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13 December 1968

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: The US Assessment of North Vietnamese Military Strength in Laos.

1. It has never been possible to follow with either precision or confidence the ebb and flow of North Vietnamese troops in Laos. There are two broad reasons for this unhappy state of affairs, one having to do with the nature of North Vietnamese activity in Laos and the peculiar characteristic of the war that is being waged there, and the other having to do with limitations under which our intelligence gathering effort in Laos operates. The two factors are obviously related.

2. There are approximately 24,500 North Vietnamese combat troops in Laos, whose efforts are more or less directed against the Vientiane government. Spread-out along a rough line that runs about 700 miles from the Chinese border in the north to the Cambodian border in the south, the North Vietnamese furnish both the backbone and the muscle for the Communist movement in Laos. The number of North Vietnamese troops in Laos fluctuates with the seasons. In the so-called dry season, roughly between November and May, the Communists take the military offensive and troops are moved in from North Vietnam to spearhead attacks. When the rains come and overland travel becomes perilous and resupply of advanced units difficult and unreliable, the enemy moves to a defensive posture. Some of the North Vietnamese troops return to their home bases.

3. We had a classic case this past year, when elements of the NVA's 316th Division moved out of Mou Chau in late 1967, and then played a leading part in the Nam Bac campaign in January. They also cleaned up some of our other guerrilla outposts in the same area and returned to North Vietnam before

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the rainy season hit. The wheel apparently is now taking another turn as we get evidence [redacted] that the 316th may be preparing to cross the border into Laos once again.

4. Our ability to keep an accurate count of the Vietnamese movement is not very good. For one thing, we have no evidence that Hanoi employs a systematic group numbering system for units heading into Laos as they do for the troops on their way to South Vietnam. There are a number of logical reasons for this, including the difference in the numbers involved and the fact that the units going to Laos deploy as organic battalions--many of which have had previous experience in Laos--rather than as groups of green recruits, as in the case often in Vietnam.

5. We know, mostly from interrogation of prisoners and defectors, that the majority of the NVA units in Laos are old-timers. As the capability of government forces--particularly the tribal guerrillas--has increased over the past four or five years, Hanoi has been forced to keep increasing number of its troops in Laos on a more or less permanent basis. This is particularly true in the panhandle area, where Hanoi's interests are paramount and where the distance separating government bases from the vital infiltration corridor is not very great.

6. The substantial increase in North Vietnamese troops permanently assigned to Laos operations (about 8,000 more than one year ago), makes the job of forecasting a major Communist push more difficult. The fact is that we believe the enemy can take almost anything it wants in Laos--including cutting through to the Mekong--without bringing in great numbers of new troops or large stocks of supplies. Again this is especially true in the sensitive panhandle area. The well-developed road and trail net there enables the Vietnamese to move troops about quickly and, in a pinch, to move-up reinforcements.

7. The situation is a good deal different in the north where the distances and the practical problems involved in moving troops through mountainous

terrain would make it more difficult for the enemy to pull a major surprise against Luang Prabang, Long Tieng or even Na Khang. The substantial numbers of friendly guerrilla-intelligence gathering assets we deploy in these areas also make enemy surprise more difficult.

8. We are somewhat more apprehensive about the Plaine des Jarres (PDJ) area because the enemy maintains a sizeable force in close proximity to government lines and is served by a well developed supply corridor - Route 7. Our roadwatch teams give us a pretty fair count of what is moving on the road, but the fact remains that we are not able to obtain a good account of what the trucks are carrying. Our book-keeping indicates, however, that the Communists probably have substantial stockpiles in the PDJ area and can move against the friendly neutralists there with little warning.

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9. Although there is no reason for complacency the fact remains that we have had some tip-off prior to just about every major Communist attack in northern Laos in recent years. Last year, for example, we sounded the alarm in Nam Bac a month before the bastion fell. We knew the North Vietnamese were going after Phou Pha Thi well before they took it, and we correctly estimated that the North Vietnamese did not have enough assets in the immediate area to take Na Khang.

10. Our record is not nearly so good in the south. Countless rumors of impending enemy actions, the generally unreliable testimony of prisoners regarding Communist intentions (the North Vietnamese are always laying it on pretty thick with their troops and the locals--in part to keep morale up and also to scare the dickens out of the government when the words filters back.) and the heavy movement in the infiltration corridor most of which is unrelated to Laos, enables the enemy to keep from telegraphing its punches. Our estimate that the Communist posture is south Laos is essentially defensive--i.e. protect the infiltration corridor--has allowed us to call a

few of the shots before they happen--the late November attack against Thateng, for example, was almost certainly in response to a government clearing operation. We are not confident, however, that we could detect a major change in Communist strategy in the south. We have the intelligence assets, for example, to detect a Communist buildup in the Thakhek area--as we have in the past--but it would be extremely difficult to predict an upcoming thrust against that Mekong town.

