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MAO'S DOMINOES? VIETNAM AND CAMBODIA

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'You have a row of dominoes set up, you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly,' President Eisenhower analogised in 1954. 'So you could have a beginning of a disintegration that would have the most profound influences.' Though discredited today, the domino theory gave a fairly accurate account of Chinese Communist ambitions in Indochina. Confidential conversations between Chinese and Vietnamese leaders from the 1950s to the 1970s turned regularly to an overarching project of world revolution. The horror of the Vietnam War was explicitly justified because, in Zhou Enlai's words, it was fought 'for the world revolution' as well as for Vietnam. It was, in China's view, a key domino whose fall would have ramifications for the rest of Asia. For this reason, China threw some $20 billion in aid at North Vietnam, trained thousands of its students and cadres in China, and supplied myriads of useful items: roads, bullets and uniforms, soy sauce and lard, ping-pong balls and mouth organs.

In strategy discussions with Vietnamese leaders, Mao casually projected his sense of ownership across South East Asia. While discussing a road-building programme in Laos, for example, he airily remarked: 'Because we will fight large-scale battles in the future, it will be good if we also build roads to Thailand.' In the early 1970s, Vietnamese Communist leaders like Le Duan – later the sworn enemy of Chinese influence, a man who in private called Mao 'that bastard' – were similarly gung-ho about spreading the revolution across South East Asia, announcing that 'We want to smash the US–Japan alliance as well as the alliance between the US, Japan, and the regional bourgeois class. We have to establish a world front that will be built first by some core countries and later enlarged to include African and Latin American countries.'

China had for centuries served as a political, cultural, linguistic model for Vietnam. Indeed, for large stretches of its history, parts of Vietnam had been directly ruled by China; the rest of the country, lying beyond direct Chinese sovereignty, Chinese emperors traditionally regarded as 'ours'. As a logical extension of Chinese domination, Vietnamese Communism from its very beginnings was entangled with that of its northern big brother. After graduating in 1924 from the Comintern's University of the Toilers of the East in Moscow, Ho Chi Minh went to Canton (Guangzhou), in south China, which at that point was the centre of the Chinese Communist revolution. While in China, Ho set up cells of a Vietnamese revolutionary party fighting French colonial rule, a precursor to his later Vietnamese Workers' Party (VWP). The CCP freely helped Ho with his political ambitions, partly bankrolling a Special Political Institute for the Vietnamese revolution (complete with hidden escape trapdoor),

not far from the CCP's own headquarters in Canton. Ho shared with Mao from the very start an intellectual and ideological faith in the vanguard role to be played by the peasantry in a future revolution. In autumn 1938, Ho made a pilgrimage to the headquarters of the Chinese revolution in Yan'an and hailed the CCP as 'the elder brother of the Vietnamese people'.

Successfully feigning Chineseness – he spoke and wrote Chinese well enough to pen classical poems – saved Ho's life at least once. In January 1933, Ho spent an uncomfortable few weeks in a Shanghai that, six years after Chiang Kai-shek's brutal purge of Communists, was crawling with French Sûreté agents eager to arrest the Vietnamese revolutionary. With the help of underground CCP members, he finally managed to set sail for Moscow, via Vladivostok, from Shanghai's bustling international dock on the Yangtze, boarding his ship disguised as a wealthy Chinese businessman. In Vietnam in 1940, as he plotted the insurgency that would eventually end French colonial rule in 1954, he passed himself off as a Chinese journalist, with the Chinese name that would later win him global celebrity: Ho Chi Minh (Hu Zhiming in Mandarin pronunciation – Hu Who Enlightens).

