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The Fragile Accord

Defusing Laos

Vientiane

The agreement on Laos signed in this sleepy little capital is largely a reassertion of the accord reached in Geneva nearly 11 years ago. It again proclaims the neutrality of Laos and, among other things, it once more calls for the withdrawal of all foreign forces from the country. It also establishes the framework for a renovated coalition government to be wrapped around Prince Souvanna Phouma, the only political figure acceptable to the assorted Laotian factions and, more important, to the major powers. So it is, in essence, an attempt to resurrect an arrangement that collapsed. The big question is whether the new accommodation will work any better than the previous settlement.

The fragility of the Laotian settlement was already apparent two days after the accord was signed, when American aircraft resumed bombings in reaction to North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao drives to grab territory. The bombings were accompanied by a warning that the United States would not hesitate to continue its air raids in response to further Communist moves. That the United States renewed bombings here but did not similarly react to violations of the cease-fire in Vietnam underlines the degree to which Laos is considered an adjunct to the main conflict. It is, in short, a victim of its location.

Though its rugged terrain and geographical remoteness are hardly conducive to military operations, Laos has been a battlefield rather than a buffer for at least a generation. It was used by the Vietminh to divert the French, and during the second Indochina war, its southern panhandle served Hanoi as the infiltration route into South Vietnam and Cambodia. The Eisenhower administration originally tried to transform Laos into an anti-Communist bastion to protect Thailand and, within the past decade, the country has been the scene of a covert ground war compounded by devastating American air actions that have turned a quarter of its three million people into refugees. Other alien elements have functioned in Laos as well. Thai battalions financed by the United States have been secretly fighting inside the country for years, and the South Vietnamese army has often darted across the border, usually with disastrous consequences. The Communist Chinese have carved out a zone in northwestern Laos, while the Chinese nationalists have been active in the area adjoining Burma.

These outsiders are still here, and all have reason to remain. The Thais, who maintain about 15,000 troops inside the country, believe that Laos is vital to their security, and besides, they have traditionally considered certain sectors to be their territory. The estimated 300 Chinese nationalists straddling the Burmese frontier are supposedly gathering intelligence for Taiwan when they are not transporting opium. The Communist Chinese, who number about 30,000, are completing an elaborate road network evidently designed to strengthen Peking's presence against the possibility of North Vietnamese and perhaps eventual Soviet influence in the region. But most significant are the US and North Vietnamese attitudes toward Laos, which basically hinge on the future of South Vietnam.

American officials here say that the United States will fully conform to the Laos agreement by refraining from further air activities and by removing its police and paramilitary specialists, among them the numerous Central Intelligence Agency operatives who direct some 25,000 Meo, Yao and other tribal mercenaries. According to these officials, the Thai "volunteers" will also be withdrawn if necessary by threatening to cut off their funds. "We didn't press for a settlement in order to violate it," one US official assured me the other day. And a North Vietnamese source echoed the same theme. Speaking with rare candor, the Hanoi representative admitted the North Vietnamese troops are in Laos but explained that they will leave now that the Paris agreement permits the resupply of the Communist forces in South Vietnam directly across the 17th parallel and by sea. "The Ho Chi Minh Trail is no longer important," he said.

But these expressions of optimism become somewhat fuzzy when challenged by the plausible hypothesis that the struggle between the Saigon regime and the Vietcong will not easily be resolved, and that Laos may again be involved should the fragile cease-fire in South Vietnam break down. Both the North Vietnamese and the United States are aware of this prospect, and are therefore hedging. A Hanoi diplomat here pointed out that North Vietnam's pledge to pull out of Laos is, in reality, contingent on US respect for the Laotian agreement. And Spiro Agnew voiced similar reservations when he passed through Vientiane recently: the United States would honor the settlement in Laos, he said. But, he added rather ominously, "we intend to insist that all other parties concerned approach their obligations in the same manner."

This kind of language suggests that, despite the rhetoric of their spokesmen, neither North Vietnam

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nor the United States is about to w..k away completely from Laos within the 90 days prescribed for their departure. The estimated 70,000 North Vietnamese troops scattered around the country are performing a variety of jobs that cannot be dropped rapidly. They manage the logistical apparatus that fuels the North Vietnamese and Vietcong units in South Vietnam and Cambodia, and they serve as cadres and artillerymen for the Pathet Lao, whose soldiers are no more energetic than other Laotians. For them to quit, at least at this stage, would not only undermine the Communist forces in South Vietnam but would vastly weaken the military leverage required by the Pathet Lao as it strives to consolidate its position in Souvanna Phouma's coalition government. By the same token Souvanna Phouma's status is largely dependent on the support given him by the United States through the network it has built up here.

