Self-Defensive Counter-Attack: The 1979 Sino-Vietnamese Conflict

Introduction

China and Vietnam: A long history

The Sino-Vietnamese War is a conflict born of Vietnam’s assertion of its power in the Southeast Asian region. Two Socialist, single party states that supported each other’s goals throughout the ‘50s, ‘60s and much of the 1970s are suddenly at war. This war would leave a legacy of border conflict and disputes that would ultimately stretch into the 1990s and the 2000s with a conflict looming over ownership of the oil-rich South China Sea. Vietnam and China have a history that stretches back several centuries. The Chinese occupied Vietnam for a time during the Han Dynasty until around CE 40 when a national movement managed to regain control of a portion of the country in a theme that would be repeated several times in Vietnamese history.

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The end of the Second World War saw the Vietnamese communists striking a path that put them close to China and the Soviet Union. During the French War the Vietnamese relied on China as a means to the end of survival but the Soviets were seen as the better choice to support the real end goals: unification of Vietnam under a one party system. The Geneva agreement of 1954, which portioned Vietnam into North and South, was supported by China as a way to focus on domestic problems in the wake of the Korean War. Subsequently when the North began to wage insurgency in the South beginning in 1959 China decided to withhold support, preferring to keep working on issues of a domestic nature rather than involve itself in Vietnam’s national liberation movement. Beijing consulted Hanoi on issues of liberation with the South but choose to withhold direct support until 1963. Chinese strategy shifted in the early 1960s as it was thought by Chinese leaders that by encouraging Hanoi to increase activity in the South they could draw an increased American presence, thus extending US commitments even further in the region and letting some pressure off the Chinese in light of several Sino-American clashes, such as the 1958 show down over Taiwan.

Mao once said of this move that China was the Democratic Republic of Vietnam’s rear base. This quote was based on the fact that until 1969 China was the DRV’s largest supplier of arms and other military goods, including 270,000 small arms, 10,000 pieces of artillery, 28 naval vessels, and 1.18 million uniforms, to name a few select categories. Vietnam sought to seek a path that allowed it to navigate between Moscow and Beijing however and use both powers to increase its ability to fight the Republic of Vietnam and the Americans. Early Soviet support of the Hanoi régime ended in early 1962 over DRV and Soviet supply of Marxist Laos guerillas. The cease fire arranged by the British and honored by the Soviets saw a nearly complete Soviet withdrawal from the Southeast Asian region in 1962. The slack was taken up by the above noted Chinese aid and this last until the start of the Cultural Revolution in 1966. As Westad points out the Chinese had traditionally taken a condescending tone with their Southern neighbors and the demands to choose China or the Soviets were no different, especially under the cloud
of the Cultural Revolution. Vietnam was also caught in the Sino-Soviet rivalry, a natural progression after the break in the early 1960s.\textsuperscript{x}

Between Chinese demands for a rigid ideological stance and Soviet agreement to help the DRV win its fight to unite the country the choice for Hanoi was a fairly easy one. Leighton sees this as the Soviets containing the Chinese and the Chinese “counter-containing” the Soviets in competition for the region during the late 1960s and early to mid-1970s.\textsuperscript{xi} After the end of the war in 1975 the newly united nation did not experience the economic recovery that was hoped for and turned increasingly to the Soviets for aid.\textsuperscript{xii} This further alienated Hanoi from Beijing, who saw a security concern with such close relations between a neighbor and a regional rival. The Soviets ramped up aid in preparation for the 1972 Easter Offensive the DRV had planned, an offensive that failed because of the American blockade of Haiphong harbor and the reduced flow of supplies coming overland through China.\textsuperscript{xiii}

