

July 18, 1954

**Minutes of Conversation between Zhou Enlai and
Laotian Foreign Minister Phoui Sananikone
(Summary)**

Citation:

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Summary:

Sananikone asks for Zhou's opinion on several problems/issues Laos faces regarding the armistice and unification in Laos. Sananikone also makes clear that Laos does not plan on joining the Southeast Asian Pact, saying there is no need to if the conference can reach an agreement.

Original Language:

Chinese

Contents:

Translation - English

Time: 18 July, 11:30 a.m. to 12:45 p.m.

Place: Prime Minister Zhou Enlai's residence

Attendees on the Chinese side: Zhou Enlai, Li Kenong, Dong Ningchuan (interpreter)

Attendees on the Laotian side: Sananikone, Ku Keolavong (Secretary of Defense),
[Director of the General Office of the Foreign Ministry] Thao Lenam.

Sananikone: At our last meeting, the Prime Minister said that you were willing to help us solve problems, therefore I came to ask for your help today. We met with Mr. Pham Van Dong yesterday and the day before yesterday. We believe that there is no problem concerning military issues which we cannot overcome. There are differences on political issues. Mr. Pham Van Dong said that first we must seriously recognize the existence of the resistance movement. Then we can delimit concentration areas and establish an independent administrative organization. This is not different from dividing our territory, and it is in fact the division of the country. It is difficult for us to accept it. Our secretary of defense also attended the meeting. Now I would like to ask him to convey our opinions to the Prime Minister.

Keolavong: Mr. Sananikone said earlier that Laos is a small country and wants to have a peaceful and friendly existence. Regarding the issue of restoring peace, we are willing to try our best to make the biggest compromise. We admit that there is a resistance movement. However, we have to point out that the resistance movement does not have a lot of influence and only has two to three thousand people. In addition, the existence of the resistance movement is based on support from the Viet Minh. Mr. Pham Van Dong suggested that the king^[1] should appoint some administrative officials based on suggestions from the resistance movement. This is not suitable to our constitution. We agreed to delimit some concentration areas and to establish several joint committees and a central committee in these areas. During the time when we wait for elections, joint committees can function as a united government. We are willing to consider all suggestions. However, we cannot accept the plan to divide the country. We will be truly appreciative if the Prime Minister could consider our situation.

Sananikone: Right now what we need to achieve is the reconciliation of all the Laotian people. It is not a [true] reconciliation if we cannot live together, and we have to be separated in two different regions after the armistice. Therefore, the disadvantage of the concentration areas is bigger than the advantage. I used to ask Mr. Pham Van Dong why they argued that we should divide [the country] like this. We all need to conduct propaganda activities freely throughout the country during the elections. If we delimit concentration areas, it will be impossible to conduct such activities. Also, they can keep cadres and weapons. They should be able to accept our plan.

[Prince] Souphanouvong has many strengths, and we all know that well. He graduated from Paris Industrial University. There are very few talented people like him in Laos. We believe that after the elections, he will surely get the most honorable position in the government. He can even be our prime minister.

Zhou Enlai: Thank you both for informing me of these situations. I would also like to give some of my opinions.

The Laotian issue can be divided into two parts to discuss: the internal one and the external one. We worked hard in June to suggest that the Vietnamese Volunteers forces and French Union forces should be withdrawn from Laos. We can then begin preparation after the above principles are decided. It is a good thing to confirm these principles in the armistice agreement on Laos. I said in my statements on 16 and 19 June, and also in my conversation with the foreign minister on the 21st, that we hope that Laos will not allow foreign countries to establish military bases within its territory or to form military alliances with foreign countries. We hope to see Laos become a peaceful, independent, unified, and friendly country with all others. [Passage excised by the Department of Archives of the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs.] We are

neighbors. We are happy to see such a situation. It will also make us feel relieved. We believe that these points should be written into the draft agreement presented by the French delegation. However, France did not agree. This is not right. The Foreign Minister also said before that Laos would not allow foreign countries to establish military bases and would not join any foreign military group. Our common desire like this should still be achieved. Then the armistice agreement can [eventually] be reached.

Regarding internal issues, the resistance forces of Laos should recognize the Royal united government; and the Royal government should recognize the resistance forces. The number [of troops] is not an important issue. You said that there are two or three thousand of them. We think that there are more than that. It is important to contact them and then decide on concentration areas. We have already read the eleven points presented in the draft of the Laotian armistice agreement. The concentration areas are scattered in upper, central, and lower Laos, and they are too spread out. It might be because you think that the concentration areas proposed by Vietnam are too large. [However,] such a distribution of [concentration areas] will make all parties anxious and may even cause localized conflict. Therefore, we believe that large areas are better than small ones. I have already discussed this with the foreign ministers, [French Prime Minister] Mr. [Pierre] Mendes-France, and Mr. [Anthony] Eden. [You] should delimit a concentration area in northeast Laos and establish a joint committee to deal with mutual and local relations. After the elections, the resistance movement [should] be able to join the Royal government. This is a good way to handle it.

