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Multipolar Infrastructures and Mosaic Geopolitics in Laos

Jessica DiCarlo and Micah Ingalls

Three decades since the fall of the Soviet Union, the media is again rife with Cold War rhetoric as China takes a more assertive stance globally. China's expansion in, for example, lending, infrastructure, and diplomacy, has prompted debates on whether China's rise and US reactions to it will create new Cold War dynamics. Although the tensions between China and competing powers – principally the US – have global dimensions, they arguably play out more concretely in third countries. This has become particularly apparent in Southeast Asia and in the infrastructure sector. Indeed, a 2021 article in *The Economist* contends that 'the rivalry between America and China will hinge on southeast Asia'. According to media and some recent academic scholarship, Southeast Asia has become a linchpin in China's strategic and infrastructural engagement, particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Hiebert, 2020; Lampton et al, 2020; Strangio, 2020). Shambaugh (2020) adds to these perspectives the need to consider US competition in the region alongside China.

Laos – low-income, landlocked, and historically considered isolated and peripheral – is centrally located on a primary BRI corridor to Southeast Asia, ostensibly situating the country at the heart of US–China competition. However, in Laos, like many other countries in Southeast Asia, there is little desire within the government to choose between powers – Washington, Beijing, or otherwise. However, at the moment in the infrastructure sector, Laos does not need to choose between the US and China because it is already dominated by Chinese actors, the US is virtually non-existent, and the Lao government instead draws on other regional actors to balance China. These other regional and multilateral actors thus end up playing a far more significant role in the Lao government's spatial projects than the US.

China is by far the largest and most significant investor in infrastructure, the largest provider of aid, largest holder of Lao sovereign debt, and second-largest trading partner. While Laos is typically viewed as a weak state susceptible to Chinese control, it has historically used infrastructure, investment, and aid to balance geopolitical relations and continues to do so. Yeh (2016, 227) points out that ‘the crux of the issue is less about “weak” and “strong” states than it is about how Chinese investment may enable a reconfiguration or reinforcement of state power’. Laos shows that host countries can capitalize on geopolitical competition and regional politics to pursue their own spatial projects. Here, the BRI’s emphasis on infrastructure aligns with Laos’s primary spatial and development goals: to extend its reach to rural areas and their extractable resources, and to connect to its regional neighbours by becoming ‘landlinked’ and the ‘battery of Southeast Asia’. These strategies give rise to overlapping, often competing, ‘jurisdictions’, and effectively shape new forms of governance. As Laos leverages international commitments to infrastructure as a means of geopolitical balancing and (re)orients toward Sino-centric value chains to pursue domestic development agendas, the scale of the projects involved require massive oversight and expertise that the current system lacks. The strengthening of institutional capacity within specific bureaucratic entities that can manage these spatial projects thus becomes the objective of state restructuring (Brenner, 2004). Institutional reforms allow the Lao state to pursue new spatial strategies and expand infrastructure networks at an accelerated pace and scale, financed and supported by the BRI.

This chapter offers two contributions. First, it problematizes grandiose new Cold War narratives by contextualizing the processes that are discussed in faraway offices in Washington and Beijing. We argue that bipolar new Cold War rhetoric does not aptly capture the Lao infrastructural experience, which is instead characterized by an array of actors and interests that the Lao government has negotiated since well before the BRI. The Lao government has demonstrated an aptitude for successfully manoeuvring between various countries, donors, and international organizations who rush to offer aid or development finance and secure influence. Within Laos’s infrastructural balancing act, the US is ostensibly absent. Instead, ‘Japan, Thailand, and Vietnam [are vying] with China for influence’ (Jennings, 2021).

Second, we propose reframing debates on infrastructural competition to focus on the ways in which BRI investments align with host state interests and prompt internal restructuring. When a host state like Laos deems a project desirable, it can often quickly adopt new ideas, policies, hopes and expectations as a means of mobilizing domestic support. Indeed, infrastructure is often desired by host countries – here this could mean local elites, specific ministries, or central governing bodies – who identified infrastructures gaps and may benefit from certain projects. In

Laos, Chinese investment has previously been shown to reinforce Lao state control in peripheries (Tan, 2012). Today, with the BRI, national development goals are not giving in to Chinese demands, but rather incorporate problems and agendas that have been on the table much longer than the BRI. The key question that arises across Lao government ministries is how to juggle and benefit from a deluge of projects and investment capital.

