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INDOCHINA IN NORTH VIETNAMESE STRATEGY

Melvin Gurtov

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"The American interventionists are not only plotting to turn these three countries [Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam] into their colonies but to use them as bases for aggression in China, to suppress the liberation movement of the peoples in Southeast Asia, and to plunge the world into a new World War. . . . The basic task of the Viet Nam, Cambodian and Laotian revolutions is to drive out the French aggressors and the American interventionists, so as to achieve the genuine independence of Viet Nam, Laos and Cambodia." So said the United Front manifesto announced by the Viet Minh radio in March 1951 following a conference of leaders of the three insurgent movements.** Nineteen years later, the *dramatis personae* had changed somewhat,*** but the script was quite similar. Delegations representing the Democratic

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** Quoted in Ellen J. Hammer, *The Struggle for Indochina*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 1954, p. 262.

*** Ton Duc Thang, now President of the DRV, represented the Viet Minh in 1951; Premier Pham Van Dong led the delegation in 1970. Prince Souphanouvong represented the Lao Communist movement on both occasions. The Cambodian representation marked the only historical discontinuity: a pro-Viet Minh Khmer Issarak (Free Khmer) named Sieu Heng was the principal figure in 1951, but in 1970 the just-ousted Prince Norodom Sihanouk, who had fought to maintain independence from both the French colonialists and the Communists (Vietnamese as well as Cambodian), headed the delegation of the NUFK (National United Front of Kampuchea).

Republic of Vietnam (DRV) and the "National United Fronts" of Laos, Cambodia, and South Vietnam held a Summit Conference of the Indochinese Peoples that issued a declaration of mutual purpose on April 27, 1970. The declaration stated in part:

In the face of the treacherous manoeuvres of the United States . . . , the conference calls on the three peoples [of Indochina] to redouble their vigilance, strengthen their solidarity and intensify the struggle against the common enemy -- American imperialism and its flunk-ys in the three countries -- until complete victory. Inspired by the principle that the liberation and defence of each country is the affair of its own people, the different parties undertake to do everything possible to render mutual support in accordance with the desire of the interested party and on the basis of mutual respect.*

The similarities in these two declarations underscore the historically close relationship between the Vietnamese Communist revolution and the balance of forces in Laos and Cambodia. To achieve their primary national objective of reunifying Vietnam under the Lao Dong Party's authority, first the Viet Minh and now the North Vietnamese and the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam (the NLFSV) have consistently had to coordinate their Vietnam strategy with their military and political actions throughout Indochina. When Premier Pham Van Dong spoke at the April 1970 conference of Indochinese unity in struggle as being "the decisive factor for our victory,"** he was only

* Text of the declaration in *Peking Review*, May 8, 1970, pp. 3-6.

** Text of Dong's speech (April 25, 1970) is *ibid.*, p. 29.

reiterating a long-standing maxim of Vietnamese Communist strategy.

To be able to state with some precision the nature of North Vietnam's interests in Laos and Cambodia, and their implications for the DRV's strategy in the next few years, it may be worthwhile to recount briefly the highlights of approximately 40 years of Vietnamese Communist involvement in Indochinese affairs.

Politically and ideologically, the origins of Vietnamese Communist interest can be traced to the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP), founded in Hanoi in June 1929. It was one of three leftist Vietnamese revolutionary groups which, at Comintern's order, merged in 1930 to become a new ICP under Ho Chi Minh's leadership.* That the party's interest extended beyond Vietnam in more than name alone did not become apparent until the period of resistance against Japanese rule during World War II. A party central committee conference in November 1940 decided that "the party must prepare to take over the sacred tasks of leading the oppressed peoples of Indochina in armed violence to seize their freedom and independence."** At its eighth conference

* See Truong Chinh, "Ho and the Introduction of Leninism into Vietnam," *Nghien-cuu lich-su (Historical Studies, Hanoi)*, May-June 1970, trans. Joint Publications Research Service (JPRS) No. 52240 (*Translations on North Vietnam*, No. 857), January 25, 1971, p. 17. The Comintern directive was republished in *Nhan Dan*, January 6, 1970. The new ICP was founded in October 1930 in Hong Kong and, in 1931, was officially recognized by Comintern. Ho Chi Minh declared in November 1945 that it was being dissolved, but in fact the ICP remained active underground.

** Lao Dong Party Central Committee, Historical Research Department, *The August Revolution (1945)*, trans. JPRS No. 52097 (*Translations on North Vietnam*, No. 844), January 4, 1971, p. 8.

in May 1941, the central committee, in announcing the birth of the *Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh Hoi* (the Viet Minh), also promised that the anti-Japanese, anti-French struggle in Indochina would become a single effort:

. . . the Eighth Conference . . . totally expressed the issue of nationalism within the framework of each of the countries -- Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos -- in the spirit of a mutually dependent and closely interrelated national liberation revolution of the peoples of these three countries goading and helping one another to achieve victory. Thus, the conference simultaneously combated the enemy scheme to divide the three nations and enabled two friendly peoples, the Khmer people and the Lao people, to develop their independence and autonomy and to actively contribute to the fight against French and Japanese fascism. . . . *

It remained until the immediate post-war period, when the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) was proclaimed in Hanoi (September 1945) and the Viet Minh-French conflict began (December 1946), for Vietnamese Communist contacts with resistance forces in Laos and Cambodia to be politically and militarily consequential. But such contacts were not entirely successful in promoting the Viet Minh struggle. In Laos, Prince Souphanouvong, returning from central Vietnam in 1946, brought along some Viet Minh advisers to support his attempt to organize resistance against the French authorities. But the prince was apparently more interested than were other leaders of the Lao Issara (Free Lao) movement in cooperating with the Viet Minh. In 1949,

* *Ibid.*, p. 13.

the Issara leadership, based in Thailand, ousted the prince.* Later that year it returned to Vientiane to head up the newly independent Laotian Government (which, however, was still tied to the French Union), leaving Souphanouvong to continue in rebellion with Viet Minh support.

