



## Revisiting the Termination of the Sino–Vietnamese Alliance, 1975–1979\*

Nicholas Khoo

Department of Politics, University of Otago, NZ  
nkk4@caa.columbia.edu

---

### Abstract

This article argues that Vietnamese co-operation with China's principal enemy, the Soviet Union, was the necessary and sufficient cause for the termination of China's alliance with Vietnam in the second-half of the 1970's.

### Keywords

Principal enemy theory; Sino–Soviet conflict; Sino–Vietnamese alliance

From the 1950s through the early 1970s, the Chinese and Vietnamese communists shared a common ideology and a strategic interest in opposing American containment policy in Asia.<sup>1</sup> During this period, relations were sufficiently close that Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh characterised the Chinese and Vietnamese communists as 'comrades plus brothers' (*tongzhi jia xiongdi*).<sup>2</sup> By all accounts, Ho's characterisation of bilateral relations was an accurate one. At a

---

<sup>1</sup> The contents of this article will also appear in a book written by the author, to be published by Columbia University Press in February 2011. Used by arrangement with the publisher.

<sup>1</sup> Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950–1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Robert Blum, *Drawing the Line: The Origins of American Containment Policy in East Asia* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1982).

<sup>2</sup> Yunnansheng Dongnanya yanjiusuo Kunming junqu zhengzhibu lianluobu, *Xiandai Zhong Yue guanxishi ziliao xuanbian* (Selected References on Contemporary Sino–Vietnamese Relations), Vol. 4 (Kunming: Yunnan Dongnanya yanjiusuo, 1984), p. 932. According to Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam's relations with China were marked by 'deep affection (since they are comrades and brothers)', '*Yue Zhong qing yi shen, tongzhi jia xiongdi*', cited in Du Dunyan and Zhao Heman (eds), *Yunnan Laowo Jianpuzhai shouce* (Handbook on Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia) (Beijing: Shishi Chubanshe, 1988), p. 102.

time when China was strapped for resources, Beijing made a significant financial contribution to the Vietnamese communists' war efforts, first against the French, and then the Americans.<sup>3</sup> Chinese estimates place the total value of Beijing's economic and military aid to their Vietnamese allies during the 1949–1978 period at approximately US\$ 20 billion.<sup>4</sup> However, with the onset of the Second Indochina War or Vietnam War (1965–1975), the Sino–Vietnamese alliance relationship began to deteriorate, culminating in a border war in 1979. The former allies were about to begin a period of confrontation that was to end only in 1991, and became known as the Third Indochina War.

The termination of the Sino–Vietnamese alliance and subsequent border war of 1979 was a pivotal development during the Cold War, at once reflecting and deepening divisions within the communist bloc. However, the fundamental cause of these developments remains a continuing source of debate among area studies specialists, historians and political scientists who study the Cold War. This article seeks an answer to the following question: Why did the seemingly close alliance between Beijing and Hanoi degenerate from close co-operation to intense conflict? In examining these developments, it will be argued that the fundamental cause for the intense conflict in Sino–Vietnamese relations lay in developments within the Sino–Soviet relationship. In this respect, the *de facto* termination of the Sino–Soviet alliance in the early 1960s set the stage for an intense competition between Beijing and Moscow that was played out on a global scale.<sup>5</sup> As the Sino–Soviet conflict increased, both sides competed for influence over their Vietnamese comrades in Hanoi. With the gradual strengthening of the Soviet–Vietnamese relationship during the course of the Second Indochina War (1965–1975), an attendant increase of conflict occurred in Sino–Vietnamese relations. The final straw for the Chinese came in the post-1975 era, with the signing of the Soviet–Vietnamese alliance in November 1978. When the Vietnamese subsequently invaded, with the aim of overthrowing the Chinese-aligned Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia, the

---

<sup>3</sup> The protagonists in the First Indochina War (1946–1954) were the Vietnamese communists and the French. The Second Indochina War (1965–1975) primarily involved the Vietnamese communists, the Americans and their South Vietnamese allies.

<sup>4</sup> Du and Zhao (eds), *Yuenan Laowo Jianpuzhai shouce*, p. 109. See also Qu Xing, *Zhongguo waijiao wushinian* (Fifty Years of Chinese Diplomacy) (Nanjing: Jiangsu Renmin Chubanshe, 2000), pp. 417–418.

<sup>5</sup> An examination of Sino–Soviet rivalry in different regions of the world can be found in Herbert Ellison (ed.), *The Sino–Soviet Conflict* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982).

Chinese viewed that act as a *casus belli*. Chinese retaliation was swift, if less than sure. The border war of February 1979 extracted a heavy toll in terms of deaths and casualties on both sides.

That said, why should we be interested in another study of the interactions between China, the Soviet Union and Vietnam? This article seeks to make two contributions to the existing literature. The first contribution lies in the evaluation of existing explanations for Sino–Vietnamese conflict, and the proposal of a distinct causal mechanism to explain the termination of the Sino–Vietnamese alliance. Here, it is argued that increasing Sino–Soviet conflict caused an increase in Soviet co-operation with the Vietnamese communists, which in turn caused an increase in Sino–Vietnamese conflict. Scholars writing during the Cold War, but with limited access to Chinese sources, argued that the Sino–Soviet conflict of the late 1950s and early 1960s had a significant impact on China’s foreign relations.<sup>6</sup> In this view, the conflict transformed the Soviet Union from a close ally into the central threat facing China. Consequently, China viewed its relations with the Vietnamese communists primarily through a Soviet prism. As the Soviet Union and the Vietnamese communists increased co-operation during the period of the Vietnam War, an attendant increase in Sino–Vietnamese conflict occurred, eventually leading to a rupture in relations in the 1978–1979 period. In contrast, the recent literature on China’s foreign relations that has had the benefit of greater access to Chinese sources has tended to minimise the centrality of the Soviet factor in Chinese Cold War-era foreign policy. Representative of this trend in the literature are a number of relatively recent and important studies, by Chen Jian,<sup>7</sup> Qiang Zhai<sup>8</sup> and Nguyen T. Lien-hang.<sup>9</sup> These studies, while not ignoring the Soviet factor,

---

<sup>6</sup> The classic work on Sino–Soviet relations prior to the termination of the alliance is Donald Zagoria, *The Sino–Soviet Conflict, 1956–1961* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962). For an account that places the conflict within the broader context of the Soviet bloc see Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Soviet Bloc: Unity and Conflict*, second edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967). More recent studies include: Odd Arne Westad (ed.), *Brothers in Arms: The Rise and Fall of the Sino–Soviet Alliance, 1945–1963* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1998); Lorenz M. Luthi, *The Sino–Soviet Split* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> Chen Jian, *Mao’s China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

<sup>8</sup> Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*.

<sup>9</sup> Nguyen T. Lien-hang, ‘The Sino–Vietnamese split and the Indochina War, 1968–1975’, in Sophie Quinn-Judge and Odd Arne Westad (eds), *The Third Indochina War: Conflict Between China, Vietnam and Cambodia, 1972–1979* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 12.

have in effect de-emphasised its centrality in Beijing's foreign policy, and more specifically, its policy towards the Vietnamese communists.

Drawing on existing English sources and Chinese-language sources, this article presents a contrary view to the one expressed in the recent literature on Chinese Cold War foreign policy. Specifically, it will be argued that the threat represented by the Soviet Union was the central and over-riding concern of Chinese foreign policy-makers, a fact that was strongly reflected in Sino–Vietnamese relations. In effect, increasing Sino–Soviet conflict following the Sino–Soviet split of the early 1960s provided the critical context for an increase in Soviet co-operation with the Vietnamese communists, and was the fundamental cause of the cracks in the Sino–Vietnamese alliance that were to manifest themselves more fully in the period following the end of the Vietnam War, eventually resulting in the Sino–Vietnamese War of 1979 and the Third Indochina War (1979–1991).

### Principal Enemy Theory

The above-mentioned emphasis on the Soviet Union as the fundamental cause of the termination of the Sino–Vietnamese alliance relates directly to this article's second intended contribution to the literature, which is to add depth to an already existing theory of Chinese foreign policy known as 'principal enemy' theory. The core insight of the principal enemy approach, that 'the friend of my enemy is my enemy', was originally put forward by Peter Van Ness in 1970. This perspective posits that Chinese policy towards any particular state during the Cold War is a function of that state's relationship with what Beijing considers to be its principal enemy, rather than ideological criteria.<sup>10</sup> Other analysts have utilised the principal enemy approach in studies of specific bilateral relationships involving China during the Cold War. J.D. Armstrong has adopted this perspective in examining China's relations with Cambodia, Indonesia, Pakistan and Tanzania.<sup>11</sup> David Mozingo has used it in his analysis of China's relations with Indonesia,<sup>12</sup> while Melvin Gurtov has studied China's relations with

---

<sup>10</sup> See Peter Van Ness, *Revolution and Chinese Foreign Policy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), p. 65.

<sup>11</sup> J.D. Armstrong, *Revolutionary Diplomacy: Chinese Foreign Policy and the United Front Doctrine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), p. 36.

<sup>12</sup> David Mozingo, *Chinese Policy Toward Indonesia, 1949–1967* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976).

Burma, Cambodia and Thailand.<sup>13</sup> We will apply the logic of this argument to China's relations with the Soviet Union and North Vietnam. In essence, the article will attempt to demonstrate how Vietnam, by aligning itself with China's principal enemy the Soviet Union, became China's secondary enemy. In this respect, it represents an attempt to look at the entire period from 1975 to 1979, systematically arguing the principal enemy thesis in social scientific terms. Alternative explanations are investigated (in the next section).<sup>14</sup>

### Contending Explanations for Sino–Vietnamese Alliance Conflict

There are two broad explanations that can be used to explain conflict in, and the eventual termination of, the Sino–Vietnamese alliance. The first explanation focuses on specific bilateral issues as the basic cause of Sino–Vietnamese conflict. The second type of explanation focuses on China's principal enemy during the second half of the Cold War, the Soviet Union.

#### 1. *Specific Bilateral Issues as Causes of Sino–Vietnamese Conflict*

The first explanation for conflict in the Sino–Vietnamese alliance locates the cause in disputes over bilateral issues within the Sino–Vietnamese relationship. In this respect, any one of three issues has been emphasised in the literature: conflict over the Chinese Diaspora in Vietnam; Sino–Vietnamese border disputes; and the frictions generated in Sino–Vietnamese relations by Mao's ideologically based cultural ethno-centrism.

Porter and Loescher argue that the failure of the Sino–Vietnamese alliance was a consequence of disagreements over the treatment of the ethnic Chinese community in Vietnam.<sup>15</sup> The mass expulsions of Vietnamese with Chinese ethnic origins certainly strained bilateral relations. However, this appears to have been an exacerbating factor rather than a fundamental cause of bilateral conflict. An examination of the timing of Beijing's decision to raise the Chinese

---

<sup>13</sup> Melvin Gurtov, *China and Southeast Asia: The Politics of Survival* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971).

<sup>14</sup> In this respect, principal enemy theory is pitted against a bilateral theory of Sino–Vietnamese relations.

<sup>15</sup> Gareth Porter, 'Vietnamese policy and the Indochina crisis', in David W.P. Elliot (ed.), *The Third Indochina Conflict* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1981), pp. 101–105; G.D. Loescher, 'The Sino–Vietnamese dispute in historical perspective', *Survey*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (1979), pp. 125–141.

Diaspora issue with the Vietnamese leadership supports this conclusion. The exodus of ethnic Chinese from Vietnam began as early as spring 1977, yet Beijing took action only a year later, when relations had reached a crisis point. This time-lag suggests that a state's broader political relationship with China matters more to Beijing than how the overseas ethnic Chinese are treated by their own government.

In this respect, one can contrast Beijing's reaction to the persecution of ethnic Chinese in Cambodia and Vietnam. The Chinese Diaspora in Cambodia was treated in a particularly egregious manner, being subject to mass killings by the Khmer Rouge. Yet the Chinese government did absolutely nothing to protest against, let alone alleviate, their plight. The reason for China's decision to ignore the ethnic Chinese factor in Sino–Cambodian relations, but to emphasise it in Sino–Vietnamese relations, is geo-political in nature. Simply put, Phnom Penh was a supportive ally, while Hanoi was seen by Beijing as an emerging threat to its national security.