The next section traces some of the historical legacies that inform infrastructural geopolitics today, drawing out the heterogeneity of actors with long relations in the country. This is followed by a section that explores how state restructuring takes place in connection to Laos's main development objectives concerned with connectivity and energy. These examples show how the Lao state engages infrastructure development on its own accord, as well as in response to the array of interests from other countries such as Vietnam, China, and Japan that observers have suggested are 'pulling Laos apart'. We conclude that Laos draws on longstanding regional relations for investment capital and political alliance in ways that allow for internal institutional reforms not bound by the kinds of conditionalities that often come with Western development aid and investments.

Historical legacies of contemporary infrastructural geopolitics

Multiple influences, including elite politics, infrastructural legacies, and competition among regional powers and organizations, have led to a diverse landscape of variously complementary, conflicting, and overlapping personal and institutional relations that we refer to as *mosaic geopolitics*. First, contemporary geopolitical relations between Laos, its neighbours, and the world have been shaped and informed by elite political relations that are rooted in the past. As Laos emerged from its colonial relations with Europe – significantly aided by Vietnam, and to a lesser degree China – postcolonial restructuring also entailed close relations with the Soviet Union. With the end of the Cold War, new patterns of aid and alliance emerged as Western governments sought to shore up the Lao state and secure access and influence. As a direct result of these political and aid-dependent relations and Cold War era restructuring, the contemporary Lao elite have been educated across the world – in Russia and the former Soviet republics, in China, Vietnam, Japan, the US, and Australia, to name a few. Virtually every senior government person was educated abroad – most in the former Soviet Union, China, or Vietnam. For example, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Saleumxay Kommasith studied at Moscow State University; President Sisoulith studied at the Leningrad State Pedagogical Institute and later was the head of the National University of Laos's Russian language programme; while the children of Quinim Pholsena

grew up in China and now hold positions as, variously, the Vice President of the National Assembly, Minister of Industry and Commerce, Head of the President's Office, and Member of the Central Committee of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) and Attaché of the Lao Military to Beijing. These relations affect the channels of access to decision makers.

In addition, Laos's contemporary geopolitics are informed by infrastructural legacies – from the colonial period through the Indochinese conflicts to Cold War era restructuring. Discursively framing Laos as disconnected and backward is not new. As far back as the 17th century, the kingdom of Lan Xang (part of which now constitutes Laos) was referred to as 'the land in between' (Evans, 2002). Considered a 'backwater' (Gunn, 1990) under French colonialism, Laos was not recognized as a state, but rather perceived as a part of Indochina, as a Vietnamese hinterland, and as a route to China. During this time, the French aimed to achieve the *mise en valeur* (value creation) of Lao territory primarily through the construction of transportation infrastructures and trading posts (Stuart-Fox, 1995). However, when rivers failed as navigable routes to southern China, the Colonial Council of Cochinchina announced a plan to build a railway to Yunnan. This, too, did not materialize due to insurmountable costs, terrain, and distance (DiCarlo, 2021). As a result of the mountainous terrain in the north and east as well as challenges of river travel on the Mekong, the goal of *débloquement*, or unblocking Laos, turned to road development in order to access natural resources (Dwyer, 2016). This expansion depended on both the dream of accessing Lao territory and the physical infrastructures themselves. While *mise en valeur* was not realized by the French, their 1930s road construction programme – which aimed to delink Laos from Siam in favour of roads to Indochina – was extolled as a success for making Laos part of Indochina (Ivarsson, 2008). Visions of infrastructural 'success' coupled with their failures foreshadow a recurrent vision of Lao territory as a bridge and pivot point in the region.

The proclamation of the Lao People's Democratic Republic on 2 December 1975 by the LPRP placed the country firmly in the socialist sphere, solidifying 'fraternal' relations with communist neighbours China and Vietnam, as well as the Soviet Union. These fraternal relations were by no means smooth. In particular, tensions between Vietnam and China were rife during Laos's early postcolonial years. Vietnam took on a more directive role in supporting and building up the bureaucratic and military capacities of the nascent state. China, meanwhile, was actively involved in fomenting anti-LPRP resistance in Laos until the mid-1980s, including the promotion of an alternative, pro-China communist party, and the arming of Hmong insurgency (Dwyer et al, 2016). While Sino-Viet tensions cooled through the 1990s and early 2000s, their historical antagonism nevertheless shaped their differential relations with Laos.

