

The Enemy of My Enemy: The Sino-Vietnamese War of 1979 and the
Evolution of the Sino-American Covert Relationship

Sam Brothers



Vietnamese soldiers pose on a destroyed Chinese tank during the Sino-Vietnamese War.

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1. Introduction

Despite the passage of time, the Sino-Vietnamese War of 1979 has gone under analyzed by historians. On its face, this appears somewhat understandable. All parties involved in the Sino-Vietnamese War of 1979—which lasted just twenty-seven days—have found strong motivations to forget about the conflict after the fact. The People’s Republic of China, which formally commenced the military action on February 17th, 1979 when People’s Liberation Army (PLA) forces entered Vietnam, suffered between 21,900 and 63,000 casualties (if Chinese sources are to be believed) from an invasion force of 200,000 to 600,000—all in a remarkably short period of time.¹ As a result of these humiliating losses, the Chinese government has been active in limiting historical remembrance and portrayal of the conflict, censoring school textbooks and fiction (including an extremely popular novel, “Traversing Death”) that reference the war, with one historian going as far as to call the conflict “China’s forgotten war.”² Even one

¹ For the 63,000 figure, see King C. Chen, *China’s War with Vietnam: Issues, Decisions and Implications* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1987), 114. For the 21,900 figure, see an analysis of recent Chinese sources in Xiaoming Zhang, “China’s 1979 War with Vietnam: A Reassessment,” *The China Quarterly*, 184 (December 2005): 866-867. For force size estimates, see Bruce Elleman, *Modern Chinese Warfare, 1795-1989* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 285, Edward O’Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War*, 3, 45-55, and Vo Dong Giang and Richard Falk, “The View from Hanoi,” *World Policy Journal* Vol. 3 No. 1 (Winter 1985/1986): 107.

² Howard W. French, “Was the War Pointless? China Shows How to Bury It,” *The New York Times*, March 1, 2005, http://www.nytimes.com/2005/03/01/international/asia/01malipo.html?pagewanted=1&_r=2&8hpib&oref=slogin, accessed November 5, 2013, and Xiaoming Zhang,

Chinese veteran of the conflict, when interviewed by Western journalists, stated that he was uncertain of the war's origins.³ It is natural that Vietnam, given its prolonged struggles for independence in the 19th century against the French, the Japanese, and the United States, would assign little significance to such a brief conflict in which regular troops beyond border guards and militia were not even deployed.⁴ Similarly, the complicated roots of the conflict—which lie (at least to some extent) in the turbulent and confusing political situation within Cambodia at the time (which will be discussed in greater depth later on)—discourage further scholarship on and popular understanding of the war.

Scholars have grappled with the significance of the Sino-Vietnamese War for the countries that were directly involved. After initially being an ally of both China and Russia, Vietnam refused to align itself against Russia, despite its proximity to China, and thus became an active participant in their geopolitical rivalry, an ongoing series of events known as the Sino-Soviet Split.⁵ As a result, the conflict marked a milestone in which the growing rift between Soviet Russia and the People's Republic of China (which was caused by issues related to political theory as well as national interests) became more and more apparent to the outside world. However, the lasting significance of the conflict is disputed, with Zbigniew Brzezinski stating that the conflict had little overall impact on

"Deng Xiaoping and China's Decision to go to War with Vietnam," *Journal of Cold War Studies* Vol. 12 No. 3 (Summer 2010): 3.

³ French, "Was the War Pointless?," *The New York Times*.

⁴ Peter Worthing, *A Military History of Modern China: From the Manchu Conquest to Tian'anmen Square* (Westport: Praeger Security International, 2007), 181.

⁵ Nguyen Manh Hung, "The Sino-Vietnamese Conflict: Power Play among Communist Neighbors," *Asian Survey* Vol. 19 No. 11 (November 1979): 1038.

the Cold War.⁶ Works have been written on the significance of the conflict for China's, Vietnam's, and Russia's positions during the Cold War.⁷ Similarly, the importance of the Sino-Vietnamese War for the regional politics and security of East Asia more broadly has been discussed by a variety of figures and historical works. However, the significance of the Sino-Vietnamese War for the Sino-American relationship has been hitherto ignored.

Even scholarship that acknowledges the very existence of U.S. policy in the Sino-Vietnamese War of 1979 treats the United States of America as a somewhat peripheral actor in a somewhat peripheral conflict. When historical works do address U.S. assistance to China, they generally simply state that while the U.S. provided "moral support, diplomatic backing, and intelligence cooperation" to the Chinese during the conflict, and leave questions of the scope, impact, and coherence of that assistance to go unanswered.⁸ Even the few historical works that accord the Sino-Vietnamese War a large degree of significance are inclined to discount the importance of U.S. involvement and policy, opting to portray the U.S. as irrelevant, rather than a key driver of events. Substantial evidence indicates that this view is erroneous.

Existing scholarship on the Sino-Vietnamese War that does cover U.S. assistance to China during the conflict fails to place this assistance in the context of the broader U.S.-China collaboration on a host of security issues that existed prior to the outbreak of hostilities between China and Vietnam. In stark contrast to the present day, during the later stages of the Cold War China and the U.S. collaborated on a host of issues ranging from intelligence sharing to technology transfer to other forms of security assistance.

⁶ Zbigniew Brezezinski, interview by author, 1616 Rhode Island Avenue North West, Washington, D.C., 20036, February 24, 2pm.

⁷ For once such work, see Chen, *The Strategic Triangle and Regional Conflicts: Lessons from the Indochina Wars* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1992).

⁸ Henry Kissinger, *On China* (New York: Penguin Books, 2012), 368.

This work uses the term “covert relationship” to describe this cumulative network of ventures jointly undertaken by the U.S. and China in fields related to military and intelligence activities during this time period. This covert relationship occurred almost entirely in response to the mutual threat that the Soviet Union presented to both the United States and China. In order to properly understand the significance of the Sino-Soviet War for the Sino-American relationship, and to understand the significance of U.S. assistance to China during the Sino-Soviet War for the Sino-Soviet War itself, it is first necessary to examine U.S. collaboration with China during the Sino-Vietnamese War in the context of this ongoing covert relationship.

By examining U.S. assistance to China during the Sino-Vietnamese War in light of the ongoing Sino-American covert relationship—as well as the shared interest in curbing the Soviet Union’s global influence that inspired this covert relationship—it can be demonstrated that U.S. policy decisions, far from being tangential to the Sino-Vietnamese War, played a larger role than is commonly understood in this conflict. When China decided to invade Vietnam, China’s leadership was undertaking a calculated risk that Russia would not in turn commence military action against them. Given the state of Sino-Russian relations at the time, this was a very real concern held by Chinese policymakers, despite statements to the contrary that were delivered to the U.S. and others. It was U.S. intelligence regarding Soviet actions and troop movements that allowed this risk to be a calculated one, and thus facilitated the instigation of the Sino-Vietnamese War in the first place.

