

August 12, 1965

**Record of Conversation between Premier Zhou and
Trần Văn Thanh, Chief, Delegation in China of
National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam**

Citation:

"Record of Conversation between Premier Zhou and Trần Văn Thanh, Chief, Delegation in China of National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam", August 12, 1965, Wilson Center Digital Archive, PRC FMA 107-00901-02, 14-26. Translated by Stephen Mercado. <https://wilson-center-digital-archive.dvincitest.com/document/165574>

Summary:

Zhou Enlai and Trần Văn Thanh discuss the war in South Vietnam, Singapore's departure from the Federation of Malaya, and prospects for the Second Asian-African Conference.

Credits:

This document was made possible with support from Henry Luce Foundation

Original Language:

Chinese

Contents:

Translation - English

Secret Document 746

Foreign Ministry File

Record of Conversation between Premier Zhou and Trần Văn Thanh, Chief, Delegation in China of National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam
(Premier has yet to review and approve)

Time: 12 August 1965

Place: Fujian Hall, Great Hall of the People

Chinese side: Vice Minister Qiao Guanhua, Department Director Yao Guang,
Department Director Lai Yali

Interpreter: Zhuang Muqiu

Recorder: He Wenyi

Content Summary

1. Trần Văn Thanh passed to Premier Zhou four letters of thanks from Chairman Nguyen Huu Tho to Chairman Mao [Zedong], President Liu [Shaoqi], Chairman Zhu De, and Premier Zhou [Enlai] thanking them and the Chinese people for supporting the people of southern Vietnam in their struggle to resist the United States and save the country, as well as introducing the situation of the armed struggle and liberated areas in south Vietnam.

2. Premier Zhou and Vice Minister Qiao Guanhua spoke of our views on Singapore's withdrawal from Malaysia and the Second Asian-African Conference and introduced Syria's political attitude.

Premier Zhou (hereafter Zhou): You are returning after a long time. You have completely recovered from your illness, haven't you?

Trần Văn Thanh (hereafter Trần): It has been a long time. I still have not completely recovered.

Zhou: You can have another examination here. Have you been to other countries in the past eight months?

Trần: No. I previously went to Cuba.

I have come today to see you, bringing four letters from Chairman Nguyen Huu Tho to Chairman Mao, President Liu, Chairman Zhu De, and you, thanking the Chinese people for supporting the people of southern Vietnam in their struggle to resist the United States and save the country.

Zhou: We should be supporting you. Speaking of thanks, we should thank you. You are pinning down US imperialism, annihilating US imperialism, and ceaselessly winning victories, which is the greatest support for the people of the world, including the Chinese people. I will certainly pass on these letters. Chairman Nguyen is in fine health, isn't he?

Trần: Very fine health.

Zhou: How old is he?

Trần: Nearly 60 years old.

Zhou: He is on the front line and often has to move. It is very hard.

Trần: In the work of keeping him safe, we are very concerned about his health and safety. In the past, in the movement to protect Saigon - Cholon, Chairman Nguyen Huu Tho was arrested and imprisoned by the Ngo Dinh Diem Group. He was later rescued by the people of southern Vietnam. Because of that, he is not in great health.

Zhou: Has Chairman Nguyen Huu Tho gone to Phnom Penh?

Trần: No.

Zhou: Are the southern comrades in Cambodia in good health?

Trần: Other than Huynh Tan Phat, who has been ill, the other comrades are all in very good health.

Zhou: Other than information that has been in the news, what is the important news of the war in the South?

Trần: In the first half of this year, we annihilated much of the enemy's effective strength, which exceeded our expectations. The reason for this is not that we are capable but that the enemy is weak.

Zhou: There are two sides to this. The enemy is timid and the People's Liberation Armed Forces of South Vietnam (PLAF) are brave and resourceful.

