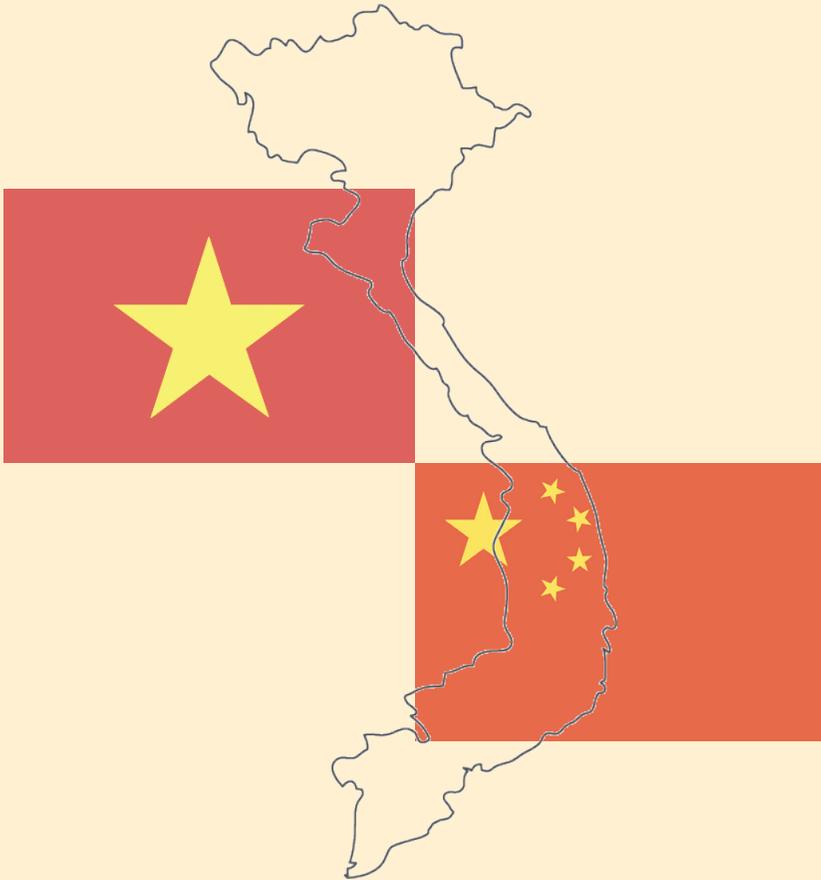


# *Art of War Papers*

## *HOW CHINA WINS* *A Case Study of the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War*



Christopher M. Gin, Major, US Army



US Army Command and General Staff College Press  
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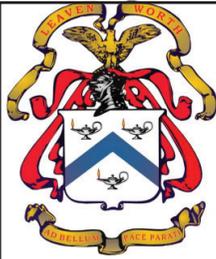
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## **Acronyms**

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
DK	Democratic Kampuchea
DRV	Democratic Republic of Vietnam
GMD	Guomindang (Republic of China's Nationalist Party)
NSA	National Security Advisor
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PRC	People's Republic of China
SALT	Strategic Arms Limitation Talks
SRV	Socialist Republic of Vietnam
UN	United Nations
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics



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## Notes on Pronunciation and Spelling

The author recognizes that many of the Chinese and Vietnamese official state documents may be subject to historical and cultural biases that are imperceptible to the author; however, there is value in examining primary and secondary references to official state records in Chinese and Vietnamese in order to provide balanced analysis.

In any study of China, one must decide which Romanization method to use. The current prevailing style taught to students of the Chinese language is a system known as *Pinyin*. The author will make every attempt to aid readers by keeping key historical personages' name spelling consistent. Mao Tse-Tung (Mao Zedong) and Teng H'siao-Ping (Deng Xiaoping) are not a problem because the spellings are not significantly different. However, Chiang Kai-shek (Jiang Jieshi) and Sun Yat-Sen (Sun Zhongshan) are significantly different in *Pinyin*. To mitigate this problem, the first time a name or place is used, the *Pinyin* will be given in parenthesis immediately following the more recognizable spelling. Thereafter, in the remainder of the text, the *Pinyin* is used.



## Chapter 1

### Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine whether or not China won a strategic victory in its invasion of Vietnam in 1979, and what relevance that victory may have on today's study of Chinese strategy and military thought. Significant studies have focused on the regional issues that led China and Vietnam to war in February 1979. This study instead focuses on China's grand strategic framing of the war and why China may interpret its involvement as a strategic victory.

In the aftermath of the problems of political succession at the later stages of the Mao Zedong (Mao Tse-Tung) era and the domestic social turmoil of the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, Deng Xiaoping (Teng Hsiao-Ping) emerged as China's paramount leader. In February 1979, fewer than two years after he assumed his role as Vice Premier, and only months after normalizing relations with the United States, Deng's government decided to wage a limited war against Vietnam. China used Vietnam's 1978 invasion into Cambodia as a *jus ad bellum*, thus prompting China to conduct a cross-border invasion of its own in order to aid its political ally in Cambodia. With nearly 450,000 mobilized soldiers, China began a limited war with strategic implications.<sup>1</sup> After three weeks of fierce fighting, one Chinese veteran unofficially admits to roughly 32,000 men killed in action, with countless more wounded.<sup>2</sup> Several notable scholars argue that the Chinese achieved only some of their operational objectives at great cost to the People's Liberation Army (PLA), and at a complete detriment to the political work system that embodied its forces at the time.<sup>3</sup> Though tactical and operational inadequacies became apparent in the aftermath of the three-week fight, China still claimed strategic victory. Throughout the next decade, China and Vietnam continued their hostilities on a lesser scale, finally ending when Vietnam withdrew troops from Cambodia in 1989 and signed a treaty normalizing the border in 1991.

This study explores whether or not the Chinese were successful in using limited war in 1979 to achieve their strategic political goals, both domestically and internationally. What was the decision-making process that led Deng Xiaoping to calculate that the benefits of going to war with Vietnam outweighed the risks? Since the late 1960s, China viewed the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic's (USSR) ideological and materiel support to Vietnam as a threat to its southern periphery. China interpreted the USSR-Vietnam relationship as a growing encroachment on its interests – real or imagined. Furthermore, China feared encirclement by the

Soviet Union through proxy states, especially after Vietnam joined the Soviet-led Council of Mutual Economic Assistance and signed a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with the Soviet Union in November 1978.<sup>4</sup>

The Chinese decision to wage a limited war to punish Vietnam challenged the very foundation of the alliance between the Soviet Union and Vietnam. Perhaps of greater strategic importance is that China was willing to gamble that the Soviet Union would not open a second front along the Sino-Soviet border. Chinese leaders also made a keen calculation of how other states would react to its decision, arguing that it could withstand the criticism of launching a major conventional military invasion and not worsen its strategic position in the world. This instance of Chinese domestic and international maneuvering is an historical case study rich with insights into the Chinese strategic use of war to achieve political ends.

This study is narrative in nature, but it pays homage throughout to the body of work that came before it. While this conflict in Asia is lesser known than others in the second half of the 20th century, there are a considerable number of complete works, articles, and accounts that examine the war's details and offer astute analysis. The following chapters will not cover all the literature written about this war, but will highlight several prominent themes and ideas to aid in the analysis.

Chapter 2 breaks down the history of Sino-Vietnamese relations, starting with Vietnam's colonial period in 1802 through its independence in 1954. The next section accounts for the peaceful decade under Ho Chi Minh's Democratic Republic of Vietnam from 1954 to 1964. The section that follows details 1965 to 1974 as a period of aid and cooperation between China and Vietnam, and finally, the chapter ends with the Sino-Vietnamese relationship in the post-Vietnam Reunification years from 1975 to 1978.

Chapter 3 focuses on China's interest in Indochina in the post-Reunification years, and the four main factors that led to war in 1979. Vietnam's tightening relationship with the USSR, the expulsion of ethnic Chinese from Vietnam, the increase of border clashes and the buildup of troops on the Sino-Vietnamese border, and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam's (SRV) invasion of Cambodia each contributed significantly to China's decision to launch the war. Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia – a Chinese ally – was the last straw on the road to war that led Deng Xiaoping to invade and “put a restraint on the wild ambitions of the Vietnamese and to give them an appropriate limited lesson.”<sup>5</sup>

Chapter 4 centers on Deng Xiaoping's rise to power and how he wielded that power to lead the nation to war in 1979. Deng, a participant in the Long March, a political commissar in the PLA, and a disciple of one of Mao's strongest rivals, Liu Shaoqi, rose to become China's paramount leader after being politically purged twice before taking the reins of the Chinese Communist Party after Mao's death. He accomplished dramatic moves from the fringe of domestic politics to the center of Chinese power – a fate that was certainly not preordained. In a calculated move, Deng shored up support at home using his decades-long military and politburo relationships, while simultaneously appealing for international acquiescence to attack Vietnam. His historic visit to Washington in late January 1979 – just weeks before the invasion – underlined China's prevailing sentiment that war over national interests was inevitable. The various strategic political goals are examined here in order to lay the foundation for analysis, conclusions, and recommendations.

Chapter 5 provides a tactical and operational understanding of the war. It examines the initial execution of operational plans, and assesses the point at which China believed its force had culminated after reaching operational objectives in March 1979. This chapter collates the lessons from the war's execution to the aftermath of the fighting and offers a brief operational evaluation. The direct result of the three weeks of battle certainly informed how each side viewed their performance. Deng Xiaoping used the war to consolidate his internal control over the PLA in order to galvanize its modernization, as evidenced in the reforms that took place in that organization in the following decades.<sup>6</sup> To do so, he opted for a battlefield test against Vietnam, albeit at the cost of thousands of combat losses. He also managed to keep the war from escalating beyond a ground conflict, or involving outside intervention. This war, in essence, helped solidify Deng's position as China's next generational leader in the wake of the Mao era.

Finally, Chapter 6 provides analysis, conclusions, and recommendations based on the war's outcome. It looks specifically at how the Chinese used war to gain a strategic political advantage, and whether or not this historical case study is a relevant example of their adeptness at this craft. It also analyzes how the Chinese defined victory in limited warfare and improved their geopolitical position vis-à-vis the USSR and the United States. The Chinese claim to victory despite heavy casualties may be a cultural behavior unique to the Chinese when deciding whether to employ its military power for a political end. The Sino-Vietnamese conflict in 1979

offers a chapter in modern Chinese history that builds on historical cultural tradition of war as one of many means available to achieve the state's ends.

There are several key questions that guide this study of the Sino-Vietnamese War of 1979. First, why did China go to war with Vietnam, and did China achieve its strategic political objectives, both in the domestic and international realms? What was the outcome of the war at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels? What does the documented strategic planning and decision-making process from this war tell us about the cultural context in which Chinese leaders decide to go to war? And lastly, with respect to Chinese culture and traditions of warfare, how do the Chinese theoretically frame what constitutes a victory, and does the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) still apply the same theoretical framework today?

Finally, this study will hopefully offer fresh perspectives on how the Chinese military approaches warfare. The American Army's modern professional military education in the fields of military history and the art of war largely focus on warfare in the western world. The scope of military history used to instruct officer cadets at the United States Military Academy, and field grade officers at the Command and General Staff College, leans heavily on western theorists and models to educate its future military leaders. Theorists like Carl von Clausewitz and Henri Jomini, Alfred Thayer Mahan and Sir Julian Corbett, become part of the American military professional's lexicon, while Lao Tzu (Laozi), Sun Tzu (Sunzi), and Mao Zedong receive little attention. In the application of warfare, American military educational institutes provide only cursory studies of Asian military history, despite the fact that nearly one-fifth of the world's population and half the world's nuclear states are located in Asia. Clearly, more discussion and exposure to warfare on the Asian continent and warfare by Asians is of use to the Army as it plans for future effectiveness and relevance as an instrument of national power in Asia.

The Sino-Vietnamese conflict of 1979 provides a rich example of the People's Republic of China's (PRC) approach to limited warfare for strategic gain. It illustrates how a rising China dealt with contending superpowers – the Soviet Union and the United States – by deepening a rift with the former, achieving rapprochement with the latter, and avoiding a detrimental conflict with either. China, unlike the United States, is accustomed to high casualties in war, as borne out by the millions of dead Chinese soldiers and civilians often forgotten in the West's memory of the last century's wars. China under the CCP does not appear to shy away from casualties in order to achieve its strategic objectives through war, and that is an important cultural point to appreciate.

Of the various state actors in Asia, several American security professionals and academics see China as one of the most likely to use military power to affect regional stability in the near future, but often make the mistake of viewing China through self-imaging.<sup>7</sup> In US Army Training and Doctrine Command Pamphlet 525-3-1, *The US Army Operating Concept* (2014), China is on the short-list of two (Russia being the other) “competing powers” described as a “harbinger of future conflict.”<sup>8</sup> American military leaders who appreciate China’s use of war will be better suited to identify Chinese intentions that directly affect US interests and military engagement in Asia. Future American military leaders will have to contend with China’s rise over the next century, and a broader, deeper understanding of China’s strategy – which includes the prospect of war – will better equip them to meet the challenge.

## Notes

1. Edward C. O'Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War: The Last Maoist War* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 45. The author cites several contending studies that give similar estimates of casualties, but states the lack of clarity on the true figures based on the diverse and contradictory evidence.
2. Retired PLA Officer, oral history interview with author, Beijing, China, 26 March 2015. The officer fought in the war and later taught future PLA Staff Officers in the PLA's Professional Military Education program.
3. O'Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy*, 121.
4. O'Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy*, 43.
5. Deng Xiaoping and company to President Carter and company, Memorandum of Conversation, 29 January 1979, Donated Historical Material Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, Geographic File, China, [People's Republic of]-Alpha Channel: [February 1972-November 1978] through China [People's Republic of] President Meeting with Deng, 3 October 1979, Folder 11, Box 9, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum, Atlanta, GA (hereafter referred to as Carter Library).
6. David C. Gompert, Hans Binnendijk, and Bonny Lin, *Blinders, Blunders, and Wars: What America and China Can Learn* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2014), 125-126.
7. Andrew Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 38. Scobell calls Chinese behavior a "Cult of Defense," which is his theory that the Chinese will actively and aggressively defend their strategic national interests, even to the point of war as illustrated in 1979, while simultaneously justifying their actions as in defense of their threatened strategic interests.
8. US Army Training and Doctrine Command, TRADOC Pamphlet 525-3-1, *The US Army Operating Concept: Win in a Complex World, 2020-2040* (Fort Eustis, VA: US Army Training and Doctrine Command, 7 October 2014), 10.

## Chapter 2

### Sino-Vietnamese History

Far better to smell the dung of the French than to eat Chinese  
dung all one's life.

– Ho Chi Minh, Quoted in Jean Sainteny,  
*Ho Chi Minh and His Vietnam*

China and Vietnam, in their present form as nation-states, have only come into being over the last century. However, the peoples and cultures of the modern states trace their origins and relationship with one another back another 2,000 years. The story starts in the ancient world of suzerain and tributary states, and ends in the late 20th century on the cusp of the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War.

The terms “China” and “Chinese,” used in this historical context, incorporate all aspects under the purview of the imperial dynasty at the time. Later, during the analysis of the Sino-Vietnam War of 1979, the terms specifically apply to the Chinese state established in 1949 under the PRC CCP. Vietnam is a term that rose to prominence during the Nguyen Dynasty starting in 1802. However, the ethnic people who occupied the three regions of modern-day Vietnam including Tonkin in the north, Annam in the center, and Cochinchina in the south, are referred to throughout this study as Vietnamese, as opposed to an association with the ruling state of their era. The distinct and general definitions of these terms is important for recognizing change within a society that accounts for parallels and discontinuities between the past and the present.

This chapter highlights identifiable periods in the Sino-Vietnamese history that give historical depth, breadth, and context for the 1979 War. Appendix A offers a more detailed history of state relations from ancient dynastical times that the reader may find of use for a deeper understanding of two millennia worth of interaction between the Chinese and Vietnamese. However, for the sake of this 1979 War case study, this chapter covers only the pertinent background period from 1802 to 1978. Key takeaways from this chapter are how the two peoples have historically come to view themselves and the other, and how the collective memory of inimical state relations manifests itself even today.

#### **1802 to 1954: From Colonialism to Independence for Vietnam**

Throughout the 19th and early part of the 20th century, both China under the Qing Dynasty and Vietnam under the Nguyen Dynasty suffered

under the colonial designs of foreign powers. The Qing Dynasty had ruled China since 1644, but in the 19th and 20th centuries, it reeled from internal pressures and foreign intervention. The British Opium Wars in the 1840s and 1850s dealt devastating blows to China, and resulted in humiliating concessions for Imperial China. Domestic political turmoil also forecasted the coming end of the Imperial Era, as China lost influence on its periphery, bit by bit.

