

May 13, 1975
Record of Conversation between French President Giscard d'Estaing and Vice Premier of the People's Republic Deng Xiaoping: First Meeting

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Summary:

French President Giscard and Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping discuss the current international situation, including the balance of power between the Soviet Union and the United States and issues of European unity and security. They also discuss the current situation in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos following the fall of Saigon and the end of the Vietnam War.

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Verbatim record of the meetings between the President of the Republic and Monsieur Deng Xiaoping, Vice Premier of the People's Republic of China

First meeting (Tuesday, 13 May 1975, 4pm)

M.DENG XIAOPING: Before beginning our talks, Mr. President, please let me first express, on behalf of the government and the people of China, the gratitude of me and my delegation for the reception prepared for us in France. I would like to tell you that the Chinese government would in turn be delighted to welcome you. I am instructed to convey to you, in the name of the Chairman of the Permanent Committee of the National People's Congress, Zhu De, and of Prime Minister ZHOU ENLAI, an official invitation to come to China, at a date of your choosing.

M.GISCARD D'ESTAING: I thank you and the government of China for this. I would like to tell you how pleased I am about this opportunity to welcome you and talk to you, and how much we appreciate the fact that you have chosen our country for your first official visit abroad.

I am pleased because you are the representative of China, a very big country. Admittedly, over the centuries, our relations have varied, but there has always been great interest in France for Chinese civilization. I have had installed on the table in front of you some of the objects that bear witness to this influence of your civilization on ours. They are porcelain vases, mounted on bronze stands, dating from the 18th century. These objects are Chinese concerning the porcelain and French with regard to the bronze. Today this interest in your country is being revived. It corresponds to our understanding of the importance of the Chinese people itself, to the attention we pay to its culture, to the way it is governed, to the political thought of its leaders. (p.2) In all this France finds subjects for interest and reflection.

But we are equally pleased about this visit because of you as an individual. You have lived in France. You know our way of life and the way we think. We think that this, perhaps, might have had a certain influence on your considerations; that it could have, in every case, enlightened them at the moment when you were brought to make choices about the direction of your life and actions. I hope that you might be able to rediscover some of the memories of that time.

We know the great responsibilities that you have within the institutions of the People's Republic of China, as well as those of the foreign minister and the other members of your delegation. I wish that our talks allow us to get to know better your analyses of global politics. Knowing them better would be useful to each of us and might have an influence on the way we act in the world's affairs. Moreover, these exchanges will be of great use to the development of our bilateral relations. That is why I wish to conduct them in the most open spirit, with the desire to reply very frankly and very concretely to all the questions you might like to ask me, regarding both the internal and external politics and policies of our country. And, if you allow, I will also ask some questions myself.

M.DENG XIAOPING: Like the President I regard these talks as very valuable and I entirely share your analysis about the reasons for their interest, both with regard to our international actions and to our bilateral relations. Exchanging our views allows us to better get to know each other and is therefore beneficial to our governments but also to our peoples. To be sure, China and France already know each other well. They have often exchanged their views, notably when President POMPIDOU came to China. But new problems have emerged in the world. It is therefore necessary to widen and deepen exchanges. Yesterday we had a very good conversation with Prime Minister Jacques CHIRAC. It was mostly about bilateral matters. Today and tomorrow, it seems to me that we should talk more about the international situation.

M.GISCARD D'ESTAING: Yes. Since you have mentioned your conversation yesterday, I would like to thank you for the decision that you announced (p. 3) concerning certain questions of transport and communication. This decision will facilitate relations between our two countries.

M.DENG XIAOPING: Talking about the international situation, I would say that the latter, contrary

to appearance is not marked by tranquility but by great upheavals, especially in the relations between the two superpowers: the Soviet Union and the United States. I would be very interested to know what you think about the evolution of the relations between the two superpowers with regard to the strategic situation.

M.GISCARD D'ESTAING: I believe, like you, that the world is undergoing a time of great changes and that these changes are bound to continue. Responding to your questions about the Soviet Union and the United States, I would say that, in their direct relations, these two countries are, at the moment, in a situation of strategic equilibrium. I have the feeling that, militarily, the United States tends to have superiority over the Soviet Union. I do not speak of conventional means – for which this is not the case – but of the ensemble of strategic, aerial and nuclear means. Taking into account the technology and the variety of arms, the United States is certainly superior. That is why each time there is a risk of direct confrontation the advantage tends to lie with the United States. But, in other cases, it is the Soviet Union that is in an advantageous position.