Another issue cited as the cause of Sino–Vietnamese conflict concerns bilateral border disputes. Chang Pao-min has posited that land and maritime border disputes were responsible for the deterioration of Sino–Vietnamese relations.<sup>16</sup> Again, territorial disputes appear to be a symptom rather than the cause of conflict in Sino–Vietnamese relations. With respect to the maritime border issue, as early as 1974 Sino–Vietnamese disputes had emerged over the sovereignty of the Paracel Islands. On the issue of the land border issue, according to Beijing, Hanoi allegedly perpetrated over 2,000 border violations from 1975 to 1977.<sup>17</sup> However, only in the later part of 1977 and 1978, when Vietnam moved into closer alignment with Moscow, did the Chinese publicly raise the land and maritime border issues as point of contention in bilateral relations, and publicly threaten the Vietnamese.

The more recent literature on Sino–Vietnamese relations has emphasised a different sort of explanation that, while also essentially bilateral in nature, focuses on a non-material cause, specifically ideology. In a recent and influential work on Chinese Cold War-era foreign policy that deals with the Sino–Vietnamese alliance, Chen Jian finds a focus on the Soviet Union to be a less than compelling explanatory tool for analysing Chinese foreign policy

---

<sup>16</sup> Chang Pao-min, 'The Sino–Vietnamese territorial dispute', *Asia-Pacific Community*, No. 8 (Spring 1980), pp. 1508.

<sup>17</sup> Huang Guoan *et al.*, *Zhong Yue guanxi shijianbian* (Concise History of Sino–Vietnamese Relations) (Guangxi: Guangxi Renmin Chubanshe, 1986), p. 257.

during this period.<sup>18</sup> He notes that: ‘One may refer to the escalating Sino–Soviet confrontation, which made the maintenance of solidarity between Beijing and Hanoi extremely difficult.’<sup>19</sup> Instead, for Chen, frictions in Sino–Vietnamese relations developed primarily as a result of Mao’s pursuit of an ideologically based foreign policy of revolution promotion.<sup>20</sup> These frictions were transformed into a serious source of conflict as a result of the Chinese leadership’s insistence on viewing Sino–Vietnamese relations through the prism of a culturally determined and ethnocentric Central Kingdom–vassal relationship.<sup>21</sup> Chen argues that Chinese leaders’ search for ‘Vietnamese recognition of China’s morally superior position’, and specifically, ‘a modern version of the relationship between the Central Kingdom and its subordinate neighbours’ set in train a process that led to ‘the final collapse of the [Sino–Vietnamese] alliance between brotherly comrades’.<sup>22</sup>

Two issues merit comment. First, by focusing so heavily on developments on the Chinese side of the Sino–Vietnamese relationship to explain conflict in Sino–Vietnamese relations, Chen has arguably minimised the critically important role of the Soviet Union. This is not to minimise the tensions in Sino–Vietnamese relations which Chen describes. Rather, it is to argue that these tensions would have been kept in check if not for the Soviet Union’s role in Sino–Vietnamese relations, and to emphasise the centrality of the Soviet factor in Sino–Vietnamese relations. Second, and more generally, notwithstanding Chen’s emphasis on ideology as a more solid basis for understanding the dynamics of Chinese Cold War-era foreign policy, it is not clear that this is indeed the case. Since Chen’s work is arguably the key text to appear on China’s Cold War foreign relations in the last decade, an extended comment is necessary. Chen contends that a basic change in Beijing’s ideological evaluation of American and Soviet imperialism allowed the Sino–American rapprochement to occur.<sup>23</sup> In this interpretation, after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968, Beijing viewed the Soviet Union as the leading imperialist in world politics and the United States as the number two imperialist. This allowed the Sino–American rapprochement to occur.<sup>24</sup> Was the rapprochement

---

<sup>18</sup>) Chen, *Mao’s China*, pp. 239, 241.

<sup>19</sup>) *Ibid.*, p. 236.

<sup>20</sup>) *Ibid.*, pp. 6–10, 236–237.

<sup>21</sup>) *Ibid.*, pp. 236–237.

<sup>22</sup>) *Ibid.*, p. 237.

<sup>23</sup>) *Ibid.*, p. 243.

<sup>24</sup>) *Ibid.*

caused primarily by developments in the ideational realm? To answer that question, we need to clarify what caused the Chinese to see the Soviets as greater imperialists. Was it the nature of Soviet social-imperialism, or was it something more basic, such as the material threat presented by the Soviet Union and, in particular, the Maoist regime's fear of being overthrown by the Soviets (as will be argued below)? It somewhat weakens Chen's argument that, by his own admission,<sup>25</sup> the Chinese had viewed the Soviets as imperialists since the early 1960s, when the Sino–Soviet split occurred. It was only in August 1968, after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia and Moscow's subsequent announcement justifying military intervention in other socialist states, that the Chinese denounced the Soviet Union as a socialist-imperialist state. In other words, only when the Soviet Union became a strategic, as opposed to merely an ideological, threat did the Chinese communists declare their Soviet counterparts as their number one adversary.

A further point concerns Chen's argument that there was a 'deeper'<sup>26</sup> cause for the Sino–American rapprochement. Chen argues the case for the causal role of ideology in explaining the Sino–American rapprochement when he contends that:

in terms of the relations between ideology and security concerns the Sino–American rapprochement was less a case in which ideological beliefs yielded to the security interests than one in which ideology, as an essential element in shaping foreign policy decisions, experienced subtle structural changes as a result of the fading status of Mao's continuous revolution.<sup>27</sup>

Yet, at another point in the analysis, it is clear that for Chen, ideology's role is important in the rapprochement precisely because its role in Chinese domestic and foreign policy has been substantially *reduced*. Thus, Chen Jian argues that: 'In a deeper sense, Beijing was able to pursue a rapprochement with Washington because, for the first time in the PRC's history, Mao's continuous revolution was losing momentum.'<sup>28</sup> If it was the decline of ideology and resultant conduct of bilateral relations on the basis of national interest that led to the Sino–American rapprochement, it is not clear how different Chen's argument is from a basic realist understanding of this development that he sets out to critique.

---

<sup>25</sup>) Ibid.

<sup>26</sup>) Ibid., p. 242.

<sup>27</sup>) Ibid.

<sup>28</sup>) Ibid., p. 243.



In the conclusion to his study of Sino–Vietnamese relations from 1950 to 1975, Qiang Zhai suggests that specific variables at the individual, domestic and international level of analysis explain Beijing’s relations with the Vietnamese communists, and Chinese foreign policy more generally. Thus, the author argues that ‘the centrality of Mao’s ideas, visions and aspirations’<sup>29</sup> must be recognised. Also important is the ‘close linkage between Mao’s domestic politics and international policy’.<sup>30</sup> On a more theoretical note, the author posits that the deterioration in Sino–Vietnamese relations during the Vietnam War can be characterised as an instance of Glenn Snyder’s theory of an alliance security dilemma.<sup>31</sup> Zhai also acknowledges the importance of ‘Mao’s preoccupation with the Soviet factor in the making of China’s foreign policy’.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, in a recent study of the collapse of the Sino–Vietnamese alliance, Nguyen posits that a variety of variables at the individual, domestic, regional and international level of analysis explain Beijing’s relations with the Vietnamese communists.<sup>33</sup> The variety of factors used to analyse Sino–Vietnamese relations has its benefits: one appreciates the inter-linkages and complexity immanent in this bilateral relationship. However, the cumulative effect of the proliferation of variables is that there is a minimisation of the centrality of the Soviet factor in Sino–Vietnamese relations.

## 2. *Principal Enemy Theory and Sino–Vietnamese Conflict*

The second broad theory explaining conflict in the Sino–Vietnamese alliance emphasises the critical role played by a ‘principal enemy’, namely the Soviet Union. There are three variants of this theory in the literature. Building on Van Ness’ research, Robert Ross utilises the concept of a principal enemy to explain conflict in the Sino–Vietnamese alliance.<sup>34</sup> Ross argues that increasing Chinese concern for Vietnam’s co-operation with the Soviet Union’s policy towards China (from 1975 to 1979) caused the deterioration, and finally the

---

<sup>29</sup> Zhai., *China and the Vietnam Wars*, p. 221.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 221.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 218–219.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 222.

<sup>33</sup> Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, pp. 221–222; Nguyen T. Lien-hang, ‘The Sino–Vietnamese split and the Indochina War, 1968–1975’, in Westad and Quinn-Judge (eds), *Third Indochina War*, p. 12.

<sup>34</sup> Robert Ross, *The Indochina Tangle: China’s Vietnam Policy, 1975–1979* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 9.

termination, of the Sino–Vietnamese alliance.<sup>35</sup> One major methodological point needs to be made concerning Ross’s account which, since its publication in the 1980s, has rightfully served as the authoritative text on Sino–Vietnamese relations in the 1975–1979 period. The dependent variable in his study is the transition from co-operation to conflict in Sino–Vietnamese relations after the end of the Vietnam War in 1975. However, this bilateral relationship was quite conflictual before 1975. Doubts are therefore raised about Ross’ selection of only the post-1975 period for his study. This is particularly the case since John Garver has used a variety of Chinese language sources to make the argument that Sino–Vietnamese relations had already deteriorated in the 1970–1973 period, in tandem with Sino–US rapprochement in the early 1970s.<sup>36</sup> While Ross presents a convincing case for this period, he does not examine what happens when China’s concern for Vietnam’s Soviet policy decreases. Doing so would have strengthened the argument. Since I will be examining only the 1975–1979 period in this article, it is also vulnerable to the same criticism. This study does differ from Ross’ in that it uses a larger number of Chinese sources that were not available when he wrote his study in 1988.<sup>37</sup> That said, it must

---

<sup>35</sup> Ross, *Indochina Tangle*, pp. 12, 245.

<sup>36</sup> John Garver, ‘Sino–Vietnamese conflict and Sino–American rapprochement’, *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 96, No. 3 (1981), pp. 445–464; John Garver, *China’s Decision for Rapprochement with the United States, 1968–1971* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1982). Additionally, basing his argument on Russian archival material obtained after the Soviet Union collapsed and hence unavailable to Ross, Steven Morris makes a strong case that Hanoi had already begun to tilt towards the Soviet Union in the late 1960s. Steven Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia: Political Culture and the Causes of War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), pp. 143–166.

<sup>37</sup> Xie Yixian (ed.), *Zhongguo dangdai waijiaoshi, 1949–2001* (Contemporary Chinese Diplomatic History, 1949–2001) (Beijing: Zhongguo Qingnian Chubanshe, 2002); Xu Xiaotian et al., *Xin Zhongguo yu Sulian de gaoceng wanglai (Shang, Xia)* (High-level Exchanges Between New China and the Soviet Union) (Changchun: Jilin Renmin Chubanshe, 2001); Wang Taiping (ed.), *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo waijiaoshi, 1970–1978* (The Diplomatic History of the People’s Republic of China, 1970–1978) (Beijing: Shijie Zhishi Chubanshe, 1999); Guo Ming (ed.), *Zhong Yue guanxi yanbian sishinian* (Forty Years of Evolving Sino–Vietnamese Relations) (Nanning: Guangxi Renmin Chubanshe, 1992); Du Dunyan and Zhao Heman (eds), *Yuenan Laowo Jianpuzhai shouce*; Chengdu Junqu zhengzhibu lianluobu Yunnan sheng kekuan Dongnan Yanjiusuo (ed.), *Yenan wenti zhiliao xuanbian, 1975–1986* (Compilation of Selected References on the Vietnam Question, 1975–1986), Vol. 1–2 (Beijing: Shishi Chubanshe, 1987); Huang Wen Huan, *Canghai yisu: Huang Wenhuan geming huiyi lu* (A Drop in the Ocean: The Revolutionary Memoirs of Huang Wenhuan) (Beijing: Jiefangjun Chubanshe, 1987); Guo Ming, Luo Fangming and Li Baiyin (eds), *Xiandai*

be acknowledged that, however convincing, any study of a single time-period, needs to be supplemented by further studies that examine other time periods in China's relations with the Vietnamese and Soviet communists.

