

1445

INFORMATION

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February 11, 1972

MEMORANDUM FOR: MR. KISSINGER

FROM: JOHN D. NEGROPONTE  
RICHARD T. KENNEDY

SUBJECT: Situation in North Laos

Background: Following the last WSAG meeting on Laos, you will recall that the field was instructed to prepare contingency plans for a withdrawal from Long Tieng and to execute it if Vang Pao's forces appeared in danger of being destroyed as an effective fighting force. As requested the field drew up the contingency plan.

However, Ambassador Godley also reported that the Thai and the Lao, including Vang Pao and Souvanna, were not in any way inclined to withdraw from Long Tieng at this time.

Instead, they proposed and are now carrying out a limited preemptive thrust aimed at interdicting enemy supply lines now stretching across the Plains of Jarres. As of February 10 a force of 5,200 friendly troops were stretched in an arc north and east of Pha Dong--just south of the plain--maneuvering into position to carry out these interdiction efforts. A force of 7,000, mostly Thai's, remain in the Long Tieng-Sam Thong area.

Godley and his Station Chief have faced a dilemma throughout this situation. They are fully aware of Washington's guidance to thin out Long Tieng's defenses, prepare fall-back positions and avoid a Dien Bien Phu. At the same time they are confronted by what appears to be an all-or-nothing psychology on the part of the Thai and the Lao. Their view is reported to be that retreating under pressure would amount to a rout and would not stop at the next ridgeline. And, as long as the pressure isn't on, they prefer to think in terms of holding out and mounting diversionary operations such as the one underway.

Godley, meanwhile, has acquiesced in this new foray although he knows it runs contrary to the thrust of his guidance from Washington. He has, however, made it clear that likely offensive activity elsewhere in Indochina places limitations on the amount of air support which might be available in a pinch.

SECRET/SENSITIVE

2

The field is, as usual, more optimistic about the prospects for this operation than are observers in Washington. Generally, the feeling here is that at best the operation will buy a little time, but not enough to prevent the NVA from overrunning Long Tieng during the dry season.

Neither the field nor Washington doubt the eventuality of an attack on Long Tieng. The basic difference of view is that observers here fear a complete rout whereas the field seems to think it will be a good fight.

The Present Situation: The Lao Ad Hoc Group has held two interagency meetings to discuss the situation, one on February 7, one on February 10.

In attendance at the February 10 meeting was General Stillwell who has recently returned from a visit to Laos. It was in fact his briefing of Secretary Rogers on February 9 which prompted the convening of the second Ad Hoc Group meeting.

The discussion at the February 10 meeting focused on the tactical situation in North Laos and what kind of guidance is called for at this stage.

Essentially General Stillwell argued that the Thai will not be able to extract themselves from Long Tieng under fire and therefore they should be repositioned now. He proposed the following steps:

-- Return the two crack battalions from Savannakhet home for rest and refit to be held in reserve for contingencies (These units are now engaged in the diversionary operation referred to above.)

-- Move the MR-I forces now in MR-II back to MR-I.

-- Redeploy the Thai to successive defensive positions south of Long Tieng.

No one at the meeting questioned the desirability of these proposed measures. Ambassador Sullivan did, however, raise the question of how best to instruct Godley since his thinking--and the reported thinking of the Laos and the Thai--runs so much contrary to the preferred Washington strategy.

After some discussion, Ambassador Sullivan proposed that the following approach be adopted:

SECRET/SENSITIVE

SECRET/SENSITIVE

3

-- A message be dispatched reaffirming previous guidance that Long Tieng's defenses be thinned and rear defense positions be established. Godley and Unger would also be instructed to raise these matters at the highest political level in Vientiane and Bangkok, since there was some feeling that local commanders are more committed to a last ditch stand at Long Tieng than their political superiors.

-- A more detailed tactical message incorporating thoughts such as General Stillwell's would be sent out jointly by DOD/CIA.

-- A brief but firm backchannel message would go out from Secretary Rogers to Godley affirming his personal concern for the situation.

A draft of the first cable has already been received and is being staffed separately.

The Symington Ceiling: This matter was also discussed. At the February 2 meeting Ambassador Sullivan proposed a WSAG meeting be held to secure the President's views on whether or not to seek a raise in the Symington ceiling. Sullivan proposed using Godley's request for increased RLAF sorties from 3600 monthly to 4500 as a vehicle for discussing the overall issue. Sullivan characterized the interagency consensus as being that the ceiling would in any event be "punctured."

On February 7, Mr. Irwin followed up Sullivan's suggestion with a formal WSAG memorandum requesting a meeting. (Staffed separately) At the February 10 Ad Hoc Meeting the NSC representative pointed out that we still do not have estimates for the ceiling overrun, if any, and these must be available before the President can make a decision. A memorandum in response to Mr. Irwin's has been prepared requesting the best available interagency estimates by March 1.

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