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MEMORANDUM

NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL

ETS-MK-ADU1590

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August 24, 1970

MEMORANDUM TO GENERAL HAIG

FROM: Jeanne W. Davis *JWD*

SUBJECT: Minutes of VSSG Meeting on Southeast Asia Air Activity, July 30

The minutes of this meeting are attached.

State Department review completed

NSA review completed

JCS review(s) completed

MORI C03234640

ON-FILE NSC RELEASE INSTRUCTIONS APPLY

cc: Lynn
Court
Kennedy
Holdridge
Smyser

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VIETNAM SPECIAL STUDIES GROUP MEETING

July 30, 1970

Time and Place: 10:10 a.m. - 11:20 a.m.; Room 1915, Century Plaza Hotel, Los Angeles, California

Subject: South East Asia Air Activity

Participation:

Chairman - Henry A. Kissinger	CIA	- Mr. Richard Helms
	25X1	Mr. George A. Carver, Jr.
State - Mr. William Sullivan		
Mr. Ronald I. Spiers		
Defense - Mr. David Packard	NSC Staff	- Dr. Laurence E. Lynn, Jr.
Brig. Gen. Fred E. Karhohs		Mr. John C. Court
		Mr. D. Keith Guthrie
JCS - Adm. Thomas H. Moorer		Col. Richard T. Kennedy
Adm. Rembrandt C. Robinson		
Col. Robert E. Fiss		

SUMMARY OF CONCLUSIONS

1. The VSSG reviewed the study of air activity in Southeast Asia prepared under its auspices and the proposal on sortie levels submitted separately by the Secretary of Defense. The VSSG also discussed a paper setting forth JCS views presented by Admiral Moorer at the meeting.
2. The VSSG decided that the issues relating to levels of air activity should be presented in a memorandum for the President's decision. Taking into account the limitations of the available analytical tools, the memorandum should state the alternative sortie levels and explain the military, budgetary, and political implications of each. The memorandum will also point out related problems which must be dealt with such as assuring adequate air support to the ARVN, providing for maintenance of airbases deactivated by the US, and avoiding a crisis of confidence in US relations with Thailand.
3. Among considerations involving US-Thai relations which should be called to the President's attention are:
 - a. Elimination of the need for one of the Thai bases in the event the level of

TOP SECRET/NODIS

US air activity is reduced.

- b. The political implications of substantial cutbacks of US forces in Thailand.
 - c. Possible compensatory measures to alleviate political strains, such as providing for stand-by operation of bases.
4. The VSSG agreed that no public announcement should be made of reductions in the level of US air activity in Southeast Asia.

Dr. Kissinger: Because of disagreements on the level of air activity in Southeast Asia, the President ordered this study in order to get an analytical handle on the problem. It is one of the issues that keep coming up in our discussions of the defense budget. The force level most affected seems to be tactical air. In the study three overall sortie levels have been presented to us. In addition, the Secretary of Defense has come in with a new proposal.

The levels proposed in the study are 18,000 sorties, which is the current level but is not being achieved; 14,000 sorties, the level proposed under current DOD fiscal guidance; and 10,000 sorties. As I understand Secretary Laird's new proposal, he wishes to maintain surge capability of 14,000 sorties, but to keep the basic level at 10,000.

Mr. Packard: What Secretary Laird is proposing is to maintain the capability to launch 14,000 sorties per month. It would be up to the field commanders to decide the level of activity within this limit. They could vary it downward according to requirements. The difficulty is that if we authorize a flat 14,000 sorties per month, that number will be operated regardless of the requirements. We are trying to achieve better management by setting a capability of 14,000 as an upper limit and urging the field commanders to keep the levels down.

Dr. Kissinger: We are not going to be able to settle this issue here. What we have to do is to decide how to present it to the President for decision. The discussion on the paper is broken down according to three geographical areas--Southern Laos, South Vietnam, and Northern Laos. Operations in Southern Laos involve primarily interdiction bombing of the Ho Chi Minh trail. We have not had a full analysis of what interdiction bombing accomplishes. One view is that it really does not affect the enemy's capability to supply his forces in South Vietnam. The other view is that it puts upper limits on his supply capability and that if we reduce the bombing, we can expect increased levels of enemy action.

I have two questions. First, what is the relation of bombing level to the level of enemy activity? Second, at what point if we reduce bombing levels do we expect to see more enemy activity?

