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Chinese Reactions to Possible Developments in Indochina

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Concurred in by the

UNITED STATES INTELLIGENCE BOARD

As indicated overleaf

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The Central Intelligence Agency and the intelligence organizations of the Departments of State and Defense, and the NSA.

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

28 May 1970

SUBJECT: SNIE 13-9-70: CHINESE REACTIONS TO POSSIBLE DEVELOPMENTS
IN INDOCHINA

NOTE

Cambodia's involvement has given a new shape to the struggle in Indochina. This paper considers how China and North Vietnam might view future hypothetical developments, particularly in the military field, which might compel them to consider a significant change in their strategy, and estimates what their reactions might be if such developments do take place. Insofar as these involve military or other moves by the US and its allies, they are to be regarded as actions which the Communists might possibly anticipate, not as courses of action being entertained by the Allied side.

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THE ESTIMATE

I. PEKING'S VIEW OF THE STRUGGLE IN INDOCHINA

1. Peking has viewed events in Southeast Asia during the course of the war in Vietnam mainly in the light of its aspirations for political dominance in the area. Its perspective is long term, involves no fixed time schedule, and is an aspect of its pretensions to lead a world-wide revolutionary movement. More immediately, Peking sees the war in Indochina as a continuation of a lengthy liberation struggle; first against the French, and now against the US. Peking's advice to the Communists in Indochina has been repetitious and consistent. They are to persist in self-reliant and protracted struggle until they can destroy the enemy or his will to fight. That this may involve occasional defeats and considerable losses is a foregone conclusion. Only by a prolonged and costly struggle can they hope to achieve eventual victory, and they must carry on this struggle themselves, without reliance on outside forces.

2. On one hand, the Chinese view the fighting as a test of Mao's theory of "people's war." They believe a victory would enhance China's political prestige in Asia and would support their claims for ideological pre-eminence over the Soviet Union. On the other hand,

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Peking has had to consider the possibility that an adverse turn in the war might lead to a security threat on China's southern border and therefore a possible direct confrontation with the US. In practice, this has meant militant advocacy of "people's war" for others, but careful maneuvering to ensure that China stays safely out of the line of fire.

3. In defining its role in this struggle, Peking has been both cautious and prudent. Thus far the policy has been to rule out any direct use of Chinese troops in the ground fighting and to reduce the risks of even an accidental confrontation with the US. There is evidence that the Peking leadership reaffirmed these basic ground rules after a long and bitter debate during 1965. This conflict, which pitted Minister of Defense Lin Piao against his Chief of Staff, was concerned with the assessment of, and possible responses to, the large-scale US intervention in Vietnam then under way. Lin Piao ended the debate with an authoritative endorsement of Mao's theories on "people's war," emphasizing defense in depth rather than moving across China's borders to meet the threat.

4. This decision not to intervene overtly in the Vietnam War was consistent with Peking's policy, at least since the Korean War, of not risking major hostilities with either the US or the USSR. There is as

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yet no indication that the acquisition of nuclear weapons has changed this basic stance. Indeed, it may have had a sobering effect. When hostilities along the Sino-Soviet border in 1969 threatened to escalate into a nuclear conflict, the Chinese moved to calm the situation. We judge that China's troubled internal situation and its unresolved problems with the USSR incline its leaders to continue making the same cautious calculations of risk that have marked their conduct of recent years. This means that China's aims in Southeast Asia should be pursued by subversion, revolutionary activity, and diplomacy rather than by the open use of its own military forces.

5. Recent Developments. Recent events in Indochina are not likely to change this basic approach. As long as the US/GVN move into Cambodia does not critically affect Hanoi's ability to continue the war, Peking is likely to minimize the threat posed by the current Allied actions. Moreover, Peking probably sees immediate benefits from the political reaction aroused in the US against the Cambodian involvement. And if the US should not withdraw from Cambodia, Peking would assess the situation as one in which the US was getting more and more bogged down in an expanding war that would guarantee growing opposition both at home and abroad. In this sense, at least, it would make little difference to Peking whether the US kept to its schedule and withdrew or whether it continued its involvement in Cambodia.

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6. In Peking's view, the US is fighting a losing war in which Hanoi has only to be patient and persevere in order to outlast the US. In order to preserve that patience, China will continue to supply North Vietnam with economic and military aid. More important, Peking is probably now better prepared to furnish steady and dependable political support than it was during the Cultural Revolution. Relations with Hanoi have improved considerably since last fall, and recent events in Cambodia have brought Peking and Hanoi closer together. The remarkable turnout in Peking for Le Duan's recent visit, in which both Mao and Lin made one of their increasingly rare appearances, is evidence of Chinese concern to strengthen ties with Hanoi at Moscow's expense. Peking's careful campaign to exploit Sihanouk, recently emphasized in a major pronouncement by Mao himself, is also intended to diminish Soviet influence in Indochina.

