

October 5, 1964

Discussion between Mao Zedong and Pham Van Dong

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Summary:

Zedong advises Pham Van Dong on how to handle war in South Vietnam and protection of North Vietnam.

Original Language:

Chinese

Contents:

Translation - English

MAO ZEDONG AND PHAM VAN DONG,^[1] HOANG VAN HOAN^[2]

Beijing, 5 October 1964, 7-7:50 (p.m.?)

Mao Zedong: According to Comrade Le Duan,^[3] you had the plan to dispatch a division [to the South]. Probably you have not dispatched that division yet.^[4] When should you dispatch it, the timing is important. Whether or not the United States will attack the North, it has not yet made the decision. Now, it [the U.S.] is not even in a position to resolve the problem in South Vietnam. If it attacks the North, [it may need to] fight for one hundred years, and its legs will be trapped there. Therefore, it needs to consider carefully. The Americans have made all kinds of scary statements. They claim that they will run after [you], and will chase into your country, and that they will attack our air force. In my opinion, the meaning of these words is that they do not want us to fight a big war, and that [they do not want] our air force to attack their warships. If [we] do not attack their warships, they will not run after you. Isn't this what they mean? The Americans have something to hide.

Pham Van Dong: This is also our thinking. The United States is facing many difficulties, and it is not easy for it to expand the war. Therefore, our consideration is that we should try to restrict the war in South Vietnam to the sphere of special war, and should try to defeat the enemy within the sphere of special war. We should try our best not to let the U.S. imperialists turn the war in South Vietnam into a limited war, and try our best not to let the war be expanded to North Vietnam. We must adopt a very skillful strategy, and should not provoke it [the U.S.]. Our Politburo has made a decision on this matter, and today I am reporting it to Chairman Mao. We believe that this is workable.

Mao Zedong: Yes.

Pham Van Dong: If the United States dares to start a limited war, we will fight it, and will win it.

Mao Zedong: Yes, you can win it.^[5] The South Vietnamese [puppet regime] has several hundred thousand troops. You can fight against them, you can eliminate half of them, and you can eliminate all of them. To fulfill these tasks is more than possible. It is impossible for the United States to send many troops to South Vietnam. The Americans altogether have 18 army divisions. They have to keep half of these divisions, i.e., nine of them, at home, and can send abroad the other nine divisions. Among these divisions, half are in Europe, and half are in the Asian-Pacific region. And they have stationed more divisions in Asia [than elsewhere in the region], namely, three divisions. One [is] in South Korea, one in Hawaii, and the third one in [original not clear]. They also placed fewer than one division of marine corps in Okinawa in Japan. Now all American troops in South Vietnam belong to the navy, and they are units under the navy system. As far as the American navy is concerned, they have put more ships in the Western Pacific than in Europe. In the Mediterranean, there is the Sixth Fleet; here [in the Pacific] is the Seventh Fleet. They have deployed four aircraft carriers near you, but they have been scared away by you.

....

Mao Zedong: If the Americans dare to take the risk to bring the war to the North, how should the invasion be dealt with? I have discussed this issue with Comrade Le Duan. [First], of course, it is necessary to construct defensive works along the coast. The best way is to construct defensive works like the ones [we had constructed] during the Korean War, so that you may prevent the enemy from entering the inner land.

Second, however, if the Americans are determined to invade the inner land, you may allow them to do so. You should pay attention to your strategy. You must not engage your main force in a head-to-head confrontation with them, and must well maintain your main force. My opinion is that so long as the green mountain is there, how can you ever lack firewood?

Pham Van Dong: Comrade Le Duan has reported Chairman Mao's opinions to our Central Committee. We have conducted an overall review of the situations in the South and the North, and our opinion is the same as that of Chairman Mao's. In South Vietnam, we should actively fight [the enemy]; and in North Vietnam, we should be prepared [for the enemy to escalate the war]. But we should also be cautious.

Mao Zedong: Our opinions are identical. Some other people say that we are belligerent. As a matter of fact, we are cautious. But it is not totally without ground to say [that we are belligerent].

....

Mao Zedong: The more thoroughly you defeat them, the more comfortable they feel. For example, you beat the French, and they became willing to negotiate with you. The Algerians defeated the French badly, and France became willing to come to peace with Algeria. It has been proven that the more badly you beat them, the more comfortable they feel.

....