Adm. Moorer: This is difficult to specify. There is a big weapons factor involved. Also, it is hard to quantify the results down to the last ton. 25X1

TOP SECRET/NODIS

It is not feasible to pin down the required bombing levels within a couple of hundred sorties. I personally think that the bombing has had a serious effect on enemy capabilities. 25X1

There is also the question of whether we are talking about tonnage in munitions or food supplies. They get most of their food in South Vietnam.

Dr. Kissinger: In that case, we are obviously not concerned about food.

There are really two views. One is that the interdiction bombing actually limits enemy activity in South Vietnam. The other is that the enemy will carry out whatever level of activity they desire and that bombing only affects the cost of their operations. 25X1

Adm. Moorer: [REDACTED]

Dr. Kissinger: Was this the result of our interdiction? Or was it caused by our spoiling operations in South Vietnam?

Adm. Moorer: I think it is the result of our actions along the trails.

Dr. Kissinger: One can look at this in two ways. The enemy makes plans, and the bombing keeps him from carrying them out. Or the enemy prepares his plans, and the bombing merely increases the cost of implementing them.

Dave, what do you think?

Mr. Packard: The bombing does increase the enemy's supply difficulties. It is hard to say whether our interdiction reduces the level of enemy activity in the South. We do have indications that they have planned certain actions and then have not been able to follow up. How much of this is due to our interdiction efforts is not known, but the bombing undoubtedly has some effect although it is perhaps not a decisive factor.

My judgment is that on the average the enemy can get through all the supplies he needs. However, on some specific occasions, the enemy has run into logistical snags and has had to curtail actions planned in South Vietnam.

Dr. Kissinger: Dick, what is your view?

Mr. Helms: Our view has long been that the main constraint on enemy activities in the South is personnel. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Furthermore, they have the capability to increase the volume of incoming supplies if they want to.

TOP SECRET/NODIS

Adm. Moorer: This same argument was used against the bombing of North Vietnam. People said that it did nothing to halt the enemy's capability to supply his forces in the South.

Mr. Packard: No doubt our interdiction does some good. We want to make it more effective and are taking some steps toward this end. We will increase the number of gunships and we are introducing other improvements, such as laser-guided bombs. With these improvements, we will be able to reduce the number of sorties and still continue an effective campaign. We are not considering calling a halt to the bombing. Our program envisions improved weapons, a lower sortie level, and reduced costs.

Dr. Kissinger: Bill, what do you say about this?

Mr. Sullivan: I have long wondered whether this argument is really meaningful. I think the enemy, when considering a new operation, looks at the costs in terms of the additional manpower, trucks, munitions and other resources needed. However, once he has come to a decision to go forward, he will commit the required resources.

Dr. Kissinger: That implies that the enemy may decide to undertake a less ambitious campaign because of our interdiction.

Mr. Sullivan: That is right.

Dr. Kissinger: What happens when infiltration along the trails is stepped up? Does our kill ratio also go up? Do we continue to destroy 13 percent of their trucks?

Mr. Sullivan: This depends on conditions along the trails, for example, whether the nights are dark or moonlit.

Dr. Kissinger: Then the kill ratio is not related to the volume of traffic?

Mr. Sullivan: The trail is somewhat like a python. Supplies tend to go down it in big chunks. There is no doubt that our bombing introduces a cost factor into enemy supply activities.

Dr. Kissinger: Do you mean to say that it is easier to hit one package of supplies going down the trail than it is to strike fifty that are going down simultaneously?

Mr. Sullivan: It is usually the case that there are fifty packages enroute at once. The movements tend to be concentrated in the dry season.

Dr. Kissinger: Prior to the Tet offensive was the kill ratio up?

Dr. Lynn: The VSSG report has a table giving results during the 1969-70 dry season. This shows that the number of trucks moving down the trail varied from 141 to 345 a day. However, the kill ratio remained practically constant.

TOP SECRET/NODIS

Adm. Moorer: Remember that the bombing of North Vietnam had stopped at this time. Another argument used against bombing North Vietnam was that we would be able to interdict enemy supplies just as well in Laos.

Dr. Kissinger: (to Packard) Your view is that the main reduction in air resources would come out of the interdiction effort.