In Cambodia during this period, there likewise was disagreement among the nationalist forces that the Viet Minh sought to use to their own advantage.** King Sihanouk headed a moderate group that was willing to negotiate with the French for independence, while Son Ngoc Thanh and others in the Khmer Issarak (Free Khmer) movement demanded armed resistance and formed an exile government in Thailand. Some Khmer Issaraks received help from the Viet Minh, whose cadres helped set up a Khmer People's Liberation Army (KPLA) in 1946 and a "resistance government" in southern Cambodia in 1950-51. Sihanouk, in the face of rebellion from two sources and French intransigence on independence, was able to rally some Issaraks to his cause by warning of Viet Minh aggression and by eventually obtaining French agreement (in November 1949) to Cambodia's independence -- as in Laos, however, on terms that compromised Sihanouk's control of the Cambodian armed forces.

To support their own and outflank French Union forces, Viet Minh activities in Laos and Cambodia increased sharply during 1953 and 1954.

* See Hugh Toye, *Laos: Buffer State or Battleground*, Oxford University Press, London, 1968, pp. 77-80, and George Modelski, "The Viet Minh Complex," in Cyril E. Black and Thomas P. Thornton, eds., *Communism and Revolution: The Strategic Uses of Political Violence*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1964, p. 195.

** This paragraph relies on Roger M. Smith, *Cambodia's Foreign Policy*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, 1965, pp. 26-51.

This was preceded by more open integration with their allied "liberation" forces in Laos and Cambodia, namely, Souphanouvong's Free Laos Front and Resistance Coalition Government (formed in August 1950 and known collectively since then as the Pathet Lao), and the KPLA. These two essentially puppet movements, which contributed marginally to the Viet Minh's military operations,* met in November 1950 and again in March 1951 with their Viet Minh mentors to establish a single united resistance front and military alliance. Since the governments of Laos and Cambodia opposed Viet Minh involvement in their countries, these meetings were probably meant to legitimize the Viet Minh's presence in Indochina, then and subsequently, as supporters of the only nationalist movements willing to fight the French colonial army.

By the time of the Geneva Conference, the Viet Minh had fulfilled its evident intention to make greater use of the Indochina battlefield. Due largely to General Giap's offensives in the spring and fall of 1953, the Viet Minh held sizable portions of northeastern and southern Laos. Viet Minh forces were also strong in northeastern Cambodia. The importance to the Viet Minh of being able to exploit Indochina for mobile warfare was no better illustrated than in Giap's dramatic siege of Dien Bien Phu, which was preceded in December 1953 by a feinting

* In Laos, for instance, the most careful study of the Pathet Lao states that "the Lao troops were never a significant factor in the Viet Minh's ultimate success. (Estimates of their troop strength ranged from 1500 to 3000 troops at the time of the 1954 Geneva Conference.) Most of the Lao units . . . were used merely for support activities." Paul F. Langer and Joseph J. Zasloff, *North Vietnam and the Pathet Lao: Partners in the Struggle for Laos*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1970, p. 51.

operation toward Thakhek (on the Laos-Thailand border) that succeeded in dispersing French forces from the northwest corner of Vietnam.

At the Geneva Conference, the Viet Minh delegation tried unsuccessfully to use these territorial advantages in Laos and Cambodia to gain political recognition of the Pathet Lao and "Khmer Issarak" (i.e., KPLA) movements. Pham Van Dong argued at the second plenary session (May 10, 1954) that these movements were de facto governments carrying out "democratic reforms" in the areas their armies had "liberated." He demanded that their status as equals of the Laotian and Cambodian governments be recognized, and that they be allowed to participate in national elections.* These demands (with the exception of the one concerning elections) were turned aside, apparently with some assistance from China's Premier Chou En-lai.** But the agreements eventually reached concerning the regroupment of Pathet Lao and KPLA troops, and the withdrawal of Viet Minh forces from Laos and Cambodia were sufficiently loose as to have satisfied DRV interests in at least two respects: first, in making possible the retention in both countries (though far greater in Laos than in Cambodia) of a capability for renewed fighting; second, by assuring Vietnamese Communist access and political influence in Indochina, especially at a time of rapidly receding French involvement.

* Geneva Conference, Second Plenary Session (Indochina Phase), *U.S. Verbatim Minutes*, pp. 61 ff.

** Sir Anthony Eden (*Full Circle*, Houghton-Mifflin, Boston, 1960, p. 145) has revealed that Viet Minh withdrawals from Laos and Cambodia were not agreed to by the Communist side until mid-June, when Chou told Eden the Viet Minh could be persuaded to withdraw, and the royal governments recognized, provided the United States did not establish military bases in the two countries.

The Geneva accords worked well in Cambodia but broke down in Laos, largely because political leadership was stable in Cambodia (under Sihanouk) but fragmented in Laos, because Communist military forces (indigenous and Vietnamese) were more numerous and better organized in Laos than in Cambodia, because the DRV's security (and Chinese and Soviet interest in it) was related much more closely to developments in Laos than in Cambodia, and because soon after the Geneva Conference, Laos became a setting for international power politics while Sihanouk was moving toward an accommodative neutralism. The result was that whereas, in Cambodia, Sihanouk's authority was publicly affirmed and the Khmer Communists remained weak and politically isolated,* in Laos political alignments were fluid, open to competition and bargaining in which the United States shortly became involved.