Laos's 'special relationship' with Vietnam has long been a dominant feature in Laos's political life. While this relationship is at its root largely political, it has found material expression in preferential trade deals and the favourable treatment of Vietnamese investment companies. With China's growing interest in Laos as both an important geopolitical partner and a frontier of economic opportunity, China has increased not only its capital investments in infrastructure and other sectors but also its investment in the political organs of the Lao state. In a significant show of solidarity, for instance, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) donated millions of dollars to support the LPRP's 10th Party Congress in 2016 (Sayalath and Creak, 2017), assuming the role of political benefactor alongside Vietnam. The degree to which overtures such as this are sufficient to destabilize Vietnam's special place in Laos's political calculus remains to be seen, but the winds of change, it would appear, are certainly blowing.

Beyond fraternal relations, the Lao government has pursued integration into the global economy through regional organizations and trade agreements. Within regional frameworks, Laos plays a key role in transportation and energy strategies. The two most infrastructurally significant regional initiatives to which Laos is a party, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Asian Development Bank's (ADB) Greater Mekong Subregion Initiative (GMS), focus on trade, logistics and enhanced connectivity through roads construction. Laos joined ASEAN in March 1996, and infrastructure is one of the four pillars of the ASEAN Integration Framework (the others are human resource development, information and communication technology, and regional economic integration). This assumes that investment in roads, energy systems, and public projects will develop the supply side of the Lao economy, reduce its reliance on the mineral sector, and foster pro-poor growth.

In earlier years, ASEAN was commonly seen as a regional counterbalance to China. However, this appears to be changing. January 2010 saw the launch of the China–ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (Creak, 2011), and in 2015 ASEAN and China agreed to higher levels of economic cooperation. In line with South–South development, some ASEAN members position China as an ally against Western powers, whereby: 'China serves as a kind of screen from Western countries and non-governmental organizations which seek progress in the areas of human rights and the democratization of their political system' (Pholsena and Banomyong, 2006, 44). Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia tend to fall in this camp as they demonstrate support for China through, for example, the 2019 letter supporting China's Xinjiang policies (Yellinek and Chen, 2019) or defence of the 'one China policy'. At the same time, Laos's political proximity to Vietnam leads the government to take the middle ground on some sensitive regional disputes; Laos and Cambodia have demonstrated support for China through, for example, actions to block

anti-Chinese positions in ASEAN, such as those relating to the South China Sea (Wong, 2017). Chinese officials continue to emphasize their fraternal relations within Laos and the pivotal role it plays in BRI in Southeast Asia. During a state visit to Laos in 2016, Xi Jinping referred to Laos and China as an ‘unshakable community of common destiny’ (FMPRC, 2016). Later in November 2017, Xi met with Lao President Vorachit and signed multiple cooperation pacts on infrastructure, economic zones, trade, and energy, as well as military contracts. During his visit, Xi referred to Laos as China’s ‘iron brother’, the same language used (only) of Pakistan, also in reference to the country’s crucial role in geopolitics, in that case on the western front.

China’s strategy appears to focus on finding areas of common interest surrounding trade and investment, bringing countries more squarely into its economic orbit through networks of investment, production, and trade wherein China functions as the hub. Ultimately, this creates relations of dependency that forestall efforts to articulate independent policies (Goh, 2014). This is clear from Laos’s enthusiastic embrace of the BRI (Lampton et al, 2020; Kuik, 2021). Lampton et al (2020, 84) characterize the Lao state response to ‘big economic power inducement’ as that of ‘receptive embrace’. While this may be the case, large-scale infrastructure projects in Laos are outward-oriented in multiple directions, and also driven by domestic developmental objectives. The BRI, for example, is doubly appealing because infrastructure has been at the centre of Lao national development strategy since the first National Socio-Economic Development Plan (1981–85). Prior to the BRI and US–China rivalry, Stuart-Fox noted in 2009 that China was a rising force in the Lao economy, offering development projects from agribusiness to hydropower and urban infrastructures that claim to lift the country out of poverty. These projects were not as transnationally oriented as the BRI, so today Laos explicitly engages infrastructure-led development to ‘get the territory right’ and enhance its regional integration (Schindler and Kanai, 2021), looking to China as a role model.

