

3. Future decisions on U.S. troop withdrawals be based on full consideration of the three criteria previously enunciated by the President and decisions will be made on an incremental basis as the situation dictates. U.S. officials dealing with the press should therefore be instructed to avoid speculation on future plans, deadlines or timetables for the reduction of the U.S. presence in Vietnam.

Henry A. Kissinger

124. National Security Study Memorandum 74¹

Washington, September 17, 1969.

TO

The Secretary of State
The Secretary of Defense
The Director of Central Intelligence
The Director, U.S. Information Agency

SUBJECT

Planning for Laos

The President has noted that the next crisis in Laos may come during or before the next dry season starting about November. If the Communists push hard militarily or bring pressure on Souvanna Phouma, they may endanger the political balance in Vientiane or force Souvanna into a compromise which leaves our interests unprotected. In order to forestall that eventuality in so far as possible, and to meet it promptly if it arises, he has requested that the following three inter-related studies be carried out:

A. Prepare a paper as to what our behavior will be if the Communists upset the present fragile stability in Laos. Among others, the following questions should be addressed:

(1) At what point do we decide that we no longer have an interest in preservation of the 1962 agreement?

(2) How can we keep from reaching that point? i.e., are there means within our current level of military involvement to persuade the Communists that it is too dangerous to upset the balance? Can we

¹ Source: National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Box 365, Subject Files, NSSM. Top Secret; Sensitive; Exclusive; Eyes Only. A copy was sent to Wheeler.

forewarn the Communists—possibly through the co-Chairmen and the ICC—that further aggression of the Muong Soui type will require us to take another look at the Geneva Accords and the question whether the Communists have not vitiated them?

(3) What do we do if the point is reached? Do we move into the Panhandle and deprive the Communists of the benefit which they principally sought? Do we encourage the Thai to move into areas of critical importance to them (e.g. Sayaboury) if the Souvanna Government falls? Do we encourage them to do so directly, or to use the enclave for a Lao Government-in-half-exile? How much backing do we provide?

(4) Or do we simply extract what propaganda advantage we can, via the UN and elsewhere?

B. Prepare a plan of retaliation for immediate execution if the Communists attack another Lao keypoint, e.g. B-52 anti-personnel raids. The plan should offer graduated levels of response.

C. Set forth the means for generating maximum publicity concerning Communist pressures in Laos. This would be intended to—

(1) Raise Communist nerves as to what we have in mind;

(2) Prepare public opinion in the US if we have to do something else in Laos (e.g. use B-52's) and provide some protection against the charge of escalation.

The President has directed that the studies be carried out by the East Asian and Pacific Interdepartmental Group.²

The studies should be forwarded to the NSC Review Group by October 10, 1969.³

Henry A. Kissinger

² In a telephone discussion with Under Secretary Richardson, September 22, at 4:10 p.m., Kissinger stated: "The President has the strong view that we ought to do more in Laos to show the North Vietnamese that they can't use it as a bargaining point in Vietnam. He has asked the bureaucracy what they can do and he always gets a 'no.' He is very restive about this." Kissinger then complained to Richardson that "We have to get Godley to take a more responsive attitude to the President's wishes." Richardson responded that "we need a better understanding of the general policy line" towards Laos, noting that "the situation on the ground there has changed a lot." (Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Kissinger Papers, Box 364, Telephone Conversations, Chronological File)

³ In NSSM 76, September 27, the President directed that this East Asia and Pacific Interdepartmental Group, a regional interagency sub-group of the Senior Interagency Group, "undertake a thorough review of U.S. policy towards Laos. The study should include full consideration of U.S. objectives and policy options vis-à-vis Laos in light of the various courses of action which might be adopted by the Communists in the area." (National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Box 365, Subject Files, NSSM)