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SPECIAL NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE ESTIMATE

The Impact on the Laotian Situation of an Early
Reduction or Withdrawal of Thai Forces From Laos

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THE IMPACT ON THE LAOTIAN
SITUATION OF AN EARLY
REDUCTION OR WITHDRAWAL
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NOTE

This Estimate considers the likely impact of an early withdrawal of some or all of the Thai SGU battalions from Laos, prior to a political settlement. For illustrative purposes, two situations are considered: (1) the drawdown from 30 to 15 SGUs by 1 July 1973, with a projected further reduction to 9 by 1 January 1974; or, (2) the total withdrawal of the Thai SGUs over the next few months.

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PRÉCIS

The combination of US supported Thai SGUs and US air support has constituted a major military and psychological prop of the RLG in recent years. Removal of either of these elements would greatly reduce the military effectiveness of the other, and greatly increase the already considerable vulnerability of the RLG to communist military and political pressures.

A partial withdrawal of the Thai SGUs alone, say a cut of 50 percent in authorized strength, need not be destabilizing so long as the communist military pressures remain at the low levels generally in effect since the cease-fire. But it would raise fears in Vientiane of further reductions in US aid to the RLG, and thus increase the sense of vulnerability to communist pressure.

Any withdrawal of the Thai force might tempt Hanoi to step up military pressure in order to force further political concessions by Souvanna. This temptation would be much greater if US air support had been terminated. Hanoi's actions in Laos, however, are governed by the requirements of its overall strategy with respect to South Vietnam, which holds priority in North Vietnamese planning. Considering its already favorable political and military position in Laos, Hanoi would probably feel no compulsion to act there in a way which would carry risks of upsetting its overall position in Indochina. As a consequence of the postulated US action, Hanoi might regard such risks as much reduced but necessarily negligible.

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THE ESTIMATE

The Role of the Thai SGUs in Laos

1. At present, there are 30 Thai SGU battalions (roughly 16,000 men) committed to Laos, part of a total friendly ground combat force of about 65,000. Most significant in terms of the situation in Laos itself are the Thai units deployed in defensive positions at Sala Phou Khoun, in the Long Tieng salient, and west of Paksong in southern Laos. These units have been the backbone of the government's defensive force on the ground, particularly at Long Tieng, where years of fighting have left the local Meo forces depleted and demoralized. The five Thai battalions deployed in Sayaboury Province have less relevance to the tactical situation along the de facto cease-fire line; they are there primarily because of Thai concern with the security of their own borders.

2. Despite a sometimes spotty performance, the very presence of Thai units at defensive strong points has meant that attacking communist units have been forced to mass and risk heavy casualties from artillery and from Lao and US support aircraft. While Hanoi has been willing over the years to accept these risks in order to push General Vang Pao's forces back from the Plain of Jars and to

defend the logistics routes and installations in the Lao panhandle, Hanoi has not been willing to pay the price—military and political—of attempting to push much beyond these limited objectives.

3. The lack of an all-out country-wide communist effort in Laos has tended to obscure the steady deterioration of Vientiane's military position over the past several years. Even with the Thai SGU, the government forces are a poor match for communist combat forces deployed in Laos (now numbering about 58,000—roughly 20,000 PL and 38,000 NVA). In addition to their superior leadership, discipline, and morale, the communists have 122-mm and 130-mm field guns with a greater effective range and rate of fire than the 105-mm and 155-mm howitzers used by the RLG forces. While the Thai SGU have played an important role in containing communist military pressures, particularly in MR-2, the key element has been the availability of Lao and—even more so—US air support.

4. There is, of course, an interdependence between ground forces and air support—neither can be fully effective without the other. In Laos, it is doubtful that the Thai SGU would stand before large-scale com-

munist assaults without US air support. Conversely, without some Thai SGUs to force a massing of communist troops, the air arm would lack concentrated targets.

5. The presence of Thai troops in Laos—and particularly US willingness to provide for their support—is also of political importance to the RLG. Lao military leaders see the Thai force as a symbol of a continuing Thai and US commitment to the defense of the government in Vientiane. Souvanna, less sanguine perhaps, nonetheless sees the force as worth something in bargaining with the Lao communists.