While China is the clear leader, the broader picture of infrastructure construction and finance is a mosaic of bilateral and multilateral relations. Competition in the field of infrastructure is backed by two sources of capital: foreign direct investment (FDI) and development aid and finance. China is the largest provider of FDI, followed by Vietnam and Thailand. Chinese FDI in Laos has grown as Chinese firms seek alternative manufacturing sites to avoid US tariffs that have resulted from the US–China trade dispute (Yuvejwattana, 2019). In terms of development aid and finance, the Japan-led Asian Development Bank (ADB) is the largest donor, followed by Japan (the largest bilateral donor), followed by South Korea. In the field of development finance, competition between Japan and China is evident. However, it follows the familiar pattern of competition–collaboration even in Laos, such as in the upgrading of the nation’s key international airport in

Vientiane that involved both Japanese and Chinese finance. Meanwhile the mosaic pattern of investors can be traced throughout the capital, where for example South Korea improved tourist infrastructure on the Mekong, and Chinese capital built international conference halls and is currently upgrading Vientiane's Mahosot Hospital. Between FDI and aid, investment is spatially distributed, with much Chinese investment clustered in the north near the border, and Vietnamese investment in the south. Some observers suggest that this shows that Laos is being 'carved up' by the rush of international investors and actors. However, this does not consider how the Lao government may or may not be engaging in how such projects take shape, nor project proximity to border crossings from Vietnam and China that eases capital flows.

Although the US has yet to directly compete in infrastructure construction or finance in Laos, there are competing visions for the integration of Southeast Asia. The US supports the Asian Development Bank's (ADB) regional spatial plan under the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS). Although Japan has a lead operational role in the ADB and is the largest donor, the US and Japan are the largest shareholders in the ADB, each with a 15.6% stake (Runde and McKeown, 2019). The GMS largely began in 1992 with dominant support from Japan, an important piece in this geopolitical infrastructure puzzle, as a strategic counterbalance to China (Soong, 2016). Glassman (2010, 32) notes it is 'driven by more global, but highly uneven, capitalist investment, production, and trade, leading less to the integration of the GMS per se than to the integration of GMS countries into a much larger East Asian regional system'. Meanwhile, China's BRI as well as the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation links Chongqing with Singapore and would integrate the regional system along a north-south Sino-centric axis.

Western actors have begun to explicitly try to counter Chinese largesse. In Laos, US launched initiatives – such as Asia EDGE, Infrastructure Transaction and Assistance Network, and Clear Choice – constitute a BRI counter strategy. According to a USAID officer in Laos, “[n]o country can compete with China in terms of money for infrastructure”, hence US programmes aim to “build [Lao] government capacity to make better decisions and negotiate better terms [with Chinese actors]” (Interview, March 2019). In the words of USAID Administrator Mark Green:

Whenever you're dealing with China there's the great power competitions ... what we we're trying to do is help countries understand, from a development perspective, if they do choose the authoritarian model ... what the fine print is ... it's unsustainable debt very often. It's tying up strategic assets. In some cases, it's robbing particularly young citizens of their birth right ... access to natural resources. (USAID, 2018)

The Australian government also recognizes the BRI as an ‘important catalyst’ in regional infrastructure development. In 2019, it proposed the Southeast Asian Economic Governance and Infrastructure Facility, ‘to help improve infrastructure decision-making ... by building and enhancing government-to-government partnerships’ and focusing on planning, procurement, implementation support, policy, and regulations (Australian Government, 2019). The most recent G7 Build Back Better World (B3W) may reorient geopolitical competition in infrastructure construction or alternatively, as the Lao experiences suggests, with so many other actors and already cheap finance available the B3W might become one more ‘ball to juggle’.

A common perspective among Lao officials is that as China finances large infrastructures, then Laos needs complementary projects to be led by Japan and other actors. However, despite Laos’s complex geopolitics, China’s has come to exert a crucial influence on the apparatus of the Lao state, particularly regarding infrastructure investment and construction. At the same time, Laos pursues spatial objectives that enhance transnational integration through the mobilization of foreign loans and grants for infrastructure projects. The government has staked its legitimacy in part on its ability to realize developmental dividends through spatial projects while simultaneously navigating fraught politics and geopolitical tensions (Schindler et al, 2020). Thus, rather than a US-China new Cold War, on the ground infrastructural competition is better categorized through a lens of mosaic geopolitics. To further nuance the contours of powers at play the next section turns to how state restructuring has taken place to specifically accommodate Chinese projects.

