

**December 5, 1965**

**Record of Premier Zhou Enlai's Conversation with  
Vietnamese Deputy Prime Minister Le Thanh Nghi**

**Citation:**

"Record of Premier Zhou Enlai's Conversation with Vietnamese Deputy Prime Minister Le Thanh Nghi", December 5, 1965, Wilson Center Digital Archive, PRC FMA 106-01484-01. Translated by Stephen Mercado.  
<https://wilson-center-digital-archive.dvincitest.com/document/176595>

**Summary:**

Zhou Enlai and Le Thanh Nghi discuss US military strategy in the Vietnam War.

**Credits:**

This document was made possible with support from Henry Luce Foundation

**Original Language:**

Chinese

**Contents:**

Translation - English

Foreign Ministry □ Top Secret File

Record of Premier Zhou Enlai's Conversation with Vietnamese Deputy Prime Minister Le Thanh Nghi

(Premier has yet to review and approve)

Premier Zhou Speaks of Next Move of the United States in War against Vietnam and Our Countermeasures

Time: 5:30 - 7:00 p.m., 5 December 1965

Place: Hebei Hall, Great Hall of the People

Our side's participants: Vice Premier Xie Fuzhi, Director Fang Yi, Vice Minister Han Nianlong, Vice Minister Li Qiang

Vietnamese side's participants: Deputy Minister Ly Ban, Ambassador Tran Tu Binh, Nguyen Huu Dinh (Deputy Prime Minister Le Thanh Nghi's secretary)

Interpreter: Liang Feng

Recorders: He Wenyun, Feng Yuzeng

Deputy Prime Minister Le Thanh Nghi (henceforth simply Le): Please convey to Chairman Mao and President Liu our regards and thanks.

Premier Zhou Enlai (henceforth simply Zhou): This is something that we should do. At present President Liu is still not taking part in outdoor activities, only indoor ones. [1]

Le: I thank Premier Zhou for directly hosting this meeting and personally resolving the issues.

Zhou: This is necessary. Comrade Li Xiannian is not at home.

Vice Premier Xie Fuzhi (henceforth simply Xie): I am not working, only signing.

Zhou: Comrade Xie Fuzhi next time will be working and investigating in a grass-roots unit and thus will not opt again to be near Beijing.

Le: Going to a distant place to engage in work and investigation in a grass-roots unit, one cannot call it returning. Does Premier Zhou have something further to recommend?

Zhou: From developments that have taken place over these past two days and the information that we have obtained, as well as [Robert] McNamara's going to Saigon, I would like to say a few things. The day before yesterday, I spoke of the United States in the present stage of the war increasing the number of its troops in south Vietnam and expanding in south Vietnam. McNamara has gone to Saigon and summed up the situation there. They feel that there is no hope of victory if the fighting continues this way. It is not going well in the rainy season or in the dry season. They themselves acknowledge it. Public opinion abroad and the allies of the United States all say so. What to do in the next stage is a new problem for the US government. As we discussed last time, at present the specific facts prove it. The United States in its next move still needs to escalate but not to expand all at once to north Vietnam or expand to China. In the meantime it needs to pass through a transitional phase. If the United States were to make the leap all at once to Indochina or to China, it would be unprepared not only politically but militarily as well. Nor has the United States talked it over with its allies. Therefore, at present its plan for expansion is one of expanding within south Vietnam proper, one of building large [2] military ports and airports.

