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Examining the issue of Indochina to understand Zhou Enlai's neighborhood diplomacy

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In recent years, China's neighboring environment has experienced profound changes, and China's external security situation has been subject to a series of shocks. Against this background, China's neighborhood diplomacy has become increasingly prominent. Indochina has been the focus of China's neighborhood diplomacy since the Geneva Conference in 1954. Based on the declassified archives of Kissinger's secret visit to China in 1971, this paper examines the issue of Indochina in the negotiations between Zhou Enlai and Kissinger. The aim is to offer a valuable historical experience for China's neighborhood diplomacy of today and the way to manage and resolve strategic disputes in its neighboring area. The study finds that during the negotiations, Zhou took a clear stance on behalf of the Chinese government in expressing support for the struggle for the national independence of the Indochinese people. This reflects China's unshakable commitment to the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence and support for the international justice of anti-aggression and anti-colonialism. Additionally, through his statements, Zhou has shown us the meaning of "amity, sincerity, mutual benefit, and inclusiveness (亲诚惠容 Qin Cheng Hui Rong)" in neighborhood diplomacy. All his efforts showed us how to effectively undertake neighborhood diplomacy, which is the essence of maintaining stability in China's neighborhood.

KEYWORDS

the issue of Indochina, Zhou Enlai, five principles of peaceful coexistence, neighborhood diplomacy, amity, sincerity, mutual benefit, and inclusiveness

1 Introduction

Since the United States characterized China as its foremost strategic competitor, the security situation that China faces in its peripheral regions has changed markedly. Through its Indo-Pacific strategy, the United States has continued to strengthen its ties with China's neighboring countries, trying to cooperate with them in the fields of security, economic and trade, science and technology, etc. In the field of security, the United States has established the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) with Japan, India, and Australia, as well as the AUKUS with Britain and Australia. In the field of trade and economic affairs, both the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPP) under the Obama administration and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework under the Biden administration intentionally exclude China and aim to re-establish the United States as the leader of regional trade. In the area of science and technology, the Biden administration has attempted to form the so-called "Chip 4 Initiative" with Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, aiming to strengthen its position on the semiconductor supply chain and weaken Chinese involvement.

Against this background, from the perspective of China, the importance of neighborhood diplomacy has been more prominent than ever. Effective neighborhood diplomacy is a necessary condition for China to maintain regional stability and to help resolve regional conflicts. Correspondingly, more and more academic attention has been paid to China's neighborhood diplomacy and the concept of neighborhood diplomacy of "Amity, Sincerity, Mutual Benefit, and Inclusiveness (亲诚惠容 Qin Cheng Hui Rong)" (Xing, 2014; Pan and Xiao, 2019). However, existing literature faces three main limitations. First, while it often admits that the concept of neighborhood diplomacy is an incisive summarization and generalization of China's neighborhood diplomatic practices over the years, it has failed to provide a historical case to prove such a point. Second, if the concept of neighborhood diplomacy has been a part of China's foreign policy tradition, then existing literature should elaborate on its relationship with the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, which so far has been limited. Third, existing literature focuses too much on identifying the scope or the outer ring of China's neighborhood, while overlooking its core, i.e., Southeast Asia, which should be more important as it has a more direct impact on China's security and development.

To address these limitations as well as to explore and provide historical experiences for current neighborhood diplomacy, this article uses declassified U.S. files on Henry Kissinger's secret visit to China as its main sources to conduct an in-depth analysis of the issue of Indochina during the talks between Zhou Enlai and Kissinger. It aims to address two main questions: how did Zhou Enlai help resolve the conflicts in Indochina in his negotiations with Kissinger? And how is his approach in line with the concept of Neighborhood Diplomacy as well as the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence?

The rest of the article is organized as the followings. First, it explains how the chosen case study - Zhou and Kissinger's negotiations on the issue of Indochina - can broaden as well as deepen our understanding of neighborhood diplomacy. Second, it offers a detailed picture of how Zhou helped defend the interests of the peoples of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia while tried to persuade the United States to end the conflict as soon as possible. Third, it points out how Zhou's approach manifests the concept of Neighborhood Diplomacy as well as the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. Lastly, based on the findings, the article identifies some crucial conditions for the success of China's neighborhood diplomacy as well as regional conflict resolution.

