not a unitary entity but was a formation of *muang* (principalities) including Vientiane, Luang Prabang and Champasak, which existed under the Mandala political model of fluid power relations and "dual vassalage" to survive (Wolters, 1999). Nevertheless, with the Emperor Gia Long and the King Rama I, a quiet shift started as both Vietnam and Siam came to understand that Laos was not only a business ally but a geostrategic base that defined the safety of the metropole. To the Hue Court, these principalities served as a western "security belt" in defense of the central Vietnamese heartland, and Bangkok saw them as an extension of the Khorat Plateau, a required shield to defend against Vietnamese control of the Mekong basin (Nguyen Van Luan, 2024).

This shift intensified during the reign of Emperor Minh Mang (1820–1841), when Nguyen Dynasty governance transitioned from a loose protectorate to direct "administrative institutionalization." The formation of prefectures like Tran Ninh, Lac Bien, Tran Tinh and Tran Man bore witness to an attempt to substitute the socio-cultural influence with strict bureaucratic control (Quoc su quan trieu Nguyen, 2002). Dinh Thi Dung (2001) asserts that the activities of Minh Mang were not only economically driven but mainly to establish an unbroken line of military posts along the Truong Son range to convert the frontier areas into organic parts of the Dai Nam Empire to balance the Siamese expansion. In response, Siam under Rama III executed a fierce "Eastward expansion" strategy, utilizing a combination of overwhelming military force and the Chakri Dynasty's title system to co-opt local chieftains (Thiphakorawong, 1978).

This status struggle thrust the Lao states, particularly the Kingdom of Vientiane, into a devastating demographic and geopolitical war, in which Siam implemented forced migration policies to deplete the resources available for exploitation by the Nguyen Court (Nguyen Van Luan, 2024). As Luu Van Loi (2007) noted, the Lao principalities gradually lost their natural independence in the Mandala system to become chess pieces in the conflict between two regional powers. This inescapably led to the collapse of native political systems as the Hue Court more or less appointed the officials itself and introduced tax systems, which in fact destroyed the old system (Tsuboi, 1987). The transition from "autonomous buffer zones" to "directly contested territories" led to catastrophic military outcomes after 1827, creating a "power vacuum" and exhausting the resources of both nations (Nguyen The Anh, 1970). This collision of imperial ambitions eventually, as Woodside (1971) and Wyatt (2003) both indicated, redraw the political map of the region, and in spite of it was contributing to the infiltration of Western colonialists during the late 19th century who drew up modern territorial boundaries (Nguyen Dynasty Royal Historical Bureau, 2005).

B. The Chao Anouvong Rebellion (1827) and the Military Turning Point

The rebellion of Chao Anouvong in 1827 was not merely an internal crisis of the Kingdom of Vientiane but served as the primary catalyst that fundamentally altered the nature of relations between the Nguyen Dynasty and the Chakri Dynasty from amity to direct military confrontation. Before this incident, although it had a latent competition over influence, both Hue and Bangkok were working on keeping a wilting balance by diplomatic ceremony and respect of the traditional buffer zones.

However, Chao Anouvong's ambition to reclaim independence from Siam forced these two regional powers into an irreversible "security dilemma." When Chao Anouvong launched attacks on Siam's northeastern provinces, he placed his trust in military support from the Hue Court a calculation based on the long-standing tributary relationship between Vientiane and Dai Nam (Quoc su quan trieu Nguyen, To the court of Emperor Minh Mang, this uprising was both a chance to broaden the influence to the west of the Mekong River and a significant geopolitical threat that could destabilize the situation in the region the Nguyen Dynasty was trying to preserve (Nguyen Van Luan, 2024).

Siam's response under Rama III to this uprising was exceedingly resolute and devastating, characterized by a "scorched earth" policy aimed at obliterating Vientiane's potential. The rapid defeat of Chao Anouvong's forces and the subsequent occupation of the capital, Vientiane, by Siamese troops triggered a wave of refugees and the collapse of the Mandala system in Laos. According to records in *The Dynastic Chronicles of the Bangkok Era*, Siam viewed Anouvong's actions as a grave betrayal of the Chakri Dynasty, necessitating a punitive deterrent against all other Lao muangs (Thiphakorawong, 1978).

The fall of Vientiane placed the Hue Court in a profound dilemma: failing to intervene would damage Dai Nam's "Son of Heaven" status and prestige among its vassals; however, deep intervention made a full-scale war with Siam inevitable. Emperor Minh Mang initially chose a middle way out and sent troops to secure the western border and sent envoys to Bangkok to investigate intentions of the adversary (Dinh Thi Dung, 2001). However, as the Siamese forces started chasing Chao Anouvong to the lands that were regarded as protectorates by the Nguyen Dynasty, including Tran Ninh, the war became a clash of diplomacy and the actual military action on the ground.