As far as I know, no one has ever considered Laos [in the same way] as Vietnam. The delimitation of concentration areas is simply a temporary idea. Laos only has one Royal government. This is not a division of the country. After the withdrawal of all foreign forces, Laos can therefore become a peaceful, independent, and unified country. Ports around [Laos] will still be supervised in the future. Therefore, Laos's security can be guaranteed. During the armistice period, defensive weapons that Laos needs to import can be decided on through negotiations. The foreign minister said on 16 June that [members of] the resistance will be able to enjoy all civil rights and will be accepted to work [for the government?]. This is very good. Resistance forces mostly have fought the French troops. Now we need to help them and unite them. It will be great if the Royal government and Mr. Souphanouvong can meet in Laos and deal with these issues. You should start uniting them not only after the elections but also before the elections. Since Laos is a small country, it should try even harder to unite all forces within the country. I think that Mr. Pham Van Dong also shares the same thoughts.

Sananikone: I appreciate the Prime Minister's invaluable advice. It is a good basis for us to consider [those issues] carefully. We have discussed with Mr. Pham Van Dong a meeting between our prime minister [Prince Souvanna Phouma] and his brother [Prince Souphanouvong]. [We believe that] if the military conference here does not make any progress it will not be effective, even if they meet in Laos. However, if the Prime Minister believes that it is the right time for the brothers to meet, we are willing to help. In sum, our prime minister is very willing to talk directly with his brother.

Zhou Enlai: It is best [if they can] discuss internal issues directly. Mr. Pham Van Dong is simply the representative of the Laotian resistance movement and cannot discuss details. Therefore, the sooner that they meet locally the better. You are family, there will not be any problems you cannot solve. Isn't it great to have all forces of the country unified under the Royal government and have all the people of the country support the government in the future?

Sananikone: Regarding the issue of military bases, as we discussed last time, the Laotian-French agreement allowed France to keep two bases in Laos. Mr. Bidault stated at the conference that if Laos requests that France withdraw its troops from

Laos, France is willing to do so after the withdrawal of the Viet Minh troops. Therefore, if we ask French troops to withdraw, they will not refuse. However, we want to ask France to withdraw the majority of its troops and keep a few personnel to fulfill security needs. If the prime minister thinks that [we] should not allow the French Union troops to stay in Laos, and France is also willing to withdraw troops, then France should express its opinions at the conference. We are willing to accept that. We will follow the agreement. However, if France wants to abandon it, we will not oppose it, either.

Zhou Enlai: What kind of agreement is the Laotian-French agreement?

Sananikone: It is the agreement we signed in October 1953. Laos joined the French Union based on this agreement. If Laos is invaded, France is to provide protection. However, if the armistice agreement can be guaranteed by all participants of the conference, even by the participants of the Colombo Conference, then we will not necessarily need a guarantee from France. We think that France does not have much interest in keeping a great number of troops in Laos after the armistice since France is having economic difficulties.

I would like to ask another question. If we accept the principle of delimiting concentration areas, what areas does the Prime Minister think they should be? I hope that the Prime Minister can briefly talk to us about that so that we can consider [this issue better].

Zhou Enlai: The details should be negotiated by the Laotian military commission. I said on 21 June that concentration areas could be delimited in two provinces in northeast Laos and should not be scattered in eleven places in upper, central and lower Laos. If so, central and lower Laos can be stabilized. [You] should not [keep] too many troops there. They can be merged into the Royal army or police forces. Some of them can also be demobilized. This is only a tentative idea. What I said in June is still valid now. Some of the problems can be solved here, the others should be discussed in Laos. Regarding the issues of military bases and military alliance, we are most opposed to American bases and military alliance with the United States. I think you all know this.

Sananikone: The Laotian government has never been formally informed about these issues. We simply learned from newspapers that the United States is planning to establish a Southeast Asian Defense Pact, which will include the three countries of Indochina. However, we do not have such an idea. I have said so to many journalists.

Zhou Enlai: If the conference can reach an agreement, then we all should join together to guarantee that there will be no instances of conflict inside Laos and Cambodia. We hope that Laos and Cambodia become peaceful, neutral areas and do not join any international military groups. Otherwise, the restoration of peace will become meaningless. [Passage excised by the Department of Archives of the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs.]

Sananikone: If all countries join together to sign [the agreement], Laos will therefore have a guarantee and should not join any military groups.

Zhou Enlai: Perhaps you will think that China is a big country and will be anxious [about us]. However, after the peace agreement has been reached, the Kingdom of Laos will be a unified country through elections. We are willing to establish a friendly relationship with Laos. The Five Principles [of Peaceful Coexistence] we referred to before can also apply to the relationship between us. We are also willing to make the same statement and will keep our promise. We do not want to threaten anyone; we do not want to be threatened by anyone either.

Sananikone: Thank you very much for this very interesting conversation. We will go back and carefully consider the points to which the Prime Minister referred. We will be back after we have reached some conclusions. We know that the Prime Minister is very busy, and we have already taken up too much of his time, please excuse us.

[1] 'King' here refers to Sisavang Vong, King of Laos.