State restructuring with an eye to China

State restructuring has been undertaken to pursue Laos’s primary spatial and developmental strategies: to transition from landlocked to ‘landlinked’ and achieve aspirations to become the ‘battery of Asia’. While the BRI is consistent with Laos’s domestic development agenda, this does not mean that alignment is a straightforward affair. Even as the BRI precipitated a proliferation of projects that the state was under-prepared to manage, Laos proved to be not simply a playground for geopolitical heavyweights. Rather, Laos undertook a substantial restructuring of key agencies to manage the influx of investments. Departments, advisory committees, and research groups have been formed or re-tasked with BRI-related mandates. Prior to the BRI, the Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI) established the Laos–China Department to oversee a large portfolio of projects, including mining, hydropower, and plantations. There are three foreign investment departments in MPI: Laos–China Cooperation Department, Laos–Vietnam Cooperation Department, and International Cooperation Department.

An MPI official explained, “there is just more certainty that we will work closely on big projects with China and Vietnam, so these offices [allow us to act] bilaterally and discuss issues directly if we have challenges” (Interview, June 2019). Other development actors, such as multilateral development banks, have expressed frustration that Chinese and Vietnamese actors do not attend the Annual Development Roundtable Meetings, preferring rather to maintain direct lines with Lao institutions, particularly those managing BRI projects.

An official in the National Institute for Economic Research (NIER) – which was created at the behest of former Prime Minister Bousaone Bouphavanh wherein he served as president – described a central purpose of the Institute as “supporting and managing Chinese investment in Laos. We are looking now to China for better investments. Vietnamese investments have not been so successful by comparison, and we don’t see much of a future in these.” (Interview, 2019) While such a mandate cannot be found in the formal charter of NIER, this informal characterization is meaningful, and largely supported by Bouphavanh’s first actions as its president. In 2016, just weeks before Xi Jinping’s first state visit to Laos, Bouphavanh visited China during which time a major investment deal on the Bolaven Plateau was agreed. While the outcome of this agreement remains to be seen, its scale and location – in Vietnam’s backyard – is symbolically significant.

State restructuring in Laos has also been undertaken for specific projects, for example the Laos–China Railway (LCR) and Laos–China Economic Corridor (LCEC) – both flagship BRI initiatives to link Laos with China and Southeast Asia. Rail is a well-recognized sector in which China and Japan compete, particularly in Southeast Asia (as other chapters in this volume explore). With the LCR, the Department of Railway under the Ministry of Public Works and Transport of Laos was rebranded the Laos–China Railway Department, and tasked to oversee the LCR. However, most of the planning, construction, and management fell to the Laos–China Railway Company, a Lao–Chinese joint venture established to develop, manage, and operate the project. In addition, ‘six special policies’ were instituted that allow state land to be used at no additional cost, tax exemptions are provided, domestic resource charges and import duties are waived, foreign residence fees for workers are reduced, related investments are encouraged.

Lao bureaucracies have been created and redirected to negotiate and manage projects with Chinese government counterparts and to coordinate different levels of the Lao government. Ministries focus on how to benefit from the deluge of projects and capital. Research desks have been formed to answer key questions related to the BRI. The Laos–China Committee, for example, was created to analyse and negotiate cooperation frameworks and in response to the LCR and the LCEC that was proposed to follow it. Its main task is macroeconomic analysis of agriculture, processing, services

and tourism, finance, and customs in northern Laos. The prime minister's office established a BRI committee for decisions regarding costs, benefits, how to move forward with the BRI, and which sectors to prioritize. The BRI is the starting point of the most recent five-year plan (2021–25), and national research institutes within the government were directed to conduct BRI-focused research to inform this plan.