2 The issue of Indochina from the perspective of neighborhood diplomacy

2.1 The scope of neighborhood

In order to analyze China's neighborhood diplomacy, it is necessary to first clarify what is meant by China's neighborhood, which areas are included, and whether its scope has changed over time. So far, Chinese academics have not reached a consensus on the definition or scope of China's neighborhood, which is directly attributed to the fact that the Chinese government has not clearly defined the concept of "neighborhood." Some scholars have pointed out that although the Chinese government has always emphasized the significance of neighborhood diplomacy and regarded it as an important part of

China's overall diplomatic agenda,¹ the term "neighborhood" appeared late in the official documents of China. It did not appear for the first time until the end of the 1980s (Wang, 2022, p. 78). At that time, the neighboring countries only included Mongolia, North Korea, South Korea, and South and Southeast Asian countries. It did not cover the Soviet Union at the time, as well as Japan. However, the scope of the neighborhood was gradually expanded later on, with Japan in 1991 and Russia as well as the Central Asian countries in 1993 beginning to be regarded as China's neighbors (Zhong, 2011, pp. 129–130). In 2013, the Chinese central government convened the first forum on neighborhood diplomacy since its foundation. This is when the concept of neighborhood diplomacy "Qin Cheng Hui Rong" was officially put forward. Many Chinese experts maintain that this forum has raised the importance of neighborhood diplomacy to an unprecedented level. Nevertheless, the forum did not put forward a clear definition or scope of China's neighborhood.

To a large extent, existing literature maintains that the scope of China's neighborhood is not just a fixed geographic concept, but fluid and closely related to the change of Chinese national power and the level of involvement of China's national interest with the outside world (Sun, 2016, p. 2; Ding, 2017, p. 110). Scholars holding this view believe that due to China's relatively weak national strength in the early stages, its national interests back then were more tied to those few very close neighbors. As a result, the scope of its neighborhood was smaller at that time. As China gains more national power and its national interests were more widely involved with the outside world, China began to consider more and more countries as its neighbors. Nowadays, some scholars have begun to use the concept of the "Great Neighborhood (大周边 Da Zhoubian)" to include the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and other countries that are geographically far away from China, but with which China's national interests are closely related. This helps us to understand why the concept of "neighborhood" is vague and in flux, mainly because it is constantly changing in line with China's national strength, national interests, and international influence.

However, this article believes that in comparison to clarify the outer ring of China's neighborhood, to deepen our understanding of the core of China's neighborhood enjoys more social relevance and significance. Compared with the outer ring, the countries and regions in the inner core have a more direct impact on China's security and development. From official documents and existing academic results, we can find that no matter how the scope of "neighborhood" extends, its core has remained stable (Liu, 2021, p. 27). Southeast Asian, particularly Indochina, has always belong to the inner core of China's neighborhood.

2.2 The neighborhood diplomacy from a spatio-temporal perspective

Built upon existing studies on China's neighborhood diplomacy, this article attempts to broaden as well as deepen our understanding of the topic by analyzing it from two angles: time and space. "Time"

¹ China's overall diplomatic agenda identifies major countries as the key, the neighborhood as the priority, developing countries as the foundation, and multilateral fora as an important stage.

refers to investigating China's neighboring diplomacy from a historical perspective. Historically speaking, the concept of neighborhood diplomacy—"amity, sincerity, mutual benefit, and inclusiveness"—is an incisive generalization and innovative development of China's neighborhood diplomatic practices over the years. It has been manifested from time to time in the early stages of China's diplomatic practices. Nonetheless, existing research has largely overlooked this aspect. Due to the relative lack of historical perspective, the relation between the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence and the concept of neighborhood diplomacy has also been rarely discussed.

The occasion neighborhood diplomatic works that take place also matters. It should be noted that China's relations with its neighbors are closely related to its relations with those great powers as well as the whole international system. History has shown that when China interacts with other major powers like the United States, China's neighboring regions have always been a significant part of their discussions. This indicates that even though developing bilateral and multilateral relationships within the region is the main task of China's neighborhood diplomacy, a successful neighborhood diplomacy also requires China to pay great attention to the potential feelings and reactions of its neighbors when it is dealing with major powers outside the region.

2.3 The significance of Indochina

As a large country, China is surrounded by a number of neighbors that are diverse in terms of politics, economics, and culture. This also means that each of them has its own special significance for China's neighborhood diplomacy. Among them, the three countries of Indochina stood out during the Cold War, and their significance to China is reflected in three main aspects.

