

JCS REVIEWED 28-Sep-2010: NO OBJECTION TO DECLASSIFICATION

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INFORMATION

March 15, 1971

MEMORANDUM FOR: THE PRESIDENT
FROM: HENRY A. KISSINGER
**SUBJECT: South Vietnamese Operations in
Laos and Cambodia**

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Attached at Tab A is a report from General Abrams on the operations in Laos and Cambodia. The report discusses the impact on the enemy, current status, and his news concerning the conduct of the final phases of these operations.

LAOS

Impact on Enemy. The report makes the following points concerning *the* impact on the enemy of the Laotian operation:

- Of the ten NVN regiments committed, six have suffered significant casualties. The enemy has lost an estimated one-third of the 30 battalions and one-quarter of the 12,000 rear-service personnel in the area.
- These losses will have a major impact on the enemy strategic reserve and strategic plans.
- Recent reports indicate that the enemy is experiencing morale problems as a result of severe losses.
- The operation has caused substantial disruption of the overall enemy logistics efforts and major disruption in Base Area 604.
- While the total effect of the operation on the enemy's logistics efforts cannot be fully assessed, most of the truck movement in the northern area appears to be in direct support of the battle. Greater use of Route 23 for the first time is indicative of the criticality with which the enemy views his logistics situation in South Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.

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- The significant decrease in enemy activities and inability to mount a counterattack last week indicates that the enemy is attempting to resupply and reorganize units which were severely hurt during initial battles.
- Although the enemy has lost well over one-half the tanks sent into the battle area, additional reinforcements are being sent to support infantry units.
- By South Vietnamese standards, the move to Tchepone was a landmark and it was undoubtedly costly to the enemy.

Current Situation. In commenting on the current situation, General Abrams reports that:

- The enemy now has five under-strength regiments north of Route 9 with an additional regiment probably on the way from North Vietnam. There are also five under-strength regiments south of Route 9, with another regiment moving from northern South Vietnam to the area. The southern enemy units are more dispersed and more difficult to support from North Vietnam.
- Although helicopter losses were moderately heavy during the initial phases of the campaign they were not excessive considering the number of sorties flown. Present and projected aircraft levels are satisfactory to meet campaign requirements as well as continue Vietnamization transfers on schedule.
- There appear to be no major logistical problems in the near future.

Future Plans. In assessing future plans for the operation, General Abrams notes that:

- President Thieu sees the remaining goals as the Route 914-C complex, Muong Mong area, Base Area 611 and the Ashau area (See map at Tab B). Attacks into these areas, except Ashau, would be most effective from current South Vietnamese positions in Laos.
- The withdrawal phase of the operation includes plans for the neutralizing of enemy forces and destruction of stockpiles and facilities in Base Area 611. Attacks into the area may be conducted both from the

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northwest and from the border (Ashau) area in South Vietnam. The month and a half remaining prior to the monsoon transitional period should permit this.

- As the ARVN attacks south and east into Base Area 611 some enemy elements north of Route 9 will probably join those to the south to defend the area.
- The extent of South Vietnam's effort in Base Area 611 will depend on a sound rotational plan, enemy pressure, and weather. To continue to be effective, South Vietnamese units must be rotated, refitted and rested.

CAMBODIA

With respect to the Cambodian operation General Abrams states that:

- The first phase has been completed. The reentry into the Chup Plantation and successful operations in the Dambe and Chhlong areas are noteworthy accomplishments (See map at Tab C).
- The enemy has changed tactics and has resisted the ARVN operations in this area. This is indicative of the seriousness with which the enemy views possible loss of control of this area, which is the southern terminus of the Mekong line of communication that provides a major portion of the logistics support to enemy forces in southern South Vietnam. When the enemy has attacked the ARVN in strength, the enemy has suffered heavy losses.
- The operation has reduced the level of enemy threat to Cambodian areas west of the Mekong and reduced the level of enemy activity in southern South Vietnam.
- The operation has not only disrupted the logistical system but may have interrupted the provision of replacements for enemy units.
- The equivalent of one-third of the 24 enemy battalions committed to defense of the area have been lost.
- The enemy will probably continue to oppose incursions into rear service facilities and will employ economy of forces tactics to conserve personnel and supplies.