The Sino-Soviet rivalry certainly strained the bonds between China and Vietnam in addition to the ideological differences during Mao’s Cultural Revolution. The two issues that broke the relationship and led to the 1979 was the Vietnamese destruction of the largely Chinese (or Hoa) middle class in the South after 1975. This was seen by China as the forced expulsion of a Chinese minority that signaled a larger policy issue.\textsuperscript{xiv} In Cambodia the Chinese support for the Khmer régime was seen as dangerous by the newly united Vietnam. In addition border skirmishes and Pol Pot’s mass killings all led to the Vietnamese invasion in December of 1978.\textsuperscript{xv} The DRV saw the invasion as safeguarding state security against a neighbor who, at best, was dangerously unstable. The invasion of Cambodia was seen by Beijing as a very good reason to launch a punishment war against the wayward Vietnamese. Many Chinese leaders took the view that the invasion was a last straw. Since 1975 the Sino-Vietnamese border had been increasingly active with border clashes over minor swaths of territory.\textsuperscript{xvi} Combined with Hanoi’s warm relationship with Moscow, explosion and perceived mistreatment of ethnic Chinese and a reluctance to embrace a Chinese view on Socialist ideology, the Cambodian invasion was a last straw. While not necessarily a cause of a full invasion the Chinese leaders, especially Deng Xiaoping. As Xiaoming noted, Deng was so offended by what he saw as a Vietnamese challenge to Chinese interests in the region that he had no scruple in waging war to teach the Vietnamese a lesson.\textsuperscript{xvii} In nearly every history of the war and in most Chinese literature surrounding the war the narrative is set as a Chinese “lesson” against the haughty Vietnamese who accepted Chinese aid only to usurp Chinese influence, friendship and interests after unification.

Disagreements with China after 1975 highlight Vietnam’s position in the regional hierarchy. Despite the country’s aspirations, Vietnam is a small state in a region dominated by much larger powers. China, obviously, is the guerilla in the room but other states such as the Soviet Union and India also have interests in Southeast Asia. The invasion of Cambodia was an important breaking point between China and Vietnam with the primary reason being that China had supported the Khmer Rouge and Pol Pot. China felt that its security and domination of the region was being challenged by a state they had aided throughout their war for national unification. For Vietnam, China’s diplomatic efforts with the west, especially the United States after Nixon’s 1972 visit, meant trouble. Even worse for Hanoi the border conflict between the Soviet Union and China after 1968 looked like one or the other would warm to a closer relationship with the US to balance against the other.\textsuperscript{xviii}
Ho’s death in 1969 saw Vietnam move closer to the Soviets. Hanoi’s ever warming relationship to Moscow further alienated the Chinese, who in the late 1970s and beyond would view Vietnam as an “Asian Cuba” in terms of a Soviet client state on their Southern border, a less than ideal situation in the view of Chinese security strategy."xix The departure of the Americans further encouraged the Soviets to use Vietnam as a piece of their containment of China throughout the late 1970s.xx While invading Cambodia and skirmishing with China on the border may look like an attempt at a regional power play, in reality Vietnam was still a small state in the plans of the great powers and their interests in the region. O’Dowd in particular takes the stance that the war was byproduct in a wider competition for power by China, the Soviets and the United States with Vietnam caught in the middle.xxxi Li notes that China saw Vietnam as an “ingrate” challenging China’s power under the protection of the Soviets.xxxii Vietnam can be viewed as a pawn in the wider game of Asian diplomacy.

The Cambodia issue was the catalyst for numerous border clashes between the PLA and the PAVN. In mid-1978 Vietnamese troops attacked Chinese troops in Guangxi Province and later occupied and fortified a mountain ridge on the Chinese side of the border.xxxiii In 1978 China reported nearly 1,100 border incidents which prompted Beijing to deploy twenty infantry divisions to further protect the Southern border.xxxiv The invasion of Cambodia made any military action morally justified and thus the Chinese leadership saw an opportunity. Deng set up three principles for the attack, limited attack, quick victory and an avoidance of “mission creep”.xxv In addition Beijing instructed that the attack should be conducted within 50 kilometers of the border and last for only two weeks.xxvi There was some concern about international fallout; hence the limited scope of the war and the operation was labeled a “self-defensive counterattack” in an attempt to reduce any negative opinion both domestically and internationally.xxxvii

PLA vs. PAVN

The People’s Liberation Army’s attack on Vietnam was the last large scale foreign action it undertook in the 20th century.xxxviii The war, through short, exposed serious flaws in the Maoist idea of a “People’s War” in modern warfare. The Sino-Vietnamese conflict would prove to be a major impetus for reform for the PLA over the next decade but the various failures of the PLA reduced its capability to perform the duty it had been assigned. The PLA had started to think about modernization in the 1970s but despite the deployment of nuclear weapons and ideas that advocated command and control systems, motorized modern transport and other concepts of modern warfare resistance by the old guard in the Army kept the “people’s war” concept front and center.xxxix

