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SNIE 58-63
18 June 1963.

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SPECIAL NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE ESTIMATE

COMMUNIST REACTIONS TO US ACTIONS
TAKEN WITH REGARD TO LAOS

CIA HISTORICAL REVIEW PROGRAM
RELEASE IN FULL

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Central Intelligence Agency

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Submitted by the

DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

The following intelligence organizations participated in the preparation of this estimate: The Central Intelligence Agency and the intelligence organizations of the Departments of State, Defense, the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, and NSA.

Concurred in by the

UNITED STATES INTELLIGENCE BOARD

on 18 June 1963. Concurring were the Director of Intelligence and Research, Department of State; The Director, Defense Intelligence Agency; 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; 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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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

18 June 1963

SUBJECT: SNIE 58-63: COMMUNIST REACTIONS TO US ACTIONS TAKEN
WITH REGARD TO LAOS

I. GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

1. General Communist policy in Laos has been confident, prudent, and persistent.

a. The Communists continue to display considerable confidence that they have a good thing going in Laos. They apparently believe that the situation there is so soft, Communist capabilities to support Pathet Lao (PL) subversion of the country so great, and the military and political inhibitions on effective US countermeasures so telling, that Communist absorption of Laos and the undercutting of the US position in the area are only a matter of time. We believe that neither the USSR, Communist China, North Vietnam (DRV), nor the PL is presently interested in any settlement or partition scheme which would preclude ultimate realization of these goals.

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b. In responding to US pressures in Laos over the past few years, the Communists have shown a generally keen sense of what the traffic would bear. They have not pressed their luck, but, whenever faced with a possibly imminent and sharp rise in the US military presence in the area, have postponed military action until negotiations and political jockeyings have produced a new situation, and US pressures and attention have slackened. In this process, the Communists have shown no disposition to risk major US military action.

c. After each spurt of non-Communist vigor in Laos, the PL/DRV have resumed their persistent efforts to erode the non-Communist position there. The recent flareup of Communist military pressures against the neutralists in Laos does not in our view signal a radical change in this general pattern of behavior; it is, instead, a reaction to a lack of Communist progress in the political arena, a response to local developments, an exploitation of opportunities presented by enemy weakness, and -- to the Communists -- an apparent decline in US attention to Laotian developments.

2. The Communists also probably estimate that the Western Powers, and their allies, continue to be reluctant to take positive action in Laos. Moreover, the Communists probably believe that the non-Communist Laotians, and particularly their armed forces, are so disorganized

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and weak that the West could not, even if it would, make very effective use of them in countering Communist actions.

3. Communist responses to US actions will be made in four centers: Moscow, Hanoi, Peiping, and on the ground in Laos. Each of these sees the Laotian situation from a different perspective, and each is now involved to varying degrees. Accordingly, each might give a different degree of credence to US signals of commitment, and each will be inclined to react somewhat differently.

a. Moscow is more remote and less deeply involved than the other Communist elements. Its immediate concern is that a new major crisis in Laos could lead to a US-Soviet confrontation. The USSR appears to prefer the tactic of subverting Laos through low-risk, essentially political means, but is probably not wholly displeased with recent Communist military gains there. In general, Moscow would almost certainly attempt to assert a restraining influence on its allies, and to prevent serious risk of war from developing in an area at the extremities of Soviet interests and influence.

b. Short of ultimate crisis, the DRV is the most important Communist entity, since the subversion of Laos is largely the product of Hanoi direction, under the probably conflicting guidance of Moscow and Peiping. The DRV's role in Laos remains high, while that of the

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USSR has become somewhat less. Hanoi would almost certainly champion a more militant course than would the Soviets, but at the same time seek not to provoke US military action.

c. China has a larger stake in southeast Asia than is indicated by its current activity in Laos: some materiel support of the DRV, the urging of a forceful course in Laos, and the apparent staking out -- largely through roadbuilding activities -- of a Chinese sphere of influence in certain areas of those northern provinces of Laos which border on China. Peiping's interest rises sharply with any prospect of a strong US presence in or near Laos, and China would become a crucially important actor in any situation where US military action against the DRV seemed imminent.

d. The PL appears to exercise at least some degree of independent military activity, and by taking local initiative, could embarrass Soviet or Chinese policies, at least in the short term.

