THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

ACTION

SECRET/SENSITIVE

January 7, 1970

MEMORANDUM FOR DR. KISSINGER

FROM: John H. Holdridge

SUBJECT: Meeting of the Inter-Agency Ad Hoc Group on Laos,

January 6

The Laos Group held a somewhat truncated meeting on Tuesday in order to comply with your instruction that all major policy matters of the assump-

tions as to US policy on which it would base its thinking in specific cases. This will of course come up to the 303 Committee or whatever group takes over responsibility for major decisions on Laos.

The Group also agreed to draft the terms for a SNIE on Communist intentions and interpretations of our motives. It was agreed that the issue will be put to you as to whether to request such a SNIE.

There was an intelligence briefing which brought out the following points of interest:

- -- Enemy Capabilities. It is assumed that the enemy can take the Plaine des Jarres. It was also noted that if he chooses, he can probably wear down Vang Pao's guerrilla forces through attrition, since there are only 8,000 Meo under arms and they have already tapped young boys down to 13-15 years of age.
- -- The Chinese Road. There is no surveying beyond Muong Houn, and no sign that the Chinese plan to carry the road to the Mekong in the immediate future. Souvanna has twice mentioned privately that he is not much concerned if the road stops at Muong Houn. The Chinese are keeping a very "low profile" in north Laos, and are not engaged in the administration as are the North Vietnamese. CIA thinks that the insurgency in north and northeast Thailand would not really

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require the road for logistic support unless they were operating at more than twice their present level. (COMMENT: The Communists need road communications in north Laos. We should avoid automatically assuming that road construction is intended to change the game dramatically. There is always a danger of escalating by over-reading the other side's signals. For example, the RLG is building a road to Vang Pao's base, which could seem as ominous in Communist eyes as the "Chinese road" does in ours.)

-- The Laos/North Vietnam Boundary. Last week, we had asked for a study of the border in connection with the proposed strikes within the 10 mile buffer zone. Research shows no evidence that the Vietnamese disagree with the standard border demarcation in north Laos, the only evidence to the contrary being one very imprecise and small scale map captured in 1964.

I think that it would be useful if upon your return you could find time to discuss the Laos decision-making process with State (presumably Alex Johnson and Jonathan Moore). Some guidance clearly is needed as to what if any mandate the Laos Group now has.

My own feeling is that the Group has gotten off to a good start, and that for the first time we in Washington, and particularly in the White House, are getting a hand on the real decisions which will determine the future of our role in Laos. There is some reason to address these problems at the level represented in the Laos Group, simply because it can devote more time to the issues than a more senior group such as the 303 Committee. While the decisions would still be left to higher authority, it can bring intelligence resources to bear, refine proposals, and generally clarify the issues to be sent to the senior group.

You have expressed concern about widening the circle of those with knowledge of Laos operations. I assume that this is the reason you do not want the Laos Group to consider operational proposals. You should be aware that Jonathan Moore has been very much aware of this danger. On operational issues, the meeting is restricted to a core of five or six persons, all with a legitimate need-to-know.

RECOMMENDATION:

That you authorize us to set up an appointment for U. Alexis Johnson to discuss the role of the Laos Group with you.

Approve Disapprove

No Objection to Declassification in Full 2013/07/31: LOC-HAK-174-2-1-5