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SNIE 10-65
Advance Copy of the Estimate
4 February 1965

SPECIAL NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE ESTIMATE

COMMUNIST MILITARY CAPABILITIES AND NEAR-TERM
INTENTIONS IN LAOS AND SOUTH VIETNAM

CIA HISTORICAL REVIEW PROGRAM
RELEASE IN FULL

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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, Defense, AEC and NSA.

Concurred in by the
UNITED STATES INTELLIGENCE BOARD

on 4 February 1965. Concurring were the Director of Intelligence and Research, Department of State; the Director, Defense Intelligence Agency; the Atomic Energy Commission Representative to the USIB; and the Director of the National Security Agency. The Assistant to the Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation, abstained, the subject being outside of his jurisdiction.

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

4 February 1965

SUBJECT: SNIE 10-65: COMMUNIST MILITARY CAPABILITIES AND NEAR-TERM INTENTIONS IN LAOS AND SOUTH VIETNAM

THE PROBLEM

To assess the significance of recent Communist military force deployments in Laos, North Vietnam, and South China, and to estimate the scope and timing of Communist military operations in Laos and South Vietnam over the next four or five months.

THE ESTIMATE

1. The Present Situation. A gradual buildup over several years has given the forces of Communist China, North Vietnam, the Pathet Lao, and the Viet Cong potent military capabilities in and near Laos and South Vietnam, including offensive capabilities as yet unused and defensive capabilities as yet untested. Since the Tonkin Gulf incidents of August 1964, various Communist moves and force deployments have

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noticeably improved some of these capabilities, particularly the air defense of South China and North Vietnam. During the same period, deployments of Communist forces in some parts of Laos have augmented capabilities already in being. There has also been a steady improvement in the capabilities of Viet Cong forces in South Vietnam. Some of this improvement results from stepped up North Vietnamese support, though detailed judgments are complicated by the spotty and frequently ambiguous nature of the evidence available.*

2. We believe that these new deployments have the immediate purpose of improving the military capabilities of Communist forces in those areas where US and US-supported pressure against them has been increased, e.g., in the Laos panhandle, where T-28 and FAR ground operations are taking place, and in the air over North Vietnam, where reconnaissance is flown and where further air strikes are feared. The Communists probably also hope that these deployments will help deter the US from expanding the war to North Vietnam. The addition of air strength to the already formidable ground strength in the China/Indochina border area is also intended to strengthen Chinese/DRV defenses against the contingency that the US might ignore Communist warnings and take the war to North Vietnam and even to China.

* The details of Communist deployments are given in the USIB MEMORANDUM D-24.7/1 of 26 January, (distributed through special channels).

3. The deployments we have observed do not now appear to be of the nature or scope that we would expect to precede a major change in the nature of Communist military activity in Laos or Vietnam such as an overt offensive. We have seen no significant increases of ground force strength in South China or the DRV; the net increase in Communist ground strength in Laos is estimated to be no more than a few thousand at the most; and no large organized military units are known to have moved into South Vietnam.

4. Peiping has recently extended by one year the terms of service for all its armed forces. This is probably designed to improve capabilities by retaining trained personnel, and it may result in a very substantial increase in the size of the armed forces. We believe that this, along with the program for development and production of more modern weapons systems, is part of Peiping's longstanding effort to strengthen its military establishment rather than an indication of an immediate Chinese intention to mount offensive activity in Indochina.

5. Increased Air Defense Capabilities. The introduction of 50-odd jet fighters into North Vietnam and the increase of Chinese air strength in the border area from 150 jet fighters to about 350 appears to be responsive to a similar buildup of US air strength in the area. This move gives the Communists a limited capability to conduct surprise raids against Laos or the northern parts of South Vietnam, especially for psychological effect. We do not believe they will do so, however, because of the high risk of major US

retaliation and the consequent danger of air conflict with the US, a form of hostilities most disadvantageous to the North Vietnamese and the Chinese. Thus far, the Communists have not used aircraft to defend forces in Laos against damaging T-28 attacks. We believe they will rely on anti-aircraft artillery, ground fire, and passive defense in Laos. However, they would certainly attempt to use fighters against air strikes on North Vietnam, and would certainly do so in the case of an attack on China.

6. Offensive Potential in Laos. The recent troop reinforcements from North Vietnam have also somewhat increased Communist offensive capabilities in Laos. In each spring since 1962, the Communists have launched some ground activity designed to improve their position during the dry season. We consider this sort of action likely again this year.