South Vietnam's monthly transportation volume at present comes to more than 700,000 tons. Oil for ground and air transportation comes to several thousand tons or one million gallons. For such a large handling capacity, relying on air transportation alone would be insufficient. South Vietnam only has six or seven first-class airports and needs to build more. Also in need of sea transportation, and with insufficient harbors, it is building Cam Ranh Bay. As Comrade Le Thanh Nghi said last time, the United States in south Vietnam is now increasing its fortified positions and military power. It may increase its troop strength to 220,000 men by year's end and to 300,000 by the middle of next year. Expanding in south Vietnam, the United States will not resolve the issue in relying on south Vietnam alone, because north Vietnam, too, can assist south Vietnam, so it has to expand abroad. This is what we were saying on Wednesday. The information that we have obtained in the past several days proves that it is so. The first action is that of land routes, completely cutting in Middle and Lower Laos the Ho Chi Minh Trail that leads to south Vietnam, not only bombing it from the air, but also sending in Thai troops and the US military, striking east from Savannakhet and completely cutting off Middle and Lower Laos. Second, at sea, the United States is strengthening naval patrols to block smuggling to south Vietnam. Third, it is expanding bombing to all of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). The present focus is bombing three lines of communication: those from Hanoi to Lao Cai, from Hanoi to Hai Phong, and from Hanoi to Pingxiang. The next move is to bomb Hai Phong and Hanoi, totally bomb them. Fourth is blockading the Beibu Gulf [Gulf of Tonkin], harassing foreign ships, and preventing their coming and going. If they cannot stop them, at least they can reduce the number of foreign cargo ships reaching Vietnam. Fifth, in Laos, apart from hitting Middle and Lower Laos, they will bomb and attack Xiangkhouang, and cut Highway 7, the major trunk line from Vietnam to Laos. Sixth, blockade the border of Cambodia and south Vietnam, which has a boundary of more than a thousand kilometers. They know that there is smuggling. After McNamara [3] returned to Washington, he disclosed these activities. The next week he had to discuss this plan with [Lyndon B.] Johnson. He said that the objective of expanding the war abroad was to isolate south Vietnam, not to destroy the DRV and wreck Cambodia's independence and neutrality. Politically, this is ready. "To isolate south Vietnam" is my interpretation. He did not say this. What he said was "mopping up the Viet Cong rebellion." Such are the steps of the United States. As Comrade Le Thanh Nghi said last time, the current warfare in south Vietnam is no longer special warfare. It has become a local war, but one that still has features of special warfare. This is correct. The war in south Vietnam is already one based on the US military, and all troop movements are based on it. Deployment in such a war requires considerable time for mobilization. The United States has sent 160,000 or 170,000 men to south Vietnam. There are five divisions, but only two are full divisions, the other divisions only having some of their units. If they mobilized 300,000 men, this would permit them to send eight divisions to south Vietnam. They would transfer all of some units not yet transferred (some of them in Honolulu). In addition, they would have to transfer another two or three divisions. This would be equivalent to their military power in the Korean War. There would be more aircraft than in the Korean War. There are already nearly 3,000 aircraft of the US Navy, Army, and Air Force in south Vietnam, a number that will henceforth increase. There are 900 fighters and bombers, 1,000 helicopters (they did not use helicopters in the Korean War), and 1,000 transport aircraft and patrol and reconnaissance aircraft, for a total of 3,000 aircraft. At present, the largest nuclear-powered cruiser [sic - in fact an aircraft carrier] of the United States, the USS Enterprise, has transferred south. Carrying more than 100 aircraft, since going there it has lost two aircraft. One was shot down. One went into the sea due to the pilot being too nervous when landing. In the Korean War, the Seventh Fleet was mainly in the Taiwan Strait. At present, most of it [4] is in the South China Sea, with only a part of it in the Taiwan Strait. To deal with south Vietnam, the United States is to increase to 300,000 its naval, army, and air forces there, and it will take a considerable amount of time to deploy them, particularly in regard to transportation and supplies. The rear bases are too distant, and there are not enough air force rest and reaction (R&R) areas. After fighting a bit, soldiers need R&R. The R&R facilities in Japan and the Philippines are too distant. We are opposed to them in Hong Kong. They have mainly been building R&R centers in Taiwan and Singapore. Very welcoming towards them is Singapore, which can earn

