

July 19, 1954

**Minutes of Conversation between Zhou Enlai, Pierre
Mendes-France, and Eden**

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Summary:

Zhou, Mendes-France, and Eden discuss regrouping areas and French troops in Laos. The three are close in their opinions, but there are still points of division. Mendes-France agrees to limit the number of French troops, but insists a specified time limit is unreasonable. Mendes-France also insists that some regrouping areas are needed in the south. This last point, the three agree to leave to military experts.

Original Language:

Chinese

Contents:

Translation - English

Time: 19 July 1954, 12:45 p.m. to 1:30 p.m.

Location: Premier Zhou's residence

Chinese Participants: Zhou Enlai, [Ambassador to the Soviet Union and Vice Foreign Minister] Zhang Wentian, Li Kenong, [Director of the Foreign Ministry Staff Office] Wang Bingnan, [Foreign Ministry Asian Affairs Department Director] Chen Jiakang, Huan Xiang, Pu Shouchang (interpreter), Dong Ningchuan (interpreter)

French Participants: Pierre Mendes-France, Jean Chauvel

British Participants: Anthony Eden, Harold Caccia, Ford

Mendes-France: The conference has now entered into [its] concluding stage, but the question of Laos has not seen much development. I wish to discuss this question with Your Excellency the Premier.

The question of Laos has two sides: on one hand, the restoration of peace and the problems afterwards, and on the other, the question of French troops in Laos. French troops are stationed there at the request of the Laotian government, and the number of troops is not large at around 3,000. This is a security measure to help Laos, and cannot be regarded as a danger. I have also discussed this with Mr. Pham Van Dong, and it is not necessary to worry about it. Laos has a border of about three to four thousand kilometers, and it needs an army that can maintain order and safeguard security. Therefore help from French troops is necessary. Would Your Excellency, the Premier, agree? I need to repeat that the French troops are by no means aggressive and will not threaten anyone.

Zhou Enlai: The question of the French troops stationed in Laos within a given time, at certain location, and in a certain number could be considered in connection with other questions. I wonder if the question of regrouping the Laotian resistance force in concentration areas has been solved. French troops should mostly be stationed along the Mekong River, and Xiangkhoang would be too close to the Vietnamese border.

Mendes-France: We have two bases along the Mekong River, and this should be no problem. As to the base in the Plain of Jars[1], we can try to find another way out. We agree to a limit on the number of French troops in Laos, but in terms of duration, I hope we could reconsider the issue, for Laos needs to take some time to establish its armed forces for self-defense.

The regrouping of the resistance force in Laos is a subtle question of principle. But it should not be a big problem, since the number of the resistance troops is not large: in the beginning there were only 2,000, later the number grew to 2,500, and now it is said to be 4,000 which may not even be true. But at any rate the number is small and this question could be solved. We also agree to guarantee that these troops will be allowed to participate in state affairs and will not be retaliated upon. Their civil servants can get jobs in administrative institutions, and soldiers can be incorporated into the national army. They can be entitled to the right to vote, to be elected, and all the other civic rights. However, we do not understand why such military troops should be entitled special political rights and control a special administrative region, even part of a region. It is inappropriate when the majority does not have such political privileges while the minority does. We are willing to consider all specific suggestions in a conciliatory spirit, but it is not a good idea to partition Laos and delimit discriminatory political regions.

Zhou Enlai: The opinions that Your Excellency the Prime Minister has just stated are quite similar to mine. I discussed solutions with the Laotian foreign minister and defense minister yesterday. We believe that a distinction should be made between two questions: one is the withdrawal of foreign troops, and the other is the regrouping of local forces. These forces should be regrouped in one area, rather than at eleven points. The regrouping of the resistance force should be protected, and

after the elections, they can either join the national armed forces, the police force, or be demobilized at their own volition. Thus reunification can be realized. After the withdrawal of foreign troops, the international supervision at the ports around the country will serve as a guarantee. A further distinction should be made between two questions. The resistance force is a military organization, and it can be protected after regrouping and political work. When reunification is achieved through elections, they can be placed well. As to the question of local administration, it is a matter of internal affairs and thus the [Laotian] Royal government and the representatives of the resistance forces should meet on the spot to look for a solution. The resistance force stood in opposition to the government during the war, but now that they recognize the Royal government, the Royal government should unite with them. Mr. Mendes-France has also said that they should be granted various rights, given jobs, and placed well.

