

July 12, 1972

Discussion between Zhou Enlai and Le Duc Tho

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Summary:

Zhou Enlai advises Le Duc Tho on negotiations with the US, particularly the issue of Nguyen Van Thieu.

Original Language:

Chinese

Contents:

Translation - English

ZHOU ENLAI AND LE DUC THO

Beijing, 12 July 1972

Zhou Enlai: On the one hand, it is necessary to prepare for fighting. On the other hand, you have to negotiate. China has some experience with that. We also conducted fighting and negotiating with Jiang Jieshi. During the Korean War, we fought one year and negotiated two years. Therefore, your tactic of fighting and negotiating, that you have been conducting since 1968, is correct.

At first, when you initiated negotiations, some of our comrades thought that you had chosen the wrong moment. I even said to comrades Le Duan and Pham Van Dong that you had to choose the moment to start negotiations when you were in an advantageous position. Yet, comrade Mao said that it was correct to have negotiations at that time and that you were also prepared to fight. Only you would know when the right moment for negotiations was. And your decision was correct, thus showing that comrade Mao was more farsighted than we were.

We do not recognize Nguyen Van Thieu as he is a puppet of the US. Yet we can recognize him as a representative of one of the three forces in the coalition government. The coalition government will negotiate the basic principles for it to observe and control the situation after the US withdrawal of troops. The US will see that Thieu is sharing power in that government, and therefore, find it easier to accept a political solution. In case negotiations among the three forces fail, we will fight again. Similar situations can be found in Kashmir and the Middle East.

Le Duc Tho: But we still think of a government without Thieu.

Zhou Enlai: We are asking the US to remove Thieu. However, if we hint that Thieu can be accepted, the US will be surprised because they do not expect that. Of course, Thieu cannot be a representative of a government. But in negotiations, surprise is necessary.

In the pro-American force, Thieu is a chieftain. He is the one that sells out his country. Yet, he plays a decisive role in his party. We, therefore, cannot solve anything if we only talk with other figures in his party rather than him. Of course how to solve this problem is your job. However, as comrades, we would like to refer to our experience: In the civil war, no result would be gained if we insisted on talking with Jiang's ministers but not with Jiang himself. In the Korean War, we talked with Eisenhower. At the Geneva Conference, because [French Prime Minister Georges] Bidault was stubborn, siding with the US, talks did not continue. When [Bidault's successor as Prime Minister in 1954, Pierre] Mendes-France came to power and was interested in negotiations, the problem was solved. That means we have to talk with the chieftains. Again, our talks with the US did not proceed until the visit by Nixon to China. [North Korean Prime Minister] Comrade Kim Il Sung is also trying to talk directly with [South Korean President] Park Chung Hee. We do the same in our relations with Japan. These are historical facts. The CCP Politburo has discussed this matter, but it is up to you to decide.

May I put it another way: you can talk directly with Thieu and his deputy, thus showing that you are generous to him when he is disgraced. Since Thieu is still the representative of the Right faction, and there is not yet anyone to replace him, the US can be assured that their people are in power. The NLF should also name its representative, who may be Mr. Nguyen Huu Tho or Mr. Huynh Tan Phat,[\[1\]](#) and the neutralist faction should also do the same. However, the real struggle will be between the NLF and the Right faction.

Le Duc Tho: We are asking Thieu to resign. If he does not, we will not talk with the Saigon government.

Zhou Enlai: If he does, who will replace him?

Le Duc Tho: We are ready to talk with anyone.

Zhou Enlai: That also means Thieu's policy without him.

Le Duc Tho: But they have to compromise.

Zhou Enlai: On general elections?

Le Duc Tho: We have not mentioned general elections. If they agree on a tripartite government and recognize the power of this government, then we agree to hold general elections.

Zhou Enlai: General elections will be very dangerous, maybe more dangerous than Thieu being the representative of the Right faction, not to mention international supervision and control of the elections.

Le Duc Tho: We hold that a tripartite government must be established. One of the duties of this government is to hold elections. And free elections require realization of democratic rights.

...

Le Duc Tho: Another complicated question relates to the neutralist faction's participation in the coalition government. We have to discuss and define the term of neutrality.

Zhou Enlai: Is Duong Van Minh^[2] acceptable?

Le Duc Tho: This is a complicated problem. Duong Van Minh is not totally pro-American. Yet, the tripartite government is very provisional.

Zhou Enlai: Eventually, we have to fight again since the tripartite government is provisional.

Le Duc Tho: It also is difficult for France to become involved because of the US influence.

Zhou Enlai: So the neutral position is both pro-French and pro-American.

Le Duc Tho: Duong Van Minh is exactly like this. But the important thing is how to make the US accept the principle of the establishment of a tripartite government. And further discussion on dividing positions and power should be held after this.

Zhou Enlai: Chairman Mao has also spent much time talking with me on the question of a tripartite government. He told me to talk with you on this issue. We also have experience on this issue. A coalition government could be established, but we later had to resume fighting. The question is to play for time with a view to letting North Vietnam recover, thus getting stronger while the enemy is getting weaker.^[3]

[1] Huynh Tan Phat (1913-89), an architect who was twice arrested by the Diem government after 1954, NLF general secretary 1964-66 and PRG President from its foundation in 1969 to 1976, when he became SRV deputy premier.

[2] General Duong Van Minh (also known as "Big" Minh), one of the main figures in the coup against Ngo Dinh Diem 1963, head of state 1962-64, when he was deposed. In 1975 he became the last president of South Vietnam before the fall of Saigon.

[3] In his peace plan of October 1972, Le Duc Tho actually dropped the demand for the resignation of President Thieu and the immediate formation of a coalition government.