A second variant of principal enemy theory is offered by Eugene Lawson. Lawson argues that China and Vietnam's respective policies towards the United States and the Soviet Union were significant in influencing Sino–Vietnamese relations from 1965 to 1975.<sup>38</sup> Ultimately, the Chinese sought rapprochement with the US and the Vietnamese sought closer ties with the Soviets.<sup>39</sup> This dynamic proved incompatible with an amicable alliance relationship since the Chinese viewed the Vietnamese as supporting their adversary the Soviet Union. The key issue with this work is its over-emphasis on chronicling Beijing and Hanoi's respective relations with Moscow and Washington and a corresponding lack of examination of Sino–Vietnamese relations themselves.<sup>40</sup> The neglect of systematic analysis of this bilateral relationship means that Lawson is unable to convincingly argue his contention that differing Sino–Vietnamese attitudes towards the US were a particularly important cause of Sino–Vietnamese conflict.<sup>41</sup>

A third variant of principal enemy theory can be seen in Anne Gilks' analysis of developments in the Sino–Vietnamese alliance from 1970 to 1979.<sup>42</sup> For Gilks, the Sino–Vietnamese relationship in the 1970s operated within the broader context of Sino–Vietnamese–Soviet relations, and the tensions that accompanied the Sino–Soviet split of the early 1960s. According to Gilks, China feared a consolidation of Vietnam's relations with Beijing's enemy, the Soviet Union. This generated intensifying security dilemma dynamics<sup>43</sup> in

---

*Zhong Yue guanxi ziliao xuanbian*, 1949–1978 (Selected Compilation on Contemporary Sino–Vietnamese Relations, 1949–1978) (Shang, Zhong, Xia) (Beijing: Shishi Chubanshe, 1986); Huang Guoan *et al.*, *Zhong Yue guanxi shijianbian* (Guangxi: Guangxi Renmin Chubanshe, 1986); Yunnansheng Dongnanya yanjiusuo Kunming junqu zhengzhibu lianluobu, *Xiandai Zhong Yue guanxishi ziliao xuanbian* (Selected References on Contemporary Sino–Vietnamese Relations), Vol. 1–7 (Kunming: Yunnan Dongnanya Yanjiusuo, 1984).

<sup>38</sup> Eugene Lawson, *The Sino–Vietnamese Conflict* (New York: Praeger, 1984), p. 6.

<sup>39</sup> Lawson, *Sino–Vietnamese Conflict*, pp. 6–7.

<sup>40</sup> Robert Ross, 'Book review of *The Sino–Vietnamese Conflict*', *China Quarterly*, No. 104 (December 1985), pp. 728–729.

<sup>41</sup> Lawson, *Sino–Vietnamese Conflict*, p. 305.

<sup>42</sup> Anne Gilks, *The Breakdown of the Sino–Vietnamese Alliance, 1970–1979* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, 1992), pp. 4, 7–8.

<sup>43</sup> The point of departure for security dilemma theory is that states operate in an anarchical international environment where there is no international sovereign. Because states cannot

Sino–Vietnamese relations, particularly when post-1975 frictions began to develop between the Chinese–aligned Cambodia and Vietnam.<sup>44</sup> In this perspective, both Hanoi and Beijing perceived their basic security interests to be incompatible. Hanoi saw control over Cambodia as necessary to guarantee its security. For its part, Beijing perceived a pro-Chinese Cambodia as fundamental to thwarting a Soviet policy which used Vietnam as a tool to encircle China and undermine its security.

The analysis that follows is similar to Gilks' in its identification of incompatible security goals as the key to understanding the disintegration of the Sino–Vietnamese alliance. That said, there are two important differences. First, as reflected in the discussion of Ross' work above, this work draws on a wider variety of English and non-English sources, most of which were available only after Gilks' book was published in 1992. Second, this study differs from Gilks' in terms of its theoretical aims. Gilks' study is concerned with demonstrating the relevance of the concept of a security dilemma to the Sino–Soviet–Vietnamese triangular relationship. This study adopts a broader theoretical agenda in examining the utility of realist principal enemy theory and constructivist-based explanations that focus on ideology (see discussion of Chen Jian's work above) for the termination of the Sino–Vietnamese alliance.

### Sino–Soviet Conflict in the Post-1975 Era

The perceived American failure in Vietnam had significant immediate (if at times unintended) effects on world politics. One particularly important immediate effect was its contribution to a more assertive Soviet foreign policy during the 1975–1979 period. Soviet assertiveness was reflected most prominently in three spheres: the Soviet military threat to China; Soviet policy towards the Third World, and Soviet–US relations. Increasingly, the Chinese feared that lack of American response to Soviet gains in all these areas would allow Moscow to consolidate a favourable international position and punish China

---

be certain that others do not have aggressive intentions, they will take the necessary measures to defend themselves. These defensive actions are perceived by other states as being offensive in nature, causing them to react by building up their military capabilities. In the process of attempting to bolster their security, a 'spiral' effect of escalating conflict is created and perpetuated. Ultimately, all states feel more insecure. Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), pp. 58–113.

<sup>44</sup> Gilks, *Breakdown*, p. 8.

for its opposition to Soviet policy. The result of Soviet actions, and attendant on Chinese alarm at them, was an escalation of Sino–Soviet conflict. We shall examine these dynamics.

### *Soviet Strategic Deployments in the Russian Far East*

The Soviet threat to China in the post-1975 period was reflected starkly in the military sphere. Over the course of the Sino–Soviet conflict, there was a significant increase in Soviet military capabilities in the Russian Far East. At the outset of the conflict in 1964, the Soviets had an estimated dozen under-strength divisions in that region.<sup>45</sup> This situation was to change. The most significant aspect of the Soviet build-up was the deployment of several Soviet divisions on the Sino–Mongolian border by 1967, a development made possible by the Soviet–Mongolian alliance treaty of 1966.<sup>46</sup> Subsequently, there was a rapid expansion of Soviet forces in the period after the 1969 border clashes.<sup>47</sup> Between 1969 and 1972, the deployment of Soviet forces along the Sino–Soviet and Sino–Mongolian border doubled from 21 divisions to 45.<sup>48</sup> A slowdown in the quantitative aspect of the Soviet build-up subsequently occurred from 1973 to 1977.<sup>49</sup> During this period, the emphasis was on upgrading Soviet forces and strengthening alliances with other states on China’s periphery. In 1976, the Chinese and the Soviets each had approximately 300,000 men deployed on their border.<sup>50</sup>

While there was a rough numerical equality in conventional forces, the Soviets were overwhelmingly superior to the Chinese in terms of tactical and strategic nuclear forces.<sup>51</sup> In 1975, China had approximately 430 operational nuclear

---

<sup>45</sup> William Hyland, ‘The Sino–Soviet conflict: the search for new strategies’, in Richard Solomon (ed.), *Asian Security in the 1980s: Problems and Policies for a Time of Transition* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 1979), p. 40.

<sup>46</sup> Thomas Robinson, ‘China confronts the Soviet Union’, in John King Fairbank and Roderick MacFarquhar (eds), *The Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 15 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 257.

<sup>47</sup> Harry Gelman, *The Soviet Far East Buildup and Soviet Risk Taking Against China* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 1982), p. vii.

<sup>48</sup> Robert Ross, *Negotiating Cooperation: The United States and China, 1969–1989* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 24.

<sup>49</sup> Gelman, *The Soviet Far East*, p. 65.

<sup>50</sup> See table detailing conventional force levels in Robinson, *China confronts*, p. 297.

<sup>51</sup> See table detailing nuclear force levels in *ibid.*, pp. 300–301.

delivery vehicles, compared to the Soviet total of 4,735.<sup>52</sup> Although Moscow had to utilise the majority of these in deterring Washington, the discrepancy between the two sides was still sufficiently large for the Russians to inflict catastrophic damage on the Chinese.<sup>53</sup> Beginning in 1978, there was a further bolstering of the Soviet military posture directed against China.<sup>54</sup> That year, the Soviets deployed the SS-20 Intermediate Range Ballistic Missiles (IRBM) for the first time in Soviet Far East.<sup>55</sup> The SS-20 was a major improvement over the SS-4 and SS-5 missiles it replaced in the Far East.<sup>56</sup> Unlike its predecessors, the SS-20 was mobile, improving its survivability. Its maximum range of 5,000 kilometres was an improvement over the SS-5 (at 4,100 kilometres) and the SS-4 (at 2,000 kilometres).<sup>57</sup> Significantly, each SS-20 missile had three multiple, independently targetable re-entry vehicle (MIRV) warheads. As a result, the number of Soviet IRBMs warheads in the Far East increased markedly. A further aspect of improvement in Soviet strategic deployments against China in its Far East region related to the Backfire bomber.<sup>58</sup> This bomber was able to perform nuclear, conventional, anti-shipping and reconnaissance missions. Its combat radius, at 5,500 kilometres, was nearly twice that of its predecessor, the Blinder.<sup>59</sup> Significantly, this afforded the Soviets the capability to reach targets in all of China, Northeast Asia, most of Southeast Asia, and parts of North America. Additionally, the threat posed from Soviet fighter aircraft was the culmination of a six-fold increase in that category of Soviet capabilities from 1965 (210 aircraft) to 1978 (1,200 aircraft).<sup>60</sup> Moreover, from the mid-1960s through to the late 1970s the Soviets had focused on improving the operational capabilities of the Soviet Pacific fleet.<sup>61</sup>

The Soviets were not averse to brandishing their capabilities to intimidate the Chinese. In April 1978, Soviet leader Brezhnev and Defence Minister Usti-

---

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Gelman, *Soviet Far East Buildup*, pp. 75–78.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> J.J. Martin, 'Thinking about the nuclear balance in Asia', in Richard Solomon and Masataka Kosaka (eds), *The Soviet Far East Military Buildup: Nuclear Dilemmas and Asian Security* (Dover, MA: Auburn House, 1986), p. 62.

<sup>57</sup> Martin, *Thinking about the nuclear balance in Asia*.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., pp. 63–65.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>60</sup> Paul F. Langer, 'Soviet military power in Asia', in Donald Zagoria (ed.), *Soviet Policy in East Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 269.

<sup>61</sup> Langer, *Soviet military power*, pp. 269–270.

nov made a prominent visit to Khabarovsk and Vladivostok.<sup>62</sup> Disturbingly, from the Chinese perspective, Brezhnev witnessed military exercises that were modelled on a Sino–Soviet war. At the same time, a particularly large Soviet joint military operation involving air force, naval and marine units was conducted in Northeast Asia waters.<sup>63</sup> By 1979, a re-organisation of the Soviet military command structure was effected for the Soviet Far East region. A highly publicised Soviet military exercise in Mongolia in spring 1979 served to emphasise the Soviet military threat to China.<sup>64</sup> In an important sense, the developments of spring 1979 represented the culmination of a broader strategy of Soviet encirclement directed against China.

### *The Soviet Union and the Third World*

The direct threat posed to China by the Soviet Union was supplemented by another kind of threat: Soviet success in the Third World. The Vietnamese communists' take-over of Saigon on 30 April, 1975 marked the beginning of a period of significant Soviet success in the Third World.<sup>65</sup> Moscow was now reaping the benefits of investments that had been made in the preceding decade. Beginning in the mid-1960s, in a departure from a previous policy of vigorous support for non-communist nationalists in the Third World, the Soviets had begun to aggressively support more orthodox Marxist–Leninists in the Third World.<sup>66</sup> Friendship treaties were signed with Somalia (1974),<sup>67</sup> Angola (1976), Mozambique (1977) and Ethiopia (1978).<sup>68</sup> Soviet support included the provision of military equipment and tactical advice offered by Soviet advisors working on the ground.<sup>69</sup> Soviet-aligned and -financed Cuban

<sup>62</sup> Gelman, *Soviet Far East Buildup*, p. 75.

<sup>63</sup> Ross, *Negotiating Cooperation*, p. 125.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>65</sup> Allan Cameron, 'The Soviet Union and the wars in Indochina', in Walter Raymond Duncan (ed.), *Soviet Policy in Developing Countries* (Huntington, NY: Krieger, 1981), p. 63.

<sup>66</sup> Donald Zagoria, 'Into the breach: new Soviet Alliances in the Third World', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 57, No. 4 (Spring 1979), pp. 737–739.

<sup>67</sup> The Soviet–Somali treaty was abrogate on 11 November 1977, after the Soviets provided the Ethiopians with military assistance. Wang, *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo waijiaoshi*, p. 187.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 186.

<sup>69</sup> Bruce Porter, *The USSR in Third World Conflicts: Soviet Arms and Diplomacy in Local Wars, 1945–1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 53.

troops were introduced into Africa.<sup>70</sup> By one estimate, there were Cuban troops in a total of 16 African and Middle Eastern states during this period.<sup>71</sup>

The Chinese viewed the Soviet success in Africa with alarm, but due primarily to resource constraints, Beijing's support of anti-Soviet forces in that continent was limited to rhetorical condemnation of Soviet activities there.<sup>72</sup> In February 1976, the Soviet–Cuban backed Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) defeated the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA).<sup>73</sup> On 6 February 1976, the *Peking Review* reproduced a *People's Daily* article condemning the successful Soviet–Cuban intervention in Angola's civil war.<sup>74</sup> Similarly, the Chinese provided rhetorical support for the efforts of the Somalis against the Soviet- and Cuban-backed Ethiopians.<sup>75</sup> To the consternation of the Chinese, the Soviet–Cuban intervention effort tipped the balance against the Somalis.<sup>76</sup> The Soviets and Cubans also supported a coup in South Yemen that brought to power a pro-Soviet leadership. A border war was subsequently initiated by South Yemen against North Yemen.<sup>77</sup>

Beijing was even more alarmed at Soviet policy in a part of the Third World that was closer to China, namely Asia. Chinese attention focused on a Soviet proposal for a collective security system in Asia. The Chinese reacted vigorously against the collective security concept. In a 15 August 1975 article in the *Peking Review*, the concept was subjected to critical scrutiny.<sup>78</sup> The Chinese took note of Soviet rhetoric that attempted to portray its collective security proposal as consistent with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' (ASEAN's) efforts to establish Southeast Asia as a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality

---

<sup>70</sup> Porter, *USSR in Third World Conflicts*, pp. 54–56; Steven Hosmer and Thomas Wolfe, *Soviet Policy and Practice Toward Third World Conflicts* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1982), pp. 97–98.