The North Vietnamese were evidently determined not to reduce their leverage in these circumstances by carrying out their commitment to withdraw completely from Laos. Instead, their military and political advisers helped the Pathet Lao to consolidate the Communist position in the regroupment provinces of Sam Neua (where Souphanouvong had established his resistance government in April 1953) and Phong

* Sihanouk's personal rule was overwhelmingly approved by popular referendum in February 1955, and his political movement -- the Sangkum Reastr Niyum -- won handily in National Assembly elections held in September 1955 under the supervision of the International Control Commission. The Communist Party in Cambodia -- the Pracheachon -- neither then nor later was a significant source of opposition. But at the time Sihanouk did charge that a number of Viet Minh soldiers had not withdrawn from Cambodia and had in fact stayed in the countryside or merged with the Vietnamese minority in the cities.

Saly.* North Vietnamese leaders were probably confirmed in their suspicions and their policy by events after the supplementary National Assembly elections of May 4, 1958, in which the Neo Lao Hak Sat (the Laotian Communists' political party, which was legally entitled to compete) was denied the fruits of its sizable gains at the ballot box by the U.S.-supported government of Phoui Sananikone.** The experiment of Phoui's predecessor, Prince Souvanna Phouma, with the kind of coalition government envisaged in the Geneva accords had failed to prevent civil war.

The fighting that ensued and lasted until mid-1962 had a dual significance for North Vietnam. With respect to Communist influence in Laos, it provided both a challenge and an opportunity to consolidate and expand the Pathet Lao's assets at the expense of the U.S.-supported "right-wing" generals. At first put on the defensive by RLG attacks and the imprisonment of their leaders, the Pathet Lao

* See Langer and Zasloff, p. 62. These provinces were formally restored to the king's authority in November 1957, with Pathet Lao officials, however, retaining a considerable voice in province affairs. Souvanna Phouma and Souphanouvong also agreed at that time, in return for legalization of the NLHS and two cabinet seats, to demobilize about 4300 Pathet Lao troops and to integrate about 1500 into the Royal Laotian Army. See Arthur Dommen, *Conflict in Laos: The Politics of Neutralization*, Pall Mall Press, London, 1964, p. 86.

** Nine of the 13 NLHS and allied candidates who ran in the elections won, and Prince Souphanouvong was the top vote-getter. But Phoui, after replacing Souvanna Phouma as prime minister in August 1958, excluded Souphanouvong and another NLHS minister, Phoumi Vongvichit, from his cabinet, thus allaying American concern about growing Communist influence in the Laotian government. For further detail and comments on the U.S. role, see *ibid.*, Chap. 6.

responded with a major offensive in the summer of 1959 that was spearheaded by units of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA).^{*} The Communists also took advantage of political upheavals in Vientiane that included a coup by Captain Kong Le and a countercoup by General Phoumi Nosavan in 1960, events that pushed the neutralists and Souvanna Phouma to the side of the Pathet Lao. Before the next set of agreements was signed at Zurich and Geneva, Communist forces had government units on the run, and probably would have taken over most of Laos had not the threat of overt U.S. intervention been so immediate.

Also of importance to the DRV, by 1959, was the insurgency in South Vietnam. What has come to be known as the "second war" in Laos had its origins then: the infiltration of men and supplies into the South over the Ho Chi Minh Trail network in the Laotian panhandle.^{**} It was probably no coincidence that in the spring of 1961, as the Geneva Conference got under way, the NVA/Pathet Lao offensive reached south into the panhandle area.

The DRV's position with respect to Laos and South Vietnam was measurably strengthened as a result of the Geneva Conference on Laos (May 1961 to July 1962). Although the Pathet Lao may not have obtained the political representation in the tripartite coalition to which their military gains entitled them,^{***} their political status

^{*} Langer and Zasloff, pp. 68-69.

^{**} *Ibid.*, pp. 70-71.

^{***} It was agreed in June 1962 that Souvanna Phouma would be prime minister, the rightist Phoumi Nosavan deputy prime minister, and Souphanouvong also a deputy prime minister. Of nineteen cabinet posts, eleven went to neutralists and four each to representatives of the NLHS and the rightists.

and territorial control was greatly improved. From the DRV standpoint, of particular importance in the accords were the recognition of the Pathet Lao as a legitimate and powerful force in the new Government of National Union, the erosion of the political and military strength of the right wing tied to the United States, the expansion of PL-controlled territory in northeastern and northern Laos, and the assumption by Communist forces of control of the entire border area of eastern Laos approximately from the 19th parallel to the Cambodia border (and thus adjacent to South Vietnam).^{*} The fact that the United States had been compelled by virtue of the Geneva accords and the Zurich Agreements (June 22, 1961) to recognize the Souvanna government and withdraw support from Phoumi Nosavan's forces also assisted the Communists' expanding effort in South Vietnam. While U.S. special forces teams were removed from Laos, a good many North Vietnamese units were not.^{**} With the situation thus tentatively stabilized in Laos, the way was cleared for intensified Communist pressure on the Diem regime in Saigon.

The de facto partitioning of Laos after the Geneva Conference provided the geographical setting for the "two wars" that has not changed significantly to the present time. In the north, fighting centered on the Plain of Jars. In push-pull fashion, North Vietnamese-supported Pathet Lao units took the offensive in the dry season, only

^{*} See the map in Langer and Zasloff, p. 75.

^{**} Dommen, pp. 239-240. At the check points set up by the ICC in Laos, 666 American military personnel passed through and only 40 North Vietnamese. Several thousand NVA troops did leave secretly, but several thousand probably remained behind.

to yield in the rainy weather to RLG forces backed by U.S. air power. For the DRV, the pattern was acceptable, since it required a fairly small investment of cadres, soldiers, and logistical support to assure that the Pathet Lao would keep up the pressure on Souvanna Phouma's government.* There was no urgency to attempt a takeover of the entire country, which has generally been regarded as feasible with strong NVA involvement but at the great risk of inviting direct American and possibly Thai ground intervention. Meanwhile, North Vietnamese control of access routes from the DRV into eastern Laos and thence into South Vietnam went unchallenged. Although the Saigon government had gained the RLG's agreement to send Vietnamese forces into the Ho Trail area as early as 1964, not until February 1971 did it do so.**

In terms of the war in South Vietnam, the Ho Trail network increased in value by 1965, when direct and extensive North Vietnamese and American ground involvement began. The northeast corner of Cambodia, and portions of the Cambodia-South Vietnam border areas, also took on importance for Vietnamese Communist strategy at that time.