The “People’s War” strategy was a manpower heavy theory that Mao had used to win the Civil War and had seen win multiple victories in Korea against allied forces. Technology was seen as useless unless combined with large amounts of manpower. Even the nuclear bomb, tested successfully by China in 1964, was seen by Mao and traditional theorists as a “paper tiger” that did not trump the iron law of manpower.xxx The PLA would suffer from nearly all of these deficiencies during its conflict in Vietnam with transport and communications being the biggest, but by no means the only, issues impacting the PLA’s ability to fight.
Facing the PLA was the People’s Army of Vietnam. As Zhang points out somehow the Chinese leadership had overlooked the fact that the army they were facing possessed nearly 25 years of experience fighting vastly superior enemies and emerging successful.\textsuperscript{xxx} Not only that but the PAVN had modern Soviet equipment, left over American equipment from the Army of the Republic of Vietnam and they knew how to employ both effectively. While the PLA was deploying the vanguard of its forces the PAVN was busy in Cambodia and the forces protecting the Northern border were local troops and militia, augmented by a few regular divisions near the town of Lang Son.\textsuperscript{xxxi} Vietnamese ground troops were generally well trained and, more important, veterans who knew how to fight a superior foe. In the air the Vietnamese had some 300 combat aircraft and their best ships, MiG-21s and American F-5s, were far more advanced than comparable Chinese models thanks to Soviet aid and ARVN captures. In raw numbers the PLA had the advantage but in capacity to fight a modern war, the PAVN came out ahead.

The War

The Chinese self-defense counter attack began on February 17, 1979.\textsuperscript{xxxii} In early January the PAVN had captured Phenom Phan and with that the occupation of Cambodia was nearly complete. This gave the Chinese a window that not only saw most of the PAVN diverted to Cambodia but also reinforced the moral high ground the Chinese counted on. The Chinese offensive had three aims, according to Vietnamese sources:

1- Quick occupation of a strip along the border about a few kilometers deep that included the towns of Cao Bang, Lang Son and Lao Cai. These would serve as a springboard for more operations depending on the situation

2- Destruction of Vietnamese military forces and weakening of Vietnam’s national defense capacity by “making a clean sweep” of the border guards, annihilating a major parts of the regional troops, and mauling some of the regular units.

3- Destruction of Vietnamese economic bases.\textsuperscript{xxxiv}

Clearly the Chinese strategic objective were limited spatially. Only ground forces would be employed; no air or naval assets would take part in the attack.\textsuperscript{xxxv} According to O’Dowd the Chinese have claimed as late as the mid-2000s that the number of ground forces involved only reached an upward limit of a few thousand border troops. However this number is quite misleading. Most scholars writing on the war seem to agree that the PLA was poised to launch their attack with around 300,000-400,000 ground troops and about 1,200 tanks along with attached artillery, missiles, rocket launchers and other assorted support weapons.\textsuperscript{xxxvi}

The limited scope of the attack saw the PLA fighting in some of Vietnam's most impassable terrain, the Northeast mountains around the border cities of Long Son and Cao Bing. The Chinese announced publicly that they would not advance south into the Red River Delta.\textsuperscript{xxxvii} This open admittance of objective was designed to ward off any Soviet intervention in the wake of the November 1978 defense treaty that solidified a Vietnamese-Soviet alliance with an eye towards China.\textsuperscript{xxxviii} Knowing that the Soviets had an obligation to go to war if Vietnam was invaded China sought to minimize their attack to
avoid a two front conflict. These two factors, terrain and a limited use of force, proved problematic for the PLA and gave some advantages to the PAVN troops defending the frontier. The PLA commander, Xu Shiyou, responded to the requirement for a limited war by naming his approach “using a butcher’s knife to kill a chick”. xxxix This approach comprised three elements: strike the vital parts of the enemy’s defense but not enemy strongpoints, overwhelming force and firepower should be used to smash the enemy at the point of engagement and attacking troops must move as quickly as possible to go deep and strike the heart of the enemy. This planning was heavily influenced by the Maoist concept of the “people’s war” and depended on force cohesion, speed and a reliable line of supply.

Two military regions were involved in the planning for the attack, Guangzhou and Kunming. Both developed separate war plans based on the forces against them and strategic goals. The war was planned with two stages in mind. The first stage would encircle the cities of Cao Bang and Lao Cai, trapping the two regular PAVN divisions there and destroying them. Meanwhile a simultaneous attack on Dong Dang would be launched to confuse the PAVN about Chinese objectives. xl Other scholars dispute these objectives by noting that the PLA never really spelled out its objectives. xli We can say for certain that the attack was three pronged and designed to take at least three Vietnamese provincial capital cities. xlii

