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The Communist View of the Situation in Laos

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THE COMMUNIST VIEW OF THE SITUATION IN LAOS

THE PROBLEM

To estimate Communist views of the situation in Laos with particular attention to North Vietnam's assessment of recent Royal Lao Government (RLG)/US military activities in the country.

CONCLUSIONS

A. Hanoi almost certainly wants to establish its hegemony over all of Laos, but subordinates this goal to its higher priority interest in establishing its control over South Vietnam. Although broader questions are involved in Soviet and Chinese Communist policies toward Laos, Moscow and Peking give priority to supporting Hanoi, and each recognizes that its ability to influence Hanoi's policy with regard to Laos is limited.

B. The Communists stepped up military activity in northern Laos during 1968-1969 partly to counter US-supported RLG military initiatives. Actions to which they were particularly sensitive included guerrilla and intelligence operations in areas close to North Vietnamese and Chinese borders, and penetrations into areas regarded by the Communists as rightfully theirs. The increased Communist activity must also be seen as stemming from Hanoi's anticipation of favorable developments in Vietnam, and its related desire to bolster its political and military posture in Laos in order to be in the best possible position for any coincident movement toward a new settlement there.

C. While the Communists believe that the US has violated the Geneva arrangements—and have certainly done so themselves—nevertheless, they wish to preserve the symbolic authority of the 1962 settlement. They believe it affords them opportunities for an eventual return, without further international negotiations, to a legitimate and

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strengthened position in Vientiane. This concern, among other factors, has operated as a restraint on their military actions. We do not believe that they are likely at this time to cast aside these restraints and embark on military actions as dramatic as a push to the Mekong.

D. Nonetheless, we expect a vigorous Communist military campaign over the next few months aimed at retaking the Plain of Jars, the capture of which, particularly in the context of the intensified US air campaign in northern Laos, they probably regarded as evidence of a surprisingly tough US posture. They probably will also aim at eliminating Vang Pao and his forces who have been carrying the major burden of the war in northern Laos. If the Communists are successful in these efforts, they will probably seek to take advantage of badly shaken RLG confidence to persuade RLG leaders, Souvanna and the King in particular, that a new political settlement is necessary to bring an end to the war. Such a settlement would almost certainly require that the RLG obtain a halt to all US bombing in Laos, and an alteration of the tripartite arrangements that would enhance the Communist political position.

DISCUSSION

I. GENERAL COMMUNIST OBJECTIVES IN LAOS

1. *North Vietnam.* Communist objectives in Laos are determined almost entirely in Hanoi. The indigenous Lao Communist movement (the Neo Lao Hak Sat—NLHS) and its military arm (the Pathet Lao—PL) are essentially creations of the Vietnamese Communist Party (the Lao Dong) and are firmly under Hanoi's control.

2. There is little question that Hanoi wants eventually to establish its hegemony over all of Laos. Physically weak and lacking even a firm national identity, Laos lies between the far stronger and competing Thai and Vietnamese nations, each of which controlled major portions of what is now the Kingdom of Laos before the establishment of the French protectorate. With the departure of the French, Hanoi came to see itself as the logical leader over all of former French Indochina and, according to some sources, as the predominant influence over ethnically related peoples in adjacent portions of Thailand. Hanoi's interest in bordering northeastern Laos is particularly strong because, at its eastern extremity in Houa Phan (Sam Neua) Province, Lao territory extends to within 50 miles of the North Vietnamese heartland—the Tonkin Delta. Hanoi's interest in southern Laos has been reinforced as that area has become virtually indispensable to the campaign to take over South Vietnam.

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3. Hanoi appears to have no set timetable for establishing its hegemony over Laos; the North Vietnamese seem willing to defer this aim until they achieve their priority objective in South Vietnam. Nevertheless, for the ultimate achievement of this aim, Hanoi wants to preserve and strengthen the Lao Communist movement. Thus, it is concerned to prevent Lao government forces from making any major inroads into Communist-held territory, to recover such ground when it is lost, to maintain the strength of PL forces, and to consolidate political control over PL-occupied areas. In pursuit of these goals, however, Hanoi has been careful to avoid moves which might overturn the Geneva settlement or be used by the US to justify large-scale ground intervention in Laos, particularly against Communist supply routes in the southern corridor.