Turning to the Mekong River offers an example of more active US involvement. The Mekong, much like the South China Sea, has become a geopolitical issue grounded in infrastructure construction. While the US does not compete in terms of infrastructure construction and finance, the Mekong is a central forum of US interest in Laos. The 1957 founding of the Coordination of Investigations of the Lower Mekong Basin (later known as the 'Mekong Committee') was a precursor of the Mekong River Commission, which the US saw as an integral component of its military strategy in Indochina – the carrot to the stick (Menon, 1971). Building on the Mekong Committee, the Lower Mekong Initiative was created in 2009 under Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Foreign Ministers of Lower Mekong countries, offering a means of expanding US government presence in the region. In September 2020, it was updated to the Mekong–US Partnership, Washington's aid plan and counterweight to China in continental Southeast Asia, including Laos. According to the US Department of Defense (2019, 40), 'China is increasingly focused on Laos, and Beijing continues efforts to expand its strategic footprint through large debt-fuelled investments, especially in infrastructure and energy'. However, the US Department of Defense has cited Laos as cautious, maintaining strong ties with Vietnam and Russia as defence partners.

Meanwhile, as the US attempts to increase engagement, the Lao government undertook perhaps the most significant restructuring efforts connected to China around *Électricité du Laos* (EdL), the state energy corporation. While EdL's finances are largely a black box, its debt levels were so high (largely due to sunk investments in hydropower projects) that the Lao state restructured its ownership stakes in EdL to keep it afloat. The government also created a new entity, the *Électricité du Laos Transmission Company Limited* (EdL-T). Assets were privatized and debts were renegotiated with China as the government attempted to secure new sources of short-term credit (see Barney and Souksakoun, 2020). Today, the state-owned enterprise China Southern Power Grid Company (CSG) holds a controlling stake in Laos's national grid, possibly up to 90 per cent of EdL-T. In exchange, CSG will complete construction of the transmission grid, thus allowing the Lao government to achieve its second core objective of regional energy connectivity. As Barney and Souksakoun (2020, 100) note, EdL 'has maintained that the sale does not represent a loss of sovereignty; that CSG is a large and professionally-run utility with deep pockets; and that

the completion of the domestic grid through the CSG investment could allow for more efficient and profitable distribution of energy production within the country'. They also suggest that this may allow EdL and EdL-T increased bargaining power with 'external off-takers', indicating that CSG may disrupt regional competition over electricity costs and distribution. As in other cases of state restructuring for infrastructure, however, many details of deals and negotiation processes remain behind closed doors, leaving the infrastructures themselves as the main evidence of such processes.

Conclusion

Critically examining the US–China rivalry in Laos as expressed through infrastructure reveals cracks in the notion of a 'new Cold War'. While geopolitical tension has undoubtedly intensified, bipolar rivalry is scarcely visible despite recent US overtures. Rather, other bilateral relations such as those with Vietnam, Japan, as well as Russia, remain pivotal for three reasons. They are not only investing in and building much of Laos's infrastructure, but they also have deep historical relations, and their capital and projects have become tools for the Lao government to balance Chinese investment, even as they lean into it.

While Vietnam and China are Laos's closest political allies, Moscow's linkages to Laos's local communist regime date back to the Cold War. As state restructuring demonstrates, Lao state agency allows certain countries to exert more influence than the US to balance China. For example, in July 2021 Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov visited Vientiane with special focus on the 'China challenge'. On the visit, Lao President Thongloun Sisoulith noted the close ties that Laos has maintained with its 'Russian brothers' over 60 years. Indeed, since the founding of Lao People's Democratic Republic in 1975, Russia has assisted by supplying food, goods, and vehicles. While Russia cannot compete with China at scale, the Lao government actively courted Russian support as a means of balancing China. The two countries are poised to engage in military infrastructure development as Moscow pledged to upgrade a Lao military airstrip,¹ supply military technology, and train Lao armed forces.

Still, Laos's integration to the global economy is largely and undeniably mediated by Chinese-backed projects. State restructuring for Chinese-backed projects hints at how Laos is increasingly shifting its geopolitical orbit on its own terms. As the Lao government embraces new spatial strategies, the BRI presents capital and momentum to achieve longstanding projects, but this necessitates state restructuring. The *raison d'être* for new governmental institutions and agendas is to design and produce an integrated territory, as a landlinked energy hub. This has not been without controversy – the social and environmental costs of the BRI have attracted scrutiny, especially

since economic gains have yet to materialize. However, Lao Prime Minister Sisoulith assured members of the National Assembly that the economy will pick up and indeed grow beyond 2020 as BRI and mega-infrastructure projects – the railway, a ‘smart’ city, expressways, bridges, industrial farming, and processing facilities – ‘kick into gear’ (Phouthonesy, 2019).

Note

¹ Unexploded ordnances dropped by the US from 1964 to 1973 still have to be cleared from this area.

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