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Probable Communist Reactions to Certain US Courses of Action with Respect to Laos

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PROBABLE COMMUNIST REACTIONS TO CERTAIN U.S. COURSES OF ACTION WITH RESPECT TO LAOS

Submitted by the
DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

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Concurred in by the
UNITED STATES INTELLIGENCE BOARD

on 21 February 1961. Concurring were The Director of Intelligence and Research, Department of State; the Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence, Department of the Army; the Assistant Chief of Naval Operations (Intelligence), Department of the Navy; the Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence, USAF; the Director for Intelligence, Joint Staff; the Assistant to the Secretary of Defense, Special Operations; and the Director of the National Security Agency. The Atomic Energy Commission Representative to the USIB, and the Assistant Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation, abstained, the subject being outside of their jurisdiction.

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PROBABLE COMMUNIST REACTIONS TO CERTAIN US COURSES OF ACTION WITH RESPECT TO LAOS

SCOPE

The purpose of this estimate is briefly to assess Communist (Soviet, Chinese, and DRV) reactions, and, where significant, non-Communist reactions, to certain US-sponsored military actions [1] with respect to Laos. It is proposed that these reactions be assessed for two situations: that the military moves were undertaken (a) under essentially present circumstances, or (b) after neutrals and US allies had accepted a US proposal for the establishment of a neutral nations commission in Laos, but before it had begun to function in Laos.

The courses of action here considered were given to the intelligence community for the purposes of this estimate and were not intended to represent the full range of possibilities. The given courses are of five general types:

a. The direct delivery of military supplies to Vientiane by US aircraft.

b. Sustained US aerial reconnaissance over Laos (by such aircraft at RB57, RF101, F8U).

c. Air actions in Laos by volunteer combat aircraft (Thai, Vietnamese, or others).

d. The introduction of various volunteer ground forces (Thai technicians, Chinese Nationalist irregulars, or a composite nationality volunteer legion) to various types of action in Laos.

e. Overt military action by US and allied forces (forward deployment in Thailand of a token force, air or ground forces committed in Laos, or the threat of US air and amphibious action against North Vietnam).

[1] "Military action," as used in this estimate, means the application of greater military pressures on Communist forces in Laos than now obtain, the purpose being to improve the non-Communist military-political negotiating position.

THE ESTIMATE

A. The Present Situation In Laos

1. Since the bursts of activity that ended in the RLG's capture of Vientiane and the seizure of the Plaine des Jarres by the Pathet Lao-Kong Le forces, the military situation in Laos has turned into sporadic, inconclusive civil war. Military action at present is largely small unit probe and movement, with each side groping toward the other, hampered by difficult terrain and uncertain communications. Combat consists chiefly of inconclusive skirmishes between small infantry groups, usually broken off when one or the other side brings a few mortar or artillery rounds to bear. Although the terrain favors guerrilla tactics,

not even the pro-Communist forces have yet chosen to base their fighting essentially on such tactics. In sum, neither side is likely to "win" the war in Laos in the near future, unless it receives more than logistic support from the outside. However, more limited victories by one side or the other could occur, and might have significant political effect on the situation.

2. The RLG forces have a greater amount and diversity of military equipment available to them at present than do the PL forces, but the USSR is continuing to airlift supplies and equipment into Sam Neua and the Plaine des Jarres. Bloc support appears to be in excess of the present needs of the PL-Kong Le forces, and it is not clear for what purposes this stockpiled support is intended. Also, we believe that PL forces have a somewhat greater military capability than they have yet chosen to exercise. For their part, these Communist forces have the great advantages of covert support from across the jungle border with North Vietnam (DRV), and of the ability to retire into the DRV for safe haven and retraining. More importantly, the PL do not have to maintain their military effort at a very high level to serve Communist aims in Laos.