Ho's friendship with the post-1949 Chinese leadership stretched back to the 1920s, when both he and his later Chinese comrades were finding their way in the revolution. He first met Zhou Enlai in Paris in the early 1920s, then renewed that friendship in Canton in the mid-1920s, and again during the Second World War. Whenever Ho visited China after 1949, he inevitably received red-carpet treatment: Zhu De, founder of the People's Liberation Army, took him to the cinema; Mao told anyone listening that he and Ho 'were kinsmen'. Ho Chi Minh was not the only Vietnamese Communist to venerate Mao and his revolution before the declaration of his Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) in 1945. Vo Nguyen Giap, one of the chief architects of the military strategy that so demoralised first the French and then the US armies that battled Vietnamese Communist forces between the 1950s and '70s, also read the works of Mao in the late 1930s, with a view to making use of Chinese strategies for guerrilla and protracted war. Dang Xuan Khu, general secretary of the Indochinese Communist Party from 1941, expressed his admiration for the CCP through changing his name, sometime after 1936, to Truong Chinh: Vietnamese for Long March (a switch that the Chinese found 'deeply gratifying'). Most of the Vietnamese leadership, remarked one insider, were plagiaristic 'disciples of Mao'. Once Chinese Communist armies gained breathing space in their own civil war with the Nationalists, they helped train Ho's officers and intelligence agents in Ho's pro-independence force, the Viet Minh, for the war with the colonial French Army that began in 1946. Truong Chinh explicitly modelled Viet Minh tactics on Mao's military writings. 'Helping the people of Vietnam with their struggle is our unshirkable international duty,' Liu Shaoqi told Luo Guibo, his special envoy to Vietnam, in 1950. Luo's posting was not a cushy one. During a two-week meeting in the jungle with the Vietnamese politburo, he was accommodated in a hut made of bamboo and sunflower leaves. 'The tropical miasma was overwhelming,' he recalled thirty years later. 'The rats came out to enjoy themselves, the centipedes danced, poisonous snakes had fun with us by squeezing into my boxes of documents and my cotton quilt, while enormous moths and mosquitoes circled the mosquito nets at night, the latter taking large bites out of me whenever they got the chance.' Liu had personally briefed Luo to offer the Vietnamese a crash course in Maoist warfare, while Chinese military advisers provided essential training at regimental and battalion levels.

Without Chinese assistance, the demoralisation of French armies in the first Indochinese war would have been unthinkable. In 1950, China also dispatched to North Vietnam the Chinese commander of Ho's choice: Chen Geng, a bookish-looking general with a robust Communist pedigree – he had survived the purges of the 1920s, the Long March, Rectification and the civil war. Chen, like other Chinese advisers in Vietnam, vigorously promoted Mao's 'People's War', telling the Viet Minh they should 'concentrate [their] forces and destroy the enemy troops by separating them' – just as the Chinese Communists had done in their war against the Guomindang. He taught the Vietnamese to observe Maoist military discipline: publicly praising role models, commemorating victories and martyrs, 'rectifying' – *zhengfeng* in Chinese, *chinh huan* in Vietnamese – party and army. 'Mao's military thought', Giap agreed, was 'very applicable to Vietnam'. At moments of military crisis, China bolstered Vietnam's frontier with its own soldiers. Every decision that Chinese military advisers made on the ground was immediately fed back to the CCP leadership; little happened, it seemed, without Beijing knowing of it. In 1950, during a military campaign to secure Viet Minh bases on the border with China, Mao himself directed the closing stages of the campaign. 'If you can properly solve these…problems,' he told the advisers in a bossy telegram, 'victory will be yours.'

In 1990, Bui Tin – a loquacious Vietnamese colonel turned journalist who had travelled in the tank that smashed through the gates of Saigon's presidential palace in April 1975 as the city fell to Communist armies – defected to France, disillusioned by the corrupt authoritarianism of Vietnamese Communism in power. Five years later, he published a memoir which was, among many things, an acidic account of Chinese influence on the Vietnamese Communist movement. 'Maoism after 1951 began to stultify our consciences and has caused lasting harm right up till now…Repression was mistaken for enlightenment and progress.' Coming from a well-heeled, Franco-Sinophile background, Bui Tin had studied at an elite francophone school.Writing in exile, he recalled the cosmopolitan routine of his childhood Sundays: 'All day…we would eat only French food with knives and forks on a table set with napkins. Bowls and chopsticks were forbidden. So too were Vietnamese clothes. My brother and I had to wear European-style shirts and shorts. My father would also read French poems to us.' He entered the anti-colonial, Communist resistance as a young patriot with a personal tragedy: his mother had been shot dead through the chest, in her own kitchen, by French troops in 1948. Bui saw the Indochina war as an anti-colonial conflict until 1950, when North Vietnam fastened itself to the new People's Republic of China, Mao suits became de rigueur and curly hair a bourgeois, imperialist abomination.