* The reversal of Communist support of Souvanna's prime ministership occurred after the right-wing coup of April 19, 1964, when Souvanna authorized U.S. reconnaissance flights and jet air attacks on Pathet Lao positions. Since then, Hanoi and the Pathet Lao have maintained that Souvanna is only qualified to represent the Vientiane faction, not the national union government, which has ceased to exist.

** The agreement was reached in March 1964 between General Phoumi and South Vietnamese Premier Nguyen Khanh (Dommen, p. 255). South Vietnam's invasion of the Ho Trail area in 1971 was not, however, based upon exercise of the 1964 agreement.

The Sihanouk government had become increasingly friendly toward Hanoi and Peking, and increasingly hostile toward South Vietnam (with which it broke relations in August 1963) and the United States (with which it severed aid relations in December 1963 and diplomatic ties in May 1965). But Sihanouk's friendship, by which he hoped to keep the Vietnam conflict from involving Cambodia, could not be entirely reciprocated by North Vietnam, especially when the war started to intensify. Hanoi's leaders refused, for instance, to state in writing their respect and recognition of the existing Vietnam-Cambodia border.* And, pending the end of hostilities in the South, Hanoi also turned down Sihanouk's bid in 1965 to have the Geneva conferees reaffirm and guarantee Cambodian neutralism and territorial integrity.** By then, Vietnamese Communist forces needed the border regions of Cambodia for rest and sanctuary from U.S. pursuit, for infiltrating men and supplies from the Laotian trails area, and for supplying Viet Cong units in the Mekong Delta of South Vietnam by way of Sihanoukville (now, Kompong Som).

* Several discussions involving Cambodian, North Vietnamese, and NLFSV spokesmen took place during the 1960s. Sihanouk did not obtain their written agreement until mid-1967 -- and then, apparently only because the Soviet Union committed itself on the issue, forcing the others to follow suit.

** This occurred at the Indochinese People's Conference (March 1965) of Cambodian, North Vietnamese, and leftist Indochinese delegations. Sihanouk had also then hoped to elicit support for his proposal to neutralize Cambodia, South Vietnam, and Laos in exchange for U.S. withdrawal from the region. Because of opposition from Hanoi and Peking, the prince did not deliver the speech containing his plan; but it was published: see *Royaume du Cambodge, Discours de S. P. Norodom Sihanouk Upayuvareach, chef de l'état du Cambodge, à l'occasion de l'ouverture de la conférence plénière des peuples indochinoises*, Ministry of Information, Phnom Penh, February 25, 1965.

Intensified Vietnamese Communist activities in Laos and Cambodia beginning in 1968 may have been related to the Tet offensive in South Vietnam and to the DRV's acceptance of President Johnson's proposal (on March 31) of a partial bombing cessation in return for beginning negotiations. Departing from their previous pattern in Laos, Communist forces continued their attacks into the wet season. In the north, they moved within striking distance of the royal capital at Luang Prabang, and in the south they ranged beyond the Ho Chi Minh Trail area.* Viet Cong use of sanctuaries in Cambodia increased at this time, to the point where Prince Sihanouk, faced with the possibility of U.S.-ARVN forays in pursuit of the insurgents, publicly admitted that Communist infiltrations (which he distinguished from "implantations") were occurring.** Early in 1968, with the resurgence of Cambodian Communist dissidence that the Royal Government previously declared had been suppressed, the prince went further. He charged that Viet Cong and Pathet Lao agents were assisting dissident Khmer Loeu and other tribesmen in the northeast; and he allowed that some Viet Cong base camps and hideouts might exist in inaccessible, uninhabited areas of Cambodia.*** These developments in Laos and Cambodia seem to have been prompted less by Hanoi's desire to improve the

* Robert Shaplen, "Our Involvement in Laos," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 48, No. 3, April 1970, p. 485.

** In a letter to the *Christian Science Monitor*, October 27, 1967.

*** These charges were made in broadcasts by Sihanouk over Phnom Penh domestic service on April 23, May 24, and August 17, 1968.

positions of its Communist insurgent allies than by a decision in Hanoi to strengthen its own hand once negotiations began with the United States.

The drive for increased territorial holdings in Laos and for consolidation of the base areas in Cambodia continued during 1969. Again, Hanoi's purpose seemed to be to exploit Communist advantages and capabilities in Laos and Cambodia at the Paris talks. Between March and June in Laos, Communist forces captured the key government base of Na Khang in Sam Neua, successfully maintained their drive to oust government troops from the Bolovens Plateau in the south, and took over Muong Soui (on the western edge of the Plain of Jars) from RLG Neutralist forces.* Hanoi coupled the offensive with a diplomatic initiative: its ambassador to Laos, Le Van Hien, reportedly returned there after a lengthy absence to present Souvanna Phouma with a proposal for stopping the offensive and eventually withdrawing some NVA troops if Souvanna would request the cessation of heavy U.S. air attacks on the Ho Trail area.** Had the offer been accepted, it would not only have sanctioned the farthest Communist military advances in Laos to date, but would also have assured their use of the trails area with impunity.

The expansion and consolidation of Viet Cong base areas in Cambodia proceeded simultaneously with the drive in Laos. Investigation by senior Cambodian military leaders disclosed that the Viet Cong had been launching operations from the border provinces into South

* A strong RLG counterattack in September recaptured the Plain, however.