First, territorial security. The three countries are geographically close to China, so their security situation and stability have a direct impact on China's security. This is particularly the case after the Second World War. Since the 1950s, the United States had stepped up its intervention in Indochina, first by supporting France in suppressing the Indochinese people's fight for independence. Then, after the signing of the Geneva Accord in 1954, the United States employed a variety of means, such as providing money, weapons, and military advisers to South Vietnam, to prevent the implementation of the agreement, plunging Vietnam into a deep civil war. Finally, it directly deployed hundreds of thousands of troops to invade Vietnam. In addition, the United States instigated a civil war in Laos and subverted as well as invaded Cambodia. The actions of the United States posed a direct and serious threat to the territorial security of southern China.

Second, similar historical experiences. The people of Indochina had also been bullied by imperialist powers in modern history, and this makes them hold similar miserable historical memories as Chinese people do. They all struggled for national independence and liberation. Moreover, North Vietnam even chose an identical path to that of China: establish a socialist country under the leadership of the communist party. At the personal level, Ho Chi Minh held strong friendships with Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, and other Chinese leaders. He was a close friend of the Chinese Communist Party as well as China.

Third, the balance of power at the global level. As mentioned above, neighborhood diplomacy requires China not only to emphasize

its relations with regional states but also to keep an eye on the roles and impacts of the region in the international environment. In the early 1960s, in its competition for global hegemony against the Soviet Union, the United States felt that it was faced with a relative decline in power and had to take a defensive posture. Among many factors, the Vietnam War was one of the most crucial reasons why the balance of power shifted in the Soviet Union's favor. Against this grand background, the United States took the initiative to re-approach China. It hoped to achieve two purposes through the re-approchement. First, the United States hoped to take advantage of China's influence on Vietnam to end the war as quickly as possible so that it could concentrate on its competition against the Soviet Union. Second, the United States hoped to use this opportunity to improve its relations with China and even form a quasi-alliance with the latter to balance the threat of the Soviet Union.

3 The negotiation between Zhou Enlai and Henry Kissinger on Indochina

From July 9 to 11, 1971, Dr. Henry Kissinger, then President Nixon's Assistant for National Security Affairs, made a secret visit to China, the purpose of his trip being to improve relations between the United States and China. Kissinger and Zhou held multiple meetings in 48 h, and both sides reached an agreement on President Nixon's visit to China and issued an announcement of Kissinger's visit to China. The issue of Indochina was a very important part of the talks.

3.1 The situation in Indochina before the talks

One of the main reasons why the issue of Indochina occupied such an important place was inextricably linked to the situation in Indochina before the talks. The United States was stuck in the Vietnam War, with its losses mounting every day. Worse still, after almost 15 years of war, the People's Army of Vietnam and the Viet Cong, led by North Vietnam and the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam respectively, were still able to pull off a spring offensive on January 30, 1968. They launched a massive attack on South Vietnam, the United States, and other U.S. allies. This spring offensive was the largest ground operation during the Vietnam War, and its gruesomeness shocked the American public, which caused the rise of massive antiwar movements in the United States. Even many American veterans joined the anti-war movements in the United States, as they threw the medals they won in Vietnam War away in a war protest at Capitol ([New York Times, 1971](#)). Under the public pressure, the U.S. government was forced to initiate peace talks with the North Vietnamese.

From May 13 to October 30, 1968, bilateral peace negotiations were held in Paris between North Vietnam and the United States. On January 25, 1969, South Vietnam and the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam (PRG)² also joined the negotiations, and quadripartite meetings were held at the International

² The PRG was mainly founded by the Viet Cong.

Conference Center near the Arc de Triomphe in Paris. Later, Nguyễn Thị Bình, on behalf of the PRG, put forward several proposals to resolve the Vietnam War, such as the Eight-Point Plan of September 19, 1970, and the Seven Point Proposal for Peace of July 1, 1971. However, the negotiations failed to reach an agreement on a final peace accord due to wide divergences.

Nixon intended to get the United States out of Vietnam as soon as possible. On June 8, 1969, Nixon announced to unilaterally withdraw 25,000 troops from Vietnam by the end of August of that year. On July 25, 1969, Nixon made another statement in Guam, proposing the withdrawal of 500,000 U.S. troops and the Vietnamization³ of the Vietnam War.