> The ever-increasing amount of military and civilian aid from China enabled the Viet Minh to strengthen its position. But…tension grew…large numbers of Chinese advisers arrived…The friendly, even cosy atmosphere which had previously existed disappeared with talk of orthodox class warfare. Marxism had come to Vietnam via Maoism…What is the Communist Party? It plays the leading role in every aspect of society. It is constant, correct and absolute…The individual is as worthless as a grain of sand, and to be crushed underfoot…Chinese books, films and songs were everywhere…Mao Tse-tung's song 'The East is Red' assumed the status of an official anthem…Only after that came a song in honour of Ho Chi Minh and the Internationale. At the same time, a campaign got underway to encourage the reading and speaking of Chinese while a constant stream of cadres was sent north to study in Peking,

> Shanghai, Nanking, Nanning and Canton…Having just escaped from the long night of being slaves to the French, we were dazzled by the new light of the Chinese Revolution which was acclaimed as our role model. We accepted everything impetuously and haphazardly without any thought, let alone criticism.

At the 2nd Party Congress, held in northern Vietnam in early 1951, Marxism-Leninism, Stalinism and Mao Zedong Thought were sworn in as 'the basic theory of the party'. 'The thinking of Ho Chi Minh and the rest of the leadership in those days was to regard Mao Tsetung thought as the only way to follow,' remembered Bui Tin. 'A French journalist asked Ho Chi Minh why he had written so little about politics. The reply came back "What is there for me to write about? All the theory that is needed has been worked out and written by Mao Tsetung." '

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One fine day in May 1953, an audience of 5,000 gathered at the foot of the pine-tree-lined Mount Voi, about a third of the way to the Chinese border heading north from Hanoi. The congregation was partly camouflaged with tree branches: as shade from the sun, and as concealment against French bombers. No such cover for the accused, a slim woman dressed in brown, kneeling beneath a scarlet banner that read 'Overthrow the despotic landlord Nguyen Thi Nam, take back the land for the peasants!' For eight and a half hours, members of the audience rushed up to Nguyen to snarl, scream, slap and spit their loathing of her. 'Down with the evil landlord! Down, down, down!' roared the cadres orchestrating the trial. The audience chorused the refrain back. The list of her crimes included collaboration with the French and Japanese, betraying the resistance and the Viet Minh, exploiting and starving people, and murdering 259 individuals. 'Execute the reactionary wicked landowner Nguyen Thi Nam!' the judge shrieked in conclusion. 'Execute her!' answered the crowd. Six weeks later, she was stood against a tree trunk and shot by a five-soldier firing squad. On inspecting the body, the squad's captain found only four bullet holes. Muttering that 'one shot missed the target', he blew her brains out with his own pistol.

This was the overture of North Vietnam's land reform. Ushered in by the 2nd Party Congress, it was closely modelled on its Chinese-Maoist predecessor, for the leaders of the PRC had made its ongoing support for the anti-French war effort contingent on the campaign. China thus gifted Communist Vietnam not only countless tons of material aid but also a means of organising Vietnamese society in its own image. The revving engines of Chinese jeeps – carrying to villages Mao-suited leaders of land reform brigades, who held absolute power over life and death – formed part of this period's soundscape of terror.

On that hot day in May 1953, the audience gave a flawless performance of this Chinese script and choreography. An uninformed observer of this scene would not have guessed that the case against Nguyen Thi Nam was intensely controversial. Her socio-economic profile fitted the bill: she was a wealthy trader and plantation owner. But she also happened to be an ardent patriot who had given the Viet Minh leadership sanctuary during the Second World War, provided generous famine relief in her community, and through donations saved Ho Chi Minh's new regime from financial collapse in 1945. She could have protected her two sons from having to fight against the French; instead, she encouraged them to join the revolution. Yet Luo Guibo insisted that the Vietnamese Communists made an example of her.

Ho Chi Minh had blanched and quoted a French saying: 'A woman should not be touched, not even with a rose petal…[We] cannot open the campaign by shooting a woman, especially one that has nourished communist soldiers and [is] a mother of an officer in the People's Army.' But Ho could never say no to Luo. 'Uncle Ho knew it was not right,' recalled one of his closest liaisons with the Chinese, 'but even he did not dare to tell [the Chinese advisers]…They were the sons of God, Mao's special envoy.' Ho's acquiescence and the execution of Nguyen gave the North Vietnamese Communists impunity to annihilate those deemed to be enemies of the state.

