

~~TOP SECRET~~ [redacted]

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SPECIAL NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE ESTIMATE

PROBABLE REACTIONS
TO CERTAIN COURSES OF ACTION
CONCERNING LAOS

NOTE: This is an advance copy of the estimate as approved by the United States Intelligence Board. The printed text will be circulated within five days of this issuance.



Central Intelligence Agency

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Submitted by the
DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

The following intelligence organizations participated in the preparation of this estimate: The Central Intelligence Agency and the intelligence organizations of the Departments of State, the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, and The Joint Staff.

Concurred in by the
UNITED STATES INTELLIGENCE BOARD

on 5 July 1961. Concurring were the Director of Intelligence and Research, Department of State; the Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence, Department of the Army; the Assistant Chief of Naval Operations (Intelligence), Department of the Navy; the Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence, USAF; the Director for Intelligence, Joint Staff; the Assistant to the Secretary of Defense, Special Operations; and the Director of the National Security Agency. The Atomic Energy Commission Representative to the USIB and the Assistant Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation, abstained, the subject being outside of their jurisdiction.

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C E N T R A L I N T E L L I G E N C E A G E N C Y

5 July 1961

SUBJECT: SNIE 58-2-61: PROBABLE REACTIONS TO CERTAIN COURSES
OF ACTION CONCERNING LAOS

THE PROBLEM

To estimate whether South Vietnam and the rest of South-east Asia can maintain their independence if southern Laos should come under predominant Communist control; and to estimate the consequences of certain courses of action by non-Communist forces in the area.

NOTE

This estimate has been prepared in response to a request by the Department of State for answers to several specific questions relating to certain postulated courses of action. The questions and the courses of action are set forth below, and the paper is organized to correspond

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directly to the terms of the request. The assumed courses of action here considered were provided for the purposes of this estimate and are not intended to represent the full range of possibilities.

THE ESTIMATE

I. CONSEQUENCES FOR SOUTH VIETNAM AND SOUTHEAST ASIA OF PREDOMINANT COMMUNIST CONTROL OF SOUTHERN LAOS

Question: If southern Laos falls under predominant Communist control, will it become impossible for South Vietnam to maintain its independence, and will all of Southeast Asia be opened to predominant Communist influence?

A. South Vietnam. The fall of southern Laos would radically increase the already very great difficulty of preserving South Vietnam's independence. The Communists would gain the advantage of a safe haven and secure lines of communications in Laos, and could greatly expand their support of the Viet Cong. This would open the possibility that the Viet Cong campaign in South Vietnam might come to resemble recent Communist tactics in Laos, with the Viet Cong operating from secured areas in which a Communist or ostensibly independent government had been established, militarily and

politically supported by the Bloc. There is, however, no simple correlation between the fall of southern Laos and the fall of South Vietnam. The latter might fall even if southern Laos did not. On the other hand, the Communists face in South Vietnam much more formidable armed forces and a less flabby political situation than they do in Laos. There would be no immediate collapse. The long-term chances for the maintenance of South Vietnam's independence, however, would rest principally on the nature and amount of US support, and on the ability of Saigon to develop the political, psychological, and security programs required to gain and retain popular support.

B. The Rest of Southeast Asia. The fall of southern Laos would greatly increase the difficulties of the non-Communist position in Southeast Asia, but would not of itself inevitably open the area to predominant Communist influence. Long-term developments would still depend not merely on the Communist threat, but on US actions and on those of the various governments in the area.

II. CONSEQUENCES OF CERTAIN GIVEN COURSES OF ACTION

Question 1. What would be the short-term and long-term reactions of the Communists (PL/DRV/Chicom/USSR) to the following military actions in southern Laos and along the Mekong:

A. Coordinated South Vietnamese-Thai-RLG military action, beginning gradually and on a small scale, designed to secure the Savannakhet-Tchepone-Lao Bao line (Route 9) and extending eventually to a cleanup of southern Laos?*

(1) The Communists would probably contest the allied action in the vicinity of Route 9 with whatever forces they considered necessary to resist it, including unacknowledged DRV forces. As the allied action progressed, the Communists at some point would probably declare that the non-Communist side had broken the ceasefire, and would resume military operations throughout the country. At the same time, the Bloc would almost certainly conduct a worldwide political-propaganda campaign to highlight and to condemn the US-backed intervention in Laos.