7. In short, Peking has moved promptly to exploit the Cambodian developments for its own ends. The Chinese leadership has seized the opportunities presented to reduce Soviet influence on Hanoi and to increase its own capability to influence Hanoi without, for the present at least, exposing itself to greater risks or markedly higher costs.

8. At the same time, Peking may have some concern that an intensified and enlarged scale of hostilities could weaken Hanoi's



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will and capacity to continue. Against this possibility Peking is probably prepared to render increased aid to Hanoi, increase the level of threat in its propaganda, perhaps stimulate insurgency and tensions elsewhere in Asia, or attempt to unsettle the US by moving troops about in southern China. Judging by its past actions, however, Peking is likely to calculate carefully the risks of these moves and to prefer gestures and actions that will worry but not provoke the US.

9. The Soviet Factor. Peking's reactions in Indochina are conditioned by the terms of its bitter rivalry with the USSR. At critical points during the course of the war, the Chinese have sought to project an image of militant devotion to "people's war," partly at least to outflank politically the Soviets; the latter are constrained in Southeast Asia by geography and by some concern to avoid complicating relations with the US or offending potentially friendly non-Communist Asian regimes. Peking calculates in these situations that Moscow's position is certain to be relatively "soft," providing ample room for Chinese posturing without a requirement for risky commitments. Nonetheless, this stance carries the risk that the Soviets might be able to expose the gap between Chinese rhetoric and performance.

10. Moreover, so long as large and hostile Soviet forces threaten China's northern and western borders, there is added reason for avoiding

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direct military involvements in Southeast Asia. In sum, the Soviet factor reinforces other considerations which make Peking want to avoid precipitate and risky action even though it continues to discourage compromise settlement of the war.

II. PEKING'S REACTIONS TO POSSIBLE FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

11. The paragraphs above outline what has been China's fundamental position on the situation in Indochina. At this juncture, the Chinese may be preoccupied as well with future developments, particularly in the military field, which might compel them to consider a more direct involvement. In this section, we estimate Chinese reactions to each of several such possibilities. Peking's reactions to the possible cumulative effect of these various actions are discussed in paragraphs 23 through 26.

Continued Allied Military Activity in Cambodia

12. Peking probably anticipates a continuing and substantial Allied effort to exploit the political turnabout in Phnom Penh -- to include sustained operations by ARVN in strategic border areas and occasional deeper forays, all with US air and logistical support, and a naval blockade in the Gulf of Siam. Peking may also expect to see

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continued employment of US advisory personnel with ARVN units in Cambodia and would not be greatly surprised at reintroduction of US combat units subsequent to 30 June 1970. Such developments, in our view, would not lead Peking to undertake any radically new commitment to the struggle in Indochina. Cambodia is relatively remote from the Chinese border. Moreover, despite concern over the immediate impact of the Allied operations, Peking would probably not conclude that longer term prospects for the success of the liberation struggle in Indochina were critically affected.

Allied Support of the Lon Nol Government

13. Though apparently willing to bargain on Hanoi's behalf with Lon Nol only a month ago, the Chinese are now committed to the destruction of his regime. In their logic, there is little doubt that the US will provide support to Lon Nol. China almost certainly expects continued and increased shipments of US (and other) arms to Phnom Penh and, perhaps, the dispatch of US advisory personnel on the Laos pattern. Even so, the Chinese almost certainly give little weight to the capabilities -- present or future -- of the Cambodian Army. The Chinese might attempt to counter the US move by establishing some sort of political-military advisory presence with a "liberation government" on Cambodian soil -- on the pattern of its

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mission at Khang Khay in northern Laos. The Chinese will even draw some political comfort from the Soviet diplomatic presence in Phnom Penh as a situation which the Chinese can exploit as evidence of Soviet opposition to the forces working for Sihanouk's return.

Thai Military Commitment to Cambodia

14. The entry of Thai forces into Cambodia would further complicate the Communist military position there, but it would be equally significant, in Peking's view, as a sign of Bangkok's willingness to commit itself more firmly and overtly to an active military role in the Indochina area. The Chinese reaction would be designed as a clearcut warning to Bangkok of the perils of its course: the Thai "liberation movement" would be elevated to a more prominent position in Peking's revolutionary propaganda and insurgent forces in Thailand would be directed to increase their pressures on the Thai Government. But China would almost certainly see no need to bring its own forces to bear.

Renewed Bombing of North Vietnam

15. Additional and sustained US bombing raids on North Vietnam's panhandle area -- on SAM sites and other military targets -- would not surprise Peking which, as before, would stand aside while Hanoi coped

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with the problem of maintaining the southward flow of troops and materiel. If the US resumed bombing of North Vietnam on the pattern of 1965-1968, the Chinese would probably, as before, provide engineer troops and AAA units to supplement North Vietnamese air defenses.