4. *The USSR.* Soviet policy toward Laos is a function of broader considerations arising from Moscow's desire to offset and minimize the influence of China and the US, which it attempts to do mainly by supporting Hanoi. The Soviets also find it useful to preserve their role as one of the sponsors of the 1962 accords on Laos and their continuing shared responsibility for the government of Souvanna Phouma. For the present, therefore, the USSR does not desire to have the delicate balance in Laos upset or to see the Vietnam conflict spill over into adjacent areas. Moscow is obviously in an ambiguous position, but it is likely to continue to accord priority to the support of Hanoi's objectives and policies.

5. *Communist China.* China's basic objectives in Laos are to eliminate the US military and political presence, and to ensure that Laos is controlled by a regime closely aligned with China. Until these objectives are achieved, Peking wishes to make certain that the areas of Laos bordering on its own territory are in friendly hands, and that it retains access through Laos to the Communist insurgents in northern Thailand. Apparently satisfied for the present with the prospect of a North Vietnamese-dominated Laos, the Chinese have played a supporting role there that both advances their own objectives and is intended to bolster Peking's position with Hanoi in competition with Moscow. The Chinese provide supplies for the local Communist forces in northwestern Laos where their military construction units are also building an extensive road network.¹

II. THE COMMUNIST VIEW OF THE SITUATION IN LAOS SINCE 1962

6. *The 1962 Geneva Settlement.* North Vietnam understood the 1962 settlement—the Geneva Agreements, and the understandings reached by the three Lao factions at Zurich and the Plain of Jars—as providing a relatively secure

¹The most significant of these roads is the one which the Chinese are pushing southwestwards from Muong Sai, previously the southern terminus of their efforts, down the Nam Beng Valley in the direction of Pak Beng on the Mekong River, only 22 miles from the Thai border. (See map.)

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cease-fire line² behind which it could meet its own priority requirements, principally of ensuring a buffer for North Vietnam's western borders and a corridor for safe passage of supplies and troops to South Vietnam. Hanoi also expected that the 1962 arrangements would ensure a Communist veto in the tripartite Provisional Government of National Union, through the seats held by the Lao Communists and their neutralist sympathizers and through requirements for unanimity on important issues. Hanoi expected, moreover, to be able to play upon divisions between the right and Souvanna's neutralists, bringing the latter increasingly under its influence.

7. Although the Communists probably did not expect that the US would necessarily honor to the letter the 1962 terms as they understood them, the leadership nevertheless probably believes in its own public position, the cardinal point of which is that the US has consistently undermined the Geneva Agreements. Specifically, they believe that the US has subverted the neutralists, encouraged the RLG to penetrate areas rightfully controlled by the Communists, and used Laos to support the war against the Vietnamese people. The fact that some US actions in Laos, particularly against the Communist logistic routes in the Panhandle, have been in response to Hanoi's efforts to gain control of South Vietnam by force probably does not alter these basic views in Hanoi. The Communists argue that the struggle in South Vietnam is an internal matter which is of no concern to the US and feel that their military action is justified by US efforts to thwart North Vietnam's rightful claim to all of Vietnam which they established by their victories against the French.

8. Although the Communists may assert that they are "punishing" imperialist transgressors, their military activities are rarely undertaken for any single reason. Rather, the Communists are led to act—or not to act—by a complex of considerations. Certainly the drive to regain their "own" territory, eliminate hostile pockets within it and retaliate against specific RLG acts are among these considerations. The Communists no doubt viewed the RLG capture of Nam Bac in 1966 and its use as a support base for guerrilla and intelligence operations in Phong Saly Province and other areas close to the Chinese borders, the establishment of navigation sites related to the war against North Vietnam such as Phou Pha Thi, the expansion into the Sedone Valley in the south, and the growth of Vang Pao's forces and their activities in areas of Houa Phan and Xieng Khouang Provinces as requiring retaliatory action. The RLG's recent rainy season operations against Muong Phine in the south and Vang Pao's successful drive across the Plain of Jars undoubtedly fall into the same category. But Communist military actions in Laos are not determined solely by a desire for retaliatory action. Such decisions are made also in the context of furthering long-term Communist goals of

² Actually, the Geneva Agreements did not give formal recognition to any cease-fire line. The cease-fire merely called on all troops to hold fast in place. (The centerspread map shows the territory held by the various factions at the time of the 1962 settlement.)

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securing complete control over Laos and of furthering their efforts in South Vietnam, as well as such short-term goals as expanding lines of communication, reaping political benefits from military pressures, taking advantage of targets of opportunity, and making the most effective use of limited resources.

