

SNIE 58-68

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21 March 1968

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APPROVED FOR RELEASE
DATE: JAN 2005

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SNIE 58-68
21 March 1968

(b) (3)

SPECIAL
NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE ESTIMATE
NUMBER 58-68

Communist Intentions in Laos

Submitted by



DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

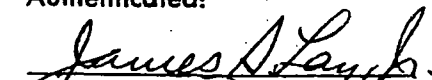
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21 March 1968

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The following intelligence organizations participated in the preparation of this estimate:

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COMMUNIST INTENTIONS IN LAOS

THE PROBLEM

To estimate likely Communist intentions in Laos over the next 2-3 months.

CONCLUSIONS

A. We believe that Communist intentions in Laos are highly contingent on developments in South Vietnam. The Communists have the capability to reduce the area controlled by the Laotian Government to a few enclaves in fairly short order. For the present, however, Hanoi's primary concern in Laos is with the security of the vital pan-handle infiltration routes; in these circumstances it is unlikely that the Communists would wish to over-extend their forces in Laos or run grave risks of destroying the general framework of the 1962 settlement. Thus, we believe on balance, that they will probably take a few more positions and then reduce their military pressures during the rainy season.

B. Nevertheless, the possibility remains that the Communists might press their advantage. The chances of Hanoi adopting this course would increase in the months ahead if the war in South Vietnam reached a critical juncture and Hanoi saw advantage in deliberately opening a "second front" in Laos in order to place further strain on US resources. Or, if Hanoi were confident at some point that negotiations on South Vietnam were at hand, it might think it useful to take as much territory in Laos as possible to strengthen the Communist bargaining position.¹

¹ Lt. Gen. Marshall S. Carter, The Director, National Security Agency, believes the estimate is overly influenced by the contingent relationship between developments in the war in South Vietnam and North Vietnamese activities in Laos. Communist military capability now present in northern Laos is greater than at any time since 1962. While the Communists may be content to take and hold only those areas previously under Pathet Lao control, they nonetheless, have the capability to extend their control over additional areas of northern as well as southern Laos. In their view they could take this action virtually without regard to or risk of any meaningful US counteraction. Gen. Carter, therefore, believes that a greater emphasis should be given to this possibility.

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DISCUSSION

I. THE PRESENT SITUATION

1. Since the 1962 Geneva settlement, the war in Laos has been characterized by Communist advances in the dry season (November to April in Laos) and counteroffensives by the Royal Lao Government (RLG) forces during the rainy season (May to October). These annual military operations, however, have been limited, and at least until this year neither side has appeared anxious to take action in areas that might provoke a strong reaction by the other.

2. Although generally the fortunes of war had seesawed back and forth, by the fall of 1967 RLG forces had penetrated well into some areas usually dominated by the Communists. This process was highlighted by the RLG capture in August 1966 of the Nam Bac Valley²—60 miles north of the royal capital of Luang Prabang—which the Communists had controlled for nearly 10 years. These successes had by the summer of 1967 given the RLG new confidence, and in September 1967 RLG forces planned a further offensive in the Nam Bac area.

3. In mid-January 1968 the Communist forces turned the RLG offensive at Nam Bac into a debacle for the government. Meanwhile, the Communists had begun to launch offensives elsewhere in Laos. In support of these operations, the Communists have introduced new forces from North Vietnam and redeployed other units, possibly including several battalions normally assigned to duty along the infiltration routes to South Vietnam. In general, the present Communist offensive has been directed so far at targets which were either held by them in 1962 or attacked by them in their campaigns since then.

4. In north Laos, in addition to Nam Bac, Communist forces concentrated on Phou Pha Thi, and on 11 March they destroyed the US navigational site located there. They have also attacked other guerrilla positions and have taken the villages of Tha Thom and Sala Den Dine, about 30-35 miles north of Paksane.

5. In central-south Laos, Communist forces have harassed Route 13, the main road artery connecting northern and southern Laos, and on 6 February they blew up the bridge on this route across the Se Bang Fai River between Thakhek and Savannakhet. They also took Muong Phalane against minimal RLG resistance and forced the removal of the US Tacan navigational site in that area.