As hoped, the campaign did reap political and military benefits for the party. During the battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954, which destroyed French resolve to hold on to Vietnam, some 200,000 peasants won over by land reform helped the Communist armies by hauling military supplies across the country. The meetings, the propaganda, the political education mobilised thousands to fight and die on the mountain slopes of Dien Bien Phu. Yet the campaign has also gone down in popular memory as one of the party's greatest mistakes: for its excessive harshness and fanatical violence, for polarising society between the have-nots and the have-littles. Even a government institution like the Vietnam Institute of Economics stated in 2002 that almost 80 per cent of 'cruel and bullying landowners' had been wrongly categorised. In Vietnam today, land reform remains a volatile topic. A brand-new exhibit on the subject was unveiled in the National Museum of History one Monday in September 2014. By the Friday of that week, it had been shut down because the public discussions that resulted refuted government orthodoxy that the campaign had made life better for millions of poor peasants.

'We did not realise what a mistake it was going to be,' observed Bui Tin forty years later. 'Land Reform occurred after we had heard hundreds of Chinese advisers introduce the process on the basis of experience in their own country…Everything was cut and dried. He is a landlord even though he owns only 10 square metres. Therefore he is bad, greedy, cruel and the evil hand of imperialism…even though the system of land tenure in northern Vietnam was different from that in China and few people owned more than a few hectares.' The death toll of land reform – somewhere between 10,000 and 30,000 Vietnamese – was 'the result of the mechanistic application of Chinese experience imposed by their advisers…Ho Chi Minh was to blame…[but] it was Mao Tsetung who really forced his hand.' Land reform set a precedent of blind imitation of Chinese campaigns. 'What the Soviet Union and China are today, Vietnam will be tomorrow,' went the slogan. The makers of propaganda films were sent to China to study the principles of heroic socialist realism. The Vietnamese state's crackdown on two periodicals calling for freedom of speech echoed China's Anti-Rightist Campaign of 1957; Ho and his party carefully matched their own responses to Khrushchev's Secret Speech and to de-Stalinisation with those of Mao. The Great Leap Forward's preoccupation with backyard furnaces, and inflating targets and achievements, became 'almost a way of life', Bui Tin recalled. '[T]he press reported production of over 100 tons of rice per hectare and then 200 tons, which was in excess of what China had claimed to achieve. Of course these statistics were totally unrealistic and unrealisable in both countries, but in the case of Vietnam it was all part of the…competitive emulation of Mao Tse-tung thought.'

The Chinese influence was decisive in turning the first Indochinese war in favour of the North Vietnamese. In May 1953, the French expressed a new determination to resecure Vietnam as a colonial possession: they appointed an intellectually brilliant new commander, General

Henri Navarre, evocatively dubbed ‘the air-conditioned general’ for his coolly calculating persona. As in the past, the leadership of the CCP assumed a dominant role in plotting out the approaching campaign, dictating a precise order to attacks. The Chinese plan forced a confrontation with the French in the north-west of the country, near the border with Laos. On hearing where the Viet Minh troops were headed, Navarre decided to stage a showdown in the region, parachuting his battalions into the valley village of Dien Bien Phu. If the French held the village, he theorised, they could prevent the Vietnamese Communists from taking over the north-west and moving on to assault Laos. Chinese advisers applied Maoist strategy, telling the Vietnamese to concentrate on ‘separating and encircling the enemy, [to] annihilate them bit by bit’. After six months of gruelling siege, the French garrison was overrun by the Viet Minh; around 10,000 French soldiers became prisoners.