Trần: Having summarized the situation in the first half of this year, we feel that there are still many weaknesses in the PLAF leadership that we need to overcome. If we can overcome them, then we can achieve even greater victory. Like the Battle of Binh Gia, if we are more resolute and again persist for some time, we can achieve even greater victory, because we still have potential. Also, as in the Battle of Ba Gia and the Battle of Thanh Son, the greater our determination is, the greater our victory will be. These two battles made us realize that our past estimates of enemy strength were incorrect. In the past we believed that it was necessary to have two, three or four times the enemy's strength to fight a battle of annihilation. In fact, that is not the case. In the Battle of Thanh Son, we annihilated the enemy with a force ratio of 1 to 1. (Zhou interrupts to ask if the enemy was completely annihilated)

Trần: Yes, completely annihilated. In 1964, although we achieved many victories, in the first half of 1965 there was a major change in the situation. In the past there was too much to handle at the same time. If we struck the Fifth Zone, activity in the south would decrease, allowing the enemy a chance to catch his breath. This year is an offensive all along the line, from the 17th parallel to Cape Ca Mau. The enemy force guarding Saigon accounts for 45 percent of total enemy troops, but at times of tension only two battalions remain.

Zhou: Is that 45 percent entirely puppet troops or regular ones?

Trần: They are regular troops.

Zhou: So, that means 45 percent of 9 divisions?

Trần: The enemy's main force, in addition to the 9 divisions, also has marine and paratroop forces.

Zhou: How many enemy battalions in all are there?

Trần: According to this formation, a complete division has from 15,000 to 16,000 men. According to the 4: 4: 4 formation, each battalion has four companies, each company has four platoons, and each platoon has four squads. However, the enemy's formation is not complete. For example, the 1st Battalion of the Fifth Division's 9th Regiment has only 36 puppet troops.

Zhou: Is it not that not only local forces, but the regular forces as well, find it difficult to augment their troops?

Trần: In fact augmentation of the enemy's force is very difficult. In March this year, the Honolulu Conference decided on a troop increase of 6,000 but has not been able to increase them by that number.

Zhou: Is it that the puppet army, nominally 500,000 troops, does not really reach that number?

Trần: The puppet army and regular troops, plus local ones, do not reach a nominal 600,000. In 1964 it was only 580,000; in 1965, it has fallen to 560,000.

This year our guerrilla warfare is developing widely and with balance, from the mountain areas to the plains, from the countryside to the cities. It is developing everywhere. In some villages, the enemy sent an entire battalion to conduct a sweep and there was nothing that we could do about it. For example, the village of Mau Duc has a total of 127 guerrillas. Their arms are simple and crude. Of course, there are also some new weapons seized from the enemy. The enemy sent a force of several battalions and in four months has conducted over a hundred sweeps. The guerrillas have not lost a single person.

However, there are still weaknesses in leadership work. If the main force is between battles, guerrilla activity will also relax, allowing the enemy a chance to occupy again our liberated areas. For example, in the first half of this year, we expanded the liberated areas, with a population of approximately a million persons, but an area of 11 villages and a population of 35,000 persons was taken back by the enemy. The areas taken by the enemy were mainly near the 17th parallel in Quang Tri Province and Thua Tien Province.

Zhou: How many "strategic hamlets" does the enemy have?

Trần: The enemy has built in total more than 7,000 "strategic hamlets," of which more than 5,000 have already been destroyed by us. At present there are approximately 2,000 of them, all situated along Highway 1 and around the towns.

Zhou: If the highways are destroyed, there is no way for the enemy to recover, is there?

Trần: The enemy sent an entire division to guard Highway 19 in attempt to regain control. Highway 1 has been cut off in many places between the 17th parallel and Saigon.

Zhou: The US military is mainly guarding the coastal areas, airports, and cities. Does it sortie much with the puppet army?

Trần: The US military also sorties but is tentative in going out. If the first day it sorties 20 kilometers, the second day it will go out 30 kilometers. In June, the enemy swept ZONE D. It was the troops of the United States, Australia, and the south Vietnam puppet army in a joint action. In their first encounter they confronted guerrillas and in their second, our main force. This main force was annihilated.

Zhou: The number of aircraft, other than helicopters, has increased compared to before, hasn't it?

Trần: In the first half of the year, there was a total increase of 400 aircraft. In addition there was an addition of eight M113 mechanized units, each unit having from 12 to 16 armored vehicles. In the south they use many landing craft, with a total increase of 200 craft.

Zhou: Are there any amphibious tanks?

Trần: The M113 armored vehicle is amphibious.

Zhou: Is there a way to destroy it?

Trần: Last year in the Battle of Ap Bac, it was destroyed for the first time.

Zhou: How is the supply of the puppet army's weapons, food, and clothing?

Trần: They are supplied by the US military, but food is a problem. In the first half of the year, the puppet army's stored only 40,000 tons of rice. It is said that Thailand has supplied 40,000 tons.

Zhou: Do puppet troops loot food in the rural areas?

Trần: The struggle is very fierce. The enemy has also gone against merchants who were hoarding and exporting grain.

Zhou: Do the capitalists go to the rural areas to purchase food to export?

Trần: Yes. These people are in contradiction with the bogus government. They hoard food and export it; the bogus government acquires food from them by force.

Zhou: How many tons of rice did Saigon export last year?

Trần: It is not clear. For many years exports were approximately one million tons. They are much less now.

Zhou: What is the situation for rural production in the liberated areas? Is normal production possible for the most part, or is it constantly subject to destruction by the puppet army and reduced production?

Trần: Production in the liberated areas is normal. Production in the contested areas is difficult.

Zhou: The contested areas are larger than the consolidated liberated areas, aren't they?

Trần: The consolidated liberated areas are larger. We have published a map showing the situation of the liberated areas, the contested areas, and the enemy-occupied areas.

Zhou: Is it old or new?

Trần: It was published in 1965 and revised in the first half of the year. Because it is for publication, it should not be specific. Otherwise, experts would know at a glance the deployment of our forces.

Zhou: How is the food supply in the liberated areas?

Trần: The South is relatively easy and the Fifth Zone is difficult, but the North has given some food aid to the Fifth Zone. The Sixth District is the most difficult one, the one furthest south in the center.

Zhou: Is it near Saigon?

Trần: It is north of Saigon and south of Highway 21.

Zhou: Does the enemy often conduct sweeps there?

Trần: Food in this area has always been in short supply. The enemy has occupied the lines of communications, and transportation has been difficult. In the first half of this year, the South gave some supplies to this area. When the enemy declared that they would sweep Zone D, they seized the food. At that time, we did not have the time to transfer the food.

Zhou: What is the situation of the enemy going to the mountain areas to seize food?

Trần: The mountain areas are not lacking in food, compared to the period of the War of Resistance against France, but lacking only in salt

The Fifth Zone's liberated area is very large. Apart from the North's material assistance, some of the food can be resolved on the spot. There is a surplus of corn and cassava in the Sai Yuan area. The forces plant crops everywhere. When the forces pass by, they can harvest everywhere.

Zhou: Are they still importing food from Cambodia?

Trần: Part of it can be resolved from Cambodia. Cambodians transport food to the border areas. We can buy food through border trade. There is no need to go far. Once across the border, there are places to cache food.

Zhou: Do the American and puppet troops often patrol the Cambodian-Vietnamese border?

Trần: In Ha Tien, Giang Thanh, and elsewhere, other than Chau Doc on the east side, it is all liberated area. The enemy often goes between Tien Giang and Hau Giang. The enemy also often goes to the border between Cambodia's Svay Rieng Province and

the Thap Muoi Plain. The enemy can still control from north of Highway 1 to the Duc Co District, but the region north of Duc Co for 60 to 70 kilometers is our liberated area.

Zhou: Do you use foreign currency for Cambodia?

Trần: According to the trade agreement with the border inhabitants, we can use Cambodian currency and south Vietnam's bogus currency, which is very convenient. We do not ourselves issue bank notes. Cambodian currency can be exchanged via border inhabitants for trade. South Vietnam bogus currency is donated by southerners.

Zhou: Can one still easily go from the liberated areas to Cambodia?

Trần: It is still relatively easy.

Zhou: Does the National Liberation Front have representation in Cambodia?

Trần: We still have no representation in Cambodia.

Zhou: Have the National Liberation Front representatives who attended the Conference on Indochina all returned?

Trần: They have all returned by now.

Zhou: Are there not any persons who go temporarily to discuss matters, or are they conveyed via the North?

Trần: Officially, it is through Truong Cang, the Cambodian ambassador to China, who is in contact with us. Unofficially, it is through Phnom Penh intermediaries. We avoid contact with Ca Van Thinh, the North's commercial representative in Cambodia.

Zhou: What about maritime transport?

Trần: It was cut off after the enemy realized that the North was transporting things by sea to the South. But between Quang Tri and Quy Nhon they can also go by junk.

Recently, Singapore declared its withdrawal from Malaysia. Premier Zhou, would you be able to discuss your view on this issue?

Zhou: Please, Vice Minister Qiao, say a few words.

Qiao: The Philippines and Indonesia have nearly the same attitude regarding Singapore's withdrawal from Malaysia, showing a need to look at it a bit.

Zhou: In any event, in Singapore's withdrawal from Malaysia it was Malaysia that opened the breach. Contradiction between Malaya and Singapore was the main cause behind the conflict. Singapore is a free port with well-developed trade. Malaya is a producer of raw materials. Its rubber, tin, and other raw materials need to ship through Singapore. The two sides needed to unite and form the Malaysian Federation, in the process bringing in Sarawak, Sabah, and such. At the time of its establishment, it was said that Singapore's finances would mainly be used locally. After its establishment, [Tunku Abdul] Rahman tightly controlled Singapore's finances,

exceeding the provisions of the agreement. The people of Singapore were dissatisfied. Lee Kuan Yew could not but take the side of the people of Singapore. The dispute lasted a long time. Rahman would not yield, going so far as to expropriate the Bank of China. Singapore was unhappy about this, because the bank was beneficial for its trading. Lee Kuan Yew, too, was opposed to it and went to Malaya to talk. Malaya has many ethnic Chinese, and they are very influential. Rahman was very nervous about this, due to the very large number of ethnic Chinese in Singapore and Malaya. Rahman advocated religious unity and making Islam the state religion, using religion to oppress ethnic groups. Now, most ethnic Chinese do not believe in Islam. This was the second conflict. The third one was that there was no benefit to Singapore for being in the Malaysian Federation. Its finances were taken away by Rahman, and its trade suffered. Rahman faced the following choice: If he had a falling out with Lee Kuan Yew, it would affect him in the election, because Lee Kuan Yew was more influential than Rahman. If he repressed Lee Kuan Yew and arrested him, Singapore would vehemently oppose it. Similarly, Britain had also opted for separation, enabling Malaysian rule not to end in failure. This was the result of struggle. In any event, it was a loss for him as well. But there was no other solution. Lee Kuan Yew was not necessarily thinking of separation from the start. When the separation was announced, Lee Kuan Yew also cried. It has been said that the separation was something that Britain did deliberately with the intent to disperse and oppose Malaysia's struggle. However, whether such talk is true or not remains to be seen.

Trần: What is your view regarding the Second Asian-African Conference convening as scheduled?

Vice Minister Qiao: It seems now that it is not a major issue. Of the 19 countries of Black Africa that have accepted the invitation, 14 have endorsed convening the conference in Algeria. Only five countries are not going, and three of those countries have proposed the need to guarantee the life of [Ahmed] Ben Bella.

Zhou: In the past, only five countries of Black Africa went to the meeting, and it was precisely because there were too few Black African countries that it was postponed. Now three quarters of them are united in going to the meeting and one quarter in not going. In the past, only a quarter of them went, so it has gone exactly the opposite way. In addition, another 10 countries in Africa, namely the eight countries of the African and Malagasy Union, led by the Ivory Coast, as well as Burundi and Rwanda, have not received an invitation. Recently, following the United Arab Republic's lobbying, six countries still are not going to participate. It doesn't much matter.

Vice Minister Qiao: The African Summit, which Ghana has proposed to convene on 21 October, will thus have an effect on the Second Asian-African Conference. Algeria is very nervous about it. Following the lobbying, Ghana is not very insistent, and it seems that this issue can be resolved.

Zhou: There are two aspects to imperialism. They want to carry out destruction. If they cannot destroy, then they run in and destroy. As with India, Japan, the Philippines, Thailand, and elsewhere, they form small groups. Ceylon's attitude is more relaxed; they are not diehards.

Yesterday, Vice Premier and Foreign Minister Chen Yi went to Indonesia to attend Indonesia's twentieth National Day anniversary. Vietnam Foreign Minister Nguyen Duy Trinh also went, as did Algeria's minister of state. We can use this opportunity in Jakarta to talk a bit about the issue of preparations for the Second Asian-African Conference.

Trần: Syria intends to invite the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam to send a delegation to visit. I heard that it is the Premier's proposal.

Zhou: I simply raised it with them. It is still their initiative. Are you prepared to go visit?

Trần: If they issue a formal invitation, we are prepared to go visit. How is their political attitude?

Zhou: Syria's attitude is very good. It was the first to recognize Boumedienne and, after the decision to postpone the Second Asian-African Conference, was also the first to express agreement on convening it as scheduled at the location previously determined.

When you write back, please convey our regards to Chairman Nguyen Huu Tho and the other leading comrades.