<sup>71</sup> Porter, *USSR in Third World Conflicts*, p. 55.

<sup>72</sup> Wang, *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo waijiaoshi*, pp. 186–189.

<sup>73</sup> Hosmer and Wolfe, *Soviet Policy and Practice Toward Third World Conflicts*, pp. 81–88.

<sup>74</sup> 'Big exposure of Soviet revisionists' colonial expansion in Angola', *Peking Review*, Vol. 19, No. 6 (6 February 1976), pp. 8–9.

<sup>75</sup> 'Soviet military intervention provokes world indignation', *Peking Review*, Vol. 21, No. 8 (24 February 1978), pp. 20–22.

<sup>76</sup> Hosmer and Wolfe, *Soviet Policy and Practice Toward Third World Conflicts*, pp. 88–94.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 96–97.

<sup>78</sup> 'Soviet social-imperialists covet Southeast Asia: the "Asian collective security system" is a pretext for expansion', *Peking Review*, Vol. 17, No. 33 (15 August 1975), pp. 20–21.



(ZOPFAN).<sup>79</sup> For the Chinese, the collective security proposal was patently a mechanism for the expansion of Soviet influence in Southeast Asia.<sup>80</sup> Thus the article stated that the proposal was ‘designed to serve nothing but the Kremlin’s policies of aggression and expansion’, and was ‘contrived for the purpose of contending with the United States for hegemony in Asia, dividing the Asian countries, and bringing small and medium-sized countries into their sphere of influence’.<sup>81</sup>

### *China and Soviet–US Détente*

Chinese concerns were particularly marked regarding the American attempt to achieve détente with the Soviets, which were aired even before the end of the Vietnam War. In his 1974 ‘Three Worlds’ speech at the United Nations, Deng Xiaoping had warned that attempts to achieve détente with the Soviets were illusory. Deng argued that:

In the final analysis, the so-called ‘balanced reduction of forces,’ and ‘strategic arms limitation’ are nothing but empty talk, for in fact there is no ‘balance’, nor can there possibly be ‘limitation’. They [the US and the Soviet Union] may reach certain agreements, but their agreements are only a façade and a deception.<sup>82</sup>

As Deng’s comments suggest, the Chinese viewed Soviet–US détente as a misnomer and a serious strategic error. It was a misnomer because the disarmament talks that were the concrete manifestation of détente were aimed at reducing increases, rather than achieving absolute reductions. It was a strategic error because the Chinese did not perceive any restraining effect of détente on Soviet policy. Indeed, Beijing viewed the Soviets as having exploited the process to achieve strategic nuclear parity with the Americans, and in some categories of nuclear capability acquire a superior position.<sup>83</sup> Thus, the Chinese assessments of this period of the Cold War took note of the gains the Soviets achieved from 1963 through 1975, despite the signing of various treaties including the

---

<sup>79</sup> Donald Weatherbee, *International Relations in Southeast Asia: The Struggle for Autonomy* (Boulder, CO: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), pp. 70–71.

<sup>80</sup> *Soviet social-imperialists covet Southeast Asia*, p. 21.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> Xie Yixian (ed.), *Zhongguo dangdai waijiaoshi, 1949–2001* (Contemporary Chinese Diplomatic History, 1949–2001) (Beijing: Zhongguo Qingnian Chubanshe, 2002), pp. 300–301.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 301.

Limited Test Ban Treaty in 1963, the SALT I Treaty in 1972 and the Threshold Test Ban Treaty in 1974.<sup>84</sup>

Fundamentally, China feared the use of *détente* by the Soviets to achieve gains at US expense which were then translated into a heightened Soviet threat to China.<sup>85</sup> Thus, in reviewing the one-year anniversary of the 1975 Helsinki Agreements, cited as a successful outcome of *détente* by some American and European analysts, the Chinese continued to stress the dangers of compromise with the Soviets. While China feared that the US might be exploited by the Soviets via *détente*, China also feared that *détente* was a possible mechanism by which the Americans could exploit China. Beijing developed a critique of Washington's policy towards Moscow that utilised the metaphor of 'Munich'.<sup>86</sup> The Chinese claimed that just as British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain made concessions to Hitler's Nazi Germany at the Munich conference in September 1938 during a period of British weakness, so too the Americans were viewed by the Chinese as making concessions to the Russians at a time of American weakness. However, in the Chinese critique of American policy, there was an insidious twist to the plot. In the Chinese view, the US was seeking *détente* in Europe in order to turn Soviet energies and resources towards the East, and China more specifically. This was a major source of Chinese distrust of President Nixon and his National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger's pursuit of *détente* with the Soviets during the Nixon administration.<sup>87</sup> After renewed American scepticism of the Soviet Union during the Ford administration during 1974–1976, the Chinese were taken aback by the initial complacency of the Carter administration's Soviet policy,<sup>88</sup> which was only corrected in 1978.<sup>89</sup>

---

<sup>84</sup> See table tracking Soviet gains vis-à-vis the Americans in various categories from 1969 to 1975 in *ibid.*, p. 300.

<sup>85</sup> Robert Ross notes the danger of *détente* from the Chinese perspective: 'The danger for China was clear—*détente* might well be the cover for a Soviet attempt to pressure China to end its opposition to Soviet foreign policy, and the US interest in continued stability might deter Washington from offsetting the Soviet threat'; Ross, *Negotiating Cooperation*, p. 29.

<sup>86</sup> For an analysis of the literature and debate surrounding this issue see Robert J. Beck, 'Munich's lessons reconsidered', *International Security*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (1989), pp. 161–191; Gerhard Weinberg, 'Munich after 50 years', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 67, No. 1 (Fall 1988), pp. 165–178.

<sup>87</sup> By 1974, it was clear to the Ford administration that *détente* was not serving as a constraint on the Soviet Union. See Ross, *Negotiating Cooperation*, p. 76.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 92–119.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 120–125.

### Increasing Sino–Soviet Conflict

It is in the context of Chinese perceptions of Soviet military activities directed against China on their border, Moscow's activism in the Third World, and its achievement of significant gains because of détente with the US, that we should understand the increasing Sino–Soviet conflict during this period. The first opportunity for any improvement in Sino–Soviet relations during this period came with Mao's death in September 1976. This event led to a number of conciliatory gestures by Moscow, made in the hope that the Chinese leader's passing might lead to a new Chinese leadership in Beijing that was interested in improving bilateral relations. The Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko signed a book of condolence at the Chinese embassy in Moscow on 13 September.<sup>90</sup> Soviet polemics ceased for a while. Addressing the Soviet Central Committee on 25 October, Brezhnev noted that: 'The improvement of our relations with China is our constant concern' and that Moscow's view was

that there are no problems in relations between the USSR and the People's Republic of China which cannot be solved in a spirit of good-neighborliness. We shall continue to act in this spirit. Everything will depend on the position adopted by the other side.<sup>91</sup>

On 27 October, a formal statement of congratulation was sent by Brezhnev to Hua Guofeng to congratulate him on his appointment as Chairman of the CCP.<sup>92</sup> It was rejected on the grounds that party-to-party ties did not exist. Relations took a turn for the worse. Negotiations stalemated on the disputed Sino–Soviet border negotiations from 30 November 1976 to 28 February 1977.<sup>93</sup> The first verbal attack by a high-ranking Soviet official occurred on 22 April 1977.<sup>94</sup> Sino–Soviet conflict quickly picked up. The *Peking Review* published an article on 15 July 1977 declaring that 'Soviet social-imperialism' was 'the most dangerous source of world war'.<sup>95</sup> In August 1977, at the Eleventh

---

<sup>90</sup> Alan Day (ed.), *China and the Soviet Union, 1949–1984* (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1985), p. 129.

<sup>91</sup> Sun Qimin, *Zhong Su guanxi shimo* (Sino–Soviet Relations from Start to End) (Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin Chubanshe, 1998), p. 632.

<sup>92</sup> Day, *China and the Soviet Union*, p. 130.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> 'Soviet social-imperialism: the most dangerous source of world war', *Peking Review*, Vol. 20, No. 29 (15 July 1977), pp. 4–10, 21.

Central Committee of the CCP, Hua Guofeng stressed the threat posed to China by the Soviets and blamed Moscow for the deterioration of bilateral relations.<sup>96</sup>

To further drive home the point that the new Chinese leadership was committed to Mao's anti-Soviet policy, an extended commentary on the Chairman's 'Three Worlds' theory was published on 1 November 1977.<sup>97</sup> In the article, the Soviet Union was portrayed as a greater threat than in Deng's 1974 United Nations speech. It was argued that compared to the United States, the Soviet Union was 'the more ferocious, the more reckless, the more treacherous and the more dangerous source of world war'.<sup>98</sup> A number of reasons were given for this, including the fact that while the United States had over-extended itself and had to adopt a defensive strategy, the Soviet Union was still on the upsurge and had adopted an offensive strategy.<sup>99</sup> Even relative Soviet weakness in the economic sphere compared to the Americans was seen as a source of threat. In the Chinese view, since Soviet economic strength was relatively underdeveloped, it had to depend on military means to achieve its goals.<sup>100</sup>

Subsequent developments were to confirm the trajectory of increasing conflict in Sino-Soviet relations. On 24 February 1978, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union proposed that a meeting be held with the Chinese. It was suggested that a joint statement be issued declaring that the Soviet Union and China would 'build their relations on the basis of peaceful co-existence, firmly adhering to the principles of equality, mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, non-interference in each other's internal affairs and the renunciation of the use of force'.<sup>101</sup> The official Chinese reply delivered on 9 March 1978 dismissed the Soviet proposal as 'worthless'.<sup>102</sup> It should be noted that Chinese and American perspectives on the Soviet Union increasingly converged, a fact that was reflected in the establishment of Sino-US diplomatic relations in January 1979.<sup>103</sup>

<sup>96</sup> Sun, *Zhong Su guanxi shimo*, pp. 637–638.

<sup>97</sup> Day, *China and the Soviet Union*, p. 133.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 133–134.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> Cited in *ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> Cited in *ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>103</sup> For further discussion on President Carter's movement towards an increasingly adversarial view of the Soviet Union and the role of his National Security Advisor in supporting that shift see Cecile Menetrey-Monchau, 'The changing post-war US strategy in Indochina', in Westad and Quinn-Judge (eds), *Third Indochina War*, pp. 71–75; Zbigniew Brzezinski,

### Soviet Resurgence and Increasing Soviet Economic and Military Ties to Vietnam, 1975–1979

The Soviets responded to the reintensification of Sino–Soviet conflict elaborated above by attempting to drive a wedge between Beijing and Hanoi through increasing their economic and military ties to Vietnam. In May 1975, immediately after the Vietnamese communist victory over the South Vietnamese,<sup>104</sup> the Soviets cancelled all Hanoi's debt to Moscow.<sup>105</sup> This was valued at US\$ 450 million.<sup>106</sup> In April 1976, during a visit by Soviet Deputy Prime Minister I. Arkhipov, a broad commitment to increase Soviet economic assistance to Vietnam was made.<sup>107</sup> In December 1976, on the occasion of the Vietnamese Communist Party's Fourth Congress, Moscow pledged a significant commitment to Hanoi's 1976–1980 Five Year Plan, promising to contribute US\$ 11–13 billion, twice the amount it had made to the Vietnamese communists' previous five-year plan.<sup>108</sup> The burgeoning economic ties can be seen in the overall Soviet–Vietnamese trade levels which rose from 1976 to 1979.<sup>109</sup>

Soviet largesse was particularly welcome to the leadership in Hanoi. In the post-Vietnam war era, Vietnam's leadership, at least initially, had economic development as one of its top priorities. Vietnamese Communist Party Chief Le Duan announced soon after the defeat of the South Vietnamese that 'economics is in command'.<sup>110</sup> The increasing economic ties culminated in Vietnam's admission to the Soviet-led Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON)<sup>111</sup> on 29 June 1978 at the organisation's meeting in

---

*Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Advisor 1977–1981* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1983).