** Shaplen, pp. 485-486.

Vietnam.* Protests to the NLF and DRV missions in Phnom Penh only produced repetition of previous pledges to respect Cambodia's territorial integrity. In the fall of 1969, Sihanouk reported the presence of about 40,000 Vietnamese Communist soldiers in the border provinces.** These events were not without effect on the prince's policy. In late April, he issued the first order for Cambodian army units to attack Viet Cong encampments; and in June, he agreed to have the American Embassy reopened.

Nineteen hundred and seventy began in much the same way as the two previous years. North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao forces retook the Plain of Jars and Muong Soui, and advanced on other strategic outposts in central and southern Laos. Once again they coupled these moves to a peace proposal. On March 6, the NLHS issued a five-point plan whose main feature was the suggestion that an all-Laotian political conference be convened to establish a provisional coalition government and to decide the conditions for general elections. A subsequent telegram from Souphanouvong to Souvanna Phouma indicated that the complete halt of U.S. bombing was a precondition to negotiations.*** Before further action on the proposal could develop, however, the overthrow of Prince Sihanouk (March 18) intervened.

Sihanouk's removal had a profound impact on North Vietnamese strategy in Indochina. It meant the end of Cambodian cooperation to

* See, for example, the report of Lieutenant General Nhiek Tioulong, commander-in-chief of the army, in *Neak Cheat Niyum* (Le Nationaliste, Phnom Penh), March 24-30, 1969.

** Phnom Penh radio broadcast by Sihanouk, October 18, 1969.

*** Arthur Dommen, "Laos in the Second Indochina War," *Current History*, Vol. 59, No. 352, December 1970, p. 331.

ensure that the port of Sihanoukville would be open to Communist ships delivering war materiel for use in South Vietnam. It meant the start of collaboration between Cambodian and South Vietnamese army commanders along the border in actions (some jointly, most by the ARVN alone) against Viet Cong units in the Cambodia sanctuaries. By the end of April, with the entry of U.S. and ARVN units into the sanctuaries without Phnom Penh's formal approval, Vietnamese Communist forces in Cambodia were in retreat, forced either to move deeper into the interior, thus threatening to isolate Phnom Penh, or to solidify their hold over the northeast at the junction of Laos, Cambodia, and South Vietnam. Cambodian neutralism had changed from friendly to hostile toward the Communist world, and with that change, Cambodia became -- as Sihanouk had warned just prior to his ouster -- a "second Laos."

The initial North Vietnamese and NLF reaction to the overthrow of Sihanouk was to attempt to negotiate with General Lon Nol, the new leader. But Lon Nol, in no mood to compromise and probably encouraged by the prospect of receiving military support from the United States and the GVN, demanded the complete and rapid withdrawal of Communist troops from Cambodia. The negotiations quickly broke down, the DRV and NLF withdrew their diplomatic missions, and, on March 21, Radio Hanoi vowed "solidarity" with the Cambodian "people's struggle." In response to Sihanouk's five-point declaration from Peking on March 23 that announced plans to form the NUFK and an exile Royal Government of National Union (both of which were later revealed to have pro-Hanoi Khmer Communists in key positions), Hanoi quickly issued a statement of strong support. The statement made clear that North Vietnam's

future strategy in Indochina would be geared to the new situation of three fronts:

The more the U.S. imperialists intensify and expand the war and the more they resort to perfidious manoeuvres to divide the Indo-Chinese peoples, the tighter the Vietnamese, Khmer and Laotian peoples will close their ranks and the higher will be their determination to fight and defeat them. . . . The coup d'etat of March 18, 1970 in Cambodia can in no way save the U.S. imperialists, but will on the contrary cause them to sink deeper in the quagmire of a still more disastrous defeat.*

The strong possibility implicit in this statement that North Vietnamese forces would respond elsewhere in Indochina to loss of the sanctuaries in Cambodia soon became a reality. They gained control of large areas of north-central and western Cambodia, and speedily cut off access routes to the capital. They made northeast Cambodia and southern Laos a single massive new sanctuary following the seizures (for the first time since 1962) of Attopeu and Saravane in southern Laos. By gaining control of these towns and the surrounding areas, the North Vietnamese were able to direct supplies to units in Cambodia and South Vietnam over the Se Kong and Mekong Rivers. The NVA was also thereby able to develop a major logistical and troop deployment center in southern Laos -- a natural consequence of the U.S.-ARVN Cambodia operation that led to the ARVN invasion, with U.S. air support, of the Ho Trail area in February 1971.

* Statement of the Government of the DRV, March 25, 1970, in *Peking Review*, No. 14, April 3, 1970, p. 19.

Until the invasion, however, the North Vietnamese and the Pathet Lao, without public Chinese support, continued their efforts to begin peace talks with Souvanna Phouma. But in view of events in Cambodia, the previous NLHS terms for negotiations stood no chance of gaining acceptance unless modified to suit Souvanna's military supporters.* Toward the end of 1970, the NLHS proposal did change significantly: instead of demanding a complete halt to the U.S. bombings throughout Laos, the Pathet Lao were willing to begin talks if the bombings ceased only in Sam Neua and Xieng Khouang Provinces.** In terms of North Vietnamese strategy -- and it is very unlikely that the new proposal, any more than previous ones by the NLHS, originated without Hanoi's approval -- the concession on the bombing may have reflected Hanoi's reassessment of feasible alternatives in Laos in light of the changed Cambodia situation. Now, a cease-fire limited to the Plain of Jars (but without requiring a prior NVNA withdrawal) would be preferable to no cease-fire at all.***

* Arthur Dommen ("Laos in the Second Indochina War," p. 332) has described the Laotian generals' exhilaration at the U.S.-ARVN incursions in Cambodia, and their anticipation -- which may have worried Hanoi -- that the United States might be prepared to acquiesce in the overthrow of Souvanna and thus put an end to the neutralization experiment. Even though their expectations have not been met, the generals probably continue to exert influence against Souvanna's acceptance of peace talks while North Vietnamese troops are still in Laos. The ARVN operation in Laos in 1971 could only have strengthened the rightists' hand.

