

The High Stakes in Laos

U.S. Worries That Hanoi Is in Position To Decide Effect of Fighting on Vietnam

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WASHINGTON, March 3— For almost a decade, the official though private judgment here has been that the defense of Laos, the Asian kingdom of two and a half million people, is not in itself a vital interest of the United States.

Even Dean Rusk, when he was Secretary of State and before he was cast as a superhawk,

News Analysis used to tell visitors in 1961, during crises in old Indochina, that "Laos is not worth the life of a single Kansas farm boy."

Then, as now, Washington admired the leisurely Laotians and wanted them left to their interminable strife. The diplomats saw no need to rush to their defense with American troops. More persuasively, the generals here wanted no part of an assignment in Laos.

Having meddled throughout the nineteen fifties in their internal affairs, Washington finally decided in the nineteen sixties to let the Laotian peoples live in fragile coalition and pulled away with a quip: "The situation there is disastrous, but not serious."

It Is Now a Hope

That remark can still be heard among the top men of the Nixon Administration, but it is uttered only in hope, no longer in jest. For the North Vietnamese did not pull away from Laos. They have kept their troops there as insurance in the war in South Vietnam, and the fear among United States officials here now is that Hanoi may decide to send them in.

So the Pentagon is flying hundreds of bombing raids against the North Vietnamese in Laos, risking the lives of Kansas and other boys. The Central Intelligence Agency manages a sturdy but outnumbered little defense force there. President Nixon weaves and ducks whenever the subject of American involvement arises at his news conferences. And even calm men such as Mike Mansfield, the majority leader, are provoked into somber declarations of alarm on the floor of the Senate.

The reason for the anxiety is not the fear that Laos may become another Vietnam, but that Hanoi is now in position to decide to make Laos a significant battleground in the

struggle for Vietnam. The Nixon Administration does not regard itself as committed to defend the self-determination or territorial integrity of Laos as such. But it does feel itself vulnerable to political and psychological pressures that North Vietnam can generate by way of Laos.

Campaign Has Begun

In the view of some knowledgeable Asian diplomats and informed members of Congress, such pressure has already begun. Though military in form, it is believed to be political in purpose: to persuade the United States Government (and-or the American people) that peace in Southeast Asia can be obtained only through further American compromise at the bargaining table.

By threatening advance in Laos, these observers agree; Hanoi intends to frighten Laos's neighbors in South Vietnam and Thailand, to dramatize the diminishing strength of the retreating United States forces in Southeast Asia, to rekindle antiwar agitation inside the United States and thus to drive home the point that negotiation rather than "Vietnamization" is the only way out of the conflict.

Just as President Nixon is claiming progress for "Vietnamization" — the process for turning all aspects of the war over to Saigon forces — Hanoi is thought to be executing a grand diversion in Laos to prove that its forces will never be contained by South Vietnamese troops and American air power alone, and that United States withdrawal, without negotiation, will never bring peace to the region.

Choice Is Hanoi's

American officials have urgently re-examined the situation and concede that such a turn of events is now possible. They are not sure that the campaign has actually begun, but they recognize the choice to be entirely Hanoi's and they are more worried than ever before.

Elements of the more than 40,000 North Vietnamese troops believed to be in Laos are said to have moved farther — and sooner in the dry season — than ever before. They could, by risking a further extension of their supply lines

against heavy bombing, cut the already partitioned Laos in half yet again.

If they move on, they will no doubt be subjected to even harder pounding by B-52's and stiffer resistance by the C.I.A.-run ground forces. But military planners doubt that they could be stopped with the available force and no one in authority here believes that Congress or the American people would sanction the use of American ground troops to repel the challenge.

So the Administration has been forced to consider other counter-measures, ranging from diplomatic protest to the Soviet Union to the resumption of some bombing of North Vietnam. President Nixon has repeatedly warned that he would take strong action if North Vietnam attempted to take advantage of the American withdrawal from the war zone. With the accelerated bombing of Hanoi's forces in Laos, he has already served notice that he regards the fighting there as an extension of the conflict itself.

Possibilities Are Few

Some officials think that the North Vietnamese want to trade off restraint in Laos for cancellation of the B-52 raids in South Vietnam. But either way, the stakes are high and the measures available to Washington are few.

Thus the first point of appeal is once again Moscow. That is where President Kennedy found a sympathetic hearing in 1961 from Premier Nikita S. Khrushchev, who also did not wish to become more deeply involved in Laos.

Between them, they arranged the 1962 Geneva accord on coalition and neutrality for Laos, but the agreement could not withstand the strains of major war in Vietnam. The war has changed everything, including the opportunities for Soviet-American collaboration.

In stating his minimum peace terms, President Nixon has already firmly linked neutrality for Laos with self-determination for the South Vietnamese. Two weeks ago, in his address on foreign policy, he said the only alternative for Hanoi to a bargain that meets those terms would be continued "Vietnamization," meaning "costly sacrifices while its bargaining power diminishes."

Hanoi, with Moscow's blessing, is obviously determined to prove the opposite. A few more weeks will show whether the maneuvering in Laos is a central feature of that exercise.