The true military turning point commenced when the Hue Court decided to grant sanctuary and protection to Chao Anouvong after his initial defeat. Bangkok viewed this move as meddling in internal matters and a sign of Vietnamese expansionist intentions (Luu Van Loi, 2007). The mountainous areas of west of Thanh Hoa and Nghe An, involved in skirmishes between the Nguyen army and the Siamese forces, revealed discrepancies in military doctrine and logistical capabilities. Even though the Siamese took advantage of their familiarity with the Lao terrain and intelligence sources in the local muangs, the Nguyen army was in great difficulty because of the geographical distance and the severity of the climate in the frontiers (Nguyen The Anh, 1970). The 1827 events formally ended the period of cold peace, which had been developed under the reign of Gia Long and forced Emperor Minh Mang to carry out large-scale defense reforms in which the security focus was no longer based on the north, but on the west and south (Nguyen Van Luan, 2024). This conflict not only exhausted the national treasury but also gave rise to the system of deep defensive lines across the Truong Son range turning the Lao lands into a battlefield of the next several decades (Nguyen Van Luan, 2010).

Furthermore, geopolitical analysis indicates that the Anouvong rebellion revealed the fragility of buffer states in the face of indigenous imperial ambitions. According to Tsuboi (1987), the Nguyen Dynasty's intervention in this event was an attempt to establish a regional order based on administrative institutionalization, in stark contrast to Siam's loose tributary system. The establishment of new administrative units by the Nguyen Court in the borderlands following the 1827 incident was an effort to "legitimize" territorial control while preventing Siamese presence at strategic locations (Quoc su quan trieu Nguyen, 2005). However, this battle of attrition of human and material resources unwittingly undermined the internal power of both Dai Nam and Siam just before the onset of Western colonial invasion (Woodside, 1971). The eventual downfall of Chao Anouvong and the equalization of Vientiane brought to an end a Lao political unit that could serve as a counterbalance, making the mainland Southeast Asian landscape a two-sided chess board between Hue and Bangkok (Wyatt, 2003). Finally, the 1827 crisis was the "point of no return," and short-term tactical decisions turned into a strategic face-off, which would determine the map of conflict and diplomacy in the region until the end of the 19th century (Nguyen Van Luan, 2024).

C. Geopolitical Consequences and the Formation of Provisional Spheres of Influence

The protracted struggle for influence between the Nguyen Dynasty and the Chakri Dynasty in Laos did not cease with transient military engagements but left profound geopolitical consequences, directly shaping the provisional spheres of influence and the regional security structure of mainland Southeast Asia. The main and most drastic effect was the complete destruction of the classical model of the governance of the so-called "buffer zone", which was substituted by a bipolar order that adds the direct opposition between Hue and Bangkok. Prior to the 19th century, the Lao political space existed as a "gray zone" with fragmented power, where principalities maintained survival through a loose balance of power. However, Emperor Minh Mang's efforts toward "administrative institutionalization" annexing western muangs into Dai Nam administrative units such as Tran Ninh, Tran Tinh, and Lac Bien created a territorial entity with more defined boundaries (Quoc su quan trieu Nguyen, 2002). Nguyen Van Luan (2024) indicates that this was a radical change in the territorial logic of the

Hue Court, who tried to convert the symbolic power of the tributary system into the practical administrative regulation to create a strong security shield around the national heartland.

Conversely, Siam responded by establishing more stringent control over the right bank of the Mekong River, transforming this region into a strategic base to halt Vietnamese "eastward expansion." The formation of these spheres of influence inadvertently bifurcated the Lao cultural and political space into two parts, each of which fell under the influence of different currents of power. These tentative boundaries, according to Dinh Thi Dung (2001), were not only instituted with military outposts or landmarks but also through forced migrations and changes in the titling of local chieftains. The policy of clearing populations on the left bank to move to the right bank that was adopted by Siam permanently transformed the demographic map of the region, forming a strategic "empty land" (Thiphakorawong, 1978). This underscores Bangkok's ambition to redefine security perimeters based on the control of human resources rather than mere geographical lines.