The mid-19th century was no better for the Vietnamese. In 1858, under the pretext of religious persecution of Catholic missionaries in Vietnam, France and Spain launched the Cochinchina Campaign as a punitive expedition that resulted in the establishment of the French colony. Unfortunately for the Vietnamese, the Chinese were of little help during this period, precisely because it coincided with the Second Opium War. The First Treaty of Saigon brought peace in 1862, but the Vietnamese ceded Saigon and three southern provinces. By 1875, the Nguyen Dynasty signed the Second Treaty of Saigon that returned Hanoi to the Vietnamese, but ceded even more Vietnamese sovereignty to the French. Anxious to receive help from the Chinese, the Vietnamese pleaded for intervention that eventually came in the Sino-French War fought between August 1884 and April 1885. This war began when the French government challenged China's long-held suzerainty over Vietnam, and resulted in another defeat for China's faltering Qing Dynasty.<sup>1</sup>

Prior to open hostilities between France and China, the Vietnamese had already fought the French for nearly 20 years. An historic example of military cooperation was Vietnam's employment of a Chinese militia known as the Black Flags. This group was one of many that had fallen out of favor with the imperial court and departed China following the Taiping Rebellion in 1864. In particular, the Black Flags made themselves useful to the Vietnamese court by assisting Vietnam's armed resistance against French dominion.<sup>2</sup> Toward the end of the Sino-Franco War, the Chinese regular forces fighting in Vietnam also allied with the Black Flags.<sup>3</sup> However, China's lead diplomat, Viceroy Li Hongzhang, was unable to stave off French claims in Vietnam after three years of land and naval defeats. He eventually ordered Chinese troops back across the border after the Treaty of Tianjin in June 1885 renounced China's ancient suzerainty and recognized the French protectorate, the Court of Hue.<sup>4</sup>

In ceding its Vietnam interest to the French, Li understood the value of withdrawing troops, so as not to be bogged down in an extended fight in Vietnam.<sup>5</sup> Although a concerted effort might have been able to logistically support a sustained war effort in Vietnam, the Chinese court did

not appear to have the stomach for a protracted war on foreign soil. In the aftermath of Treaty of Tianjin, the Chinese continued to support Vietnam's indigenous insurgency against the French by trafficking arms throughout the colonial era in an effort to rid the area of western influence, while strategically securing its southern border.<sup>6</sup> The inability of the Chinese to truly defeat an opponent of a friend surely played on the Vietnamese psyche and their trust in China's role as a regional hegemon.

Throughout the first half of the 20th century, China and Vietnam enjoyed some support for one another's anti-imperialist struggles. By 1902, China served as a base for Vietnamese nationalist leaders like Phan Boi Chau, who modeled his revolutionary movement after that of China's Sun Yat-Sen (Sun Zhongshan).<sup>7</sup> Likewise, Vietnam also served as a base for Chinese political factions that fell out of grace with one another until the start of the Second World War.<sup>8</sup> When the Chinese Nationalist Kuomintang (Guomindang, or GMD) and CCP formed an anti-Japanese alliance in 1940, it was Phan Boi Chau who arranged to have 40 Vietnamese men attend training at China's Whampoa Military Academy, presumably to continue the anti-colonial resistance to the French, and later the Japanese, in Vietnam.<sup>9</sup> However, after the Japanese defeat in the Second World War, it was the Chinese GMD troops who marched into Hanoi in October 1945 to take the Japanese surrender. The Chinese Nationalists would eventually recognize French colonial rule over the Vietnamese, despite the Vietminh's contributions to the anti-Japanese war effort.

Because Vietnamese leadership might ultimately hinder China's ambitions for influence in the region, Chiang Kai-shek likely preferred the French colonialists to the Vietminh because of the latter's nationalist and communist leanings.<sup>10</sup> Ho Chi Minh, resentful of China's betrayal at the victor's table said, "Far better to smell the dung of the French than to eat Chinese dung all one's life."<sup>11</sup> This poignant sentiment permeated through the Vietminh leadership and the people of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) in the north, as they continued their struggle for unification and independence. After the Vietnamese efforts to fight the Japanese occupation, the GMD's action insulted Ho Chi Min and dampened his hope of independence.<sup>12</sup> The lesson Ho learned from this insult was that Chinese politicians would sell out Vietnam if China stood to gain. China, and the world, did not consider Vietnam a regional power until Ho's Vietminh eventually defeated the French colonialists in 1954 at Dien Bien Phu.

## **1954 to 1964: The Peaceful Decade under the DRV**

In the decade following Dien Bien Phu, relations between Ho Chi Minh's communist DRV and Mao's PRC grew friendlier, partially out of shared enmity towards non-communist countries. After expelling Chiang Kai-Shek (Jiang Jieshi) and the GMD to Taiwan, the CCP supplied economic and military aid to the Vietnamese struggle leading up to 1954, and would continue to do so as Ho Chi Minh strengthened his rule in North Vietnam after ousting the French. In fact, it was Zhou Enlai (Chou En-lai) who negotiated an end to French involvement in the Indochinese conflict at Geneva in 1954.<sup>13</sup> However, Zhou again placed Chinese strategic goals first, and signed an agreement with French negotiator Pierre Mendes-France that called for an end to military conflict, outlined a plan for reuniting North and South Vietnam, and encouraged the Vietminh to speed up the process with the South.<sup>14</sup> Although there was no formal reinstatement of Vietnam as a tributary state to China, there were certainly intimations of China's paternal will for Vietnam's future.

Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai also ensured the fractured Vietnam favored China over the Soviet Union in the 1950s and 1960s. China wanted to avoid encirclement by the Soviets as the ideological rift between the two countries deepened. Beijing attempted to continue a tradition of paternal suzerainty by supplying aid to Hanoi in return for cooperation. Though wary of any outside influence, Hanoi appeared to prefer Beijing to Moscow, perhaps due to a cultural and geographic closeness. However, later reflections on Chinese concessions at the Geneva Convention of 1954 show that the Vietnamese could not help but feel betrayed by the Chinese and their collusion with the French.<sup>15</sup> Ho, always a staunch nationalist, continued to build up his forces and consolidate political power. The divergent Sino-Vietnamese interests remained manageable as American involvement in Vietnam supplanted the French and attempted to counter the foothold of communism in Southeast Asia.

## **1965 to 1974: Chinese Communist Support to Vietnam**

From 1965 to 1974, Vietnam once again plunged into conflict, this time against the Americans. China initially remained a staunch ideological and materiel supporter of Ho Chi Minh's DRV. Vietnam understood the value of being a pivot state, and used its position to play the Soviets and the Chinese against each other by seeking aid from both.<sup>16</sup> However, by 1968, Hanoi's pendulum of favor swung towards Moscow, largely because of Beijing's objections to Hanoi's use of outposts and territories in Laos

and Cambodia, and Beijing's fear that Hanoi's unexpected aggressiveness, as displayed in the Tet Offensive of 1968, might be difficult to contain.<sup>17</sup>

Mao feared an emboldened, unified Vietnam would eventually endanger China's southern border, especially once Vietnam exerted political influence on other Indochinese states.<sup>18</sup> By 1968 until the end of the war, the Vietnamese understood that their quest for unification relied mostly on their own efforts and Soviet, rather than Chinese, help. Beijing's fear of Moscow's strategic objectives also grew during this period. The Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968 and the 1969 Soviet threat to attack Chinese nuclear weapons installations led Mao to break with the Soviet Union and reevaluate China's relationship with the West.<sup>19</sup> As a result, Beijing softened its tone towards the United States, thereby souring any remaining trust it held with Hanoi.<sup>20</sup>

At the 1973 Paris Peace Accords, the war with the United States appeared to be winding down, and China's relationship with Vietnam cooled even more. Beijing continued to pursue normalized relations with the United States, and viewed Moscow as its main security threat. Dual-hatted as the National Security Advisor (NSA) and Secretary of State at the Paris Peace Accords, Henry Kissinger claimed that Vietnam's growing disdain for the Chinese was evident. He remembered Vietnam's representative at the talks, Politburo leader Le Duc Tho, being most critical of Beijing rather than the United States, which further implied Hanoi's growing closeness with Moscow as the war with America ended.<sup>21</sup> Evidence from 1972 to 1975 indicates a healthy Soviet-Vietnamese relationship as the Soviets supplied fresh military support for Hanoi that ultimately helped it achieve a swift victory over the South in 1975. During the same period, the Chinese noticeably decreased their military aid to Vietnam.<sup>22</sup> Although Beijing congratulated Hanoi's ideological victory over Saigon in 1975, it continued to distance itself from Vietnam. Instead, China pursued its strategic normalization goals with the United States that began in 1971, as the Soviet Union grew correspondingly closer with Vietnam.<sup>23</sup>

### **1975 to 1978: Post-Vietnam Reunification**

After 1975, the construct of China as the big brother and Vietnam as the little brother would never be the case again, at least in Vietnam's eyes. The similar ideology shared by the two Communist regimes did little to assuage differences, and rather sharpened their individual objectives over the next few years.<sup>24</sup> Vietnam, in their own eyes, had just defeated the American superpower and their supported state in South Vietnam, and as added insurance, enjoyed the patronage of a nuclear USSR. The Soviet

Union became a major part of China's decision to wage war against Vietnam in 1979, in response to its own discomfort with the Soviet-Vietnamese relationship. By 1975, Vietnam's fighting forces and its society were battle-hardened and experienced in both conventional and unconventional warfare, as a result of more than 30 years of total warfare.

In the aftermath of its war with America, Vietnam aggressively turned its attention to Cambodia, where the Chinese-backed regime of Pol Pot had become increasingly hostile to Vietnam's interests. In the first half of the 1970s, the Vietnamese hoped to control Phnom Penh through their fraternal Khmer Viet Minh, who opposed Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge. When the latter seized power in 1975, paranoia of insider threats led the Khmer Rouge to carry out ruthless purges in Cambodia from 1975 to 1978. During this time, Vietnam and Cambodia retained outwardly cordial relations, but Khmer Rouge units instigated attacks against Vietnamese and Thai villages in its border areas.<sup>25</sup> Vietnamese nationalism rose in response to oppose the Khmer Rouge hostility. The Chinese, sensing Vietnam would resort to military action against Cambodia, accused Hanoi of seeking regional hegemony and expansionism.<sup>26</sup> Until Vietnam and its Soviet sponsors no longer threatened Cambodia's struggling Khmer Rouge government, the PRC remained nervous that Vietnam could adversely affect China's own influence in the region. Building on this history, the following chapter examines the regional political landscape and the road to war.

## Notes

1. Xiaobing Li, ed., *China at War: An Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, LCC, 2012), 458.
2. Henry McAleavy, *Black Flags in Vietnam: The Story of a Chinese Intervention*, (London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1968), 105-110.
3. McAleavy, *Black Flags in Vietnam*, 277-278.
4. Li, *China at War*, 458-459.
5. McAleavy, 279. Moreover, Li remained in favor as the premier imperial negotiator for the waning Qing Dynasty until his death in 1901. His legacy of skill and adeptness for dealing with foreign powers set a notable standard for those statesmen who succeeded him in the twentieth century.
6. Steven J. Hood, *Dragons Entangled: Indochina and the China-Vietnam War*, (Armonk, New York: East Gate, 1992), 14, and Helen B. Lamb, *Vietnam's Will to Live*, (New York: M.E. Sharpe Inc., 1992), 227.
7. Hood, *Dragons Entangled*, 14.
8. King C. Chen, *Vietnam and China, 1938-1954* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 16.
9. Hood, 15.
10. Hood, 16.
11. Jean Sainteny, *Ho Chi Minh and His Vietnam: A Personal Memoir* (Chicago, IL: Cowles Book, 1972): 119.
12. Hood, *Dragons Entangled*, 16.
13. Hood, *Dragons Entangled*, 19.
14. Hood, *Dragons Entangled*, 18-19.
15. Anne Gilks, *The Breakdown of the Sino-Vietnamese Alliance, 1970-1979* (Berkeley, CA: Institute of East Asian Studies, 1992), 19.
16. Gilks, *The Breakdown of the Sino-Vietnamese Alliance*, 23.
17. Hood, *Dragons Entangled*, 22-23.
18. Hood, *Dragons Entangled*, 23.
19. Stephen J. Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia: Political Culture and the Causes of War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 87.
20. Eugene K. Lawson, *The Sino-Vietnamese Conflict* (New York: Praeger, 1984), 305.
21. Henry A. Kissinger, *The White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), 1113.
22. Hood, *Dragons Entangled*, 29-30.
23. Hood, *Dragons Entangled*, 30.
24. Lawson, *The Sino-Vietnamese Conflict*, 310.
25. Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia*, 95-98.
26. Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia*, 107.



## **Chapter 3**

### **The Road to War**

The Paris Peace Accords, signed in January 1973, ushered in a changing dynamic in China's relationship with Vietnam and the other regional states of Indochina. As Vietnam emerged victorious in its struggle for unification, the influence of the United States in the region appeared to wane. Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand all watched wearily as Hanoi consolidated its power through forceful reunification in 1975. China shifted its focus to the strategic aim of regional influence, decided to distance itself from Hanoi and Moscow, and to grow closer to the United States, Thailand, and Cambodia.

This chapter explores the four main factors during the period after the reunification in 1975 that led to the rapid breakdown of relations between the China and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV, renamed from DRV by communist leaders in 1976 following reunification that same year) in 1978. Those factors were the USSR-SRV treaty, the expulsion of ethnic Chinese from Vietnam, the increase in border clashes, and Vietnam's 1978 invasion of Cambodia. The chapter will also examine the Sino-American rapprochement that began with Henry Kissinger's diplomacy and led to President Nixon's trip to China in 1972, but took on greater significance during the early Deng-Carter era.

#### **The Road to the War: Four Main Factors**

Tensions between the former communist allies continued to escalate in 1978, with four leading factors as causes of the war. First and foremost, Vietnam's decision to join the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance in June 1978 placed it squarely in the Soviet Union's camp. The SRV followed this agreement with a 25-year Friendship and Cooperation Treaty signed in November 1978 that China interpreted as a clear threat.<sup>1</sup> The Soviet-Vietnamese relationship threatened China's southern borders, and gave the Chinese a reason to hasten normalization with the United States. Second, the expulsion from Vietnam of ethnic Chinese in a mass exodus into China created cultural agitation and an insult that the Chinese felt compelled to address. Third, territorial disputes turning into small skirmishes along the Sino-Vietnamese border occurred continuously from 1977 and continued to escalate, resulting in cross-border troop buildups. Finally, Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia in December 1978 and the overthrow of Pol Pot resulted in the Chinese move to military action.

## **Factor One: Soviet-Vietnamese Relations Deepen**

In the wake of the 1971 ping-pong diplomacy and Kissinger's visit to China, President Nixon travelled to the PRC in 1972 for a landmark visit that produced the first Shanghai Communiqué – affirming to the world the United States and PRC were interested in moving towards normalized relations. From the head of state visit, Nixon decreased Mao's immediate concern about US encirclement, even in light of the remaining Taiwan question.<sup>2</sup> Despite decades of anti-American rhetoric, China chose a closer relationship with the United States, since its relationship with the Soviet Union and Vietnam appeared irreparable by this point. In response, the Soviet-Vietnamese relationship strengthened in the aftermath of the Second Indochina War, and left the Chinese fearful of a new encirclement by the Soviet Union and its proxies.

In order to further rebuff Soviet influence in Indochina, the Chinese continued on the path to normalizing relations with the United States following the signing of the Paris Peace Accords in January 1973. Beginning that year, both the Soviet Union and China sought a détente strategy with the United States, as the two communist heavyweights eyed each other with growing suspicion. China moved towards normalizing relations with the United States, while the USSR sought common ground with the United States through the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) starting in November 1969 and continuing throughout the 1970s. China significantly decreased its military aid to Vietnam, while the Soviets continued to provide both military and economic aid.<sup>3</sup> The Vietnamese interpreted the Chinese reduction of aid and China's warming relations with the United States as a betrayal to the Vietnamese quest for reunification under the socialist banner.<sup>4</sup>

In July of 1973, a Vietnamese delegation led by Le Duan and Pham Van Dong travelled to Moscow and issued a joint communiqué affirming that they “support the Soviet Union's activities which . . . are directed at strengthening peace and international security . . . at giving vigorous support to the peoples struggling for independence, freedom and social progress.”<sup>5</sup> Clearly, the Soviet-Vietnam relationship was on the rise, and strengthened inversely as China and the United States sought bilateral relations and a rebalance of power in Indochina against the Soviet Union. Vietnam viewed the Soviet Union as their preferred ally who would treat them as a more equal ideological state, while China's opportunity to use Vietnam as leverage against Soviet interests quickly diminished.<sup>6</sup>

Vietnam's relationship with the Soviet Union eclipsed the Sino-Vietnamese relationship from 1973 to 1978. In addition to centuries of mistrust and ethnically-based disdain for the Chinese, the Vietnamese viewed the Soviet Union as the only socialist ally willing to provide enough economic and military aid to strengthen Hanoi's position. Hanoi also used its ideological compatibility with Moscow to cast the Beijing leadership as socialist revisionists now in bed with western imperialists. It also used Moscow's fear of a Sino-US détente to garner political support for its actions in Indochina.

The end of the American war in Vietnam brought a time of uncertainty to Indochina. In light of Sino-US détente and rapprochement, the Vietnamese also attempted to normalize relations with the United States, and even offered to drop their previous demands for war reparation aid.<sup>7</sup> US intelligence reports even calculated that the Soviet Union, despite its desire to counterbalance US influence in Indochina, would not object to normalized US-Vietnam relations, especially at the expense of Sino-US relations.<sup>8</sup> However, the United States felt that normalizing relations with China was the most beneficial to American interests, while simultaneously normalizing relations with Vietnam could "impede" the former's progress.<sup>9</sup> In the end, the Sino-US relationship moved forward, while the US-Vietnam relationship stalled.

