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Hanoi between Moscow and Beijing

The exception to the Chinese disengagement from foreign affairs during the Cultural Revolution was the war in Indochina. Needless to say, it was not a trivial exception. During the second half of the 1960s, the Vietnam War brought the struggles between communism and capitalism in the developing world, as well as the national liberation movement, into the immediate consciousness of people around the world in a way that Congo, Palestine, or Angola did not. Consequently, the competition between Moscow and Beijing for influence in Hanoi itself as well as on the world stage to be seen as Hanoi's primary patron heated up during this period. The two objectives were not distinct; influencing the policy of Hanoi, because of its visibility and symbolic importance, was seen as a key way to promote each side's model of struggle. The situation for both the Soviets and the Chinese was further complicated by the direct involvement of the United States. As Sino-Soviet bilateral relations deteriorated to the point where each side began to perceive a potential security threat from the other, both leaderships also began to view developments in Vietnam through the prism of their own relationships with the United States, as well as that of their opponent. Despite the massive increase in Soviet aid in 1964-65 under the new Kremlin leadership, the Soviets found Chinese influence in Hanoi very difficult to dislodge. Nevertheless, during the late 1960s a number of factors, including shifting aid balances, strategic transformations, leadership changes, and the negative effect of the Cultural Revolution on the Vietnamese perception of China, led Hanoi to move slowly but surely closer to Moscow.

The ties that had been forged between Beijing and Hanoi were not easily severed by the Soviets. Ho Chi Minh and other Vietnamese leaders had spent their formative years in contact with many Chinese leaders, both as students in Paris and during the early years of the CCP struggle in the 1920s. China had been Hanoi's sole provider of aid, as well as its strategic adviser, during the war against the French, and Chinese influence had been predominant during the early years of constructing socialism after the first Geneva conference. **The Soviets were latecomers to the game, and they knew it.** A December 1965 report by the Soviet embassy in Hanoi complained about the significant Chinese influence over domestic and foreign DRV policy, as well as **nearly uniform DRV support for Chinese positions.** Given the categorical Chinese opposition to the peace negotiations that the Soviets were trying to promote, the embassy ruefully wrote that "the danger of such presentations by the Chinese side is that it constrains the actions of the Vietnamese, reinforces their inflexible positions in relation to the use of political means of struggle in the international arena and in practice means the tying of the Vietnamese side to the Chinese line." As the quote indicates, the Soviet embassy was aware of the fact that the predominant view in the DRV leadership itself was against negotiations at this time; it was not solely the doing of the Chinese. In any case, the lack of traction provided by Soviet aid frustrated Moscow. A Vietnamese journalist, talking to Izvestiia correspondent Mikhail Il'inskiĭ, said, "What is the Soviet Union's share in total assistance, received by Vietnam, and what is the share of Soviet political influence there (if the latter can be measured in percent)? The respective

figures are: 75ó 80 percent and 4ó 5 percent.ö Il'inskii remarked in his report to the Central Committee that while these figures might be exaggerated, they were basically correct.

Moscow was also well aware of just how crucial Vietnam was to the Chinese, especially given their current circumstances. In January 1966, the Soviet embassy in Beijing reported that "the great misfortunes of Chinese foreign policy in Asia and Africa necessitate that the Chinese leaders now concentrate their efforts ever more first of all on Vietnam and the other countries of Indochina, which in this way, take on for the Chinese a special significance since the defeat of Chinese policy in the region after the failure in Indonesia would mean the most complete bankruptcy of the special Chinese course and the ideas of Mao Zedong-ism." The Chinese, therefore sought to present the war in Vietnam as the focus of the entire global struggle against imperialism. At a banquet in honor of a visiting delegation from Mauritania in February 1967, Chen Yi declared: "Now in the entire world, a great bitter battle rages between the forces of revolution and counterrevolution, and the focus of this battle is the war of the Vietnamese people against American imperialism for the salvation of their homeland." More problematic for Moscow was the fact that this was also a point of convergence between Beijing and Hanoi. North Vietnamese diplomats and the North Vietnamese press essentially told a global audience that "your position on Vietnam is your position on imperialism."