9. Their doctrines about US behavior apart, the Vietnamese Communist leaders probably believe that the situation in Laos as it has developed since the Geneva settlement has served their purposes reasonably well. This has been the case particularly with respect to their priority objective, support of the war in South Vietnam. Although US interdiction measures against the virtually indispensable logistic routes in the Panhandle have imposed heavy burdens on their logistic effort, the Communists have nevertheless succeeded in keeping the supply lines open to South Vietnam.³

10. Until the fall of 1967, because of its concentration on South Vietnam, Hanoi did not attempt to move decisively against US/RLG gains in Laos at its expense. Characteristically, the war in Laos seesawed back and forth, with RLG offensives during the May-October rainy season and Communist counteroffensives during the November-April dry season. If North Vietnamese forces were not withdrawn as required by the Geneva settlement, neither were they used to modify greatly the general lines of military control pertaining in 1962. Indeed, after registering a net gain in such seesaw exchanges in the first few years, in 1966 and 1967 the Communists suffered a net loss of territory, and an even greater loss of population (through migration) in these annual cycles of military action.

11. *Recent Developments.* Communist military action took on a new intensity in 1968 and 1969. PL/NVA combat forces in northern Laos were increased substantially during the period. Vigorous campaigns in the dry seasons of both years, beginning with the recapture of Nam Bac, and targeted primarily against major government sites behind Communist lines, resulted in some of the worst RLG setbacks of the war.

³ Maj. Gen. Rockly Triantafellu, the Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence, USAF, believes the last sentence of this paragraph seriously underestimates the extent to which the flow of supplies through Laos to South Vietnam has been impeded and the impact which this has had on Hanoi's options and strategy in the war.

He notes that since the Tet offensive of 1968 the Communists have had two years and every incentive to rebuild their forces to the level necessary to achieve their objectives in South Vietnam. The enemy has made enormous efforts to overcome the interdiction obstacle by introducing supplies at a rate five times the level he eventually filtered through. Although not personnel limited in the north, he was forced to reduce troop infiltration to a level he could support logistically. This has resulted in an intensity of operations insufficient to prevent progress in pacification and Vietnamization.

He believes that the interdiction in Laos is causing the conflict in South Vietnam to remain at a losing level for the enemy and forcing Hanoi to recognize it is faced with a more protracted war. Finally, the margin of interdiction success or failure is very critical. The outcome will impinge heavily upon the rate and success of pacification and Vietnamization.

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12. This buildup and these Communist offensives are not fully explained, however, only as reactions to RLG initiatives, increased US bombing,⁴ or Hanoi's concern over the security of border areas. Communist military moves in 1968-1969 in Laos must also be seen in the context of Hanoi's expectations with respect to the war in Vietnam. During 1968-1969 Hanoi apparently began to expect the military and political struggle in Vietnam and pressures on US policy to develop increasingly in its favor. In anticipation of such developments in Vietnam, it appears that Hanoi set out in Laos to bolster its political and military posture in order to be in the best possible position for coincident developments toward a new settlement in Laos.

13. On the political side the Lao Communists began in the spring of 1968 to set the stage for a new internal settlement which would retain the tripartite principle but accord to the "true" neutralists under their control the right to represent the neutral faction. Moreover, while Lao Communist propaganda attacks on Souvanna continued, the North Vietnamese, and perhaps the Russians as well, seemed to be suggesting to Souvanna that he could purge himself of the puppet stain and continue to play an important role in a revised tripartite formula if he could bring an end to US bombing. Unusual gestures of respect to the King were also orchestrated with demands that the bombing cease as a prelude to an internal settlement to be reached by the Lao among themselves.

14. The psychological impact of the Communist military and political campaigns was considerable, and at the end of both dry seasons there was much apprehension in Vientiane that the Communists would soon break out of previous patterns of military action and push to the Mekong. At the end of June 1969, for example, it appeared in Vientiane that the Communists had established a springboard in north Laos from which they would launch major offensives early in the winter of 1969-1970.

15. Then, much to the Communists' surprise, Vang Pao undertook a major rainy season offensive which drove the Communists off the Plain of Jars for the first time and captured stores in quantities which appeared far in excess of normal Communist requirements. The Communists probably viewed the capture of the Plain, especially in the context of the intensified US air campaign in northern Laos, as evidence of a surprisingly tough US posture in Laos. The loss of the Plain was not only a blow to Communist prestige but also a serious setback which complicates their continuation of the high level of military activity they pursued in 1968 and 1969. Now, the Communists almost certainly believe they have to recapture the Plain before they can increase the military pressure on the

⁴ Souvanna first requested US air reconnaissance in May 1964. A month later these planes were authorized to return fire. Total US attack sorties in Laos grew steadily from 250 in 1964 to almost 50,000 in 1966. In November 1968, after the bombing of North Vietnam was halted, US attack sorties over Laos jumped from an average of about 5,000 per month to about 12,000 per month. Until July 1969 by far the greater portion of these sorties were made in the corridor in south Laos. Beginning in July 1969, however, attack sorties in north Laos, flown mainly in support of Vang Pao's operations, increased from about 1,200-1,900 a month to about 4,000 per month.