A second geopolitical consequence was the decline in the autonomy of Lao principalities, causing these entities to entirely lose their role as intermediaries in regional international relations. The disintegration of Kingdom of Vientiane in 1827 and the consequent undermining of the strength of Luang Prabang had turned Laos into a "power vacuum" that both Hue and Bangkok aimed to fill with military power (Luu Van Loi, 2007). The heavy drain on national resources by the frontier campaigns placed a heavy burden on the economies of both Dai Nam and Siam. According to Nguyen The Anh (1970), the permanent presence of the officials and troops in the rugged western highlands drained the Nguyen treasury, which indirectly undermined the defensive ability of the country against the impending Western colonialism. Similarly, an over-concentration on mainland continents compelled Siam to deal with complicated diplomatic problems as Britain and France began to expand their footprint in the region (Tsuboi, 1987).

Ultimately, the formation of provisional spheres of influence between Vietnam and Siam in Laos served as the direct precursor to border negotiations with French colonialists in the late 19th century. The territories that the Nguyen Court meticulously "institutionalized" through blood and effort later became the legal and physical basis for French colonialists under the guise of "protecting" Vietnam to reclaim control of the Mekong's left bank from the Siamese (Nguyen Van Luan, 2010). The collision of these two internal imperial ambitions inadvertently created a geographical framework that colonial powers later inherited and "Westernized" through modern international treaties. As analyzed by Woodside (1971) and Wyatt (2003), without the intense competition for influence by the Nguyen and Chakri dynasties in the early 19th century, the configuration of modern mainland Southeast Asian borders might have assumed a vastly different form. The establishment of these boundaries, though provisional and contested, marked the end of the traditional Mandala order and the start of the period of nation-states, having a definite territorial sovereignty (Nguyen Dynasty Royal Historical Bureau, 2005; Nguyen Van Luan, 2024).

IV. CONCLUSION

The investigation into the struggle for influence between Vietnam and Siam in Laos during the first half of the 19th century reveals a complex geopolitical landscape where indigenous imperial ambitions collided and redefined the regional order. The results of the research corroborate that Vietnam-Siam relations at this time changed to the state of conditional amity under Gia Long to the state of "comprehensive strategic confrontation" under Minh Mang. This shift was not only based on frontier warfare but also on the collision of two different systems of governance: the centralized administrative institutionalization of the Nguyen Dynasty and the free-flowing and militaristic tributary system of the Chakri Dynasty. The establishment of prefectures such as Tran Ninh and Lac Bien by the Nguyen court exemplified a strategic logic that viewed buffer zones as organic components of national security an effort to transform "symbolic influence" into "actual sovereignty".

The Chao Anouvong rebellion of 1827 served as the pivotal event, exposing the limitations of the traditional Mandala system and forcing both powers to mobilize maximum resources for an arms race in the Mekong basin. This study indicates that the Hue Court's intervention was not merely to protect a vassal but was a concerted effort to assert its status as a "regional superpower" against Bangkok's "eastward expansion". Nevertheless, to this claim came a heavy price in terms of loss of both financial and human resources by the two countries.

According to modern historians, being mired in the politics of continental conflicts severely compromised the defensive skills and political savvy of the two dynasties just before they faced Western colonialism. These tentative spheres of influence created in this period, although controversial and temporary, unintentionally gave the structure to subsequent colonial mapping and contemporary national boundaries.

Furthermore, the research derives critical lessons regarding the art of diplomacy and frontier management in a multipolar context. The failure to maintain an autonomous buffer zone in Laos led to a "zero-sum game," where neither Vietnam nor Siam could achieve absolute victory, yet both sustained long-term losses. In the modern international landscape, 19th-century records of Vietnam-Siam relations offer profound reference points for addressing border issues and maintaining regional stability based on mutual respect for sovereignty. Although the late 19th-century loss of diplomatic control over the Nguyen court by the French colonial power terminated a period of independent feudal diplomacy, the marks of influence spheres and power relations between Hue and Bangkok can still be traced in the geopolitical setup of Southeast Asia. Overall, the article adds a multidimensional aspect to the analysis, moving beyond ethno-centric historical accounts to achieve an objective picture of how indigenous states constructed their survival space in the face of the great changes of the time.

A. Future Perspectives and Scholarly Contributions

Beyond the historical narrative, this study opens several avenues for future research. First, the effects of 19th-century Vietnam-Siam rivalry on the exact delimiting of contemporary borders are a promising area of interdisciplinary study between history and political geography. Second, additional work on the socio-economic changes in Lao local communities during this period of direct intervention would be a more bottom-up view of the "Mandala" to "Nation-State" transformation. Lastly, the foreign policies of the Nguyen Dynasty and especially Emperor Minh Mang provide deep historical points of reference to the present day stability and respect of sovereignty of the region in a modern multipolar Southeast Asia.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declare that there is no conflict of interest concerning the publishing of this paper.

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