7. A likely Communist move would be an attempt to recapture the junction of Routes 7 and 13, lost to rightist forces last summer. The Communists might estimate that they could attempt this without risking serious escalation of the war. The Communists might also move against Kong Le's position near Muong Soui. In the panhandle, the Communists are likely to try to push the FAR out of positions it has recently taken along Route 9 in Operation "Victorious Arrow." Though they are capable of seizing any of the Mekong towns (e.g., Thakhek or Savannakhet) or Seno, we do not believe they will attempt to do so, since they would consider it involved undue risk of enlarged US counteraction.

8. Military Portents in South Vietnam. In the past year, the Communists have appreciably augmented the size, armament, and general capabilities of Viet Cong (VC) forces with particular emphasis on their regular ("Main Force") units. Recent battles (e.g., Binh Gia) indicate that when the VC consider the circumstances favorable they are willing to initiate battles with sizable GVN regular units. They have not yet willingly engaged GVN regular units except when they outnumbered them at the point of attack. More probes and actions on the order of Binh Gia are probable. We consider, however, that unless GVN military capabilities deteriorate sharply, the chances are less than even that the next four or five months will see prolonged offensives employing larger units.

9. The VC military campaign will certainly be carefully tailored to exploit and increase South Vietnam's political and morale problems. For reasons of psychological warfare, the Communists -- unless and until convinced that such actions carry unacceptable risks -- will probably essay further attacks against US facilities and personnel. The Communists will also continue to improve their conventional capabilities so that, if discord should split the GVN's military establishment, they could, if they chose, take full military advantage of the situation.

10. Although Hanoi and Peiping are still apprehensive about the possibility of US attacks on North Vietnam they are probably less so than they were in the late autumn of 1964. For example, while the attack in

August on a De Soto patrol met with instant retaliation, US warships later suspended these patrols. Communist action against Bien Hoa in November and the bombing of the Brink BOQ in December did not produce any military rejoinder. The Communists appear prepared to accept present levels of US and US-sponsored activity and even to run the risk of some escalation. Influential voices in the US opposing extension of the war may have persuaded the Communists that the US is not disposed to undertake major escalation.

11. In these circumstances, we believe that Hanoi and Peiping are determined to continue their present policies in Laos and South Vietnam. While the Communists are probably not yet ready to embark on a general military offensive, it is almost certain that they will continue their support of insurrectionary forces and will prepare to exploit any new opportunities which arise in either Laos or South Vietnam.

12. Role of the USSR. Kosygin's projected visit to North Vietnam carries forward the trend of increasing Soviet involvement in this area which began directly after the fall of Khrushchev. The new leaders apparently believe that Khrushchev erred in leaving a dangerous situation largely in the hands of Peiping and that his limited responses in past incidents may have encouraged the US to be more aggressive. We believe that the USSR now hopes to rebuild influence in Hanoi and to deter the US from expanding the scope of hostilities. To this end, the Soviets will probably increase their

military and economic assistance to North Vietnam to include additional air defense equipment and perhaps jet fighters and surface-to-air missiles. They will probably also offer a full line of equipment for use in insurgency and subversion. But we doubt that the Soviets will undertake the military defense of the DRV or run very high risks to protect it.

13. The Soviets almost certainly hope that North Vietnam will avoid actions which might provoke US reprisals and produce further escalation. Kosygin will probably urge this point of view in Hanoi, but the intricacy of Sino-Soviet-North Vietnamese relations will require him to maneuver carefully lest the USSR seem to be lacking enthusiasm for the DRV cause.

14. Less Likely Contingencies. Our estimate of what the Communists probably will do militarily in the near-term future falls far short of our appreciation of what they could do against indigenous forces if the latter were not reinforced from the outside. Using only forces already in Laos, the Communists almost certainly have the capability to carry out actions such as the following: to recapture the junction of Routes 7 and 13 in Laos and to launch a subsequent drive on both Vientiane and Luang Prabang; to capture Thakhek and Attapeu and to harass both Seno and Savannakhet. At the same time, the VC could be augmented by some of the PAVN forces now in the panhandle of Laos for a drive against the northern provinces of South Vietnam. However, such moves are not likely unless Hanoi and Peiping are

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willing to take the risk of direct and punishing attacks on at least DRV territory -- or unless Hanoi and Peiping should come to believe that Free World persuasion coupled with internal US pressures would be strong enough to prevent such retaliation and force the US to a negotiated settlement.

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