Mr. Packard: Yes. Our first priority is to provide direct support for combat forces in South Vietnam. Next, we should make available some support for the CIA operation in Northern Laos. We might also want to allocate some of our sorties to Cambodia. What is left could be used in the Panhandle. Of course, we want to keep our interdiction efforts at a meaningful level.

Dr. Kissinger: Is it possible that we could compensate to some extent through improved weapons?

Mr. Packard: Yes.

Dr. Kissinger: What percentage reduction in our interdiction effort is contemplated?

Mr. Packard: We think we can achieve a truck kill equivalent to the present level while reducing costs by about one half. This assumes that the gunships are as effective this year as last year. The enemy, of course, often changes his tactics, and this might reduce the effectiveness of the gunships.

We come out with a level of 14,000 sorties per month.

Adm. Moorer: We now have authorization to configure our gunships with the new "surprise package." Improved enemy antiaircraft capability has forced the gunships to operate at higher altitudes--up above 5,000 feet. The gunships must be escorted; they require flak suppressors.

We really need a combination of capabilities in order to carry out our interdiction effort. Other targets need to be hit besides trucks, for example, antiaircraft weapons and river craft.

After consulting CINCPAC and MACV we have come up with a proposed sortie level ranging from 12,700 to 17,500 per month. The 12,700 figure is based on current fiscal guidance. We feel it is the minimum that should or could be used during the coming year.

Sortie levels have been down recently; in July it appears that they will be below the 14,000 level. Our people are trying to use their assets more efficiently. Direct support in South Vietnam has decreased, as there is less activity there. The weather has also been a factor; and in addition, certain air units have been withdrawn.

Mr. Packard: Those figures are not much different from ours. Figuring on a

TOP SECRET/NODIS

25 percent surge capability, our 14,000 figure would mean that we will have a surge level of 17,500.

Dr. Kissinger: Isn't your proposal to maintain sortie levels between 10,000 and 14,000 per month?

Mr. Packard: No. We plan to be in a position to launch 14,000 sorties if necessary and to surge to 17,500.

Adm. Moorer: The decision on actual levels has to be left to MACV.

Dr. Kissinger: Dave, do I understand that your proposal is that if MACV wants 14,000 sorties per month and can justify them, you would allow them to be flown?

Mr. Packard: Yes. I certainly see no reason why we cannot reduce from the present level to 14,000 sorties. There are some other variations that could be worked into our plans. For example, we could shift the balance between carrier-based and land-based aircraft.

Tom, have you worked out a plan on this?

Adm. Moorer: We have a paper which we would like to distribute at this time. (distributes paper)

Dr. Kissinger: Since no one has seen this paper could you sum up your views for us?

Adm. Moorer: The paper sets out the military viewpoint on the question of sortie levels as seen by the JCS. It proposes an upper and lower level for sorties and emphasizes that field commanders should set the level and allocate their air resources among our various objectives.

Dr. Kissinger: When we consolidate all of this information into a memorandum for the President, we can make use of this paper.

The problem is that we just don't have very good analytical tools for evaluating what is being accomplished by the bombing. We ought to consider at some point making a study of our whole air operation somewhat like the strategic bombing study of World War II. For example, I don't know exactly what the figure of 13 percent for destruction of enemy trucks means.

Adm. Moorer: Having a lot of captured enemy documents to analyze helped us a great deal in preparing the World War II study.

Dr. Kissinger: I think we have about covered the problem as it relates to Southern Laos. Let's take up South Vietnam. What is meant when the study refers to direct support for forces that are not in contact with the enemy?

Adm. Moorer: This includes such missions as pre-assault strikes and attacks on enemy antiaircraft defenses.

Dr. Kissinger: Sixty percent of our sorties are used for indirect support against known or suspected targets. What is the difference between a known and a suspected target?

Adm. Moorer: A suspected target is one that we have reason to consider is a probable enemy location based on our previous experience and on intelligence information which we have.

Dr. Kissinger: Then a known target is one on which we have hard intelligence of enemy presence.

Adm. Moorer: Yes.

Dr. Kissinger: The paper gives no breakdown between sorties against known and suspected targets.

Adm. Moorer: Yes. The percentages are in the paper.

Mr. Sullivan: 38 percent of all tactical air sorties are directed against suspected targets and 20 percent against known enemy locations.

Adm. Moorer: Another thing to consider is what happens to our casualties if we cut our indirect support.