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RLG in pursuit of their objectives of stopping the US bombing and forcing a favorable political settlement.

III. THE OUTLOOK

16. The available evidence strongly indicates a vigorous Communist campaign during the present dry season in north Laos. At a minimum, such a campaign would be aimed at retaking the Plain of Jars; the extent of their military preparations suggests that the Communists may also intend to move against the major Meo bases and eliminate Vang Pao and his forces, once and for all. The Communists probably are aware that Vang Pao's reserves are relatively thin; that a concerted campaign against his Meo forces could exhaust them within a single dry season; and that once the Meo, who have been carrying the major burden of the war in northern Laos, had been dispersed, the psychological impact on the RLG, combined with the military effect, could leave all of northern Laos open to the Communists.

17. The Communists might also move against Vang Vieng, the headquarters of the Souvanna neutralist troops, hoping to take advantage of its political symbolism by installing the "Patriotic Neutralist Forces" there. In order to increase political pressure on the RLG, Communist forces may also pose a threat to Luang Prabang, and possibly Vientiane, without actually carrying out attacks. Interest in political impact might also lead them to further shellings of important towns and other terrorist actions. In the southern Panhandle, where the Communists already enjoy a relatively satisfactory territorial position, they will probably devote their energies to interdicting the RLG's lines of communication, and immobilizing local RLG commanders.

18. If the Communists retake the Plain of Jars, and inflict heavy damage on Vang Pao's forces, they are likely to follow up fairly quickly with a heightened political campaign. They will hope thereby to take optimum advantage of badly shaken RLG confidence. Their intent will be to persuade RLG leaders, Souvanna and the King in particular, that a new political settlement is necessary to bring an end to the war. The Communists would probably offer Souvanna and other Lao political forces a position of some continuing legitimacy and authority. But the settlement would almost certainly require that the RLG obtain a halt to all US bombing in Laos, and enhance the Communist political position in a reconstituted tripartite government.

19. The Communists are unlikely to engage in military actions such as a military drive to the Mekong so dramatic and extensive as to threaten the survival of the 1962 arrangements. These 1962 arrangements are probably still regarded by the Communists as providing them with an optimal—and unassailable—basis for a return to legitimacy and the political path to power at a time of their own choosing. The Communists may calculate that the major signatories are willing, even anxious to regard the international aspects of the Laos question as settled in principle, if not in practice, by these arrangements. Thus, they may anticipate that all that will be required in Laos itself, when the

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time is ripe, is a readjustment of the internal arrangements which will strengthen and guarantee the position of the Lao Communists, while hopefully retaining the prestige and legitimacy attached to the participation of Souvanna and the sanction of the King. Once the tripartite government is restored with alterations favoring the Communists, Hanoi probably has considerable confidence, despite its experience with the 1962 accords, that with North Vietnamese assistance, its Lao clients will eventually take control of the country.

20. Although the North Vietnamese probably no longer have any serious concern that a move to the Mekong on their part would bring US ground forces into Laos in strength, they would see a much better than even chance of an intense air reaction. We do not believe they would want to run these risks at this time simply to enhance their political impact in Vientiane. Their political objectives with respect to the RLG can be better served by more measured actions that shake its confidence severely without causing it to disappear.

21. The North Vietnamese probably calculate that any Communist successes in Laos are likely to contribute to American war-weariness. However, we doubt that Hanoi would cast long-standing restraints aside and move in strength to the Mekong, in the hope that the US Government would feel compelled by its own re-evaluation of the over-all prospects, or by public opinion, to move more rapidly toward withdrawing American forces in Vietnam and ending the war there on Communist terms. Hanoi cannot be especially confident at this time of its reading of either American public opinion or US Government policy, nor does it have any particular basis in past behavior for assuming that specific events in Laos cause specific US reactions with respect to Vietnam.

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22. We cannot predict the outcome of the current military struggle around the Plain of Jars except to note that Vang Pao is up against a much superior force and his troops lack the resilience and reserves to fight a sustained defensive campaign. But we have no doubt that a serious defeat would cause much alarm in Vientiane, possibly even panic. In certain circumstances Souvanna might lose his ability to hold things together. Either he or the King might then feel it necessary to bargain with the Communists with few useful cards left in their hands.