3. Despite the apparent military stalemate of the past few weeks, we believe that longer range trends in Laos in present circumstances are, slowly, toward the Communists. Pro-Communist forces occupy the key centers of Xieng Khouang and the Plaine des Jarres, most of Sam Neua and Phong Saly provinces, and a number of pockets in the central and southern provinces. They are not meeting effective resistance in these areas and have established a shadow government, which they claim to be the legal continuation of Souvanna Phouma's, at Xieng Khouang. The RLG is largely inept and ineffective in marshalling non-Communist support throughout Laos, and will probably not be able to retake Xieng Khouang and the Plaine des Jarres in the near future. Present PL actions appear directed towards consolidating their position in areas they hold, but they may shift to more offensive tactics at any time.

4. Many US allies and the neutrals have been disturbed by events of the last year or so in Laos and critical in varying degrees of US objectives and policies there. The British and the French in particular have felt that the US was too unyielding in its dealings with Souvanna Phouma, too inflexible regarding a possible RLG accommodation with the Pathet Lao, and overly confident that a military solution was possible. There has been a generally favorable response among US allies and neutrals thus far to the new US plan for a neutral nations commission in Laos. Thailand, South Vietnam, the Philippines, and The Republic of China have generally supported US actions in Laos, but have been critical of the US at the same time for what they regard as its failure to act swiftly and decisively in the face of the Pathet Lao-Kong Le challenge. Allied and neutral opinion has been further disturbed by the recent retreat of Chinese Nationalist irregulars from Burma into northwest Laos, near the Laos-Communist China border.

B. Communist Interests and Policies with Respect to Laos

5. The USSR has for some time almost certainly considered Laos to be one of the softest spots in US commitments and a promising candidate for eventual fall to the Communists. Until recently the USSR has apparently been content to keep subversion-aggression in Laos in a fairly low-key, and to let the DRV largely run the Communist show there—backed up by Soviet and Chinese Communist logistic, propaganda, and diplomatic support. Premier Souvanna Phouma's recognition of the USSR in October 1960 gave Moscow the opportunity to involve itself more directly in affairs in Laos. This it was quick to do, probably considering at the time (November – early December) that trends in Laos were rapidly benefiting Bloc interests, and that a relatively small commitment (POL and rice airlift) could markedly abet this. Particularly since the fall of Vientiane to General Phoumi, however, the USSR has increased that commitment, organizing and maintaining a steady airlift of military supplies into Communist-held areas of northern Laos—in the face of indications that the US considers

Laos a test case of Soviet willingness to reduce tensions and to turn to serious negotiation of other outstanding issues.

6. The USSR has not committed the Bloc irrevocably in Laos. It has not admitted, even to its own public, that Soviet aircraft are flying into Laos; DRV military involvement in Laos has been kept covert, although we have firm evidence that DRV technicians and gunners are present; and the USSR has not given any ultimata concerning Laos, publicly or privately. At the same time, Moscow's persisting airlift is unprecedented, the DRV has officially warned through diplomatic channels that it might be forced to intervene, and the Bloc has warned that the situation in Laos is a threat to the security of the DRV and Communist China and that there is a danger of expanded hostilities. Tactically, the USSR seems to be playing by ear in Laos, taking advantage of a target of opportunity, apparently confident that there is little if any compulsion at present either to raise the Communist military ante or to negotiate a settlement, and that present Communist tactics will both accelerate the demise of non-Communist authority in Laos and seriously embarrass the US internationally.

7. The USSR probably considers, too, that it is at a political-military advantage in Laos and that there is presently little risk in continuing Communist efforts in Laos at about their present scale and pace. Moscow probably anticipates that the US is going to have a difficult time either winning the jungle war in Laos or backing out of it; that the US will be hesitant to take any extreme measures in Laos which might divide it still further from its Western allies and the neutrals; that the US will be concerned not to become engaged in expanded hostilities with the DRV or, possibly, Communist China; and, hence, that the US will probably in time agree to a settlement on terms which, from the Soviet viewpoint, will leave ample opportunities for future Communist subversion of Laos. Additionally, the USSR may also consider that its believed advantages in Laos can be used as a counter in any high-level negotiations it might have with the US in coming months on other world issues.