China used the US's mutual distrust of the Soviet Union, and Washington's lingering distaste for Hanoi, as an opportunity to press forward with measures of normalization leading up to the 1979 war. An important aspect of China's attempt to retain a strategic advantage over the Soviet Union was to ensure the United States gave at least equal attention to the Sino-US relationship as it did to the Soviet-US relationship. When the Carter Administration revealed its policy for equal attention to both relationships, the USSR reacted angrily by slowing the progress of SALT II.<sup>10</sup> China used the United States as a counterbalance to the Soviet Union, and the USSR responded precisely as Beijing intended, with little regard for putting the United States in a difficult political position.<sup>11</sup>

By mid-1978, the trajectory to normalized relations with the United States seemed certain, and would eventually become a reality in January 1979. To a lesser extent, but with important implications, Deng Xiaoping also moved towards reconciliation with China's mortal enemy, Japan. The scars of the Second World War still weighed heavily on the Chinese collective psyche, but through a masterful propaganda campaign in a nation desperate for strong leadership, Deng convinced his own political apparatus and people that a treaty with Japan would improve China's position.

China and Japan signed the Treaty of Peace and Friendship in August 1978 that went into effect by October 1978, following Deng's official visit to Tokyo. The treaty explicitly stated the two countries' renouncement of hegemonic goals in the region, as well as their opposition of "efforts by any other country or group of countries to establish such hegemony."<sup>12</sup> Clearly, this group of countries referred to the Soviet Union and Vietnam. Moscow saw the treaty as an affront to their effort to build a regional system of collective security, and it left them on the outside of a growing China-United States-Japan military entente that could undermine Soviet influence in the Far East.<sup>13</sup> In light of the changing arrangement, the Soviets looked to deepen their support for Vietnam to offset China's diplomatic maneuvers. In the aftermath of the Sino-Japanese Treaty, the Soviets and SRV signed their own Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation in early November 1978, along with seventeen more state-to-state agreements regarding trade, training, and infrastructure before February 1979.<sup>14</sup>

China detested the Moscow-Hanoi agreement, but did not believe it had real teeth. In actuality, once the Sino-Vietnamese war began, the support Moscow committed to Hanoi would prove to be little more than political because the Soviets did not want to instigate a wider war with China.<sup>15</sup> Article Six of the Soviet-SRV Treaty stated:

In case either party is attacked or threatened with attack, the two parties signatory to the treaty shall immediately consult each other with a view to eliminating that threat, and shall take appropriate and effective measures to safeguard peace and the security of the two countries.<sup>16</sup>

China correctly read the intentionally vague war clause as a Soviet signal that they did not intend to fight a war with China over Vietnam.

The United States recognized China's role as a regional power in Asia on a scale that Vietnam would likely never reach. When the Chinese and the United States ultimately announced their normalized relations in early January 1979, Deng Xiaoping saw a clear path to flex Chinese might against the Vietnamese, and reassert China's place as the regional heavyweight. He would travel to Washington later that month, seemingly with his mind already made up to attack Vietnam.

## **Factor Two: Overseas Chinese in Vietnam**

Another exacerbating issue for Sino-Vietnamese relations was the large population of ethnic Chinese living in Vietnam. Overseas Chinese presented a problem for the ethnocentric tendencies of Indochinese states during this period, particularly Vietnam. The Chinese, often involved for

generations in trade and business, enjoyed a relatively positive relationship with their adopted states in times of peace. However, in times of conflict or political unrest, these minority groups became the scapegoat of paranoid governments, as was the case in Vietnam after the Second Indochina War. In March of 1978, the Vietnamese government ended private business in southern Vietnam using police and soldiers to confiscate the lands and livelihoods of thousands of ethnic Chinese. In April, the Vietnamese government took action to unify southern and northern currencies, but confiscated any excess above a prescribed amount, thereby robbing many Chinese of their personal wealth.<sup>17</sup> Discriminatory policies throughout Vietnam aimed at the overseas Chinese resulted in a mass exodus of an estimated 450,000 Hoa minority Chinese back to China between 1975 and 1979.<sup>18</sup>

Geopolitical interests allowed the Chinese to pick and choose where mistreatment of overseas Chinese could be a pretext for war. In fact, the Khmer Rouge's first act after coming to power was to forcibly remove nearly two million Chinese, Vietnamese, and others from the capital on 17 April 1975.<sup>19</sup> Although the Khmer Rouge also summarily mistreated overseas Chinese, the mistreatment did not seem to reach a threshold at which China would intervene, as China would later claim in their case against Vietnam. According to one researcher, nearly 200,000 Chinese died under the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, but China raised no compelling protest.<sup>20</sup> That point aside, the culmination of Vietnam's anti-ethnic Chinese policies resulted in nearly 100,000 Hoa Chinese expelled from Vietnam in the first half of 1978 alone, and intensified mistrust between the two sides. Vietnam adamantly denied accusations of victimizing the Chinese Hoa, but it did report fears of Chinese spies controlled by a reactionary group in Beijing leadership.<sup>21</sup> Vietnam's view of the Hoa as a Chinese "fifth column" – agents of Beijing – further entrenched a popular, nationalistic opinion of China as an enemy state.<sup>22</sup>

### **Factor Three: Border Clashes**

The departure of so many Chinese from Vietnam back into China coincided with the hardening of border positions and escalated the argument over land demarcation. During the Second Indochina War, land borders had not been an issue. In fact, porous borders and reciprocal training areas had been a cornerstone of Sino-Vietnamese cooperation in the wars against the French and Japanese earlier in the century.<sup>23</sup> Beginning with polite negotiations in 1974 over the joint points of the Sino-Vietnamese railway, Vietnam raised increasingly belligerent and assertive claims over

an oil pipeline juncture, misplaced border markers, and even on the correct delineation of border area rivers.<sup>24</sup>

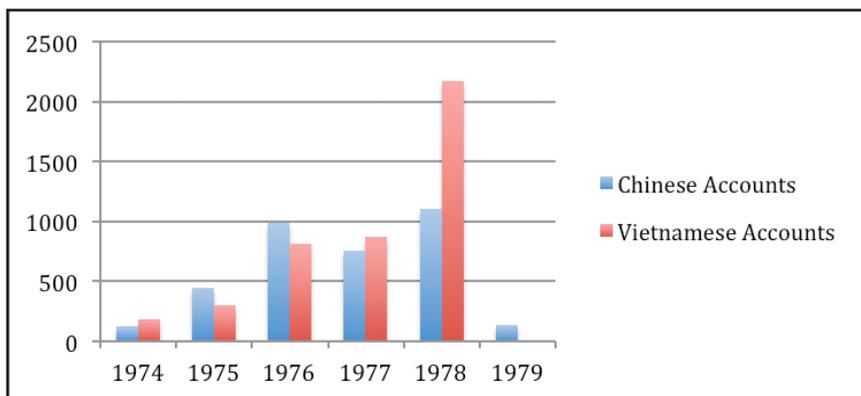


Figure 1: Sino-Vietnamese Border Incidents, 1974-1979. Source: Renmin Ribao, 14 May 1979, and "SRV Memorandum," 16 March 1979, K19, quoted in King C. Chen, *China's War with Vietnam, 1979* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1987), 50.

From 1974 to 1979, border clashes increased. Figure 1 shows the gradual increase in claimed border incidents by the Chinese and Vietnamese from 1974 up to the eve of the Chinese invasion on 17 February 1979. The first propagandized incident of violence occurred on 4 May 1977 at the ironically named "Friendship Pass" (*Youyiguan* in Chinese; *Huu Nghi Quan* in Vietnamese).<sup>25</sup> According to the Chinese press, some 500 Vietnamese troops injured 51 Chinese railroad workers, some seriously, but without any shots being fired.<sup>26</sup> Though the claims differ, both sides indicate an increase in clashes in 1978 following Vietnam's internal policies against the Hoa, and external relationship improvements with the Soviet Union.<sup>27</sup> As the troop presence increased along the border, it was reported that General Vo Nguyen Giap was accompanied by his Soviet military advisors to inspect the border defense preparations, perhaps aware of the rising possibility of a Chinese invasion, especially in light of his leadership's decision to invade Cambodia.<sup>28</sup> An American intelligence report states that as early as July 1978, the Chinese had begun to fence, barbed wire, and stake the borderline to their advantage, and in response, the Vietnamese established their own defensive line using villages cleared of civilians.<sup>29</sup> In October, the first instance of a shooting occurred when the Vietnamese alleged that Chinese border guards shot and killed two Vietnamese border guards at Pha Long Village, Mong Khuong District, Hong Lien Son Province, and kidnapped a cadre member.<sup>30</sup>

Rhetoric rose on both sides over the borderland disputes, and incidents of incursions and deaths continued through the end of 1978. Sensing an upcoming Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, evidence suggests that China's policy changed sometime between 13 and 23 December allowing the Chinese border guards and militia units to shoot Vietnamese on sight, conduct forward patrolling into Vietnam's claimed border areas, and attack Vietnamese border posts using small arms.<sup>31</sup> China's encouragement of these border skirmishes had strategic implications. The inability of the border guards to sufficiently intimidate their Vietnamese opponents or force Vietnam's political leaders to back down from their territorial claims laid the groundwork for the eventual Chinese invasion. Starting in October 1978, regular PLA units began taking up positions on the border, while units from other military regions moved great distances and prepared for a likely conflict.<sup>32</sup>

#### **Factor Four: Vietnam Invades Cambodia**

The Sino-Cambodian relationship from 1973 to 1978 grew conversely to the Sino-Vietnamese relationship over the same period. One of the key justifications for the Chinese invasion of Vietnam in 1979 stemmed from Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia in December 1978. China used its support for Cambodia to prevent Vietnamese regional expansion, and by extension, curb Soviet influence in Indochina. Vietnam's influence in Laos and against Thailand also factored into the regional situation (see Appendix B for a brief contextual history). Although it took the Chinese several weeks to respond against Vietnam's aggression in Cambodia, the Chinese ultimately calculated that there was a strategic advantage to be gained by attacking Vietnam directly as a response to Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia.

The Sino-Cambodian relationship survived the aftermath of the Second Indochina War, and the overthrow of Lon Nol's anti-Chinese Cambodian Republic by Pol Pot's pro-Chinese Khmer Rouge forces in April 1975. The Democratic Kampuchea (DK), as the government came to be known, was eager to exploit its victory and assert itself. Having suffered the devastating effects of US bombing campaigns and the continued stationing of Vietnamese troops within its borders, the new leaders of the DK were considerably paranoid of threats to their power. The Khmer Rouge's blatant attacks against Vietnamese and Thai border stations and villages increased between 1977 and 1978.

China's interest in Cambodia arose from a desire to check both Vietnamese expansion and Soviet influence in Indochina. Its two most

important contributions were material support and Maoist ideology, the latter of which Pol Pot exercised in excess. The DK was also quick to ensure it was not viewed as Beijing's puppet. The DK attempted to court diplomatic support from regional countries, including Indonesia, which was regarded as one of the most anti-Chinese Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) government at the time.<sup>33</sup> While Cambodia's overconfidence undoubtedly annoyed the Chinese, especially after Mao's death in 1977, it did not have the external capability to reach the level of a security threat posed by Vietnam.

A brief anecdote that illuminates the complexity of the tri-national relations that entwined China, Vietnam, and Cambodia between 1975 and 1978 occurred in early May of 1975, within a month of North Vietnamese forces capturing Saigon. That month, the DK engaged Vietnam in a territorial skirmish involving offshore islands claimed by both sides. During the conflict that lasted from 2 May to roughly 2 June, the Cambodians stopped all foreign ships in the area, and to complicate matters more, they captured an American merchant vessel named the *Mayaguez*.<sup>34</sup> Almost immediately, the DK leaders realized they had overstepped their bounds and bellied up to the negotiating table. Pol Pot's DK leadership was not willing to escalate conflict with the Vietnamese, and certainly did not wish for conflict with the United States after the latter dispatched Marines and aircraft from Thailand to liberate the *Mayaguez*.<sup>35</sup> However, the DK made clear their message of nationalism to other regional actors: "Our Kampuchea is not a satellite of any foreign nation; it receives aid from all foreign friends as long as this aid is unconditional and is not directed toward interference, subversion or aggression . . . our policy is to remain independent and self-reliant under all circumstances."<sup>36</sup> However, Hanoi estimated Phnom Penh's patriotic fervor was not strong enough to withstand a punishing blow.

The aforementioned Cambodian and Vietnamese territorial skirmish was ultimately resolved when Pol Pot, along with his second and third in command, Nuon Chea and Ieng Sary, travelled to Hanoi to discuss a treaty of non-aggression with Vietnam on 11 June 1975.<sup>37</sup> Although no formal treaty was signed, the Vietnamese withdrew forces from the island of Puolo Wai to demonstrate sincerity in its commitment to improving relations with its neighbor.<sup>38</sup> However, this nominal peace in Indochina remained shaky at best, as Cambodian and Vietnamese forces continued to clash along their borders. China continued to see Vietnam as the greatest regional threat, but kept lines of communication open with both countries throughout this period.

During the late summer of 1975, the DK leaders paid an aid-seeking visit to Beijing to meet with Chinese leaders. By the CCP's design, the visit coincided with Vietnam's Le Thanh Nghi's similarly motivated visit. At this time, the Sino-Vietnamese relationship remained cordial and the Vietnamese were looking to China to help consolidate the gains of their newly reunified country by providing with economic aid. However, the Cambodians enjoyed a much warmer reception, conceivably as a deliberate slight to the Vietnamese delegation also in town.<sup>39</sup> The Cambodians secured a substantial aid agreement from China, and also conceded to allow Prince Sihanouk to return in early September.<sup>40</sup> The Vietnamese delegation left Beijing feeling snubbed and insulted.

Despite warming relations with Cambodia and welcoming its independence, Chinese moderates like Zhou Enlai had reservations about the DK's domestic policy and excessive use of military power. Specifically, the DK forced nearly a half million ethnic Chinese into cruel living conditions after an ordered mass exodus from Cambodian cities, similar to the policy Vietnam would make towards its overseas Chinese population in 1978.<sup>41</sup> Moderates in Beijing were hopeful that Prince Sihanouk's return would provide a more desirable and reasonable line of communication between the two communist states than the less predictable Pol Pot zealots.<sup>42</sup> Since 1970, Sihanouk – deposed by Lon Nol – was a welcome houseguest in Beijing, but he returned to Cambodia after the DK victory, only to be placed under house arrest by the Khmer Rouge.<sup>43</sup> It was not the welcome home China expected for an erstwhile friend it hoped to use to influence Cambodian affairs. A Central Intelligence Agency report from November 1978 stated that the Chinese knew that they were “saddled with support for a Kampuchean regime that is a public relations disaster,” due to its belligerent international reputation and its domestic “rule-by-the-gun” style.<sup>44</sup>

China retained its relationship with Cambodia for its own geostrategic reasons, but likely saw the DK's domestic and foreign policies as dangerously provocative and self-destructive. Attempts to moderate the DK's behavior became a sore point between the two.<sup>45</sup> Cambodia became a battleground for the Sino-Vietnamese struggle for regional influence. As the Sino-Soviet rift deepened, a closer relationship with the United States looked more favorable for the Chinese to improve their overall position. In the meantime, China's relationship with Cambodia served a clear rebuke to Soviet and Vietnamese encirclement.

China's true commitment to Cambodia was tested when the Vietnamese launched a full-scale invasion of Cambodia in December 1978 to forcibly remove the Khmer Rouge from the capital in Phnom Penh. Following

the invasion of Cambodia, China's leaders did not offer immediate military assistance to their ally. Without a direct land route to provide aid, and with the risk of supplying by air or sea too high, China's support was initially through its rhetoric against Vietnam. Beijing leaders then had to decide how to respond in a way that would decisively demonstrate the CCP's support for Cambodia.<sup>46</sup> Ultimately, the decision to launch an invasion of Vietnam as a punitive measure took fewer than two months, giving the Chinese enough time to justify its action internally and externally, plan its operation and mobilize troops, and execute in furtherance of its grand strategy for regional leadership.

### **The Frame is Set**

The four main points – the SRV's closer relationship with the USSR as China sought rapprochement with the United States; the expulsion of ethnic Chinese; the increase in border clashes and the buildup of troops; and finally, the SRV's invasion of Cambodia – each contributed significantly to China's decision to go to war against Vietnam. Examined separately, each reason may not have galvanized Deng to take action, but when combined they created enough cause for China to launch its limited war.

The Chinese, in line with their tradition, sought first to evaluate the strategic advantage a war with Vietnam could bring, and then measured those advantages against possible drawbacks. The war itself came from deliberate planning and reasoning with the long-game in mind, rather than a disproportionate reaction to a slight offense. There were off-ramps on the road to war, but China was wedded to its own image as the power broker in Asia, and could not divorce itself from its self-appointed place as the historic regional power in Indochina. It was within this framework that Deng Xiaoping made the decision to conduct limited offensive operations.

## Notes

1. David Way Chao, *The Impact of the Two Vietnamese Conflicts on the Sino-Soviet Relations* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1992), 161.

2. David L. Osborn to Secretary of State, Washington, DC, Telegram, Subject, "What Peking got from Nixon Visit: A Speculative Assessment," 4 April 1972, David L. Osborn Papers, 1947-1994 Collection, Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library and Museum, Abilene, KS (hereafter referred to as Eisenhower Library).

3. Gilks, *The Breakdown of the Sino-Vietnamese Alliance*, 102.

4. Gilks, *The Breakdown of the Sino-Vietnamese Alliance*, 103.

5. Foreign Broadcast Intelligence Service, *USSR International Affairs*, July 16, 1973, AAA11, quoted in Lawson, 258-259.

6. David L. Osborn to Secretary of State, Washington, DC, Telegram, Subject, "PRC Leverage Against USSR: A Personal and Speculative Assessment," 5 May 1972, David L. Osborn Papers, 1947-9494 Collection, Eisenhower Library.