Dr. Kissinger: We could say that the statistics show that the Air Force has a predilection for indirect as against direct air support.

Adm. Moorer: That would not be a fair conclusion. The Air Force always provides the support when requested.

Mr. Packard: This is just another case of allocation of resources. If we give the field commander authorization to use a certain number of sorties, he will request them. We need to put a little more pressure on our commanders to conserve our air resources.

Dr. Kissinger: How do we assess the utility of these activities?

Mr. Packard: We need better damage assessment than we now have.

Dr. Kissinger: What would MACV cut back if we put constraints on sorties?

Adm. Moorer: They would reduce the number of attacks on suspected enemy concentrations.

TOP SECRET/NODIS

The MACV air operations plan for the next dry season will be received shortly. Of course, the actual bombing operations conducted vary from day to day depending on conditions, and our actual air activities may not exactly follow the plan.

Dr. Kissinger: Bill, what are your views?

Mr. Sullivan: Our only concern at State is that we not take air support from the South Vietnamese. We would not want to cut the number of sorties provided to them to the point that they complain that we are placing an unfair share of the burden of Vietnamization on them.

The statistics in the paper indicate that we can provide the necessary support if we go ahead with our plan to improve the Vietnamese Air Force. Also, with the withdrawal of our forces more resources will be available to support the South Vietnamese.

Dr. Kissinger: Do our planes support only our forces?

Adm. Moorer: No, they support all Allied forces.

Mr. Sullivan: With a larger number of gunships and with improvements in the Vietnamese Air Force we should be able to provide the necessary support in Vietnam. We realize, of course, that the options set forth in the paper are illustrative and that the field commander must have the flexibility to allocate his resources.

Dr. Kissinger: Are the proposed improvements in the Vietnamese Air Force taken into account in drawing up the various alternative sortie levels?

Mr. Packard: I believe so.

Dr. Kissinger: Look into that. It will serve to ease the President's mind on the bombing question.

Mr. Sullivan: Another factor is that if we go ahead with plans to deactivate bases in Vietnam, for example, Tuy Hoa, and Chu Lai, we must know how the South Vietnamese will be able to maintain them. They have not planned for this in their current budget.

Dr. Kissinger: (to Packard) What are you going to do about it?

Mr. Packard: I think it is a relatively minor issue.

Mr. Sullivan: Not to the South Vietnamese. It would be an expensive operation for them.

Mr. Packard: I think we either cover the maintenance cost for them or maintain them ourselves.

TOP SECRET/NODIS

Dr. Kissinger: (to Lynn) Include that point in the report.

Dr. Lynn: The program for accelerated Vietnamization of air activity has been approved and is going forward.

25X1 Dr. Kissinger: Let's turn to the question of air operations in Northern Laos. I have a factual question. On page 67 of the paper is an estimate of the input of supplies to Northern Laos. The figure is 67 short tons per day, almost as large as the 75 short tons per day figure for enemy supplies to South Vietnam. How is it that these two figures are so close?

[redacted] There is a greater reliance on outside sources of supply in Northern Laos.

25X1 Dr. Kissinger: But there are considerable differences in manpower between the two areas.

[redacted] The amount of food brought into Northern Laos is higher.

Dr. Kissinger: How is it that the North Vietnamese were able to move back into the Plaine des Jarres so quickly after having been ejected in 1969?

Adm. Moorer: They did not lose any supplies. In Northern Laos they tend to retreat when pressed and wait to build up their logistical base before advancing again.

Mr. Helms: This dependence on supplies coming in from North Vietnam is also the reason they did not go beyond Long Tieng this year. They over-extended their supply lines.

Dr. Kissinger: Are they moving in supplies now?

Mr. Helms: The roads are almost impassable.

Mr. Sullivan: Right now they are negotiating.

Dr. Kissinger: Of course we know that the Communists never resupply while they are negotiating. Is it the weather that makes the roads impassable?

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Mr. Helms: Yes.

[redacted]

Dr. Kissinger: Do you mean that you have the best figure that you could get out of Dave (Packard)?

Mr. Helms: No, we believe that our estimate states what is required to do the job.

Dr. Lynn: If there is a logistical constraint in Northern Laos, how were we able with only a marginal interdiction campaign to stop them?