foreign exchange. In fighting, we do not consider R&R centers, but the United States has to consider them. It has a series of logistical problems. It needs repair bases for overhaul and major repair of aircraft and weapons. At present, most repair bases are in Japan. The United States is now talking with Chiang Kai-shek, who wants to attack the mainland. The United States, which does not allow Chiang Kai-shek to attack the mainland, says, "I will give you some benefits": (1) building R&R centers in Taiwan; (2) building a B-52 air base in Taiwan, as the one on Guam is too distant; (3) putting some repair centers in Taiwan rather than placing all of them in Japan. The United States gives Chiang Kai-shek three major benefits. In addition, it also wants Chiang Kai-shek to send officers to go train south Vietnam's officers, mainly in ways of anti-guerrilla warfare. All of this is conceived for the expansion of the war. The United States at home still needs to mobilize. Within the United States there are not enough troops, and there is domestic opposition to increasing their number. The United States on the one hand announced that it would increase to 300,000 the number of troops for south Vietnam while, on the other hand, it did not dare to announce an expanded mobilization. If it announced that it was expanding mobilization, it would have to refer it to the Congress. Without the addition of newly mobilized troops, it can only transfer troops from other bases in the world, which would weaken the other bases, which is a contradiction. In particular, replenishing their air force is very difficult. The last time that I talked with Prime Minister Pham Van Dong, the US Air Force Reserve was insufficient, with major losses. It takes time for military mobilization. Politically, the United States is engaged in expansion [5]. Everyone is worried whether or not it is going to expand to Indochina and to China. It needs to explain. Therefore, the United States cannot but carry out political mobilization. Producing its "peace talks" fraud, the United States talks on the one hand of expansion and on the other hand talks of not opposing the negotiations. The United States has spoken very clearly about its negotiating conditions. Some have asked whether or not the United States could consider halting the bombing of north Vietnam (in particular it is the Cairo Declaration that is very critical), to which the United States has replied very clearly. McNamara has said that if it stops bombing north Vietnam, then north Vietnam must stop aiding south Vietnam. This is very clear. In the past the United States, which said "stop the aggression," now says "stop the aid." The objective of the United States in expanding the war is to isolate south Vietnam. Now it is using military action to achieve this objective. If the United States can negotiate, if a halt to the bombing can make north Vietnam stop aiding south Vietnam, it can achieve its objective of isolating south Vietnam. The United States will agree. British Foreign Secretary [Michael] Stewart spoke very clearly in Moscow. The Soviet foreign minister, too, officially stated that the Vietnam issue must be decided by Vietnam. The Soviet Union supports Vietnam's four-point proposal but, on the other hand, the Soviet Union actually had Britain's foreign secretary give a televised speech, on its own television station, advocating peace talks. The Soviet Union's television station is the podium of a socialist country. A socialist country's podium actually had imperialism make propaganda. This is a first in the history of the socialist camp. Second, it let Britain's foreign secretary hold a press conference. At the press conference, someone asked Britain's foreign secretary whether or not Britain would apply itself to the task of peace talks. He responded by saying that Vietnam did not want talks, nor did China advocate them, so Britain did not wish to work hard for them. Originally, he only said that Vietnam could do it, but he also dragged China into it and did not mention the Soviet Union. Clearly, he has limits. Someone asked whether or not Britain could persuade the United States to stop bombing north Vietnam. He immediately said that it was possible, but that north Vietnam must not give material assistance to south Vietnam. This is very clear. The conditions are very clear, as is the price. There is an even more serious issue. Britain's foreign secretary said: I have found the Soviet Union interested in preventing nuclear proliferation and in reducing armaments. He explained: First, that the Soviet Union continues to obstruct disarmament negotiations is not due to the ongoing war in Vietnam. Second, nor is it that the Soviet Union obstructs non-proliferation negotiations due to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) multilateral nuclear forces. Several months ago, the Soviet Union had the following attitude: Relations between the United States and the Soviet Union would suffer if the United States did not halt the war in Vietnam and, if the issue of NATO multilateral nuclear forces were not resolved, it would

hinder the resolution of nuclear non-proliferation. At present, the Soviet Union's interest has changed and has run not to this side but to the other side. It is not due to the war in Vietnam that it obstructs disarmament, nor is it due to the issue of the multilateral nuclear forces that it obstructs nuclear non-proliferation. This is the Soviet position. Of course, Britain's foreign secretary says that he has this impression. He was speaking in Moscow at the time. It has now been three days since he returned to Britain, and TASS has issued no correction. One statement was in Moscow, and one was in Cairo. Cairo was radio propaganda, saying that Vietnam is to send a representative to Cairo and make contact with the United States. Of course, we know that there is no such thing. (Le interjected: There is no such thing.). We have a representative in Cairo. You, too, have a representative in Cairo. They are in contact with one another, and there has never been any such thing. Cairo is publicly starting rumors that Moscow is going to have its foreign minister formally negotiate. The political declaration of the United States is to prepare the next move. [7]

