

177. Telegram From the Secretary of State to the Department of State¹

Paris, May 8, 1955—5 p.m.

Secto 8. Following is summary conversations on Indochina held with British and French this afternoon.² French Delegation headed by Prime Minister Faure, British by FonMin Macmillan and US by Secretary. During first part of conversations British were absent, joining later as noted.

Faure opened conversations by referring to ratification Paris Agreements³ and difficulties French Govt had encountered in process. He observed that public opinion must now be satisfied with early four-power talks. He agreed that we would now be talking from strength and that prospects for success were thereby increased. He referred to China and to fact that France was now ignoring govt which had in hands fate of hundreds of millions of people because of her recognition of fact that US views must be taken into account. He remarked there are now two areas of particular interest to France. They are North Africa and Vietnam. He would call upon Laforest, Minister of Associated States, to give outline French position on latter.

Secretary replied by stating that US recognized courageous step France had taken in ratifying Paris Agreements. Both he and President appreciated magnitude of political task. They felt step, however, was in France's own interest as well. Secretary expressed opinion that in ratifying France had reaffirmed her position as "one of great nations of world".

Laforest then opened Indochina discussion. He stated that Geneva Accords had posed several questions including that of how to deal with forthcoming elections. Division of country had given South Vietnam disadvantage in competing with north but what south lacked in area and population was counterbalanced by her economic superiority. France believed that south could win over north in lections if she could present more attractive regime to people. This could be done only with nationalist, stable and broadly based govt. Time was of essence for discussions prior to elections which would

¹Source: Department of State, Central Files, 751G.00/5-855. Top Secret; Priority. Repeated for information priority to Saigon. Dulles arrived in Paris on May 7 for talks with the British and French and for the scheduled North Atlantic Council meetings, May 9-11. He then proceeded to Vienna on May 13 for discussions and the signing of the Austrian State Treaty by the Foreign Ministers of the Soviet Union, the United States, France, and the United Kingdom.

²According to the diary of the Secretary's trip, this meeting took place at 6:30 p.m., May 7. (*Ibid.*, Conference Files: Lot 60 D 627, CF 445)

³Apparently the reference is to the Nine- and Four-Power Agreements, signed October 23, 1954; for texts, see *Foreign Relations*, 1952-1954, vol. v, Part 2, pp. 1435 ff.

open next July and elections themselves in July 1956. There was no ambiguity in French policy between North and South Vietnam. Presence of France in north could not be erased by stroke of pen. It is French duty to protect her cultural and economic presence there. Sainteny mission is designed for only that purpose. France had given up thoughts of mixed companies as result our objections and had now surrendered coal mines. Sainteny mission would be maintained on its present terms. It would be neither enlarged nor changed.

Laforest continued to say that France had loyally supported govt of Diem from beginning. Any allegation to contrary is untrue. France constantly tried to reenforce Diem govt. France reached agreement with US last December to persuade "or compel" Diem to enlarge govt. It was agreed to give him until January at which time, if he had failed, we would look into matter of alternate discreetly. This was not done. Last March present govt broke into open conflict with sects. United Front of sects was formed against Diem. Both December agreement and common sense told US at that time that something [had] to be done to avoid civil war. France warned that armed conflict—first civil war, then guerrilla warfare, then terrorism—would result if we failed to take action. France has always desired peaceful solution. For this reason joint Ely-Collins approach was tried. It was hoped they would arrive at joint plan for solution. Washington appeared first to welcome this concept then changed its mind. Collins left Saigon when civil war was about to break out. Untenable truces were declared. When they were about to expire Bao Dai submitted his own plan on April 19 in order to try to reconcile US and French failure to act. US failed to reply to Bao Dai. In absence of Collins from Saigon Bao Dai acted.

