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THE SITUATION AND SHORT-TERM OUTLOOK IN LAOS

THE ESTIMATE

I. THE SITUATION

1. Laos has never been a national entity governed by sure and united authority. Its people lack a sense of national loyalty and identity and they continue to be divided by traditional ethnic, regional, and family antagonisms. A gulf has always existed between the central government in Vientiane and the people in the countryside, and those who have governed Laos have never established effective authority or won the respect of all of the various peoples who make up the Laotian nation. The non-Communist political factions have never achieved unity or cohesion and have tended to view one another with as much suspicion as they do the Communist left. As a result, no strong, effective non-Communist leadership has emerged since Laos achieved independence. These fundamental weaknesses in the political and social fabric of Laos have been brought again to the surface and accentuated since Kong Le seized control of Vientiane in early August. Indeed, developments since the coup were made possible, almost inevitable, by the incoherent nature of the country, its leaders, and its people. This chaos has been compounded by contradictory and inconsistent Western counsel and by the wide attraction of neutralism, however vaguely understood, among many Laotians.

2. The principal political elements in Laos, aside from the Communist-dominated Pathet Lao—the Souvanna Phouma government in Vientiane, the Revolutionary Committee set up by Phoumi and Boun Oum at Savannakhet, and King Savang at the royal capital of Luang Prabang—have been unwilling to work together. Alone none of them has the fol-

lowing, the national status, and the military strength to contain the Pathet Lao. The Laotian Army, spread thin in small often isolated units, has been uncertain in its loyalties. A majority of the commanders lean to Phoumi and the Revolutionary Committee although some still support Souvanna's government. Others seek to maintain a neutral position in the struggle among the non-Communist factions. Few of them, however, appear willing to fight one another. Some commanders are anti-Pathet Lao and ready to do battle with that enemy.

3. Under cover of the confusion, and taking advantage of both the stalemate among the non-Communist elements and the desire of Souvanna and Kong Le for a negotiated end to the civil conflict, the Pathet Lao have steadily improved their political and military positions. Thus, Kong Le's act of mutiny set in motion a chain of events in Laos which could lead to the country's departure from its western orientation and its entry into the Communist orbit.

4. Kong Le's mutiny and its aftermath have also had deep repercussions in Southeast Asia, particularly in Thailand and South Vietnam. Thailand's Prime Minister, Sarit, is convinced that either a Communist takeover or the establishment of a neutral, coalition government in Laos would seriously threaten Thai security. Either development, he feels, would dangerously expose his country to Communist infiltration, subversion, and attack, and would generate strong pressures inside Thailand for a more neutralist policy. Moreover, he believes it would undermine his own personal position. He almost certainly views US policy in the Laotian crisis as providing a

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