7. Robert S. Ross, *The Indochina Tangle: China's Vietnam Policy, 1975-1979* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 200-201.

8. Director of Central Intelligence, Interagency Intelligence Memorandum, "Sino-Soviet Competition in Indochina," 14 November 1978, accessed 31 August 2014, [http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document\\_conversions/89801/DOC\\_0000261922.pdf](http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/89801/DOC_0000261922.pdf), 19.

9. Ross, *The Indochina Tangle*, 200-201.

10. American Embassy, Moscow to White House Situation Room, Memorandum, Subject, "Ambassador's meeting with Gromyko: Deng Xiaoping visit to the US; Kampuchea," 16 February 1979, Donated Historical Material Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, Geographic File, China, (People's Republic of)-Sino-Vietnamese Conflict (November 1978-16 February 1979) through Cuba-Alpha Channel (December 1978), Box 10, Carter Library. On the eve of the war, the USSR's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Andrei Gromyko, stated to the US Ambassador the Soviet disdain for the US Government's policy towards China. He stated, "China with the help of Deng has taken the US along with him. What evidence do we have for this conclusion? The weak reactions from the USG toward the hostile statements against the USSR, plus the fact that the communiqué accepted Chinese phraseology, which has a clear meaning. All this amazes us. Washington speaks of the importance of good relations of SALT, of giving priority to relations with the Soviet Union - but such statements are then followed with references to 'equal attention' to the Soviet Union and China. This is to the benefit of China. Washington often speaks of fundamental principles, but then forgets them with ease."

11. Brezhnev to Carter, Message, 18 February 1979, Donated Historical Material Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, Geographic File, China, (People's

Republic of)-Sino-Vietnamese Conflict (November 1978-16 February 1979) through Cuba-Alpha Channel (December 1978), Box 10, Carter Library.

12. Chao, *The Impact of the Two Vietnamese Conflicts*, 154.

13. Chao, *The Impact of the Two Vietnamese Conflicts*, 154-159.

14. George Ginsburgs, *A Calendar of Soviet Treaties 1974-1980*, (Dordrecht: M. Nijhoff Publishers, 1987), 522.

15. Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia*, 215. In an interview with a former senior Soviet official, Mikhail Kapitsa, Morris conveys that the Soviet Union had no intention to go to war with China over Vietnam.

16. Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia*, 214.

17. Ross, *The Indochina Tangle*, 176-177.

18. Sophie Quinn-Judge, "Victory on the Battlefield; Isolation in Asia: Vietnam's Cambodia Decade, 1979-1989," in *The Third Indochina War: Conflict between China, Vietnam and Cambodia, 1972-79*, edited by Sophie Quinn-Judge and Odd Arne Westad (New York: Routledge, 2006), 207.

19. Ben Kiernan, "Sources of Khmer Rouge Ideology," in *The Third Indochina War: Conflict between China, Vietnam and Cambodia, 1972-79* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 191.

20. Ross, *The Indochina Tangle*, 186.

21. Ngoai Giao Bo, *The Truth About Vietnam-China Relations over the Last Thirty Years* (Hanoi, Vietnam: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1979).

22. Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia*, 195.

23. Bernard Fall, *Street Without Joy*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1964), 32-34.

24. King C. Chen, *China's War with Vietnam, 1979: Issues, Decisions, and Implications*, (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1987), 49.

25. O'Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy*, 41.

26. Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia*, 183.

27. Chen, *China's War With Vietnam*, 49.

28. *New York Times*. June 6, 1978, quoted in Chen, *China's War with Vietnam, 1979: Issues, Decisions, and Implications*, 49.

29. National Foreign Assessment Center, Research Paper, "The Sino-Vietnamese Border Dispute," 5 March 1979, accessed 31 August 2014, [http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document\\_conversions/89801/DOC\\_0000789482.pdf](http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/89801/DOC_0000789482.pdf), 5.

30. "The Sino-Vietnamese Border Dispute," 6.

31. "The Sino-Vietnamese Border Dispute," 9.

32. O'Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy*, 51.

33. Jing-dong Yuan, "China-ASEAN Relations: Perspectives, Prospects and Implications for US Interests" (Monograph, US Army Strategic Studies Institute, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 2006), 3-4; see also Morris, 83.

34. Gilks, *The Breakdown of the Sino-Vietnamese Alliance*, 140.

35. Gilks, *The Breakdown of the Sino-Vietnamese Alliance*, 140.

36. Phnom Penh Radio, British Broadcasting Corporation, *Summary of World Broadcasts, Far East*, 4902/A3/11, May 10, 1975, quoted in Gilks, 142.

37. Gilks, *The Breakdown of the Sino-Vietnamese Alliance*, 141.
38. Gilks, *The Breakdown of the Sino-Vietnamese Alliance*, 141.
39. Gilks, *The Breakdown of the Sino-Vietnamese Alliance*, 143.
40. Gilks, *The Breakdown of the Sino-Vietnamese Alliance*, 143.
41. Pao-Min Chang, *Kampuchea Between China and Vietnam* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1985), 45. The poor treatment of overseas, ethnic Chinese (*Huaren*, 华人) is another factor that China underscores as a reason for war with Vietnam in 1979. Even today, with the generations of Chinese diaspora throughout the world, the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council remains an office specifically devoted to the needs of those of Chinese residing in foreign countries. For more information, see The State Council, The People's Republic of China, "Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council," accessed 8 January 2015, [http://english.gov.cn/state\\_council/2014/10/01/content\\_281474991090995.htm](http://english.gov.cn/state_council/2014/10/01/content_281474991090995.htm).
42. Gilks, *The Breakdown of the Sino-Vietnamese Alliance*, 142.
43. Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia*, 83-84.
44. National Foreign Assessment Center, "The Sino-Vietnamese Border Dispute," 15.
45. Morris, 85-86.
46. National Foreign Assessment Center, "The Sino-Vietnamese Border Dispute," 15.



## Chapter 4 Deng's Decision

圍魏救趙 – Chinese Proverb, translated as “Besiege Wei to Rescue Zhao”

China decided to go to war with Vietnam to gain a strategic advantage in the region, as well as the world. This concept appears in translated versions of Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* through the definition of the Chinese word *shi* (勢). Though the definition can be a bit ambiguous, the essential concept has been defined as, “full concentrated release of that latent energy inherent in one's position, physical and otherwise;” in other words, a strategic advantage.<sup>1</sup> This chapter explores the calculations that the Chinese leadership made in order to determine that their *shi* was favorable, and that a war with Vietnam would result in a better strategic position after hostilities. There were also several strategic domestic political goals that Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping sought through war with Vietnam. This analysis goes beyond the common narrative of China merely teaching Vietnam a lesson, and expounds on other areas where Deng sought to gain a strategic advantage, both in the domestic and international realms.

The decision to go to war is often under-accounted for or left out of historical accounts of the period. It is typically analyzed together with the wars fought by the PRC since it consolidated to power in 1949.<sup>2</sup> Those other events are the Korean War in 1950, the First Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1954, the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1958, the border war with India in 1962, and the Sino-Soviet border war in 1969. These wars were all fought under Mao's leadership. The Vietnam War of 1979 is sometimes overshadowed by Deng Xiaoping's rapid rise as China's next generational leader, and his sweeping economic reforms that changed the direction of the country, making an indelible turn from Mao's previous policies. However, the war is important to analyze because it is the first war ordered by a post-Mao leader, and truly, the most recent example of how the post-Mao Chinese leaders may use limited war to achieve a strategic advantage.

Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia on 25 December 1978 was the last straw for the Chinese. The political and cultural reasons for Vietnam's decision to invade Cambodia are more nuanced than a desire for regional hegemony, to include a reaction to Khmer Rouge attacks on Vietnamese border villages and civilians.<sup>3</sup> Bolstered by the Soviet Union's support, and intolerant of continued Khmer Rouge attacks inside Vietnam, the Vietnamese unilaterally sought regime change in Phnom Penh in their rap-

id, combined arms operation. They successfully ousted Pol Pot from the capital in just two weeks, and thumbed their nose at international condemnation. By 8 January 1979, the Vietnamese installed a pro-Vietnam government in Phnom Penh, thus starting a decade long occupation that the Chinese would continually attempt to end.

Admittedly, there are discontinuities between the CCP of 1978 to 1979 and today's CCP, but the decision process and space for political debate bears some of the same characteristics. Though the Sino-Vietnamese War of 1979 appears to represent the failing of interstate, diplomatic relations in the region, Deng saw it as an opportunity he could exploit to improve China's international position and increase his domestic political capital. By executing a limited war with a designated end state and clearly reasoned objectives, Deng and his supporters furthered China's grand strategy of a more secure and superior strategic position in Asia.

### **Who was Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping?**

Born to a well-to-do family in Sichuan in 1904, Deng travelled to France at age 16 where he first encountered Zhou Enlai. It was there that he became familiar with Communist ideology and joined the Chinese Communist Youth League in Europe before travelling to Moscow to study Marxism in depth. He returned to China in 1926 and became a local leader in the PLA and the newly formed Communist Party. After leading revolts against the GMD Army, Deng retreated with the Communists on the Long March of 1934 from Jiangxi to Shaanxi. During the Sino-Japanese War, Deng served as the political commissar of the 129th Division of the 8th Route Army, and then served as a secretary of the PRC's Southwest Bureau until he was called to Beijing in 1954 to serve as the general secretary of the CCP's Central Committee.<sup>4</sup>

While in Beijing, Deng enjoyed a meteoric rise in the Party. Mao hand-selected the rising star to lead a rectification campaign to counter the diverse, often-critical views of the CCP expressed through the 100 Flowers Campaign of 1956. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, he played a distinguished role in Sino-Soviet relations, ultimately becoming a passionate opponent of Soviet policies. In 1960, he travelled to the USSR and delivered speeches marking a clear break in friendly relations between the two regimes.<sup>5</sup>

By 1965, Deng's star burned so bright that Mao feared it would eclipse his own. In 1966, Chairman Mao launched the Cultural Revolution, during which he purged Deng and stripped him of all his titles. Deng was relegated to work in a tractor repair factory in order to undergo political "re-

habilitation.”<sup>6</sup> In this way, Deng escaped with his life, which was not the case for his mentor, former-PRC President and Mao’s rival, Liu Shaoqi, who died in a prison in 1969. It was not until 1973 that Deng reemerged at a time when both Mao and Zhou recognized the need for a competent leader in light of Zhou’s failing health. By 1975, Deng joined the Politburo’s Standing Committee, and took on the responsibilities of vice chairman of the party’s Military Commission and Chief of Staff of the PLA. This elevated him to a much higher position than he held before being purged, and afforded him the opportunity to reconcile with the Party.

Premier Zhou died in January 1976, and while Mao’s health deteriorated, the Gang of Four leading leftists organized another attack on Deng’s character that resulted in a second fall. Mao, without a clear front-runner for succession, tapped Hua Guofeng to be the next premier. Mao died in September of that same year, and within a month, the party purged the Gang of Four, paving the way for Deng’s second redemption. The rehabilitation of Deng Xiaoping in 1977 began what was to become a rebalancing of domestic politics with China’s international ambitions.

### **Deng on the Domestic Front**

Premier Hua Guofeng grudgingly allowed Deng Xiaoping to be rehabilitated in April 1977.<sup>7</sup> He shared the position of Vice Premier with Li Xiannian, the latter a man of little formal education who had survived the Cultural Revolution unscathed – a safe ally to Hua.<sup>8</sup> While Hua concentrated his efforts on continuing Maoist rhetoric and denouncing the Gang of Four to legitimize himself, Deng concentrated on shoring up support for a reformist movement and outmaneuvering Hua’s clique for control of the CCP.<sup>9</sup> A 1978 Central Intelligence Agency dossier described the Americans’ understanding of Deng’s position, stating, “Denied the prestige of the title, Deng nevertheless will continue to share responsibilities of the Premiership with Hua and fellow Vice Premier Li Xiannian.”<sup>10</sup>

At the 3rd Plenum of the 11th Central Committee in December 1978, Deng and his faction of reformists, led by Hu Yaobang, made effective changes that stole the advantage from Hua and other competing factions on the domestic front.<sup>11</sup> During this meeting, political reshuffling placed Deng and his faction in the lead. Deng held *de facto* control of the PLA General Staff, who saw him as the foreman of the *lao shuai* (old marshals).<sup>12</sup> The next step was to begin implementing his vision for China’s future in a period of opening up and reform, but those changes under Deng’s command would be preceded by the bloody, short war in Vietnam.

Following Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia, Deng felt compelled to react, but had to shore up support within the party. Hua, who had no military experience, would be forced to defer to Deng in military matters, increasing Deng's stature and decreasing his own along the way. Deng saw an opportunity to assert the PRC's willingness to shape Southeast Asia through military action.<sup>13</sup> Some historians argue that the need to punish Vietnam through war was easily reached by consensus at the highest levels.<sup>14</sup> However, a more recent view that includes memoirs from senior PLA staff officers indicates a vigorous debate between Deng, Marshal Ye Jianying, and Marshal Xu Xiangqian. The latter two were vice-chairmen of the Central Military Commission, and Xu, in particular, disagreed with a military action. He was, it seems, the lone dissenting voice, but eventually got behind the planning for war on Deng's terms.<sup>15</sup>

On the domestic political front, Deng made three arguments to win over any opposition within the CCP. First, he argued that the current international hegemonic struggle might tip in the Soviet Union's favor because America, Japan, and Europe were afraid to start a war. Therefore, China must take the lead in opposing the Soviet Union on the world stage. Second, Deng argued that China needed a secure and reliable environment in order to complete its modernizations. Deng wanted to move the country ahead in the areas of agriculture, industry, national defense, and science and technology, but a feeling of insecurity hindered those ambitions. With a defensive counterattack, China could stave off the Soviets' taking advantage of what it perceived to be a weak China, thus allowing China to flourish.

Third, Deng argued that the PLA, untested since its skirmishes in the northern border with the Soviet Union nearly a decade prior, would also benefit and improve from combat experience.<sup>16</sup> Mao once said, "No truly able commander of a high rank can be made out of one who is a mere beginner in warfare or one who knows warfare only on paper; and to become such a commander one must learn through warfare."<sup>17</sup> Though Deng tried to distance himself from the cult of Mao, he needed to show the international community that meddling with Chinese sovereignty and interests would not be tolerated. Casualties on the battlefield would not be a definite measure of success. However, the mobilization of units from all over China would confirm or deny China's ability to defend its borders, and deploy its army.

To the Chinese people, Deng could measure the success of the war by the furtherance of his new agenda, and the belief among the people that China was heading in a new, positive direction. The *laobaixing* (The Old

Hundred Names, a Chinese pejorative referring to the masses of Chinese civilians), accustomed to seeing the PLA as the central government's arm during the Cultural Revolution, would now witness the PLA as defenders of Chinese interests on the periphery. Success would be measured by limited domestic unrest, controlled information about the war until it was complete, and the short nature of the war that would allow a quick shift back to the economic agenda. According to firsthand accounts of PLA officers serving during the war, heavy operational casualties were a concern for Deng's war planners, but losses were a factor that could be controlled, overcome, and ultimately accepted, as a means to achieving the stated objectives.<sup>18</sup>

### **China as a Responsible Stakeholder in Southeast Asia**

The international community at the United Nations (UN) also vehemently opposed Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia, allowing Prince Norodom Sihanouk the opportunity to plead the case of the deposed regime.<sup>19</sup> Thailand, and the rest of the ASEAN, also rejected Vietnam's actions as an intolerable threat to the stability of the region.<sup>20</sup> Taking advantage of the international uproar, China asserted that Vietnam's invasion constituted an extension of undue Soviet influence. In a statement before the UN in January 1979, the Chinese government called Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia "a major step in pushing its own regional hegemony and an important part of the Soviet drive for hegemony in Asia and the Far East."<sup>21</sup> Deng then used this opportunity to drum up support, or at least tacit acquiescence, of a unilateral action to punish Vietnam.

In the weeks leading up to the February war, Deng and other Chinese officials went on the political offensive by increasing their rhetoric in international forums and exchanges. From 25 December 1978 when Vietnam invaded Cambodia, until 17 February 1979 when China invaded Vietnam, Deng Xiaoping explicitly told regional actors that China could and would "teach Vietnam a lesson," and that the result would benefit regional stability.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, Deng calculated that the Soviet Union would not go to war with China over Vietnam, thus lowering the risk for devastating repercussions if and when the Chinese chose to attack.<sup>23</sup>

On 10 February 1979, a week before invading Vietnam, the PRC's representative to the UN, Chen Chu, sent a letter to the UN Security Council President, Abdullah Yaccoub Bishara, stating:

The Vietnamese authorities are pursuing a policy of aggression and expansion abroad, thus seriously menacing the peace and stability in Southeast Asia and the whole of Asia. This has naturally

aroused the concern and anxiety of all the countries in Asia and the rest of the world. We sincerely hope the United Nations will uphold justice, exercise its functions and authority and take all necessary measures so that the Vietnamese authorities will immediately halt their armed incursions and provocations against China, immediately stop their aggression and military occupation of Kampuchea, withdraw all their forces from Kampuchea and immediately cease all their acts jeopardizing the peace and security of Southeast Asia and the whole world.<sup>24</sup>

One such letter was written to the UN Secretary General by Vietnam's Ambassador Ha Van Lau on the eve of the war, citing increased border trespasses:

Everyone can clearly see the extremely serious character of the Chinese authorities' armed activities and arrogant threats against Viet Nam. The Peking leaders have openly threatened war against an independent and sovereign country, and claimed to have the right to use force against the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam. They have laid bare their hostile designs against Viet Nam and their big-nation expansionist ambitions in South-East Asia.<sup>25</sup>

Deng, at this point, saw a future with the United States as a key player not only for regional stability in Asia, but also as an important source for financing and investment to keep his reforms on track.<sup>26</sup> In the delicate throes of the Cold War, an affront that could potentially draw the USSR into a shooting war certainly needed to be addressed with US President Jimmy Carter. Particularly because of the threat of Soviet intervention, Deng headed to the United States to both further the Sino-US normalization of relations and to commit the United States to a mutual anti-Vietnam stance. If Deng conveyed to President Carter China's intention to conduct a limited attack against Vietnam, then he could ease US concern that an expanding conflict might ultimately involve the superpowers. Deng also aimed to limit the further development of US-Soviet relations, and possibly even get the Americans to help restrain the USSR while the Chinese dealt their punitive blow to Vietnam. According to Zbigniew Brzezinski, it was with these goals that Deng travelled to America.<sup>27</sup>

## **Deng Visits Carter**

In late January 1979, Deng Xiaoping arrived in Washington for direct talks with President Carter. Though not the premier himself, the Americans recognized Vice Premier Deng's rising star and received him with a warm welcome. The Nixon and Carter administrations are largely credited

with normalizing relations with Communist China, and Deng's January visit was a milestone for how the two countries would continue their frank dialogue.