Beyond the scope of the conflict itself, the Sino-Vietnamese War took the U.S. covert relationship to unprecedented heights. Because the Sino-Vietnamese War truly

put the Sino-American covert relationship to the test—with U.S. intelligence assistance to China playing a concrete role in supporting Chinese military action against Vietnam—the Sino-Vietnamese War in fact constituted a landmark event for both for the Sino-American covert relationship and for the Sino-American relationship more broadly. The Sino-Vietnamese War greatly influenced the Sino-American covert relationship, and in turn the Sino-American covert relationship continues to exert influence on the U.S-China relationship in the present day.

2. The Historical Roots of the Conflict

The Sino-Vietnamese War of 1979 has been poorly covered in contemporary examinations of Cold War geopolitics. This is not surprising, given the incredible complexity of the conflict. The Sino-Vietnamese War features a staggering array of casus belli, turning two countries that had once been staunch allies into overt adversaries for reasons related to contemporary geopolitics, border tensions, refugees, and shared history. Only near the end of the conflict on March 18th, 1979, did China openly list five reasons for its invasion: Vietnam's hegemonic ambitions, the refusal of Vietnam to respect Chinese borders, the mistreatment of ethnic Chinese residing in Vietnam (called the Hoa by the Vietnamese), the oppression of the Vietnamese people, and the Soviet Union's attempts to expand its influence in Southeast Asia.⁹ Although there is some truth in this explanation, the reality is a good deal more complicated.

To understand the factors that motivated the U.S. to involve itself in the Sino-Vietnamese War, it is first necessary to learn more about the causes and context of the Sino-Vietnamese War in order to better understand the factors and logic underlying the conflict. These causes can be divided into two primary groups—historical causes, which created the climate in which China and Vietnam entered hostilities (but did not in and of themselves cause the two nations to go to war), and proximate causes, which served as more temporal casus belli. This section will examine the historical factors that brought Vietnam and China to war in 1979—the most important of which was issues related to the emerging strategic partnership between Russia and Vietnam.

⁹ Steven J. Hood, *Dragons Entangled: Indochina and the China-Vietnam War* (Armonk: An East Gate Book, 1992), 55-56.

2A: Issues Related to the Improving Relationship between Russia and Vietnam

The Sino-Vietnamese War—and equally importantly, U.S. assistance to China during the Sino-Vietnamese War—is unexplainable without the context of the improving relationship between Russia and Vietnam, and the simultaneous deteriorating relationship between Russia and China.

At the start of the 1950s the Soviet Union and China cooperated on a multitude of issues. However, during the 1950s and 1960s this began to change, initially for reasons related to ideological disagreements over the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev's policy of de-Stalinization and Stalinist socioeconomic development policies more broadly.¹⁰ As decolonization accelerated throughout the Third World, China and Russia were also brought into conflict over how best to handle this process. While Khrushchev advocated a policy of “peaceful coexistence” towards the United States and the West, Mao and many of his contemporaries in China felt strongly that China should sponsor a series of Third World guerilla movements to attempt to spark global revolution.¹¹ By the end of August 1960, Russia withdrew all of its 1,400 advisors from China.¹²

While this dispute initially had strong ideological components, it rapidly affected the relationship between China and Vietnam in more concrete ways as the dispute expanded to involve national interests. The delineation of the Sino-Russian border had always been a point of contention for China, and as ties deteriorated, China became much

¹⁰ Lorenz M. Luthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 2.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² “Basic Events in Soviet-Chinese Relations in 1960,” December 17, 1960, *Arkhiv Vneshnei Politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, f.01000, o.53, d.24, p. 457, 269, 270 in *Ibid.*, 174.

more assertive in arguing against what it declared was the result of an “unequal” treaty foisted upon a weakened China by an imperial czarist Russia.¹³ On March 2nd, 1969, confrontations between Chinese and Soviet border guards which had previously involved only fist fighting and fire hoses escalated to a firefight, igniting several months of border clashes.¹⁴ While this fighting ended before a full-scale war began, it nevertheless served as a clear indication of the precipitous state of Sino-Russian relations. In 1980 when an anonymous Chinese general met with Department of Defense officials and answered many questions with reference to “sustained belief in Soviet world-wide hegemonistic aspirations,” he was expressing what was by then a common opinion in the highest levels of Chinese government.¹⁵

By 1978, Russia was deploying its most modern weaponry along its border with China, including the SS20 intermediate range ballistic missile (IRBM). In April 1978, no less a figure than Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev travelled to the border region to witness extensive military exercises simulating a war between Russia and China.¹⁶ These continued Sino-Russian border tensions took place alongside a clear deterioration in Sino-Vietnamese relations—which corresponded closely to a warming of Russo-Vietnamese ties that served to greatly alarm China’s leadership.

Until the U.S.-China rapprochement under President Richard Nixon, Vietnam tried to walk a thin line between Russia and China, accepting aid from both. However, as

¹³ Michael S. Gerson, “The Sino-Soviet Border Conflict: Deterrence, Escalation, and the Threat of Nuclear War in 1969,” (Center for Naval Analysis, November 2010), <http://www.cna.org/sites/default/files/research/D0022974.A2.pdf>, accessed April 29, 2014, 10.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁵ Department of Defense, Joint Chiefs of Staff Message Center, “MND General Speaks to Strategic Issues,” December 31, 1980, 2.

¹⁶ Robert S. Ross, *Negotiating Cooperation: The United States and China, 1969-1989* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 125.

the U.S. military effort in Vietnam accelerated, North Vietnam became increasingly dependent on the Soviet Union for sophisticated military hardware that China simply could not produce.¹⁷ One journalist was told about a secret 1964 diplomatic offer by Deng Xiaoping of \$1 billion 1964 U.S. dollars a year in aid to Vietnam provided that Vietnam declined all Soviet aid (assuming this report is true, Vietnam evidently declined).¹⁸ Vietnam for its part in 1979 began to accuse China of reaching a covert agreement with the U.S.A. between 1970 and 1972 wherein China would pressure Vietnam to postpone unification of North and South Vietnam.¹⁹ This allegation aside, a broader warming in U.S-PRC ties—including developments such as Nixon’s visit to China in 1972, which eventually led to the normalization of relations—was viewed by the Vietnamese as a terrible betrayal.²⁰

Cooperation between the Soviets and the Vietnamese only continued after Vietnam was unified, owing in part to the cessation of aid by the Chinese in response to the Hoa issue (which will be discussed later on). More ominously for China, military cooperation between Vietnam and the Soviets continued to increase. In May 1977, Vietnam and Russia signed an agreement on military cooperation wherein Vietnam would allow Soviet personnel access to naval bases in Danang and Cam Ranh Bay.²¹ In June 1977, Vietnam joined the Soviet Council for Mutual Economic Assistance

¹⁷ Huynh Kim Khahn, “Vietnam: Neither Peace Nor War,” *Southeast Asian Affairs* (1979): 341.

¹⁸ R. P. Paringaux, “The Indochinese Power Seesaw,” *The Guardian Weekly*, October 29, 1978, in *Ibid.*

¹⁹ John W. Garver, “Sino-Vietnamese Conflict and the Sino-American Rapprochement,” *Political Science Quarterly* Vol. 96 No. 3 (Autumn 1981): 446.

²⁰ William S. Turley and Jeffrey Race, “The Third Indochina War,” *Foreign Policy* No. 38 (Spring 1980): 95-96.