Ground Troops in Southern Laos

16. The Chinese might think it possible that the Allies will try to challenge Hanoi's control of southern Laos by sustained ground operations into that area. While small Allied military units have operated in Laos for years, their impact on the war has been relatively slight and their numbers have been small enough to permit their presence to remain largely unacknowledged -- in deference to the "neutral" status of the Lao Government. Crossing this political threshold would be read in Peking as US willingness to contemplate a far more activist course in Indochina in search of a military decision.

17. Presumably, the Allied forces in southern Laos would be targetted against VC/NVA sanctuaries, logistical bases, and infiltration routes to South Vietnam. The Chinese concern would depend on the degree of success these operations had in stemming the flow of men and supplies from North Vietnam and on the nationality of the forces involved.

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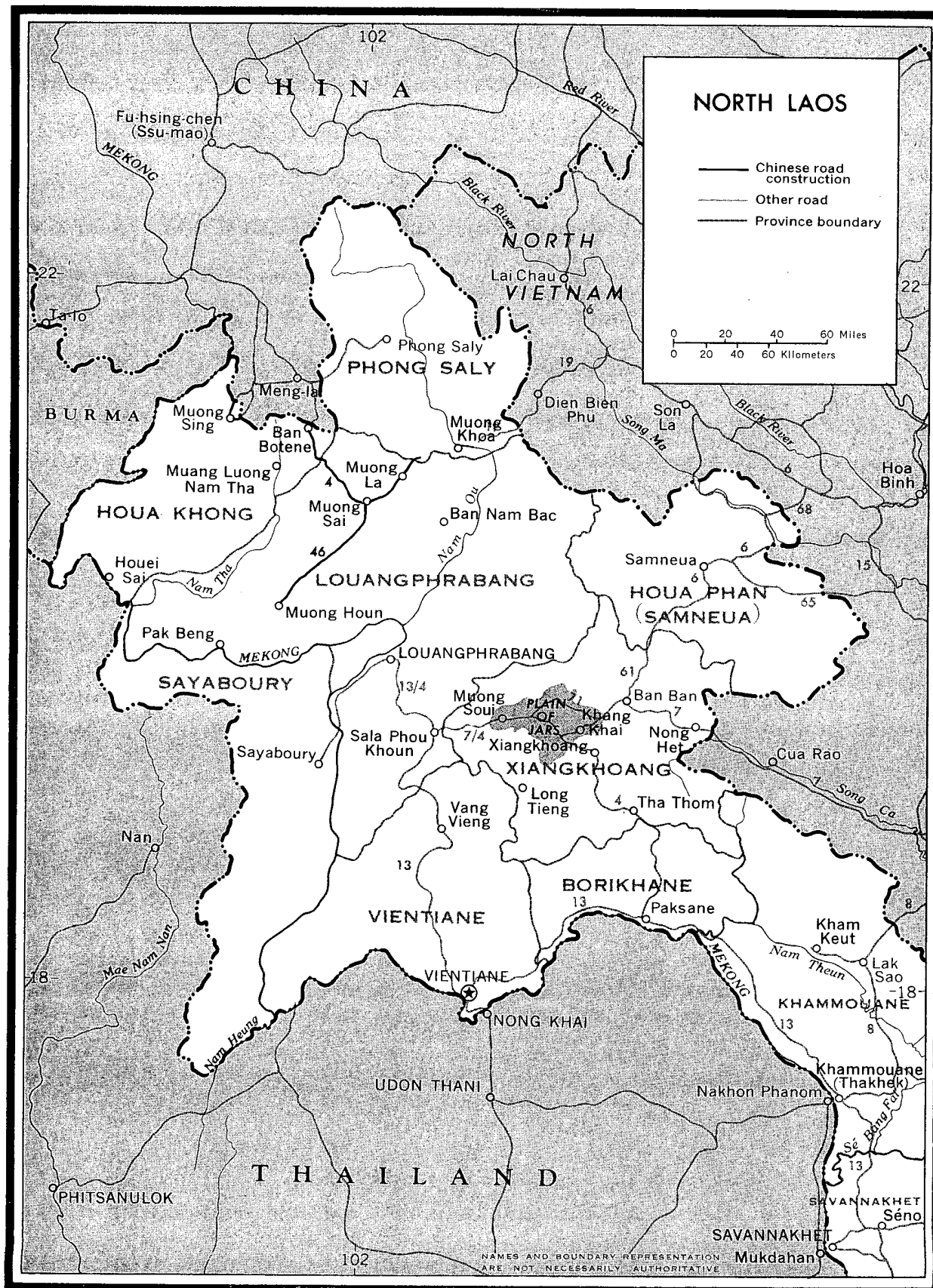
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18. The Chinese would probably view Thai entry into southern Laos as part of a longer range US plan to place the defense of the Mekong Valley in Thai hands. Although China (and North Vietnam) would be inclined to doubt that effective Thai troops in sufficient numbers would be available to have a decisive impact on the situation, the Communists might see the move as portending the eventual commitment of US ground forces to the area. The entry of US ground forces into southern Laos would raise concern in Peking because of the military effect on Hanoi's logistic system and because it would raise the spectre of later US ground operations in northern Laos. Nonetheless, so long as the deployment of US forces were confined to southern Laos, the Chinese would probably feel no need to introduce their own forces in the area. They would probably move ground forces to the Laos border, however, and might reinforce their units presently in northwestern Laos in order to signal their concern over the safety of their borders.

