

NSC BRIEFING

29 December 1953

THE CURRENT VIET MINH
OFFENSIVE IN LAOS

- I Viet Minh forces involved in present offensive in central Laos believed to total about 9 battalions or 7,200 men.
- A. These forces consist mainly of six battalions of 325th Division, regarded as a second line unit and always based in the Vinh area of northern Annam rather than Tonkin.
 - B. They also include one regiment from first line 304th Division, the bulk of which is located to west of delta perimeter in Tonkin.
 - C. This regiment of the 304th Division probably serves as the spine of the present attacking units.

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II The Viet Minh reached Thakhek, on the Mekong River, on 26 December, after three French companies evacuated that post.

A. Only one of these three reportedly reached Savannakhet, 50 miles southward.

B. French had by that time grouped about eight battalions (over 6,000 men) at Savannakhet.

III Possible new Viet Minh moves in central Laos.

A. They may try to remain in Thakhek region, astride French road and water communications along Mekong River valley, which supplied 20 percent of French needs in northern Laos.

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B. They have been reported probing southward, but French garrison at Savannakhet should be able to hold off a strike there.

C. They could also advance up Mekong to attack capital at Vientiane, but probably without success unless together with much larger Viet Minh assault on Laos from north.

IV General Navarre has acted swiftly to counter enemy thrust in central Laos.

A. He has been flying five battalions of paratroops to Seno airfield near Savannakhet to reinforce the eight battalions already there.

B. He plans a counterattack to retake Thakhek. French scouting units have already penetrated the town.

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- C. He is not worried by the Viet Minh incursion which he believes diversionary but says it might throw his offensive plans a trifle off schedule.
- D. He has also started action south-east of Hanoi to forestall Viet Minh operations in that area.
- V The major Viet Minh military threat is still posed by four enemy divisions located in Tonkin.
 - A. All or part of these could quickly move into northern Laos and eventually overrun large parts of this area.

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- B. They could also be employed to consolidate the enemy hold on northwest Tonkin, or to attack the delta where French reserves have been reduced to 27 battalions. (These are being further reduced by the transfer of five battalions to Savannakhet.)
- C. French believe Viet Minh are preparing a major assault on Dien Bien Phu in northwest Tonkin.

D.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] such a frontal attack would be a marked change in Viet Minh tactics.

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VI French counter movements to reinforce threatened posts can be made only by depleting their delta reserves or their forces in south Vietnam.

- A. They have already weakened delta strength by transfer of 12 battalions to Dien Bien Phu.
- B. This move, in effect, more than nullified the increase in strength of nine battalions which arrived from France last fall.
- C. French forces in south Vietnam, numbering 171,500, cannot be removed without a resurgence of activity by 40,000 enemy troops there.

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- VII The immediate political advantages of the Viet Minh attack on Laos seem greater than the military.
- A. Of the military advantage the dispersion of French forces and severing of Mekong communications seem the most important.
 - B. Viet Minh penetration of Laos gains it considerable prestige in the eyes of Indochinese peoples on both sides of conflict.
 - C. This political gain enhances Viet Minh morale and lessens Vietnamese support of the French war effort.

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VIII A major Viet Minh campaign now may be connected with Ho Chi Minh's recent peace feeler.

- A. Such military pressure might be designed to force France to negotiate and simultaneously put Viet Minh in better position for negotiations.
- B. Thus, Ho Chi Minh's call on 27 December "to destroy the enemy" does not necessarily mean he won't negotiate.
- C. It was quite possibly intended to underscore to the French and Vietnamese peoples the desirability of peace.
- D. It may be forerunner of a heavy attack in Tonkin or northern Laos to push Paris and Saigon further toward negotiations.

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IX Prime Minister of Laos has appealed to free world for support in resisting aggression.

- A. Laotian government, as well as Thailand, was prepared to appeal the Viet Minh's invasion of last spring to the UN.
- B. But objections by the French forestalled such action. French embassy Washington has just stated Paris continues to oppose appeal either by itself or any other country.
- C. French objections to a UN appeal are strongly resented by Laotians and could embitter the relations of the two countries.

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- D. Already Laotian foreign minister reportedly has resigned at French failure keep him informed of situation in central Laos.
- X Viet Minh forces have made no attempt to enter Thailand and there is no indication they will.
 - A. The Thais appear capable of defending themselves.
 - B. They have 15,000 heavily armed police and over 12,000 army troops in the nine border provinces.
 - C. These backed by air force, including 125 fighters and bombers, with a fair efficiency.
 - D. Reinforcements of one battalion of infantry and two armored companies been sent to the Laotian border.

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XI State of emergency declared by Bangkok was a precautionary measure to screen refugees crossing the Mekong.

A. Thai government sensitive over this problem as there are 50,000 Vietnamese within its border.

1. These have strong sympathies with Viet Minh and facilitate Communist subversive activity.

XII Simultaneous with the Viet Minh advance last week Moscow radio attacked Thailand as a base for American supplies to Indochina. Chinese Communist radio has now followed with similar charges.

A. Nothing new in these charges, which probably intended to disrupt Thailand's close cooperation with US.

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B. During Viet Minh invasion of Laos last spring, Thailand permitted limited French supplies through its territory.

XIII Threat from Communist China always hangs over Indochina.

- A. In four South China provinces contiguous to Indochina there are 150,000 to 220,000 troops.
- B. 60,000 more are on Hainan Island.
- C. Troop strength in South China has not changed appreciably since Korean truce.
- D. About 50,000 are stationed along the Indochina border and could be committed immediately.
- E. Chinese are judged capable of committing and supporting at least 150,000 troops.

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XIV Chinese Communist air capabilities.

- A. There is an under-strength Chinese Communist air division in Kwangsi Province; it may be training Viet Minh airmen.
- B. There is a combat-seasoned MIG-15 jet fighter division at Canton.
 - 1. It could operate from South China coast between Canton and Indochina.
- C. In South China there are three airfields capable of sustaining jet operations, six potentially capable, and seven serviceable for light propeller-driven aircraft.
- D. If Chinese renovate bases nearer Indochina, they can commit 250 to 300 fighters and bombers, including jets.

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XV No evidence of Chinese Communist military preparations for large-scale intervention in Indochina at this time.

- A. American spokesmen have warned that such intervention might have "grave consequences."
- B. Peiping seems disinclined to involve itself in another Korean-type venture.
 - 1. It probably fears retaliation against the China mainland.

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