Laforest continued to say that new Revolutionary Committee appeared to have control. Committee is strongly under Viet Minh influence. A man named [name deleted], staff officer in Vietnamese Army, educated in China was vice-president of Revolutionary Committee. [Name deleted] was one of vice-presidents of Viet Minh Govt. [Name deleted] is notorious Viet Minh agent. Viet Minh influence of "revolutionary" groups is recognizable throughout and their influence is spreading to country. Bao Dai's deposition is demanded. There is violent campaign against French and French Expeditionary Corps. Viet Minh agents make good use of it and certain Americans do not seem sufficiently aware of this. French Govt does not wish to have its army act as platform for Viet Minh propaganda. Army will not be maintained in Vietnam at any cost. Laforest closed by referring to govt censorship and showed copy of Saigon newspaper, half of which had been censored, as example of extent of govt censorship.

Secretary replied referring to seriousness of situation and necessity that French and US as good friends work closely together. It

would not be profitable to go into detailed charges made against each other in two countries. Question is what to do in face of present situation. He summarized present situation as follows:

- (1) There is a revolutionary movement under way in Vietnam,
- (2) We believe that Diem has the best chance of anyone of staying on top of revolution and keeping it within "tolerable" limits. Diem is only means US sees to save South Vietnam and counteract revolution. US sees no one else who can. Whatever US view has been in past, today US must support Diem wholeheartedly. US must not permit Diem to become another Kerensky.

Regarding Bao Dai, Secretary said in his view he had irretrievably lost capacity to be anything but titular head of government if even that position could be saved for him and that this was solution Secretary preferred until election (of National Assembly). Bao Dai should support Diem and not take away his power. Cao Dai and Hoa Hao could be used but not Binh Xuyen. Secretary expressed opinion that with support two governments, Diem could sit on top of revolution. Diem is only force of moderation. FEC a certain stabilizing influence. US was giving funds to support Vietnamese Army and could not see anyone else to give funds to but Diem for that purpose. Concluded by stating that support of Diem was only way he could see to deal with common problem pointing out that time was running against us and no successful results could be achieved unless two countries worked together.

Meeting was then joined by British for whom Secretary resumed US position as summarized above adding that in US view present revolution is not yet dominated or influenced by Communists to any appreciable degree. He remarked that prior association with Communists was not in itself sufficient reason to believe that man was a Communist now, citing that Bao Dai himself could be considered a Communist on this reasoning. Support of Diem did not indicate US non-recognition of his weaknesses. US had not taken part in his original selection and had been and remained ready to support any other man who might be presented by orderly process of law. He remarked that just before outbreak of fighting US was prepared to consider alternatives but he was not sure now that it would have been practical. Secretary remarked he was told last March by Collins that we had already reached point of no return on Diem.⁴ There was no practical way of getting rid of him. Secretary wished to do everything to get Diem to enlarge government. It might be possible to change government at the time of forthcoming elections but question remains "who is better than Diem". If there is a better man US is ready to consider him but re-submits no one has been suggested. Al-

⁴See Document 84.

though Collins had reached agreement with Ely in early April to change Diem he now believes we must support him.

Faure replied that he thought it best that he speak himself. He wished to state that France is not in agreement with US views. In the past we have concealed this fact from each other but now it is time to speak frankly. Diem is not a good solution. Joint efforts to prove he is have resulted in failure. France is convinced that Diem is leading to catastrophe. Diem took advantage of Collins' absence to effect a "coup de force" which won primary victory but which has not contributed to any lasting solution. His anti-French sentiments are extreme. France does not object to his being anti-French if he is capable but being anti-French is not a sufficient quality in itself. France will not continue with him for, one way or another, he will bring on a Viet Minh victory. He is surrounded by Vietnam elements and there is no time to lose. Diem is not only incapable but mad (fou). He ruined our chances for a possible solution just when it was in the offing. France can no longer take risks with him. He could yield to the revolutionary groups. Continuing with Diem would have three disastrous results:

- (1) It would bring on a Viet Minh victory,
- (2) It would focus the hostility of everyone on French, and
- (3) It will bring on a Franco-US breach. Everyone believes that the US is backing Diem and encouraging him in his anti-French sentiments even if the French Government knows US is not.