Given the convergence between Hanoi and Beijing on a view of the conflict and a strategy inimical to Moscow's desires as well as the difficulty the Soviets had in edging their way into the discussion, one might reasonably ask why they chose the path of direct competition with the Chinese to be Hanoi's revolutionary patron. There was an alternative. The hard-line North Vietnamese position was not nearly as popular in the developing world as Hanoi or Beijing would have had people believe. Many saw the DRV's position as dangerously provocative, foolish in its confrontation with an American army that many doubted could be defeated, and one that contained the possibility of igniting a global conflagration. A report by the Soviet embassy in Hanoi on DRV relations with Africa detailed the ambivalent reactions to Hanoi's policies. According to the report, even left-leaning African governments refused to express support for the DRV's four points or the NLF's five points. In June 1965, a DRV delegation with the task of gaining support in Africa was able to visit only the UAR, Guinea, and Mali because no other invitations were proffered. The African leaders, according to the report, "were frightened off by the sharp political and anti-American direction of the position of the DRV." Nasser, Nkrumah, and Ben Bella were only three of the Afro-Asian heavyweights who tried to offer themselves as mediators in peace negotiations. The Soviets themselves were certainly very interested in a peaceful solution to the conflict in order to prevent the deterioration of their relations with the United States. Furthermore, they understood that the Chinese wanted to exacerbate the conflict specifically in order to cause a U.S.-Soviet confrontation that conjured images of the ultimate Soviet nightmare during this period, namely a Sino-American rapprochement. They knew as well that not all DRV officials agreed with the confrontational policies adopted by the leadership with Chinese support. An October 1965 report from the Soviet military attaché in Hanoi to the Central Committee detailed the dissatisfaction on the part of some DRV military officers with the leadership "which, to please the Chinese, conducts a policy which does not reflect the national interests of the Vietnamese people." On top of everything, Moscow was simply not as sanguine as other socialist countries regarding Hanoi's chances of defeating the United States.

Given the tremendous risks and meager rewards, along with the existence of a practical alternative, Moscow's policy choice to support the DRV's war cannot be taken for granted.

Nevertheless, support the war it did, with increasing rhetorical belligerence and massive aid. The Soviet leadership even began to adopt public positions very close to those of the DRV and PRC. Brezhnev declared that "relations to the unity of action in the face of the imperialist assault on Vietnam serve today as the decisive criterion of international responsibility and devotion to the ideals of progress and revolution." The phrase "unity of action" was meant as an attack on the Chinese, who continually rejected Soviet proposals to develop a united plan of action in support of Vietnam. In other words, the Soviet leadership, rather than taking the position of peacemaker and mediator for the reasons outlined above, chose publicly to attempt instead to outflank the Chinese from the left by accusing them of being insufficiently supportive. The logic of Soviet anti-imperialism dictated that it was much more dangerous for the position of the USSR in the world to be seen to be insufficiently revolutionary than excessively revolutionary, since its political and ideological appeal rested on being seen as the center of world revolution. Therefore, once again, the Soviets found themselves supporting a war that threatened their interests. Even worse, the need of the Soviets to be seen as anti-imperialist reduced their leverage over Hanoi, since the North Vietnamese could always threaten to publicly praise Chinese aid more than Soviet aid, with the attendant problems that doing so would entail for the desired Soviet image. Consequently, even when Moscow thought it could possibly exert enough pressure on Hanoi to get it to agree to negotiations, it demurred, for fear of losing influence to Beijing.

As a result, Soviet aid poured into the DRV in ever-increasing amounts. Though starting from a position far below the Chinese, Soviet aid to the DRV reportedly exceeded that of the Chinese by 1968, accounting for half of all socialist aid. Chinese aid remained very significant, however, and its impact was magnified by the fact that between 1965 and 1968 more than 320,000 Chinese troops served in the DRV, primarily in air defense, engineering, construction, minesweeping, and logistical units. Soviet personnel did not arrive on a similar scale, and the presence of so many Chinese could not but affect the impressions of Vietnamese on the ground. Since Soviet aid had to be transported by rail through China, it required the cooperation of the Chinese, which, given the state of Sino-Soviet relations and the chaos in the country during the Cultural Revolution, was bound to be a source of trouble. The Soviets continually accused the Chinese of delaying or stealing shipments of weapons, while the Chinese in turn argued that they were transporting everything, for free no less, and that the Soviets were merely using transport issues as an excuse for the insufficiency of their aid. Hanoi tried to find a middle position by praising Soviet aid but refusing to publicly mention transportation issues. Instead, the DRV press criticized "rumors" in the Western press about the Chinese delaying shipments and stealing arms, which led the frustrated Soviets to ask the North Vietnamese where they thought such rumors might originate. Behind closed doors, however, the North Vietnamese were becoming ever more frustrated with Chinese transport issues, and Pham Van Dong expressed this sentiment on a visit to Beijing in April 1967.⁸⁶ When Beijing suggested that if the Soviets were dissatisfied they could try shipping aid instead, the Soviets took this as an attempt by the Chinese to ignite a Soviet-American conflict on the high seas.