In spite of these remarks and decisions, other military actions undertaken by the United States in that period expanded the territorial scope of the war. On March 18, 1969, with Nixon's approval, the U.S. military deployed B-52 bombers to carry out carpet bombing against the Viet Cong in Cambodia. In May of the same year, the Battle of Hamburg Hill broke out, which is near the western border of Vietnam with Laos. On March 18, 1970, Lon Nol, a pro-U.S. general of Cambodia, staged a military coup to overthrow the regime of Prince Norodom Sihanouk. In May of the same year, with Lon Nol's acquiescence, U.S. and South Vietnamese forces entered Cambodia and attacked North Vietnamese military bases there. The coup and U.S. military actions drew Cambodia, which had been struggling to maintain its fragile independence, into the war completely. On February 2, 1971, South Vietnamese forces launched the Operation Lam Son 719 in Laos, aiming to cut off supply routes to the North Vietnamese by taking control of the 9th Route. All these provoked the peoples of the three Indochinese countries to fight against the United States and protect the integrity of their countries' sovereignty. China, for its part, postponed the U.S.-China Warsaw Talks for two consecutive times to show its support for the peoples of the three Indochinese countries (FRUS, 2006, p. 365).

The U.S. goal of exiting the war in Indochina with a military victory completely failed. Faced with the deteriorating situation, the Nixon Administration hoped to get out of the Vietnam War as soon as possible. In order to do so, the United States needed not only to continue negotiating with North Vietnam and the PRG but also to pay attention to the stances and attitudes of their supporters, i.e., China and the Soviet Union. One of the purposes of Kissinger's visit was to find out whether China could play a role in helping the United States to end the military conflict.

3.2 The significance of the issue of Indochina in the negotiations

In their first meeting, Kissinger raised the issue of Indochina to Zhou. In fact, there were seven issues in total that Kissinger would like to discuss with Zhou: (1) Taiwan; (2) Indochina; (3) Relations with other major countries, such as the Soviet Union and Japan; (4) The situation in South Asia; (5) the establishment of a secure channel of communications between the United States and China; (6) arms

control; (7) any other topics that China would like to raise (FRUS, 2006, p. 362).

The issue of Indochina accounts for about 40% of all the content in the declassified files.⁴ This sheds light on the significance of the issue to the negotiations between the United States and China, especially in terms of overcoming their strategic differences to achieve the normalization of diplomatic relations.

3.3 The exchange of views between Zhou Enlai and Henry Kissinger

Winston Lord, a participant of the negotiations and a senior staff member of the National Security Council, noted: "on Indochina, his [Zhou] language was relatively restrained, but he gave firm support to his friends and a hands-off attitude, even while recognizing the link you were establishing between this issue and Taiwan." As Lord described, throughout the whole negotiation process, Zhou on behalf of the Chinese government made it crystal clear to Kissinger that China's attitude toward the Vietnam War and toward a solution of the issue of Indochina is composed of two points:

1. All foreign troops of the United States and the troops of other countries which followed the United States into Indochina should be withdrawn.
2. The second point is that the peoples of the three countries of Indochina should be left alone to decide their own respective fates (FRUS, 2006, p. 379).

To resolve the conflicts in Vietnam and Indochina, the two sides had a lengthy and in-depth discussion over three major aspects.

First, the so-called "link" Kissinger tried to establish between the issue of Indochina and Taiwan. Since the beginning of the preparations for the resumption of the Sino-U.S. ambassadorial-level talks, Zhou through various channels had expressed China's position clearly to the United States that all U.S. armed forces should be withdrawn from Taiwan and the Taiwan Strait (Jin, 2018, p. 1845). During the negotiations, Kissinger tried to link the issue of Indochina with Taiwan. According to Kissinger, the U.S. military presence in Taiwan at that time consisted of two parts: two-thirds of it which was related to activities in other parts of Asia, and one-third of it which was related to the defense of Taiwan. Basically, what Kissinger subtly proposed is that if China could help the United States to resolve the conflicts in Indochina, the United States would withdraw two-thirds of its forces in Taiwan within a specified short period of time in return. Furthermore, as the U.S.-China relations improve, the United States would prepare to reduce the rest of its forces in Taiwan (FRUS, 2006, p. 369). Nevertheless, Zhou responded that linking the issue of Indochina with Taiwan was an act of complicating the situation, and that such a step-by-step approach to problem solving would lead to the emergence of more new problems.

Second, the way to achieve a peaceful resolution of the Vietnam War. This is particularly concerned with how to undertake the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Indochina. Kissinger briefed Zhou on

³ The Vietnamization refers to the Nixon Administration's policy to end the U.S. military involvement by helping to South Vietnamese forces.