In every case, this is not satisfying for Europe. Europe has no political unity and even less unity for its defense. Our policy is to foster, in the first place, the political union of Europe and then the unity of its defense. Why are we only approaching defense problems as a second step? Because certain European countries have particular relations with the United States in the field of defense, they consider that their defense can only be assured in close liaison with the United States. But if political unity is put into effect, this problem will change. The unity of defense will become possible.

I would like to ask you a question. At different recent occasions, you have evoked the risk of a new armed conflict on a global scale. What are the considerations that make you think such a conflict possible? (p.4)

M.DENG XIAOPING: We have indeed repeatedly expressed our opinion on this question. What we say is that there can be no tranquility in the world because the two superpowers strive for hegemony. From the strategic point of view, there exists a balance on a global scale, but the United States is on the defensive and the Soviet Union is in an offensive position.

In the conversations we have had with them, the United States also speaks of equilibrium. Well, we say: which equilibrium is this about? Including the matter of nuclear arms. Three agreements have been signed in the past with regard to nuclear arms. The first one, in July 1963, signed by the United States, Great Britain and the Soviet Union outlawed nuclear tests in the atmosphere. At the time I happened to be in Moscow as the head of a delegation. It was on the day of our departure that the Soviets announced to us the signature of that agreement. At that time, the Americans had a very clear superiority, the Soviets were far behind. From the signature of that first treaty until the second, the non-proliferation treaty of 1972, nine years have passed. This period was one of accelerated nuclear efforts by the Soviets. In 1972, the gap between the two superpowers was already much smaller. Then there was a third agreement, concluded in Vladivostok in 1974. Between 72 and 74, within two years, the Soviet Union has made a new considerable effort and it has today basically caught up with the United States. Almost at the same level. Even those in charge in the US admit that. It is only with regard to the technology of multi-entry vehicles and the mobility of devices that the United States maintains a slight advantage.

Very shortly after the agreement of Vladivostok KISSINGER came to Beijing. He told QIAO GUANHUA that this agreement was a big step forward, a “breakthrough” in the search for a strategic equilibrium. So we asked him: “what type of 'breakthrough' is this? Do you really believe you can limit the development of nuclear arms?” Kissinger did not reply directly to this question, but he had to admit that this agreement would not in any way serve to prevent the two parties from developing their armament systems. They worry about limiting the quantity but not the quality. And, as for the quantity, there are no real limits. They agreed to a maximum of 1700 missiles each.

Obviously the Soviet Union as well as the United States was far from reaching this level. They still had a desirable margin. I said to KISSINGER: Go ahead! Continue the race! In 11 years, from 1963 to 1974, the Soviet Union has basically caught up with you. Continue if you like. (p. 5)

Some in the United States consider that the moment the quantity of arms is sufficient to destroy the world then this quantity of arms does not matter much. In the American opinion and in their political circles there has therefore been a sense of equilibrium for three years. But is it a rising or a shrinking equilibrium?

M. GISCARD D'ESTAING: It is a rising equilibrium. That is inevitable. Each of the two superpowers refuses to be inferior to the other. This will of competition is inherent to their nature.

I, for my part, observe that in the field of technology, the general scientific level, the United States maintains nevertheless superiority over the Soviet Union. This advantage cannot fail to have an effect on the global structure of their armament system. Even if that happens with a delay. Because the American technological power undeniably surpasses that of the Soviet Union. Their level of industrial and technological development remains superior, and sooner or later that has to translate into military capacity.

We too have had the opportunity to talk about the question of equilibrium with M. KISSINGER. That is a man who travels a lot.

I would like to ask you a question which concerns me a lot: in your analysis: does there exist a hypothesis that the Soviet Union might effectively make use of its nuclear force? Or is that only an instrument to create diplomatic pressure?

M. DENG XIAOPING: You just mentioned an aspect of the problem. But it is only one aspect. Fundamentally, the question is the following: the Soviet Union wants to take from the United States their position of hegemony. One should not forget about conventional arms. In this area, the Soviet Union has a net superiority.

M. GISCARD D'ESTAING: Without any doubt.

M. DENG XIAOPING: If the Soviets did not pursue an objective of military action to assure their superiority, in the field of global strategy, one wonders why they feel the need to also increase their conventional efforts, to increase the size of their army. In 7 years, that size went from 3 million to 4.2 million men and even more. (p.6)

M. GISCARD D'ESTAING: On the European side one can confirm that if there was an aggression, it would immediately be nuclear. This is because the American reaction would be to employ tactical weapons and then, subsequently, strategic arms. And, as far as France is concerned, this would be our reaction as well. Our policy is to prevent a conventional war from taking place. We have the means for this, notably thanks to our submarines, the number of which is, admittedly, a lot smaller than for the United States, but sufficient for forcing the enemy to transform his aggression into a war that would quickly become a nuclear war.

