

April 13, 1968

Discussion between Zhou Enlai and Pham Van Dong

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Summary:

Zhou Enlai discusses with Pham Van Dong Vietnam's course of action in the face of American turmoil at home and negotiations in Vietnam.

Original Language:

Chinese

Contents:

Translation - English

ZHOU ENLAI AND PHAM VAN DONG

Beijing, 13 April 1968

Zhou Enlai: ...According to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam's (DRV's) previous position, if the US didn't cease its bombing completely and unconditionally, there could not be any conversations.^[1] But the April 3rd statement of the Government of DRV was a surprise not only for the world's people but even for Johnson's opponents. However, in your statement you only used the word "contact." You have had secret contacts before there was limited bombing. Now with this statement you made public those contacts. And, to the world's people, it partly is your compromise, and it helps the US solve their difficulties. After the Tet Offensives, the US tried to cover up its difficulties. After [Gen. Earle] Wheeler visited Saigon, he returned to Washington and talked with President Johnson and [Gen. William] Westmoreland. They had to admit their difficulties...Westmoreland then asked for an additional 200,000 troops but the US Congress and government refused...Primary elections in some states showed that the number of expected votes for Johnson had decreased to only 38%. It proved that Johnson's policy of aggression was a failure. All over the world, everyone was asking Johnson to stop bombing. We all knew about it, even De Gaulle admitted it. And the dollar crisis also occurred at that time. There was only one thing we didn't expect, namely the murder of [civil rights leader Martin] Luther King on April 4th, one day after your statement had been issued. Had your statement been issued one or two days later, the murder might have been stopped. Like Gandhi of India, Luther King advocated a non-violence policy. Even a person like him was killed, not to mention other black people. This explained the growth of the black American movement which spread to over 100 cities. Johnson therefore, had to cancel his trip to Honolulu as well as to postpone the deployment of 10,000 additional troops in the South [of Vietnam]...In this international situation, the monetary crisis became worse, leading to an impasse. In the end of March 1968, the US held an ANZUS meeting in Wellington [New Zealand]. Johnson had planned to go there, but he was not able to. Rusk went instead. There, the US asked its allies to send more troops to Vietnam but didn't enlist their support. The US even asked Jiang Jieshi to withdraw his 7 divisions from Jinmen-Mazu [Quemoy-Matsu], and send at least 2 divisions to Vietnam. Jiang didn't accept it, and asked his ambassador in Washington to delay making the position known. The proposals for more troops, tax increase, and an increase in expenditures for the Vietnam War were not accepted by the US Congress.

In these circumstances, Johnson was forced to release the March 31 statement. It was a wicked and deceitful scheme. In fact, he doesn't want to give up the war. The statement is only a means for them to overcome the difficult time. And Johnson even declared that he should not run for reelection. It is also a familiar means being used in the history of the US presidential campaigns...But as it turned out, your April 3rd statement solved his difficulties. The whole situation has been changed. Its impacts may be temporary, but disadvantageous.

Kang Sheng: The number of expected votes for Johnson increased from 38% to 57%.

Zhou Enlai: (continues) So many people don't understand why the Vietnamese comrades were so hurried in making this statement...It is the judgment of the world's people.

In the eyes of the world's people, you have compromised twice. In his statement, Johnson used the word "meeting" whose weight is less than the word "contact." He also stated that the US could go to any place for the meetings. He already appointed [Averell] Harriman for the job...Then you proposed Phnom Penh. It was a good tactic as you could win Sihanouk's sympathy and put the US into a difficult situation. When the US rejected it, you again compromised without contesting. Of course, it was

correct when you rejected the five places in Asia that the US proposed. Then you proposed Warsaw. We understood that your proposal was based on the fact that the China-US negotiations were also held there. You have appointed Comrade Ha Van Lau^[2] for the meeting but the US once again rejected this proposal.

The situation showed that Vietnamese comrades find it easy to compromise. The world's people can't help thinking that you are facing some difficulties in your struggle. That you changed your positions has increased the number of expected votes for Johnson, increased the price of stocks in New York, and decreased the gold price in free markets...So, you now have created conditions for them to play a double-dealing policy. Under these circumstances, they do not bomb the entirety of DRV territory, but continue bombing north [sic: clearly should be south] of the 20th parallel and, at the same time, prolong the talks. We entirely believe in your fighting experience. But we are somewhat more experienced than you are as far as conducting talks with the US is concerned.

I said many times last year and two years ago that negotiations could take place during the war. At a certain point, negotiations can begin. Comrade Mao Zedong also reminded Comrades Le Duan and Pham Van Dong of negotiating, but from a stronger position. But with your statement, it has been seen that your position is now weaker, not stronger. It is for the sake of our two parties' relations that we take every opportunity to remind you of this matter. And when we tell you this, we tell you all what we think.

^[1] On March 31, President Johnson had announced a partial end to the US bombing of North Vietnam and his intention not to seek reelection. The DRV had responded on April 3, announcing its readiness to open contacts with the US.

^[2] Ha Van Lau, PAVN colonel, member of the Vietnamese delegation to the Geneva Conference in 1954. Headed the PAVN Liaison Mission to the International Commission for Control and Supervision in Vietnam 1954-73. Represented DRV at the Russell International War Crimes Tribunal in Copenhagen in 1967, and was a member of the DRV delegation to the Paris peace talks 1968-70. Thereafter served successively as ambassador to Cuba, the UN, France, and as Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs.