

April 19, 1968

Discussion between Zhou Enlai and Pham Van Dong

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Summary:

Zhou Enlai chastises the Vietnamese for seemingly being too conciliatory in negotiations and failing to take opportunities that would have allowed a stronger position against the US.

Original Language:

Chinese

Contents:

Translation - English

ZHOU ENLAI AND PHAM VAN DONG

19 April 1968

Zhou Enlai: According to us, at present, your acceptance of Johnson's proposal for a limited cessation of US bombing of the North is not good timing and not advantageous. We are insistent on that judgment. For Johnson, it is now a question of how to survive the election year, how to avoid being held responsible for a lost war. He also wants to be seen as a man of "peace" as well as wanting to overcome present internal and external difficulties. These are his objectives, and his calculations are not [propitious] for any concrete outcome of the meeting.

Comrade Nguyen Duy Trinh's statement of January 28 last year [1967] had some influence on the international arena. It was not only felt in African and Asian countries, but some Western and Nordic countries as well. These countries understood that total cessation of bombing the North was the precondition for negotiations. Thus, that statement was supported not only by people in the world, but some Western governments, including De Gaulle's.

So, when Johnson was facing the most difficult moment—I have not mentioned the exploding movement by the black Americans—you accepted his proposal. This act disappointed the people of the world. Pro-American circles were happy. The African and Asian countries, which had been supportive of your demand for a total cessation of bombing, were surprised. So were some Western countries, including France. You had accepted partial cessation of bombing, and then accepted the place for talks which was not Phnom Penh. You, therefore, compromised twice. You are not initiating, but to the contrary, are losing the posture for initiating. You were very quick to accept Warsaw as the meeting place, and by so doing, you did not create more difficulties for Johnson, but in fact helped him out. So Johnson now demanded more: he then proposed a list of 15 meeting places. Rusk mentioned this list too, without mentioning any place in Eastern Europe or Phnom Penh. I do not mean that Phnom Penh is necessarily a suitable place, but once you mentioned Phnom Penh, you have to keep insisting on it. Since you compromised from the position of totality to that of partiality [on the bombing halt], you now have to keep Phnom Penh [as the meeting place].

It is our assessment that these two compromises have diminished the firmness of the statement of January 28th. From our experience, we see that negotiations must start when we have a stronger position, not a weak one. Johnson does not consider that the negotiations, meetings, or contacts will bring about any result. For him, at present, open contacts represent some assets. Or do you plan to obstruct the meeting when it is convened? If so, why did you accept partial cessation of bombing? What if they do not plan to obstruct the meeting?

We do not understand your whole plan. We do not believe in other plans that have been mentioned by the Western press, either. Logically, there is one feasible plan.

Pham Van Dong: What plan?

Zhou Enlai: As I said, you have to ask for total cessation of bombing and contacts begin. But now, contacts will begin when there is a partial cessation. Before, the US stated that they would go anywhere to meet you. But when you proposed Phnom Penh, then they did not accept. Then you proposed Warsaw. I guess that the US would choose Warsaw, but they will play for time, suggesting 15 other places, waiting for you to suggest another place and then finally accepting Warsaw. When meeting you in Warsaw, they may propose that in return for American total cessation, you must stop assisting the South, which you of course will not accept. They then may mention indirect support from the North. The other day, Comrade Pham Van Dong said that [the North] would send weapons, and stop sending people to the South.

Pham Van Dong: No, I have never said that, never, never.

[The two sides argued on this point and finally Zhou Enlai agreed that the misunderstanding was due to misinterpretation.]

Pham Van Dong: I would like to add one point: That we send people and troops to the South shows our entire nation's will to fight the United States. This will of ours is like iron and stone, which is unshakable. We have faced some extremely difficult moments and you also have been concerned for us. But we are determined to advance forward, never allowing retreat. The whole of our nation is fighting the US to the final victory. The whole of the 31 million Vietnamese people are fighting to the final victory. Because you misheard, we have to tell you again.