<sup>104</sup> Saigon fell to the Vietnamese communists on 30 April 1975.

<sup>105</sup> Ramesh Thakur and Carlyle Thayer, *Soviet Relations with India and Vietnam* (London: Macmillan, 1992), pp. 60, 194.

<sup>106</sup> Thakur and Thayer, *Soviet Relations*, p. 194.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60. Varying estimates of Soviet aid to Vietnam can be found in *ibid.*, p. 190.

<sup>109</sup> Douglas Pike, *Vietnam and the Soviet Union: Anatomy of an Alliance* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1987), p. 135.

<sup>110</sup> Douglas Pike, 'The impact of the Sino–Soviet dispute on Southeast Asia', in Ellison (ed.), *The Sino–Soviet Conflict*, p. 200.

<sup>111</sup> Romania and Poland objected to Vietnam's admission, arguing that it would be an economic burden to the organisation. See also Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia*, p. 211.

Bucharest.<sup>112</sup> A formal treaty of admission was signed on 5 July. It represented the successful completion of a process that had been started by the Vietnamese in mid-1977.<sup>113</sup> Membership in COMECON provided economic benefits such as access to a preferential exchange rate in intra-bloc trading. COMECON took over some aid projects abandoned by China.<sup>114</sup> Estimates of Soviet economic aid to Vietnam during this period vary but indicate that it was substantial.<sup>115</sup>

The Soviets also increased their military ties to Vietnam. For the Soviets, an alliance with Vietnam was a critical piece in an evolving Soviet encirclement policy aimed at China. The Soviets had already had alliances with Mongolia (1966) and India (1971). Beginning in 1971, they began pressing for a formal alliance treaty with the Vietnamese.<sup>116</sup> With the unification of Vietnam in 1975, Moscow began pressing for access to Cam Ranh Bay in 1975.<sup>117</sup> The alliance issue was raised again after the fall of Saigon in 1975.<sup>118</sup> The Soviets were turned down on both issues. Lacking access to Vietnamese sources, we can only speculate that Hanoi was concerned that being too close to the Soviets would undermine post-war relations with the United States and China. Undeterred by this rejection, the Soviets offered military aid to consolidate relations. Soviet military aid to Vietnam during the 1975–1980 period was substantial. Thakur and Thayer cite figures that suggest there was a steady increase in military aid from US\$ 123 million in 1975 to 1.4 billion in 1979.<sup>119</sup>

### *Vietnam and Its Neighbours*

Even as the Vietnamese increased co-operation with the Soviet Union, their concerns were also fixed on an objective closer to home: establishing a sphere of influence in the states on its periphery, namely Laos and Vietnam. This reflected an understandable concern with maximising Vietnamese security. In the post-1975 period, Hanoi claimed to enjoy a ‘special relationship’ with the

---

<sup>112</sup> Pike, *Vietnam and the Soviet Union*, pp. 129–133.

<sup>113</sup> Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia*, pp. 209–211.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 211; Pike, *Vietnam and the Soviet Union*, p. 131.

<sup>115</sup> Thakur and Thayer, *Soviet Relations*, p. 190.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126.

<sup>118</sup> Nayan Chanda, *Brother Enemy: A History of Indochina Since the Fall of Saigon* (New York: Collier Books, 1986), p. 257.

<sup>119</sup> Thakur and Thayer, *Soviet Relations*, pp. 118, 124.

regimes in Phnom Penh and Vientiane. The ‘special relationship’ appears to have meant at least two things.<sup>120</sup> These are: (1) that the governments in Phnom Penh and Vientiane would never take a major decision without first clearing it with Hanoi; (2) the continued existence of an organised group within the communist parties of Laos and Cambodia that were pro-Vietnamese. In June 1976, Party General Secretary Le Duan, in a speech to the Vietnamese National Assembly, described the special relationship that exists between Hanoi, Phnom Penh, and Vientiane as ‘the primary and basic content of our foreign policy’.<sup>121</sup>

The Soviets were aware of Hanoi’s plans for Cambodia and Laos. As early as February 1973, just after the Paris Peace Agreement, the Soviet ambassador to Hanoi expressed clearly his perceptions of the Vietnamese communists’ intentions in a report to Moscow. The ambassador observed that:

The program of the Vietnamese comrades for Indochina is to replace the reactionary regimes in Saigon, Vientiane, and Phnom Penh with progressive ones, and later when all Vietnam, and also Laos and Cambodia, start on the road to socialism, to move toward the establishment of a Federation of the Indochinese countries. This course of the VWP [Vietnam Workers’ Party] flows from the program of the former Communist party of Indochina.<sup>122</sup>

Notwithstanding the increasingly close ties that Vietnam enjoyed with Moscow in the post-1975 period,<sup>123</sup> Hanoi would have preferred to have established control over Indochina without relying on the Soviet Union. The Vietnamese communists had long prided themselves on their ability to maintain independence and flexibility in their foreign policy. A formal alliance with the Soviet Union would invariably place greater strictures on Hanoi’s foreign policy

<sup>120</sup> Douglas Pike, ‘Communist vs Communist in Southeast Asia’, *International Security*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (1979), p. 81.

<sup>121</sup> William Duiker, ‘China and Vietnam and the struggle for Indochina’, in Joseph J. Zasloff (ed.), *Postwar Indochina: Old Enemies and New Allies* (Washington, DC: Foreign Service Institute, 1989), p. 157.

<sup>122</sup> Cited in Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia*, p. 66.

<sup>123</sup> In the 1975–1978 period, Vietnamese leader Le Duan visited Moscow five times. Le visited Moscow in August 1975, February 1976, October 1977, June 1978 and again in November 1978 to sign the Soviet–Vietnamese Treaty. In contrast, he visited Beijing twice, once in September 1975 and again in November 1977. On both occasions, the customary reciprocal farewell banquet was not held by the Vietnamese. See Ross, *Indochina Tangle*, pp. 65, 149.

options. Indeed, Hanoi succeeded in establishing control over Laos rather easily, without Soviet support. Soon after the Pathet Lao's victory in Laos in the summer of 1975, ties with Vietnam were strengthened. An agreement covering aid, trade, transportation and education was signed in June 1975. In February 1976, just two months after the Lao People's Democratic Republic was founded on 2 December 1975, Lao Prime Minister Kaysone Phomvihane headed a high-level delegation to Hanoi. One important outcome of the visit was the unambiguous declaration that Laos fell under the Vietnamese sphere of influence. The joint statement released after the meeting used the significant 'special relationship' term to describe Lao–Vietnamese ties.<sup>124</sup> Both sides agreed to the continued stationing of 30,000–40,000 Vietnamese troops in Laos and the construction of an all-weather road linking Laos to the Vietnamese port of Haiphong. This road ended the traditional Laotian dependence on transit routes through Thailand for imports and exports. The new dispensation was formalised in a 25-year Treaty of Friendship and Co-operation that was signed in July 1977.<sup>125</sup>

The state of Cambodia assumed immense significance in Southeast Asia's post-1975 strategic dispensation. Ruled by the increasingly Chinese-aligned and anti-Vietnamese Khmer Rouge, they presented an entirely different proposition from Laos. As events were to turn out, the Vietnamese were to reach the conclusion that an alliance with the Soviets had to be signed (in November 1978) before an invasion of Cambodia could occur. The Khmer Rouge had seized control of Cambodia independently and just prior to the Vietnamese communists' victory in Vietnam. They had a history of antagonism (that included kidnappings and assassinations) against the Vietnamese communists that stretched back to 1971.<sup>126</sup> Indeed, in a Kampuchean Communist Party conference in September 1971, Vietnam had been identified as an 'acute enemy'.<sup>127</sup> These underlying hostilities were to escalate in the post-1975 period. In May 1975, just a month after the Khmer Rouge seized Phnom Penh, maritime border clashes occurred. A meeting on 11 June between Pol Pot and Le Duan secured a tentative cessation of conflict.<sup>128</sup> Border negotiations were

<sup>124</sup> Cited in Gilks, *Breakdown of the Sino–Vietnamese Alliance*, p. 159.

<sup>125</sup> Alexander Woodside, 'Nationalism and poverty in the breakdown of Sino–Vietnamese relations', *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 52, No. 3 (1979), p. 386.

<sup>126</sup> Morris, *Why Vietnam invaded Cambodia*, pp. 55–68.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>128</sup> Edward C. O'Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War: The Last Maoist War* (New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 34.



initiated in April 1976, but suspended in the next month. Conflict between Hanoi and Phnom Penh increased as Pol Pot sought to consolidate his position within the Khmer Rouge by beginning to purge members who had ties to Vietnam.<sup>129</sup>

### After Victory: Sino–Vietnamese Relations in the Post-1975 Era

Amid these foregoing developments, the Chinese were caught in a dilemma. Uncertain about Vietnam's ultimate intentions, they neither committed to Vietnam's economic and military development, which could ultimately backfire in creating a stronger adversary in Southeast Asia, nor treated the Vietnamese communists as a full-fledged Soviet ally. The Chinese ambivalence towards the Vietnamese communists diminished the aid they were prepared to offer in this period, which then in turn negatively affected Vietnamese perceptions of the Chinese.

In August 1975, in an important trip to seek economic assistance, Vietnamese Vice-Premier and Chairman of the State Planning Commission Le Thanh Nghi visited Beijing en route to Moscow.<sup>130</sup> Beijing and Hanoi were unable to reach an agreement on a Chinese aid package to Vietnam.<sup>131</sup> From 22 to 28 September, Le Thanh and Le Duan visited Beijing, in a second attempt to obtain an economic agreement.<sup>132</sup> Documents in the Soviet archives, that contain the post-visit Vietnamese report, state that the Vietnamese wanted to assure the Chinese that they were interested in maintaining good relations with both Moscow and Beijing.<sup>133</sup> This message did not resonate with the Chinese, who did not approve of such straddling. Deng reminded his Vietnamese visitors that: 'The superpowers are the greatest international exploiters and oppressors ... Today, more and more people realise, opposing superpower hegemonism is an important mission facing the people of every nation.'<sup>134</sup> In contrast, in Le Duan's speech at the same banquet, a clear difference on the Soviet Union could be detected. In his speech, Le Duan did not share the Chinese view of the Soviets. The Vietnamese leader made no mention of the

<sup>129</sup> O'Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy*, p. 35.

<sup>130</sup> Guo Ming *et al.*, *Xiandai Zhong Yue guanxi* (Xia), pp. 927–931.

<sup>131</sup> Ross, *Indochina Tangle*, p. 63.

<sup>132</sup> Guo Ming *et al.*, *Xiandai Zhong Yue guanxi*, pp. 950–962.

<sup>133</sup> Cited in Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia*, pp. 171–173.

<sup>134</sup> Guo Ming *et al.*, *Xiandai Zhong Yue guanxi*, p. 956.

Soviets. Instead, he pointed out that in the present period, it was the Americans who were the source of neo-colonialism and were responsible for difficult task facing the Vietnamese in rebuilding their country.<sup>135</sup> Moreover, in a move that would not have gone unnoticed by his hosts, Le Duan implicitly acknowledged the Soviet Union's role in the Vietnamese communists' success over the Americans. He pointed out that the Vietnamese success was due to 'the contributions of other socialist countries'.<sup>136</sup>

Given the developments above, it is not surprising that little progress was made during talks. On 23 and 24 September, the Vietnamese visitors engaged in discussions with Deng Xiaoping and Li Xiannian.<sup>137</sup> Two economic agreements were signed, although it should be noted that there was no offer of a grant or non-refundable aid. Moreover, no military aid was provided. A significant topic of discussion concerned Soviet objectives in the South China Sea.<sup>138</sup> On 18 September, just prior to the visit, the *People's Daily* published six photographs of the Spratly Islands.<sup>139</sup> Seen in the context of Sino-Vietnamese differences over the Spratly Islands that had already existed in the 1973–1975 period, it is not surprising that there was dissatisfaction on the Vietnamese side. At the end of the trip, no joint communiqué was issued, nor was the customary reciprocal banquet hosted by the Vietnamese side. Le Duan left earlier than planned.<sup>140</sup>

Seizing an opportunity afforded by their relatively stronger economic position vis-à-vis the Chinese, the Soviets were more generous to the Vietnamese. During Le Duan's October visit to Moscow, the Soviets agreed to provide US\$ 3 billion in aid for the 1976–1980 period.<sup>141</sup> Of this total, US\$ 1 billion was grant aid. Le Duan signed an economic agreement on 30 October.<sup>142</sup> Moreover, in contrast to the tension that characterised Le Duan's China trip, the Chinese must have noticed the effusive praise bestowed on the Soviets in

---

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., p. 960.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., p. 959.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., pp. 960–961.

