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THE VIET MINH OFFENSIVE IN LAOS

Viet Minh forces from Tonkin, which began advancing into Laos on 13 April, have now taken control of about one fifth of that country. This campaign has been virtually unopposed by French-led forces who have so far avoided contact with the enemy. The early establishment of a puppet Laotian government to rule the newly acquired territory may be expected.

Latest reports show that Viet Minh forces of about 19,000 are converging on the French defensive position on the Plaine des Jarres. The nearby town of Xieng Khouang has already been taken. One column of these forces numbering about 9,000 is advancing southward from the French post of Sam Neua, evacuated in mid-April, and the other of 10,000 is moving directly west. It is not certain, however, whether the Communists will hit the French here.

The 3,000-man garrison on the Plaine des Jarres is composed of two Foreign Legion and one Laotian battalion. It has been reinforced by some 2,000 additional native units retreating from Sam Neua. These forces are well entrenched in defensible terrain and they could only be overrun at great cost to the attackers. Therefore, the Viet Minh may bypass this position and proceed west toward the lightly defended cities of Luang Prabang, the historical capital, and Vientiane, the administrative headquarters of the government. On the other hand,

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it may stop at Xieng Khouang as the rainy season is fast approaching.

French reaction to the Viet Minh campaign in Laos has been characterized by extreme confusion. No immediate counter plan, except to defend the Plaine des Jarres, is known to have been formed. Strategy for the future, if any, has not been divulged to American observers. [redacted] 25X1

25X1 [redacted] The French Command itself is reported to be for the most part ignorant of Viet Minh strengths, dispositions, movements and intentions in Laos.

This is the current military picture. Now, what is behind the invasion of Laos?

Short term aims probably are:

1. An easy "real estate" victory;
2. A boost to Viet Minh prestige and morale;
3. A shot in the arm to Laotian dissidents;
4. An undermining of Laotian confidence in the French; and
5. A dispersion of French forces.

Long term aims probably are:

1. The build-up of an extensive "liberated area" in Indochina not readily accessible to French military action;
2. The use of northern Laos to create sounder economic support of the Viet Minh war effort;

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3. To link up with 50,000 Vietnamese in northern Thailand who are mostly sympathetic to the Viet Minh;

4. The setting up of a puppet government with the attributes of authority and with the outward appearances of popular support;

5. Preparations for an advance through Cambodia to attack the Saigon area via the back door; and

6. Paving the way for a Chinese invasion of Southeast Asia, if such is decided on in the future.

It may be assumed the Viet Minh has already achieved its short-term objectives. Its capability of attaining most of the long-range aims is good.

French-Laotian forces number only some 25,000 and are widely spread in static defense posts. Reinforcement from Vietnam is possible, but only by weakening badly needed strength in that country. In this connection, on 21 April the Viet Minh staged strong guerrilla attacks in the Tonkin delta and blew up a large French ammunition dump.

The Laotian people are racially distinct from the people of Vietnam. They would thus be resentful of encroachments by the Vietnamese Communist movement. They would not, however, vigorously resist Viet Minh attempts at political and military subjugation. In Cambodia, there would be more resistance, but the King announced in New York last week that the French could not count on his people for substantial aid in case of a Viet Minh invasion.

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An eventual attack on the Saigon area by a march down the Mekong valley might be possible but would be very difficult for logistical reasons. It would, however, out-flank the French position in Tonkin.

Northern Laos and a section of the Mekong valley is the best route for a Chinese invasion directed at Thailand and southern Indochina.

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