Figure 2: Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping and his entourage in his January 1979 visit to President Carter in Washington, DC. It was during these meetings that Deng relayed to the White House that China intended to teach Vietnam a lesson. Photo courtesy of the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum, Atlanta, GA, Contact Sheet 9145/Frame 7.

Over the course of two days, the two leaders – Carter and Deng – met formally in three separate roundtables. Prior to the meetings, the US side assessed that the Chinese goals for the meetings would include securing a strong anti-Vietnam stance so the Chinese could “hit Vietnam with the appearance of United States acquiescence.”<sup>28</sup> The United States believed a main goal of the meetings was to deter a Sino-Vietnamese military confrontation by convincing China that a rash decision on China’s part would make cooperation in Asia more difficult. The United States also wanted to assure China of its commitment to act as a counterweight to Soviet military buildup in Asia, and that the United States wanted to see a “strong, secure, and peaceful China” capable of deterring a Sino-Soviet conflict.<sup>29</sup> To that end, the United States was willing to soften its stance on Western European arms sales to China, which had long been a point of contention between the US Government and the CCP.<sup>30</sup>

The first meeting on 30 January 1979 allowed time for a cordial exchange in which President Carter read many of the key strategic talking points that Brzezinski had coached him on prior to the meeting. In the afternoon meeting, Deng further expounded on his justification for teaching Vietnam a lesson. He cited his recent visits to Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand, where key ASEAN leaders expressed a hope that China would do something to punish Vietnam's actions in Cambodia, and prevent Thailand from becoming the next victim of a Soviet-backed Indochinese Federation.

Deng warned that the Soviet Union would "make use of Vietnam to harass China," and that the Chinese "general view is that we must disrupt Soviet strategic dispositions. If we do not disrupt with strength, we will only create more trouble."<sup>31</sup> President Carter responded by urging diplomacy and reminding Deng of several considerations. Namely, he emphasized the threat of Soviet aggression from the north, the possibility of a rapid shift in world opinion against China, and a possible escalation of violence. In an effort to show the US government's preference for cooler heads, he even offered US intelligence briefings, and confirmed US knowledge of no new Soviet military deployments along the Sino-Soviet border. Deng recognized the possibility of a second front on the Sino-Soviet border, but dismissed it. He ended the meeting stating:

The problem might be from the North. We do not expect a major reaction. But if there is one, they will have to withdraw troops from Europe. If they withdraw troops from the West, that will be beneficial for Iran and Europe.

We understand it will be difficult for you to give an affirmative answer. Sometimes one has to do what one does not wish to. Our warnings to Vietnam were of no use. We are happy about persuading countries not to give aid, but that doesn't put restraint on Vietnam. There is a question of timing: if we wait until Cambodia is subdued, they can use all their forces against us. If we do this well and quickly, we will have a more tranquil boundary.<sup>32</sup>

That evening, the White House put on a state dinner that included an informal meeting with former President Richard Nixon, followed by a night of entertainment at the Kennedy Center. The next morning, after carefully crafting a response, President Carter delivered a handwritten note to Deng in which he listed nine points that strongly urged China not to take military action against Vietnam. The most compelling of his points stated, "Armed conflict initiated by China would cause serious concern in

the United States concerning the general character of China and the future peaceful settlement of the Taiwan issue. Our claim of peace and stability resulting from normalization would be refuted to some extent.”<sup>33</sup> For this and the other reasons, President Carter urged Deng not to approve a military action, and stated clearly that the United States would not support such an action. Deng listened patiently, without interrupting, and then rebutted the president’s remark with the statement that China must still teach Vietnam a lesson, but that it would be limited to 10 to 20 days, followed by a withdrawal. Deng also predicted divided and negative initial responses from the international community, but that in time world opinion would “turn more favorable.”<sup>34</sup>



Figure 3: President Carter, pictured with President Nixon, hosting Vice Premier Deng at a White House State Dinner, January 1979 when Deng delivers his justification For China to invade and teach Vietnam a lesson. Photo courtesy of the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum, Atlanta, GA, Contact Sheet 9162/ Frame 18.

At the end of the trip, President Carter and Vice Premier Deng found common ground in other areas to move the normalization process along. Both sides, for the moment, saw the visit as a success for the newly budding relationship. For his domestic critics, Deng displayed his willingness to stand up to American pressure, while at the same time making China’s goals transparent to those parties of concern. No one would blame Deng

for being ambiguous about China's intentions for the coming war with Vietnam.

Observing the United States negotiate for years with the Vietnamese over the terms of restoring diplomatic relations, the Chinese felt their offer was more timely and appealing than that of the Vietnamese. Since the PRC wrested the UN seat and international recognition from the GMD in 1971, Sino-US relations stood on the brink of another breakthrough. Deng seized his opportunity to improve China domestically by promoting economic reform and dismantling the cult of Mao, while improving China's international standing by normalizing relations with America. The Americans feared that the Soviets had already filled the vacuum created by the US withdrawal from Vietnam; therefore, normalizing relations with China seemed the preferred choice to hinder the USSR's involvement in Indochina. From an analysis of the geopolitical situation, it can be inferred that Deng left for the United States with his decision already made.

The four factors described in Chapter 3 were the reasons China used to launch its war against Vietnam. Deng, newly ascended to power, and surrounded by his hand-chosen clique of advisers, made the decision to launch the campaign against Vietnam. With internal opposition muted, and the international community in resounding condemnation of Vietnam, Deng saw that China in a favorable position, and poised to increase its *shi* through military action.

Strategic success would be determined by keeping the Soviet Union from intervening on Vietnam's behalf. It is unlikely and unstated that Deng expected a complete withdrawal of Vietnam's troops in Cambodia because of this short war. However, disrupting the Soviet's strategic disposition and reacting from a position of strength to Vietnam's border transgressions were incremental steps on the path to weakening Vietnam's position.<sup>35</sup> Reaching operational ground objectives in a timely manner, then withdrawing without an occupation of Vietnam, were also goals that would ameliorate domestic concerns of a protracted war that might divert resources from domestic reforms.

Deng deduced that war would achieve China's strategic political ends and led to his ultimate decision to carry out the ground offensive. His stature within the CCP by this time had already cast a shadow on Premier Hua Guofeng's clout, and his backing by the PLA leaders made the decision an order they would not refuse. The probability for significant backlash from the international community was low, and the potential gain of strategic international and domestic advantage was high. Though Deng's star

was rising and with a war of his design looming, he and Premier Hua still remained cordial and presented a unified political-military front. Against this backdrop, Premier Hua signed the mobilization order in early February for the PLA to prepare to launch the war against Vietnam.<sup>36</sup>

## Notes

1. Roger Ames, *Sun-Tzu The Art of Warfare: The First English Translation Incorporating The Recently Discovered Yin-Ch'ueh-Shan Texts* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993), 82.
2. See Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force*; Segal, *Defending China*; and Gompert, *Blinders, Blunders and War*.
3. Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia*, 97-99.
4. Deng Xiaoping Dossier, Document #5A, 9 May 1978, Donated Historical Material Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, Geographic File, China, [People's Republic of]-Alpha Channel: [February 1972-November 1978] through China [People's Republic of] Pres. Meeting with Deng, 3 October 1979, Folder 4, Box 9, Carter Library.
5. Deng Xiaoping Dossier, Document #5A.
6. Li, *China at War*, 102-104.
7. Ross, *The Indochina Tangle*, 117-118.
8. Li, *China at War*, 226-227.
9. Richard Baum, *Burying Mao* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 56-65.
10. Deng Xiaoping Dossier, Document #5A.
11. Baum, *Burying Mao*, 64-65.
12. Zhang Sheng, *Cong zhanzheng zhong zoulai; Liangdai junren de duihui* [Coming from the War: A Dialogue between Two Generations of Soldiers] (Beijing, China: PLA Press, 2007), quoted in Xiaoming Zhang, "Deng Xiaoping and China's Decision to go to War with Vietnam" *Journal of Cold War Studies* 12, no. 3 (Summer 2010): 18.
13. O'Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy*, 44.
14. Gerald Segal, *Defending China* (London: Oxford University Press, 1985), 224-227.
15. Liu Zhi and Zhang Lin, eds., *Xu Xiangqian zhuan* [Biography of Xu Xiangqian] (Beijing: Contemporary China Press, 1997), quoted in Zhang, 18.
16. Zhang, *Xu Xiangqian Zhuan*, 19.
17. Mao Tse-tung. Excerpts from "Strategic Problems of China's Revolutionary War," in *Selected Works, vol. 1, 1926-1936* (New York: International Publishers, 1954), 175-188, 192-198..
18. Retired PLA officers, oral interviews with author, Shanghai and Beijing, China, 24-26 March 2015.
19. Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia*, 222.
20. David M. Jones and Michael L. Rainsborough Smith, *ASEAN and East Asian International Relations: Regional Delusions* (Northampton, England: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 2006), 55.
21. *New York Times*, January 8, 1979, quoted in Morris, 221.
22. President Carter with Deng Xiaoping, Report on Conversation, 30 January 1979, Donated Historical Material Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, Geographic File, China, [People's Republic of]-Alpha Channel: [February

1972-November 1978] through China [People's Republic of] Pres. Meeting with Deng, 3 October 1979, Folder 11, Box 9, Carter Library.

23. Deng Xiaoping and company to President Carter and company, Memorandum of Conversation.

24. Chen Chu to His Excellency Ambassador A.Y. Bishara, President of the UN Security Council, United Nations, Letter, 10 February 1979, Record ID 118477, S-0442-0365-04, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, accessed February 10, 2015, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/118477>, 2.

25. Ha Van Lau to UN Secretary General, Letter, 16 February 1979, Record ID 118500, S-0904-0089-10, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, accessed 10 February 2015, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/118500>, 5.

26. Li, *China at War*, 412.

27. National Security Adviser Brzezinski to President Carter, Memorandum, 24 January 1979, Donated Historical Material Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, Geographic File, China, [People's Republic of]-Alpha Channel: [February 1972-November 1978] through China [People's Republic of] Pres. Meeting with Deng, 3 October 1979, Folder 11, Box 9, Carter Library.

28. Memorandum, NSA Brzezinski to President Carter.

29. Memorandum, NSA Brzezinski to President Carter.

30. Memorandum, NSA Brzezinski to President Carter. NSA Brzezinski underlined the importance of conveying to Deng the USG's desire for a balanced approach to the US-Soviet and the US-China relationships.

31. Deng Xiaoping and company to President Carter and company, Memorandum of Conversation.

32. Deng Xiaoping and company to President Carter and company, Memorandum of Conversation.

33. President Carter to Deng Xiaoping, Personal Letter, 30 January 1979, Donated Historical Material Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, Geographic File, China, [People's Republic of]-Alpha Channel: [February 1972-November 1978] through China [People's Republic of] Pres. Meeting with Deng 3 October 1979, Folder 11, Box 9, Carter Library.

34. President Carter with Deng Xiaoping, Report on Conversation.

35. Deng Xiaoping and company to President Carter and company, Memorandum of Conversation.

36. PLA Senior Colonel (Ret.) Zhao Zongjiu, oral history interview with author, Shanghai, China, 25 March 2015. Senior Colonel Zhao was an Air Force Officer stationed in the border region at the time the mobilization order was given. All officers were mustered on or around 10 February 1979 in order to acknowledge the order signed by Premier Hua.



## Chapter 5 The War

At this time when Chinese Frontier Troops are forced to repulse the Vietnamese armed incursions, the Chinese Government appeals to the Vietnamese authorities to stop on the precipice, retract from the wrong path, and do not go any further.

– Xinhua News Agency, “US Liaison Office  
Peking Cable to US Secretary of State”

Sometime around five o’clock on the pre-dawn morning on 17 February 1979, China launched its attack against Vietnam with barrages of artillery on border positions, followed by an infantry advance. After months of movement and staging, the Chinese had an estimated force of 11 armies (*jun*, equivalent to a US Corps), or 450,000 troops on its Southern Front oriented towards Vietnam.<sup>1</sup> Vietnam, in turn, readied to face the invasion with only 50,000 regular People’s Army of Vietnam and militia troops, but had the advantage of well dug-in positions, and a better knowledge of the terrain.<sup>2</sup> On 18 February, all Chinese official media outlets carried an editorial entitled, “Rise in Counter-Attack in Defense of Frontiers” that offered a justification for the Chinese attack. The reports referred to Chinese troops only as “Frontier Troops” with no mention of the large build-up of the regular forces from throughout the country, and noted that the Chinese did not desire “a single inch” of Vietnamese territory.<sup>3</sup> From the start of the war, China’s information campaign framed its actions as a limited action in response to Vietnam’s unacceptable behavior.

This chapter examines the tactical and operational levels of war, and how the PLA’s commonly perceived failures on the battlefield were not, in fact, tantamount to a strategic failure. Forcing Vietnam to withdraw from Cambodia – or at least force the Vietnamese to redistribute some resources away from Cambodia – was a long-term strategic goal, but it is one that would not be achieved immediately through the military action of 1979. Evidence indicates that the initial operational objectives of the PLA ground forces were to quickly seize control of three of the six northern Vietnamese provincial capitals.<sup>4</sup> The original attack began at 26 separate penetration points across a broad front of the Sino-Vietnamese border using all 11 Chinese armies mobilized at the border.<sup>5</sup> Three armies would attack south from Yunnan Province in China to seize Lao Cai city on the western front, located northwest of Hanoi. Simultaneously, on the eastern

front, eight PLA armies would attack south from Guangxi Province in China to seize the provincial capital cities Cao Bang and Lang Son in Vietnam's northeast (see Figure 4, exact locations of units are not to scale).<sup>6</sup>

Mao himself once said, "The view that strategic victory is achieved by

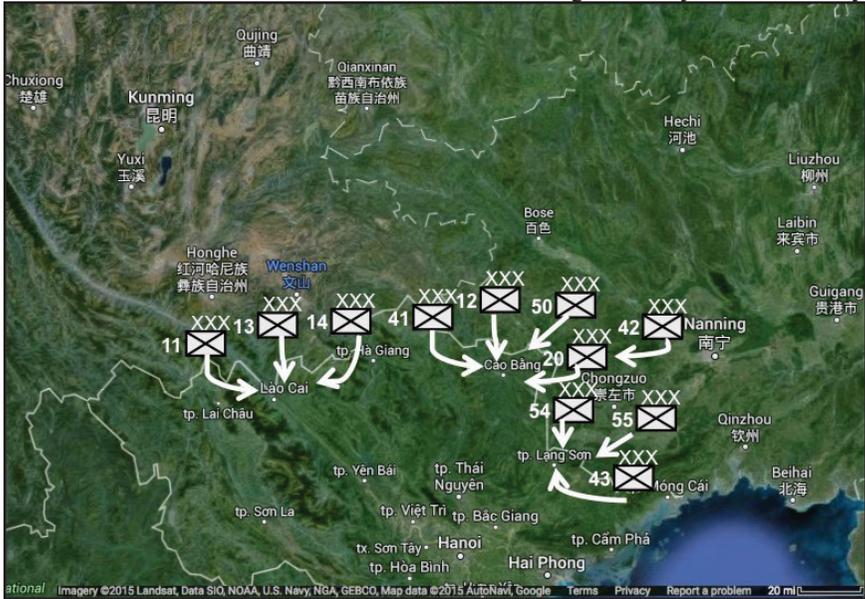


Figure 4: Map of Chinese Units at the Sino-Vietnamese Border, February 1979. Source: Created by author using Edward C. O'Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War: The Last Maoist War* (New York: Routledge, 2007); James Hoare, "On this Day – Beginning of Sino-Vietnamese War," 17 February 2014, All About History, accessed 22 April 2015, <http://www.historyanswers.co.uk/history-of-war/day-beginning-sino-vietnamese-war/>; Google Maps, "China," Google, accessed 22 April 2015, [www.google.com/maps](http://www.google.com/maps).

