

Two Key Questions Facing United States in Southeast Asia Fracas

Editor's note: How deeply committed is the United States in Southeast Asia and how much farther can the present crisis involve Americans? In the following dispatch UPI's foreign news analyst examines causes and effects of the current situation and points up problems with which the United States now is faced.

By PHIL NEWSOM
UPI Foreign News Analyst

With two-thirds of Laos firmly in the Communist grip, two key questions face the United States in its announced determination to prevent the remainder of Southeast Asia going the same way.

Has the right-wing government of Prince Boun Oum and strongman Gen. Phoumi Nosavan announced too late its readiness to join a neutralist regime for Laos?

How much farther is the United States, already deeply involved in South Viet Nam, willing to commit itself?

Any lingering doubt about the reliability of the royal Lao forces vanished last week when 5,000 troops fled in panic from their Nam Tha stronghold, with their officers in the vanguard of the flight and without even bothering to inform their American advisers of their plans.

Militarily, there also seemed no doubt that the Communist-led and equipped Pathet Lao forces could, under present circumstances, take over the whole of Laos if they wished.

Problem Is Two-Fold

For the United States, the question was both military and diplomatic.

It joined with Great Britain in demanding that Moscow prevail upon Pathet Lao forces to withdraw to the cease fire line established in May 1961.

Militarily, the United States reacted with a show of force which included the movement of a 1,000-man U.S. combat unit in Thailand near to the Mekong river border with Laos and the dispatch of a 7th Fleet carrier force with U. S. Marines aboard to the Gulf of Siem.

Tactically, it was a move reminiscent of U. S. strategy in defense of Formosa where, without actually declaring itself, the mere presence of the 7th Fleet has been credited with preventing a Red Chinese attack on the Nationalist offshore islands of Quemoy and the Matsus.

It obviously was hoped that similar moves might also instill caution into the Reds in Laos.

In Washington, officials refused to be drawn out on the possibility that U.S. troops might be dispatched to Laos itself.

Undersecretary of State W. Ball declared that the United States still sought a coalition government for Laos and "we have not at all abandoned hope of achieving it."

Decision Reached

There were, however, other straws, which also were available to the Communists, indicating that some military decisions already had been reached.

The most important of these emerged more than a year ago at a meeting of SEATO (Southeast Asia Treaty Organization) military advisers in Bangkok.

It was indicated then that the military commanders had agreed that the defense of Southeast Asia must be made at the Mekong river, a major stream which originates in the mountains of Tibet, forms Burma's border with Laos, most of Thailand's and finally empties through a vast delta in South Viet Nam into the South China Sea.

U. S. Secretary of State Dean Rusk assured Thailand leaders scarcely more than two months ago that the United States firmly would support its commitments to Thailand against both direct and indirect aggression and would do it either inside or outside of SEATO.

Hence, the dispatch of U. S. troops to the Mekong river line in Thailand may take on special significance, especially in light of the fact the Laotian army no longer can be counted as a military force.

This evidence, coupled with the United States' declared determination to remain in South Viet Nam until the Communist menace is defeated, seems to indicate the defense line, running from the 17th Parallel in Viet Nam to the east to the Mekong river border in the west.

There were other conditions mitigating against the dispatch of U. S. forces into Laos itself.

One was the assurance of Red Chinese Foreign Minister Marshal Chen Yi that in the event of Western military intervention in Laos, Communist China "also will send troops," thus assuring another Korea.

In Washington, there also was opposition.

As long ago as May of last year, Sen. J. W. Fulbright, declared he would oppose intervention in Laos because the Laotians were unwilling to shoot "even if you give them a gun." He said he would not oppose intervention in Thailand or South Viet Nam because those people were willing to defend themselves.

In Laos, Nikita Khrushchev holds the key.

In their Vienna meeting in June, 1961, President Kennedy and Khrushchev agreed to establish a "neutral and independent Laos" which would serve as a buffer zone between the Communist and Western powers.

He might move now to halt the southward spread of Red Chinese influence, or he might turn his back.

Whether neutral or Red, Laos loses none of its strategic importance.

Under Communist control it exposes both Burma and Thailand, strengthens the possibility of a Communist take-over of neutral Cambodia and provides another avenue for the flow of Communist arms into South Viet Nam.

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Bids Called for River Trail Work

The Medford district of the bureau of land management has called for bids for reconstruction of an eight-mile segment of the Rogue River Trail, according to District Manager Ross A. Youngblood.

The portion of the trail is located between Bronco creek and Kelsey creek, approximately 20 miles west of Wolf creek, Ore.

Persons interested in bidding on the work may secure specifications from the Medford district office, 1133 South Riverside ave., Medford. A guided inspection tour of the project site will be conducted Thursday, May 24, one week prior to the date set for opening bids.

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Construction Strike Threats Subside

San Francisco—UPI—Threats of a state-wide California construction tieup subsided today with reports of progress in labor negotiations in the southern part of the state, but Northern California's \$3.5 billion industry slowed to a standstill.

James L. Smith, chief negotiator for the Laborers Union in Southern California, said there was a "fair possibility" of a settlement.

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