<sup>138</sup> Marwyn Samuels, *Contest for the South China Sea* (New York: Methuen, 1982), p. 109; Chang, *Sino-Vietnamese Territorial Dispute*, p. 29.

<sup>139</sup> Chang, *Sino-Vietnamese Territorial Dispute*, p. 28.

<sup>140</sup> Ross, *Indochina Tangle*, p. 65.

<sup>141</sup> Gilks, *Breakdown of the Sino-Vietnamese Alliance*, p. 153.

<sup>142</sup> Another economic agreement was signed on 18 December 1975. The October agreement was for long-term ten-year aid while the December agreement was for economic aid and technical assistance. Pike, *Vietnam and the Soviet Union*, p. 128.

the joint communiqué released at the end of the Vietnamese leader's trip to Moscow.<sup>143</sup> Significantly, this communiqué approved of the Soviet policy of détente.<sup>144</sup>

As the development of Sino–Vietnamese relations stalled and Soviet–Vietnamese relations gradually tightened, statements by high-level Vietnamese officials exacerbated relations.<sup>145</sup> In an interview with Swedish journalist Erik Fierre in July 1976, Hoang Tung, a member of the Central Committee of the Vietnamese Communist Party, Deputy Chairman of the Propaganda Commission and editor of the Party's daily paper *Nhan Dan*, was clear about the convergence of Soviet and Vietnamese interests in checking Chinese influence in Southeast Asia:

During the war, it was vital for Vietnam that both China and the USSR helped Vietnam to the full. Today, it is no longer so vital for this country to follow that policy ... Anyway, the political and cultural pressure from the north [i.e. China] must be removed. Therefore, the rapprochement with the USSR plays a very important role for Vietnam today. There is a tangible strong Soviet interest coinciding with Vietnamese interests—to reduce Chinese influence in this part of the world.<sup>146</sup>

Hanoi's tilt towards the Soviets was evolving. However, Vietnam also did not want to antagonise the Chinese by abandoning the Chinese in favour of the Soviets. Accordingly, throughout 1976, an independent trend can be detected in Vietnamese foreign economic policy.<sup>147</sup> Hanoi choose not to join COMECON yet. Instead, Hanoi joined the International Monetary Fund and sought economic assistance from Japan and the United Nations.<sup>148</sup>

A turning point in Sino–Vietnamese relations came at the Fourth Vietnamese Workers' Party Congress held in December 1976. It was the first Congress to be held since September 1960, when the decision had been made to launch the war in South Vietnam.<sup>149</sup> This Congress has been described

---

<sup>143</sup>) Chengdu junqu, *Yenan wenti ziliao xuanbian*, pp. 26–32.

<sup>144</sup>) Chengdu junqu, *Yenan wenti ziliao xuanbian*, pp. 26–32.

<sup>145</sup>) Beijing xinhua yinshuachang yinshua, *Zhong Yue bianjie chongtu de zhenxiang* (The Truth Behind the Sino–Vietnamese Border Conflict) (Beijing: Renmin Huoban Chuban, 1979), pp. 3–4; Huang Guoan *et al.*, *Zhong Yue guanxi shijianbian* (Concise History of Sino–Vietnamese Relations) (Guangxi: Guangxi Renmin Chubanshe, 1986), pp. 246–247.

<sup>146</sup>) Beijing xinhua yinshuachang yinshua, *Zhong Yue bianjie chongtu*, pp. 3–4.

<sup>147</sup>) Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, pp. 182–185.

<sup>148</sup>) Ross, *Indochina Tangle*, pp. 89–92.

<sup>149</sup>) At the Congress, the Vietnamese Workers' Party name was changed to the Vietnamese

by one Chinese survey of Sino–Vietnamese relations as a signal of Hanoi ‘establishing a line of opposing China and throwing one’s lot in with the Soviet Union, while at the same time, clarifying [Vietnam’s] policy of an Indochina federation’.<sup>150</sup> Hoang Van Hoan, Politburo member since 1956, Vice-Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National Assembly and former ambassador to China from 1950 to 1957, lost all his positions in the party.<sup>151</sup> Hoang, who was later to flee to exile in China after the 1979 war, claimed in 1987 that those who did not agree with Le Duan were purged at this Congress.<sup>152</sup> Indeed, former Vietnamese ambassadors to China Ngo Minh Loan, Ngo Thuyen and Nguyen Trong Vonh lost their positions as alternate members of the Central Committee of the Vietnamese Communist Party.<sup>153</sup>

In mid-April 1977, after a disappointing response from Western countries to Vietnamese requests for economic aid, Hanoi took its first step towards membership in the Soviet-led COMECON.<sup>154</sup> Hanoi requested membership in COMECON’s International Bank for Economic Co-operation. It obtained admission in late May.<sup>155</sup> These developments elicited Beijing’s displeasure. In early June, General Giap, while visiting Beijing after a trip to Moscow, did not receive a standard welcome as required by protocol.<sup>156</sup> On 7 June, Pham Van Dong arrived in Beijing from Moscow. In a 10 June meeting with Li Xiannian, frank discussions occurred on a range of issues, including anti-China

---

Communist Party. William Duiker, *Vietnam Since the Fall of Saigon* (Athens, OH: Center for International Studies, 1980), p. 17.

<sup>150</sup> Huang *et al.*, *Zhong Yue guanxi shijianbian*, p. 247.

<sup>151</sup> Duiker, *Vietnam Since the Fall of Saigon*, p. 17; Ross, *Indochina Tangle*, p. 93.

<sup>152</sup> Huang Wen Huan, *Canghai yisu*, pp. 322–328. Le Duan was promoted from First Secretary to Secretary General. Ross, *Indochina Tangle*, p. 93.

<sup>153</sup> Ross, *Indochina Tangle*, p. 93.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 120–122.

<sup>155</sup> It should be noted that Hanoi was also pursuing the option of obtaining aid from the US as well as normalising diplomatic relations with Washington. In mid-March 1977, President Carter dispatched United Automobile Workers’ President Leonard Woodcock on a trip to Hanoi to make progress on resolving the American Missing-in-Action (MIA) issue as well as establishing formal diplomatic relations. On 3 May 1977, US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and the Pacific Richard Holbrooke entered into negotiations in Paris with Hanoi on these issues. Negotiations dragged on and a scheduled fourth round in February 1978 was not held. There was to be no normalisation of relations until the 1990s. For discussion on US–Vietnamese relations during this period that utilises recently released primary materials see Menetrey-Monchau, *The changing post-war US strategy in Indochina*, pp. 71–75.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128.

statements made by senior Vietnamese officials, sea and land border disagreements, mistreatment of ethnic Chinese in Vietnam.<sup>157</sup> Li made it clear that China was disturbed by the Vietnamese co-operation with the Soviet Union.<sup>158</sup> The Chinese nevertheless were open to reversing the decline in relations. Li Xiannian's stated purpose for raising these issues was that 'a solution will be found to these problems through a comradely and in-depth conversation so that the revolutionary friendship and unity between our Parties and countries can be upheld and enhanced'.<sup>159</sup>

The Chinese looked on as Soviet–Vietnamese ties tightened. A little more than three weeks later, Le Thanh Nghi visited Moscow to sign economic agreements.<sup>160</sup> On his return to Hanoi, he stopped over in Beijing, where he had a lukewarm meeting with Li Xiannian who did not grant any new economic aid.<sup>161</sup> On 30 July 1977, approximately two weeks after the signing of a Laos–Vietnamese defence treaty,<sup>162</sup> Chinese Foreign Minister Huang Hua, in a speech peppered with references to 'Soviet revisionism', repeated Deng Xiaoping's Soviet tiger metaphor.<sup>163</sup> Huang proceeded to explicitly warn the Vietnamese about the consequences of a Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia.<sup>164</sup>

---

<sup>157</sup> See Beijing xinhua yinshuachang yinshua. *Zhong Yue bianjie chongtu*, pp. 1–12. The full transcript of the meeting was subsequently published in English in the *Beijing Review* after the Sino–Vietnamese Border War in 1979. 'Memorandum on Vice Premier Li Xiannian's talks with Pham Vandong', *Beijing Review*, Vol. 22, No. 13 (30 March 1979), pp. 17–22.

<sup>158</sup> Ross, *Indochina Tangle*, p. 129.

<sup>159</sup> *Memorandum on Vice Premier Li Xiannian's talks with Pham Vandong*, p. 22.

<sup>160</sup> Ross, *Indochina Tangle*, p. 132.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>162</sup> The treaty was signed on 17 July 1977. For analysis of Vietnam's relationship with Laos see Carlyle Thayer, 'Laos and Vietnam: the anatomy of a "special relationship"', in Martin Stuart-Fox (ed.), *Contemporary Laos* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1982), pp. 245–374.

<sup>163</sup> Huang Hua, 'Problems with Indochina, Albania and Yugoslavia, 30 July 1977', in King C. Chen (ed.), *China and the Three Worlds: A Foreign Policy Reader* (White Plains, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1979), pp. 270–271.

<sup>164</sup> Huang pointed out: 'We will support the stand of Cambodia and her people against Soviet revisionist social-imperialism and will not watch indifferently any intervention in Cambodian sovereignty or coveting of Cambodian territory by social-imperialism. We will support Cambodia and her people in their struggle and in their actions to protect Cambodia's territorial integrity and national sovereignty by giving all possible assistance'; *ibid.*, p. 272.

### The Cambodian Vortex and Sino–Vietnamese Relations

Increasingly, the preservation of a Chinese-aligned Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia was Beijing's way of demonstrating its commitment to resisting the Soviet-backed Vietnamese in Southeast Asia.<sup>165</sup> That said, fearing abandonment by Hanoi, Beijing also endeavoured to restrain the Khmer Rouge in its policy towards Vietnam. From late 1977 to early 1978, the Chinese sought to mediate the Cambodian–Vietnamese conflict. For its part, Vietnam viewed a compliant Cambodia as crucial to its security, but would have preferred to achieve that goal through means short of war. As events developed, the Chinese and the Vietnamese were unable to prevent war between Hanoi and Phnom Penh. This subsequently drew in their respective allies, the Soviets and the Chinese.

In January 1977, a new campaign of attacks was initiated against Vietnam. Six Vietnamese provinces were attacked.<sup>166</sup> Border-liason committees that had been operating since 1975 were ceased. In April, following Pol Pot's consolidation of power against rivals within the Khmer Rouge, there was an intensification of conflict on the Cambodian–Vietnamese border.<sup>167</sup> On 17 April 1977, Ieng Sary asserted that Phnom Penh would 'not join any regional association or be allied with any country'.<sup>168</sup> On 30 April, Vietnamese reports claimed that the Khmer Rouge had infiltrated 'division-size' forces up to 10 kilometres into Vietnam, killing innocent Vietnamese civilians. In late April and May 1977, Vietnamese forces were deployed on the border. On 7 June, Hanoi sent a confidential letter to Phnom Penh seeking a 'high-level meeting' of the two governments.<sup>169</sup> The Cambodian response on 18 June demanded a mutual withdrawal of troops and the creation of a demilitarised zone. Neither side was interested in compromise. In July, the leadership of the Eastern Military Region of Cambodia asserted that compromise was not possible with Vietnam because Hanoi had 'a dark scheme to conquer our land and destroy the Khmer race'.<sup>170</sup> Throughout the summer, there was an increase in conflict.

<sup>165</sup> In September 1977 and again in January 1978, China supplied Cambodia with military equipment. Ross, *Indochina Tangle*, pp. 156–157.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 35–36.

<sup>167</sup> Ross, *Indochina Tangle*, p. 133.

<sup>168</sup> As cited in Ross, *Indochina Tangle*, p. 135.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>170</sup> O'Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy*, p. 36.

