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THE JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF
WASHINGTON, D. C. 20301

JCSM-176-67

31 MAR 1967

MEMORANDUM FOR THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE

Subject: Pan-Southeast Asian International Highway [redacted]

1. [redacted] Reference is made to the attached Department of the Army staff study, subject as above, which sets forth a concept for the construction and internationalization of a highway to link the countries of Thailand, Laos, and South Vietnam as an additional US course of action in Southeast Asia. The short-term objective of the highway, as stated in the concept, is to disrupt the Laotian panhandle infiltration system between North and South Vietnam while construction is in progress. The long-term objective of the highway is to contribute to a form of regionalism in Southeast Asia and to improve the prospects for future stability in the area. To obtain the necessary force assets to achieve the long- and short-term objectives, the concept proposes that the United States undertake quiet diplomatic approaches to several other nations of the world to determine the extent of support which might exist for a proposal of this nature. If tentative inquiry revealed that such support was nonexistent, the project could be quietly dropped with no waste of resources or adverse publicity.

2. (SHF) The Joint Chiefs of Staff have reviewed the Army concept and they, less the Chief of Staff, US Army, consider that the advantages and disadvantages of the proposal are:

a. Advantages

(1) The concept envisions the project as an international civil construction effort that could contribute to the economic growth and stability in Southeast Asia upon its successful completion. The work force would be constituted of a few civilian contractors augmented by contributions of work forces, also civilian, from those countries throughout the world desirous of contributing.

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(2) The presence of such an internationally constituted, nonmilitary construction contingent in the eastern Laotian panhandle could prove helpful in observing and reporting the infiltration system in the specific area of construction. The decision by the enemy to attack or impede the project by military means presents a very difficult choice to Hanoi, threatening revelation of the extent of the North Vietnamese Army presence in Laos and forfeiture of a large portion of favorable world opinion for her position.

(3) While it is difficult to predict the North Vietnamese reaction if a civil works contingent were introduced into the area, an attack upon the project could provide the rationale for the provision of US/South Vietnam/Free World troops as a reaction force. Introduction of troops at Laotian request would attenuate the international criticism which would be involved if we took such action unilaterally. Once introduced, US/South Vietnamese/Free World forces would be in a position to employ military force to stop infiltration as well as to remain to insure stability in the region of Laos now under communist control.

b. Disadvantages

(1) A civilian construction force operating without security force protection in contested terrain would have little effect on disrupting infiltration and would be exposed to almost certain harassment and sabotage actions by communist forces.

(2) The security forces required to protect the construction contingent in South Vietnam and Laos are an additional corps-size force (two and two-thirds divisions) in each country.

(3) The foregoing security forces are not available without:

(a) Diversion from other on-going operations which would jeopardize such operations and require revision of the strategy for Southeast Asia.

(b) Mobilization by the United States and drawdowns from other areas; or

(c) Contributions from other Free World nations. The prospects of obtaining additional Free World forces for this program would be doubtful without quid pro quo.

(4) An introduction of US/Free World security forces into Laos could be interpreted as a violation of the Geneva Accords of 1962 and disrupt the delicate political and military balance now existing in that country. The decision to invite US forces into the country could be made by the Royal Laotian Government thereby reducing appreciably the international criticism.

(5) The likelihood of obtaining significant multilateral construction work forces and financial or other contributions to the construction project is doubtful. It is recognized that a more definitive judgment in this matter could be made after informal discreet diplomatic inquiries of several key nations throughout the world.

3. The Chief of Staff, US Army, considers that the highway concept represents a better counterinfiltration proposal than the air-supported portion of Practice 9 in Laos. He further considers that the concept is militarily and politically feasible for accomplishment of both short- and long-range objectives and its execution should be undertaken by the US Government to induce greater international support for US/Free World efforts in Southeast Asia and to disrupt communist infiltration. In this connection, the concept offers a plausible means for the United States to seek further and expanded participation by Free World countries in the South Vietnam effort. If the international civilian work force in this project were ignored and not molested by the North Vietnamese Army/Pathet Lao, the project, as a minimum, would provide a superior roadwatch capability (an intelligence bonus), would assist in exposing the magnitude of North Vietnam's infiltration efforts, and would contribute to economic growth and stability in the region.

4. (S) The Joint Chiefs of Staff, less the Chief of Staff, US Army, after weighing the pros and cons of the Army concept, believe that the proposal to construct and internationalize a highway link as an additional US course of action in Southeast Asia to counter infiltration does not have sufficient benefits to warrant pursuing it.

5. (U) Comments on the Army study are attached in Appendix B hereto.

6. (S) The Joint Chiefs of Staff, less the Chief of Staff, US Army, recommend that the Army concept not be undertaken.

SIGNED

EARLE G. WHEELER
Chairman
Joint Chiefs of Staff

Attachments

APPENDIX A

ARMY STAFF STUDY

"PAN-SOUTHEAST ASIAN INTERNATIONAL HIGHWAY (S)"

/Forwarded separately/

APPENDIX B

COMMENTS BY THE JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF, LESS THE CHIEF OF STAFF, US ARMY, ON THE ARMY STAFF STUDY: PAN-SOUTHEAST ASIAN INTERNATIONAL HIGHWAY (S)

1. (U) Vulnerability of the Construction Force. A civilian construction force operating without security force protection in contested terrain would have little effect on disrupting infiltration and would be exposed to almost certain harassment and sabotage actions by communist forces.