M. DENG XIAOPING: In our opinion, the problem has two aspects. There is the question of who at the moment has global superiority: we think that with regard to nuclear arms but especially concerning conventional weapons, the United States alone cannot confront the Soviet Union. And there is the question of whether a war, once started, would necessarily turn into a nuclear conflict: we do not think so. We think that the most likely war is a conventional one. Neither side could easily decide to launch a nuclear strike.

I mentioned all this during our conversations with the Americans. I have said that the Americans were not strong enough, that they needed Europe, and Japan, to assure their defense, just as Europe and Japan need the United States.

The Americans like to use the term umbrella. We told them that this was a term we did not like. We asked them: who protects who? Do the United States protect Europe, or Europe the United States?

Who is in greater need of the other? This is a mutual need that one has to discuss. It is therefore necessary that the relations are based on the principle of equality. That is the only way to assure their permanence and their solidity.

M. GISCARD D'ESTAING: Yes. But that is not the opinion of the Americans; their conception is that of a superpower that likes to impose its policies. And then, as I just mentioned, there is another problem, that arises from the fact that some countries, for example Germany, have not yet come to this stage of analysis where they can envisage a European defense and retain a marked preference for the American umbrella.

But, in the mid-term, our objective is, for sure, an alliance between equal partners. (p.7)

M. DENG XIAOPING: Last year we have received M. Heath and recently M. Strauss. Their views are close to yours.

M: GISCARD D'ESTAING: Events are developing in that way. May I ask you if you consider whether the recent events in South-East Asia are going in the direction of a better equilibrium, and therefore peace, or if they reveal new tensions?

M. DENG XIAOPING: With regard to Asia, we have tried to give some advice to the United States. We told them that, if one tries to catch ten flies with ten fingers, one loses them all. We advised them to concentrate instead on some solid points, some sure objectives. But they did not listen to us. They even went so far as saying that Lon Nol, Thieu, were their "old friends" whom they had to defend. That was not as in the case of Chiang, though. Chiang really was an old friend of the United States. Lon Nol and Thieu were just acquaintances. After the war in Korea, the United States themselves drew a balance and concluded that it was the wrong war in the wrong place and at the wrong time. I think that for Vietnam they will arrive at the same conclusion.

M. GISCARD D'ESTAING: Concerning Vietnam, I can tell you confidentially that the French Government and the PRG (Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam, MA) have agreed to announce tomorrow the decision to upgrade mutual relations to the level of embassies and to quickly exchange ambassadors.

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M. DENG XIAOPING: That is a good thing.

M. GISCARD D'ESTAING: With regard to Laos, does the Chinese government consider that the equilibrium in that part of the Indochinese peninsula might be preserved, and the particular situation of that kingdom maintained?

M. DENG XIAOPING: That is an issue on which I do not have all the latest information. I can only answer in general terms.

As far as concerns Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam, we have in the past made efforts to provide these countries with the aid they needed. That is unconditional aid. We have not interfered with their internal affairs to tell them how to organize the war or their politics. What we can say is that all those who act badly will come to a bad end (M. Deng Xiaoping and M. Qiao Guanhua laugh).

(p. 8) In Laos we have noted a declaration by Prince Souvanna Phouma announcing that there would be no major changes but only small changes.

On the subject of South Vietnam our impression is that the question of unification is not a very urgent problem.

M. GISCARD D'ESTAING: In Vietnam our policy was, and still is, the application of the Paris Peace Treaties. The misfortune was caused by not applying these Treaties. The respect of their provisions

would have prevented many tragedies, including for the United States.

The Treaties speak of the unification of Vietnam, but only as a long-term perspective. That is a complex question and Vietnam has perhaps other tasks to fulfill and other problems to solve. It is necessary to start with the reconstruction of the country and put in place new institutions.

M. DENG XIAOPING: Talking of the Paris Treaties, everybody knows which party did not want to apply them. During our conversations with the Americans we told them: since you have withdrawn from Vietnam, let the Vietnamese set up a coalition government. If they had allowed the creation of such a government, the course of events would have been different. But now they were effectively forced to leave, and under the worst conditions. They did not manage to learn the lessons of General Charles de Gaulle. The policy followed by Charles de Gaulle and by France in Africa and Indochina has produced completely different results.

M. GISCARD D'ESTAING: In Vietnam we have asked the French community to stay during the most recent events. Their staying has played a certain role.