China sought to support its ally the Khmer Rouge against Vietnamese pressure, and at the same time was careful not to be too firm in its support, for fear of pushing the Vietnamese towards the Soviets. Beijing still held out hope that by restraining Chinese co-operation with the Khmer Rouge, it could minimise Vietnamese incentives to co-operate with the Soviet Union. In January, when the initial border clashes occurred, the Xinhua news agency quoted Nuon Chea, a high-ranking Khmer Rouge official as stating that ‘our army and people will certainly defeat whatever country that dares to invade us’.<sup>171</sup> Again in late April, China provided low-level support to Phnom Penh.<sup>172</sup> At a reception in Beijing in late April, Chinese Foreign Minister Huang Hua pointedly praised the success of the Pol Pot-led Khmer Rouge leadership in thwarting ‘the sabotage attempts’ of ‘foreign and domestic enemies’.<sup>173</sup> Set in the context of the recent hostilities, in a clear signal to Hanoi, Hua further declared that Beijing and Phnom Penh were ‘close comrades-in-arms’.<sup>174</sup> Yet, in a signal to both Phnom Penh and Hanoi to exercise restraint, Beijing was quiet for approximately ten weeks between February and April, at a time when Phnom Penh would have most required Chinese support.<sup>175</sup>

### Stirring the Pot

Amid the rising Cambodian–Vietnamese conflict and after a year of political purges, particularly of veteran Indochina Communist Party members within the Khmer Rouge, Pol Pot announced the existence of the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK) on 27 September 1977.<sup>176</sup> The issue of Cambodia’s relations with Vietnam was expressed symbolically over the date of the founding of the Communist Party of Kampuchea, and whether its roots lay in the ICP. Rather than dating the birth of the CPK from 30 September 1951, when the ICP split to form three separate national parties, Pol Pot dated the party’s first congress as 30 September 1960, when the Workers’ Party of Kampuchea was created by Pol Pot. By this act, Pol Pot disavowed any lineal descent from the ICP and, by implication, Vietnam’s leadership of the Indochina region.<sup>177</sup>

---

<sup>171</sup>) Ibid.

<sup>172</sup>) Ibid., p. 136.

<sup>173</sup>) Cited in *ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>174</sup>) Cited in *ibid.*

<sup>175</sup>) Ibid., pp. 136–137.

<sup>176</sup>) Sagar, *Major Political Events in Indo-China*, p. 132.

<sup>177</sup>) David Chandler, ‘Revising the past in Democratic Kampuchea: when was the birthday

From Hanoi's perspective, Pol Pot's declaration was a rebuff to Vietnam and marked a turning point. Hanoi realised that any attempt to control Indochina would necessitate the removal of Pol Pot. In a Vietnamese message to the CPK on 28 September 1977, the concept of a special Vietnamese–Cambodian relationship was stressed. The term 'special relationship' appeared three times in the short message.<sup>178</sup> In a clear sign of Phnom Penh's displeasure at Hanoi's characterisation of bilateral relations, the reference to a 'special relationship' was deleted when broadcast in Cambodia.<sup>179</sup>

### The Point of No Return

Relations between Hanoi and Phnom Penh were at boiling point. Vietnamese General Giap visited the border in late July and early August 1977.<sup>180</sup> In September, Cambodian artillery shelled Vietnamese border villages. Infantry attacks were conducted on villages in Dong Thap and Tay Ninh provinces, killing more than 1,000 Vietnamese civilians.<sup>181</sup> The Vietnamese responded with a series of limited counter-attacks into Cambodia. Despite these events, a not insignificant portion of American intelligence and some prominent Southeast Asian experts in the US academic community<sup>182</sup> were sceptical that Vietnam would invade Cambodia.<sup>183</sup> For their part, the Chinese tried to restrain the Khmer Rouge in their relations with the Vietnamese.

At the end of September 1977, Pol Pot visited Beijing just as border hostilities between the Vietnamese and Cambodian started up again.<sup>184</sup> The Khmer Rouge leader was criticised by the Chinese for his border policy.<sup>185</sup> The Chinese leader Hua Guofeng encouraged the Khmer Rouge leader not to exacer-

---

of the Party? Notes and comments', *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 56, No. 2 (Summer 1983), pp. 288–300.

<sup>178</sup> Eero Palmujoki, *Vietnam and the World: Marxist–Leninist Doctrine and the Changes in International Relations, 1975–1993* (London: Macmillan, 1997), p. 94.

<sup>179</sup> Ross, *Indochina Tangle*, p. 148.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>181</sup> O'Dowd, *Last Maoist War*, p. 36.

<sup>182</sup> MacAlister Brown and Joseph Zasloff, *Communist Indochina and US Foreign Policy: Postwar Realities* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1978), p. 68.

<sup>183</sup> Interview with Professor Karl Jackson (Johns Hopkins University) in Washington, DC, in April 2005. Jackson was a participant in Central Intelligence Agency discussions with academics on Vietnamese intentions with respect to Cambodia.

<sup>184</sup> Ross, *Indochina Tangle*, p. 157.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158.



bate relations with the Vietnamese communists. Hua urged Pot to resolve the conflict with the Vietnamese.<sup>186</sup> The Chinese were actively trying to cool down relations between Hanoi and Phnom Penh. While Pol Pot was in Beijing, the Chinese arranged for Vietnamese Deputy Foreign Minister Phan Hien to visit and meet Pot twice.<sup>187</sup> The meetings were not successful, with the Vietnamese reporting afterwards that the Khmer Rouge delegation were only interested in an apology for Vietnamese aggression and attempts to overthrow their leadership.<sup>188</sup> At a news conference in late October, Deng Xiaoping stressed that the conflict between Phnom Penh and Hanoi needed to be resolved through negotiations by both parties themselves. In an indication that the Chinese were trying to be impartial, Deng stressed that ‘we ourselves do not judge what is just or erroneous’.<sup>189</sup>

As hostilities continued along the Cambodian–Vietnamese border, a watershed in Sino–Vietnamese relations was reached during Le Duan’s visit to Beijing during 20–25 November 1977.<sup>190</sup> Le Duan had just led a delegation to Moscow to attend the sixtieth anniversary of the October Revolution. According to the official Chinese Foreign Ministry history of Chinese foreign relations, Le Duan was interested in additional Chinese aid. In response to this request, Chinese leader Hua Guofeng noted that the Chinese side felt ‘uneasy’ (*women gandao buan*).<sup>191</sup> He stated that ‘we both have differences in principle (*yuanze fenqi*)’ and that ‘a few disputes have intensified (*zhengduan jihua*)’, which have caused a ‘deterioration in relations’.<sup>192</sup>

Citing economic difficulties that China had been experiencing in the previous few years, Hua told Le Duan that Beijing was unable to agree to the

---

<sup>186</sup> Hua told Pot: ‘We do not want the problems between Vietnam and Cambodia to get worse. We want the two parties to find a solution by diplomatic means in a spirit of mutual comprehension and concessions. However, we are in agreement ... that the resolution of the problem via negotiations is not simple. One must be very vigilant with the Vietnamese, not only in diplomatic terms but even more when it comes to defending the leadership brain, which is the most important problem.’ Cited in Christopher E. Goscha, ‘Vietnam, the Third Indochina War and the meltdown of Asian internationalism’, in Westad and Quinn-Judge (eds), *Third Indochina War*, p. 174.

<sup>187</sup> Ross, *Indochina Tangle*, p. 159.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>189</sup> Cited in *ibid.*, p. 160.

<sup>190</sup> Wang, *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo waijiaoshi, 1970–1978*, pp. 66–67; Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia*, pp. 184–185.

<sup>191</sup> Wang, *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo waijiaoshi*, p. 66.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*

aid the Vietnamese leader was requesting.<sup>193</sup> According to the Chinese Foreign Ministry account, upon hearing Hua's response, Le declared: 'On various questions, our two countries have different viewpoints, [but the] most important difference relates to how we view the Soviet Union and the United States.'<sup>194</sup> In his banquet speech Le Duan issued a stern message to his Chinese hosts and implicitly criticised the Chinese as a reactionary power:

The Vietnamese people's most pressing wish is to live in peace; and while establishing and strengthening friendly co-operative relationships, to be able to contribute to the peace of regional and global peace and, at the same time, they are determined to not allow imperialism and any reactionary powers to violate their independence and freedom.<sup>195</sup>

As was the case in Le Duan's visit to China in 1975, the Vietnamese did not host a customary reciprocal banquet. The next day, the Xinhua news agency published a condemnation of COMECON; Vietnam had recently applied for membership in this Soviet-bloc organisation.<sup>196</sup>

Soon after Le Duan's visit to Beijing, the Chinese still sought to mediate between Hanoi and Phnom Penh. On 3 December 1977, Vice-Premier Chen Yonggui led a delegation to Cambodia.<sup>197</sup> In the context of tensions on the Cambodian–Vietnamese border, Chen's lack of strong support for Phnom Penh's defence policy efforts was a rebuke of sorts. Indeed, the statements at the farewell banquet for Chen indicate strongly that it was taken as such.<sup>198</sup> Soon after Chen's trip, rising tensions caused by Khmer Rouge incursions into Vietnamese territory culminated in a massive Vietnamese attack against Cambodia.<sup>199</sup> Hanoi issued instructions to prepare for a massive attack on Cambodia involving an estimated force of between 30,000 and 60,000 troops,

---

<sup>193</sup> Ibid. However, some agreements were reached during this period. On 3 November 1978 and 10 January 1979, agreements were signed on science and technology as well as goods and payment.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid., pp. 67.

<sup>195</sup> Guo Ming *et al.*, *Xiandai Zhong Yue guanxi ziliao xuanbian*, p. 970.

<sup>196</sup> Hsin Ping, 'Drawing together under Moscow's pressure', *Xinhua*, November 1977, in FBIS-PRC, 21 November 1977, pp. A3–5.

<sup>197</sup> Ross, *Indochina Tangle*, pp. 160–161.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> Stephen Herder, 'The Kampuchean–Vietnamese conflict', in *Southeast Asian Affairs 1979* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Affairs, 1979), pp. 176–185; Gilks, *Breakdown of the Sino–Vietnamese Alliance*, p. 85.

which occurred on 16 December.<sup>200</sup> Six Vietnamese divisions invaded Cambodia.<sup>201</sup> Phnom Penh broke diplomatic relations with Hanoi at this time.<sup>202</sup> China sought to act as a restraining influence. On 9 January and again on 20 February 1978, Vietnamese Vice Foreign Minister Phan Hien visited Beijing for discussions with the Cambodian government.<sup>203</sup> In between these visits, on 18 January 1978, Zhou Enlai's widow, Vice Premier Deng Yingchao, visited Phnom Penh in an attempt to get negotiations started.<sup>204</sup> She met with strong resistance.<sup>205</sup> Despite Deng Xiaoping's subsequent statement that conflicts in Asian should be dealt with by means of the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence, it was clear that China's mediation had not been successful.<sup>206</sup>

Events moved quickly and Beijing and Hanoi were set on a collision course over Cambodia. By early 1978, Vietnamese officials and So Phim, the Khmer Rouge party head in the strategic eastern zone of Cambodia, began to discuss plans to overthrow Pol Pot by means of a military uprising backed by Vietnam.<sup>207</sup> In mid-February 1978, at the Fourth Plenum of the Fourth Central Committee of the Vietnamese Communist Party, a proposal was approved to remove the Pol Pot regime by means of a general uprising. The Vietnamese strategy was foiled by the Khmer Rouge, and So Phim's forces came under attack over the next few months.<sup>208</sup> So Phim eventually committed suicide, and his lieutenant Heng Samrin fled to Vietnam where he formed the Kampuchean National United Front for National Salvation (KNUFNS), which was to play a part in the subsequent Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia.<sup>209</sup>

The Chinese saw the hand of the Soviet Union behind Vietnam's actions. Indeed, throughout the period covered below, the Soviet press encouraged Vietnamese opposition to China.<sup>210</sup> Not surprisingly, against the backdrop of continuing Cambodian–Vietnamese border clashes, on 19 January 1978

---

<sup>200</sup> O'Dowd., *Last Maoist War*, p. 36.

<sup>201</sup> Ross, *Indochina Tangle*, p. 156.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

<sup>203</sup> Gilks, *Breakdown of the Sino–Vietnamese Alliance*, pp. 188–189.

<sup>204</sup> Ross, *Indochina Tangle*, pp. 158, 162.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid., p. 163.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

<sup>207</sup> Duiker, *China and Vietnam*, p. 78.

<sup>208</sup> Gilks, *Breakdown of the Sino–Vietnamese Alliance*, p. 201.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid.

<sup>210</sup> Ross, *Indochina Tangle*, p. 179.

Xinhua argued that the Soviet Union was the primary cause of the turmoil.<sup>211</sup> Subsequent developments in Vietnamese policy towards its ethnic Chinese minority convinced Beijing that Hanoi was determined to pursue a policy of alignment with the Soviet Union, in opposition to China.<sup>212</sup> At the Fourth Plenum of the VCP in February 1978, the decision was taken to abolish capitalist trade in South Vietnam and to invade Cambodia.<sup>213</sup> Since the ethnic Chinese in Vietnam occupied a significant role in the economy of South Vietnam, they bore the brunt of the decision.

On 23 March 1978, Hanoi announced that all private enterprises would be nationalised.<sup>214</sup> In a campaign characterised by the use of violence, by mid-April the Vietnamese authorities had seized more than 30,000 private enterprises in the South, the vast majority of which were owned by ethnic Chinese.<sup>215</sup> The crackdown spurred a mass exodus, both across the Sino–Vietnamese border in the north and into the South China Sea. Compounding the desperate financial situation of the ethnic Chinese, on 23 April Hanoi announced plans to unify the currencies of northern and southern Vietnam.<sup>216</sup> The previous currencies in use in North and South Vietnam were to be traded in for the new unified currency at an unfavourable rate of exchange.

