

**SNIE 10-10-65**

**Reactions to a Certain US Course of  
Action in Southeast Asia**

**10 September 1965**

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**SPECIAL**  
**NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE ESTIMATE**

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**Reactions to a Certain US Course of  
Action in Southeast Asia**

*Submitted by the*  
DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

*Concurred in by the*  
UNITED STATES INTELLIGENCE BOARD

*As indicated overleaf*  
10 SEPTEMBER 1965

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*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, and NSA.

*Concurring:*

Director of Intelligence and Research, Department of State  
Director, Defense Intelligence Agency  
Director of the National Security Agency

*Abstaining:*

The Atomic Energy Commission Representative to the USIB and the Assistant to the Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation, the subject being outside of their jurisdiction.

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## REACTIONS TO A CERTAIN US COURSE OF ACTION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

### THE PROBLEM

To estimate Communist and other reactions to the use of US forces to establish a barrier across Communist supply lines in the Lao pan-handle.

### ASSUMPTION

A US force of three divisions moves into Laos along Route 9 from Thailand and South Vietnam to seize and hold terrain along the Route with the purpose of blocking Communist troop and supply movements.

### DISCUSSION

1. The international reaction to the US action would be generally unfavorable, particularly if the action were not undertaken at the request of Premier Souvanna Phouma. We believe, however, that the chances are less than even that Souvanna could be persuaded to make such a request. He would recognize that the US action would be a clear and conspicuous violation of the 1962 Geneva accords upon which the legitimacy of his government rests. He would see few advantages to Laos and many dangers in such a deployment. He would fear that Laos would become a major battleground for the powers involved in Vietnam, that the Communists would retaliate against his forces in other parts of Laos, and that the Chinese Communists might occupy the northern provinces. Souvanna has approved of US escalation of air activity, and he would probably prefer to see this course fully exploited, including the destruction of Hanoi, before considering involvement of Laos in a US-Communist ground war.

2. If the US pressed for a Lao Government request in the face of Souvanna's opposition, he might be led to resign and return to France, as he has so often threatened to do. While most other Lao leaders, including the King, would be likely to share Souvanna's misgivings, Souvanna could probably be removed by a coalition of conservative forces. Under such circumstances, however, any successor government would be seen by most of the world as a US puppet.

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3. If Souvanna could be persuaded to call for the US divisions, his assent would almost certainly be conditioned on explicit US guarantees of protection against DRV and Chinese counteraction in northern and central Laos. He might not request immediate deployment of US forces into these areas, lest this precipitate the very attacks he wished to prevent, but he would almost certainly demand some tangible evidence that substantial US forces would indeed be available quickly if needed. This would be equally true of any successor government.

4. The Thai would be concerned about having such a large foreign presence in their country as the assumed action implies, but their major concern would be that the action might bring Communist, particularly Chinese, attacks against Thailand. We believe that the Thai would cooperate with the US plan if given specific commitments on defense measures to protect Thailand in such a contingency. The Thai leaders would also almost certainly seek a substantial increase in US aid. At least sporadic sabotage efforts against the lines of communication across Thailand to the Route 9 region of Laos would be likely, and their protection would require a fairly large-scale Thai or US effort. In short, the US would almost certainly be called on to provide substantial forces, in Thailand as in Laos, over and above those which would be required to seal off the Communist supply route through Laos.

5. In Cambodia, Prince Sihanouk's fear of US-supported attacks from South Vietnam or Laos would probably be increased. He would vociferously condemn the US action and would probably reiterate in some form his demands for international guarantees of his borders. At the same time, however, he would probably be impressed with this new evidence of US determination not to be driven out of Southeast Asia. Until he had some clearer view of the outcome of the US effort, he would probably be reluctant to see any expansion in the use of Cambodia as a supply route and safe-haven for Communist forces in Vietnam.

6. The North Vietnamese would almost certainly learn that a major US operation was being planned; they already seem to suspect that something of the sort may be under consideration. As US intentions became clearer, Hanoi and the Pathet Lao would seek to discourage Souvanna's concurrence and to deter the US action by propaganda and by actions designed to demonstrate their ability to threaten areas about which the Lao and Thai governments are sensitive, e.g., by troop movements in the north and central areas. At the same time they would send some reinforcements into southern Laos and attempt to stockpile supplies. As the dimensions of the US build-up in northeast Thailand became more apparent, Hanoi might undertake limited offensives to bring PL/PAVN forces close to the Mekong along the Thai frontier. All this would be accompanied by a vigorous propaganda campaign designed to heighten fears in Laos and abroad of an ever-expanding conflict.

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7. Once the US operation was under way, the North Vietnamese might choose to engage US forces at specific points where the PL/PAVN units would have local advantage, but the normal pattern probably would be vigorous harassment and ambush. Though the PL/PAVN would probably exert strong pressures in north and central Laos, we believe the chances are less than even that they would launch a major counter-offensive against the US forces in the south. For at least some time, the Communists would be likely to feel that they could maintain the insurrection in South Vietnam, even if the US interdiction reduced the levels of activity. Hanoi and the Pathet Lao would call for condemnation of the US action under the Geneva agreement. The North Vietnamese might set up a rival Lao "government of National Union," particularly if Souvanna were no longer in power. They would at least withdraw their diplomatic representation from Vientiane, have the Pathet Lao sever all contacts with the Lao government, and threaten to renounce the Geneva agreements.