M. DENG XIAOPING: Yes

M. GISCARD D'ESTAING: Our impression is that in the current context the PRG continues to preserve a degree of independence, at least for some time.

M. DENG XIAOPING: There exists an important difference between the North and the South. The North is a socialist country. The conditions in the South are different. We are convinced that eventually Vietnam will be reunified. But that will take some time. Perhaps quite a long time. (p. 9)

Now, if you allow, I would like to return to the question that you had asked about the eventuality of war. There are people who say that the Chinese are warmongers. They make believe that we like war. Or they simply say that we are pessimists. But we, as Chinese, do not talk lightly of war. We have been at war for 22 years. 25 if one includes the Korean War.

M. GISCARD D'ESTAING: You yourself have fought throughout this period, M. Vice Premier?

M. DENG XIAOPING: Yes, except for the Korean War.

The truth is that the Chinese people have had enough of war. We have to build up our country and for that we need time and peace. We need a calm and favorable international situation. We for our part tell everybody that Chinese troops will never leave our territory. Otherwise China would itself become a superpower, the enemy of the peoples of the world.

Our position is well known. I have explained it in detail last year at the General Assembly of the United Nations. Nobody likes war. But the problem of war depends neither on you nor on us. It stems from the fact that there are people in the world who strive for hegemony. If they want to wage war, how can we stop them? Recently, Mr. Tindemans, the Prime Minister of Belgium has come to China and Chairman Mao has talked with him for a long time about the subject. He told them that the people had to strengthen their vigilance. Chairman Mao said: we do not want to cause fear. But we want you to be prepared. Otherwise you will suffer.

So this is a point where we particularly appreciate the policies of France. We have noted, Mr. President, your recent declaration on the necessity to assure one's own defense.

M. GISCARD D'ESTAING: We certainly prefer to spend most of our budget on the economic and social development of our country. But, considering the international situation, we also have to assure our security and have the appropriate means to do so. That implies more means than at present. (p. 10)

M. DENG XIAOPING: The danger of the outbreak of a Third World War really exists. This danger

comes from the two superpowers, but particularly from the Soviet Union.

I do not say that such a war can break out in the very near future, 3 or 5 years. No. The United States would not dare to attack and the Soviet Union is not yet sufficiently prepared. But the fact is there: the two Superpowers increase their armaments in the aim of war, and particularly the Soviet Union. Last month, for example, the Soviets have conducted maneuvers in all oceans. Was that with a defensive objective? No, rather offensive. When will war break out? We do not know. But we know that peace cannot last long. It will not last for a whole generation (which is 60 years in China) from 1918 to 1939, only 21 years passed. Since 1945 already 30 years. Admittedly, we can hope that the peace will last for another 10, 20, or even 30 years. But one has to know that if someone possesses a great number of nuclear arms, a day will come when he will be itching to use them.

M.GISCARD D'ESTAING: If we envisage the situation in 20 or 30 years, we have to account for two elements that will by then be important. First the influence of China which will, until then, be a world power and will have the possibility of making itself heard. Secondly the union of Europe. In 20 years Europe will have reached a degree of political unity which will be an important element in the global equilibrium.

Today we are reflecting about two superpowers. But in 20 years' time they will have lost the particular position they have today.

M.DENG XIAOPING: Even if one takes into consideration these new elements, it will be impossible to prevent the outbreak of war between the two superpowers. Furthermore there exists the danger that the Soviets, when they feel supremacy slipping from their hands, will commit a premature action. Naturally if Europe and China are well prepared for this kind of situation, the Soviet Union will think twice.

M.GISCARD D'ESTAING: One should not forget that, militarily, Germany could have beaten the Soviet Union in 1942-43. Only the existence of two fronts prevented it from doing so. Let us not underestimate the importance of a unified Europe in the global equilibrium. (p.11)

M.DENG XIAOPING: We attach, precisely, great importance to what happens on the European side. If the two Superpowers want hegemony they first have to control Europe. We agree with you that Europe represents an economic, political and military power. But the condition is that it is united. Sometimes it is said that the Chinese are more European than the Europeans.

M.GISCARD D'ESTAING: Our situation is the same. China has accomplished its cultural unity more than ten centuries ago. From then on it has not encountered any serious obstacles on its way to political unity.

Europe, by contrast, has fragmented a culture that was, initially, a culture common to all Europeans. This fragmentation is a considerable obstacle. But I think that we are making important progress in the search for this unity and that we will be nearing the aim in the years to come.

M.DENG XIAOPING: Of course, that is a difficult path. But you are right: it is the only possible way. And we also totally welcome your efforts.