

MEMORANDUM

NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL

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January 21, 1972

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MEMORANDUM FOR:

MR. KISSINGER

FROM:

JOHN H. HOLDRIDGE *JHM*

SUBJECT:

Air Incidents in Vicinity of Chinese Road in Laos

Background

As you know there are well over 30,000 Chinese troops in Northwestern Laos engaged in the construction of a road network headed for Thailand, under the protection of substantial AAA.

The diplomatic history surrounding the construction of this road is somewhat murky but dates back practically a decade and appears to have RLG acquiescence, if not explicit concurrence.

All sorts of theorizing is possible as to what this Chinese road is intended to achieve, although the most evident reason would appear to be facilitating support for insurgency in Thailand over the long haul.

Our policy towards the development of this road, which is now only 20 or 30 miles from the Thai border, has been passive. We never make a public fuss about it and our rules of engagement in Laos are to avoid any military measures against it.

The Recent Incidents

As you know an Air America C-123 was reported missing in Northwestern Laos on December 27. This unarmed cargo plane was moving supplies to the town of Xieng Lom for later distribution to military field units.

Search and rescue efforts were immediately initiated and continued until after the January 15 shooting at an unarmed Volpar plane on a leaflet mission. As a result of these SAR efforts, 3 unarmed Air America planes have been hit by ground fire. In 2 of these incidents the ground fire was probably Chinese.

NSS, DOS Reviews Completed.

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Our Press Line

Concerned by the prospect of headlines to the effect that Chinese forces are shooting at American planes on the eve of the President's visit, the State Department has played these incidents in a very low key and thus far there has been no undue press interest. On January 17, the last time our spokesman at State addressed this question he was asked whether the plane most recently fired upon (January 15) had been hit by Chinese anti-aircraft fire. He replied, "No, I don't think there is any way we can confirm that."

Since that briefing the issue has arisen in the press again in a story filed by AP on January 19 datelined Vientiane which quotes an Air America spokesman as saying that Chinese anti-aircraft guns are believed to have hit 4 U.S. planes searching for the crew of the missing C-123.

We believe the Air America statement, although probably correct, should not be confirmed by official spokesmen and that we should stick to the line that we cannot confirm who is shooting at these planes. Guidance to this effect has been drawn up on an "if asked" basis.

Possible Other Steps

In the interest of avoiding any further incidents you may wish to give consideration to private contact with the PRC on this question in which we would take the line that we are concerned that these shooting incidents might be of Chinese origin and that it is in our mutual interest to avoid further such occurrences. We may also want to ask their quiet assistance in the return of these pilots to safety.

Recommendation:

That you consider raising this issue with the Chinese in the interest of avoiding the development of any public embarrassments.

OK - I'll do so in Peking.

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