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## Chapter 8: The Road to Conflict Termination

(pp. 202-206).

### The 1990 Chengdu Meeting

In June 1990 (when Eastern Europe was free from communism for the first time in more than forty years), Vietnamese leaders made another plea for a visit to China. During his meeting with the Chinese ambassador in Hanoi, Nguyen Van Linh recalled his trips to China before the border dispute and his meetings with Mao, Zhou, and Deng. Nguyen Van Linh claimed to have been a student of Mao's revolutionary theory and stated his great appreciation for China's aid during Vietnam's struggles against the French and Americans. He then admitted that Vietnam had wronged China and was willing to correct its mistakes. With respect to Cambodia, the Vietnamese leader expressed confidence that the situation would be resolved peacefully but urged both Vietnam and China to work together to prevent the West and the UN from meddling in Cambodia in the future. The exclusion of the Khmer Rouge from a future Cambodian government, Nguyen Van Linh admitted, was impractical. Somewhat echoing Deng, he finally expressed a desire to meet Chinese leaders to resolve the Cambodia issue and the Vietnamese-Chinese relations issue before his retirement. Chinese leaders nevertheless apparently remained indifferent to the Vietnamese leader's views on Cambodia and were annoyed by what they perceived as Vietnamese foreign minister Nguyen Co Thach's aggressive posturing during his meeting with the Chinese deputy foreign minister in Hanoi. The Chinese leadership may no longer have been satisfied with the withdrawal of Vietnamese military forces from Cambodia, but now expected more from Hanoi. In a swift reply to Nguyen Van Linh, China insisted that a summit between the two countries could come only after the resolution of the Cambodia issue: Vietnam still needed to complete its withdrawal and then help with Cambodian national reconciliation.

The Vietnamese reaction to this disappointing response remains unknown. Some progress had been made between January and August 1990. First, the five permanent members of the UN Security Council had already reached an agreement on the framework for a political settlement on the Cambodia problem: all external aid to the competing factions would be halted, the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia would be created, and Cambodian sovereignty would be respected. Second, all Cambodian political factions had accepted this agreement, and a new round of talks with Hanoi had been scheduled for September in Jakarta. On 16 August, the Chinese embassy in Hanoi received an oral message from Nguyen Van Linh via the son of former Vietnamese leader Hoang Van Hoan, who had defected to China in 1979. The Vietnamese leader made yet another conciliatory appeal, blaming his foreign minister for endless haggling between Vietnam and China over Cambodia and maintaining that such a difficult situation could be overcome only by a summit between the two countries' top leaders.

Because this message did not come directly from the Vietnamese leader, Beijing ordered Zhang Dewei, the Chinese ambassador to Vietnam, to seek personal contact with Nguyen Van Linh to find out his real intentions with regard to Sino-Vietnamese relations. The decade of hostility between the two countries kept contact between Chinese diplomats and Vietnamese officials to the bare minimum necessary for communication. Chinese diplomats had great difficulty identifying the best person to contact the top Vietnamese leader after many years of limited dialogue between the two sides. Because Nguyen Co Thach controlled the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Chinese ambassador decided to ask General Le Duc Anh, the minister of national defense, who had echoed many of Nguyen Van Linh's points at an earlier meeting with the Chinese ambassador, to help arrange a meeting with his superior.

This approach worked. On 22 August, **Nguyen Van Linh received Zhang Dewei at the Ministry of National Defense.** The Vietnamese official acknowledged that he had sent an oral message to the Chinese ambassador and reiterated his intention to visit China. He specifically noted that his meeting with Chinese leaders would help silence those who still opposed his desire to resolve the Cambodia issue. Under such circumstances, Beijing had to make a concession. On 27 August, Premier Li Peng went to the home of the now semiretired Deng Xiaoping to report his successor's decision to invite the Vietnamese leader to visit China. Li then suggested that for security reasons related to the 1990 Asian Games, which would be held in Beijing, the meeting would take place in Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan Province. Deng approved.

