

November 16, 1966

Telegram number 3725-59 from M. Lucien Paye

Citation:

"Telegram number 3725-59 from M. Lucien Paye", November 16, 1966, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Documents Diplomatiques Français, 1966 tome 2 (1Jun-31Dec) (Bruxelles: Peter Lang, 2006), 874-878. Translated by Garret Martin.
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Summary:

Lucien Paye, upon departing China, meets with Foreign Minister Chen Yi to discuss the Red Guard movement, Sino-French relations, and the Vietnam War, among other topics.

Credits:

This document was made possible with support from MacArthur Foundation

Original Language:

French

Contents:

Translation - English

Beijing, 16th November 1966
Received at..... 13h15

M. Lucien Paye, French Ambassador in Beijing
to
M. Maurice Couve de Murville, Foreign Minister

Telegram number 3725-59
Limited Distribution

A few weeks ago, I had mentioned to the Protocol Services my imminent departure for France, adding that I would be available if the Foreign Minister wanted to see me before then. I was told this morning that M. Chen Yi would see me an hour later. We had a nearly two hour conversation during which we mostly discussed domestic questions and the Cultural Revolution, as well as the Vietnamese question.

I started the meeting by saying that during my trip to Paris, the personalities that I would surely meet would undoubtedly ask me questions about Chinese policy, and in particular the actions of the Red Guards. Before leaving, I wanted to make sure I got information from the best possible source.

The Foreign Minister, to give me time to think, then asked me to first start by mentioning how I viewed the situation. To direct his presentation, I referred to what President Mao Zedong had told me in September 1964 on the necessity to allow the youth to prove itself, and I emphasized the points on which we wanted more information: organization of the movement, origin of the participants, differences between cities and regions, control from the party or the army, durability of the movement, etc...

M. Chen Yi, using a presentation that he cherishes, made sure to place this period within a vast historical framework, which allowed him to both give a general value to the current episode of the revolutionary movement and to limit the importance of the hesitations that we have witnessed recently. He recalled, according to a well know approach, the development of revolutionary forces delineated by the great upheavals of 1789, 1917, 1949, and even referred, as he had already done with me, to the Paris Commune.

As for the Red Guards, he admitted that their creation had stirred some criticisms, with some sharing their reservations and others expressing their fears. But one could only pass judgment in a few years. We had noted after several years the success of the people's communes, which had been criticized by the Soviets. In the same way, for the Red Guards, facts and experience will help to convince the skeptics and the opponents.

It is a movement that started spontaneously before 18th August, but which was sanctioned by the first demonstration to which Mao Zedong took part. From the start, President Mao approved, supported and directed this movement. It is an organization that is specific to universities and schools. There are ten million students in higher and secondary education, and there is roughly the same number of Red Guards. Responding to one of my questions, M. Chen Yi acknowledged that not all students were Red Guards, and there was freedom to join the movement or stay away. Nonetheless, he still believed that only a minority had chosen to stay aside.

I tried to get the Minister to say more about the importance of the opposition that he had referred to during his presentation, but he only stuck to general considerations. We can note many oppositions and different ideas. That is normal as all factions must

be able to express themselves. There are some bourgeois factions, others who are tempted by revisionism. There are even some elements interested in the United States, which is not surprising considering the important number of Chinese who were trained in that country. Currently, we are witnessing many debates that are of interest not only to the Red Guards, but also for the general public, and that is how we can reach a consensus. But in the end, decisions will be made by Mao, by the Central Committee, and the Council of State Affairs, who determine policies.

Through these developments, the main idea that M. Chen Yi wanted to put forward was that the vast majority of the population agrees on a certain number of fundamental principles like the construction of socialism, the fight against imperialism, the support for the party and President Mao, but that opinions can diverge on more specific problems. Yet, he refused to say more about the points that are subject to opposition, or about their scale.

The Minister finished this part of the conversation by reminding me, as he had said earlier before, that the current movement also aimed to strengthen China's defense capacity. In case of an American aggression, the movement is ready to support a war effort. 'As a Marshal, he added, I am very satisfied. I hope that the time comes where I could lead, on the front, millions of Chinese, including the Red Guards, in the struggle against the American aggressor. Maybe the Red Guards have made some criticisms against me, but that did not prevent them from obeying my orders'. I have the impression that my interlocutor, by replacing the Red Guards' movement in the context of China's revolutionary history, was trying to reduce it to a limited episode, 'to a little wave' to use his expression.

The words of the Foreign Minister on the possibility of a war with the United States allowed me to shift to the question of a settlement of the Vietnamese conflict. I brought up the declarations of General de Gaulle in Phnom Penh, as well as those in his press conference and the known position of the French government.