Effects of a Withdrawal of Thai Forces

6. *Military Effects.* Except for minor skirmishing directed at securing local advantage in still contested areas, the cease-fire has taken effect in Laos. The communists now appear content with the present de facto cease-fire line, and a renewal of large-scale hostilities is not likely, in the near future at least. So long as military action remains at a low level, a reduction of the Thai SGU force to 15 battalions need not have serious military consequences.¹ Remaining Thai units would presumably be concentrated in the key Long Tieng and Paksong areas, where NVA forces pose the greatest threat.² These units together with the various RLG elements could probably cope with minor communist probes and harassments of the type now characteristic of the situation. But friendly forces would

¹ It is assumed here that these battalions would be at or near authorized strength, a total of some 8,000 men. At present the SGU force is well below authorized strength due to normal attrition, desertion, casualties, and the suspension of recruitment.

² The Thai Government might object to the redeployment of the Thai SGUs currently in Sayaboury for this purpose. It is possible, in fact, that the Thai Government would be reluctant to keep any SGUs in Laos if the force were to be cut in half.

have little capability for counterattacks to regain lost positions.

7. A total withdrawal of the Thai units would be far more serious. It would have a depressing effect on Lao troops in the areas where the SGUs have played a major role and would, in any event, leave RLG forces in some key areas much more vulnerable to communist probes and assaults, even on a small scale. Without the presence of Thai SGUs to force a massing of communist forces, US air support would lack concentrated targets. Recognition of this condition might, in fact, encourage further communist attempts to expand territorial control.

8. *The Effects on RLG Morale.* A partial withdrawal of the Thais before the signing of the political agreement would certainly cause distress in Vientiane. The concern would probably be less with the effects of the withdrawal on the military balance than with the possibility that this action might presage a reduction in all types of US aid and the elimination of US air support. The net result would be a sense of increased vulnerability to communist pressures.

9. These concerns would be much more pronounced if the SGUs were totally withdrawn prior to the signing of a political agreement. The government would view its negotiating position as extremely weak, but once again, if US air support were still thought to be available, Souvanna would probably act as if he still had some cards to play (he would still attempt to use whatever contacts he has with Peking and Moscow to gain assistance in limiting the Pathet Lao's more extreme demands).

10. Were it to appear, however, that Souvanna was preparing to grant substantial additional concessions to the communists, the rightists would certainly contemplate moving against him. A major—and probably control-

ling—restraint on their ambitions, however, would be their fear that a coup against Souvanna would bring an end to American support.

11. *Hanoi's Reaction.* Any withdrawal of the Thai forces before a political settlement is reached in Laos might tempt Hanoi to step up military pressure in order to force further political concessions by Souvanna. This temptation would be much greater if US air support had been terminated.

12. Hanoi's actions in Laos, however, are governed by a complex of factors. South Vietnam holds priority in North Vietnamese planning, and Laos is seen as a secondary theatre. As a result, communist moves in Laos are not so much affected by the military balance on the ground there, as by the requirements of Hanoi's overall strategy with respect to South Vietnam. Hanoi is not likely to launch actions in Laos which would carry any risk of upsetting its overall position in Indochina.

As a consequence of the postulated US action, Hanoi might regard such risks as much reduced but not necessarily negligible.

13. It had been intended to withdraw the Thai battalions at a rate consistent with the withdrawal of NVA units in the 60-day period following a political settlement. Premature withdrawal of the Thai SGU could affect Hanoi's intentions with respect to withdrawal of its own forces from Laos following a political agreement. If Hanoi viewed this action as a lessening of US commitment and influence in Laos, it would probably feel less pressure to abide by the withdrawal provisions. In that event, its action on withdrawal would be determined primarily on the basis of convenience and other general policy considerations. Nonetheless, in the absence of the Thai SGU, Hanoi might see little reason to maintain large numbers of NVA troops in forward combat positions and in the circumstances of a political settlement, it could withdraw several of its regiments with little risk.

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

30 May 1973

MEMORANDUM TO HOLDERS OF SNIE 58-73, "THE IMPACT ON THE
LAOTIAN SITUATION OF AN EARLY REDUCTION OR WITHDRAWAL
OF THAI FORCES FROM LAOS," dated 24 May 1973, SECRET

ERRATUM

Page 2, Précis. In last line of paragraph 3, insert "not" after "but".

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ule of E. O. 11652, exemption category:
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