On 3 September, the summit was convened. In attendance were China's party secretary-general, Jiang Zemin, and premier, Li Peng, and Vietnam's party secretary-general, Nguyen Van Linh; premier, Do Muoi; and party adviser Pham Van Dong. Jiang Zemin candidly stated that both sides must come to terms with what had been right and wrong between the two countries since the late 1970s. According to the Chinese leader, China wanted not to settle old scores but rather to get to the root of the problem and break fresh ground for the future. He welcomed the new Vietnamese leadership's initiative to improve relations but pointed out yet again that Cambodia remained the major obstacle to normalization. The Chinese leader then urged his Vietnamese counterparts to accept the UN's plan. **Nguyen Van Linh confessed that Vietnam had pursued a wrong policy for the past twelve years and explained that the current Vietnamese leadership wanted to make corrections to** resume the friendship between the two countries and parties established by Ho Chi Minh. He promised to support a political settlement of the Cambodia issue based on the UN's framework documents. Even so, the Vietnamese still resisted Beijing's plan for a Cambodian Transitional Authority under the leadership of Prince Sihanouk, though Pham Van Dong was the only strong opponent of China's proposal. Beijing proposed that the Hanoi-supported Phnom Penh government would occupy six seats in the Cambodian Transitional Authority, while each of the three resistance factions would take two seats. Because Sihanouk also belonged to the resistance side, Vietnam felt that this arrangement was unfair and unreasonable. The first day of talks lasted until eight o'clock in the evening without reaching agreement. Later in the evening at the welcome banquet table, Chinese leaders allegedly continued to try to persuade the Vietnamese leaders to accept China's proposal. **After another lengthy meeting the following day, Vietnamese leaders capitulated.** They also promised to persuade the Phnom Penh regime to accept China's plan. The two sides subsequently reached agreement on the principles for the political settlement of the Cambodia issue and the resumption of relations.

On 6 September, Chinese foreign affairs officials rushed to Jakarta to inform all parties of the new agreement between China and Vietnam on Cambodia and to urge them to reach an accord.

Another year of infighting among the Cambodians would pass before a peace agreement was signed. The Chengdu summit denoted the end of China's twelve years of hostility toward Vietnam. Jiang Zemin concluded the meeting by quoting a Qing poem: "Disasters are never powerful enough to separate true brothers; a smile is all they need to eliminate ingratitude and resentment" (*Dujin jiebo xiongdi zai; xiangfeng yixiao min enchou*). The new Chinese leader waxed sentimental in recollecting the brotherly relationship between China and Vietnam from 1950 to 1970, though he later admitted that the decade long mutual hostility had made it impossible for the two countries to return to the kind of close and cordial relationship they enjoyed during the 1950s and 1960s. For their part, the Chinese people remained bitterly aware that their earlier sacrifices for Vietnam had not brought permanent friendship and gratitude and became even more annoyed with Vietnam's unreliable behavior. They reproved Hanoi's ingratitude by recalling an old Chinese expression, "Whoever suckles me is my mother" (*younai bianshi niang*).

Nicholas Khoo is correct that "the decrease in Sino-Soviet conflict" was the inevitable corollary of opening "the door for Sino-Vietnamese rapprochement." In retrospect, as Hanoi reached out to Beijing in 1989 and 1990, the communist world was on the cusp of dramatic and profound changes. Political storms raged through Eastern Europe. The Soviet Union was on the verge of disintegration. In the midst of the collapsing of communism, many Vietnamese party members and supporters began to worry about what would happen to their nation, one of the youngest communist countries. China's success in economic reform and openness to the world offered hope. According to Nguyen Van Linh, because the SRV was a small nation and the Vietnamese Communist Party was a small party, they needed to count on the PRC and the CCP to carry forward the socialist flag. The Vietnamese leader further pointed out that the SRV and the Vietnamese Communist Party needed their socialist neighbors' support. Again, from Vietnam's point of view, shared political and ideological interests should be enough to bring these two socialist countries back into a close alliance. For China, however, this ideologically guided tradition was outdated: in the current international environment, each socialist country should pursue policies that served its own national interests. At the time, China's national priorities were economic reform and openness. Despite Vietnam's eagerness to improve its relationship with China, Beijing appeared unmoved and continued to insist on a final settlement of the Cambodia problem before normalizing their bilateral relationship.