11. Although the basic intelligence problem in the south strikes us as almost insoluble given the current realities there, some steps have been taken to increase our intelligence capabilities.

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Our best guess, however, is that Hanoi will not pull the plug on us in Laos at least until such time as they have played out their game in South Vietnam. We don't know anybody who feels particularly comfortable with this estimate of Hanoi's intentions, however, least of all our very capable people in Laos who are watching the enemy closely and often at close quarters.

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ANNEX

CIA ACTIVITIES TO MONITOR ENEMY INFILTRATION INTO LAOS

1. In anticipation of the possibility that the Communists would not honor the 1962 Geneva Accords, CIA developed a mechanism using ethnic Lao Roadwatch teams to report on North Vietnamese military incursions into northern Laos. This effort was initially very small and unsophisticated but as North Vietnamese military presence grew the program was expanded and its reporting techniques greatly improved. This information is now disseminated as acquired so that it can be exploited immediately and tactically by USAF or CIA irregular forces. At present, CIA roadwatch teams provide daily coverage on all major enemy infiltration routes into Laos. These routes are: 321 and 31 in northwest Laos from China; Route 19 in north central Laos from North Vietnam; Routes 6, 65 and 7 in north-east Laos from North Vietnam; Routes 8, 15 and 912 in south central Laos from North Vietnam; and Route 110 in south Laos from Cambodia. (See attached Map I for current CIA roadwatch team locations in north Laos and Map II for team locations in south Laos.)

2. Approximately 50 roadwatch teams are deployed tactically at any given time in order to report on the level of enemy infiltration into or through Laos to South Vietnam. In the latter instance the teams are deployed along Routes 12, 23, 911, 9, 91, 92, 922, 23 and 96, as well as several key rivers. The teams operate clandestinely in enemy-controlled areas adjacent to these arteries and report the volume, type, direction, time and other information about traffic moving past their observation points. Order of Battle information is also collected through contact with local villagers. An average team consists of 10 to 15 lightly armed men who carry, in addition to necessary field equipment,

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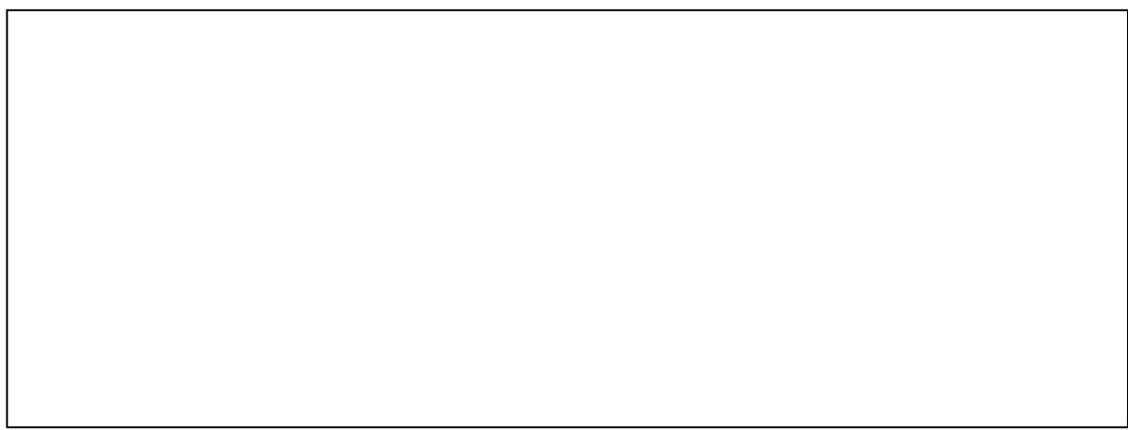
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3. The teams operating in north Laos have had more success in accurately monitoring the level of infiltration and the subsequent destination of enemy forces and materiel coming into Laos than have those in south Laos. This is due primarily to the difference in terrain between the north and the south. In the north the rugged mountainous terrain restricts the enemy to well defined roads and trails, thus making his movement easier to monitor. In the south the flatter terrain and heavy jungle or rain forests provide the enemy considerable cover and flexibility of movement making his whereabouts more difficult to detect. Nevertheless, with the aid of other intelligence sources -- agent nets, informants, prisoner and defector debriefings, overhead photography, [redacted] -- CIA believes it is able to provide reliable estimates on enemy plans and capabilities in Laos. From this all-source reporting the Agency has been able to provide early warning on enemy buildups and subsequent attacks at Nam Bac, Phou Pha Thi (Site 85), Na Khang (Site 36), Saravane, Attopeu and more recently the Chinese road construction in Laos. This effort produces over 200 positive intelligence reports per month which are disseminated immediately to field commanders in Vietnam, Thailand and Hawaii as well as the intelligence community in Washington, D.C.

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