8. There has been no clear indication to date of the degree to which difficulties in Sino-Soviet relations have either spurred or hampered Bloc action in Laos. The fact that the Soviets, rather than the Chinese, have taken a direct role there is probably the product of: (a) the opportunity accorded the USSR in the RLG's diplomatic recognition of it, but not of Peiping; (b) Soviet concern not to evoke the much stronger US response which, in Moscow's view, would probably result were Peiping demonstrably involved in direct support of the PL-Kong Le forces; (c) Soviet desire to demonstrate its revolutionary initiative as the leader of the Bloc; and possibly (d) Soviet interest in precluding greater Chinese Communist influence in Laos.

9. Chinese Communist propaganda activity with respect to Laos has increased in the past two weeks, partly as a result of the injection of the Chinese Nationalist irregulars into the Laos picture. Communist China is almost certainly more concerned with the US presence in Laos than is the USSR, and is probably urging a firm line on Moscow. We believe, however, that Soviet policy in Laos springs more from response to the situation in Laos and the US' involvement therein, than from problems arising out of relations with Communist China. At the same time, Soviet policy in Laos is probably somewhat more assertive than it might be were it not for the recent Sino-Soviet dispute.

C. Probable Reactions to US-Sponsored Military Actions

10. Communist reactions to particular US-sponsored military actions would be greatly influenced by a variety of factors: e.g., the precise combination of such actions; their manner, speed, and success; the degree of support or condemnation given these actions by world opinion; and the diplomatic circumstances and general Bloc posture existing at the time. Also of primary importance would be the Bloc leaders' impression of the determination and vigor of the new US Administration, which they will judge from the whole

range of US moves and statements. This impression will affect the degree of credibility which the Bloc leaders assign to any US warnings given them concerning Laos. The following discussion of Bloc reactions is based on the situation in Laos as it has developed thus far.

11. Bloc reactions would be profoundly affected by Bloc appraisal of the political effects of the US-sponsored measures. Except in the case of the most modest US military measures (paragraph 18 below), Bloc leaders would almost certainly expect that most of world opinion would be sharply critical of the US, and that this fact would deter the US from pressing too far.[2] Hence, unless Communist assets were directly threatened or a confrontation of US and Bloc military forces had actually taken place, the Bloc would probably not feel compelled to make a significant military response in Laos.

12. In the light of these considerations, we believe that the fact that a neutral nations commission for Laos were being established would not affect Communist reactions to US military measures in a major way. In the event that there were general Free World support of the neutral nations commission plan, the USSR might well associate itself with it and might even attempt to use it for its own purposes. We believe, however, that any US-sponsored military actions, except for the most modest measures (paragraph 18 below), would meet adverse non-Communist reactions, possibly causing the participating neutrals either to withdraw from the commission scheme or to attempt to insert themselves more fully into settlement of the Laos situation.

13. We believe that Bloc reactions would be essentially determined by the USSR, except in those instances, as discussed below, where specific military measures engaged special Chinese Communist or DRV sensitivities.

14. Except possibly in the case of extreme military measures,[3] we believe that Soviet leaders would not feel it necessary to match US-sponsored military actions in Laos with corresponding, step-by-step, Bloc military measures. Soviet leaders would probably conclude that the lesser US-sponsored measures would probably not prove militarily decisive, would not threaten to destroy or greatly reduce Communist positions and assets in Laos, and therefore would not necessitate Bloc actions which carry any considerable degree of risk. They would probably also consider that US-sponsored measures would evoke adverse world reactions, cause friction between the US and much of the non-Communist world, and create receptive audiences for the Bloc's effort to convince the world that it is US policy which threatens the peace in Southeast Asia and elsewhere. In these circumstances, the USSR would probably consider that it would have the option, at any stage at which it thought US moves were becoming hazardous, to bring about negotiations with excellent prospects of achieving an outcome favorable to the PL.

