

Peking story (American prisoners in China) - correspondence, letters and ca...

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Peking story

14 August 1955

Aide memoire conc. talks with Chinese Ambassador Wang Ping-nan

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as maintained all through the spring, I wanted to point out to the Ambassador that, as a matter of course, I would be happy to receive him if there was any point he wanted to raise with me or any aspect concerning which it was felt that I might properly be of some assistance.

The Chinese Ambassador said that he would transmit my message to Mr. Chou En-lai. He gave the impression that, if anything, the message embarrassed him a little. Probably the explanation was that he did not know what Mr. Chou En-lai had said to Ambassador Wistrand. Concerning the talks his only observation was that he noted that I would be in Geneva: he would see me if Mr. Chou En-lai had anything he wanted to say. The Ambassador finally asked me if I had anything I could tell him concerning the American side of the matter, to which I replied that I had no such information and, so far, had not even seen Ambassador Johnson.

..... On Friday 5 August he called me and asked for an interview Saturday morning. When he came, he handed me the annexed letter from Mr. Chou En-lai concerning which I did not say anything immediately as I wanted to have his oral comments which I foresaw might clarify the significance of the letter. I felt this need to wait especially as Mr. Chou En-lai in his final paragraph had put an emphasis on my previous contact with Mr. Wang Ping-nan which was not warranted by what I had actually said.

Mr. Wang Ping-nan said that I had all the time stressed that the release of the prisoners was a move which had to be taken before any progress was likely on other issues. Mr. Chou En-lai felt that now was the time for such progress, as China had made the gesture. It was apparent from the Ambassador's elaboration of the letter that what was regarded as a "deed" was not a gesture in return for the prisoners, but some kind of agreement

with a mutual give and take, which had the release of the prisoners not as an integral part, but as its background. Thus, the Ambassador in his explanations remained on the basis of the formula which had been mine all through. Specifically, he seemed to mean by "deed" not any new move, for example concerning the students, but an understanding covering both sides of the first item on the agenda of the Sino-American talks.

The Ambassador went on to say that I might know that China had suggested that a third power, for example India, should take care of the interests of the students as well as the interests of the American civilians in China. Mr. Chou En-lai hoped that I would find it possible to support that proposal.

I replied that I first of all wanted to comment on the penultimate paragraph of the letter. I had noted the point in Mr. Chou En-lai's discussion with Ambassador Wistrand to which a reference was made. Mr. Chou En-lai should, however, understand that as I did not want to enter the public discussion on these issues, we, on both sides, would have to accept a certain latitude of misunderstanding and misinterpretation. To my knowledge nothing had been said which Mr. Chou En-lai had any reason to consider as embarrassing. Concerning the final paragraph and the request for "deeds", I could only confirm what I had said before, that in my view a straightening out of the prisoner question had to be achieved before any progress could be foreseen in the relations between China and the United States. I now considered such progress possible. Obviously I took a great personal interest in the success of the talks now in progress, and I would do what I could in general terms in order to further them within the limits of strict impartiality. As concerned the proposal to entrust a third

party with certain tasks in this context, I was at this stage neither for nor against it. This was the first authoritative indication I had had of the proposal and I had so far had no opportunity to consider its advantages or weaknesses. The Ambassador should not read into my expression of general interest in the success of the talks that I tied my hands on any specific issues or expressed approval of any specific formula. Obviously several formulas were possible, and what was necessary was to find one which was mutually acceptable. If my thinking could be of any help in the effort to find such a formula, I would be happy to help in such a way. At all events, however, I wanted to get in touch with Ambassador Johnson to get his views on the matter before I went any further in a discussion.

The Chinese Ambassador said that he understood my attitude and would report it. However, Mr. Chou En-lai had noted that I was returning to New York next week and he considered it likely that my word would carry weight in Washington. That was one reason why he had expressed hopes that I might find it possible to support the Chinese effort. I replied that on my return to America I naturally would get in touch with the United States' representatives and that, true to the principles which had animated my contacts with Mr. Chou En-lai during the whole period of negotiations, I would, of course in a spirit of strict objectivity, do what I had said in my letter to him, i.e. try and help towards an appreciation of the problems of China. If I found possibilities to help towards a mutually satisfactory solution of the problems covered by item (1) in the Sino-American talks, I would be happy to help, but I had to repeat that all my activities were under strict, self-

imposed rules, requiring first of all the firmest impartiality, without which I would be of no value either to Peking or to Washington.

To this reply, where I stressed my special responsibilities so sharply in order to eliminate any temptation to try to use me as a spokesman, the Ambassador replied that he would not fail to report to Mr. Chou En-lai the "friendly and sincere" way in which I had reacted.

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If that was Mr. Chou En-lai's intention - which, of course, was extremely uncertain - the formula would have to be that the two parties agreed on a procedure for protection of the interest of the Americans in China and the students in America and called upon the Secretary-General to implement it, e.g. by nominating agents.

It should be added that at some stage of the discussion with Mr. Wang Ping-nan I said to him that as the legal issue of the students to my knowledge was solved, the discussion of that question from my point of view was concluded. However, this did not exclude that from a purely humanitarian point of view I would continue to take an interest in their fate in view of such financial or other difficulties as might exist in spite of the positive legal attitude that was taken by the authorities.

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