Mao Zedong: Is it true that you are invited to attend the [UN] Security Council meetings?

Zhou Enlai: This is still a secret. The invitation was made through U Thant.[\[6\]](#)

Mao Zedong: And U Thant made it through whom?

Zhou Enlai: The Soviets.

Mao Zedong: So the Soviet Union is the middleman.

Pham Van Dong: According to the Soviet ambassador to Vietnam, they met with U Thant on the one hand, and with [U.S. Secretary of State Dean] Rusk on the other.

Mao Zedong: It is not completely a bad thing to negotiate. You have already earned the qualification to negotiate. It is another matter whether or not the negotiation will succeed. We have also earned our qualification to negotiate [with the Americans]. We are now negotiating with the Americans on the Taiwan issue, and the Sino-American ambassadorial talks are now under way in Warsaw. The talks have lasted for more than nine years.

Zhou Enlai: More than 120 meetings have been held.

Mao Zedong: The talks will continue. One time, during a meeting at Geneva, they did not want to continue the talks. They withdrew their representatives, leaving there only one person in charge of communication and liaison matters. We gave them a blow by sending them a letter, setting up a deadline for them to send back their

representative. They did return to the talks later, but they did not meet the deadline we set for them: they were a few days late. They said that it was an ultimatum by us. At that time, some among ourselves believed that we should not set the deadline for them, nor should we make the harsh statement, and that by doing so it became an ultimatum. But we did, and the Americans did [return to the talks].

[1] Pham Van Dong (1906-), a long-standing member of the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) who worked closely with Ho Chi Minh and was Prime Minister of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) until 1980 (from 1976 the Socialist Republic of Vietnam—SRV).

[2] Hoang Van Hoan (1905-1994?), a long-standing member of the ICP and a Politburo member of the Lao Dong (Vietnam Workers' Party—VWP) from 1960 to 1976. Hoan was a crucial link between the DRV and China; ambassador to Beijing 1950-57; led many delegations to China as Vice Chairman of the DRV National Assembly Standing Committee in the 1960s. Lost much of his influence after Ho Chi Minh's death in September 1969. In 1973 Hoan again went to China to arrange for a visit by Le Duan and Pham Van Dong. He defected to China in July 1979. In 1986 he published his memoirs (*A Drop in the Ocean*) which gave a rare glimpse into the inner life of the ICP/VWP.

[3] Le Duan, (1908-86) had been secretary of the Nam Bo (southern region) Party Committee, later COSVN, during the first Indochina War. Sent a letter to party leaders objecting to the 1954 Geneva agreement. From 1956 acting general secretary of the Lao Dong. (Ho Chi Minh was officially General secretary.) The prime mover, in 1957-59, for a resumption of armed struggle in the South. From 1960 until his death in 1986, Le Duan served as general secretary of the VWP (in 1976 renamed Vietnam Communist Party—VCP).

[4] Right after the Gulf of Tonkin Incident, Le Duan visited Beijing and met Mao on 13 August 1964. The two leaders exchanged intelligence reports on the two incidents. Le Duan confirmed to Mao that the first incident (that of August 2) was the result of the decisions made by the Vietnamese commander on the site, and Mao told Le Duan that according to the intelligence information Beijing had received, the second incident of August 4 was “not an intentional attack by the Americans” but caused by “the Americans’ mistaken judgment, based on wrong information.” Touching upon the prospect for the war to be expanded into North Vietnam, Mao thought that “it seems that the Americans do not want to fight a war, you do not want to fight a war, and we do not necessarily want to fight a war,” and that “because no one wants to fight a war, there will be no war.” Le Duan told Mao that “the support from China is indispensable, it is indeed related to the fate of our motherland...The Soviet revisionists want to make us a bargaining chip; this has been very clear.” Ed. note: In some of the footnotes we have added additional information from the same sources as the documents themselves.

[5] On 22 January 1965, Zhou Enlai told a Vietnamese military delegation: “As far as the war in Vietnam is concerned, we should continuously eliminate the main forces of the enemy when they come out to conduct mopping-up operations, so that the combat capacity of the enemy forces will be weakened while that of our troops will be strengthened. We should strive to destroy most of the enemy’s Strategic Hamlets by the end of this year. If this is to be realized in addition to the enemy’s political bankruptcy, it is possible that victory would come even sooner than our original expectation.”

[6] U Thant (1909-74), Secretary General of the UN 1962-71.