⁴ The statistics is by the author's own calculations.

his negotiations with North Vietnamese representatives and expressed the U.S. willingness to resolve the conflicts in Vietnam and Indochina through negotiations, and that the United States is prepared to set a date for the withdrawal of all U.S. forces from Vietnam and Indochina as Zhou suggested before. But, the United States wanted the exit to be consistent with its honor and self-respect, and if it could not achieve this, the war would continue. Even though the U.S. military actions in the area would not target China, they would interrupt the improvement of U.S.-China relations, which is a situation that the United States would try to avoid. Meanwhile, Kissinger also said that the United States sought no military bases or military allies in Indochina, and it would pursue no policy in that area that could concern China, and he strongly believed that the end of the war in Indochina would accelerate the improvement of U.S.-China relations (FRUS, 2006, pp. 373–376). In short, Kissinger employed the tactics of carrot-and-stick: while showing his goodwill, his words were not devoid of hidden threats.

There were two core elements of the U.S. peace proposal to North Vietnam: (1) the United States would prepare to withdraw its troops from Indochina and set a fixed date for such withdrawal if there was a cease-fire from the side of North Vietnam and the release of U.S. prisoners; (2) the United States would allow the political settlement in South Vietnam to happen naturally and gradually and would allow the people of Vietnam to decide on their own future according to their own will, free from outside interference (FRUS, 2006, p. 375, p. 382). In other words, the United States conditioned its withdrawal of troops and no further interference in Vietnamese affairs on a complete cease-fire and release of prisoners of war on the part of the North Vietnamese.

However, in Kissinger's opinion, North Vietnam made two demands that prevented a peace agreement from being reached. One is that North Vietnam in effect asked the United States to overthrow the government of South Vietnam. The other is that North Vietnam refused to agree to a ceasefire throughout Indochina, but only a ceasefire with the United States, not including its allies (FRUS, 2006, p. 375). Kissinger argued that if the Saigon government in South Vietnam was a U.S. puppet, as the North Vietnamese believed, then with the withdrawal of U.S. troops, that government would naturally fall without the need for the United States to overthrow it, and the United States had no intention to overthrow it. In addition, if the North Vietnamese attacked U.S. allies, particularly South Vietnam, while the United States was withdrawing, then the United States would find it inconsistent with the U.S. honor and consequently would have to be drawn into the war again. The conflict would break out again, with incalculable consequences (FRUS, 2006, p. 375).

Zhou first thanked Kissinger for systematically stating the position of the United States on the Indochina question, but he noted that the United States could not shirk its primary responsibility for the enlargement of the war in Indochina (FRUS, 2006, p. 382). In Zhou's opinion, since the United States recognized that the withdrawal of its troops is a good thing and conducive to peace in the Far East and the world, the United States should make up its mind to do so, and the best way to realize the honorable withdrawal that the United States wants is to withdraw all its forces directly and completely, without caring about the ways in which the Indochinese people solve their problems afterwards. This is the most honorable way of withdrawal (FRUS, 2006, p. 383). Citing the example of China's readiness to make greater sacrifices to consolidate the new

China, Zhou said the same was true of the Vietnamese and Indochinese people. Ho Chi Minh before he died said that he would not allow any foreign soldier, that is, American soldier, to remain on Vietnamese soil and would fight on to victory. Therefore, if the Vietnamese people could not live in peace they would rather sacrifice another million people to fight to the end. The United States emphasized dignity and honor, but the greatest honor for it would be to withdraw all its forces voluntarily without leaving any "tail" behind (FRUS, 2006, p. 386). The "tail" Zhou referred to was that the United States planned to withdraw its combat troops first and then its advisers. Kissinger argued that the advisers would be only for logistical and technical purposes. Zhou refuted his argument with historical facts, pointing out that the Vietnam War had begun with the dispatch of military advisers (FRUS, 2006, p. 380).

Responding to the "incalculable consequences" Kissinger mentioned, Zhou said that the Chinese Government had clearly and repeatedly stated its support for the seven-point proposal put forward by Nguyễn Thị Bình on behalf of the PRG. China sincerely wished the war in Indochina could end. Nevertheless, the crux of the problem is the withdrawal of the U.S. forces. If the forces of the United States and its allies remained, then fighting would continue. And the Vietnamese people are prepared to continue fighting. They had only two prospects: one would be the complete withdrawal of all U.S. forces, while the other would be the continuation of the war (FRUS, 2006, p. 383). For the second scenario, the "incalculable consequences" would not be for the Vietnamese people, but for the United States (FRUS, 2006, p. 406). Moreover, Zhou repeatedly stated that as long as the war lasted, China and the Chinese people would continue to support the Vietnamese, Cambodian and Laotian people until complete victory was achieved (FRUS, 2006, pp. 418–419, p. 421).