²¹ Robert S. Ross, *The Indochina Tangle: China’s Vietnam Policy, 1975-1979* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 128-129, in Ezra F. Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2011), 274-275.

(COMECON).²² Vietnam's membership in COMECON coincided with a substantial increase in weapons shipments from Russia to Vietnam, in quantities far larger than were needed to maintain Vietnam's ongoing occupation of Cambodia.²³ U.S. officials estimated that by August 1978, between 3,500 and 4,000 Soviet advisors were in Vietnam, and by mid-October U.S. officials believed that the Soviets were unloading missiles, airplanes, munitions, and tanks in Vietnamese ports.²⁴ Russia also provided direct support for Vietnam's occupation of Laos, with 1,200 to 1,500 Russian advisors present in Laos serving alongside Vietnamese forces in 1979.²⁵ Around 1977, the Soviets had constructed missile bases in Vietnam that were designed to threaten China, with Soviet personnel and equipment stationed at each base.²⁶ On November 2nd, 1978, Vietnam formalized its relationship with the Soviet Union by signing a treaty of friendship and cooperation, which contained a clause providing for mutual consultations in the event of an attack or threatened attack—a clause that China immediately denounced as an overt military alliance.²⁷

Vietnam's close development of ties with Russia would have been threatening to China had it occurred in isolation. When viewed in conjunction with Russia's heavy troop presence on China's northern border, Russia's cooperation with India, and Vietnam's dominance of Laos and Cambodia, it was all too easy for senior Chinese leaders such as Deng Xiaoping to believe that China was in the process of being encircled

²² Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping*, 275.

²³ Hood, *Dragons Entangled*, 46-47.

²⁴ Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping*, 281.

²⁵ Thomas J. Bellows, "Proxy War in Indochina," *Asian Affairs* Vol. 7 No. 1 (September-October 1979): 22.

²⁶ Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping*, 269.

²⁷ Chen, *The Strategic Triangle*, 147.

by Russia.²⁸ Deng believed that the Russo-Vietnamese alliance was the most threatening of all the aforementioned developments to China.²⁹ Deng was additionally viscerally upset by the topic of Vietnam, feeling betrayed by Vietnam's close ties with the Soviet Union in the light of the extremely generous assistance that China provided to Vietnam during its war with America.³⁰ While many of Vietnam's actions (some of which will be discussed elsewhere) in Southeast Asia would have threatened China's security in the absence of any further developments, when presented alongside Vietnam's growing ties with the Soviet Union, they represented a major hindrance to China's continued security in the eyes of Chinese policymakers.

2B: Ethnic and Nationalist Tensions Between China and Vietnam

It is not accurate to say that China and Vietnam were ethnically predetermined to come into conflict. However, in order to comprehend the origins of the Sino-Vietnamese War, understanding the centuries of context underpinning the relationship between these two nations is important.

One historian has observed that China and Vietnam's cooperation during Vietnam's thirty-year war for national independence can be conceived of as an anomaly in the two thousand years the two peoples have coexisted.³¹ From the second century B.C. to the tenth century A.D. Vietnam was formally part of the Chinese empire, during which time there were numerous uprisings against Chinese domination, one of which is

²⁸ Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping*, 269-270.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 270.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 270-272.

³¹ Bruce Burton, "Contending Explanations of the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War, *International Journal* Vol. 34 No. 4 (Autumn 1979): 701.

still celebrated in Vietnam today, despite its occurrence in 40 A.D.³² Vietnamese history is marked by repeated Chinese invasions and repeated Vietnamese insurrection against these attempted occupations. In a darkly ironic twist, the route that Chinese forces used in 1979 to invade Vietnam—Friendship Pass—was also used by the Sung, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties to invade Vietnam.³³ Deng Xiaoping was aware that throughout the ages, Vietnamese patriots had historically viewed China as their primary enemy, in no small part due to this history.³⁴ Just as the Vietnamese have historically viewed the Chinese as foreign aggressors, the Chinese have historically viewed the Vietnamese as inferior subhumans. Even today, there are two nationalities that the Chinese primarily refer to as “monkeys”—the Japanese and the Vietnamese. In short, there is substantial history to the Chinese-Vietnamese relationship, and much of that history involves antagonism—antagonism that would go on to affect the strategic climate in which the two nations fought in 1979.

³² Ibid.

³³ O’Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy*, 74.

³⁴ Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping*, 271.

3. The Proximate Causes of the Conflict

While historical tensions between China and Vietnam certainly played a prominent role in creating the sort of climate in which the two nations could go to war, and while Russia's expanding influence with Vietnam similarly made Vietnam a more prominent national security threat to China, these factors were in and of themselves insufficient to lead to war. Proximate causes—including Vietnam's 1978 invasion of Cambodia, ongoing border tensions between Cambodia and Vietnam, and ethnic Chinese refugees fleeing Vietnam into China (the Hoa) all played a more immediate role in causing an outbreak of hostilities.

3A: The Vietnamese Invasion of Cambodia

The vast majority of historical observers agree that the major strategic motivation underpinning Chinese hostilities with Vietnam was Vietnam's December 1978 invasion of Cambodia—an invasion which was caused in turn by a mixture of border tensions, disputes related to Khmer Rouge policy on topics such as refugees and human rights abuses, geostrategic imperatives related to international relations in Southeast Asia at the time, and historical tensions between Cambodia and Vietnam.³⁵

At their core, Vietnam-Cambodia tensions were caused by a poorly drawn boundary between the two nations that did not follow topographical reality imposed by the same French colonial administration that Vietnam would later fight against for its

³⁵ For an example of one historian who feels that the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia was the primary motivation for Chinese military action, see O'Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy*, 4-5.

independence.³⁶ North Vietnamese forces had been stationed in border areas of Cambodia during Vietnam's conflict with America in order to protect supply lines, and had in many cases not been withdrawn in the aftermath of Vietnam's unification under communist rule in 1975.³⁷ It is certainly possible that the two nations, had they been inclined to view each other favorably on other issues, might have negotiated and reached mutually acceptable compromises on issues related to the proper demarcation of the Vietnam-Cambodia border, much as Russia and China would in future decades. However, Vietnam and Cambodia had a fractious relationship due to Vietnamese objections to a variety of policies undertaken by Cambodia's ruling regime, the Khmer Rouge, and its leader, Pol Pot.

The Khmer Rouge instituted a brutal policy of slaughter tantamount to genocide in pursuit of the complete transformation of Cambodian society that both resulted in the influx of 60,000 Cambodian refugees into Vietnam and caused Cambodian authorities to commit atrocities against Vietnamese ethnic minorities living within Cambodia.³⁸ The Khmer Rouge additionally purged the Kampuchean Communist Party and armed forces of those suspected of pro-Vietnamese leanings in January 1977.³⁹ Under Pol Pot's rule, Cambodian efforts (in the form of limited border raids) to evict Vietnamese residents and troops from Cambodian territory in the Mekong Delta escalated—as did Vietnamese counterattacks.⁴⁰ While these conflicts had started as early as 1974, in late April 1977 Cambodian troops increased raids along the border near the Vietnamese cities of Ha Tien

³⁶ Tai Sung An, "Turmoil in Indochina: The Vietnam-Cambodia Conflict," *Asian Affairs* Vol. 5 No. 4 (March-April 1978): 245 and Chen, *The Strategic Triangle*, 133.