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CONCLUSIONS

In reflecting on the outlook for the two operations General Abrams advises that:

- The remaining course of the campaign must be directed toward inflicting maximum damage to enemy installations and troop dispositions.
- Weather is a key consideration and will require a flexible timetable during the latter stages of each operation.
- Priority of allocation of resources remains with the Laotian operation.
- Premature or hasty withdrawal would be a mistake. The one viable option available is to continue toward an orderly conclusion of both operations with an outcome which reflects hard fought but successful campaigns in Laos and Cambodia.

In endorsing General Abrams' report Admiral McCain emphasized⁵ several points (Tab D):

- Enemy losses of personnel and supplies has put him in a position where he can no longer take the initiative.
- Enemy losses indicate that attainment of his objectives becomes increasingly remote as success of the South Vietnamese forces is assured.
- Barring unforeseen events the South Vietnamese can and will retain the initiative. The favorable tactical situations which now prevail and continued U. S support will insure an orderly successful conclusion.

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March 14, 1971

TO: ADMIRAL MCCAIN
INFO: CHAIRMAN, JCS
FROM: GENERAL ABRAMS

SUBJECT: Planning for Lam Son 719 and Toan Thang 01-71NB

REFS: A. JCS 6049/112220Z Mar 71
B. MACV 120905Z Mar 71
C. MACV 120955Z Mar 71
D. JCS 6102/121231Z Mar 71
E. CINCPAC 122153Z Mar 71

1. Ref A extends authority for U.S. support to Lam Son 719 and suggests desirability for continuing RVNAF operations in Laos. Ref B indicates President Thieu's intention of continuing operations in Laos. Ref C provides current situation in Lam Son 719 area of operations and projects short term objectives. Ref D requests urgent assessment of subject operations and restates the authority for continued U.S. support of Lam Son 719. Ref E requests submission of assessment.

2. At this point in time a medial phase of the Lam Son 719 operation has been reached. By South Vietnamese standards, the attainment of Tchepone was a landmark; and it was undoubtedly costly to the enemy. Remaining is the long view, within limitations of time and space, toward an orderly successful conclusion of the operation. I see the continuing U.S. role as one of encouraging and influencing President Thieu and his generals to reinforce success, to take full military and political advantage of the current favorable situation, and to exploit every opportunity to achieve maximum objectives of the operation until termination in an orderly fashion.

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3. In the Lam Son 719 area of operations, elements of 10 NVA regiments remain committed against RVNAF forces. Of these, six have suffered significant casualties and it is estimated that the enemy has lost the equivalent of 10 of the 30 battalions he has committed. In addition, the enemy has lost 2500-3000 of the 10-12,000 rear service personnel operating in the area at the beginning of the operation. His total losses to his combat units were inflicted upon newly deployed regiments from NVN and this must have a major impact on his strategic reserve, as well as his strategic plans. Recent reports indicate the enemy is experiencing morale problems in Laos as a result of his severe losses.

4. It is estimated that the enemy has already deployed 100 tanks to the area of operations. However, to date he has lost well over half that number. Reports this morning reveal he may be moving twelve additional tanks from the Western DMZ area of NVN to the Lam Son area of operations. This indicates his desire to continue armor support for infantry units.

5. While the total effect the operation is having on the enemy's logistics effort cannot be fully assessed at this time, it is apparent that most of the truck movement in the northern part of the lines of communication is in direct support of the battle. He is now attempting to increase his use of Route 23 to the west for the first time in the war. This is an indication of the criticality with which he views his logistics situation in RVN, Cambodia and Southern Laos.

6. During the last week enemy initiated ground attacks diminished significantly. Indications are he is endeavoring to resupply and reorganize

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those units which were severely hurt during the initial battles. Since ARVN forces moved into the Tchepone area, the enemy has been unable to react rapidly enough to mount a significant counterattack. The enemy now has elements of five under-strength regiments committed north of Route 9 and one additional regiment probably moving to reinforce in that area from NVN (9th Regiment, 304 Division). South of Route 9, he presently has elements of five under-strength regiments committed with possibly one additional regiment (The 803D, 324B Division) moving west from Military Region 1 to reinforce. The enemy forces south of Route 9 are more widely dispersed and will be more difficult to support and reinforce from NVN.

7. The enemy will continue to defend against attacks to the south and east into Base area 611 with elements of the five under-strength regiments presently committed. In addition he will probably reinforce with elements of the 803D Regiment, 324B Division from Military Region 1. Some elements of the five under-strength regiments now north of Route 9 will probably attempt to deploy south of Route 9 to reinforce as the main RVNAF thrust moves southeast.

