

March 21, 1970

Discussion between Zhou Enlai and Pham Van Dong

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Summary:

Zhou Enlai advises to support Prince Sihanouk over Lon Nol.

Original Language:

Chinese

Contents:

Translation - English

ZHOU ENLAI AND PHAM VAN DONG

Beijing, 4:20 pm, 21 March 1970

Zhou Enlai: France is concerned that if Sihanouk tilts toward us Cambodia will be another battlefield. French interests, therefore, will be affected. So France wants to win Sihanouk's sympathy. France also wants to win the Soviets' sympathy. France may explain to the Soviet Union that Lon Nol is not entirely pro-American, that he is pro-French and he is following the policy of neutrality. The Lon Nol government, therefore, can be recognized.^[1] France may also promise that it will advise the Lon Nol government not to attack North Vietnamese and the NLF troops. These can be seen in the context of the last two days' developments: the Lon Nol government promised a policy of neutrality, respect to the treaties Cambodia had signed before. It especially ordered security measures to protect Chinese and Soviet Embassies in Phnom Penh.

We should support Sihanouk for the time being and see how he will act. We should support him because he supports the anti-American struggle in Vietnam, because the Indochinese countries opposed the Japanese [and] French in the past and because we have been supporting him after the [1955] Bandung Conference [of nonaligned nations]. We will also see whether he really wants to establish a united front to oppose the US before we support him. But because of the circumstances he may change his position. However, the more we can win his sympathy the better. It is what we initially think.

I think that Lon Nol's coup d'état against Sihanouk is approved by both the French and Americans. Of course, when talking about it, he mentioned only the Americans, not the French. However, according to Rayer [?] who had a talk with the Chinese writer—Hanzi—France does not believe in Sihanouk anymore. So both France and the US supported the coup.

The fighting capability of the Sihanouk faction cannot match yours. So if Sihanouk agrees to establish a united front, Cambodian forces can be stronger. But France advises him not to with the reason that if he allows the Vietnamese to enter Cambodia, they will not leave. France, at the same time, thinks that Sihanouk does not entirely listen to France, so France wants to replace Sihanouk by Lon Nol. Yet, Sihanouk is tilting to the Soviet Union and China, thus reducing French influence. For his part, Lon Nol does not want to displease China and the Soviet Union. On March 18, after the coup, Lon Nol did not attack your forces in the border areas and he did not press us to solve this problem. On March 18, they destroyed houses of Chinese and Vietnamese living in Svay Rieng province. On the 19th, however, they stopped these acts. And on the 20th, they issued a special order not to damage the Chinese and Soviet embassies in Phnom Penh. Lon Nol is also afraid that the Khmer people will rise up against him and at the same time, afraid that if he attacks [forces in South] Vietnam, North Vietnam will fight back. China will support North Vietnam. In that way, the war will broaden. War has broken out in Laos. A similar situation can occur in Cambodia. Thus the situation in Indochina will return to the one before the Geneva Conference of 1954. I am sure that you still remember what comrade Mao told President Ho: "Indochina is united as a bloc. This situation was created by the French." If the situation develops that way—which is what the US actions will lead to—Indochina will become a united battlefield.

I do not know whether the forces of Um Savuth^[2] have reached Rattanakiri, and have they contacted Vietnamese forces?

Pham Van Dong: We received information that they have. These forces may turn against Lon Nol. We also got the information that troops in Seam Reap are opposing

Lon Nol.^[3]

Zhou Enlai: In the talk with him, you raised the possibility of cooperation between the Khmer People's Party Khmer Rouge and Sihanouk's forces. You also mentioned the principle of no interference into the domestic affairs of Cambodia. We have the feeling that Sihanouk wants us to help on that. Therefore, we would like very much to hear from our Khmer comrades before we advise Sihanouk.

Pham Van Dong: We stated clearly that contacts should take place on both high and lower levels in order to have good cooperation at the grass roots.

Zhou Enlai: What was his reaction?

Pham Van Dong: He said nothing except giving general consent. He did not mention what he wanted us to do. Maybe he will ask you. That will be good, as both China and Vietnam will help.

Zhou Enlai: We can exert political influence, but they, as Khmers, have to deal directly with each other.

Pham Van Dong: It will not be difficult if we agree on the guiding principles. In this situation, we can ask both sides to cooperate. Sihanouk is now waiting for your reply to his requests, isn't he?

Zhou Enlai: Yes. Because I told him that I will answer them after my meeting with you. At first, Lon Nol and Sirik Matak^[4] will negotiate with both North and South Vietnam. How will you solve this matter?

Pham Van Dong: Before I came here, we discussed this. We held that negotiations would not bring about any results, because they would eventually fight against us. But we are not to be defeated. So what is the use of negotiations? However, at present when we are still talking with you and with Sihanouk to see how the situation will develop, we ask our comrades to wait, explore their attitude, and play for time. As for Sihanouk, our attitude is affirmative and our position on other issues will be based on that.

^[1] Prime Minister Lon Nol had led a coup against Sihanouk on March 18, while the Prince was abroad.

^[2] Um Savuth, a Lt.-Col. in the Royal Armed Forces, was stationed in Rattanakiri in 1970. He did not "defect," but remained in the Armed Forces of the Khmer Republic, in which he was promoted to Colonel, and later fought in the Chen La II campaign in Kampung Thom against combined Vietnamese and Khmer Rouge forces.

^[3] Several rebellions against the central government in Cambodia had broken out in early 1969. Some of these rebels later joined the Khmer Rouge or the Vietnamese forces.

^[4] Deputy Prime Minister of Cambodia, close associate of Lon Nol.