³⁷ An, "Turmoil in Indochina: The Vietnam-Cambodia Conflict," 245.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 250.

³⁹ Khahn, "Vietnam," 345.

⁴⁰ Bellows, "Proxy War in Indochina," 17.

and Chau Doc, pushing ten kilometers into Vietnamese territory and forcing Vietnamese militia in the area to withdraw in the process. Five months later, Cambodian forces launched a series of assaults along a 150 kilometer front in Tay Ninh Province which killed and wounded thousands of soldiers and civilians and additionally prompted the evacuation of civilians from Vietnamese border areas.⁴¹ In addition to these land offensives, Cambodian forces had repeatedly attacked Vietnamese-occupied islands near the waters shared by the two nations, landing troops on Phu Quoc Island and Tho Chu Island in 1975. Despite the fact that Cambodia's military was weaker than that of Vietnam, Cambodia's leadership apparently believed that aggressive action might intimidate Vietnam into capitulating.⁴² This would be proven to be a miscalculation with grave consequences.

While these issues were the most temporal causes of the tensions that would erupt into open hostilities when Vietnam attacked Cambodia, any mention of them without any deeper context or background would be misleading. Both geostrategic calculations and a history of ethnic tensions between Cambodia and Vietnam helped incubate the conflict as well.

Vietnamese control over two important strategic areas—the Mekong delta and Saigon, its second largest city—could fundamentally not be secure if Cambodia was hostile.⁴³ Highway One, which linked Ho Chi Minh City (the capital of Vietnam) with Phnom Penh (the capital of Cambodia), traversed Svay Rieng Province in Cambodia

⁴¹ An, "Turmoil in Indochina," 250-251.

⁴² Hood, *Dragons Entangled*, 45.

⁴³ Dennis Duncanson, "'Limited Sovereignty' in Indochina," *The World Today* Vol. 34 No. 7 (July 1978): 268.

(also known as the Parrot’s Beak) which juts deeply between Tay Ninh and Kien Tuong provinces in Vietnam to come within 40 miles of Ho Chi Minh City.⁴⁴



Figure 1.1: The “Parrot’s Beak” of Cambodia, a strategically significant piece of territory jutting into Vietnam. Vietnam and Cambodia’s border is represented by the yellow line.

Image courtesy of Google Earth.

⁴⁴ Bellows, “Proxy War in Indochina,” 17.

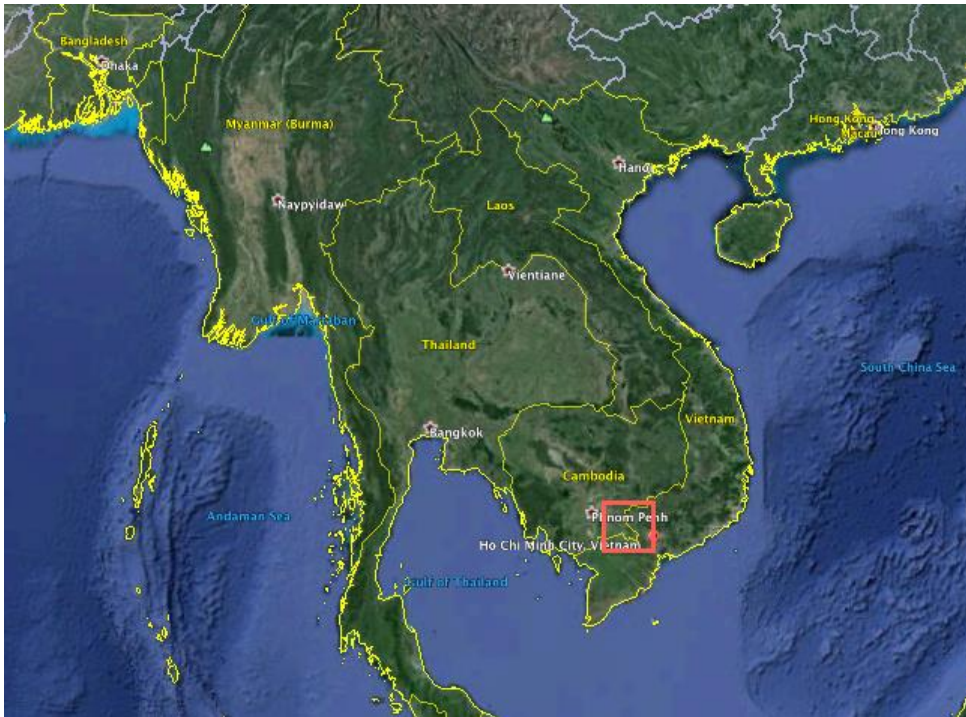


Figure 1.2: A larger perspective view of the “Parrot’s Beak.” Image courtesy of Google Earth.

One contemporary observer wrote that in Vietnam’s eyes, the strategic issue regarding Cambodia was simple, as Vietnam believed that developing “protectorate relationships” with both Cambodia and Laos was important to prevent being encircled by hostile powers and thus was vital for Vietnamese security.⁴⁵ Thus, ensuring that any Cambodian regime would be accommodating to Vietnamese interests was a major priority for Vietnamese policymakers.

Additionally, Vietnam and Cambodia share a history of ethnic rivalry and tension that clearly influenced the situation in which both countries found themselves in 1978. In 1471, the Vietnamese (or the Annamese, as they were then called) annexed the Kingdom

⁴⁵ Sheldon W. Simon, “The Indochina Imbroglio and External Interests,” *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (October 1983): 97-98.

of Champa (the equivalent of Cambodia in terms of ethnicity and culture), foreshadowing frequent attempts by Vietnam to dominate its neighbor.⁴⁶ In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Cambodia swung between being a tributary state to neighboring Thailand (Siam) and Vietnam, until the French began to colonize the area, when several regions which were historically inhabited by ethnic Cambodians were transferred to the territorial unit of Vietnam.⁴⁷ Throughout the nineteenth century, the Vietnamese came to refer to ethnic Cambodians as “barbarians,” and according to the Khmer Rouge, since the Angkor era, the Cambodian people have referred to the Vietnamese as “savages.”⁴⁸

While these ethnic tensions might seem to have no impact on more recent history, they are in fact very present in the modern history of Southeast Asia. Under the French occupation, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam became one administrative unit (“Indochina”), wherein the relatively well-educated Vietnamese were utilized to fill the lower and middle ranks of the colonial administration for the entirety of Indochina.⁴⁹ As a result of this experience, it can be argued that the Vietnamese were used to dominating their Cambodian neighbors throughout history. This attitude outlived the French colonial occupation, and was visible in Vietnam’s communist movement as well. When it was first founded in the 1920s, the Vietnamese communist party was called the “Indochina Communist Party,” despite its lack of Laotian, Cambodian, or, indeed, non-Vietnamese, members—it was assumed by the Vietnamese communists that they spoke for Cambodia

⁴⁶ Chen, *China’s War with Vietnam*, 30.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Bellows, “Proxy War in Indochina,” 16.