Mr. Carver: It is because they depend on a more conventional logistical set-up. Their supply lines are lengthy. Our figures show that we destroyed about ten percent of the supplies they attempted to bring in.

Mr. Packard: The percentage must have been higher than ten percent.

Mr. Court: The destruction percentage which we have is about ten percent. George (Carver) is right in pointing out that the enemy does not operate in Northern Laos with prepositioned supplies.

Mr. Carver: The interdiction effort was a major contributing factor to the slowdown of the enemy's March 1970 campaign.

25X1 Mr. Packard: Where did the ten percent figure come from?

[redacted] The sources are the same as for all of these figures. They are estimated on the basis of data and indicators which we have available.

25X1 Mr. Packard: In other words, it is just another educated guess.

[redacted] It is a calculation.

Dr. Kissinger: Bill, do you have anything to say about the situation in Northern Laos

Mr. Sullivan: The paper suggests that many A-1's are to be used in connection with our air operations in Laos. Whether they will be available is not clear. As I understand, there are only two squadrons left in Thailand. What happens if these few remaining A-1's are taken out of Thailand?

Mr. Packard: They will be in the theatre area. We can't work out these details here. They must be managed by the theatre commander.

Mr. Sullivan: This paper seems to be based on assumptions about re-deployments from Thailand involving actions which have not been taken because the President has held up making a decision.

Mr. Packard: What we can do is set a sortie level for Northern Laos and let the field commander allocate his resources as needed.

Dr. Kissinger: We do not want to shake up the Thais, and we want to maintain the option of having Thailand as a fall-back base in Southeast Asia. We ought to separate

TOP SECRET/NODIS

the political issue of Thai bases from the question of the sortie level. We don't want to maintain a high sortie level to provide a reason for keeping the bases, and conversely, we don't want to hold on to the bases as an excuse to keep up a high level of air activity.

This paper suffers because of the lack of good analytical tools. We are really guessing. We can't lick these problems in the time left to us before the President has to make a decision. The best we can do is to draw together some conclusions. We should state what the alternative sortie levels are, give the implications and let the President decide. We should also note certain collateral requirements. One would be the necessity of providing adequate air support to the South Vietnamese forces. Another would be the question of assuring the maintenance of bases which we will be de-activating. Finally, there is the whole Thai problem.

25X1

It

looks as though a potential crisis of confidence is developing with the Thai.

Mr. Sullivan: Ambassador Unger suggests we let the Thais know about our plans for withdrawal from the bases in about 60 days and then move out by the end of the fiscal year. He has raised the question of the three-month difference in our fiscal year and that of the Thai. Their fiscal year begins in October, and they have not budgeted funds to operate the bases during their FY 1971. That means that they do not have funds allocated to operate the bases for the period between July and October of 1971.

Mr. Packard: There is no sense keeping the F-105's in Thailand just for that purpose. The best we can do is maintain the bases.

Dr. Kissinger: We ought to have a paper for the President that sets forth the problem regarding Thailand. It should note the issue of sortie levels and should point out that if air activity is reduced, one of the Thai bases should be dispensable. The paper should also note the political problem posed by substantial reductions of U.S. forces in Thailand and should consider how we might compensate for this, for example, by providing for standby operation of the bases or by moving in new forces. We need a Thailand paper. The President has been very restive about Thanat's recent moves. They are old friends.

In presenting all of these issues to the President we should point out that Secretary Laird is proposing to give MACV flexibility in determining the number of sorties flown.

Mr. Sullivan: What about Cambodia? The simplest solution would be to tie it to the Southern Laos interdiction package.

Dr. Kissinger: I assumed that was the way it was being handled.

Mr. Packard: That's right. Some operations in Cambodia are provided for.

TOP SECRET/NODIS

Adm. Moorer: There would be an additional factor. The Cambodian Air Force has a limited capability. It could provide a certain number of sorties. We might be asked to help support Cambodian Air Force operations.

Mr. Sullivan: Do we want to try to get kudos in Paris for reducing our air operations?

Dr. Kissinger: One thing not to do is to try to take kudos on budgetary grounds. If we attempt to seek credit for doing this, it should be for diplomatic reasons.

Mr. Packard: There is no good diplomatic basis for publicizing the cuts.

Dr. Kissinger: Then let's agree that we make no announcements about this. Dave, can you make sure that your spokesman is so instructed?