Zhou Enlai: For the North, US bombing and blockading are the acts of aggression. Maybe because of poor interpretation, one thing remains unclear to me: The US asked for the cessation of indirect assistance [to the South] and you accepted partial cessation of bombing [the North]. Is it a way of admitting that you are indirectly assisting the South?

Kang Sheng: This was repeated in the statements of January 1st, December 8th and 12th.

Pham Van Dong: I do not know what you mean by referring to indirect assistance to the South?

[The two sides again argued on that point and the Chinese side introduced the term de-escalation.]

Pham Van Dong: Do you want to talk about de-escalation in assisting the South?

Zhou Enlai: That's correct.

Pham Van Dong: I would like to tell you our grand strategy applied in the anti-American war. We have talked with you about it since late 1966. This strategy is demonstrated in the following slogans: to defend the North, to liberate the South...We divided it into two aspects, or two steps, two stages, with a view to step by step defeating the US. We are still following this strategy....

Now, I return to your question of whether we are de-escalating. If it is understood that de-escalating means less fighting, the answer should be an absolute no. If it is understood that de-escalation means some compromise, the answer is no; we didn't think and act that way. To the contrary, we are all the more attacking, using diplomatic tactics, forcing them into a corner, mobilizing world opinion against the enemy. It is now the time for us to escalate and win over the enemy, not to de-escalate.

Zhou Enlai: As far as the South is concerned, from present small-scale fighting, you will conduct large-scale fighting, it means you escalate. But for the North, from asking for a total cessation of bombing to accepting the partial cessation, how can you consider it an escalation?

(Pham Van Dong smiled.)

Zhou Enlai: The other day, you accepted our assessment that the US would

concentrate their forces to bomb the area between the 17th and 20th parallels, thus creating difficulties for us. More than that they can resume bombing at any time they want even when they have contacts with you. Whenever you do not respond [to their requests], they will resume bombing. Yet, world opinion has been supporting your demand for a total cessation. In all, we still hold that your statement helped Johnson out. We are talking to you on this matter in a frank way.

...You Vietnamese comrades say that your policy is to force the US into a corner. If you want to do so, you should have asked for the total cessation of bombing when they proposed partial cessation.... You accepted partial cessation and then accepted to meet; it means a compromise as compared with the previous position. The world public opinion also noticed that. Or do you still insist on either Warsaw or Phnom Penh to be the meeting place and then become obstructive if they do not respond? So what is your purpose in accepting the US proposal? For the US, they calculate that they would try to prolong the negotiating process once it starts. We hypothesize the situation as follows: you will insist on total cessation of bombing, upholding your 4 or 5-point position, then Harriman will not oppose it totally, playing for time and adding some more conditions. When you reject, the process will be prolonged. When you obstruct the meeting, they will not. They prolong it, thus reaching their target of solving their difficulties in this election year. So you help them a lot. The coming situation will prove this judgment. We believe in our judgment, it's not my personal judgment but the one of our [Party] Central Committee. You said that you didn't have any illusions. For the world public opinion, you have compromised. For your diplomatic struggle, you have been put in a passive position. You may suspect our assessment, but you will see it very clearly when negotiations start.

...Still, the key factor is the war itself. Victory is decided by the war. But, so far as negotiation is concerned, we are still holding on our point of view, namely that you have lost your initiative and fallen into a passive position. Had you insisted on your January 28th statement, we would all have been driving them into a corner, Johnson would have been facing more difficulties, both internally and externally. Johnson had been in a corner, even without the April 3rd statement. Now you should analyze the consequences of the contacts. I think that they will certainly accept Warsaw or Phnom Penh, but with some conditions. They intentionally mentioned 15 other places. But it was only their tactic before coming to acceptance [of one of your proposed meeting places]. In all, your statement is a compromise. If you cannot see the consequences now, later you will.

Pham Van Dong: You have stated your opinion in a constructive way, and we should pay more attention to it. Because, after all we are the ones fighting against the US and defeating them. We should be responsible for both military and diplomatic activities.

Thank you very much for your opinion. We will consider it for our better performance, for our victory over the US.