⁴⁹ Marek Thee, “Red East in Conflict: The China/Indochina Wars,” *Journal of Peace Research* Vol. 16 No 2 (1979): 96.

and Laos as well.⁵⁰ Additionally, Vietnam's cultural attitude towards its Cambodian and Laotian neighbors can be inferred by the concept of an "Indochina Federation" or "Indochina Union" that surfaces repeatedly in Vietnamese history—a union of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam into a single state, governed by the Vietnamese. The Vietnamese communist leadership claimed to have renounced this concept in 1951, when the Indochina Communist Party was dissolved and reformed as the Vietnam Workers' Party, with separate Laotian and Cambodian communist parties established as well.⁵¹ However, party documents circulated at the time made reference to "a genuine union...under a single party," and Ho Chi Minh spoke of "realizing a great union of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia."⁵² Is it any wonder that when Le Duan, a prominent Vietnamese leader, visited Phnom Penh in 1975 to propose a "special relationship" between Vietnam and Cambodia, a skeptical Cambodian government politely declined?⁵³

As a result of the sum of the aforementioned tensions, Vietnam invaded Cambodia and deposed the Khmer Rouge. Initially, Vietnam attempted to defeat Cambodian forces decisively in isolated border skirmishes, while simultaneously working to foment internal insurrection within Cambodia.⁵⁴ However, Vietnam's efforts in this regard were unsuccessful, and Vietnamese forces, while superior to Cambodian units, were vulnerable to Cambodian tactics in small hit-and-run ambush assaults.⁵⁵ Thus, after waiting for the winter dry season to begin in order for units to function more effectively,

⁵⁰ Ibid., and *Thirty Years of Struggle of the Party* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1960), 64, in Duncanson, "Limited Sovereignty," 262-263.

⁵¹ Duncanson, "Limited Sovereignty," 263.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Khahn, "Vietnam," 345.

⁵⁴ Chen, *The Strategic Triangle*, 148.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

on Christmas Day 1978 Vietnam invaded Cambodia.⁵⁶ This event caught the international community off guard—in a survey of sixty five political, diplomatic, and military leaders in the ASEAN countries conducted by an American scholar in 1977, nearly all of those surveyed viewed ““open aggression”” by Vietnam as ““most improbable.””⁵⁷ Despite calls from both ASEAN and the United Nations for Vietnam to withdraw (a UN Security Council resolution condemning Vietnam’s invasion was defeated thirteen to two with the Soviet Union voting no), on January 7th, 1979, the People’s Republic of Kampuchea was declared, with Heng Samrin—considered by most as a Vietnamese puppet—as head of state.⁵⁸ While most urban areas (including Phnom Penh) were under Vietnamese control, it is important to note that Vietnamese forces encountered harsh resistance in the hill areas of Cambodia, where Pol Pot and forces loyal to him fled to begin a guerilla war.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, the conflict concluded with a clear victory for Vietnam.

Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia proved a major irritant to China, as China had attempted to develop strong ties with Pol Pot’s Cambodia in order to counter Vietnamese ambitions to dominate the geopolitics of Southeast Asia. The Khmer Rouge had signed a major agreement with China in August 1975, followed by an alleged (according to the Vietnamese) major military buildup on Cambodia’s part aided by the People’s Republic of China that added twelve divisions to Cambodia’s armed forces.⁶⁰ Henry Kissinger observed that, in the 1960s and 1970s, China’s interests in Southeast Asia optimally

⁵⁶ Ibid. and Hood, *Dragons Entangled*, 50.

⁵⁷ Franklin B. Weinstein, “The Meaning of National Security in Southeast Asia,” *The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, November 1978, 28.

⁵⁸ Chen, *The Strategic Triangle*, 149 and Hood, *Dragons Entangled*, 50.

⁵⁹ Hood, *Dragons Entangled*, 50.

⁶⁰ Radio Hanoi broadcast, February 21, 1978, in Khahn, “Vietnam,” 345.

would have no single state achieving regional hegemony, because then that state might be able to encircle China and threaten Chinese interests in Southeast Asia. The existence of a 100 million person Indochinese Federation, whether formal or informal, led by a people with a history of resistance to Chinese domination would be highly threatening to the People's Republic of China.⁶¹ Thus, the Chinese were tremendously alarmed by Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia.

3B: Border Tensions Between China and Vietnam

As important as the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia was for the instigation of the Sino-Vietnamese War, it was by no means the conflict's only source. A classified report from the CIA's National Foreign Assessment Center points out that tensions along the Sino-Vietnamese border were a significant issue between Vietnam and China long before Vietnam invaded Cambodia.⁶² It is important to note that throughout the war, the Chinese themselves were generally consistent in stating that the only issue affecting the Sino-Vietnamese relationship was Vietnamese border provocations.⁶³ The Chinese themselves refer to their war with Vietnam as a "counter attack in self defense" or the "defensive counteroffensive"—the original attack being a series of border raids launched against China.⁶⁴ While the total number of border provocations—to say nothing of the true instigator in each case—remains murky at best, the Chinese alleged that there was a

⁶¹ Kissinger, *On China*, 344 and 346.

⁶² Central Intelligence Agency, National Foreign Assessment Center, "The Sino-Vietnamese Border Dispute: A Research Paper," June 2002, iii.

⁶³ Harlan W. Jencks, "China's 'Punitive' War on Vietnam: A Military Assessment," *Asian Survey* Vol. 19 No. 8 (August 1979): 803.

⁶⁴ Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping*, 532.

sharp rise in border violations from 1977 (when there were 752, as compared to 121 in 1974) to 1978 (when there were 1108).⁶⁵

There had long been difficulties in accurately defining the border between China and Vietnam, as the border was technically delineated by a series of stone markers placed at the base of mountains and in valleys by the French, with many of the markers as far as twenty kilometers apart. However, in 1957 both sides had agreed to resolve their differences amicably at a later date.⁶⁶ Over time this agreement collapsed, in part due to tensions between the two nations on a host of unrelated issues such as relations with the Soviet Union, in part due to issues involving the proper demarcation of maritime boundaries.⁶⁷ These disputes escalated to firefights in 1978 when Hoa refugees fleeing Vietnam were pursued by Vietnamese security forces (the issue of the Hoa will be discussed further below), and were further escalated in 1978 when Vietnam unilaterally erected border fortifications, creating arguments over the ownership of territory where there had previously been none.⁶⁸ In a very real sense, the issues of Cambodia and the border were “mutually reinforcing,” and both served to convince the Chinese that the Vietnamese—receiving Soviet aid and support all the while—would continue to openly defy Chinese interests unless harsh action was taken.⁶⁹

3C: The Issue of Hoa Refugees

⁶⁵ “People’s Daily,” February 27, 1979, 1, in Daniel Tretiak, “China’s Vietnam War and Its Consequences,” *The China Quarterly* No. 80 (December 1979): 741.

⁶⁶ Central Intelligence Agency, “The Sino-Vietnamese Border Dispute,” 5 and 1.

