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## Why the Russia-Ukraine War is Not the Same as the Sino-Vietnamese War of 1979

**Vietnam's alliance with the Soviet Union put limits on how far China could go. Those limits don't exist in the current situation.**

By Khang Vu

In the early morning hours of February 24, Russia officially launched an invasion of Ukraine, marking a major escalation to the Russo-Ukrainian conflict that started in 2014. The war shocked the rest of the world and Vietnam was no exception. Russia's invasion, after failing to secure a pledge from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) not to expand its membership to Ukraine, reminded many Vietnamese of the Chinese invasion of Vietnam in 1979, after the country tilted toward the Soviet Union in the aftermath of the signing of its Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with Moscow the previous year.

Many Vietnamese netizens have drawn an analogy between the two invasions: a big power, unsatisfied with a small power's foreign policy, decides to launch an invasion to teach the small power a lesson. In this sense, China launching a lightning invasion of Vietnam in the early morning hours of February 17, 1979, involving more than 600,000 troops bears a close resemblance to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

While it is tempting to draw this kind of connection between the two events, such an analogy misses one fundamental difference between Vietnam in 1979 and Ukraine in 2022. Namely, China invaded a country backed by a superpower with which it had an official treaty, while Ukraine is not officially part of any military alliances with the West. While the goal of the two invasions may be similar – to undermine Vietnam and Ukraine's belief in the security commitments of the Soviet Union and NATO, respectively – the presence of a major power ally in the case of Vietnam significantly restrained how Chinese leaders would conduct the war. In the case of Russia, so far there has been little evidence that the country felt any restraint by NATO when contemplating its war plans.

An alliance is different from an alignment in one major sense: whether there exists a legal document that explicitly states that one side must come to the defense of another when there is a military threat. The alliance treaty is significant in several aspects. First, it creates hand tying mechanisms that can generate costs if one side does not uphold its commitment. Second, it [lays](#) the foundation for military cooperation before a war starts to increase chance of victory and lowers the costs of military assistance. An alignment, /on the other hand, is based on an expectation, but not an obligation, of support when a conflict arises. Vietnam's 1978 alliance with the Soviets put it in a stronger position to deter and defend against China than Ukraine's alignment with NATO.

There is no doubt that China's invasion of Vietnam in 1979 was launched first and foremost as a result of Hanoi's alliance with the Soviet Union. China scholars attribute the decision to invade Vietnam to the "principal enemy theory": that China's policy towards a country is a result of that country's policy towards China's principal enemy. According to this theory, China would turn [hostile](#) to a country if it improved its relations with China's principal enemy. China's motive

to prevent a hostile alliance from threatening the homeland may be similar to the Russian motivations for invading Ukraine, but the scope of the two wars is likely to be very different.

Before the war and Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia, China's leader Deng Xiaoping saw the probability of the Soviet retaliation along China's northern border as one of the most important factors behind the limited scope of the invasion. The Chinese leadership agreed that it should not threaten the survival of the Hanoi government, and that the war should be confined to the border areas. China's military would withdraw after seizing Vietnam's border cities. Importantly, China intentionally made clear to the public that the invasion would be limited in duration to avoid a Soviet intervention.

It is worth recalling that the Soviet Union stationed 44 divisions along the Sino-Soviet border at the time of China's invasion. Soviet deployments had greatly worried Deng when he was probing a normalization of Sino-U.S. relations with the Jimmy Carter administration in 1978. When China invaded Vietnam, it did not seek to overthrow the Hanoi government out of concern that it might prompt a Soviet intervention. The Soviet Union, although it evoked the 1978 treaty, believed the invasion would be limited, exactly as Deng intended to signal, and it only provided military supplies and advisors to Hanoi.

This is not what is happening in Ukraine. Russian President Vladimir Putin did not signal that the invasion would be short or limited in scope. The Pentagon has warned that Putin wants to decapitate the Kyiv government and install pro-Russian figures. Moreover, Russia does not face any immediate threats on its border to the scale China feared in 1979. Russia is supposedly confident that its military partnership with China is strong enough that it can leave its eastern flank exposed and move troops westward for an invasion of Ukraine. Putin also covered his troops in Ukraine with the threat to use nuclear weapons if the West intervenes. In short, Putin's war aims are maximal and he seems to be prepared to pay a high price for them, in a stark contrast to Deng's limited and in many ways cautious "lesson" to Vietnam.

The difference in Vietnam having an official ally while Ukraine does not renders infeasible any attempts to use the Sino-Vietnamese war to predict Russian behavior. We cannot even guess if China's invasion of Vietnam would have been limited in the absence of a Vietnam-Soviet alliance, or whether China would have invaded had Hanoi never tilted to the Soviet side in the first place. Counterfactual reasoning is rarely easy.

Importantly, some netizens in Vietnam have expressed worries that Russia's invasion of Ukraine reminds them of the threat of a potential surprise Chinese invasion should Vietnam seriously consider joining a U.S.-led alliance against China in the future. However, this worry is premature since China's willingness to punish Vietnam for its closer military relations with the U.S. depends on many factors not necessarily linked to the lessons of the Russian invasion. China would more likely worry about the expectation of U.S. support for Vietnam at the moment of invasion, the China-U.S. military balance in East Asia, Washington's military commitments to Taiwan, the level of Russian support (which would dictate China's willingness to expose its northern flank), or North Korean nuclear issues. Calculations at the time of action are even more important than lessons learned from history. Vietnam's irrational fear of a Chinese invasion may hamper improvements in U.S.-Vietnam relations that are necessary to check Chinese ambitions in the South China Sea, which counterintuitively may invite more Chinese aggression when China sees the U.S. security commitment to Vietnam is low.

Even with perfect information of each other's intentions, a war can take on its own momentum and may progress beyond the initial aims of the instigating party. Hence, it is always important to note that war is complicated and that we should be cautious of drawing hasty, superficial historical analogies.

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