8. Lam Son 719 as briefed to the Secretary of Defense and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs was a four phased operation to sever the enemy lines of communication by seizing the Tchepone area and conducting search and destroy operations in Base Area 604. Withdrawal from the objective area would be either along Route 9 or through Base Area 611. The operation was to terminate during the monsoon transitional period. The seizure of Tchepone was not in itself an objective as was the severing of the lines of communications and

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maximum destruction of enemy forces and stockpiles in the Base Area 604. To the extent that RVNAF has conducted operations in Base Area 604 and occupied the Tchepone area for several days Phases I and II can be said to be completed and Phase III is in progress. Phase IV is the withdrawal phase which should include Base Area 611 operations. The month and a half remaining until the monsoon transitional period should permit full execution of the Phase IV option of attacking Base Area 611. This phase has the objective of neutralizing enemy forces and maximum destruction of enemy stockpiles and facilities. RVNAF was to conduct supporting operations through the Laotian salient and against the eastern portion of Base Area 611 from Ashau to optimize the probability of success against the entire base area.

9. The thrust into Laos has resulted in substantial disruption of the broader enemy logistic effort. Major disruption of the localized logistic system of central and eastern base area 604 and as indicated earlier reduced effectiveness of six of the 10 enemy regiments committed to the Lam Son area of operations. The on-going operations of the 1st ARVN Division and the Vietnamese Marine brigades to the south of Route 9 should result in further destruction and disruption of the enemy logistic system. The remaining goals as President Thieu sees them are the Route 914-C/complex from the vicinity of Tchepone south to Muong Nong, the Muong Nong area (vicinity of intersection of routes 92, 914, 926), Base Area 611 and the Ashau. Attacks into these areas except Ashau, would be most effective from current positions in Laos and in conjunction with search and destroy operations through the entire area along the way.

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10. While Lam Son 719 is the major effort in progress at this time, many other important operations are in progress throughout RVN and in Cambodia. Achieving maximum effectiveness in all is important to the progress of Vietnamization and the continued orderly redeployment of U.S. forces. This requires conservation of resources and effective orchestration of the overall effort. RVNAF units have been fighting hard for over a month in difficult terrain against a tenacious enemy. These units should be rotated, refitted and rested on a regular basis to ensure maximum combat effectiveness against an enemy who, it must be assumed, will continue to maintain pressure against the RVNAF. If this enemy pressure is maintained, the RVNAF must be capable with U.S. air support to inflict maximum casualties and further disrupt his plans. In this light, the extent to which Base Area 611 can be entered and searched will be a direct function of a sound unit rotational program, enemy pressure, and the weather.

11. Several additional considerations are pertinent. The remainder of the operation should not be tied to a date or tightly defined time frame. The field commanders must retain sufficient latitude within authorities to permit precise yet flexible orchestration of the campaign in a tempo responsive to the vagaries of enemy activity, the natural flood and ebb in the tide of battle, the significant impact of the weather and of overriding importance, the most effective method of accomplishing the mission. It is particularly important that from this point the operation be conducted in a thoroughly sound, military manner. Premature or hasty withdrawal contains significant military risk

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and courts certain North Vietnamese exaggerated claims of a South Vietnamese defeat.

12. Though U.S. helicopter losses in Lam Son 719 were moderately heavy during the initial phases of the campaign, in consideration of the total number of sorties flown these losses can not be considered excessive. The overall aircraft replacement program has been modified in-theater to provide maximum priority support to the operating elements. Inbound aircraft have been diverted to Da Nang to the maximum extent feasible. Lateral transfer of aircraft from Keystone . . . 6 units and other units not actively engaged in critical operations have been consummated. Priority air shipments from the U.S. are underway and the programmed projection for March through June appears adequate. Although assets fall short of desired 100 percent fill in some types of aircraft from time to time, present and projected levels appear satisfactory to meet campaign requirements and at the same time transfer the required assets to the VNAF to carry forward the Vietnamization program on schedule.

13. Losses of some items of major equipment have exceeded the ARVN annual attrition rate, but float assets on hand plus stocks received in-theater as of 13 March 1971 have been adequate to replace campaign losses. Expedited deliveries have been accomplished and are presently underway from PACOM (Pacific Command) rebuild facilities and CONUS (continental U.S.) supply bases, adequate to reconstitute the float and attrition stocks in tanks, armored personnel carriers, and artillery pieces. Stocks of class I, III, and V are also

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adequate and, barring unforeseen developments, there appear to be no major logistical problems in the near future.