Third, the question of the development of the situation in Indochina after the withdrawal of U.S. troops. This involves two points. One is that Kissinger mentioned that if the United States withdrew its troops from Indochina, then should the North Vietnamese also withdraw their troops from Laos and Cambodia. Zhou replied that it would be the problem for the Indochinese peoples to decide, and that the prerequisite for solving the problem would be the withdrawal of foreign troops from Indochina first, and then the Indochinese people could make decisions on how to proceed next. The other one is about those U.S.-backed regimes like the Saigon government in South Vietnam and the Lon Nol regime in Cambodia. Zhou asked Kissinger whether the U.S. government would still consider them as legitimate governments or allies after the withdrawal and therefore keep on supporting them, such as with military aid (FRUS, 2006, p. 387). In Zhou's opinion, the United States should not pay attention to those two puppet regimes, and that support for them would only be detrimental to U.S. credibility and honor. Of course, if they could be led to reform and build a coalition government, that would be another matter (FRUS, 2006, p. 407).

4 Zhou Enlai's concept of neighborhood diplomacy

Through an in-depth study of the content of the negotiations, we can summarize four concepts of Zhou on resolving conflicts in China's neighborhood: (1) sticking to principles; (2) firmly supporting the pursuit of national independence and liberation by the peoples of

other countries; (3) being open and honest and facing up to differences; (4) respecting others' choices of their own path.

4.1 Adherence to the five principles of peaceful coexistence

Zhou's adherence to the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence is best shown in his emphasis on respecting the national sovereignty of Vietnam. Despite the fact that the issue of Indochina was extremely important to China's national interest, and that China was an important supporter of North Vietnam, Zhou, in the course of the negotiations, only expressed China's political attitude and position. Zhou never tried to negotiate the issue for North Vietnam, not to mention overstepping his bounds to make any decisions for North Vietnam. As for the specific contents of the U.S.-Vietnam peace talks, such as the timing of the withdrawal of U.S. troops and whether and how the U.S. side would deal with the puppet regimes in Indochina, this should be a matter of discussion between the United States and the North Vietnamese side, and China would not interfere (FRUS, 2006, p. 388, p. 418). Zhou repeatedly pointed out that even though China wished the negotiation to be successful, final decisions on a settlement rested with Hanoi, not Beijing (FRUS, 2006, p. 542).

Zhou's adherence to principles and respect for Vietnam's sovereignty is also reflected in how he refused to trade in principles. Zhou was well aware of Kissinger's purpose in linking Taiwan and Indochina: to reduce the number of U.S. troops in Taiwan in exchange for China's persuasion of North Vietnam to enter into negotiations with the United States so that the two could resolve the Vietnam War through negotiation. With this proposal, Kissinger was inducing the Chinese side to violate the principle of mutual equality among nations by suppressing Vietnam and forcing it to change its own political will in exchange for China's national interests. Reducing the number of U.S. troops in Taiwan by two-thirds was a big temptation for China, but Zhou not only ignored this offer during the talks, but also emphasized to China's foreign ministry after the meeting that, in dealing with U.S.-China relations, as well as other international affairs, China "will stick to the established principled position, and will never make a deal with principles" (Jin, 2018, p.1853).

4.2 Resolute support for national independence and liberation

First, the strongest statement made by Zhou on behalf of China on the Indochina issue was that China supports North Vietnam and the PRG. China would continue to support them as long as the war continued. China's support was not limited to the Vietnamese people, but included the peoples of Laos and Cambodia as well (FRUS, 2006, pp. 418–419, p. 421). Still, peace is what the Indochinese peoples were looking for. In the interests of the Indochinese peoples, China sincerely hoped that the Vietnam War would come to an early end and that peace could be realized as soon as possible through diplomatic negotiations (FRUS, 2006, p. 419). Consequently, during the negotiations, Zhou repeatedly stated that the Chinese side was in favor of the seven-point proposal put forward by Nguyễn Thị Bình, which took the interests of both the

United States and North Vietnam into account (FRUS, 2006, p. 420).

Second, Zhou's support for the resistance of the Indochinese peoples during the negotiations was based on international law and historical facts. The main responsibility for the outbreak and enlargement of the Vietnam War was on the United States. The United States did not abide by the 1954 Geneva Agreement and successively installed a number of pro-U.S. and anti-communist puppet regimes in Indochina (FRUS, 2006, p. 378, p. 382). Zhou took the regime of Ngo Dinh Diem in South Vietnam as an example. Under Diem's control, countless people in South Vietnam could not gain liberation as well as freedom, and they continued to be oppressed, imprisoned, and even massacred (FRUS, 2006, p. 379). Through his clear and unequivocal statements, Zhou indicated that North Vietnam and the PRG were on the side of jurisprudence and morality, and that their resistance to the United States was reasonable, justified, and lawful. China therefore firmly supported their resistance of their fight for national independence and liberation.