Beijing finally responded publicly to the crisis on 30 April, expressing concern for the refugees and indicating that it was monitoring the situation.<sup>217</sup> On 30 April, as Sino–Vietnamese tensions escalated during the ethnic Chinese exodus from Vietnam, a coup in Afghanistan installed a pro-Soviet leader, Nur

---

<sup>211</sup> Commentary, ‘Why is the Soviet Union spreading lies and slanders on the incident of armed conflicts in Kampuchea?’ *Xinhua*, 19 January 1978, FBIS-PRC, pp. A8–9. This article is reproduced in Chen, *China and the Three Worlds*, pp. 283–285.

<sup>212</sup> Until 1954, China had considered all Chinese living outside China as Chinese nationals. In 1954, at the first Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung, Indonesia, Zhou Enlai announced a change in policy. According to Zhou, Beijing was willing to reach agreements with friendly states via a treaty or communiqué. Once such a document was signed, ethnic Chinese could choose either to voluntarily adopt local citizenship and cease to be Chinese nationals, or remain Chinese nationals while living outside of China. In 1955, Hanoi and Beijing reached a tentative agreement on the status on the ethnic Chinese issue in North Vietnam. This agreement was never published and became an issue in the post-1975 era. For a general statement of China’s and Vietnam’s versions of the agreement see Leo Suryadinata, *China and the ASEAN States* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Academic, 2005), pp. 33–35.

<sup>213</sup> Duiker, *Roots of Conflict*, pp. 73–74.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>215</sup> Gilks, *Breakdown of the Sino–Vietnamese Alliance*, p. 195.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 197.

Mohammed Taraki. The regime was recognised by Vietnam on 3 May. Viewed from Beijing, this was the Soviet Union taking another step in its encirclement of China and abandonment of the Chinese by the Vietnamese. On 3 May, the separate currencies in Vietnam were unified, provoking a further flow of refugees.<sup>218</sup> In another case of the Soviets making provocative moves during a time of maximum crisis, on 9 May Soviet forces penetrated into Chinese territory, on the pretext of pursuing a Soviet citizen.<sup>219</sup> Soon after this incident, Soviet naval forces moved towards Southeast Asia, and in late May they conducted manoeuvres in the South China Sea.<sup>220</sup>

In the face of an increasing exodus, Beijing announced on 26 May that it was dispatching ships to Vietnam to retrieve these fleeing ethnic Chinese. Unfortunately, since Hanoi insisted that the ships use ports in Cholon, they were inaccessible to those wanting to leave.<sup>221</sup> The ships eventually returned to China without picking up any ethnic Chinese. Deng Xiaoping stated bluntly that ‘Vietnam is leaning toward the Soviet Union, which is the enemy of China’.<sup>222</sup> On 16 June, China announced that it was closing its consulate in Ho Chi Minh City as well as Vietnam’s consular offices in the Chinese cities of Guangzhou, Kunming and Nanning.<sup>223</sup>

It was in the context of escalating Sino–Vietnamese conflict in midsummer 1978 that the Vietnamese Central Committee met at its Fifth Plenum and approved a new plan to launch an invasion to overthrow the Pol Pot regime.<sup>224</sup> Vietnamese cadres were told in June 1978 that Vietnam was planning to attack Cambodia.<sup>225</sup> On 28 June 1978, for the first time, Vietnam was referred to by the Chinese press as a ‘“Cuba” in Asia’, the implication being that, like Cuba, Vietnam was actively co-operating with Moscow’s foreign policy in the Third World.<sup>226</sup> On 29 June, Vietnam was formally admitted into COMECON.<sup>227</sup> At the end of June 1978 there was a substantial increase in Chinese military aid

---

<sup>218)</sup> Ross, *Indochina Tangle*, p. 181.

<sup>219)</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>220)</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>221)</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184.

<sup>222)</sup> Cited in *ibid.*, p. 187.

<sup>223)</sup> Guo Ming *et al.*, *Xiandai Zhong Yue guanxi ziliao xuanbian*, pp. 999–1000.

<sup>224)</sup> Porter, ‘Vietnamese policy’, in Elliot (ed.), *Third Indochina Conflict*, p. 113.

<sup>225)</sup> Interview between Vietnamese defector Bui Tin and Steven Morris. Cited in Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia*, p. 108.

<sup>226)</sup> Ross, *Indochina Tangle*, p. 189.

<sup>227)</sup> Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia*, p. 212.

to Cambodia.<sup>228</sup> For their part, the Vietnamese were building up their forces along the border with Cambodia. Preparations for a Vietnamese invasion were widely reported in the international and Chinese press.<sup>229</sup>

On 3 July 1978, Beijing halted all aid to Hanoi.<sup>230</sup> This was the final suspension in a staged process.<sup>231</sup> Then, in late July through early August, Cambodian Defence Minister Son Sen visited Beijing.<sup>232</sup> Sino–Vietnamese talks in August and September on the overseas Chinese issue stalled.<sup>233</sup> A Rubicon had been crossed. As Robert Ross notes, ‘for the Chinese leadership, the issue was no longer how to minimize Vietnamese security co-operation with the Soviet Union but how to prevent Vietnamese cooperation with Soviet encirclement of the PRC from extending into Kampuchea [Cambodia]’.<sup>234</sup>

The Vietnamese were determined to oppose the Chinese efforts to limit Hanoi’s influence in Cambodia. On 10 September, in a speech in Hanoi celebrating the thirty-third anniversary of the Vietnamese declaration of independence in 1945, Pham Van Dong vividly described China’s use of ‘the Pol Pot–Ieng Sary clique’ as a tool to undermine Vietnam’s security.<sup>235</sup> Pham further added that this had been a concerted strategy since 1975 and that the Vietnamese people could no longer tolerate it.<sup>236</sup> In a September 1978 meeting in Hanoi between Vietnamese leader Le Duan and the Soviet ambassador to Vietnam, Le stated his intention ‘to solve fully this question [of Cambodia] by the beginning of 1979’.<sup>237</sup> He further stated that the initiative lay with Vietnam since the Chinese would need to station at least ten divisions in Cambodia to deter a Vietnamese attack. According to Le, for the Chinese to transport these troops to Cambodia by sea was a ‘very difficult matter’.<sup>238</sup> It was but a short step to a formal Soviet–Vietnamese alliance. On 3 November 1978, the

---

<sup>228</sup> Ross, *Indochina Tangle*, p. 193.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 207–208.

<sup>230</sup> Guo Ming *et al.*, *Xiandai Zhong Yue guanxi ziliao xuanbian*, p. 1094; Ross, *Indochina Tangle*, p. 187.

<sup>231</sup> The first curtailment was in February 1977, the second in June 1977, and the third in November 1977. Ross, *Indochina Tangle*, pp. 102–103, 150.

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 193.

<sup>233</sup> Qu, *Zhongguo waijiao wushinian*, pp. 430–432.

<sup>234</sup> Ross, *Indochina Tangle*, p. 189.

<sup>235</sup> Chengdu junqu, *Yenan wenti zhiliao xuanbian*, Vol. 1, pp. 134–135, 137.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 134–137.

<sup>237</sup> Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia*, p. 108.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.

Soviet–Vietnamese Treaty was signed.<sup>239</sup> The subsequent Vietnamese offensive against Cambodia took place between mid-November and 13 December.<sup>240</sup>

China's reaction to these developments was to prepare the international community for a vigorous Chinese response to the newly consolidated Hanoi–Moscow axis. Relations with Japan and the ASEAN states were strengthened. Deng Xiaoping visited Tokyo in August 1978, where he signed the Sino–Japanese Treaty of Peace and Friendship.<sup>241</sup> Significantly, it contained an 'anti-hegemony' clause that was directed against the Soviet Union. Then in November, to counter a Southeast Asian trip made by Vietnamese Deputy Foreign Minister Phan Hien in July and Pham Van Dong in September, Deng made a tour of Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand.<sup>242</sup> Deng was particularly concerned with securing Thai support for its containment policy against the Vietnamese.<sup>243</sup>

The diplomatic work having been initiated, China took a hard line with Vietnam. A 13 December note from Beijing to Hanoi warned that there were 'limits on China's forbearance and restraint'.<sup>244</sup> On 25 December 1978, in the *People's Daily*, Hanoi was warned again.<sup>245</sup> As the *People's Daily* was being read in China that very morning, about 150,000 Vietnamese troops invaded Cambodia, in the second phase of a Vietnamese assault.<sup>246</sup> By 7 January 1979, the Vietnamese had seized Phnom Penh.<sup>247</sup> Estimates suggest that 10,000 Vietnamese and 15,000 Khmer Rouge soldiers had been killed.<sup>248</sup> In the third phase, the Vietnamese moved northwest, and with the capture of Sisophon had taken the Khmer Rouge's main supply route to Thailand. The fourth and final phase lasted from the end of January to March and involved the consolidation of Vietnamese gains and defence against counter-attacks.<sup>249</sup> Following the

<sup>239</sup> Ibid., pp. 213–215; Pike, *Vietnam and the Soviet Union*, pp. 184–187.

<sup>240</sup> O'Dowd, *Last Maoist War*, p. 38.

<sup>241</sup> A Chinese account of Deng's visit can be found in Xie, *Zhongguo dangdai waijiaoshi, 1949–2001*, pp. 314–315.

<sup>242</sup> Ross, *Indochina Tangle*, pp. 221–222.

<sup>243</sup> For further examination of Deng's discussions with Thai Prime Minister Kriangsak Chamanand that relies on Vietnamese accounts see Goscha, *Vietnam, the Third Indochina War*, pp. 178–179.

<sup>244</sup> Guo Ming *et al.*, *Xiandai Zhong Yue guanxi ziliao xuanbian*, p. 1014.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid., pp. 1020–1021.

<sup>246</sup> O'Dowd, *Last Maoist War*, p. 39.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid.

Vietnamese invasion, while visiting the United States from late January to early February 1979, Deng Xiaoping informed the Carter administration that Vietnam would pay a price for its actions. According to Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Carter's National Security Advisor, Deng told his American hosts that the Chinese 'consider it necessary to put a restraint on the wild ambitions of the Vietnamese and to give them an appropriate limited lesson'.<sup>250</sup> True to Deng's words, soon after returning to China, the Chinese launched a border war against Vietnam. This was followed up by a decade-long period of Chinese support for the Khmer Rouge forces, designed with the aim of extricating Vietnamese military forces from Cambodia.

### The End of an 'Indestructible Friendship'

In a speech at the Mass Rally in Da Binh Square, Hanoi, on 12 May 1963, the visiting Chinese leader Liu Shaoqi characterised the Sino–Vietnamese relationship as a 'a militant friendship, forged in the storm of revolution, a great class friendship that is proletarian internationalist in character, a friendship that is indestructible'.<sup>251</sup> This article has sought to show how the increasing Soviet–Vietnamese co-operation, conducted in the context of a larger framework of Sino–Soviet conflict during the 1975–1978, period resulted in escalating intra-Sino–Vietnamese-alliance conflict, and the termination of this once indestructible friendship. In essence, the escalating Sino–Soviet conflict was the lighted match that found a haystack in the Sino–Vietnamese relationship. Thus, a significant implication of this study is that we have to view bilateral differences between the Chinese and Vietnamese communists within the broader context of Sino–Soviet relations. Here, it is argued, a revised version of principal enemy theory provides us with a distinct causal mechanism to explain developments in the Sino–Soviet–Vietnamese triangle. In theory, Hanoi could have continued a balancing game of taking aid from both sides as it had done for the preceding decade. As it turned out, Hanoi was clearly swayed by the Soviets, who were at

---

<sup>250</sup> Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 409. What exactly the 'lesson' was that the Chinese meant to teach the Vietnamese in *military* terms was not spelled out in any detail, and was ambiguous. On this point, see King C. Chen, *China's War with Vietnam, 1979: Issues, Decisions, and Implications* (Stanford: Hoover Institution, 1987), p. 95; Andrew Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force: Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 142.

<sup>251</sup> Foreign Languages Press, *Joint Statement of Liu Shaoqi and President Ho Chi Minh* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1963), p. 19.



once able and willing to provide for Vietnam's economic and national security defence requirements. In exchange, the Vietnamese agreed to be participants in Moscow's encirclement policy that was targeted against China. In return, the Chinese sought to punish the Vietnamese by supporting the anti-Vietnamese Khmer Rouge in Cambodia.



Copyright of European Journal of East Asian Studies is the property of Brill Academic Publishers and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.