M. Chen Yi indicated that these texts had been studied carefully in Beijing. He reminded me that it was thanks to the General de Gaulle that friendship had been restored between China and France, and he expressed his approval of the 'opposition policy to the dominance of the two superpowers' led by our country. China, he added, agrees with the demand made by General de Gaulle calling for the withdrawal of American military bases: they have been removed from France, while the United States have still not left our province in Taiwan.

In the same way, the Chinese government agrees with France to oppose the nuclear monopoly of the United States and the USSR. It would be very dangerous, added the Minister, to provide nuclear weapons to West Germany. The latter, like Japan, can be a source of war. True, it is hard for us to talk about German affairs, but we hope that General de Gaulle can have a positive and peaceful influence there.

As for Vietnam, when General de Gaulle called on the United States to withdraw their armed forces from the country, he is expressing a correct opinion. In Phnom Penh, he proposed that the interested parties negotiate to solve the problem: these words imply that we recognize the rights of the NLF. We agree on these points. That proves the depth of the Sino-French friendship.

The Minister then dismissed the idea of a resort to the Geneva conference to settle the Vietnamese problem: that would be a trap laid out by the United States, which want Great Britain and the USSR to convene a new meeting. They have already sabotaged a conference and can sabotage another. 'We are not advocating that the five powers, or the six powers, solve world problems through negotiations. We are not interested in the policy of the great powers'. World problems, he added, must be solved by all countries, big and small. And to avoid any confusion, he briefly took up

the usual argument against the UN, dominated by the United States.

I brought the discussion back to the Vietnamese problem by recalling two essential points of General de Gaulle's declarations: the necessary participation of China in any negotiation on this question, and a call on the United States to accept to make a commitment to withdraw their forces within a determined delay.

In his reply, M. Chen Yi clearly defined the three positions that had surfaced until now on this problem: we start negotiations, and the withdrawal of troops happens afterwards, during the negotiation; we first ask a guarantee from the United States on the withdrawal and then we start the negotiation; we demand the withdrawal of American forces before the start of any negotiation. 'Vietnam, he told me, has spoken in favor of the third position, and we agree with it'.

Asked about whether or not China would also support Vietnam if it agreed to the second position, the Minister replied, as he had already done so on 14th July 1965: 'The Vietnamese have the final word in this affair and we cannot speak for them. However, if they asked our opinion, we would advise them to fight until the end'. He explained his perspective by indicating that the United States had not fulfilled promises in the past, especially towards China: their promises were not sufficient. As I alluded to the influence and the eventual guarantee of the other powers interested in a settlement, including France, M. Chen Yi replied that the United States would not listen to the opinions of others.

During the meeting, M. Chen Yi came back several times to the Sino-Soviet dispute. He first mentioned that the people's communes had allowed China to take a step that the USSR had not dared to make. He then spoke about the critical and skeptical attitude of the Soviets towards the Red Guards movement. Our opponents, he said, spoke too quickly on this subject. Moscow will maybe be threatened one day by that danger. The Soviet leaders do not see the ardor of the Soviet youth that surfaced during the struggle against fascism. Sooner or later, it will reveal itself.

Mentioning the 'repression' methods used by the Soviet leaders, the Minister brought up once again the Chinese and Asian student protests in front of the United States' embassy in Moscow, and the police intervention. 'This kind of tragedy, he concluded, would not have happened in Lenin and Stalin's time'.

I took advantage of my meeting with the Foreign Minister to bring up the question of the French exhibition in Shanghai: we are thrilled, I said, with the welcome given to this event and of the interest shown by the many Chinese visitors. However, the exhibition organizers felt that the level of commercial affairs have not matched until now this friendly atmosphere. I was planning to discuss this subject with the Ministry of External Trade: I still wanted to bring this up before hand with M. Chen Yi. He listened with attention and promised to intervene with the Ministry of External Trade.

I indicated to M. Chen Yi that I recently seen the Director of Consular Affairs of the Foreign Ministry in regard to the building dispute and briefly repeated the French position on this matter: we did not want to start discussing details, but we would hope that in exchange for the buildings that we would return to China, we could benefit from additional means to build a new Embassy according to our plans.

I added to the Minister that we would include in this total the wage of the workers that would complete the work. Then, without responding directly, he asked me to work in Paris to ensure the return of the two buildings of the Embassy of China, adding that the other questions would be easy to settle. He also expressed the wish that the new embassy could be built quickly.

I briefly mentioned with Chen Yi the question of Sino-French cultural relations. Reminding him that France had kept the Chinese students and researchers, I expressed the hope that our own scholarship students could return to China next year. The Minister replied that they would recover their spot at the start of the academic term: for the moment, there are no classes, as we could see. As for the start of the academic term, it might take place either in May, in July or in the fall. We did not know yet. The youth had started a long march, and we cannot make precise plans for the moment.