In my estimation, the US plan will require a half year of preparation for its realization. If we fight well, we can continue to destroy its plan. To destroy its plan, we cannot depend alone on fighting in south Vietnam. There are several things that we have to do. First of all is the military, and we must put assistance to south Vietnam first. We put it first and you put it first. In respect to transportation, (1) By land: We definitely must find a way to keep the Ho Chi Minh Trail and, even if the United States, Thailand and Laotian Rightists attack Middle and Lower Laos, we cannot allow it to destroy the transportation from north Vietnam through Middle and Lower Laos to south Vietnam; (2) By sea: We must give a great deal of thought to means of transportation to south Vietnam. In the US bombing of the DRV, even if it bombs Hai Phong and Hanoi, we must still find a way so that transportation to south Vietnam is unaffected; (3) Marine transportation between the DRV and foreign countries: We must think of how to struggle for it. At a time of embargo against Cuba, many ships still go there; (4) We must act so that the lines of communication between Cambodia and south Vietnam are not cut. Smuggling must be maintained by various means. If the major routes are destroyed, we must maintain the trails and open up various kinds of trails.

We have several tasks before us: [large portion of text blacked out] (2) No matter what, we cannot allow the enemy to cut China's two railways and highway to the DRV or the sea route from Zhanjiang to Vietnam. (3) The military status of Laos is even more important. The United States would like to open a new field of battle on this flank, using troops of Thailand and the Laotian Rightists [8] to cut the transportation lines running south. If before today the United States has put its main force in south Vietnam, not paying attention to Laos, it has now increased its attention to Laos. In this way, the DRV's burden is even heavier. We can only cooperate from the side, such as helping Phongsaly. Yesterday I spoke with Kaysone [Phomvihane] about the things that I was discussing with you last time and today. He will return to Hanoi from the 15th, and I asked him to confer with the Workers Party of Vietnam Central Committee and work out a plan. First of all, the parties of Vietnam and Laos first talked things over well. Comrade Kaysone made a trip to the Soviet Union, which made many promises, a mouthful of promises, but provided no aid list. Because the Soviet Union proposed the convening of a five-party conference and Geneva Conference on Laos, Comrade Kaysone could not agree, saying that he had to report to the Central Committee. The second thing is that the Soviet Union made a request to send a resident TASS correspondent to the area of the [Pathet] Lao side. Comrade Kaysone similarly said that he had to consult with the Central Committee. You know that if a TASS correspondent goes there, then your secrets will all be known by the enemy. There was no agreement on the two matters, and the Soviet Union would not hand over its list. The Soviet Union told Comrade Kaysone that when he read out the aid list that they themselves had written down, that was it, he did not provide it. How would these things be transported in the future? What would be done? Nominally, the Soviets have given help. In fact, they have added a great deal of trouble, not only for China but for Vietnam as well, as the things all must be transported via China and Vietnam. How to help Laos is an important issue, and I hope that you think it over. (4) Cambodia's role has become more important than before. [Senator Mike] Mansfield's

trip this time to Cambodia, too, is a double policy. Mansfield's going is a soft hand. His relationship with Sihanouk is not bad. He has advised Sihanouk to improve relations with the United States. Mansfield visited Cambodia for one day as a private [9] guest. But the US public remarks increased the pressure on Sihanouk, saying that Sihanouk was aiding south Vietnam. Sihanouk is good, similarly taking a dual approach in publicly opposing US pressure and privately speaking with Mansfield of three conditions for improving relations: (1) recognize and protect Cambodia's existing borders; (2) that the United States take responsibility for preventing the governments of Saigon and Thailand from violating Cambodia's borders; (3) that the United States pay compensation for the losses caused in the bombing of Cambodia. At present Sihanouk's attitude is good and he wants to work [a line of text is blacked out]. We must consult more among ourselves, either in Hanoi or in Beijing. In Phnom Penh, our two sides' representatives have to be in frequent contact and engage in close cooperation.

