

SNIE 13-10-71

Communist China's Reactions to  
Developments in Laos

18 February 1971

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# SPECIAL NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE ESTIMATE

Communist China's Reactions  
to Developments in Laos

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SI 43-10-71  
18 February 1971

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

18 February 1971

SUBJECT: SNIE 13-10-71: COMMUNIST CHINA'S REACTIONS TO DEVELOPMENTS  
IN LAOS

THE ESTIMATE

*Chinese Response Thus Far*

1. Peking trailed both Hanoi and Moscow in reacting to recent developments in southern Laos. The Chinese did not speculate publicly on the possibility of cross-border operations into Laos until 2 February when they began to cite press commentary from Hanoi, which had begun some days earlier. Since then Peking has issued a number of authoritative commentaries as well as several Foreign Ministry statements. At first, these pronouncements dwelt on the same themes: the US is expanding the war in Indochina; the people of Indochina will certainly surmount the new challenge; and China will continue to provide "powerful backing and support." More recently, Peking has strengthened its rhetoric, claiming that the allied move into Laos is "a menace to China" and that

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it "definitely poses a grave threat to China." The latter statements are an escalation of the rhetoric that followed Cambodia last spring, and suggest that Peking now takes a more serious view of the situation in Indochina.

2. Large rallies have been held in Peking and Shanghai to condemn allied actions in Laos, a pattern that will no doubt be repeated throughout the country. Nevertheless, all authoritative comment on the situation in Indochina since the beginning of the month has placed Chinese assurances of assistance in terms of rear base support.

3. It is reasonable to assume that Peking and Hanoi have been consulting on the present situation, but there is no evidence of a high-level conference. Rumors of important Chinese -- e.g., Chou En-lai and Chief of Staff Huang Yung-sheng -- attending communist strategy sessions in Hanoi in late January and early February appear to be unfounded. A Vietnamese negotiator, however, has been in Peking recently to sign a supplemental agreement on military and economic aid to North Vietnam.

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4. No unusual military movements -- either on the ground or in the air -- have been detected in South China.<sup>1/</sup> [ ]

[ ] It could, however, presage an expansion of the Chinese roadbuilding activity.<sup>2/</sup> The recent discovery of heavier anti-aircraft guns -- with associated fire control radar -- in the area of the roadbuilding can not be related to developments in southern Laos, [ ]

*Chinese Options and Probable Courses of Action*

5. Peking has viewed the war in Indochina as a test of Mao's theory of "people's war" and has consistently advised the communists in Indochina to prepare for a long and costly struggle and to persist in self-reliant and protracted warfare. Peking doubtless believes victory in such an effort would enhance its claims for ideological

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<sup>1/</sup> This judgment is based primarily on information derived from [ ] no photography is available to confirm this.

<sup>2/</sup> This roadbuilding activity is discussed in the Annex.

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pre-eminence over the Soviet Union and would strengthen China's political influence in Asia. On the other hand, Peking has had to consider the possibility that an adverse turn in the war could lead to a security threat on China's southern border.

6. While Peking has advocated "people's war" for the Indochinese it has given no indication of intent to use Chinese troops or to risk an accidental confrontation with the US. The involvement of Chinese forces in the struggle thus far has been limited to construction and anti-aircraft detachments in northern North Vietnam during the bombing and currently in northwestern Laos. China has built roads from its own territory into northwestern Laos, and now has some 14,000 to 18,000 troops there in engineering, anti-aircraft artillery, and security. This activity can serve several purposes. Roadbuilding to the east facilitates North Vietnamese access to northwestern Laos for support of Pathet Lao operations. The extension of the road south and west in the direction of Pak Beng also poses the threat of a greater communist presence in the Thai border region and this threat might be exploited to deter a greater Thai role in Laos. And, of course, the road system provides China itself with direct access to northwestern Laos.

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7. Peking would naturally be concerned about the effect a successful interdiction of the Ho Chi Minh trail could have on the capability of the NVA/VC to carry on the struggle in the South. At this early point, Peking's most sanguine estimate is probably that Hanoi can counter the South Vietnamese move and through pressure in Laos and South Vietnam, can force an early withdrawal. In their worst case estimate of the consequences of operations generally limited to the Tchepone area, the Chinese will have considered the possibility that Hanoi's supply lines could be disrupted so severely that the overall communist position in South Vietnam would suffer serious deterioration.