Third, Zhou highly praised Vietnam and its people during the negotiations, describing Vietnam as a heroic country and the Vietnamese people as heroic people (FRUS, 2006, p. 374). To praise the Vietnamese people's spirit of resistance from the standpoint of a third party had two implications. For North Vietnam and the PRG, this was not only to give them moral support but also to gain a more favorable position in their negotiations with the United States. For the United States, Zhou's praise was to help them understand what kind of power Vietnam is. That is, the United States needed to realize that suppressing Vietnam through force would not make the Vietnamese people retreat and yield, but would only be counterproductive.

Fourth, Zhou made no secret of the "comrade and brother" relationship between China and Vietnam during the negotiations. Zhou called Ho Chi Minh an old friend whom he had known since 1922, and Ho had joined the Chinese Communist Party in Paris (FRUS, 2006, p. 378). Zhou praised Ho for giving the Vietnamese people national dignity and pride. Zhou made it clear that if the United States had adhered to the 1954 Geneva Agreement, and Vietnam had held elections, Ho undoubtedly would have become Vietnam's supreme leader because he had won the hearts of the Vietnamese people (FRUS, 2006, p. 378).

Fifth, Zhou's resolute support for the peoples of the three Indochinese countries, was the consistent position of the Chinese Government. Zhou's statements on other occasions were as outright as in his negotiations with Kissinger. Zhou had said that not supporting the resistance of the Vietnamese people was tantamount to betraying the revolution (Wilson Center, 2011a). China had helped to protect the fundamental interests of the Indochinese peoples not only at the negotiating table, but also in practical actions, even when China itself was confronted with extremely difficult conditions. According to statistics, during the Vietnam War, China's military and economic assistance to North Vietnam and the Viet Cong totaled \$20 billion, or about \$160 billion adjusted for inflation in 2022. This aid included 5 million tons of food donated to North Vietnam, the equivalent of one year's worth of North Vietnam's food production, which accounted for 10–15% of North Vietnam's food supply in the 1970s (Womack, 2006, p. 179). Zhou, on behalf of the central government, made it clear to local governments and the whole country that supporting Vietnam is China's top priority, and no matter

how difficult it is, China must continue its aid to Vietnam (cited in Zhang and Liu, 2009, p. 37).

4.3 Being open and candid in the face of disagreements

During the negotiations, Zhou was very straightforward in terms of stating China's position, being open to as well as respecting the differences between the United States and China. In drafting the Sino-American joint communiqué, Zhou opposed Kissinger's "untruthful appearance" of the wordings, who sought to obscure the disagreements between the United States and China (Keith, 1989, p. 200). Instead, Zhou proposed that China and the United States should affirm their respective positions on major issues of common concern. When it comes to the issue of Indochina, China expresses its firm support to the peoples of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Kissinger initially was wary of this proposal, fearing that would lead President Nixon's visit to China to achieve nothing but a list of disagreements; however, in the end, he accepted this unprecedented formulation because it would show both countries' friends and allies that their interests had been defended (Kissinger, 2011, pp. 1062–1063).

China's candidness was more evident in its communications with North Vietnam. To start with, right after Kissinger left China, Zhou flew to Hanoi to inform North Vietnam about the negotiation and its specific content. In Zhou's own words, he had given his whole heart to the brother party of North Vietnam (cited in Zhang and Liu, 2009, p. 39). Zhou also shared China's own experience of resistance with the North Vietnamese and gave them China's analysis and advice on the U.S.-Vietnamese negotiations. According to Zhou, on the one hand, it was necessary to prepare for fighting, and on the other hand, North Vietnam should master the technique of fighting while negotiating (Wilson Center, 2011b). China employed this two-pronged strategy of combining fighting with negotiation when it was fighting against Chiang Kai-shek's government in the late 1940s and the United States during the Korean War (Wilson Center, 2011b). As far as the situation in Vietnam at that time was concerned, Vietnam might need to establish a joint provisional government, but the struggle against the oppressive forces would not end with that, according to Zhou. Even if a provisional government could be formed, the war might still break out again afterwards. The key for North Vietnam and the PRG was to take advantage of this period of time to recover and regain strengths so that they could be prepared to win the new struggle (Wilson Center, 2011b,c).