14. Many of the considerations enumerated in the foregoing paragraphs concerning Lam Son 719 equally to Toan Thang 01-71NB. Phase one and phase two of this operation are in reality an expansion of the previous continuing III Corps cross border operation in Cambodia. The plan was developed to achieve immediate and long range objectives directly supporting the combined campaign plan, the Vietnamization program and the stability of the GKR. The first phase of this campaign has just been completed. The reentry into the Chup Rubber plantation and the successful operations in the Dambe and Chhlong areas are noteworthy accomplishments.

15. Throughout the course of the operation, the enemy has positioned his forces to oppose ARVN maneuvers. Two under-strength enemy infantry divisions and major elements of a third have been committed in the Chup-Dambe-Mimot-Snuol area.

16. The enemy has not avoided contact and has attacked ARVN in strength on several occasions, suffering heavy casualties as a result. In December and January, when ARVN moved deeper into Cambodia to break enemy control of Route 7 west of Kompong Cham and along Route 4, the enemy offered only token resistance. His change in tactics with respect to operation Toan Thang indicates the seriousness with which he views the possible loss of his control in this area. The area serves as the southern terminus of his Mekong line of communication from which support to the major portion of his forces in RVN

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Military Region's 3 and 4 must come. The operation has not only disrupted his logistical system, but may have also interrupted the arrival, training, and distribution of much needed replacements. The enemy has lost the equivalent of eight maneuver battalions of the 24 he has committed.

17. It is estimated that the enemy will continue to oppose any incursion into his rear service facilities and will employ economy of force tactics to conserve both personnel and supplies.

18. RVNAF operations to date have opened Highway 7 from RVN border west to Tonle Bet; severely disrupted the traditional communications liaison route Kratie-Chhlong-Kompong Trach; and caused the enemy to retain major elements of two divisions north of Highway 7, thus reducing the level of threat to Kampong Cham City and other areas west of the Mekong and the level of enemy activity in RVN Military Region 3. Most significant are the severe casualties (approximately 3400 KIA) inflicted on the enemy. Continued operations as planned are essential for the successful attainment of our objectives. Phase II of this campaign commenced 10 March and presents an opportunity to inflict even greater losses on the enemy.

19. In conclusion, the following points are submitted:

A. There is one viable and feasible option available to us and that is to continue toward an orderly conclusion of both Lam Son 719 and Toan Thang 01-71 NB with an outcome which reflects hard fought but successful campaigns in Laos and Cambodia.

B. The remaining course of campaigns must be directed toward inflicting

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unabated, maximum damage on the enemy by destruction of his installations and by application of maximum fire power against his troop dispositions and supporting weapons.

C. The significance of the weather to these operations, particularly Lam Son 719, must be underscored and flagged as a key consideration dictating a flexible time table during the latter stages of each operation.

D. Priority in allocation of resources remains with Lam Son 719. Through close liaison with Gen. Vien and Gen. Davison, I am ensuring that Toan Thang 01-71 NB receives an equable allocation of ARC Light, TACAIR, and other resources, to Gen. Minh's satisfaction.

E. These operations should remain essentially GVN directed operations supported to the maximum with U.S. resources within existing authorities.

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March 14, 1971

TO: ADMIRAL MOORER

FROM: ADMIRAL MCCAIN

SUBJECT: Planning for Lam Son 719 and Toan Thang 01/71 NB

REFS: A. JCS 6102/121231Z Mar 71
B. COMUSMACV 140425Z Mar 71

1. Ref A requested field input concerning an assessment of how subject operations will be conducted from this point forward. Ref B responded to Ref A.

2. COMUSMACV's assessment is complete and an outstanding review of possible options available to the enemy. One very important aspect are the losses sustained by the Communists. The KIA and the destruction of supplies has put him in a position where he can no longer exercise initiative. Without question the enemy is hurting to the point where the attainment of his objectives becomes increasingly remote as success for the ARVN forces is assured.

3. I have reviewed Ref B and fully support COMUSMACV's views presented therein. Both operations are progressing generally as planned. Barring unforeseen events the GVN can and will retain the initiative. The favorable tactical situations which now prevail with continued US support, insure an orderly and successful conclusion.

4. Very respectfully. Warm regards.

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