The Geneva Conference that followed the surrender of the French garrison at Dien Bien Phu was, in many respects, the PRC’s diplomatic ‘coming out party’, as Zhou Enlai shuttled between French and Vietnamese negotiators to produce the outcome that the PRC wanted. The following year, the Chinese delegation would again shine at the Bandung Conference for Afro-Asian Unity, but Geneva was an opportunity to dazzle old and new imperial powers in the West. Behind the scenes, the brilliant and faithful Huang Hua (Edgar Snow’s old friend) was working away at international PR, in his respectable flannel jacket, waistcoat and Oxford bags: running press conferences and ensuring that Zhou Enlai’s speeches got into all the right hands. Under Huang’s direction, the spacious house in Geneva that the PRC delegation rented was carefully furnished with Chinese antiques, reassuring visitors that the Communists were upholding China’s glorious cultural traditions. In these sedate, cultured surroundings, Huang screened to a full house a new Chinese movie, a soupy opera that his diplomatic master Zhou Enlai pointedly described as China’s Romeo and Juliet: *The Love Story of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai*. The Chinese Communists, ran the subtext, are not brainwashed automatons; they have emotional lives too. It was, Huang later remembered, ‘a full house; those who came late had to stand. Even US journalists, who had not been invited, came.’ Hearing of the screening, Charlie Chaplin (living in nearby Lausanne) was filled with a desire to see ‘New China’.

The North Vietnamese, meanwhile, were bullish: they wanted to capitalise on crushing the French at Dien Bien Phu to unify ‘the entire Indochina’. It would take only two to three years, Giap argued, as long as the US kept out of the conflict. But in the end, as usual, the Chinese laid out a course of action; the Vietnamese followed it. In this instance, the Chinese emphasised the need for a peaceful, negotiated solution to avoid galvanising the US and the old European colonial powers into a united front. Chinese interests heavily shaped the Geneva settlement: after four years of military hostilities with Western nations (principally, the US and France), China was apprehensive of drawing the US into direct military intervention in Indochina. If the Vietnamese were to go on fighting openly, the Chinese would unavoidably be drawn into helping them. Mao and his lieutenants therefore told the Vietnamese Communists to postpone their ambitions for military unification. In July 1954, the Vietnamese delegation at Geneva agreed to the division of the country between north and south at the 17th parallel: through the rumpled terrain of the Annamite mountains.

Without Chinese assistance, the North Vietnamese would have had no bargaining power at all. Compare and contrast Vietnamese success in defying and ousting the French from North

Vietnam, with the Malayan Communist Party's inability to best the British in their own anti-colonial struggle between 1947 and 1957. Chinese material aid was the crucial differentiating factor. But the help had been self-interested. The Chinese were the real winners from Geneva: Zhou Enlai had established himself as a suave international diplomat and the settlement had created a buffer zone in South East Asia between Communist China and Western spheres of influence. Although the DRV was eager to export Communist-led insurgency to Laos and Cambodia, to create an 'Indochina Federation', Zhou Enlai and his fellow Chinese diplomats were wary of a Vietnamese-dominated military alliance between the three countries, and had done their best to shut the idea down. The Vietnamese Communists would always resent the Chinese for pressuring them to accept a suboptimal outcome – a divided Vietnam – at a time when they were confident that reunification by force was within reach.

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Regardless of the Geneva settlement, the DRV soon resumed its offensive to unify Vietnam under Communist rule. Aid from the PRC kept flowing, the Chinese making immense sacrifices on behalf of their Vietnamese 'brothers'. In January 1959, and in addition to existing long-term economic and technical help, China gave North Vietnam a new loan of 300 million yuan, for which repayment was not required until 1967. Another 100 million yuan was given outright, following on from an 800-million-yuan gift in 1955. 'All my equipment from top to bottom,' recalled Bui Tin of that time, 'from my solar topee to my rubber sandals, and even my underpants…was made in China.' Vietnamese leaders repaid Mao's largesse by genuflecting to his 'theory of revolutionary war…his stress on the peasants, his idea of rural areas encircling the cities, and his concept of protracted armed struggle as a "model strategy for many Communists in Asia, Africa and Latin America" '. Ho Chi Minh fondly described relations between North Vietnam and China as being 'as close as lips and teeth' and recounted 'the special significance of the Communist victory in China for the Vietnamese people'.