Meanwhile, when differences arose between China and North Vietnam, China did not take an evasive attitude toward them. During the U.S.-Vietnamese peace talks, representatives of North Vietnam told Zhou that North Vietnam was reluctant to negotiate with Nguyễn Văn Thiệu, who was the leader of South Vietnam at that time. Rather, they would talk with anyone from the Saigon government other than Thiệu. In response, Zhou pointed out that although China also did not recognize Thiệu and considered him a U.S. puppet, it was undeniable that he was the most influential figure in South Vietnam. Consequently, if North Vietnam chose not to negotiate directly with Thiệu, but only with other figures within his party, then no problem could be solved. Zhou further illustrated this with China's own experience. If the Chinese Communist Party had insisted on negotiating only with other members within Chiang Kai-shek's ruling

clique instead of negotiating with Chiang directly, it would have been difficult to reach any agreement (Wilson Center, 2011b).

4.4 Respect the rights of other countries to choose their own development path

After the withdrawal of the U.S. forces, the question then would be what kind of decision the three Indochinese countries would make. Zhou repeatedly emphasized China's non-interventionist stance during his talks with Kissinger. Zhou stressed that whether the civil wars in the three Indochinese countries continue or not, the United States should not intervene, again. Meanwhile, China would not intervene neither as it believed that the peoples of the three Indochinese countries were capable of solving their own problems. As for the political systems the three Indochinese countries would choose after the war, Zhou stated that China would not intervene in this matter. It would be completely up to the peoples of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia to decide. Last but not least, China's non-interventionist principle would also apply when the three Indochinese countries decide with which countries they would develop diplomatic relations (FRUS, 2006, p. 418).

In sum, in China's efforts to help resolve the conflicts in Indochina, China adhered to the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, applied them accordingly to the situation, and demonstrated the meanings of the concepts of neighborhood diplomacy through practice. When the situation in Indochina continued to intensify and China's national security was threatened, China decisively provided a large amount of material assistance and strong moral support to the three Indochinese countries, even at the cost of national sacrifice. This demonstrated the meanings of "amity" and "mutual benefit." In his communications with Kissinger and his counterparts from Vietnam, Zhou was candid with the differences between them, stayed firm in principles but flexible in tactics, refused to exchange principles for profit, and effectively defended the fundamental interests of the Indochinese peoples. This demonstrated the meanings of "sincerity." What needs to be emphasized is that all these Chinese efforts and assistance were not for the purpose of establishing regional hegemony or controlling regional order. Even if the Indochinese countries chose different political paths from China, China would have no intention to interfere with, needless to mention control, their internal politics. This is the meaning of "inclusiveness."

5 Concluding remarks

Through reviewing the issue of Indochina and the historic negotiations between Zhou Enlai and Henry Kissinger, this study finds that there are three crucial conditions for the success of China's neighborhood diplomacy as well as regional conflict resolution.

First, China must abide by the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence and apply them specifically according to specific issues. The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence were put forward by the Chinese government in the 1950s to develop relations with those new nation-states, especially neighboring independent nations. These five principles embody the common political demands of China and neighboring countries to the international community that still hold true nowadays. They are the norms that China must abide by when

conducting neighborhood diplomacy. They are unshakable, uncompromising, and cannot be traded under any circumstances. That is, when resolving conflicts in the neighborhood, even if the situation is highly intensified and the pressure is increasing, China still needs to adhere to the Five Principles.

Second, on the basis of adhering to the Five Principles, idealistic neighborhood diplomacy concepts are also necessary. Resolving conflicts can only be seen as the first step to realize peace, or what Benjamin Miller called “normal peace” (Miller, 2005). In order to build a fairer and more reasonable international community and realize “warm peace” in its neighborhood, China needs to incorporate idealistic concepts like “amity, sincerity, mutual benefit, and inclusiveness” into its neighborhood diplomatic practices. In this way, China can decrease the possibility of returning to conflicts, promote trust in the region, and improve regional integration. Building warm peace will be a long-term project, and setbacks should be expected, but if China insists on holding up the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence and putting neighborhood diplomatic concepts into practice, conflicts in China’s neighborhood can become unthinkable.

Third, China needs to manage its relations with those great powers outside of the region effectively, the United States in particular. The United States will continue to play an influential role in China’s neighborhood. And as mentioned above, to guarantee the effectiveness of China’s neighborhood diplomacy, the (re)actions of the United States need to be taken into account. A cooperative U.S.-China relationship will be beneficial to the regional situation, while a confrontational one is likely to cause regional turbulence.

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