I was able to observe part of the extensive US network in Laos during a three-day trip across the northern tier of the country. It comes straight out of a CIA textbook on counterinsurgency, and although its effectiveness may be dubious, it combines American organizational genius with an old-fashioned American spirit of adventure. Known as "case officers," the CIA agents managing the tribal mercenaries are mostly former special forces types who work out of different bases bearing such code names as AB-1, the annex or 118-alpha. The most celebrated CIA client in Laos is General Vang Pao, the Meo commander, but there are others like Colonel Kamphay, the head of the Lao Theung, and Chao La, the Yao chief. The CIA machine functions independently from the US Army attaché's office, which is called ARMA, and whose representatives advise regular Laotian troops. The supply and financial side of these operations is handled by the requirements division, which is manned by Defense Department civilians ostensibly accredited to the economic aid office. Troops, couriers and cargo are shuttled around the country by two charter outfits, Air America and Continental Air Services, whose pilots are retired US Air Force or Navy officers. On one of these shuttles I flew the other day, the passengers included a squad of Thai soldiers in unmarked uniforms being moved from Houei Sai to a battle area near Xianglom. Although their presence here is a violation of Laotian neutrality, nobody tries anymore to deny their existence, which has been costing the United States about $100 million per year.

At the top of this establishment here in Vientiane is the American ambassador, G. McMurtrie Godley, a hearty diplomat whose penchant for military matters has earned him the nickname of "Field Marshal." His military leanings have also earned him promotion to assistant secretary of State for East Asian affairs, a job he will soon assume. It is said that he was President Nixon's personal choice for the post, which has until now been filled by Marshall Green, a wise and experienced diplomat whose restraint was not fully appreciated by the White House.

The Laos establishment is underpinned, meanwhile, by a huge array of installations conveniently situated just across the Mekong River in northern Thailand. These include a CIA station that trains tribal mercenaries, a helicopter detachment run by the army attaché in Vientiane, a Defense Department funding office, and headquarters of Air America and Continental Air Services. The northern Thai town of Udorn is also the sight of "pepper grinder," a 379-acre supply depot at which military equipment for Laos is stored. The advantage of keeping these installations in Thailand is that they technically do not violate the ban against foreign intervention in Laos. Nor are there any indications that they or the airfields deployed against North Vietnam and Laos will be dismantled. As a North Vietnamese diplomat here put it: "They are the sword of Damocles hanging over our head."

With all this the Thai battalions and tribal mercenaries fared poorly during the weeks before the cease-fire agreement was signed. In early February, for example, they failed to hold Nam Yu, a major CIA base in northwestern Laos out of which clandestine teams were sent into China in years past. Not long after that the mercenaries lost Moung Moueng, the last important district town in northwestern Laos. Following the cease-fire and the stand-down of US air support, the mercenaries were also pushed back in the southern Laos panhandle. In the opinion of one American official who has worked with them for years, the mercenaries have grown flabby. "We've corrupted them with money and special favors, and they've gone soft."

There is some speculation here at the moment that Vang Pao and his Meos may eventually break away and form an independent force similar to the Chinese nationalist remnants who have roamed the region for the past two decades. According to this speculation the Meos might be secretly financed by Thailand even if denied US support. Some sources here also submit that the Thais, whose interest in Laos is intense, may also seek to play a role in internal Laotian politics.

If he faces problems from the Pathet Lao members of his government, Souvanna Phouma will also be confronted by the right-wing components in the coalition. The right-wingers consist of two rival clans, one representing the southern landholders headed by Prince Boun Oum and the other representing the Sananikone family, rich merchants whose power base is Vientiane. The Sananikones are supported in Bangkok by Marshal Dawee Chullasapya, the Thai air force commander, and the southerners are backed by Marshal Praphas Charusathien, the deputy prime minister and armed forces chief. The suspicion is that Praphas may try to regain the foothold in Vientiane for Phoumi Nosavan, the former CIA protégé who has been living in exile in Thailand for nearly 10 years. Praphas keeps in

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touch with Phoumi through a special intermediary by the name of General Phaytoon and one guess holds that this group might try to inspire a coup against Souvanna Phouma by right-wing Laotian officers. But this prospect is dismissed as fantasy by many diplomats. They contend that Souvanna Phouma's coalition is guaranteed by the major powers, and it will survive as long as the prince is alive. "And if he dies," adds one of these diplomats, "we will hire a taxidermist and have him stuffed."

In all likelihood Laos is bound to be an international responsibility during the years ahead. It is a complex land, however, that has a way of confounding the best of international intentions. Its future, though, is linked to that of Vietnam, the main arena in the region, and that is where its destiny will be determined.

Stanley Karnow

MR. KARNOW, *former diplomatic correspondent of* The Washington Post, *reports for NBC.*