As time went on, however, rifts began to emerge between Hanoi and Beijing, and the position of Moscow grew ever stronger. One of the early fruits borne by Soviet aid was the attendance of a

DRV delegation at the Twenty-Third CPSU Congress in 1966. Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, in meetings with the North Vietnamese on their way to and from Moscow, told them that "if you are consistent revolutionaries and firm Marxist-Leninists, then you must politically and organizationally detach yourselves from the CPSU, view it as an enemy, a renegade from Marxism-Leninism, and conduct struggle against it." Deng even threatened to withdraw Chinese troops from the DRV. The Vietnamese in turn explained that they depended on the Soviets for aid, and, consequently, they could not afford not to attend. In the words of Le Duan, "You are saying that the Soviets are selling out Vietnam, but we don't say so." The Cultural Revolution would have the effect of significantly accelerating the process of Hanoi's shift from Beijing to Moscow, partly because of the further radicalization of the Chinese position and partly because of the reaction in the DRV to the Cultural Revolution. As early as June 1966, some Vietnamese intellectuals were worried about the possibility of a Cultural Revolution in the DRV and they asked the VWP for clarification on its policy. The VWP answered that "the Cultural Revolution is an internal matter of the Chinese comrades. The situation in the DRV is different from the situation in China, the class struggle in Vietnam has other forms which differ from the Chinese. The struggle with American aggression for the salvation and unification of the motherland demands the maximal unity of all, including intellectual, forces of the Vietnamese people." As the Cultural Revolution progressed, Hanoi's reaction became ever more negative. The DRV ordered the return of its 4,000 students from the PRC to avoid their participation in the Cultural Revolution. In September, the VWP distributed a document among party cadres saying "one should not support the ideas of the Cultural Revolution; however, it is not necessary to loudly proclaim our disagreement with these ideas." As that directive indicated, pressure from the Chinese for the Vietnamese to support the Cultural Revolution was intense. The PRC's chargé in Hanoi told the DRV foreign minister that the Cultural Revolution had the same significance for the PRC as the armed struggle for the DRV, and consequently Vietnamese support was required. Publicly, Chinese pressure produced results, and the seventeenth anniversary celebration of the PRC led to the first public DRV mention of the Cultural Revolution; however, privately, Chinese pressure for support only frightened and angered Hanoi. The Soviet embassy took notice, reporting in March 1967 that "currently the process of improvement of relations between the CPSU and VWP continues, as well as the weakening of the influence of the CCP, which is enabled to no small degree by the so-called Cultural Revolution in China."

Ultimately, the shift of influence from Beijing to Moscow made itself felt in the North Vietnamese conduct of the war. Beginning in August 1966, Chinese pressure on Hanoi to avoid negotiations became ever stronger, while the North Vietnamese, in turn, became ever more doubtful of the wisdom of the Chinese approach, especially because of their doubts of whose interests it was meant to serve. In mid- to late 1967, this attitude resulted in a North Vietnamese decision to launch a massive offensive in early 1968 contrary to Chinese demands to avoid large-scale warfare. At the same time, the VWP conducted a purge known as the "Revisionist Anti-Party Affair" that included well-known generals on the staff of Vo Nguyen Giap, who was thought to be pro-Moscow himself, in part to allay Chinese fears that the offensive would signal a tilt toward Moscow. The following spring, however, the direction of Hanoi's policy became clearer. The DRV agreed to Johnson's offer of peace negotiation on April 3, 1968, without consulting the Chinese, who furiously and absurdly accused the Vietnamese of thereby contributing somehow to the death of Martin Luther King Jr. the following day. A shift in the leadership seems also to have played a part in the Vietnamese decision. Ho Chi Minh was in

Beijing at the time receiving medical treatment, and when Zhou Enlai asked him about the decision to negotiate, it became apparent that Ho had not been consulted.

In 1968, as negotiations began, Chinese troops began leaving the DRV, and they had all left by the end of 1970. While Soviet influence began to predominate over Chinese, Hanoi still tried to keep Beijing in the picture in order to maintain its strategic independence from Moscow. By 1968 then, the Soviets had largely achieved their objective of gaining influence over Hanoi and diminishing Chinese influence. This was due, partly, to their own increased aid and, partly, to the Cultural Revolution and Hanoi's discomfort with Chinese pressure. It is not clear, however, to what degree Moscow achieved its larger goals. The growth of Soviet influence in Hanoi did not necessarily reestablish Moscow as the leader of the world revolution. Publicly Hanoi made sure that China remained very much in the picture. In addition, Moscow seemed to be a reluctant follower of Hanoi's policy, an example of the tail wagging the dog, rather than the vanguard of the world revolution. Soviet anti-imperialism was making burdensome claims on Soviet policy and resources without necessarily producing benefits for Moscow.