Faure continued that much of Franco-US difficulty grows out of fact that we have never admitted our true thoughts from beginning. Last September we might have had an agreed solution if we had expressed our doubts but we did not. Bao Dai is a "bad card" but by means of him something is possible but with Diem failure is certain. We might have been able to save situation on eve of coup de force if we had had three-sided agreement (US, France, Bao Dai) but again we failed. Bao Dai has faults but he can serve a useful purpose and should be used for that. He cannot be excluded as a possibility for bringing about a more productive solution but as long as Diem is there the view is obstructed and no solution is possible. To résumé, Faure said, Diem is impossible and there is no chance for him to succeed or to improve the situation. Another man might not be able to improve the situation either and, in fact, there is no one specifically in mind but at least with another man there is a chance but with Diem there is none.

Faure then concluded with the following significant statement: "Diem is a bad choice, impossible solution, with no chance to succeed and no chance to improve the situation. Without him some solution might be possible, but with him there is none. However, I

cannot guarantee any other solution would work nor is it possible to clarify the situation. There seems to be fundamental disagreement between us. I could have claimed that since French position is predominant in Vietnam, you should accommodate your views more to ours, but I have rejected this. What should be done under the circumstances? What would you say if we were to retire entirely from Indochina and call back the FEC as soon as possible. I fully realize this would be a grave solution, as it would leave French civilians and French interests in a difficult position. There is also the question of the refugees' fate. If you think this might be a possible solution, I think I might be able to orient myself towards it if you say so. It would have advantage of avoiding all further reproach to France of 'colonialism' while at the same time giving response to Diem's request that France should go. Since it contemplates the liquidation of the situation and the repatriation of the FEC, would the United States be disposed to help protect French civilians and the refugees? If you do not agree to this solution and believe it would hamper you, then we can have further discussions on the Vietnamese situation."

Secretary replied that he appreciated frankness. It is only way friends should speak to each other. There is a fundamental difference between France and US. US has higher regard of Diem's capabilities than France. US informed "coup de force" was engineered by Binh Xuyen while French say otherwise. Secretary himself had had doubts that Diem could survive. It was questionable whether army was loyal to him and he did not control the National Police. Loyalty of French Govt itself in support of Diem was not questioned but there were difficulties from other sources such as Radio Francaise-Asie. US does not agree with French opinion of Diem. If he had been a non-entity he would have collapsed but he did not. He showed so much ability that US fails to see how he can be got rid of now. It is assumed that France would not wish to do so by force.

Diem is stronger now than when Bao Dai first withdrew his powers. Worst aspect is that problem involves difference of opinion between France and US. Vietnam is not worth quarrel with France. Common interests are too great to be jeopardized by difference of opinion on Vietnam. Secretary agreed with French statement that it must not affect Franco-US relations in other areas. If it would solve problem, US would withdraw and drop its support of Vietnam. Franco-US differences must be resolved now for Secretary did not believe that US Congress would continue with its present aid program otherwise. Substantial sums of 4 to 5 hundred million dollars are involved.

Choice open to US is to have Diem supported or to withdraw. It is grave problem which the Secretary would like to think about overnight. French suggestions are serious and must be weighed carefully.

Advice and counsel are needed. US interest in Vietnam is simply to withhold area from Communists. US will give consideration to any suggestion French make but must warn that US financial support may not be expected to any solution which Secretary can think of as alternative to Diem.⁵ Question must be taken up again tomorrow.

Macmillan stated that British interests in Vietnam were more indirect but nonetheless vital because (1) interest in area itself and (2) interest in Communist threat from any area in world. It would be grave error to reach decision that evening. Foreign Ministers are to be in Paris several days and should look into matter again. Events might overtake our decisions. Accurate review of what has been said should be undertaken and effort to ascertain facts should be made by all sides. It is important that nothing be released of what had been discussed during meeting as leak would be calamitous. Believe efforts should be made by all to think seriously of what has been said and keep contents absolutely secret.