tactical successes alone is erroneous, because it overlooks the fact that the first and the foremost problem in deciding the outcome of a war is whether or not the whole situation and its various stages are properly taken into consideration."<sup>7</sup> However, several seminal works that examine the PLA's tactical and operational losses clearly indicate that the Maoist ideology infused into the PLA throughout the Cultural Revolution did not equate to operational effectiveness in battle.<sup>8</sup> However, some PLA participants in the war still believe that the Maoist ideology did in fact bolster the resolve and discipline of the fighting men, and gave them a zeal and resilience unfamiliar to western armies at the time.<sup>9</sup>

In order to clearly convey the limited nature of the war to the international community, Deng decided not to involve the PLA navy, and only

employed the PLA air forces in a limited fashion, using fighter jets to intimidate Vietnam through incursions as early as May of 1978.<sup>10</sup> The Chinese air force and navy had active parts in the planning stages of the operation, but their poor showing in exercises may have been reason enough to leave them mostly out of the fight. That, and the increased risk of inciting Moscow to aid Vietnam if China used a joint air-land-sea campaign, surely merited careful consideration.<sup>11</sup> Intelligence in Washington determined that the PLA had used some air forces from Hainan Island, but they appeared to be limited to close air support, as opposed to long-range interdiction against deeper Vietnamese targets around Hanoi.<sup>12</sup> After a decade of fighting American air power, the Vietnamese retained one of the best anti-aircraft capabilities in the world, as well as a much more experienced MiG-21 pilot corps.<sup>13</sup> Zhao Zongjiu, a retired professor from the PLA College of Politics in Nanjing, was a junior Air Force officer stationed in Yunnan at the start of the war. He recalls how the concentration of up to five different aircraft at airports built to handle only three would have made logistics and timely ground support difficult if they had been called to fight.<sup>14</sup>

On the ground, the PLA infantry from 11 Chinese armies, with poor artillery support, slogged through harsh fighting against a mixture of seasoned Vietnamese troops and irregular fighters in dug-in, high-ground defenses. Much like the Chinese, Vietnamese commanders often drew on the teachings of their ancient military sage, Nguyen Trai, who advocated fighting on familiar ground while coaxing an enemy to overstretch themselves.<sup>15</sup> By fighting a delaying action, the Vietnamese fighters were able to funnel and ambush PLA ground units as they slowly moved south towards the three provincial capitals. Taking massive casualties in their attempts to capture their objectives through frontal infantry assaults (“human waves”), and urged on by the political commissars’ slogans, the PLA appeared to the Vietnamese as a “swarm of ants.”<sup>16</sup> Their lack of combined arms training and coordination was evident in the assaults, which failed to effectively integrate artillery to spare the infantry massive losses from running head-on into Vietnamese small arms fire.<sup>17</sup> The PLA’s inability to quickly rout the Vietnamese defenders resulted in much slower progress than originally expected, but by 26 February, they succeeded in seizing the three provincial capitals. However, Lang Son became the most contentious key terrain, with the PLA being dislodged by a successful Vietnamese counterattack in early March, at great cost of life to both sides.<sup>18</sup>

In order to achieve all their operational goals, the Chinese retook Lang Son on 4 March, after the outnumbered Vietnamese withdrew to their defense in-depth of Hanoi. Vietnam’s military leadership reorganized its

units as they fell back and rapidly established the 5th Corps, consisting of five divisions, for future operations to retake Lang Son.<sup>19</sup> Despite significant losses and a potential threat to Hanoi, the People's Army of Vietnam did not redistribute forces from Cambodia to join the fight. Then, on 5 March, Beijing gave the order to begin the PLA withdrawal after political leaders decided they had achieved the strategic goals of defending China's borders and sufficiently punishing Vietnam. Hurting for supplies and with large numbers of wounded dying from inadequate field medical services, the PLA marched back across the border, leaving a trail of scorched earth in their wake and reinforced border outposts that would remain throughout the next decade.<sup>20</sup>

Prior to and during the short war, the Vietnamese were confident in their own abilities, but possibly overconfident in their Soviet allies. In a November 1978 issue of the Vietnamese Communist Party's theoretical journal, *Tap Chi Cong San*, the author praises Soviet success and commitment to defending other socialist countries:

Today, there is one fact that no one can deny: in the face of the invincible strength of the USSR and the fraternal socialist countries, the imperialists and international reactionaries, regardless of how bellicose they might be, think twice before recklessly unleashing a war against the world socialist system. They realize that the inevitable outcome of a military attack upon the USSR and the fraternal socialist countries closely linked to it by means of a bond of great friendship would be heavy retaliation. This situation has increased the bravery and confidence of the fighters for the revolution and peace in the world.<sup>21</sup>

Ultimately, that confidence did not materialize into a second front to challenge the Sino-Soviet border, and allowed China to concentrate on its operational goals in the ground war. Had the Soviets decided to gamble retaliation against the Chinese, it would likely have come from either a second front against China's northern border, or through direct military aid and intervention, starting with its navy, already located nearby the coast of Vietnam. However, the Soviets stopped short of escalating the war by entering into hostilities, and instead allowed their Vietnamese comrades to fight the war on their own. Lacking direct military support from the Soviet Union did not discourage the People's Army of Vietnam and irregular troops from facing the Chinese armies. The rapid withdrawal of PLA troops after only three weeks of combat likely bolstered Vietnam's confidence in its fighting force, despite heavy losses.

The Soviet Union did not retaliate against China as Vietnam may have expected, but rather held only to the vague language of its Friendship Treaty that did not require the Soviets to provide direct military assistance. In verbal support to the Vietnamese, Soviet leaders offered strong official statements of condemnation of Beijing's actions from Moscow to Havana, but stopped short of actual military support.<sup>22</sup> Leaders in the Soviet Union likely grappled with serious implications if they were to intervene, including their prestige as the Socialist community's leader, the impact of a military action on Soviet-US relations, and finally, the cost of an extended or escalated fight with China. Their strategy was to wait-and-see if China's action would be limited and short like Deng proclaimed, and if the Vietnamese could handle the fighting on their own.<sup>23</sup> After seeing the Chinese withdrawal, Moscow likely breathed a sigh of relief not having to face an escalated conflict with China.

From the PLA's calculations, even if the Soviets had opened a second front, the Chinese forces massed on the border were prepared to meet them with numerical superiority. A source reports that intelligence at the time indicated that of the 57 Soviet divisions along the northern Chinese border in 1979, only 30 percent were fully equipped, and only 60 percent were capable of a rapid mobilization.<sup>24</sup> By PLA calculations, if the Soviets decided to open a second front, it would take at least two months to shift adequate forces and logistics from eastern Europe.<sup>25</sup> By then, the Chinese would have already accomplished their objectives in Vietnam and could shift forces back to the north. Retired PLA officers reflecting on the war placed faith in their politicians' use of political-military design to accurately determine four critical strategic factors before the war ever started: first, whether or not to fight – in this case, there was enough justification to fight; second, how to fight – in this case, choosing to limit the war to ground forces so as not to escalate its scale, or entice third parties to enter; third, the extent to which the war should be waged – in this case, only to the operational objectives and only against military targets; and, fourth, when to end the war – in this case, a predetermined, short amount of time. According to one source, the PLA units engaging in combat initially prepared to fight a three-month war, but if objectives were met ahead of time, as was the case, there was no reason to extend the campaign.<sup>26</sup>

At the UN, China's Ambassador Chen justified the PRC's attack on Vietnam, and wished to draw a sharp distinction for the international community between Vietnam's incursion into Cambodia, and China's incursion into Vietnam.<sup>27</sup> Much to the US's chagrin, he repeatedly referred to China's consultation with the United States during Deng's visit a few

weeks earlier, intimating that the United States supported China's position – a point that US officials then had to adamantly deny while affirming the American call for an immediate end to hostilities.<sup>28</sup> A senior retired PLA officer who fought in the war claimed that China should thank the United States for sharing intelligence prior to the war that the Soviet troop dispositions indicated that they had no intention of opening a second front against China, thus bolstering the PRC's confidence prior to and during the war.<sup>29</sup>

Domestically, life continued as usual in the rest of China. Xinhua's official statement justified the war to the Chinese people and promoted a rosy version of the post-conflict world where the "Chinese government and people treasure and uphold the friendship" of the Vietnamese, and stating that "the grave armed conflict between China and Vietnam is wholly the making of the Vietnamese authorities acting contrary to the will of the Chinese and Vietnamese people."<sup>30</sup> The state media agencies did not report news of China's casualties or battlefield setbacks. The average Chinese, eager to move beyond the Cultural Revolution's societal upheaval, was not directly affected by a national war on the border. The majority of China was and remains agrarian, and the civilian population was likely more concerned with improving their domestic lot under Deng's government. For such a short war, China did not require a nationwide mobilization of industry to supply its forces, nor did it institute a draft to replenish the ranks of the dead PLA soldiers. Deng's ability to prevent the war from escalating and keep his promise of a limited war did not make him vulnerable to political criticism or give adequate time for a people's protest to mount.

Tactical and operational failures during the fight did not change the strategic aims of the war. The PLA experienced its trial by fire, Deng proved himself as a worthy Party helmsman once again, and the Chinese people offered no objection. While the fighting raged on south of the border, Deng had already shifted his efforts to the other reformist efforts, particularly the decollectivization of farms and increasing the state's pay to peasants for compulsory grain deliveries.<sup>31</sup> With farmers expecting a larger handout from the government and stability returning to social life after the Cultural Revolution's excesses, the war in Vietnam simply did not affect domestic life in China. Deng's ability to retain all his leadership posts, despite high war casualties, point to his strategic victory.

Neither the PRC nor the SRV have released complete records of their numbers of war dead and wounded, but a senior retired PLA officer with assumed access to such information puts the figure for the Chinese at

32,000 dead.<sup>32</sup> What is less commonly mentioned is that the Chinese invasion force, fighting for three weeks against a smaller, but determined enemy crossed back into China not as heroes of the PRC, but as a blunt and bloodied tool for Deng Xiaoping's consolidation of power. The army proved itself a loyal and willing weapon that the Party could firmly wield to further China's grand strategy.

## Notes

1. O'Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy*, 53.
2. O'Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy*, 53.
3. US Liaison Office Peking to Secretary of State, Washington, DC, Cable, 22 February 1979, National Security Affairs, Brzezinski Material Collection, Cable File–PRC/Vietnam (1-10 February 1979 through 21 February 1979), Carter Library. The editorial goes on to emphasize China's almost immediate willingness to negotiate at the "appropriate level" for peace with Vietnam, another indicator its intention for limited war. It also states that, "The Chinese people urgently need an international situation of peace and stability," in order for it to achieve its modernization program. USLO Peking assessed that this statement was included for opponents to Deng's decision for a long war that could likely divert resources from economic modernization efforts.
4. O'Dowd, 55. Scholars disagree about the PLA's operational plans and the number of provincial capitals the Chinese attacked to seize, but author Ed O'Dowd offers the most comprehensive analysis of unit dispositions and concludes that the campaign was fought mainly over the three capitals of Lang Son, Cao Bang, and Lao Cai.
5. Brantly Womack, *China and Vietnam: The Politics of Asymmetry* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 200. According to the author, the PLA successfully occupied five of the six northern capitals. In addition to Lang Son, Cao Bang, and Lao Cai, the PLA also took Lai Chau and Ha Giang. The sixth provincial capital would have been Hon Gai (also known as Ha Long) of Quang Ninh Province, but an attack there might have posed a direct threat to the economic centers of Haiphong and the Red River delta. It can be assumed that seizing Hon Gai may have illicited an escalated response from Vietnam that was beyond the limits of what the CCP and the PLA were prepared to face.
6. O'Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy*, 55-63.
7. Mao Tse-tung excerpts, 175-188, 192-198.
8. O'Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy*, 164-166.
9. Senior, retired PLA officers, oral history interviews with author, Shanghai and Beijing, China, 24-26 March 2015.
10. National Foreign Assessment Center, "The Sino-Vietnamese Border Dispute," 3.
11. O'Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy*, 51-52, 65-67. O'Dowd claims that the PLA Navy (PLAN) was task organized into the 217 Formation to support the ground force attacks, deny Soviet intervention, and patrol the Gulf of Tonkin and the South China Sea to attack the Vietnamese Navy. However, the PLAN found itself up against elements of the Soviet Pacific Fleet and basically shirked away from confrontation. Ultimately, no combat exchanges were recorded and the PLAN did not support the ground forces.
12. Special Coordination Committee Meeting at the Situation Room in the White House, Minutes, 18 February 1979, Donated Historical Material Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, Geographic File, China, (People's Republic

of)-Sino-Vietnamese Conflict (November 1978-16 February 199) through Cuba-Alpha Channel (December 1978), Box 10, Carter Library. The situation update from Admiral Turner indicate that Vietnamese Surface-to-Air Missiles (SAMs) may have been used in the northwest front, but that no units from Hanoi moved away from their defensive positions to respond to the Chinese attack.

13. O'Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy*, 67-68.

14. PLA Senior Colonel (Ret.) Zhao Zongjiu, oral history interview with author, Shanghai, China, 25 March 2015.

15. Luu Van Loi, *50 Years of Vietnamese Diplomacy: 1945-1995* (Hanoi, Vietnam: Gioi Publishers, 2000), 2-5.

16. O'Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy*, 80-81.

17. O'Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy*, 74.

18. Li, *China at War*, 412-413.

19. O'Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy*, 87.

20. Retired PLA Officer, oral history interview with author, Beijing, China, 26 March 2015. This officer fought in the war and later taught future PLA Staff Officers in the PLA's Professional Military Education program,

21. *Tap Chi Cong San*, 214.

22. Moscow Radio and Progress in Mandarin to China, Radio Transcrip, 19 February 1979, Donated Historical Material Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, Geographic File, China, (People's Republic of)-Sino-Vietnamese Conflict (November 1978-16 February 1979) through Cuba-Alpha Channel (December 1978), Box 10, Carter Library. This Soviet propaganda outlet accused the Chinese and the United States of working together to plan the invasion stating, "A number of facts prove that the aggression against Vietnam was planned and decided upon as early as when Brzezinski, US Presidential National Security Advisor, visited China. Details were finalized when Deng Xiaoping visited Washington. Political observers have pointed out: It was no accident that Deng Xiaoping lunched with Brzezinski immediately upon his arrival in the United States. As the Chinese troops were beginning to invade Vietnam, the Chinese NPC Standing Committee was meeting in Beijing to endorse the results of Deng Xiaoping's visit to the United States, his collusion with the US militarists and their decisions on the invasion of Vietnam;" US Institute, Havana to Secretary of State, Washington, DC, Cable, 2 March 1979, National Security Affairs, Brzezinski Material Collection, NLC-16-16-1-13-2, Carter Library. At an observed public announcement, President Fidel Castro sharply criticizes the Chinese and American leadership, and tells Cubans to "prepare for any contingency in support of Viet-Nam," but stops short of a promise for actual assistance.

23. US Embassy, Moscow to Secretary of State, Washington, DC, Cable, Subject, "Sino-Vietnamese War: How will the Soviets React?" 22 February 1979, National Security Affairs, Brzezinski Material Collection, Cable File-PRC/Vietnam (1-10 February 1979 through 21 February 1979), Folder 3, Box 15, Carter Library.

24. Retired PLA Officer, oral history interview with author, Beijing, China, 26 March 2015.
25. Retired PLA Officer, oral history interview with author, Beijing, China, 26 March 2015.
26. Retired PLA Officer, oral history interview with author, Beijing, China, 26 March 2015.
27. US Mission, United Nations to Secretary of State, Washington, DC, Cable, Subject, "Discussion with Chinese of Attack on Vietnam," 22 February 1979. National Security Affairs, Brzezinski Material Collection, Cable File—PRC/Vietnam (1-10 February 1979 through 21 February 1979), Folder 3, Box 15, Carter Library.
28. Carter to Prime Minister Callaghan, President d'Estaing, and Chancellor Schmidt, Message, 18 February 1979, Donated Historical Material Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, Geographic File, China, (People's Republic of)-Sino-Vietnamese Conflict (November 1978-16 February 1979) through Cuba-Alpha Channel (December 1978), Box 10, Carter Library.
29. Retired PLA Officer, oral history interview with author, Beijing, China, 26 March 2015.
30. US Liaison Office Peking to Secretary of State, Washington, DC, Cable, Subject, "Xinhua Statement on Border Situation," 22 February 1979, National Security Affairs, Brzezinski Material Collection, Cable File—PRC/Vietnam (1-10 February 1979 through 21 February 1979), Folder 3, Box 15, Carter Library. This statement was released shortly before midnight on 17 February 1979 and delivered to the US Liaison Office an hour later by China's Foreign Ministry Information Department.
31. Maurice Meisner, *The Deng Xiaoping Era* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996), 221-227.
32. Retired PLA Officer, oral history interview with author, Beijing, China, 26 March 2015.

## Chapter 6

### Analysis, Conclusions, and Recommendations

#### Analysis

The withdrawal of PLA forces from the three Vietnamese provincial capitals did not end the hostilities between the two countries. China and Vietnam would remain at odds in the international arena until at least 1989, when Vietnam finally withdrew all its forces from Cambodia, and the Chinese and Vietnamese governments signed the Paris Peace Accords normalizing relations in 1991.<sup>1</sup> It would be yet another decade until the two sides signed a land border treaty, in December 1999. Though official documents stating a victory are difficult to obtain, China's internal and external rhetoric point to a belief that their action in Vietnam, in fact, secured their ultimate goal of an improved strategic position. From the Chinese point of view, despite the operational difficulties examined in Chapter 4, a strategic victory was readily apparent following the 1979 war.