8. In an effort to forestall this latter situation, there are a number of things that Peking might do short of direct involvement of its own combat forces. It would, of course, seek to persuade Hanoi to persevere in the struggle, and it would promise additional materiel support to encourage Hanoi in this course. Peking could also offer to re-introduce logistic personnel into North Vietnam.

9. Beyond these measures the Chinese may see small risks and considerable advantage in certain steps -- accompanied by shrill propaganda closely coordinated with Hanoi's military efforts and threats -- that convey menace but which do not commit them to serious action. The purpose would be to raise the threat of Chinese

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intervention and thus to encourage an abortive end to current Allied operations in southern Laos and, in any event, to create such apprehension particularly in the US, as to inhibit any future initiatives of a similar nature.

10. Among the measures that the Chinese might take to give credence to their threats would be to move troops about in South China or to make a show of stepping up construction of the new road to the Mekong -- a project they probably intend to move ahead with anyway. They might also send reconnaissance patrols beyond the present area of road construction toward the Thai border. This latter move would have the particular objective of causing Bangkok to pull back from its involvement in Laos.

11. Another move open to the Chinese would be to introduce advisory personnel into combat areas and to let their presence become known. They might feel that the advertised presence of such advisors could raise the spectre of Chinese intervention as in Korea, without in fact involving much real risk. (Chinese observers have visited COSVN in the past but so far reports of Chinese advisors in combat situations in Cambodia and Laos have not been confirmed.)

12. Finally, if it were prepared to go still further Peking could send troops into the Plain of Jars area or even into southern Laos. But

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this would be unlikely unless US troops or ARVN forces backed by US air power, having destroyed communist forces around Tchepone, should move northward with the apparent intent of carrying the war into North Vietnam or northern Laos. In this event the Chinese would feel that their own security interests were directly threatened.

13. Short of these circumstances, such a radical shift in Chinese policy seems most unlikely. In northern Laos there is presently no real threat to Chinese or North Vietnamese interests. Even should Vang Pao and US air power inflict heavy blows on the communist forces around the Plain of Jars in the next few months, Laotian forces would not be in a position to threaten vital Chinese or North Vietnamese interests. Thus, we doubt that the Chinese would choose at this point to take the risks involved by moving to claim a larger role in northern Laos.

14. As for southern Laos, there are practical difficulties in developing an effective Chinese military presence there. Chinese troops would suffer the same relative disadvantages in fire power and mobility as the more readily available North Vietnamese. They would also have the same logistical problems that confront the NVA. Beyond considerations of this sort, however, lie the larger risks and complications of direct involvement with the US.

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15. It is possible, of course, that the South Vietnamese incursion into southern Laos would arouse such a sense of desperation in Hanoi as to produce a request for participation of Chinese combat forces. All the evidence we have, however, extending over a good many years, indicates that the North Vietnamese would be exceedingly reluctant to call for such assistance, unless they saw that the security of their own country and regime were in grave peril. Short of a direct threat of this kind we do not believe that the North Vietnamese would invite the Chinese in.

16. In sum, China's most likely course of action in response to recent events in Laos is to publicly and privately encourage Hanoi to persist in its protracted struggle; to raise the level of threat in its propaganda; and to increase its flow of arms and equipment to allay whatever reluctance Hanoi may have about continuing the conflict. At this stage of the Allied incursion into Laos, Peking probably sees the US and its allies still bogged down in a war that offers no graceful exit. If Hanoi maintains its will to resist, the Chinese will probably see no need to change their basic approach. And even if North Vietnam felt compelled to shift to a less aggressive posture or to seek a negotiated settlement, Peking would have little leverage to prevent such a move.

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Any effort by Peking to coerce the Hanoi leadership would almost certainly be resisted. It is more likely that Peking would follow Hanoi's lead, and should an Indochina-wide conference develop, the Chinese would probably insist on participating.