4. Although the Sino-Soviet dispute has apparently not as yet crucially affected Communist policies concerning Laos, it would complicate Communist responses to forceful US or US-sponsored courses of action. The forthcoming Sino-Soviet confrontation this summer will probably intensify this problem and make it even more difficult for the Communists to concert their responses.

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a. Sino-Soviet estrangement could become so acute that the USSR would seek to dissociate itself from Communist China -- and from the distant DRV -- in the event of a crisis showdown with the US in southeast Asia. Even in such a situation, however, it is unlikely that the USSR would abandon the DRV or Communist China.

b. Short of such crisis, continuation of Sino-Soviet dispute at about present levels will tend to keep Moscow involved and might make it appear more militant concerning Laos than it might otherwise be.

II. COMMUNIST REACTIONS

5. Generally speaking, we would expect the Communists to react in the future much as they have in the past: quiet down when the threat of US military intervention seems markedly to increase, and advance again when the threat has abated. We think there is a good chance, therefore, that the first or second phases of action described below would lead either to a re-establishment of the Government of National Union or to de facto partition. We do not believe, however, that either of these developments would go far to insure lasting stabilization in Laos, for the internal situation in that country would remain highly vulnerable to the virtually certain continuance of determined Communist efforts at subversion.

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A. PHASE I --

US actions not involving the use of US forces, and generally within the framework of the Geneva Agreements. These actions might include strengthening the Royal Laotian Army (FAR), the Kong Le neutralist forces, and the tribal irregulars; and providing the FAR with aircraft for strikes against Communist concentrations and lines of communication within Laos. The principal objectives of these actions would be the conclusion of a cease-fire and reactivation of the National Union Government under Geneva Agreements. It would be made clear to the Communists that if the US-sponsored actions did not cause them to honor their Geneva commitments concerning Laos, the US would be ready and willing to raise the level of pressures.

6. There is a good chance that the first Communist reaction would be a PL move toward talks at the local level. It is possible that their allies would suggest that a new international conference be held on Laos, depending to a considerable extent upon how they judged things were going for them in Laos. In any event, the Communists would probably embark on an international campaign denouncing the US actions.

7. Meanwhile, DRV encadrement of the PL might be increased to meet an increased FAR ground threat. Evidence of a substantial buildup of FAR or Kong Le units in local areas might be countered by limited PL/DRV attacks to disrupt FAR and Kong Le forces. This

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might result in a quick effort to eliminate completely Kong Le's position in the Plain of Jars.

8. If US-provided aircraft were used by the FAR to attack the PL, the Communists would increase their political attacks on the US and would probably try first to counter with ground fire, including DRV (and, perhaps, Communist Chinese) antiaircraft units. If these efforts proved ineffective and the FAR aerial attacks were really hurting, the Communists might introduce "volunteer" fighter aircraft.

B. PHASE II --

Actions not involving combat use of US forces, but in some cases exceeding the limits of the Geneva Agreements. These actions might include, in addition to those of Phase I, removing existing restrictions on FAR/Kong Le offensive actions (ground and air), introducing "volunteer" combat aircraft, significantly increasing US air and naval forces in adjacent areas, and undertaking US aerial reconnaissance of Laos and North Vietnam and harassment of DRV shipping. The objectives of this phase would be same as those of Phase I.

9. Communist concern over escalation would rise. We think that the Soviets at this stage would seek to persuade the US and the DRV/PL/Chinese not to take such further actions as might escalate hostilities. The extent to which the PL, the DRV, the Chinese, and the Soviets would believe that the US was prepared to take major additional steps would be influenced significantly by the nature and extent of US deployments

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in the area. The absence of a buildup of US ground forces in adjacent areas, e.g., in Thailand, would detract from the credibility of US intentions. The Chinese would be harder to convince than the Soviets regarding US determination, and would probably exert whatever pressure they could upon Moscow to call the US "bluff."