Domestically, Deng confirmed that his leadership style of appearing open to debate, allowing some internal dissention, then ultimately directing a path of his own design allowed him to control Beijing's decision-making process throughout his tenure as China's leader, from roughly 1978 to 1994. Although the war involved units from throughout China, an American delegation travelling to Beijing in April 1979 noted two interesting observations. First, there was no cultish adoration of Deng, as there had been of Mao, but the people appeared to recognize him as their supreme leader. Second, there was very little news reporting or evidence to the general public that a bloody border war had just taken place.<sup>2</sup> The CCP appeared to have kept the populace in the dark about the military action, as life carried on in the capital and throughout the country. The lack of domestic backlash from the people or the party, coupled with Deng retaining and expanding his high-level positions until 1989, argues that the war can be considered at least strategically useful, and over the longer term, ultimately successful.

Internationally, Deng's estimate that the Soviet Union would not intervene was correct. In the months following, China would further seek to isolate Vietnam from the international community, while seeking détente with the Soviet Union. China's position in Southeast Asia improved in the sense that it reaffirmed its position as the leading regional power willing to endure – and inflict – casualties to achieve its stated strategic objectives. The war with Vietnam effectively served as a warning to other states to

think twice before challenging China's place in Southeast Asia. In the immediate aftermath of the war, China achieved its goal of isolating Vietnam internationally, and even received assistance from the international community to further prod Vietnam to withdraw from Cambodia.<sup>3</sup>

With regards to its relationship with the United States and Japan, China adroitly played its new friends. It estimated that the United States would object to actions against Vietnam, but not strongly enough to derail the progress of normalization. Because US policymakers were preoccupied with expanding the Sino-American relationship in areas like the economy, technology, and even cooperative intelligence collection against the Soviet Union, China's limited war against Vietnam was an inconsequential concern.<sup>45</sup> In sensitive talks about how the Carter Administration should respond, Brzezinski made the US government's position clear, stating, "While we should criticize the Chinese, we should not create a situation in which we adversely affect our bilateral relations or through our criticism give the Soviets a justification for harming our interests."<sup>46</sup> Normalization between China and the United States was the overriding interest in this period, and China emerged "satisfied" with the US Government's response to the Sino-Vietnamese War.<sup>47</sup> However, the war was not without cost to the United States. By failing to deter China, the United States lost some political face with the Soviets. At the outset of fighting, President Carter sent messages to President Brezhnev urging both sides to exercise restraint, so as not to encourage the war to escalate.<sup>48</sup> Brezhnev offered a blunt rebuke, telling President Carter that China had taken the United States for a ride at a cost to America's own interest.<sup>49</sup>

On the other hand, the Sino-American relationship and China's war with Vietnam achieved the effect that throughout the rest of the Cold War, the United States would view China as an undermining force against the Soviets' desired world order. Sino-American relations would find cooperation in a growing number of fields throughout the 1980s, at least until the Tiananmen Square incident cooled relations again. Working from an anti-Soviet common ground with the United States afforded China the secure space it needed to modernize areas integral for its explosive growth throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and into the 2000s. Further analysis by some PLA officers indicates that operational shortcomings, such as the poor use of combined and joint arms and the outmatched technology, underscored the need for modernization.<sup>50</sup> Deng Xiaoping did not have to press hard in the aftermath of Vietnam to convince the Party to increase defense spending in order to support his vision for China's secure future.

The war had a negative net effect on Sino-Asian regional relations. The Japanese, in particular, likely felt that China unfairly sullied Japan's international reputation by attacking Vietnam, since Deng's visit shortly before the war gave the appearance of Tokyo's acquiescence. Japan also feared that the Soviet Union ultimately benefitted in the region because of the war because it could shift the claim of hegemony from itself to China. Additionally, there was a renewed possibility of the Soviet Union expanding military bases in Vietnam to prevent future Chinese aggression, which could further destabilize the region. However, one positive result, according to the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs at the time, was that socialist political parties in Japan's anti-war environment were likely to suffer at the polls amidst the backdrop of communist countries warring with each other.<sup>11</sup> China accomplished its mission by backing up its warnings with military action in order to defend its national interests, but its method was much to the chagrin of its neighbors.<sup>12</sup> Japan, like the ASEAN members, grew increasingly wary of Deng's future intentions after witnessing the Sino-Vietnamese War. China's actions led Asian countries more to fear than to respect China, and encouraged many to strengthen ties with the US-led international system founded on international laws to hedge against future Chinese threats.

Following the war, Vietnam saw itself as victorious as well. It repelled the 11 Chinese divisions hurled into its sovereign territory, and forced the PLA to withdraw without having to divert forces from defense of Hanoi or occupation of Cambodia. However, Vietnam did sustain significant losses, and remained antagonistic to China throughout the next two decades. A stalemate continued along the border with sporadic artillery and infantry skirmishes occurring throughout the 1980s – the most notable actions being the Vietnamese surprise capture of Long Shan Mountain in 1984, and the 1988 Spratly naval battle that resulted in close to 80 Vietnamese casualties.<sup>13</sup> The USSR and Vietnam remained allies after the war, despite the Soviets' unwillingness to militarily intervene. An agreement signed on 12 October 1979 committed Soviet aid to help Vietnam recover from war damages.<sup>14</sup> China never paid war reparations. The Vietnamese, accustomed to fighting for their national interests, remained undeterred in the immediate aftermath of the war, but their strategic position was no better off for the price they paid in the war with China, or their extended occupation of Cambodia. Ultimately, throughout the 1990s, the Sino-Vietnamese relations slowly returned to a new normalcy involving reciprocal recognition of sovereign territory, as well as new economic opportunities.<sup>15</sup>

## Conclusions

Based on the historical record and evidence examined in this study, the main conclusion to draw about how the PRC uses war is that it is willing to use military force to protect its stated strategic interests, even beyond its own borders, and even when unprovoked by a direct military assault. The leaders of the PRC do not share America's aversion for high casualties to achieve ends, and China is capable of enduring significant troop and material losses in order to achieve its strategic interests. A key difference from the American or western way of war is that the Chinese leadership pride themselves on directing a coherent, political-military endstate before the start of hostilities.<sup>16</sup> This behavior indicates a possible cultural way of war that opponents should consider if hostilities arise. Oral history interviews with combat veterans who ascended to senior leadership positions in the PLA did not reveal much personal remorse that so many Chinese died teaching Vietnam a lesson. The reason for this acceptance of losses was that prior to the fighting, operational losses were realistically factored in and accepted by both politicians and ground commanders. When combat commenced, the army was trusted to achieve its operational objectives without having to incessantly answer to the Party, or the people, about its operational plans or its casualty counts.<sup>17</sup>

China attempted to signal its intentions and assuage international fears by making a diplomatic case for pending action before invading Vietnam. Transparent political signaling before taking unilateral action likely holds true for today's CCP, and China's potential adversaries should not misinterpret signals for bluffs.<sup>18</sup> However, signaling the international community does not equate to a mandate for China to gain international endorsement before acting in its own interest. If the Chinese feel there will be too much international opposition to an action, it may still exercise force without international endorsement. Though urged by the United States and others to conform to norms of diplomacy and restraint in 1979, Deng was not bound enough by the international system to compromise with a non-military solution.

However, China's current integration into the capitalist world market makes resolving inter-state issues through non-military means much more attractive and beneficial to maintaining the CCP's political primacy, and a secure environment for protecting its interests. The CCP's willingness to use military force before exhausting other options must be tempered by its present, objective reality. The striking difference between 1979 and today is China's economic power, which is fundamentally tied to the global, capitalist market system. In 1979, China was not nearly as developed or

wealthy as it is today, nor had the ideological clash of a communist versus capitalist world order reached resolution. The collapse of the Soviet Union and Deng's economic reforms charted a new course for the Chinese – one which is still being realized today as millions rise out of abject poverty. By 2013, The World Bank statistics ranked China as second only to the United States in terms of its Gross Domestic Product. With such wealth came a corresponding increase to China's political position in the international community, far greater than it enjoyed in 1979.<sup>19</sup> Although it continues to grow its military capabilities, China's preferred primary means to punish other states to protect its strategic interests in the future will likely come in areas of national power other than the military.

Another conclusion from this case study is that China's military rise over the last 40 years can be directly tied to the 1979 war with Vietnam. As early as 1975, Deng began openly calling for a streamlining of the Army, adoption of a new education system, and an ushering out of the older generation in order to best prepare for modern war.<sup>20</sup> Upon ascending to national leadership before the Sino-Vietnamese war, Deng sought to further his aim of creating a modern defense force because he felt the PLA had atrophied during the Cultural Revolution into a weak force, overzealous with Maoist ideology.<sup>21</sup> The long-lasting effect of the war's operational shortcomings underlined the need for a more streamlined, modern defense force that could rely on its quality as opposed to quantity. Reflecting on the war a year later, Deng bluntly stated:

Can our army fight? Can it deal with any emergency? I don't mean an emergency like the self-defense counterattack on Vietnam. That kind of incident is easy to cope with. What I mean is: If we should be confronted with a more powerful adversary than Vietnam, how reliable would our fighting be? Of course, we will still have many disadvantages.<sup>22</sup>

The emphasis on the Army's professional military education and training became paramount in the decades to follow as the PLA implemented Deng's decree to streamline and modernize, while state funds flowed more heavily into other areas of civil reform. Gradually, investment in advanced technology and a downsize of its top-heavy cadre force structure resulted in a leaner force. The PLA managed to reduce its Mao-era "bloatedness" and increase the implementation of joint and combined arms warfare.<sup>23</sup>

After nearly 40 years, China's defense spending now ranks second in the world behind the United States.<sup>24</sup> An official Chinese White Paper from 2013 states that China's current development and modernization of

the PLA aims to protect against threats to national unification, territorial integrity, and development interests.<sup>25</sup> While these mission sets encompass continuities from the Deng era, one key difference between the late 1970s and present-day is the lack of emphasis on ideological training.<sup>26</sup> The rhetoric that married the PLA to the Party in 1979 is replaced by the PLA's current charter to adhere to the constitution of the republic.<sup>27</sup> Skeptics might see this as merely semantics, since the CCP is still the only political party in China, but this subtle change in emphasis may reflect a conscious effort to depoliticize the armed forces. With respect to China's concern for facing informationized opponents, the decline of ideological training after the Sino-Vietnamese war is another way the PLA streamlined training so its members could concentrate on developing the practical knowledge to "win local wars in an informationized world."<sup>28</sup> PLA modernization is a continuous process and will surely impact regional stability. Exactly how that process evolves and integrates into the existing security structure is beyond the scope of this study, but merits further analysis.

A key observation from this study of the Sino-Vietnamese war is that the CCP has not changed its centrist and uncompromising nature with regards to its ultimate authority. Domestically, recent crackdowns of political protests in Hong Kong and targeted anti-corruption campaigns are ominous indications that the Party leaders will not tolerate challenges to their political power. Internationally, only in the last 175 years of their 2,000-year dynastical and modern history have the Chinese been anything but the central power in Asia. The Chinese offer cooperation and agree to international norms when they perceive their *shi* is comparatively weak. However, once in a position of equal or greater relative power, the CCP may be eager to change the environment with some disregard for international norms.

The assumption of skillful strategic patience often attributed to China's geopolitical strategists is misleading. Impulsiveness and displays of strength may be more likely traits if and when the CCP views its *shi* as relatively stronger than others'. In the next 50 years, the author assesses that China's holistic *shi* will grow. CCP leaders, in order to retain legitimacy and project confidence, will likely test the international system's status quo more often. Recent examples include the establishment of the Air Defense Identification Zone in 2013 as a military means, and the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank in 2015 as an economic means, to challenge the status quo. Unlike in 1979, the CCP has learned to assert influence simultaneously through various elements of national power, instead of primarily pursuing its national interests with military force.

## Provisional Implications for Future Study

Historian Colin Gray states that the American way of war is characterized by 12 key factors. The first three he describes are its apolitical, astrategic, and ahistorical nature.<sup>29</sup> Though Gray was not writing specifically in contrast to a Chinese way of war, his top three characteristics are sharply different from the way the CCP wages war. This paper examined how the Chinese used war for political and strategic gain with a clear end-state in mind from the outset. The Chinese strategic calculations from the end of the Second Indochina War in 1975 until war broke out in 1979 led Deng Xiaoping to seize an opportunity using a limited, politicized military force, without exhausting other means of engagement and national power. Gray advocates a clear understanding of the American cultural approach to war and the ways it differs from the Chinese cultural approach.

There are two key implications Gray hopes readers will consider from the Chinese experience in the Sino-Vietnamese war. The first implication is to exhaust the other instruments of national power in order to save blood and treasure, but those instruments must have the mandate, resourcing, and support of the nation's highest leaders in order to succeed. Oftentimes, this is out of the hands of military leaders, but it does not absolve them from advocating in favor of other national instruments to solve complex problems. The second recommendation is that if military means are ultimately decided upon, having strategic political ends clearly identified and agreed upon between politicians and military leaders prior to committing military forces may justify even a poor outcome in war.

The historical causes and the context of the Sino-Vietnamese War may be more similar to the wars that came before it – Korea, the Soviet Union, and India – than to the wars China may fight in the future. Deng's economic and societal reforms broke with the Cold War mentality that dominated society prior to 1979. The focus on internal reforms made it necessary for both the Party and PLA to keep China out of conflicts that might divert attention or resources away from modernization. Studying the width and depth of instances where the CCP resorted to military means to achieve its strategic goals since 1949 may help American policymakers and military leaders make better judgments in their approach to East Asia. However, western students of Chinese military history must also take into account historian Michael Howard's rule of context to avoid abusing any potential lessons from past conflicts.<sup>30</sup> In the case of the Sino-Vietnamese war, absolute parallels with today's geopolitical reality are difficult to find, and this single case study aims only to arm the reader with additional insight into one of the CCP's many wars. Other works that focus on the aforemen-

tioned wars may add a width of study, but linking the context of each war to today's relevance is subject to constant change.

In closing, elder statesman and former NSA to President Nixon, Henry Kissinger, advocates for a "Pacific Community" that challenges the notion that China and the United States are set on a collision course due to competing interests.<sup>31</sup> Instead, he argues that strategic leaders in both countries should formulate a new construct that looks beyond immediate issues of disagreement. When he met Zhou Enlai in the early 1970s, Zhou told him that together China and the United States would, "Shake the world."<sup>32</sup> Reflecting on that time, he counters, "What a culmination if, forty years later, the United States and China could merge their efforts not to shake the world, but to build it."<sup>33</sup> Though Mr. Kissinger stops short of prescribing the ends, ways, and means for achieving such a lofty accommodating environment, his notion of cooperative framing may still readily apply to American and Chinese military leaders' thinking about the other. China's actions during the Sino-Vietnamese war provide elements of what can result when other instruments of national power are not first exhausted, and military action becomes the primary solution.

Ultimately, America should encourage China's peaceful rise and acknowledge that China seeks greater regional leadership. Currently, China may feel vulnerable to US military presence in the region, especially when it feels its own strategic interests threatened. If this is true, it will at most be a reluctant follower. America must be willing to allocate space in the international system in ways that China sees as win-win. The goal should be to influence China's role in the system so that China feels it can increase its *shi* by contributing to the system, rather than breaking or gradually undermining it. Going forward, the most difficult aspect for the Chinese to accept will be exercising restraint and adhering to the rule of law when their positional power outweighs others', and the use of force may achieve faster results.

Finally, it is recommended that the US government take a longer view of the shifting dynamics of leadership in Asia, and acknowledge that China's economy and defense spending will likely surpass America's in the next century. For the near future, America enjoys a stronger *shi*, and will undoubtedly dominate competitive areas, but in ways that respect international laws and norms. The introduction to the 2015 *National Security Strategy* explicitly states, "We [the US] and our partners must make the reforms and investments needed to make sure we can work more effectively with each other while growing the ranks of responsible, capable states."<sup>34</sup> To achieve this end, American military leaders, educated in China's his-

tory and strategic culture, should play an active advisory role by offering their best assessment of China's military intentions. The military's approach must acknowledge that the CCP and the PLA see their defense forces as only one component of China's comprehensive national power, and likely not the most preferred instrument. America, by comparison, differs culturally from China in that our expeditionary defense forces seem to have become the preferred tool of global interaction. The cultural gap that exists in our collective understanding of China should be filled by those who appreciate and understand the nuances of how and why each society goes to war. Through education and analysis, perhaps they can help steer this complex relationship towards a more stable, secure, but admittedly different, future.

## Notes

1. Jin E. Pan (潘金娥) 越南政治经济中越关系前沿, *Vietnam Politics Economics, Chinese-Vietnamese Relations Cutting Edge*. (Beijing, China: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2011), 129-130.

2. Eleanor Lansing Dulles, Papers, 30 April 1979, 1880-1973 Collection, Box 37, Eisenhower Library. Ms. Dulles participated in a goodwill trip to Peking in April 1979. She casually observed that there appeared to be no “cult of personality” surrounding Deng Xiaoping, but that he enjoyed the loyalty of the people who did not seem restless under their current national leadership. She also noted that those people she spoke with knew little about the border wars, and she heard no talk of Vietnam or Russia.

3. In an office call between the PRC Ambassador to the UN, Chen Chu, and the UN Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim, the latter undertakes the task of travelling to Hanoi to urge the Vietnamese to withdraw from Cambodia, followed by a trip to Beijing to inform the Chinese of the trip’s progress. Waldheim also made Chen aware of his itinerary that included the other ASEAN states, where he would presumably attempt to assuage the international community’s concerns regarding the recent Sino-Vietnam War. UN Secretary General, Meeting Notes, Friday, 16 March 1979, at 10:30 p.m., Record ID 118483, S-0987-0008-14, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, accessed 9 February 2015, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/118483>, 1.