15. Under certain conditions the USSR would sponsor some military moves in Laos. Moreover, the USSR would not hesitate to make serious threats against the bases of countries participating in the US-sponsored moves. It would not consider that such Soviet actions would prejudice its efforts to

[2] It is the opinion of the Director for Intelligence, Joint Staff, that reactions of the Bloc and the non-Communist world to US-sponsored measures would depend significantly on the vigor, forthrightness, and success of these measures. Accordingly the Bloc leaders would not necessarily expect "most of world opinion" to be "sharply critical of the US." Forthright US action in the Taiwan Strait and in Korea attest to the fact that a significant segment of world opinion could be expected to applaud heartily US-sponsored military action taken against a Communist threat against all of Southeast Asia and its attendant challenge to the Free World. The considerations of timing, vigor, and success of possible US-sponsored measures are not weighed in the ensuing paragraphs of this estimate. The Director for Intelligence, Joint Staff, believes that without a careful weighing of these factors the judgments as to probable Bloc and non-Communist reactions must be viewed with reserve.

[3] See paragraph 20 below, where the estimated Communist reactions are given to a composite-nationality volunteer ground force, US and allied air forces, US and allied ground forces, or the threat of US air and amphibious action against the DRV.

portray the US as the disturber of the peace. However, we believe that Bloc responses to all except the most extreme military measures (paragraph 20 below) would be designed far more for their political than their military effects. Depending on the US-sponsored measure or measures in question, the Communists would probably run the gamut of propaganda attacks, political action, riots, demonstrations, and attempts in the UN and other international groups to condemn the US and its participating partners.

16. The Soviets do not want to prejudice their chances of negotiating with the US on issues more important to them than Laos. This consideration may restrain them from stepping up military pressures in Laos on their own initiative; it will be less likely to restrain them from military responses to US military initiatives there. They will wish to be sure that the new US Administration is convinced of Soviet firmness and determination. They may also see cases where Soviet military reaction will reinforce, rather than weaken, Soviet political and propaganda efforts.

17. In general:

a. Those US measures which fell short of threatening defeat or serious setback to Communist forces would probably not cause the Bloc to make any substantial change in the present scale and nature of its logistic support to the PL, or place the Bloc under any compulsion to make political concessions to the US. Some PL military activity would probably develop, however, as an adjunct to Bloc political and propaganda efforts.

b. Those US measures which actually began to threaten PL positions or security would probably cause some Bloc military responses in Laos. However, before these became too sharp and irrevocable, we believe that the Communists would attempt to move the Laos question into some international forum. They would probably consider that world hostility to any expansion of the conflict, together with Bloc firmness, would suffice to force the US to negotiate a settlement which, at a minimum, preserved the Bloc position in Laos.

18. *Reactions to lesser measures.* There would certainly be a vigorous diplomatic and propaganda reaction, but probably not a substantial increase in Bloc intervention in Laos in response to the following measures:

a. The direct delivery of military supplies to Vientiane by US aircraft. (However, the Communists would probably increase their logistic support of the PL forces.)

b. Sustained US reconnaissance flights over Laos. (However, if the US aircraft on such flights were detected on overflights of the DRV or Communist China, the Bloc propaganda campaign would become shrill, interception attempts might be made by Bloc aircraft, and hot pursuit might occur as the US aircraft returned to their bases.)

c. The use of unmarked Thai or other aircraft to augment present FAL and CAT airlift in Laos.

d. The assignment of volunteer Thai specialists to FAL units.

None of these measures would be likely, in our judgment, to cause the Communists to cease their military efforts in Laos, to feel the need to make any concessions, or, on the other hand, themselves to step up the tempo in Laos. Non-Communist world reactions to such US-sponsored measures would probably be severe only if incidents involving outside forces occurred, but pressures for a negotiated solution would grow.