The central question now is to make the regrouping areas the areas where the resistance forces have been for a long time. This would be conducive to resolving the problem. I say candidly that we are willing to consider the French plan to retain some troops in Laos within a given time and at certain locations so as to train and strengthen Laos' self-defense forces. We hope to see Laos become a peaceful, independent, free, and friendly country, and be capable of defending itself. We believe that Mr. Mendes-France should also consider delimiting a fairly large regrouping area. Later reunification could be realized through supervised elections, and the resistance force should be taken good care of. This would be promoting reunification from another side. After the withdrawal of the Vietnamese Volunteer Forces, the resistance force should have protection.

We can promote reunification from two sides. We are willing to have Laos become a buffer zone as described by Mr. Eden. I am delighted that Mr. Eden is also here, so that we can discuss ways to reach our common goals. We should all urge upon the Royal government to assume responsibilities. When everything is done through the Royal government, it could be normalized.

Mendes-France: As Your Excellency the Premier has said, our opinions are no longer far apart. The question of French troops in Laos should be easy to solve. The retention of French troops in Laos should not cause anyone to worry; the Vietnamese People's Army should be withdrawn; the resistance forces should be well taken care of. Specific solutions to these questions should not be too difficult to find. The reason why I proposed eleven regrouping points is that we believe it to be a fairly appropriate solution. If you think there should be fewer points, it can be done easily, but it would complicate the problem to move all the people in the south to the north. Since the resistance force is all over the country, shouldn't we also consider regrouping points in the south? Most of the people there are accustomed to local life, and the question should be solved there. The other part of the people can be transferred north. As to regrouping in the north, the question is relatively easy. We suggest that we protect the resistance force as best we can, and grant them all civic rights, but no special political rights.

Laos is a weak country; we all agree that it could be totally independent. What needs to be avoided now is that we should not give Laos and other countries the impression that just as a country is acquiring independence, people begin to consider dividing it up and marking out administrative regions with special positions. The real independence of Laos should be guaranteed, and it should not be threatened either from within or from without, otherwise it would have a negative influence on Asia and on other areas. I hope Your Excellency the Premier would pay attention to this.

Zhou Enlai: I said in a talk with Mr. Mendes-France and Mr. Eden in June that there should be a regrouping area for the resistance force in Laos. But this is different from the situation in Vietnam. In Vietnam, there are two regrouping areas and two governments. Within a specific period they control their respective areas. But the

regrouping areas in Vietnam are only a provisional solution, and this does not harm reunification. The proposed eleven regrouping points in Laos will not bring about stability; rather, they might cause local conflicts. The retention of French troops in Laos is to help Laos establish a force for self-defense, reunification, and independence. We will not call this French aggression, but French troops are foreign forces. The resistance forces are local forces and should be concentrated rather than scattered at eleven points. They should have protection, and after regrouping gradually participate in state affairs under international supervision. Laos is not like Vietnam, and the Royal government should be responsible for solving their problems and reassuring them.

It is possible that some people in the south do not want to move to the north. This is a political issue, and can be solved through negotiations by the representatives of the resistance force and the Royal government. Administrative questions should be separated from military questions. What I said in June was based on realistic concerns, and what I say now is the same, without any additions or reductions. On the contrary, we are willing to consider the retention of French troops in Laos. This is a new point.

Mendes-France: Now that our opinions are no longer far apart, I suggest that the discussion be continued by experts.

Eden: I hope so, too. From what we have heard, agreements have been reached on some points here. As we understand, Mr. Zhou Enlai is not opposed to the idea of a regrouping area in the south, but to the idea of eleven scattered points. I think this question can be handed to experts to be discussed along with the question of French troops in Laos.

Zhou Enlai: What I proposed in June and what I have always stated is the establishment of a regrouping area in the northeast, and not eleven scattered points. Otherwise unrest would result, and the cease-fire would not be stable. This regrouping area is only provisional, and after reunification through elections, the resistance force could become part of the Royal armed forces or part of local police forces, or simply be demobilized. This would be promoting reunification and not disunity.

Mendes-France: Regarding the question of the number and location of the regrouping areas, I think the main regrouping area can be established in the northeast. Perhaps regrouping points could still be established in the south, but as to the question of specific borders, it can be solved on the spot. After regrouping, representatives of the resistance forces can get in touch with the local authorities to solve all the problems after regrouping.

Zhou Enlai: I agree with Your Excellency the Prime Minister. The questions shall be studied by experts.

Mendes-France: The experts can meet this afternoon.

Eden: If we are through with the Laos question, I would like to propose another thing. [Mr.] Caccia and Ambassador Zhang had a very productive talk. I suggest that they talk again.

Zhou Enlai: Good. Mr. Caccia, why don't you stay for lunch so you can have a talk.

[1] A collection of fortified bunkers surrounding an airfield, this installation was built in Xiangkhoang province, near the Plain of Jars, in May 1953 as a landing point for

French troops and equipment.