10. During Phase II, we believe the Communists would be more inclined than during Phase I to attempt to bring the situation under control through negotiations. If they had not already done so, they would press demands for an international conference and would probably seek to consolidate their military gains through a cease-fire agreement. Their initial offers for a cease-fire would include provisions which would grant them further areas of control. If this was not accepted, they would probably resume local military pressures hoping for an eventual cease-fire based on the then existing positions. Communist expectation in any cease-fire would probably be that the US would find it almost impossible to maintain a high pitch of preparedness in the area over the long term, and the Communists would await an opportunity to take renewed action whenever the situation appeared opportune.

11. In the event the US were to harass DRV shipping and move US naval units into the Gulf of Tonkin, the Chinese would almost certainly make increasingly threatening statements and ready themselves militarily. We do not believe that Chinese forces would intervene directly in Laos

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or North Vietnam at this time, though we do not rule out the possibility that the Chinese might commit themselves formally to the defense of the DRV, in an attempt both to deter US actions and to increase pressures on the Soviets to extend their commitment in the area.

C. PHASE III -- Actions including combat use of US forces. These might include, in addition to those actions of Phases I and II, US forces' occupation of key Laotian centers remaining in non-Communist hands, US naval blockade of North Vietnam, US bombing of selected targets in Laos and North Vietnam, and such additional commitment of US and SEATO force to the struggle as might be judged expedient. The objective of these actions would be achievement of a formal partition of Laos.

12. As we have indicated under Phases I and II, Communist reactions would vary depending on many imponderable factors. Without knowing what the precise reactions would be, or assessing their significance, we cannot estimate with any degree of confidence Communist reactions to Phase III. Assuming that the first two phases had failed to achieve the results sought, we would conclude either: (a) that the Soviets did not believe that the US would in fact take extreme action in southeast Asia; (b) that the Soviets were unable to control the situation; or (c) that they were prepared to assume the rather considerable risks of assisting the Communists on the scene.

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13. We estimate that initial reactions to Phase III would be approximately as follows:

- a. Communist forces in Laos would probably attempt to harass US forces and movements of US personnel, but would probably avoid direct confrontation with US forces. They might attempt to overrun areas defended by non-US forces.
- b. The DRV would raise the level of its military activity in Laos.
- c. Communist China would increase its presence in Laos and raise further its level of warnings to the US, but at this point would probably not openly commit Chinese Communist armed units. The Chinese would probably not care to put their aging fighter aircraft in opposition to US air forces over Laos, but might try to counter by providing the PL/DRV in Laos with some increased air defense capabilities.

14. US air attacks on North Vietnam would pose the immediate possibility of hostilities between the US and Communist China. We incline to the view that the Chinese would commit their forces to assist the DRV against these attacks, as needed, and we believe that Communist forces in Laos and South Vietnam would exercise their maximum remaining military capabilities in those countries and in defense of DRV efforts.

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Chinese Communist aircraft would be clearly unable to compete with US air power, and the Soviets would be under strong DRV and Chinese pressure to provide advanced aircraft.

15. We are unable at this time to estimate Communist responses beyond the local military reactions we have just described. Whether the Communists at this stage would come to the conference table ready to arrive at some kind of settlement would depend largely upon their reasons for allowing the situation to reach this point. If their reason was that they did not believe the US would take extreme action, they now would have strong indications to the contrary and presumably would be willing to talk. If the Soviets had been unable to control the situation, perhaps the US actions would have convinced the Chinese and North Vietnamese that the situation had become dangerous and that it was unduly hazardous to remain adamant in the face of Soviet disapproval. On the other hand we cannot exclude the possibility that the Chinese would feel so deeply committed in southeast Asia that they might be willing to accept the risks of large-scale engagement with US forces in the area. In any event, if the Soviets were prepared to assume rather considerable risks, the situation might become quite critical and involve the possibility of a US-Chinese confrontation, with the Chinese supported by the Soviets, and of a US-Soviet confrontation.

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