** Vientiane domestic service, November 29, 1970. The proposal was to hold the talks in Khang Khay, on the Plain of Jars, and to suspend the bombing in the two provinces for a number of days before, during, and after the talks. The RLG's counterproposal was for North Vietnamese troops to withdraw from these provinces and for the bombing to be suspended in and around the towns of Khang Khay and Sam Neua. Radio Pathet Lao, December 16, 1970.

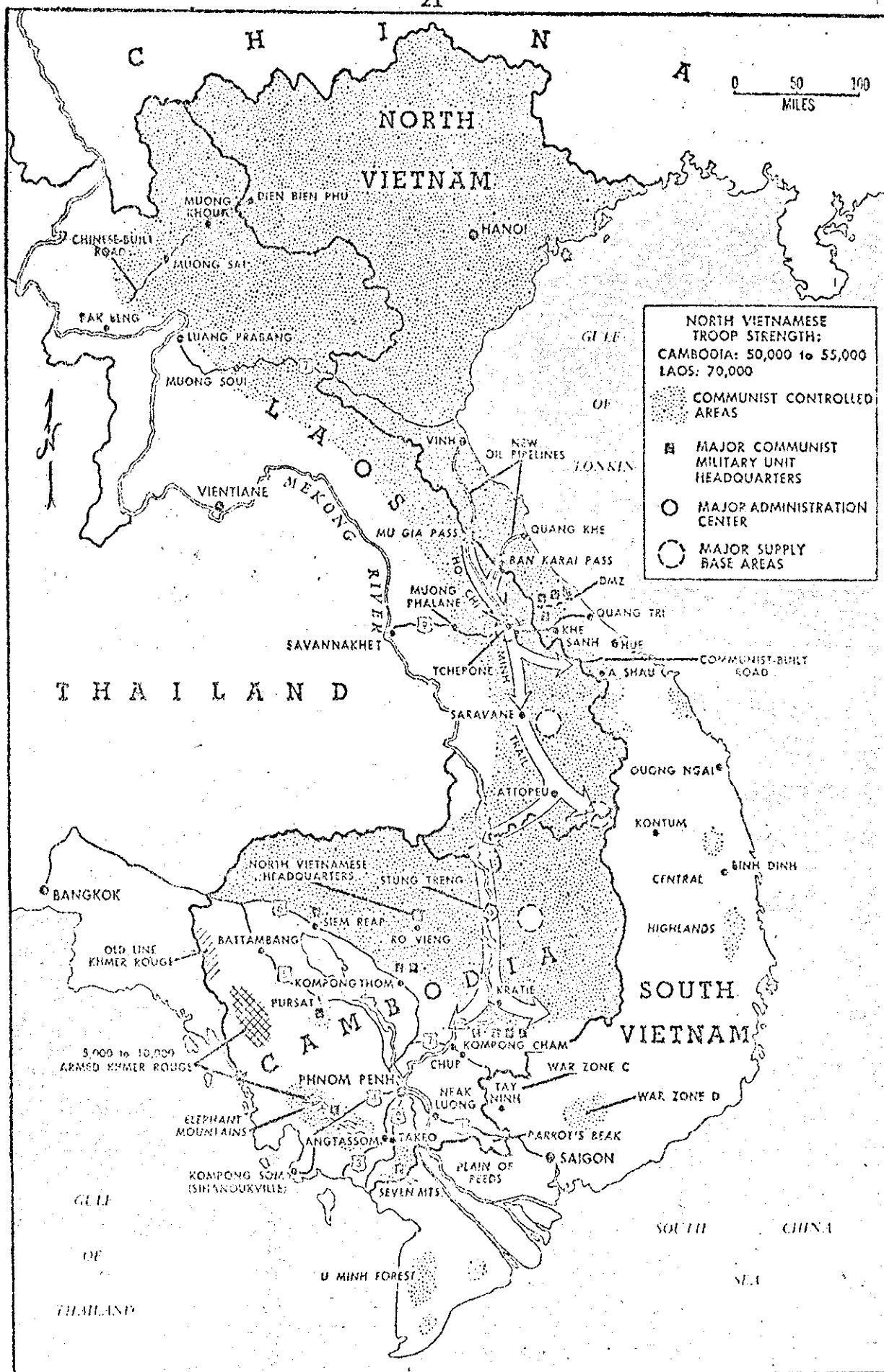
*** See R.P.W. Norton, "The Rocky Road to Peace," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, January 23, 1971, pp. 43-45.

In the aftermath of the U.S.-ARVN incursions into Cambodia and Laos, repetition of which in future dry seasons must be considered, how are North Vietnamese interests in Indochina, and their Indochina strategy in the next few years, affected? According to figures presented in February 1971 by President Nixon, the NVA has committed about 90,000 men to Laos, over 50,000 (including Viet Cong) to Cambodia, and approximately 100,000 to South Vietnam.* He stated then that "Hanoi has made the war an Indochina conflict." But the war has been an Indochina conflict since 1946; and the close relationship of Laos and Cambodia to Vietnamese Communist strategy has been recognized since the founding of the ICP in 1930. It is precisely because of the interdependence of the three countries in that strategy that North Vietnam cannot be expected, any more now than in 1954 or 1962, to withdraw completely from Laos or Cambodia so long as the objective of reuniting South Vietnam under Communist control is still unsatisfied.** In the absence of an ability to react in any of several locales in Indochina to U.S.-ARVN military moves, North Vietnamese leaders seem to believe they would risk losing the initiative in the war. The "balance of forces," a key concept in their military thinking, would then tip in the opponent's favor.***

* In the President's 1971 State of the World Message; *The New York Times*, February 26, 1971, p. 12. See the map on p. 21.