(2) The degree of Communist military counteraction would depend on the success of the allied operation, and on the Communist estimate of the allied objectives. If their earlier, small-scale responses did not frustrate or neutralize the allied course of action, the Communists would probably expand their military operations in Laos to include attempts to seize Vientiane, Luang Prabang, and other key points. DRV regular forces might be overtly introduced into Laos.

* See full text of postulated course at Annex.

(3) The PL/DRV would meanwhile continue to attempt to infiltrate cadres and logistic support to South Vietnam through the mountain routes of eastern Laos.

(4) We do not believe that, in response to course A, DRV forces would make a military attack on South Vietnam, lest they provoke large-scale US counteraction. Neither do we believe that Chinese Communist armed forces would be committed in this circumstance, either in Laos or in South Vietnam.

B. In conjunction with Course A, temporary US occupation of Vientiane, Thakhek, and Savannakhet, together with coordinated actions by Thai, Lao, and Meo troops in the Mekong Valley and northern Laos?*

(1) Pathet Lao forces, with unacknowledged North Vietnamese participation and continued Soviet-DRV-Chinese Communist support, would probably step up the scale of their military actions throughout Laos, with the aim of confining US-allied control to the three towns, and of destroying RLG armed forces and political control elsewhere in the country.

* See full text of postulated course at Annex. See also SNIE 10-2-61, "Likelihood of Major Communist Military Intervention in Mainland Southeast Asia," dated 27 June 1961.

PL forces, with DRV cadres, would harass US supply and communications lines, and Communist agents would probably undertake terrorist and sabotage activities within the US-occupied towns.

(2) Depending^{on}/the size and apparent intent of the US intervention, it is possible that DRV military forces would be overtly introduced into Laos. Even so, we believe these forces would not, at least initially, attempt to drive the US troops from the towns or otherwise seek direct engagement with US forces.

(3) The Bloc political-propaganda response to course B would be more intense than that estimated for course A above.

(4) The Chinese Communists would probably be more aroused by course B than by A, and might press for a more aggressive DRV response than that estimated. We believe that the USSR would not share the Chinese view, however, and would exert a restraining influence.

(5) The Communists would probably consider that over the longer term, confinement of US and allied forces to the towns in question, together with world pressures on

the US, would place the US in an awkward military-political predicament and might cause the US to withdraw from Laos. If, however, US-PL clashes expanded and the Communists came to believe that US forces threatened Communist-controlled areas of Laos, direct engagement with DRV forces would probably result. It is also possible in this circumstance that the Chinese Communists would introduce forces into Laos, and they would almost certainly do so if the US action appeared to constitute a threat which the DRV forces could not counter.

Question 2. What would be the reaction of the Royal Laotian Government (RLG) and principal political groupings in Laos to the foregoing courses of action?

A. RLG leaders without significant exception would be reluctant to accede to course A unless US forces were also committed. They would be aware that course A implied their having to give up northern Laos including the royal capital of Luang Prabang -- in return for an uncertain venture in the south, still with no guarantee that the US would intervene to save the RLG. General Phoumi's reluctance would stem also from a belief that this course would preclude his salvaging at least some political future for himself in a neutralist government. Nevertheless, with sufficient US urging, the RLG leaders would probably accept course A, in

part because many of these leaders and their troops are southerners. Indeed, many of them might stir themselves to a more effective effort in the south than the RLG has generally shown to date. There would be considerable chance, however, that if Course A did not immediately succeed, much RLG political and military resistance to Communist pressures would evaporate.

B. RLG leaders would strongly prefer that courses A and B be undertaken concurrently. Most of them would welcome course B, hoping that this first step in direct US military intervention in Laos presaged further steps which would restore RLG fortunes. The King would be concerned lest this course involve the loss of Luang Prabang, and his continued backing of US-RLG moves would probably require additional guarantees or assurances to him.