The transportation issue is very important in smashing the next move of the United States. Although Comrade Le Thanh Nghi went this time to the Soviet Union to discuss the trade issue, it had a direct link with transportation. It is necessary to make clear which items are urgent, and then ship them first. The Soviet Union is not directly aiding the south, but the south can use those things and can take them first. You certainly must authorize the commercial counselor of your embassy in Moscow and give him the authority to decide what to send first. If not, some things that are not urgent will ship, take up space in the train wagons, and take up space in the warehouses. At our border, in Manzhouli, you have a group set up there. You have to give them authority over what to accept first as an urgent necessity and what not to accept as something not an urgent necessity. If some matter arose, the group could call your embassy in Moscow and Hanoi to talk. Next, you must inform them (indicating the Soviet Union) that marine transportation could be obstructed and, since they are helping, they should risk sending some ships, all the more so since the United States has not declared war on Vietnam. Currently, the United States publicly says that it is not going to destroy [10] the DRV. At a time when Cuba is blockaded, such capitalist countries as France, Spain, and even Morocco have sent ships there. How can Vietnam's waters be blockaded? It won't do if the socialist countries take no risks.

I would like to discuss the current circumstances and situation with Comrade Le Thanh Nghi, supplementing and substantiating our conversation on Wednesday. According to the information now at hand, it is more or less the same as what I originally thought.

Le: Thank you, Premier Zhou. I agree with Premier Zhou's views. We have already sent a telegram, reporting to the Central Committee what Premier Zhou said last time. Tomorrow, we will send back a detailed record of it. Premier Zhou's additional comments today are very good. We will quickly put the record together and send it tomorrow for the Central Political Committee's reference in examining the situation. As far as I know, our Central Political Committee is discussing these issues, including a view of the enemy's scheme. Premier Zhou's views are very good.

Zhou: We estimate that it will take half a year for the United States to expand its deployment in south Vietnam and beyond south Vietnam. If within a half year we destroy its plan, the transitional phase will drag out.

Le: Does the expansion of which Premier Zhou speaks refer to an expansion to north Vietnam or to Indochina?

Zhou: It still refers to the transitional phase. The United States is going to send 300,000 troops to south Vietnam. Without airports and sea ports, there would be no way to send them. The United States is going to send troops from Thailand to Laos.

Deployment within half a year is not possible. The United States is going to cut a thousand-kilometer road [11] in Cambodia. How much organization work is required!

Xie: International and domestic mobilization are both necessary.

Zhou: There is also the blockade of the Beibu Gulf [Gulf of Tonkin]. Many countries disagree, opposing the US expansion and the blockade, making its plan impossible to realize, which will naturally drag it out. (Vice Premier Xie interjected: Dragging it out to the rainy season.). If, in this new stage, they go through two yearly plans, meaning 1966 and 1967, go through two rainy seasons and two dry seasons, it will change in 1968. [Ambassador Jean] Chauvel, too, has said that it will change in two years, so we must fight and destroy this plan, from its political to its military aspects. We must crush it, from its domestic to its overseas aspects. Will the Soviet Union not engage in "joint action"? I do not believe so. When you (indicating Le Thanh Nghi) went to the Soviet Union, it must have spoken of it. You requested that it stop discussing the nuclear proliferation issue and mobilize all against the United States. We have never called for the Soviet Union to join the war, only that it not carry on with the United States.

Le: Everything that you are saying is clear to me. The enemy's focus is on expansion in south Vietnam. (Premier Zhou interjected: The isolation and blockading of south Vietnam, and in the end its elimination.) The enemy on the one hand is vigorously increasing its number of troops and strengthening its military activities, while on the other hand it is disseminating and discussing public opinion to prepare for military action.

Zhou: South Vietnam is fighting well. You and we must give it more encouragement. On this year's "20 December" [anniversary of the National Liberation Front's founding in 1960], we must vigorously disseminate propaganda and support south Vietnam.

Le: Thank you. [12]

Zhou: We should thank them. They pin down 300,000 US troops. They are on the front line.