** Thus, for instance, proposals to the DRV for cease-fires and "mutual withdrawals" in Indochina prior to a political settlement in South Vietnam will invariably be rebuffed by Hanoi. See the DRV Foreign Ministry's statement on President Nixon's five-point proposal of October 7, 1970, broadcast by VNA (Hanoi) international service, October 14, 1970.

*** North Vietnamese commentaries on the significance of Communist military actions in Laos and Cambodia to the balance of forces may be



SOURCE: *Los Angeles Times*, Sec. E. p. 1, February 7, 1971.

The cruciality to the North Vietnamese of maintaining an Indo-chinese dimension in their strategy relates not only to their paramount objective of bringing about a rapid and total U.S. withdrawal and completing the Communist revolution in Vietnam. It also relates to their objective of eroding, and preventing the restoration of, the U.S. presence and influence in Laos and Cambodia. The governing of those two countries by compliant regimes that are friendly to North Vietnam and hostile to U.S. policies is thus a major interest of the DRV. In the event of Communist control of South Vietnam, the DRV probably would want to assure that, in return for pledges of noninterference (such as Pham Van Dong gave at the April 1970 "summit" conference), Cambodian and Laotian governments are not hostile to Communist Vietnam. Military aid or advisory relationships with the United States would have to be terminated. North Vietnam's ties to Communist insurgent movements in Cambodia and Laos would be a powerful source of leverage to assure that they act in conformity with DRV interests. It is also conceivable that some kind of loose Indochinese federation might be proposed by Hanoi as a means of monitoring its neighbors' behavior.*

found, for instance, in Radio Hanoi domestic service, May 24, 1970; and in the NVA publication, *Quan Doi Nhan Dan* (People's Army, Hanoi), June 1, 1970 and October 26, 1970. These commentaries make the point that as U.S. troop withdrawals proceed under the "Vietnamization" program, American forces will lose the manpower and the mobility to cope with Communist armies on three fronts. Incursions by ARVN and U.S. forces, such as into Cambodia, are explained as desperate efforts to resurrect the balance of forces before Vietnamization thoroughly depletes U.S. combat strength.

*The federation concept was raised at the aforementioned Indochinese People's Conference in 1965. When the conference agenda was set up in February, one of the items included for discussion was creation of a permanent secretariat of the Indochinese states to symbolize and promote the area's solidarity. (Phnom Penh broadcast to Southeast

Speculating more specifically about North Vietnamese policies and objectives in Laos and Cambodia over the next few years is a hazardous undertaking for a number of reasons. American tactical and financial support of South Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Thai military operations in Indochina seems certain to continue, but at what level and with what objectives -- hence, with what impact on those governments' strategy and on North Vietnamese planning -- remain unclear. The state of Sino-Soviet relations would affect Hanoi's policies if relations should so deteriorate as to jeopardize their respective military and economic assistance programs for the DRV.* Division in the North Vietnamese leadership could also occur, for instance over the priority to be accorded the armed forces and domestic

Asia, February 18, 1965.) Sihanouk subsequently elaborated that periodic conferences would take place at which common economic and political problems would be discussed. (In an interview with a correspondent of *Mainichi Shinbun*; see *Kambuja* (Phnom Penh), No. 38, May 15, 1968, p. 14.) But the prince apparently feared that a federation might exacerbate rather than alleviate Cambodia's border problems with a Communist Vietnam. As an unsigned editorial in the Sihanoukist weekly, *Réalités cambodgiennes*, said on May 31, 1968, there existed the danger that a federation might be "dominated by a Communist neighbor country," and that Cambodia's territorial integrity might be harmed as a result. During these years, no concrete steps seem to have been taken to implement the federation idea.

* Short of that circumstance, however, North Vietnamese leaders have demonstrated time and again in recent years their ability to capitalize on Sino-Soviet differences to meet the DRV's aid requirements without sacrificing independence in policymaking. The political and ideological competition between the two Communist powers, the cohesion and determination to act independently in the Hanoi leadership, and the DRV's ability to maintain neutrality toward (while urging unity of action in) Sino-Soviet relations help account for North Vietnam's successful "blackmailing" of its larger partners. North Vietnamese policy in wartime is a classic illustration of how a small power can exert leverage over larger powers despite being highly dependent on them for material assistance.

reconstruction -- although the post-Ho leaders seem determined to meet the requirements of both. Finally, it is always conceivable that North Vietnamese and allied insurgent forces, whether faced with an abundance or a scarcity of external aid, might suffer a serious loss of will to continue their struggle. Again, however, all the evidence, present and past, indicates that Communist forces in Indochina can maintain high morale and the determination to fight on, even under conditions of material deprivation and the necessity to lower tactical objectives.

These contingencies need to be kept in mind, but they do not pose insuperable obstacles to looking slightly ahead of the present. In Laos, North Vietnamese policy will probably continue to be guided by considerations of strategic advantage (relative to South Vietnam), the security of the DRV's borders, and the political compatibility of the Vientiane government. VNA and Pathet Lao forces can be expected to maintain military pressure in northern Laos until they can gain the RLG's agreement to at least a partial cease-fire.* A major offensive westward against the RLG-held Mekong Valley towns (including Luang Prabang) must always remain a possibility, however, despite prospects of direct U.S., ARVN, and/or Thai intervention. Should North Vietnamese leaders decide that significant new territorial gains are

* The DRV Foreign Ministry at first reacted to the ARVN invasion of the Laos panhandle by saying it was "wrecking the meeting between the representatives of the two princes in Laos and all the NLHS efforts to peacefully settle the Laotian problem." (Hanoi domestic service, February 5, 1971.) But interviews by Japanese correspondents with Pathet Lao representatives later on elicited confirmation that the NLHS would continue to seek negotiations and would not set up a provisional government of its own.

necessary in Laos in order to outflank the U.S. "Vietnamization" program, compel a cease-fire that would enable the NVA to concentrate resources elsewhere in Laos or Cambodia, and demonstrate that Hanoi retains the initiative in Indochina, they might make the attempt. Such a move, of course, would have implications for China and the Soviet Union in the event the U.S. response in northern Laos should raise the risk of a direct confrontation of major-power forces. But so long as a Laos offensive is in reply to allied military pressure (in Laos or, perhaps, in North Vietnam itself), the DRV could probably count on China's and (less enthusiastically) the Soviet Union's political and material support.