Behind this affectionate facade, the relationship was breaking down by the mid-1960s. The tensions had origins deep in history: in Vietnam's millennia-old position as the smaller neighbour of successive Chinese empires. Even in the post-1949 era of progressive, supposedly egalitarian world revolution, China's leaders still spoke from high to low when addressing their Vietnamese counterparts. China flattered the USSR with the nickname 'elder brother' but expected similar deference from the Vietnamese. The Vietnamese, meanwhile, continued to resent the Geneva settlement. The compromise led to the Vietnamese Workers' Party in the south of the country losing 90 per cent of its members: 70,000 were killed and almost one million jailed under South Vietnam's autocratic ruler Ngo Dinh Diem. (It is estimated that 200,000 of these prisoners were permanently injured by torture.) Without Geneva, leaders of the VWP believed, the millions of Vietnamese deaths from the reunification war of 1959–75 could have been avoided. Mao's rows with the Soviets were also puzzling and frustrating to the Vietnamese. Ho Chi Minh, who wrote loving letters to Stalin in French and to Mao in Chinese, was genuinely upset that the two biggest socialist states had fallen out and strove, unsuccessfully, to serve as marriage counsellor between the two. His colleagues were upset for more practical reasons: if the socialist world was busy feuding, it would not be able to pool its energies and resources to help Vietnam against the

mighty US. By the mid-1960s, after the American war effort intensified, the North Vietnamese were growing quietly irritated over the Chinese decision to block the transport of Soviet military aid across Chinese rail lines and airspace. The Vietnamese started to suspect that the Chinese wanted a protracted war in Vietnam for their own strategic purposes: to let the Vietnamese go on dying just to keep the US tied up.

But what really shook Vietnamese enthusiasm for the PRC was the creeping perception that Mao, and his policies, were flawed. Already in 1959, the North Vietnamese press was dubious about the virtues of Mao's Great Leap Forward, while the sons and daughters of political cadres studying in China during the late 1950s wrote letters home about how hard it was to get hold of anything, asking their families to send them grain, vegetables and soap. Vietnamese enthusiasm for the Maoist model in practice decreased yet further with the Cultural Revolution: the prospect of emulating China by pulling apart a disciplined, functioning party structure during a bitter war for survival with the most powerful country in the world was sheer insanity. As they continued to depend on Chinese aid, the Vietnamese Communists could not freely express their views, but their non-committal replies in conversation with Chinese leaders were expressive. In 1967, Prime Minister Pham van Dong and General Giap responded to a forty-minute presentation from Zhou on the Cultural Revolution with only one brief question. Duong Danh Dy, a veteran Vietnamese diplomat to China, remembered that 'almost every Vietnamese…immediately saw the flaws of the Cultural Revolution…Uncle Ho asked everyone [at a party meeting], "Is there anyone in this room who understands China better than I do?" Of course no one said anything, and then he said, "And yet even I cannot understand what this 'Cultural Revolution' actually is." '

Revulsion across the cities of the United States and Western Europe at the American war in Vietnam played a big part in selling the virtues of Mao's China to students and other discontented radicals. Many Western rebels saw the Vietnamese as simply inheriting and propagating the theory and practice of Mao's revolution – People's War, both in protracted and guerrilla form – expounded in Lin Biao's 'Long Live the Victory of People's War!' This assumption massively burnished their image of Mao and the PRC. Yet by the mid-1960s, the Vietnamese Communists were self-confident enough to see the flaws in the increasingly idealised visions of Maoist military strategy emanating from Lin Biao. Where was the mention of outside – Soviet and US – aid in helping Chinese armies fight the Second World War? How on earth were the Vietnamese to win any kind of decisive victory against the Americans and the US-supported South Vietnamese Army without the kind of big guns that the Soviet Union could provide? From the Tet Offensive onwards, the Vietnamese began to favour attacks on cities, a tactic that Zhou Enlai denounced as Soviet, and as an affront to the Maoist strategy of protracted war, of encircling the cities from the countryside. As one of the major shifts of the Cold War began in the late 1960s – China and North Vietnam moving towards talks with the US – both suspected each other of selling out to the Americans, and scolded the other accordingly. Above all, the North Vietnamese felt that Chinese rapprochement with the US would remove a crucial deterrent to escalation of the American war effort – the threat of Chinese intervention. 'The Chinese government told the US that if it did not threaten or touch China, then China would do nothing to prevent the attacks [on North Vietnam],' General Giap remembered. 'It was like telling the US that it could bomb Vietnam at will, as long as there was no threat to the Chinese border…We felt that we had been stabbed in the back.'

But by the time the friendship between China and Vietnam was breaking down, China had acquired another best friend and (it hoped) loyal disciple in the region: the Cambodian Khmer Rouge.

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