6. Further south, the Communists have sharply increased their activities in the Bolovens plateau area, reducing RLG positions around Saravane and taking a number of villages along Route 16 in the rice-rich Se Done Valley. In late February they attacked the town of Lao Ngam³ (the center of the Se Done Valley pacification program) and the outskirts of the district capital of Attopeu.

7. The Communists, with their ability to reinforce rapidly from North Vietnam, have long had the capability to defeat the qualitatively inferior RLG forces and to seize control of most of Laos. Every year Hanoi has strengthened its

² The town colloquially referred to as Nam Bac is shown on the maps as Ban Nam Bac.

³ Lao Ngam is shown as Ban Lao Ngam on the maps.

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forces in Laos for the dry season operations. What is noteworthy this year, however, is the extent of the reinforcement and the intensity of operations. Information on reinforcement in recent months is not firm, but it may total 10-14 battalion-size North Vietnamese Army combat units over the past year, concentrated primarily in the Bolovens plateau area in the south and around Phou Pha Thi in the north. This would place total North Vietnamese combat and support personnel in Laos at about 35,000.⁴ The Communist position has also been strengthened by their recent advances westward, and by the losses in manpower, material, and morale that they have been able to inflict on the RLG. Accordingly, we estimate that the Communists could, in fairly short order, reduce the RLG area of control to a few enclaves.

II. THE OUTLOOK

A. Factors Influencing Further Communist Actions

8. There are, however, other factors more important than raw capabilities which bear on the future scope of Communist actions in Laos. North Vietnam, of course, desires to preserve Communist control over border areas. Hanoi also has a continuing concern to protect and strengthen the Pathet Lao territorial base while retaining the option to return the Pathet Lao to active participation in the tripartite government. In part, recent military moves have been a reaction to the RLG's "nibbling" tactics and to the raids of guerrilla forces deep within territory nominally under Communist control.

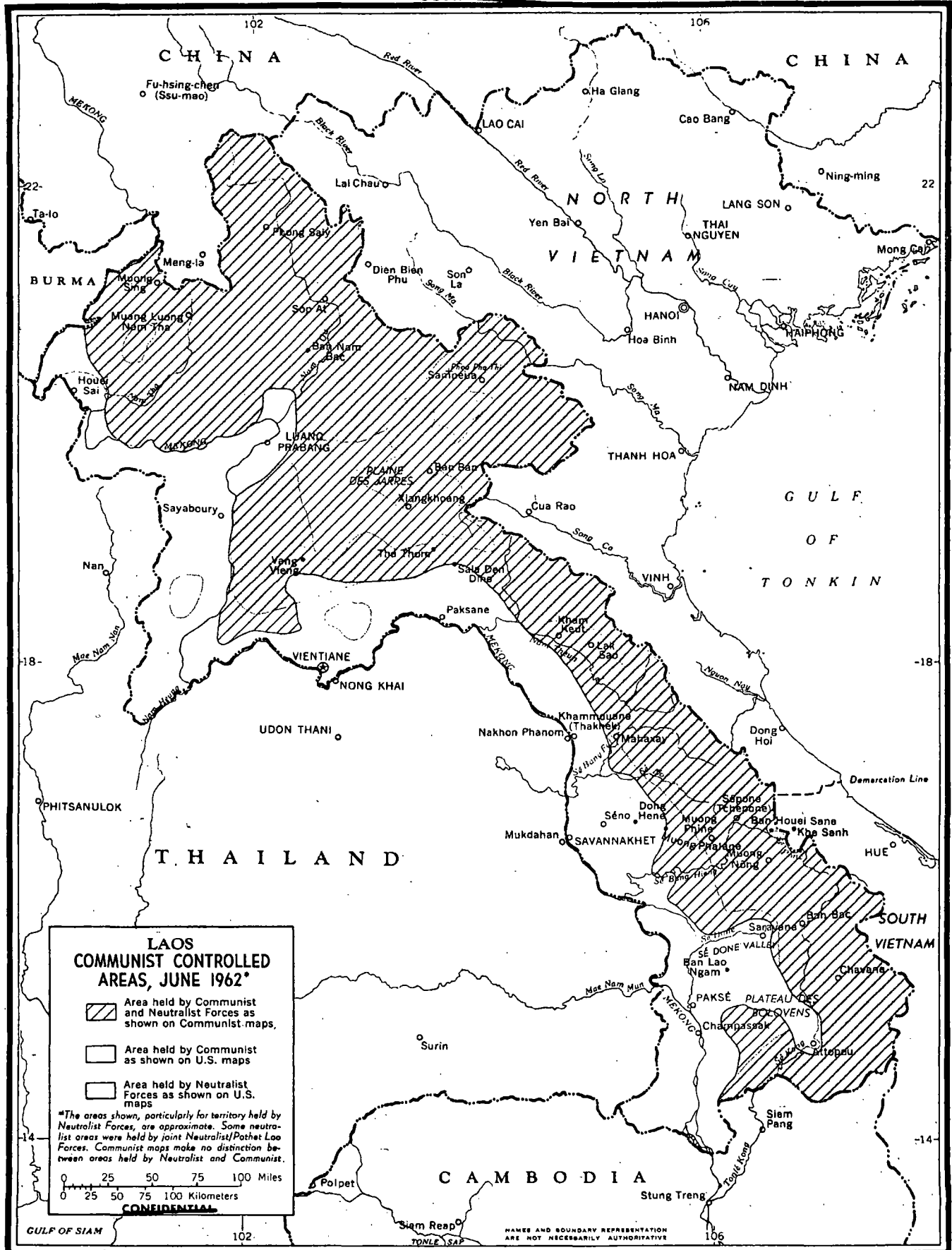
9. For the present, however, Hanoi's overriding concern in Laos is with the infiltration system in the Lao corridor. The security of the supply and infiltration routes developed there since the early 1960's has become even more critical to the Communist effort in South Vietnam in recent months. The Communist "winter-spring" offensive in South Vietnam has clearly required not only additional men and material in preparation for major and widespread military action, but also increased use of the corridor.