8. Even after the US forces had occupied the length of Route 9, we believe that the North Vietnamese would continue efforts to infiltrate some cadres through Laos. At the same time, Hanoi would increase its reliance on sea routes directly to South Vietnam or via Cambodia, at least for arms, equipment, and supplies. If the US effort, including not only the action assumed here but other actions against Communist lines of communications, succeeded in seriously restricting the supply of men and materiel to the insurrection in South Vietnam, the North Vietnamese would have to decide whether to reduce sharply the level of that insurrection, to seek a respite through political means, or to attempt to break the blockade through military action against the US forces in Laos or elsewhere. Which course they would choose would depend on a number of circumstances of the moment, such as conditions in North Vietnam, Chinese pressures, Hanoi's reading of the US domestic situation, and, probably most important, the strength of the VC and the state of its morale.

9. The Chinese Communists, as well as the DRV, have been anticipating US intervention in the corridor and have already made propaganda attacks and threats aimed at blocking such action, including private warnings that they might have to send troops into Laos if the US commitment in Vietnam were greatly increased. We believe, however, that so long as the US forces had not crossed the Laotian frontier in strength, Peking probably would not for its part send Chinese combat forces in any strength into Laos, although it might order threatening troop movements along the border. It might also increase its assistance to the Pathet Lao in northern Laos by introducing some specialized personnel to support the PL/PAVN. At a minimum, Peking would increase its propaganda attacks and threats of intervention, and step up aid and commitments of support to the DRV.

10. However, once the US had crossed into southern Laos in force, the Chinese Communists almost certainly would counter in the northwest by supplying personnel and equipment to augment Communist capabilities there and

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expand Communist control into areas close to the Thai border.<sup>1</sup> This would be designed to facilitate infiltration of Thailand, to intimidate Lao and Thai leaders, and to raise international and domestic pressures on the US Government to avoid expanding the war.

11. As long as the Chinese Communist leaders estimated that the US forces would remain in the Route 9 area of south Laos, large-scale intervention by Chinese forces would be unlikely. However, an imminent Communist move against north Laos would lead the Lao government to demand US forces for protection of this area. If the US responded by introducing US ground forces into northern Laos—e.g., the royal capital at Luang Prabang—this would in itself sharply increase the risk of Chinese entry.

12. The principal Soviet reactions would be political. In the initial stages of the US deployment, Moscow would probably use its position as Geneva co-chairman to reinforce other diplomatic and propaganda efforts to block the US action or cause abandonment of the project. Moscow almost certainly would like to see another international conference on Laos. However, its actions would be strongly influenced by the course of events and by the positions of Hanoi and Peking. For example, if Hanoi and Peking recognized a Communist-dominated government in Laos, Moscow would probably do so as well. At some stage, the USSR might renounce its role as co-chairman, on the grounds that the US had destroyed the 1962 Geneva agreements.

13. On the military plane, the Soviets would avoid a direct commitment of forces, but they might provide logistical and material support to Communist operations in Laos as they did in 1961. This would require Peking's cooperation, however, and the US action in Laos would probably not cause the Chinese to drop their opposition to any significant Soviet role in Indochina.

14. US-Soviet tensions would sharpen, both because the Soviets would be under heavy pressure from the Asian Communists, and because the Soviets would regard the US action as a repudiation of agreements worked out with the USSR in 1961 and 1962. The Soviets might increase their own defense spending and even abrogate some US-Soviet agreements or understandings. We doubt that the USSR would retaliate against the US in Berlin simply as a response to the US action in Laos. Some carefully controlled harassments in Berlin are, of course, possible in any case.

15. The British, too, would be faced with difficult problems. As one of the two co-chairmen of the Geneva conference on Laos, the UK would find it somewhat awkward, though of course not impossible, to support US violation of the accords. Furthermore, US policy in Vietnam is not popular with the British public, and a major extension of the Vietnam conflict into Laos would excite considerable opposition. Prime Minister Wilson would be under severe

<sup>1</sup> The Director of Intelligence and Research believes that the estimate should state specifically that "personnel" probably would include some regular Chinese Communist combat units, since "personnel" can be interpreted as meaning only limited numbers of specialized cadre.

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attack from his own left wing and from much of the public and press. Nevertheless, he would not want openly to oppose the US on this issue. Although he might be restrained from strong public support, he would probably give private assurances and try to avoid public criticism of the US action.

16. France would see the US action as a major extension of erroneous US policy in Vietnam, and would strongly condemn it. Even if the action had the blessing of Souvanna's government, the French reactions would be severely negative; in this case, Paris might cut off its remaining economic aid and political support for Souvanna's regime. If another regime had replaced Souvanna's, it would be condemned by France, almost as strongly as by the Communist powers, as a US puppet. We do not believe, however, that France would initiate action against the US in the UN, and we cannot see much that France could do to make its opposition felt practically.

17. The reaction of other members of the world community would generally follow predictable lines (e.g., approval from Taipei and condemnation from Djakarta), with an increased amount of unfavorable reaction. If the action had Souvanna's support, reactions would be somewhat less unfavorable than otherwise. The success of the US action would also have an important effect on world reactions; if the three divisions did not result in a speedy and pronounced lessening of hostilities in South Vietnam, criticisms would be harsher and endorsements less enthusiastic. Even though Hanoi and Peking have categorically denied that the UN has any jurisdiction in the Vietnam conflict, sympathizers might move for a UN condemnation of the US action. The likelihood of such an effort would be greater, of course, if the US action were taken over Souvanna's opposition.

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