Le: We must now concentrate all our strength on supporting the South and on attacking the United States in the South. All the North's actions are in support of the South.

Zhou: We should prepare lines of communication to the South, which for a short period of time will be cut by the United States. Before they are cut, we should strive to send in more things. Of course, we believe that south Vietnam will still be able to fight, even when there is no foreign assistance, but the more things that we are able to send in, the better. I said that day that supporting south Vietnam must be put first.

Le: Yes. We, too, have made such arrangements. The enemy's actions are directed at the destruction of the lines of communication. The enemy seizes hold of our weak point, wishing to cut off, surround, and eliminate it. If we rely on our efforts, we can smash the enemy's plan, which is also a way to combat the enemy. We are concentrating our strength to make rush repairs on the road running south and are striving to send in more things in the dry season. As its next move, the enemy may send troops to cut it.

Zhou: It takes two legs to go on foot. Of course it would be good if you could repair the road, and bicycles have to be used as usual.

Le: Various means are in use, such as by car, by bicycle, and on foot.

Zhou: Various means of communication are used for transportation.

Le: [line of text blacked out]

Zhou: We are putting this part first. We must race against the enemy. We [13] have no contradictions or difficulties. The enemy has many internal contradictions and difficulties.

Le: Whether by rail or by sea, the support that China gives also directly supports south Vietnam. The 10 coastal cargo ships, although given to the North, are also related to the South. They are mainly used for transportation between Zhanjiang and Hai Phong to prevent the enemy from carrying out a sea blockade.

Zhou: As for the issue of ships, which we have given south Vietnam, the first batch, 9 ships, was delivered this year. The second batch is 30 ships. The third batch goes to the North. We have arranged the order in this way. For transportation to the North, our ships can go when necessary. As for the South, only yours can go.

Le: All right. As for the issue of Laos, our Central Committee recently has also examined it. The enemy can use troops of Thailand and the Laotian Rightists, which is also to resolve the war in south Vietnam.

Zhou: Their contradictions are many. In supporting the south Vietnam issue, we basically have no contradictions. If having some different views is an internal contradiction, it is not an antagonistic contradiction, but one that can be resolved.

Le: You and we both have internal contradictions.

Zhou: The objective facts have been recognized, and they have been resolved.

Le: As for the issues of Laos and Cambodia, I will report your views to the Central Committee. In regard to the work of winning over Cambodia and Sihanouk, it will depend on your vigorous help (Premier Zhou interjected: coordination with one another). Of course, we also have to do it, but it is better to talk in your [14] position. As for the transportation issue, I will first examine with Comrade Ly Ban how to arrange it, and then go to the Soviet Union to implement it.

[large portion of text blacked out]

Zhou: Thank you.

Le: The United States has its strong side, but it also has many weak points. We are determined that, even if the number of US troops exceeds that at the time of the Korean War, we will still have to stand up to them and win the fight. The Politburo of our Central Committee is researching it. Certainly, the United States will be unable to cope with a people's war.

Zhou: Ten years after the conclusion of the Korean War, the popular character of the people's war that you are waging is even greater. If one does not rely on its popular character, one cannot win. The battlefield is everywhere. Recently, US military housing was bombed and harbors and airports were also bombed.



Le: If we use the tactics of people's war, the enemy cannot take the initiative.

Zhou: When the US military housing in Saigon was bombed, [Ambassador Henry Cabot] Lodge looked troubled [15]. Mansfield stood there, looking at Lodge, seeing what he would do, whether or not there was any way to resolve this. Mansfield, a Democrat, is not a great advocate of fighting. Lodge is a Republican serving as an ambassador for the Democratic Party. Each man's expression is completely different from the other. Their internal contradiction is visible.

Tran Tu Binh: As for the issue of the peace talks, in the near future the various sides may put pressure on us. Both of our sides should examine diplomatic coordination. When Chauvel saw me, what he said was exactly the same as when he saw you. On the second day, Ambassador [Sergey] Lapin came to see me. The substance of what was said was completely the same as with Chauvel.

Zhou: They are pessimistic. You both (indicating Vice Minister Han Nianlong) should get together and examine matters more often. [16]