Question 3: What would be the attitudes of:

A. South Vietnam? Diem would probably agree without hesitation to participate in course A, although he would probably seek greater assurance than he now has of US assistance. He would welcome course B as tangible evidence of US determination, but would be aware that this course by itself

would not arrest the flow of Communist cadres and arms into South Vietnam through southern Laos.

B. Thailand? The Thais would be very reluctant to undertake course A. They would interpret it as a further sign of US intention not to commit its own combat forces to Laos, and it has been their position that they would not make a major commitment of Thai forces to Laos unless US military forces were there. Moreover, course A would appear to them to benefit only South Vietnam, while leaving Thailand open to Communist retaliation across the long border with PL-controlled northern Laos. Course B would be welcomed by the Thai because it promised some protection along this border. If they were convinced that course B would follow course A, they might be favorably inclined to the latter.

C. SEATO members? France would probably strongly oppose either course. The UK would probably object to either course as long as the Geneva Conference was continuing, but might not object if the Conference had broken down. Australia, New Zealand, Pakistan, and the Philippines would in general applaud either course.

D. Other Asian states? India, Cambodia, Burma, and Malaya would almost certainly criticize course A, although

certain of their leaders might privately indicate sympathy with it. Their reactions would be more adverse in the case of course B. The GRC would welcome either course, but would be critical of the US for not making a greater intervention, especially if course A alone had been undertaken. The noisy Japanese Left would agitate against both, although the more so in the case of course B. The Japanese Government would be critical of course B, but would generally attempt to dissociate itself from either course.

Question 4: Would the Sino-Soviet Bloc be likely to consider these courses of action as not vital to their own interests and therefore only a limited war?

Yes. Communist reactions, as discussed above, would be based on confidence that the Bloc's capabilities in the Laos area could frustrate the design of courses A or B and preserve Communist assets there without incurring significant risk of unacceptable US responses. Accordingly, the USSR, the DRV, and China would almost certainly limit their response, seeking to force either a US withdrawal or the protracted commitment of US and allied forces to indecisive and humiliating action in a remote area. If the US should extend hostilities in Laos, however, the Bloc would respond vigorously but still almost certainly on a scale intended to avoid the spread of conflict beyond Laos.

Question 5. Would hostilities be limited to the type outlined in the courses of action and is it likely that they could be contained within the area of southern Laos and the Mekong Valley?

The Communists would believe themselves capable, through limited action, of preventing the US from accomplishing its objectives, and they would probably leave a decision to expand hostilities up to the US. Under course B, or in the event of large scale action under course A, the necessity to protect US or allied forces and their supporting lines would pose the constant danger of some expansion.

Question 6. What would DRV reaction be to a US threat or actual air attack against targets near Hanoi or Haiphong if the DRV stepped up its commitment of troops in Laos?

A. We do not believe that in present circumstances the Communists would take such a threat very seriously unless it were accompanied by evidences that the US was preparing for a major military effort in Southeast Asia. Accordingly we doubt that the threat would cause the DRV to alter its courses of action in any significant way. Moscow and Peiping would almost certainly announce their determination to defend the DRV against attack and stress that any such US action would carry the risk of general war.

B. An actual US air attack on the DRV would provoke a strong Bloc response and an entirely new crisis situation. Soviet or Chinese Communist aircraft would almost certainly be committed to the defense of the DRV, and Bloc aircraft might attempt to attack bases from which the US strikes had been mounted. At the same time the USSR would probably seek to keep hostilities from further expanding, and would attempt to marshal world opinion against the US. We cannot rule out the possibility that Communist China, considering the US action a threat to its security, might undertake major military action in Laos, or even in the Taiwan Strait or Korea.

Question 7. Could the recommended courses of action clean up, or effectively curtail, Communist (chiefly Viet Cong) infiltration into South Vietnam? Would they be successful without the commitment of US troops in southern Laos?