The War- Phase 1

At 5am on February 17, 1979 approximately 100,000 PLA soldiers crossed the Sino-Vietnamese border, preceded by a heavy artillery bombardment and followed by tanks and additional troops. xliii The initial Chinese advance was only opposed by a smattering of Vietnamese border guard units which were quickly thrust aside. The primary element of the PAVN facing the PLA was border guard and militia that numbered about 75,000-80,000. xlv While initially caught off guard by the size of the Chinese attack, the Vietnamese possessed a strong border defense that used the rough terrain to advantage. xlv The initial Chinese thrust lasted from February 17 to the 25th and smashed the PAVN’s first line of defense. The PLA quickly took the provincial capitals of Cao Bang and Lao Cai as well as the border towns of Cam Duong and Dong Dang. xlvii As they maneuvered the Chinese advanced down important roads capturing important communication and population centers. The PLA also sought to capture and hold positions on the flanking high ground. xlviii

Throughout the initial campaign the front lines were extremely fluid. Jencks notes that Vietnamese troops were crossing the border and attacking inside China, a symptom of just how little control the PLA could exercise on ground behind its leading elements. The lack of control behind the advancing front highlights the speed which the Chinese believed they needed to advance. Demonstrating just how vulnerable Hanoi was to a determined Chinese advance was part and parcel of the Chinese concept of a “self-defense counter attack”. xlviii One major obstacle that the PLA quickly encountered was the mountainous terrain that forced large units to split up, some down to platoon level, and the fact that the ability to supply forward units was severely hampered by the archaic logistics and impassable terrain.
The Vietnamese fought back aggressively using tactics learned from nearly thirty years of constant warfare, often against a larger more powerful enemy. Many Vietnamese units broke into platoon and squad strength and waged a guerilla campaign against the invaders.\textsuperscript{xiii} Save for a few regular units along the border it seems that the PAVN units most engaged with the PLA were militia and irregular units while many of the regular units brought up from the south were assembled on the plains south of Cao Bang and Lang Son.\textsuperscript{i} Vietnamese sources state that their defenses were quite strong with some mountains fortified with tunnels, booby-traps, bamboo punji sticks and compounded with surprise attacks and jungle warfare.\textsuperscript{xiv}

The PLA did not move as fast as their time-table demanded and the delayed taking of Cao Bang

\textsuperscript{iv} Jian, Chen. “China’s Involvement in the Vietnam War, 1964-1969.”, p, 358-359
\textsuperscript{v} Jian, Chen. “China’s Involvement in the Vietnam War, 1964-1969.”, p. 358-359
\textsuperscript{vi} Westad, Odd Arne. “Introduction: From War to Peace to War in Indochina.” In The Third Indochina War: Conflict between China, Vietnam and Cambodia, 1972-1979, edited by Odd Arne Westad and Sophie Quinn-Judge, 1-11, Routledge, 2006. P. 5-6
\textsuperscript{vii} Jian, Chen. “China’s Involvement in the Vietnam War, 1964-1969.”, p, 359
\textsuperscript{ix} Westad, Odd Arne. “Introduction: From War to Peace to War in Indochina.”, p. 5-6
\textsuperscript{xi} Leighton, Marian. “Vietnam and the Sino-Soviet Rivalry.”, p. 1-3
\textsuperscript{xiv} Westad, Odd Arne. “Introduction: From War to Peace to War in Indochina, p. 6-7
\textsuperscript{xvi} Zhang, Xiaoming. “Deng Xiaoping and China’s Decision to go to War with Vietnam.” Journal of Cold War Studies 12.3 (2010): 3-29, p. 6-7
\textsuperscript{xvii} Zhang, Xiaoming. “Deng Xiaoping and China’s Decision to go to War with Vietnam.”, p. 11
\textsuperscript{xviii} Westad, Odd Arne. “Introduction: From War to Peace to War in Indochina.” P. 19-20
\textsuperscript{xix} Leighton, Marian. “Vietnam and the Sino-Soviet Rivalry.”, p. 2
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Of the sources used in this chapter, none agree totally on Chinese war aims. Zhang is the only author to disclose any sort of official Chinese plan, the others simply note that was no published plan.

The sources used in this chapter varying wildly. O'Dowd puts the total Vietnamese at only 50,000, the number cited is from Jenck's contemporary piece on the war and Chen and Zhang both only organizational strength rather than hard numbers for the PAVN forces north of Hanoi.

Chen is using Vietnamese sources which must be taken as exaggerated in much of what is said. This is one issue with the scholarship on the war as a whole: the propaganda must be read between the lines to effectively analyze the conflict and with limited information this can be rather difficult.