Politically in Laos, it is difficult to imagine the NLHS and Hanoi accepting a settlement that would merely restore to the Pathet Lao the four cabinet seats they gained in 1962. The growth and increased territorial holdings of the Pathet Lao, their establishment of effective administration in the northeast, and their superior military assets (when linked to North Vietnamese support) make it probable that they would insist upon being accorded a dominant position in any new coalition. Hanoi could then expect to deal with a "neutral" government that would recognize North Vietnam's security interests in the eastern border provinces, would be receptive to North Vietnamese operation of the Ho Trail area, and would reflect the DRV's international policy views.

In southern Laos, the NVA command must now take into account future U.S.-supported South Vietnamese incursions to attempt to frustrate Communist buildups. North Vietnamese planning with respect to a major offensive in I Corps and the central highlands of South

Vietnam may consequently have to be reconsidered. Although it is apparent that Hanoi can count on Moscow and Peking to refurbish materiel losses sustained in Cambodia and Laos,* Hanoi's leaders may have to reevaluate how they will allocate their resources in view of the continued extensive involvement of U.S. air power in Indochina while ground forces are being gradually reduced.

One possibility is that priority in North Vietnamese strategy will, temporarily, be given to rebuilding the Cambodia sanctuaries after solidifying control over southern Laos and northeastern Cambodia. Without "writing off" support of the Viet Cong, North Vietnam might deemphasize prospects for generating high-level military action in South Vietnam and instead concentrate on expanding Communist holdings in the border areas of Cambodia.** Pressure on South Vietnam

*After the allied incursions in Cambodia, the Soviet Union signed a "supplementary" military and economic aid agreement with the DRV on June 11, 1970. Additional Soviet assistance to meet new North Vietnamese needs was probably also involved in a "technical aid" agreement signed a few days after the South Vietnamese invasion of Laos. Both agreements were in addition to annual Soviet aid commitments. Public affirmation of supplemental Chinese economic and military assistance was also announced by Hanoi in February 1971.

**Although a North Vietnamese-backed effort to overthrow the Cambodian government is also a possibility, there seem to be many more disadvantages than advantages to such an operation, even though Hanoi could probably expect Chinese and Soviet military assistance. The advantages would be that it would lead to the emplacement of a pro-Communist regime in Phnom Penh, erode the confidence and effectiveness of the Cambodian armed forces, and put Communist forces in position to attack the former sanctuary areas from the rear. Against this operation are these considerations: it would probably require one or more additional NVA divisions to be committed to Cambodia (at present, it is generally believed that only about 5000 NVA troops are actually engaged in fighting against the Cambodian army); it would take substantial resources to seize and hold Phnom Penh (especially if the ARVN chooses to defend it); it would amount to a blatant act of takeover that would belie Hanoi's (and Peking's) talk of a popular Sihanoukist liberation movement in Cambodia; and it would not necessarily improve North Vietnam's ability to assist Viet Cong forces in South Vietnam.

would, in this strategy, be applied mainly from outside rather than from within the country. Compared with the post-Tet (1968) calls from Hanoi for a "general offensive," the strategy would mark a further scaling down of Communist ambitions and activities within South Vietnam; but it would also be in keeping with China's oft-stated preference (which the Soviet Union would also have grounds for supporting) for protracted, low-level fighting in which U.S. and ARVN strength can be eroded primarily by guerrilla warfare.

As for the Communist movement in Cambodia, the North Vietnamese will probably continue to use it as a means of exerting pressure on the pro-U.S. government in Phnom Penh, as a front for Vietnamese Communist military activities in Cambodia, and, over the long run, as the basis of a pro-Hanoi alternative to either the present regime or the unpredictable and popular Prince Sihanouk. For the moment, Hanoi and the NUFK have rejected in advance any compromise solution that would bring the fighting to a halt, partition Cambodia, or imply recognition of the Lon Nol Government.* Instead, it is claimed (as in 1954) that a "people's administration" already exists in Cambodia, the head of which is Khieu Samphan, a Khmer Communist who has been Sihanouk's bitter enemy in recent years.** From Communist sources, the impression is strong that Hanoi prefers gradually to build up the

* VNA (Hanoi) international service, October 24, 1970; statement of the NUFK and Sihanouk's Royal Government, as broadcast by New China News Agency (Peking), October 27, 1970.

** Khieu Samphan is a deputy premier of the exile government and minister of defense. The claim of a "people's administration" having been established in five "liberated" provinces was made by Khieu Samphan over Liberation Radio (to South Vietnam), November 20, 1970, and in a Radio Hanoi domestic service commentary on January 18, 1971.

Khmer Communist movement, exploiting Sihanouk's sympathetic statements from Peking when necessary while developing the tight organization, leadership, and base areas that (it is hoped) will undermine Phnom Penh's authority.

A "deal" with Phnom Penh is much more likely to be offered when the indigenous Communist movement is strong (as in Laos) and when circumstances in South Vietnam are favorable to Communist forces than, as at present, when the NUFK is patently Vietnamese-controlled and when success in South Vietnam is still uncertain. Hanoi, through the NUFK, might then insist upon the formation (as in Laos) of a coalition government that would reflect Communist territorial predominance and military superiority. As with a Pathet Lao-dominated government, North Vietnam would seem to prefer a coalition responsive to Vietnamese Communist political and security needs to a purely Communist regime whose claims to neutrality and independence would lack international or domestic credibility.