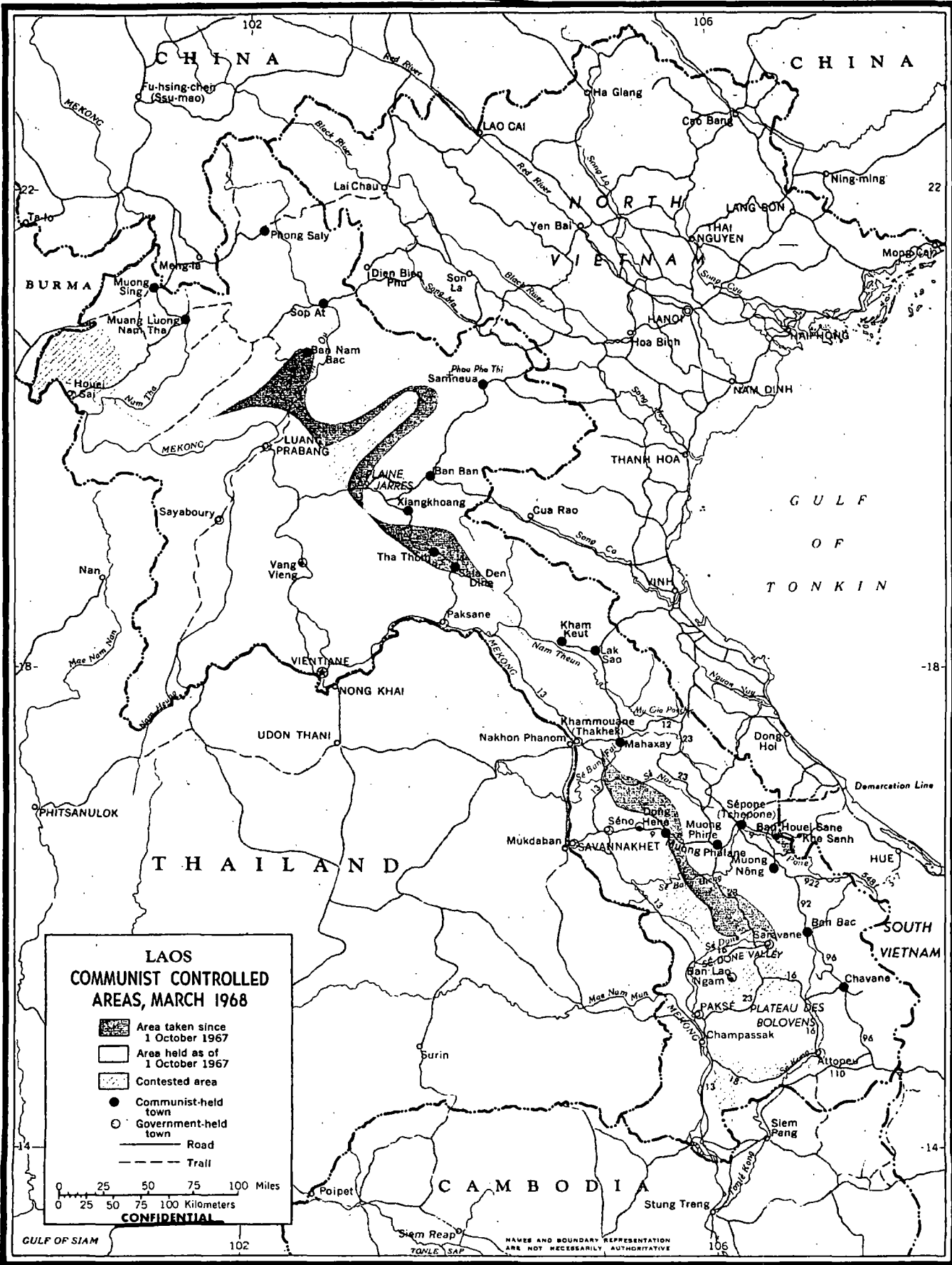
10. Hanoi's normal concern with the panhandle has thus been intensified, while at the same time US bombing and other expanded allied activities have been imposing greater strains on the Communist logistic system in Laos. Hanoi almost certainly desires to improve the routes in the panhandle of Laos, expand the area of control there, and possibly develop alternative routes further west. Although the present Communist logistical system is adequate for the delivery of needed supplies, additional routes would provide the Communists with greater flexibility and force the US to spread its interdiction efforts over a wider area.