Ground Troops in Northern Laos

19. Northwestern Laos borders China, and Peking would be most sensitive to military activities in that region. Moreover, to help supply PL/NVA troops in the region, China is building roads from its own territory, and some 10,000-14,000 troops in engineering, AAA, and

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security units are in northwestern Laos in connection with this activity.^{1/} Up to now, other Chinese security requirements in northwestern Laos have been met by PL/NVA control of the region.

20. Any direct effort -- by US, Thai, or Lao bombing or by Thai/Lao ground harassment -- to force the withdrawal of Chinese troops from northwestern Laos would be resisted. The Chinese already have AAA in place to defend against air attacks and, with PL/NVA forces, sufficient ground strength to meet small-unit probes. If necessary, they might also reinforce their own troops in the region on a limited scale or encourage PL/NVA troops to undertake diversionary moves for political and psychological effect -- e.g., feints against Luang Prabang.

21. This is not to say that the Chinese would push ahead on their road construction under any and all circumstances. The road itself -- at least the segment south of Muong Sai -- is not critical to the Communist position in the region. Thus, if PL/NVA forces proved unable to remove any Thai/Lao blocking force south of the present terminal at Muong Houn, the Chinese might choose to stop construction rather than commit their own combat forces to action in

^{1/} See map of North Laos.

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the area. The presence of Thai forces well south of Muong Houn -- in the area of Pak Beng or south of the Mekong (in Sayaboury Province) -- would probably not result in offensive military action by the Chinese.

22. Northeastern Laos and the area of the Plain of Jars is not as sensitive as northwestern Laos from the Chinese point of view. But the dispatch of sizable Thai ground forces into this region would be viewed very seriously by Peking. If this should happen, the Chinese would probably move quickly to bolster their forces in border regions adjacent to northwestern Laos, but the initial burden of meeting the buildup would probably remain on Hanoi. If such a Thai force was, in Hanoi's view, formidable enough to threaten its vital interests in the area, the North Vietnamese might feel compelled to request direct assistance from China. In these circumstances, Peking might respond to Hanoi's request.

* * * * *

23. Thus, in a developing situation in Indochina, Peking's first concern would be the possibility that an adverse turn in the war might lead to a security threat on China's southern border or a direct confrontation with the US. This makes military moves in Laos

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particularly sensitive. In addition to primary concern over the direct threat to its borders in northwestern Laos, the Chinese would be apprehensive over any actions in northeastern Laos which posed a threat to the security of North Vietnam. In contrast to its direct security interest in northern Laos, actions in southern Laos and Cambodia are of concern to the Chinese primarily in terms of the way in which they affect Hanoi's capacity to prosecute the war. For Peking, Laos plays a more significant role in this respect than does Cambodia.

24. In general, as in the past, we see two circumstances in which actions such as those discussed above might provoke Chinese reactions beyond the limits of what they have done in Indochina since 1965. The first would be a situation in which military forces approached areas in northern Laos in such a way that Hanoi found it a threat to the security of North Vietnam, or Peking a threat to its own borders. The second would be a situation in which Allied actions, singly or in combination, seriously threatened Hanoi's will and ability to continue the struggle in South Vietnam.

25. In the first case, Peking would probably introduce ground combat troops to northwestern Laos to prevent the establishment of a

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strong military presence on its borders. Peking might undertake deployments elsewhere in northern Laos if persuaded that North Vietnam's own security was threatened. Such a case might arise if large non-Lao forces overran the Plain of Jars and moved eastward.

26. In the second case, where Peking sensed that Hanoi's will and ability to persist in the struggle in South Vietnam were failing, the Chinese would attempt to encourage Hanoi to persevere and would offer generous material assistance. They would loudly threaten the Thai, the Cambodians, the South Vietnamese, and the US -- and attempt to step up guerrilla warfare in Thailand. But if Hanoi, nonetheless, concluded that it had no choice but to postpone the armed struggle, the Chinese would probably feel compelled to accept the decision. We do not believe that China would wish to alienate Hanoi by further demands that it actively continue the war, nor would Peking choose to commit its own forces to the Indochina struggle so long as territories critical to its own security or that of North Vietnam were not threatened.

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