4. Secretary Blumenthal to President Carter, Cable, 1 March 1979, National Security Affairs, Brzezinski Material Collection #7, “Backchannel Messages: Peking, 1-7/79,” NLC-7-8-8, Carter Library. This cable shows that even during China’s war with Vietnam, high-level talks on other topics continued such as the settlement of private claims. While fighting the war, China offered to pay the United States \$80.5 million over five years, which, in the words of Secretary Blumenthal, “This is an unprecedented cash settlement. It represents a first-class deal, which far exceeds any previous agreement. The deal we have worked out . . . has very important advantages for the US”

5. National Security Advisor Brzezinski and Political Counselor, Embassy of the People’s Republic of China Cao Guisheng, Memorandum of Conversation, 10 July 1979, Donated Historical Material Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, Geographic File, China, [People’s Republic of]-Alpha Channel: [February 1972-November 1978] through China [People’s Republic of] Pres. Meeting with Deng, 3 October 1979, Folder 11, Box 9, Carter Library. This declassified “Top Secret” conversation in the summer after the war refers specifically to the prospect of a joint monitoring site to monitor Soviet activity.

6. Special Coordination Committee Meeting at the Situation Room in the White House.

7. Leonard Freel Woodcock, Backchannel Message from Ambassador to China (Woodcock) to Michel Oksenberg of the National Security Council Staff and the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs

(Holbrooke), 1979, National Security Affairs, Staff Material, Far East, Oksenberg Subject File, Box 46, Meetings: March 1979, Carter Library. Woodcock was appointed Ambassador on 27 February and presented his credentials on 7 March. Chinese Premier Hua Guofeng sent a message to President Carter stating, “Both Vice-Premier Deng and I share your view that it is important for our two sides to remain in close touch on matters of common concern for maintaining peace and stability in the Asia–Pacific region and the world as a whole. The recent counter-attack in self-defense, which China undertook against Viet Nam, was a limited action of short duration, and the previously set goals have been completely attained. Our troops will complete their withdrawal to Chinese territory within a few days. I am convinced that the action was necessary and beneficial. We are satisfied with the position which you and your government took on this incident.”

8. Carter to Brezhnev, Message, 17 February 1979, Donated Historical Material Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, Geographic File, China, (People’s Republic of)-Sino-Vietnamese Conflict (November 1978-16 February 1979) through Cuba-Alpha Channel (December 1978), Box 10, Carter Library. Here, President Carter states, “In the spirit of dedication to preserving peace, as exemplified in our mutual effort to limit strategic arms, I urge you to exercise restraint and cooperate in seeking a peaceful resolution to this problem.”

9. Brezhnev to Carter, Message, 18 February 1979. In his response, President Brezhnev states, “The Chinese invasion into Vietnam is a direct manifestation, if we are to call things by their names, of the expansionistic, hegemonist aspirations of Peking. We have repeatedly brought to the attention of the leadership of different countries, including the USA, the danger of closing ones’ eyes to its (Peking’s) true goals.”

10. Senior, retired PLA officers, oral history interviews with author, Shanghai and Beijing, China 24-26 March 2015.

11. American Embassy, Tokyo to Secretary of State, Washington, DC, Cable, “Japanese Reactions to Indochinese Developments,” March 18, 1979, National Security Affairs, Brzezinski Material Collection, Cable File–PRC/ Vietnam (1-10 February 1979 through 21 February 1979), Folder 3, Box 17, Carter Library.

12. Retired PLA Officer, oral history interview with author, 26 March 2015.

13. Retired PLA Officer, interview with author, Beijing, China, 26 March 2015.

14. Ginsburgs, *A Calendar of Soviet Treaties*, 522.

15. Womack, *China and Vietnam*, 212-218.

16. Senior retired PLA officers, interviews with author, Shanghai and Beijing, China 24-26 March 2015.

17. Senior retired PLA officers, interviews with author, Shanghai and Beijing, China 24-26 March 2015.

18. Mark A. Coyle, “The Sino-Vietnamese Crisis: 1975-1979: An Historical Case Study” (Master’s thesis, US Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 1985), 84-91. In this relevant thesis on the same subject,

the author addresses the delivery, intensity, authority, and timing with which the PRC signals its intentions before and during a crisis, both to its opponents and to a world audience.

19. The World Bank, "World Development Indicators," 14 April 2015, accessed 18 April 2015, <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/views/reports/tableview.aspx>.

20. Deng Xiaoping, "The Task of Consolidating the Army," speech at an enlarged meeting of the Standing Committee of the Military Commission of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, 14 June 1975, in *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping, Vol 2., 1975-1982* (Beijing, China: Intercultural Publishing, 2011), 14-24.

21. Xiaoping, "The Task of Consolidating the Army," 14-24.

22. Deng Xiaoping, "Streamline the Army and Raise its Combat Effectiveness," speech at an enlarged meeting of the Standing Committee of the Military Commission of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, 12 March 1980, in *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping*, 254-255.

23. Xiaoping, "Streamline the Army and Raise its Combat Effectiveness," 254-259.

24. Sam Perlo-Freeman and Carina Solmirano, *SIPRI Yearbook 2014: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2014), 188.

25. Information Office of the State Council, People's Republic of China, "The Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces," White Paper, Beijing, China, 2013, accessed 2 April 2015, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-04/16/c\\_132312681](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-04/16/c_132312681).

26. Xiaoping, "Streamline the Army and Raise its Combat Effectiveness," 259. In this speech regarding streamlining, Deng still stressed that, "In any case, political and ideological work in the army must be strengthened. At present, it is considerably weakened, and our political personnel don't know how to do their job. Actually, all military and political personnel in the army should engage in [political and ideological work]."

27. Information Office of the State Council, People's Republic of China. "The Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces."

28. Information Office of the State Council, People's Republic of China. "The Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces."

29. Colin S. Gray, "The American Way of War" in Anthony D. McIvor, *Rethinking the Principles of War* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2005), 27.

30. Michael Howard, "The Use and Abuse of Military History," *Parameters* 11, no. 1 (1981): 13-14.

31. Kissinger, *On China*, 527-528.

32. Kissinger, *On China*, 528-530.

33. Kissinger, *On China*, 528-530.

34. US President, *National Security Strategy* (Washington, DC: The White House, 2015), 3.

## Glossary

**Cultural Revolution.** Refers to the period of a social-political movement that occurred throughout China between 1966 and 1976, also known as the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (文化大革命) ordered by Mao Zedong to reassert his own stature and supplant his challengers, namely Deng Xiaoping and Liu Shaoqi. It was characterized by violent purges targeting capitalist, traditional, and anti-Maoist factions within the country. It resulted in a period of fear and social turmoil during which millions of Chinese were persecuted under false pretenses of guilt.

**Four Modernizations.** The four areas, in order of precedence, of agriculture, industry, national defense, and science and technology that Deng Xiaoping advocated for a reevaluation in order to advance the PRC in the aftermath of the Mao Zedong Era. The official launch of these four modernizations came at the 3rd Plenum of the 11th Central Committee Meeting in December 1978, but had their roots in Zhou Enlai's discourses for modernization in the 1960s.

**People's Liberation Army.** The armed forces of the PRC under the command of the Central Military Committee of the CCP. Subordinate to the PLA are the component service branches of the Ground Force, the Navy, the Air Force, the Second Artillery Corps responsible for China's nuclear arsenal, and the People's Armed Police, a civilian police force that can be used to support the defense forces in times of war.

**People's Republic of China.** This term refers to the areas claimed and governed by the CCP since its proclamation on October 1, 1949.

**Ping-Pong Diplomacy.** An exchange of professional ping-pong players from the US Table Tennis Team to Beijing at Beijing's request in April 1971 that paved the way for President Richard Nixon's visit to China the following year.

**Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT).** A series of negotiations between the Soviet Union and the United States that can be broken down further into SALT I (1969-1972) and SALT II (1972-1979). The subject of these talks revolved around nuclear arms limitations for the two Cold War superpowers, resulting in treaties that limited nuclear development and capabilities on both sides.



## **Appendix A**

### **Ancient Sino-Vietnamese Relations to the Early Nineteenth Century**

The following time period descriptions provide further background information on the Sino-Vietnamese relationship from ancient times until the early 19th Century. The history of the state of affairs between the neighboring peoples accounts for the collective memory and perception each has of the other, and the suzerain-tributary relationship that was the norm for nearly two millennia.

#### **196 BC to 1802: Ancient State Relations to the Last Vietnamese Dynasty**

Ancient state relations first began in 196 BC when the Chinese Imperial Qin dynasty recognized the kingdom of Nam Viet.<sup>1</sup> Many studies of the Chinese people, and the Chinese themselves, acknowledge that China's own pervading worldview places itself at the center of the universe. The Middle Kingdom (*Zhongguo*, 中国) rightfully rules its domain of land and peoples, while other peripheral states are subjugated at worst, and tributaries at best. In the case of Vietnam, the people fostered a nascent national sentiment, even during the period when Vietnam paid tribute to its northern neighbor.<sup>2</sup> That national sentiment led to the first revolt against the Chinese imperial rule in 40 AD, but the rebellion was no match for the Imperial Chinese forces that quickly deployed south to put down the uprising. As a result of that rebellion, China directly administered Vietnam as an imperial province and attempted to culturally assimilate its people.<sup>3</sup> Several centuries later, after the fall of the Tang Dynasty in 907 AD, the peoples of Tonkin and Annam – the two largest groups of modern-day ethnic Vietnamese, once again claimed their independence from China and resumed their status as a tributary state, albeit with centuries of Chinese cultural influence infused and adapted to their local way of life.<sup>4</sup>

The difficulty of definitively conquering or assimilating the people of Vietnam recurred during the Mongol reign of Kublai Khan's Yuan Dynasty. From 1257 to 1287, the Mongols occupied Hanoi three times, but Vietnamese resisters proved too troublesome for the Mongol empire to retain its hold. Eventually, the tributary relationship was reestablished, but Vietnamese resentment and distrust of the foreign northern overlords inevitably grew stronger.<sup>5</sup> Nearly 200 years later, in 1407, the Ming Dynasty attempted to reassert their rule in Vietnam, but faced a determined guerilla resistance led by Le Loi. Le Loi defeated the Chinese in Vietnam, declared

himself king of Annam in 1428, then quickly sought to restore normal relations with the Ming emperor. As was the case throughout their history, China and Vietnam returned to the construct of suzerainty and tributary states, respectively.<sup>6</sup> Throughout the remainder of the Ming Dynasty, the Chinese seemed less inclined to intervene in Indochina. For example, when the Annam and Champa ethnic groups fought a war for primacy, the Ming Chinese did not intervene.<sup>7</sup>

The Le Dynasty remained in independent power, paying tribute to the Chinese, until a crisis of rebellion and failed crops led to the Le emperor fleeing to China for protection in 1788. Chinese troops then assisted their beleaguered tributary family by marching to recapture Hanoi, suppress the rebellion, and restore the Le family to the throne.<sup>8</sup> Although this circumstance called for China as the suzerain state to intervene in cross-border conflict, its Grand Council ordered Chinese troops to return after reinstating the Le emperor.<sup>9</sup> This instance was in line with the historic precedents for China's strategy with regards to threats at its borders, specifically in its southern region, with those states it sees as tributaries. The Le Dynasty gave way to the warring states of Tay Son, which was ultimately defeated by the last modern dynasty, the Nguyen in 1802.

Nguyen Anh wrested control from the Tay Son, proclaimed himself emperor of the Nguyen Dynasty, took on the renowned title of *Gia Long*, and formally named the nation Vietnam. He also sought China's immediate formal investiture, and once granted, sent tribute to China throughout his rule.<sup>10</sup> The relationship of suzerain and tributary worked well, until outside pressures fractured the centuries-old construct.

## Notes

1. Anne Gilks, *The Breakdown of the Sino-Vietnamese Alliance, 1970-1979*, (Institute of East Asian Studies, 1992), 2. Gilks's book synthesizes several secondary sources that set the background for the regional conflict and driving distrust between China and Vietnam in the 20th Century.

2. Gilks, *The Breakdown of the Sino Vietnamese Alliance*, 2.

3. D.G.E. Hall, *A History of South-East Asia*, 4th ed., (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1981), 212-213.

4. William J. Duiker, *China and Vietnam: The Roots of Conflict*, Indochina Research Monograph Series No. 1, (Berkeley, CA: Institute of East Asian Studies, 1986), 4-5. In the West, at least until 1945, Vietnam was often referred to as Annam, which is a pejorative transliteration of the Chinese for "Pacified South" (安南), further indicative of the contentious Sino-Vietnamese relationship throughout history.

5. Hall, *A History of South-East Asia*, p. 216-217; Wang Gungwu, "Early Ming Relations with Southeast Asia: A Background Essay," in John King Fairbank, *World Order*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 47-48.

6. Hall, *A History of South-East Asia*, 218.

7. Wang Gungwu, "Early Ming Relations with Southeast Asia: A Background Essay," in John King Fairbank, *World Order*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 50.

8. Gilks, *The Breakdown of the Sino-Vietnamese Alliance*, 3.

9. Truong Buu Lam, "Intervention versus Tribute in Sino-Vietnamese Relations, 1788-1790," in John King Fairbank, *World Order*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 165-179.

10. Hall, *History of South-East Asia*, 454.



## **Appendix B**

### **A Brief Contextual History of Laos and Thailand**

Laos and Thailand are two countries that merit further explanation with relation to their geographic positions in South East Asia vis-à-vis China and Vietnam. This brief contextual history offers information on how these two countries influenced, but to a lesser extent than Cambodia, the security situation leading up to the 1979 Sino-Vietnam War.

Much like Vietnam, Laos served as a tributary state to imperial China. After the Second Indochina War, Laos found itself courted by both the Soviet Union and Vietnam, while China struggled to stabilize its domestic politics. By the time China was able to make offers of aid to Laos, Laos was less amenable to a trade alliance for aid because it had already accepted a large amount of economic aid from the Soviet Union and Vietnam. Vietnam achieved success and brought Laos into its camp by consolidating its economic relations with the landlocked country and offering free aid and passage to the sea, which freed Laos of its dependence on Thailand.<sup>1</sup> In 1977, also as a countermove to Chinese influence, the Soviet Union provided a two million-ruble loan and delivered goods that were originally scheduled to arrive in 1980.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Vietnamese leaders Le Duan and Pham Van Dong signed a Treaty of Friendship during a visit to Laos in July of 1977, bringing about closer military ties between the two countries.<sup>3</sup>

China perceived that the Vietnamese-Laos relationship was also indicative of a growing Soviet influence in the Indochinese bloc, which the Chinese would actively seek to counter. In an attempt to use their position between rival powers to Laos's advantage, General Secretary Kaysone of Laos also visited Beijing in 1977, but China apparently offered no additional economic assistance.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, China's internal political turmoil throughout the 1970s made it difficult to court Laos, especially at a time when the Vietnamese enjoyed their role as a regional contender and began to exercise that influence on its neighbors. As the increase in Vietnamese troop presence in Laos became overwhelming, the Chinese reluctantly allowed Hanoi to exercise suzerainty over Vientiane. To China, Thailand and Cambodia looked like more viable options to curbing the spread of Vietnamese influence.

Starting in 1975, after Vietnam's reunification, China employed a strategy of strengthening relationships with Thailand and Cambodia to ensure the balance of regional power remained in its favor. In Thailand,

China sought to strengthen relations with the non-Communist Khukrit government in order to curb Vietnamese influence. Thailand, as a charter member of ASEAN, was in a unique position that China could see as a buffer to Soviet influence in the region. Thailand, also eager to improve regional relations while remaining neutral to the prospect of conflict, announced in March 1975 that it would establish diplomatic relations with China, while seeking closure of US bases within a year.<sup>5</sup> At the time, Thailand had no interest in conflict with Vietnam, but it did see a convergence of interests with China to contain Vietnam's regional influence. A Xinhua News Agency official observed that the Vietnamese should be considered Thailand's main threat.<sup>6</sup> The North Vietnamese had encouraged insurgent attacks against the Thai government, and a weakened Thailand would spell further trouble for the PRC's ideal Indochina security structure. In addition, the Vietnamese condemned the Thais for enabling US bases in Thailand, as well as harboring Laotian and Vietnamese refugees.<sup>7</sup> China understood the need to diplomatically counter Vietnam where it could, and by seeking warmer relations with Thailand – a nation also friendly to the United States – China could concentrate its arguments and struggle against Vietnam's encroachment in Cambodia.

China succeeded in identifying Vietnam as a common enemy with Thailand, the only ASEAN country with vulnerable land borders in Indochina, thus allowing China to concentrate its defensive efforts on the Vietnamese in Cambodia. Maintaining its supportive relationship with the Khmer Rouge came with international repercussions, but not to a level intolerable to China's grand strategy. At the time, China faced international criticism for its relationship with Pol Pot's Cambodia, as the latter carried out excesses tantamount to genocide of sectors of its own population despite international condemnation.

## Notes

1. Ross, *The Indochina Tangle*, 123.
2. Ross, *The Indochina Tangle*, 119.
3. Ross, *The Indochina Tangle*, 124.
4. Ross, *The Indochina Tangle*, 125.
5. Gilks, *The Breakdown of the Sino-Vietnamese Alliance*, 144-145.
6. Lawson, *The Sino-Vietnamese Conflict*, 308-309.
7. Lawson, *The Sino-Vietnamese Conflict*, 309.



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