11. In protecting the corridor and in advancing other local objectives in Laos, Hanoi would not wish at this time to take actions which unnecessarily complicated

⁴This includes North Vietnamese Army elements in the corridor concerned primarily with support of supply routes to South Vietnam. Some of the estimated reinforcement in the Bolovens plateau area may actually reflect a westward deployment of units already in the corridor.

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or hindered support of the war in South Vietnam. If, for example, it employed its capability to seize and hold most of Laos, the task of supporting and defending these extended lines of communication could detract from the main effort in South Vietnam. Such a military campaign would completely upset the Geneva arrangements which still have some advantages for North Vietnam, and more important, might precipitate larger scale US operations against Hanoi's supply lines in the panhandle.

12. Hanoi probably believes that its present limited offensive in Laos will not by itself provoke large-scale US intervention in Laos. Instead, it may believe that these operations tend to deter such action by showing the US and Souvanna that the Communists have the capability to make such intervention extremely costly. Finally, Hanoi may believe that even the present level of its military activities in Laos will cause such concern in Thailand as to affect the Thai commitment in South Vietnam.

B. Likely Communist Actions

13. On balance, we believe the Communists do not wish to destroy the general framework of the 1962 settlement, and, therefore, are not likely to push their military offensive so far as to run grave risks of this result. Thus, they will probably take a few more positions and then reduce their military pressures during the rainy season. They will, of course, defend the infiltration corridor as necessary, but Hanoi probably still prefers its present use of these routes to the situation that might arise if Hanoi expanded the conflict to the point of precipitating large-scale US intervention in Laos.

14. Nevertheless, the possibility remains that the Communists might press their advantage. The chances of Hanoi adopting this course would increase in the months ahead if the war in South Vietnam reached a critical juncture and Hanoi saw advantage in deliberately opening a "second front" in Laos in order to place further strain on US resources. Or, if Hanoi were confident at some point that negotiations on South Vietnam were at hand, it might think it useful to take as much territory in Laos as possible to strengthen the Communist bargaining position.⁶

⁶ See NSA footnote to Conclusion B.

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