⁶⁷ These maritime issues, which are beyond the scope of this thesis, can be examined further in Central Intelligence Agency, “The Sino-Vietnamese Border Dispute,” 8.

⁶⁸ Central Intelligence Agency, “The Sino-Vietnamese Border Dispute,” 2 and 5.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

The issue of the Hoa—ethnic Chinese living within Vietnam—greatly escalated both the specific issue of border tensions, and tensions between China and Vietnam more broadly. In 1978, approximately 1.2 million ethnic Chinese lived in Vietnam, the vast majority (all except for 200,000) in the newly conquered South of the nation.⁷⁰ In March 1978, Vietnam’s government eliminated nearly all private economic activity in the country.⁷¹ While it ostensibly was targeted at the entirety of Vietnam, in reality this effort was targeted at the Hoa community in Ho Chi Minh City, who controlled a large proportion of the commerce in the area.⁷² Many figures within Vietnam’s government felt that the Chinese government was covertly organizing the Hoa to sabotage Vietnam’s economy, and many of the Hoa, rather than relocate to rural areas as mandated by law, preferred to flee the country altogether.⁷³ By April 1978, 40,000 Hoa had left Vietnam for China, a number that climbed to over 160,000 by mid-July.⁷⁴ On July 12th, China sealed its border with Vietnam and declared that Hoa who wished to return to China had to apply through the Chinese embassy for repatriation, gain exist visas from Vietnam, and leave through predetermined border crossings—instructions that many Hoa ignored (or were forced to ignore by Vietnamese forces who openly chased them across the border), with a total of 200,000 leaving Vietnam for China by the end of 1978.⁷⁵

The influx of so many refugees into China caused considerable stress on the Sino-Vietnamese relationship. Indeed, the prominent exodus of the Hoa is credited by one scholar as triggering the public deterioration of ties between the two nations, as the other

⁷⁰ Huynh Kim Khahn, “Into the Third Indochina War,” *Southeast Asian Affairs* (1980): 335-336.

⁷¹ Burton, “Contending Explanations,” 710.

⁷² Chen, *The Strategic Triangle*, 141.

⁷³ Khahn, “Vietnam,” 346 and Burton, “Contending Explanations,” 710.

⁷⁴ Ramses Amer, “Sino-Vietnamese Normalization in the Light of the Crisis of the Late 1970s,” *Pacific Affairs* Vol. 67 No. 3 (Autumn 1994): 360-361.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 361 and Central Intelligence Agency, “The Sino-Vietnamese Border Dispute,” 2.

issues affecting the Sino-Vietnamese relationship—considerable though they were—were at least mostly kept away from the eyes of the international community.⁷⁶ This was not the case with the Hoa situation. During the summer of 1978, the Chinese abruptly cut off all foreign aid to Vietnam, stating that the money needed to be used to aid the Hoa refugees who were settling in China.⁷⁷ This development not only served as an indication of the disintegration of the Sino-Vietnamese relationship, it also drove the Vietnamese further into the arms of the Soviet Union for aid (as part of the increase in ties between the Soviet Union and Vietnam that has been discussed at length earlier).

Additionally, as has been mentioned previously, the refugee influx of Hoa caused the first border skirmish between China and Vietnam that involved the firing of weapons. According to declassified CIA documents, on February 3rd, 1978, refugees fleeing to China were pursued by Vietnamese forces near Dong Van in Hu Tuyen province and were then fired upon by Chinese forces, killing thirty Vietnamese border guards.⁷⁸ This incident marked a serious escalation in border tensions between China and Vietnam, and demonstrates how the issue caused by the forced migration of the Hoa from Vietnam to China caused the deterioration of the Sino-Vietnamese relationship across a host of dimensions.

3D: Conclusion

A large part of the complexity of the Sino-Vietnamese War can be attributed to its incredibly complex causes. The war occurred for a variety of reasons connected to contemporary geopolitics, refugees, disputes about borders, and ancient history. These

⁷⁶ Amer, “Sino-Vietnamese Normalization,” 360.

⁷⁷ Tretiak, “China’s Vietnam War,” 741.

⁷⁸ Central Intelligence Agency, “The Sino-Vietnamese Border Dispute,” 2.

reasons frequently reinforced one another, making the situation even more confounding. Geostrategic considerations (such as Vietnam's decision to partner with Russia and not China) are, in no small sense, motivated by the evidence of history, and domestic policies (such as the Khmer Rouge's attempts to limit Vietnamese influence within Cambodia) are frequently tied to international politics and history (in this case, Chinese patronage of the Khmer Rouge and historical tensions between Vietnam and Cambodia). In this way, a web of factors combined to produce an environment in which China and Vietnam—less for any one reason than for the interplay between a variety of reasons—were drawn together into the harsh embrace of war.

4. The Facts of the Conflict

Any contemporary examination of the Sino-Vietnamese War needs to acknowledge major shortfalls in the established historiography of the conflict. For a variety of reasons—the authoritarian nature of the governments involved in the conflict, the relative geographical remoteness of the conflict, the absence of a substantial media presence—many of the most basic details of the Sino-Vietnamese War remain unclear. During the conflict, reports on military operations published by the Chinese and the Vietnamese contradicted each other in remarkably fundamental ways.⁷⁹ Even today, Chinese public records (as seen in an encyclopedia entry about the conflict) state that the 1979 war was a minor military operation conducted by just a few thousand border guards.⁸⁰ This is manifestly false. However, determining precisely how many Chinese troops were involved in the war—to say nothing of casualty levels—is remarkably difficult. A respected historian of the war observes that casualty estimates for both the Chinese and the Vietnamese “vary so widely as to be virtually useless.”⁸¹ The conflict remained so obscure that claims by Chinese officials that Vietnamese border forces utilized “death ray” weapons against it in the war—testing these weapons on behalf of the Soviets—remain unevaluated by modern historians, as do claims by both China and Vietnam that the opposing party utilized chemical weapons against them during the

⁷⁹ King C. Chen, “China’s War Against Vietnam, 1979: A Military Analysis,” *The Journal of East Asian Affairs* Vol. 3 No. 1 (Spring/Summer 1983): 250.

⁸⁰ “Dui Yue Ziwei Huanji Zuozhan” (“Counterattack against Vietnam in Self-Defense”), in *Shongguo Da Baike Quanshu: Junshi (The Chinese Encyclopedia: Vol. 1)* (Beijing: Chinese Encyclopedia Publishing Company, 1989), 222-223, in O’Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy*, 45.

⁸¹ O’Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy*, 45.

conflict.⁸² It is surprising that a conflict that occurred so recently remains relatively obscure despite the passage of time. Nevertheless, it is important to understand the basic facts of the conflict as they are currently understood by historians.

The Chinese action against Vietnam was not anticipated by most observers of Asia geopolitics. A Department of State memorandum from January 1979—approximately one month prior to the invasion—states that UK defense and diplomatic officials viewed China’s military buildup on its border with Vietnam as a “show of force” to offset its inability to affect Vietnam’s ongoing occupation of Cambodia.⁸³ Despite this assessment, although the extent to which the Chinese carefully planned their efforts and goals in Vietnam can certainly be debated, the fact that the action was planned by the Chinese is clear. The People’s Republic of China engaged in substantial diplomatic outreach—primarily to the United States—prior to the outbreak of hostilities in an attempt to consolidate international support for its military offensive. While this effort was of debatable success, it clearly indicates that China’s leaders were very much concerned about a potential Russian intervention in the conflict.