Most of the eastern two-thirds of Route 9 is now held by the Communists, with about 1,500 troops on or near the road. About 4,000 additional Communist forces are in Laos south of Route 9. Since the Thai and Vietnamese special forces together total only about 2,000 at present, we do not believe that they could secure the road and the surrounding area, either by themselves or with FAL assistance. To clear the Communists from all of southern Laos would of course be a

still more difficult task. Taking into consideration the Communist capability for reinforcement in the area, we believe that the stated objectives could only be accomplished by a major military operation (major certainly by Laotian standards), involving the commitment of substantial Vietnamese and possibly US forces. The Thai and Vietnamese special forces, by a long-continued harassment of Communist positions, could hinder but probably not effectively curtail Communist infiltration into South Vietnam. Additionally, the postulated courses of action would not solve the problem of continuing Viet Cong success in enlisting the majority of its strength locally in South Vietnam.

Question 8. How long would these recommended courses of action have to be continued in order to safeguard the security of South Vietnam? If the initial actions were successful, could the level of activity in southern Laos be reduced?

A. The Communists are capable of keeping up military and paramilitary pressures in southern Laos for an indefinite period, and they would probably do so.

B. If military action were sufficient to clear the Communists from Route 9 and southern Laos, these pressures would probably be relaxed for a time, as has been the Communist habit when faced with superior force. Given substantial

US, GVN, and Thai support, a Lao government confined to this southern part of the country would probably be able to resist internal and external Communist pressures for some time.

Question 9. Would the recommended courses of action prevent the Geneva Conference on Laos from reaching any agreement, assuming that these actions are taken while the Conference is still in session?

Course A in its initial, inconspicuous stages, would probably have little effect on Communist conduct at the Geneva Conference. Course B or the advanced stages of course A might cause the Communists to withdraw from the Conference, though we believe it more likely that the Communists would use the Conference as a platform for castigating the US intervention as obstructing a Laotian settlement, and would seek to gain political capital from the situation. We do not believe that either course would exert any significant pressure on the Communists to become more reasonable at Geneva.

Question 10. Would the Communist reaction be greater if these actions are taken after the Geneva Conference fails to agree on Laos?

We believe that the Communist response to courses A and B would be influenced more by the military-political situation in Laos and the world reaction to the US-backed moves than by the status of the Geneva negotiations.

ANNEX: GIVEN COURSES OF ACTION

"A. Coordinated moves by picked Vietnamese, Thai, Laos troops to push salients westward from Viet-Nam and eastward from Thailand along Route 9 for the purpose of securing this road and the surrounding area. The Vietnamese would use a four force clean up using (1) hunter-killer groups (whose training will be finished in early July) to locate Commie radio stations and concentrations without engagement. They would radio back the information. The killers would then tailor a force for the job which would smash the target and escape. If these forces were insufficient, ARVN elements would be used. Secretary Thuan reports they are eager to attack Communists in southern Laos. The Thais would use elements of the Thai PARU units who have already fought in Laos. Ambassador Young believes Sarit might be induced to use them in southern Laos in a coordinated effort. Encourage Phoumi to hold his present positions if he can and withdraw to the south if he cannot. Elements of FAL, with US advisers, can be used in the clean up of southern Laos. Continue to supply the Meos by air drop as a built-in force behind the enemy lines for so long as the Meos can hold out (in the forests of Laos this might be a long period). These moves would be supported by US arms and advice, but not by US troops. US air drops and airlifts would be used if necessary. The action would be undertaken quietly over a period of two or three months. The increase in pressure would be relatively gradual for the purpose of avoiding dramatic military confrontations and resultant international excitement. World opinion would be presented slowly with a situation of increasing Thai-Vietnamese strength in the area. This slow pace would be consonant with limited Thai-Vietnamese military potential. It should also be synchronized with increasing world acceptance of the fact that Lao independence and neutrality cannot be guaranteed at Geneva. But the action on Route 9 should be started as soon as possible and not be delayed until the end of the Geneva Conference. Delay will require a larger and internationally more dangerous operation.

"B. If the action along Route 9 succeeded or if it became clear that the Geneva Conference had failed (whichever came first), we decide whether to carry out plans now under consideration (Operation Porkchop) to hold the Mekong Valley and as much of Laos to the north as feasible. It is understood that US occupation forces would move temporarily into Vientiane, Thakhek, and Savannakhet and there would be coordinated actions by Thai, Lao, and Meo troops."