19. *Reactions to intermediate measures.* In addition to intense Bloc propaganda-political action, the Bloc would probably undertake certain military countermoves to the following measures:

a. The commitment of "volunteer" combat aircraft to ground support operations in Laos. The Bloc would probably seek to increase PL AAA capabilities, possibly covertly introducing DRV AAA units. Soviet threats would be made against the (Thai, Vietnamese, or other) bases supporting the air operations. The chances are about even that "volunteer" Communist ground attack aircraft would be committed in Laos. However, the chances of such commitment would rise sharply if the non-

Communist aircraft had attacked and destroyed Soviet airlift aircraft. We believe it less likely that Communist air strikes would be attempted against the supporting non-Communist air bases.

b. The commitment of Chinese Nationalist irregulars to combat action in Laos. There would be a general assumption, Bloc and non-Bloc, that these troops had been committed with at least the tacit consent of the US. As long as the Nationalist irregulars did not significantly affect the course of fighting in Laos, and did not make raids into China, Soviet and Chinese Communist reactions would probably be confined to vigorous propaganda-political exploitation. However, the possibility cannot be excluded that the Chinese Communists would make punitive raids against the irregulars in Laos.

c. The overt assembling of a token force of US and allied ground forces in northeast Thailand. DRV troops would probably be deployed along the Laos border, and threats of DRV intervention might be made.

We do not believe that any of these measures would cause the Communists to cease their military support of the PL. However, the USSR would probably consider that much greater political gains could be made from exploiting non-Communist criticism of these US-sponsored measures than from spirited military responses in or about Laos. This might be the point at which the USSR would feel it profitable to enter into negotiations for a settlement, confident that the outcome of the negotiations would be favorable to the Communist cause in Laos.

20. *Reactions to extreme measures.* We believe that more drastic US measures would elicit a strong military and political response from the Bloc, although the Bloc would still be concerned to keep hostilities from expanding further. Its military responses would be calculated to deter the US from undertaking still more extreme action, and to force the Laos issue into negotiations. Since the US measures would almost certainly have met a negative world response, the USSR would press for negotiations in the belief that the US would be at considerable disadvantage and that no significant concessions by the Bloc would be necessary. Extreme propaganda-political action against the US, worldwide, would of course accompany Communist political and military moves. The precise scale of Bloc military response in the Laos area would vary, depending on the nature of the US-sponsored military measures, as follows:

a. The commitment of a volunteer, composite-nationality ground force in Laos. If the security of the PL forces were threatened, additional numbers of (DRV) "Lao" or "border" forces would probably be committed to stabilize the situation. We believe it unlikely that Chinese Communist "volunteers" would be committed, although we cannot rule out this possibility.

b. The overt commitment of US and allied nation combat aircraft in Laos. We believe that the Bloc would probably regard such a measure as indicating a major commitment by the US to the support of non-Communist forces in Laos and would feel that this challenge obliged it to make a strong political and military response. The Communists would seek to maximize the propaganda benefits of non-Communist adverse reactions to the US air actions. They would probably move to negotiate, calculating that they could both get a settlement that would protect Communist assets in Laos and at the same time reap considerable political benefit in the world. We cannot estimate with precision what form these military responses would take. It is possible that they might commit Bloc air or ground forces, but would in any event build up their readiness posture in the general area and issue strong threats against the US and participating allies to cease their air operations.

c. The commitment of overt US and allied ground forces to garrison or combat duty in Laos. Bloc reactions would probably be similar to, but more intense than, those described for air action (*b*) above. In particular, the chances are about even that the USSR would at the same time sponsor DRV intervention in Laos, and it might even acquiesce in Chinese Communist intervention.

d. The issuing of a solemn, private warning to the Bloc powers to cease their military support efforts in Laos or face possible US air and amphibious action against the DRV. The Soviets would certainly regard defense of North Vietnam against such an attack as imperative. They would prefer to forestall such an attack, not only to prevent great military damage to the DRV but also to avoid the risk that hostilities might expand even further. They would probably feel that their total interests could best be served by making public the US warning and castigating it as a threat to world peace. They would probably see considerable advantage in this course even if they did not believe that the US was prepared to make good on its threat. Simultaneously, Moscow would probably announce its determination to defend the DRV against attack and stress that any such US action would carry the risk of general war. The Soviet leaders would probably calculate that they could in this manner generate worldwide pressures on the US which would dissuade it from its threat and force it into negotiations on terms acceptable to the Communist side.

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