China’s paramount leader, Deng Xiaoping, had long expounded on Chinese concerns regarding Vietnam to officials representing foreign governments—most notably with officials representing the United States. On May 21st, 1978, when U.S. National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski was visiting China, he met with Deng for two hours, during which Deng expressed his wariness about increasing military cooperation

⁸² Chen, *China’s War with Vietnam*, 107 and Captain Rusty E. Shughart, “The Chinese Perception of Chemical and Biological Warfare,” Department of Foreign Languages, United States Air Force Academy, August 1995, 8-9.

⁸³ U.S. Department of State, “China-Vietnam Dangers,” January 1979.

between the USSR and Vietnam.⁸⁴ On a landmark trip to the United States that began January 28th 1979, just prior to the Chinese invasion, Deng repeatedly made statements regarding China's willingness to utilize military force against Vietnam in response to border tensions and Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia.⁸⁵ Deng's American hosts at no point publically denounced these comments. The major diplomatic engagement of the trip came in the form of an ad-hoc summit between President Carter and Deng upon Deng's visit to Washington D.C. from January 29th until January 31st. Upon Deng's arrival, shortly before a state dinner to honor the reestablishment of full diplomatic relations between the U.S. and China, Deng requested a private meeting with President Carter—a request that some of Carter's advisors (most notably Brzezinski) interpreted as a sign that Deng wished to discuss something of considerable importance.⁸⁶ In this meeting (in which Vice President Mondale, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, and Brzezinski were also present), Deng stated that China wished to “put a restraint on the wild ambitions of the Vietnamese and...give them an appropriate limited lesson.”⁸⁷ During the meeting, which lasted an hour, Deng (who was accompanied by high ranking Chinese diplomatic officials) argued that Soviet and Vietnamese plans in Southeast Asia such as the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia posed a threat to stability and peace.⁸⁸ Deng did not explain specifically what this lesson would entail, but he was careful to note that the exercise would be limited in both scope and duration, stating that if Chinese

⁸⁴ Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping*, 318-319.

⁸⁵ For a good summary of these remarks, see Tretiak, “China's Vietnam War,” 741.

⁸⁶ Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping*, 339, Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President*, New York: Bantam, 1982, 206, and Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Advisor 1977-1981*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1985, 406.

⁸⁷ Robert M Gates, *From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider's Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War*, New York: Touchstone, 1997, 121.

⁸⁸ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 409, and Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping*, 339.

troops entered Vietnam, they would depart after ten to twenty days.⁸⁹ Deng also discussed potential Soviet reactions to Chinese action—including the possibility of a Soviet military response—focusing on how China would counter them.⁹⁰

By his own account, Carter attempted to dissuade Deng, observing that the Vietnamese were presently being condemned for their aggressive actions in Cambodia, and noting that China might deflect this international pressure by taking action that might allow nations to cast them as the aggressor state.⁹¹ Carter additionally argued that he did not want nations to become concerned that the increase in Sino-America ties was in any way aimed at upsetting global peace rather than sustaining it.⁹² Robert Gates, then working as a staffer for the National Security Council, wrote that in many respects, this was the best signal Deng could have hoped for—Carter did not announce that a Vietnamese invasion would disrupt normalization, or that he would share the news of the planned invasion with any other nations.⁹³

Carter ended the meeting by stating that he wished to meet to discuss the issue with his advisors more before giving a further reaction.⁹⁴ Carter's advisors told the President to meet with Deng alone to urge him once more to reconsider.⁹⁵ The following morning, Carter met privately with Deng in the Oval Office and handed Deng a handwritten note summarizing Carter's arguments against a Chinese invasion of Vietnam.⁹⁶ Deng again stressed the need to prevent the Soviets from strengthening their

⁸⁹ Ibid. and Ibid.

⁹⁰ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 409.

⁹¹ Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 206.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Gates, *From the Shadows*, 121

⁹⁴ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 409.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 410.

⁹⁶ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 410 and Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 208.

alliance with Vietnam, and reaffirmed his earlier statement that the Chinese would not attempt to occupy Vietnam for a lengthy period of time.⁹⁷

When Deng left Washington, Brzezinski went out to the helipad to bid goodbye to Deng personally, in what Brzezinski confesses was an attempt to convey Presidential support for Deng's actions.⁹⁸ When Deng left Washington, he could do so secure in the knowledge that the United States government would not interfere with China's planned invasion. The results of this de facto U.S. approval for China's plans were immediately apparent, when forty-eight hours after Deng's meeting with Carter, the CIA reported that a second echelon of the PLA was moving south to the Sino-Vietnamese border to reinforce existing Chinese forces.⁹⁹

Interestingly, on an additional stop on Deng's trip in Texas, Deng met with George H. W. Bush (who was then actively seeking the Republican nomination for President) at the Hyatt-Regency Hotel in Houston, and convinced Bush to back his planned military action in Vietnam.¹⁰⁰ Bush, who had been the Director of the CIA and Chief of the Liaison Office to the People's Republic of China under Gerald Ford, had numerous contacts within America's foreign policy and national security establishment. Deng's outreach to Bush was likely an attempt to cultivate allies within the American bureaucracy, in addition to an effort to groom a potential American President to be a future ally.

⁹⁷ Ibid., and Ibid.

⁹⁸ Brzezinski, 410-411.

⁹⁹ Gates, *From the Shadows*, 121.

¹⁰⁰ James Lilley, *China Hands: Nine Decades of Adventure, Espionage, and Diplomacy in Asia* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), 216.

With this task and diplomatic outreach to America successfully concluded, China invaded Vietnam on February 17th and 18th, 1979. Estimates of Chinese force size vary greatly. Edward C. O’Dowd writes that the invasion force had more than 400,000 troops, while Ezra Vogel lists Chinese force size as 200,000.¹⁰¹ In 1985, Vo Dong Giang, then Vietnam’s Minister of State, stated that the Chinese invasion force numbered 600,000.¹⁰² Whichever number one chooses to believe, it is clear that the Chinese invasion force was substantial—indeed, Chinese forces were so numerous, the CIA feared that the Chinese intended to advance all the way to Hanoi.¹⁰³ Chinese statements to the contrary, this was no minor border action.

From the start of the conflict, Chinese policymakers were explicit regarding their intention to conduct a limited military intervention. Chinese leaders assured international observers (including Russia) that “we do not want a single inch of Vietnamese territory...After counterattacking the Vietnamese aggressors as they deserve, the Chinese frontier troops will strictly keep to defending the border of their own country.”¹⁰⁴ Similarly, Deng Xiaoping stated publically that “this action will be a limited one.”¹⁰⁵ These statements were supported by the manner in which China conducted its military operations. Despite a high degree of numerical (albeit certainly not qualitative, owing to both the superiority of Vietnamese aircraft due to Soviet military assistance and the excellent training Vietnamese pilots had received during military operations against American planes—to say nothing of superior Vietnamese surface-to-air missiles)

¹⁰¹ O’Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy*, 3 and Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping*, 531.