⁵In Dulte 2, May 7, 11 p.m., Dulles reported to the President on the day's events. Included in the cable was the following excerpt on this first tripartite discussion on Vietnam:

"Then we met alone with the French, being joined after a time by the British for discussion of Indochina. Here Faure proposed that in view of the sharp differences of opinion which existed between our two governments with reference to policy in Vietnam and in view of his government's total inability to support Diem, who had now become violently anti-French, he proposed that the French should withdraw their forces from Vietnam. He raised the question as to whether in this event we would be able to give any assurances regarding protection of lives and property of remaining nationals.

"I replied that this was too serious a matter to settle without deliberation, and that I agreed that Vietnam was not worth a quarrel between France and the US. If we could not agree, then one or the other should withdraw from the scene, as we could not afford to oppose each other in this area and adopt rival and competitive policies. I said that the US would be willing to withdraw, and indeed I could not have any good hope that Congress would appropriate the necessary funds for US to support the situation if we withdrew support from Diem and sought an alternative which Faure himself said he could not now define. My guess is that the French are not bluffing and that his proposal may be the agreed solution." (Department of State, Central Files, 396.1/5-755)

According to Tedul 2 to Paris, May 8, Eisenhower's "only comment on Vietnam section of Dulte 2 was to reiterate position that U.S. could not afford to have forces committed in such undesirable areas as Vietnam." (*Ibid.*, 751G.00/5-855)

In a later report to the President, Dulte 12, May 9, Dulles described inter alia to Eisenhower a discussion with Pinay which went as follows:

"Pinay also told me privately that he did not think that Faure meant what he said when he proposed to withdraw the French troops. Pinay implied that Faure was bluffing because, Pinay said, it would be 'unthinkable' to abandon southern Viet Nam to the Communists. This is another matter where Faure and Pinay differ sharply, but Indo-China is not under the jurisdiction of the Foreign Minister, but under the Minister for Colonies, and Faure is in fact running that and alone dealing with Indo-China to the exclusion of Pinay." (*Ibid.*, 396.1/5-955)

Faure agreed with Macmillan, stating that he had never expected decision that evening. Experts should get down to work immediately and prepare for decisions as events are changing hourly.

Meeting closed with general discussion concerning schedule for further talks on Indochina and forthcoming visit of Foreign Ministers to Vienna.

A discussion ensued concerning text of communiqué.⁶ Secretary rejected proposal of meeting of experts before next discussions on Indochina by Foreign Ministers now scheduled for May 10.

Dulles

⁶No text of a joint communiqué has been found. According to the text of a confidential press briefing by Dulles, May 7, the French issued a communiqué after this meeting. (*Ibid.*, Conference Files: Lot 60 D 627, CF 445)

178. Telegram From the Secretary of State to the Department of State¹

Paris, May 9, 1955—1 a.m.

Secto 11. (1) Following yesterday's tri-partite meeting² we emphasized to Berard and Faure Collins' estimate of situation as given in Saigon's 5074 to Department³ including particularly his conclusion that unless wholehearted agreement and coordination between Viet Nameese, Americans and French were secured, we should withdraw from Viet Nam. They commented that there seemed to be one basic divergence between U.S. and French estimate of situation. U.S. believed that events of past week had strengthened Diem; French information was that he was in weaker position than ever.

(2) This morning Achilles met with Berard at latter's request, Dennis Allen of British Foreign Office and Riley of British Embassy present. Berard read parts of Ely's latest telegram of which principal points were as follows:

Diem's apparent success rests in fact on present disorderly and chaotic conditions. Army had not been able to follow up its success in Saigon by further operations to destroy Diem [*Binh*] Xuyen. Sect problem was unsolved with each in control in its own area and army unable to suppress them there. Present disorderly conditions provid-

¹Source: Department of State, Central Files, 751G.00/5-955. Top Secret; Priority. Repeated for information to Saigon.

²Reference is to the meeting described in Secto 8, *supra*.

³Document 173.