

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

28 December 1960

SUBJECT: SNIE 68-2-60: PROBABLE COMMUNIST INTENTIONS IN LAOS

THE ESTIMATE

1. Since the recapture of Vientiane by General Phoumi, Communist activity regarding Laos has been vigorous and designed to provide a broad range of possible future moves. The Soviets have airlifted artillery and ammunition and probably North Vietnamese technicians as well to support Kong Le and the Pathet Lao. Pathet Lao units have been instructed to step up military activity throughout the country. Soviet, Chinese, and North Vietnamese efforts are producing a substantial logistic buildup in key centers of North Vietnam near the Laos border and also some buildup in Sam Neua. Meanwhile, the three Bloc capitals have charged the US and Thailand with intervention and have called for a reactivation of the International Control Commission and a reconvening of the 1954 Geneva Conference. Hanoi has specifically declared that foreign intervention gives them the right also to intervene.

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2. The Kong Le forces, some 400-600 strong, now occupy positions in the Vang Vieng area astride the main route north from Vientiane leading to Luang Prabang and Xieng Khouang. There are also probably 1,000-2,000 Pathet Lao troops in this general area some of which are directly in support of Kong Le. Since Phoumi's recapture of Vientiane, Soviet planes have been dropping substantial amounts (estimated at 150-250 tons) of equipment and supplies to these troops. Although Phoumi's forces are moving forward, he had not yet followed up his Vientiane victory by actually launching an attempt to dislodge the Kong Le forces from their new positions. Thus far, the Kong Le forces do not appear to be preparing a counter-attack. Rather, they seem to be regrouping and reorganizing while awaiting Phoumi's move, probably hoping that they can defeat his forces and create a psychological and military situation in which they could, with the help of Pathet Lao forces and "stay behinds" in Vientiane, recapture the capital. If this plan fails, the Kong Le forces are in a position to withdraw to central and north Laos, or to disperse in small bands in the surrounding mountains.

3. Thus far in the current crisis the Pathet Lao has been husbanding its assets and leaving the fighting largely to Kong Le and his followers. The amount of military equipment in Pathet Lao hands has increased considerably as a result of disarming Laotian army

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units in San Neua, of Kong Le's distribution of arms in the Vientiane area, and Soviet and North Vietnamese direct support. The confusion and disorganization of the Laotian Army following the Kong Le coup provided the Pathet Lao a respite in which to consolidate its positions in the countryside, recruit, and train and deploy its forces in the south as well as in the north. We believe that in the future the Pathet Lao forces will be better and more fully equipped and better trained and led, as the result of augmented Bloc aid. The Communists probably estimate that with covert assistance the Pathet Lao would be able to maintain itself as an effective guerrilla force and to prevent the establishment of non-Communist control throughout Laos.

4. Meanwhile, the Communists are consolidating their control of San Neua province. Bloc aircraft have been building up supplies in San Neua. We believe that the road from San Neua into North Vietnam is being improved and it may already be open for vehicular traffic. To counter the Doun Oun-Phoumi government in Vientiane, a Communist-dominated government claiming to be the legal and legitimate government of Laos may be set up at San Neua. The Communists would try to give this government a national front flavor and try to get Souvanna Phoum, whom they continue to recognize as the legal

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Prime Minister, to come to Sam Neua to head it. The Bloc countries would probably recognize and support a Sam Neua government, and it is probable that military elements would be infiltrated from North Vietnam to protect the Sam Neua area if necessary.

5. The primary interests of the Communist powers in the Laotian situation are to prevent the consolidation of a US-backed regime in Laos, to retain the Communist foothold in Laos and to expand the area of Communist control. They also see an excellent opportunity to embarrass the US on the international scene and to aggravate differences between the US and its allies, especially the UK and France. In addition, in view of Chinese complaints at the recent Moscow Conference that Soviet policy is insufficiently aggressive, Moscow will wish not to appear laggard in supporting embattled pro-Communist forces. In general, the Bloc probably sees the situation as one in which the risks do not appear to be very high and the rewards might be considerable. Accordingly, we believe it almost certain that Moscow, Peiping, and Hanoi will be active and militant in the Laotian situation.

6. We believe the Communists will increase their diplomatic pressures on the US. Whatever their protestations, however, the Communists do not want the Laotian situation as it now stands to be

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stabilized through international action. We thus believe that Communist diplomatic activity would be an adjunct to, rather than a substitute for, other action.

7. Both the logistics buildups in North Vietnam and Laos and the public pronouncements from Moscow, Peiping, and Hanoi can be viewed as preparation for Communist military intervention on a substantial scale, most probably with North Vietnamese "volunteers." If the Communists were to feel that their efforts in Laos were failing, it is possible that such an intervention would occur. This would be particularly the case if sizable foreign non-Communist military forces were introduced and the Communist position in Laos were seriously threatened.* In approaching any decision to make a substantial military intervention the Communists would of course be mindful of the risk that the West would meet action with counteraction. They might, however, feel that the danger of expanding hostilities could be held to an acceptable level by limiting the scale of their intervention -- as for example by using only North Vietnamese forces -- and by undertaking concurrent international political action.

* The Director of Intelligence and Research, Department of State, believes that the last part of the sentence should read, "... or if the Communist position in Laos, or the Bloc's prestige were seriously threatened." The Communists, by their actions and statements have made a heavy investment of their prestige in Laos. Moreover, partly as a consequence of the recent conference of Communist parties in Moscow, the Bloc is under considerable pressure to demonstrate the validity of its contention that the "imperialists" can no longer suppress revolutionary movements and that the Bloc can and will support such movements.

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8. We believe it more likely that the Bloc leaders would estimate that their longer term prospects are good for gaining their objectives in Laos through collapse of the non-Communist government and without the risks of overt military intervention. They probably believe that Phoumi's recapture of Vientiane marks only the beginning of a new phase in a protracted struggle for Laos. Thus, we believe that the Bloc course in supporting the Kong Le and Pathet Lao forces will be determined largely by the developing military and political situation. Bloc aid -- in the form of airlift, military equipment and supplies, technicians, and probably selected combat personnel -- will be governed to some extent by the nature and extent of US aid to the Laotian Government and will almost certainly continue at a high level for the immediate future. Bloc leaders will seek thereby to preserve and strengthen Communist military and paramilitary assets in Laos, to keep Laos in a state of civil war, to keep the US deeply involved in the difficult task of maintaining cohesive anti-Communist forces in being, and to exploit opportunities to advance the Communist cause as they arise.