2. (S/NF) Availability of Security Forces. The security forces required to protect the construction contingent in South Vietnam and Laos is an **additional corps-size force (two and two-**thirds divisions) in each country. These forces are not available without:

a. Diversion from other on-going operations which would jeopardize such operations and require revision of the strategy for Southeast Asia;

b. Mobilization by the United States and drawdowns from other areas; or

c. Contributions for other Free World nations. The prospects of obtaining additional Free World forces for this program would be doubtful without quid pro quo.

3. (S/NF) Impact of Security Forces on Laos. An introduction of US/Free World security forces into Laos, without the consent of all signatories to the Geneva Accords of 1962, could abrogate these agreements and disrupt the delicate political and military balance now existing in that country. The decision to invite US forces into the country could be made by the Royal Laotian Government (RLG) thereby reducing appreciably the international criticism.

4. (SNF) Multilateral Participation. The likelihood of obtaining significant multilateral construction work forces and financial or other contributions to the construction force is doubtful. A more definitive judgment in this matter could be made after informal discreet diplomatic inquiries of several key nations.

5. (SNF) Alignment of the Highway. For the long-term objective of regional stability, the overland transportation system between Thailand and Laos on the one hand and Saigon on the other, should provide for connecting links through Cambodia to preclude a disruptive influence in Southeast Asia. The short-term objective in Laos would not necessarily warrant connecting links through Cambodia.

6. (U) Requirement for an Integrated Transportation System An improved highway system in Southeast Asia is only part of the area's transportation needs. An integrated transportation system that considers all land, water, and air routes in the area would seem to be a more feasible approach to the long-term objective of regional stability.

7. (SNF) Political Practicality. South Vietnam and Thailand would probably concur in the highway concept since they would reap significant benefits from it. Acceptance by the Laotian Government (RLG) would depend, to a large extent, upon widespread international support. If the project were rejected by Laos, it would probably be due to the desire of the RLG to preserve the spirit of the 1962 Accords and to prevent the South Vietnam conflict from expanding further into Laos. The RLG

might also object to a highway along Route 9 which would tend to bisect rather than unify the country at the present time. Further, it could be expected that Laos would desire that the highway from Savannakhet to Vientiane follow the trace of Route 13 east and north of the Mekong River. Support for the project by Free World nations, other than the present troop contributors, would likely be accompanied, in some cases, by a demand for concessions from the United States in the form of quid pro quo.

8. (U) Construction Feasibility. The highway is technically feasible and could be accomplished within the level of effort estimated in the study.

9. (S) Requirements for Logistical Support

a. There would be an adverse impact upon the logistic support capability of current operations in South Vietnam. A large additional burden would be placed on ports, lines of communication, and depots which could only be handled by diverting resources that are programmed and required for other purposes. If construction troops were used to build the highway, (although not proposed in the Army study) there would be delays in construction programs that support current military operations.

b. An undesirable logistical conflict for engineer units, construction material, contractor services and port throughput capability would arise if both construction elements and corps-size security forces were simultaneously introduced in Laos at this time.

c. It may be possible to reduce movement requirements and project costs by using construction equipment now in the hands of contractors, such as RMK-BRJ (Raymond International, Morrison-Knutsen, and Brown & Root, J. S. Jones), subsequent to the completion of current projects.

d. Related to both construction and financing of the highway is the capability of each host nation to maintain the highway once it is built. If this capability is not assured, the long-term objective would be difficult to achieve and financing would be correspondingly difficult to obtain.

10. ([redacted]) Method of Financing. The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) would be a logical source of financing. From an economic viewpoint, the project would need more justification in terms of being a credible international sanctioned project to endure the close scrutiny which it would be given by the IBRD.

11. (SNF) Shift in US Policy. A shift in US policy toward Laos would be required since repudiation by the United States and Laos of the Geneva Accorda of 1962 could be a consequence. The accomplishment of the long-term objective for Southeast Asia and US policy toward Cambodia should require the inclusion of connecting links through Cambodia.

12. (SNF) Latin American Participation. While many Latin American countries would endorse the highway as being beneficial to regional economic growth in Southeast Asia, they would resist committing themselves because:

a. The same resources are needed for the continued regional economic development in Latin America;

b. The involvement in the Vietnam conflict would be readily apparent;

c. Unless other benefits could be exacted, the altruistic identification would probably not arouse sufficient interest, justify the price, nor show some tangible gain for the countries involved.

It would be difficult for Latin American leaders to commit resources for this project when their own countries are badly in need of farm-to-market roads and have not been able to complete the Pan American Highway. Security forces are not likely on the grounds that these forces would be needed at home for internal defense.

13. (SNF) African/South Asian Participation. While moral and political support for the highway would be probable, little economic support would be contributed. Any form of labor and/or material support would probably require a quid pro quo. India could conceivably offer civil engineers that have worked in this field as the result of US aid for an Indian project. A reciprocal action would appear to be a possibility.

14. (SNF) European Participation. Practically all European governments are facing budget squeezes that would argue strongly against incurring expenses in Asia that produce minor results (in their view) for their national interests. Widespread favorable response to the project is doubtful.

15. (SNF) Asian Participation. It is doubted that other than minimal participation could be expected from Asian countries (other than Thailand and South Vietnam). This would force the United States into the leadership role which would, in turn, make suspect the international aspects of the project.