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ANNEX

CHINESE COMMUNIST MILITARY FORCES IN LAOS

*The Chinese Communist Presence*

1. The Chinese military presence in northwestern Laos has expanded slowly from a single engineer regiment in late 1968 to a current force of some 14,000-18,000 troops. As the roadbuilding progressed, additional construction and anti-aircraft personnel were brought in to maintain and defend the road system.

2. At the end of the last dry season in June 1970, Chinese strength there was estimated at 10,000-14,000 troops. Since then, these military forces have increased slowly as Peking undertook new road construction once the rainy season ended. More anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) troops were deployed along the road system, and an additional engineer regiment was identified. Furthermore, analysis [REDACTED] indicated that the Chinese engineer regiments in Laos have five subordinate battalions instead of the normal three. As a result, the estimated military strength has been increased by 4,000 troops. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] this  
augmentation continues.

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ANNEX

3. The bulk of the existing force consists of a division-level engineer unit of some 10,000-13,000 troops organized into at least five regiments. Some 4,000-5,000 anti-aircraft personnel also are present to defend the construction force. The engineer unit, deployed to Laos from North Vietnam in late 1968, was subsequently augmented with additional engineer, support, anti-aircraft, and security units. It apparently functions as a task force command authority for the road construction program and maintains communications with the Kunming Military Region Headquarters through a subordinate command.

4. Logistical support for the roadbuilding program in northwestern Laos is channeled from Kunming through rear service support units in Ssu-mao and Meng-tzu. Prior to extending their road construction program into Laos in late 1968, the Chinese built a system of all-weather roads from these two support bases to the Yunnan border area as part of an over-all program, an indication that it is long term in nature.

5. The Chinese units in northwestern Laos have been careful to avoid any ground conflict with Laotian Government forces. North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao units have been used to clear government troops from the area prior to the initiation of road construction.

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ANNEX

The Chinese anti-aircraft and security forces have been active in their defensive role, however. AAA units have not hesitated to fire on the occasional Lao aircraft that have attacked the road or on any aircraft that happened to fly over the road.

6. The Chinese AAA inventory now includes over 150 anti-aircraft guns -- 37 mm and 57 mm and possibly a few 85 mm/100 mm -- and about the same number of smaller caliber automatic weapons. The weapons are deployed along much of the Chinese-built road network in northwest Laos, with major concentrations at Muong Sai, Muong La, and Muong Houn. The heavier pieces generally protect strategic bridges, large barracks areas, and storage installations. The smaller pieces are more widely scattered to defend the road construction units. Moreover, the use of improved radar tracking procedures, seen since 10 January, enables Chinese AAA forces in Laos to function more effectively in an area defense role. These forces were assumed previously to be functioning in a point defense role protecting individual construction elements.

*The Road Construction Program*

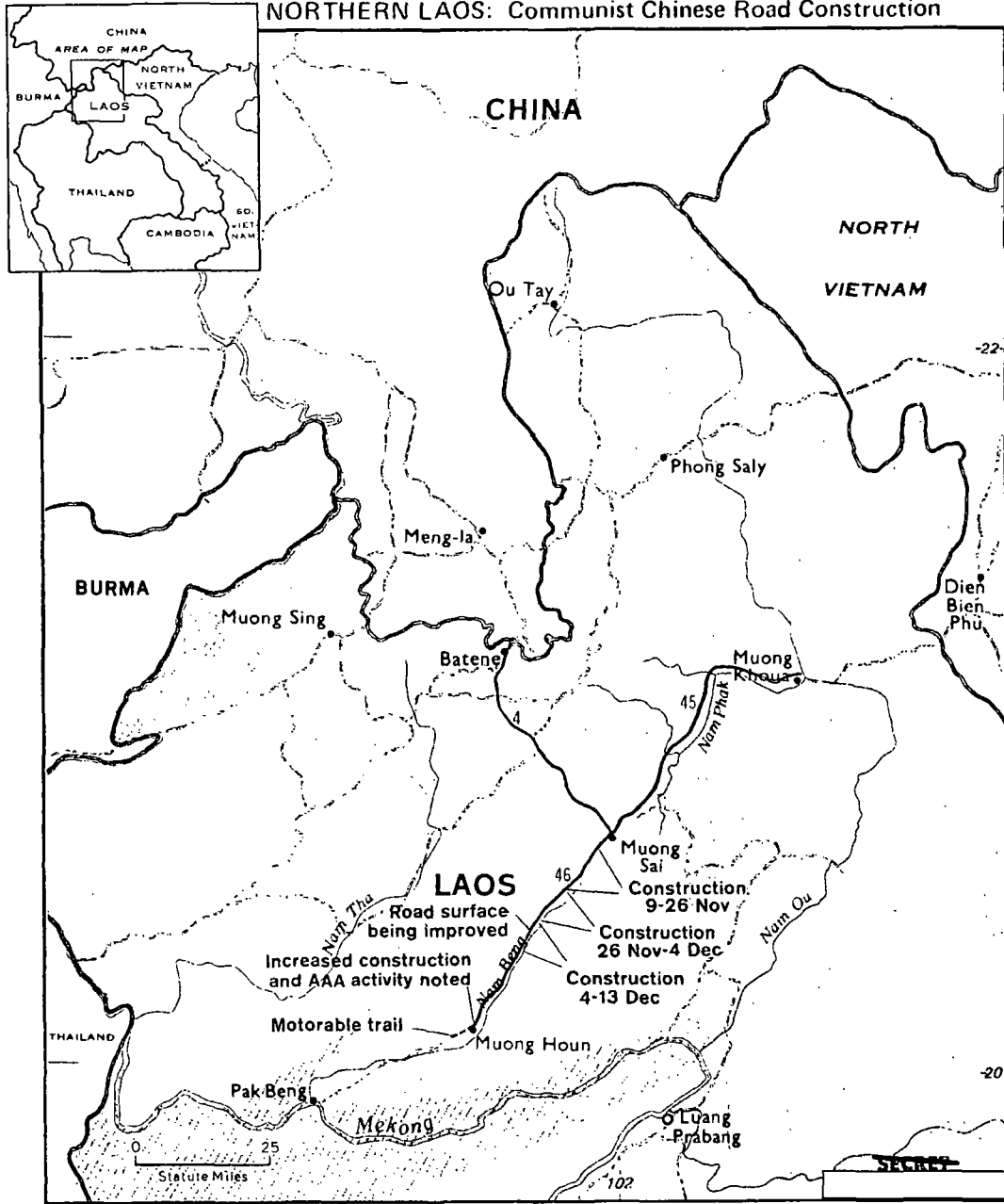
7. Since the Chinese began the major road construction program in northwestern Laos in late 1968, they have built over 160 miles of two-lane, graveled roads with permanent bridges at large water crossings. The system runs south from the Yunnan border to the village of Muong Sai,

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NORTHERN LAOS: Communist Chinese Road Construction



☐ Communist controlled area

☐ Contested territory.

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ANNEX

where it splits into two routes: one turns northeast toward Route 19 and the North Vietnamese border, and the other leads southwest toward the Mekong River and Thailand.

8. The road toward North Vietnam was completed at the end of 1970. A bridge still is needed across the Nam Ou River at Muong Khoua, however. There is no evidence that the Chinese intend soon to build the large bridge necessary to span this waterway, but on the basis of their past road construction activity, it is likely that one will be constructed eventually. An engineer regiment recently moved into the Muong Khoua area.

9. There are signs that Chinese engineers in northern Laos may be preparing to resume construction of Route 46 toward the Mekong. Photography of early January indicates an increased buildup just north of Muong Houn, the present terminus of the road. Construction camps are being enlarged, new AAA sites are being constructed, and some radar-directed AAA weapons are in place. So far this dry season, Chinese roadbuilders have concentrated on finishing Route 45, which runs northeast from Muong Sai to Muong Khoua, and improving the surface to Route 46 between Muong Sai and Muong Houn. Both projects are almost completed.

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ANNEX

10. If the Chinese extend Route 46 as far as Pak Beng, it would have a significant psychological impact on the Thais. The Nam Beng valley has been used in the past as a Communist infiltration route into Thailand, and a road would facilitate the shipment of supplies to the Thai insurgents.

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