¹⁰² Giang and Falk, “The View from Hanoi,” 112.

¹⁰³ Gates, *From the Shadows*, 121.

¹⁰⁴ James Mulvenon, “The Limits of Coercive Diplomacy: The 1979 Sino-Vietnamese Border War,” *The Journal of Northeast Asian Studies* Vol. 14 Issue 3 (Fall 1995): 78.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 78-79.

superiority in Chinese airpower, the PLA did not utilize air power for anything other than logistical transportation in its combat operations against the Vietnamese, likely anticipating that such action would escalate the conflict to an unacceptable extent, perhaps bringing the Soviet Union into the war.¹⁰⁶ Additionally, an analyst reported that Chinese forces were operating under orders not to advance farther into Vietnam than fifty kilometers (orders which would prove somewhat amusing, given that PLA divisions were unable to go farther than twenty five miles into Vietnam, according to contemporary reports, due to determined Vietnamese resistance).¹⁰⁷ There is every indication that Deng worked extremely hard to limit the extent of the conflict—in no small measure because he was concerned about the possibility of a Soviet military response.

Despite working very hard to give the impression that China was entirely unconcerned that Russia might retaliate against it for its invasion of Vietnam, China's leadership was in fact quite concerned by this possibility. It is telling that no troops from China's northern military regions bordering the Soviet Union were sent to participate in the effort against Vietnam, despite the fact that the bulk of China's forces were concentrated in these regions.¹⁰⁸ In a further indication that Deng was concerned about a possible Soviet response to the invasion, Deng moved 300,000 Chinese civilians away

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 79, O'Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy*, 67, and Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping*, 528.

¹⁰⁷ *Guang Jiao Jing*, Hong Kong, No. 78, March 16, 1979, page 8, in Jencks, "China's 'Punitive' War on Vietnam," 809 and Nguyen Manh Hung, "The Sino-Vietnamese Conflict," 1049. It is worth noting that Chinese Communist Party Central Committee propaganda alleges that PLA forces advanced "30...to 80 miles." See *Shonggong Zhongyang Guanyu Shengli Jieshu dui Yue Ziwei Fanji Baowei Bianjiang Zhanzheng di Tongzhi* (A Notice of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist party on the Victorious Conclusion of the Self-Defensive Counterattack against Vietnam and Border-Protection War) (Beijing: 1979), 2, in Chen, "China's War Against Vietnam," 254.

¹⁰⁸ O'Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy*, 53.

from the Sino-Soviet border prior to the invasion.¹⁰⁹ Indeed, in a speech given after the end of the war, Deng stated that when he and other Chinese leaders were planning the invasion of Vietnam, the issue that they had been most concerned about was the potential for a Soviet military response.¹¹⁰ This concern was not irrational, given the state of Sino-Russian relations in 1979. Indeed, in the January 1979 State Department memo referenced earlier, even in the face of clear Chinese military mobilization along the Sino-Vietnamese border, British officials viewed Chinese escalation as incredibly unlikely in no small part “because of [the] risk of Soviet retaliation on [the] Sino-Soviet border.”¹¹¹ China’s leadership was apprehensive regarding potential Soviet military action, despite numerous boasts to the contrary, and Chinese actions throughout the conflict clearly indicate this fact.

By launching his military action so soon after his visit to the United States, Deng sought to send the signal that his action was strongly supported by the U.S. During the conflict, Brezhnev phoned Carter to seek Carter’s confirmation that the U.S. was in no way supporting the Chinese in their invasion. Despite Carter’s reassurances, Brezhnev remained concerned.¹¹² In a February 24th meeting between Secretary of State Vance and the Soviet Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Dobrynin, Dobrynin made clear that many in Russia felt strongly that the United States had encouraged China to attack.¹¹³

¹⁰⁹ “Deng Xiaoping zai Zhong-Yue bianjing zuozhan qingkuang baogao huishang de jianghua” (Deng Xiaoping’s Speech at the Meeting to Report on the Situation on the Sino-Vietnamese Border), March 16, 1979, unpublished speech available in the Fairbank Collection, Fung Library, Harvard University, in Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping*, 528.

¹¹⁰ Ibid. in Ibid., 819.

¹¹¹ U.S. Department of State, “China-Vietnam Dangers,” January 1979.

¹¹² Elizabeth Wishnick, *Mending Fences: The Evolution of Moscow’s China Policy from Brezhnev to Yeltsin* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), 63.

¹¹³ Cyrus Vance, *Hard Choices: Critical Years in America’s Foreign Policy*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983, 121-122.

The Vietnamese felt similarly, as evidenced by Vietnamese accusations that the Chinese had in invading Vietnam instigated a “premeditated plan with the support of the imperialists, particularly the U.S. imperialists.”¹¹⁴ However, general historical works regarding the conflict hold that the U.S. provided no consequential support to the PRC throughout the conflict. Indeed, the U.S. was careful to publically condemn China’s actions repeatedly during the course of the war. When Secretary of the Treasury W. Michael Blumenthal was in China on February 27th (on a prescheduled trip to formally open the U.S. embassy and discuss issues regarding frozen assets), he stated in a speech that “Any erosion of these principles [the principles of territorial integrity and peaceful resolution of disputes] harms all nations. Even limited invasions risk wider wars and turn public opinion against the aggressor. Let there be no doubt as to the American position on this matter.”¹¹⁵ In reality, the U.S. position during the conflict was far more complicated.

Immediately after the Chinese invasion, President Carter convened a meeting of the National Security Council, which came to a consensus that the U.S. ought to demand a Chinese withdrawal from Vietnam coupled with a demand for a Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia.¹¹⁶ The U.S. adopted this position in no small part because American policymakers such as Brzezinski knew the Vietnamese would be unwilling to withdraw from Cambodia, and thus the U.S. demand would have the effect of providing diplomatic

¹¹⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, “Memorandum to the UN General Assembly of the Chinese authorities’ frenzied intensification of their criminal schemes and actions against Vietnam since February 17, 1979,” UN Document Number A/25/105, S/13804, Annex, February 1980, in Hood, “American Influence in the China-Vietnam War,” 38.

¹¹⁵ Tretiak, “China’s Vietnam War,” 760.

¹¹⁶ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 412.

cover for Chinese actions.¹¹⁷ This position was adopted by consensus, and Brzezinski remembers little opposition to it, likely because it made reciprocal demands of both China and of Vietnam.¹¹⁸

Unsurprisingly, the Soviet Union and its allies—namely, Cuba, Mongolia, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, and Albania—all harshly condemned the invasion and demanded an immediate Chinese withdrawal.¹¹⁹ In five emergency sessions of the United Nations Security Council (requested by Norway, Portugal, Great Britain and the United States), the body was divided.¹²⁰ ASEAN member states and the United States favored a resolution asking for the withdrawal of all “foreign” troops that presumably would apply to both Chinese forces in Vietnam and Vietnamese forces within Cambodia (it is worth noting that this resolution was supported by all nations then on the Security Council—including China—with the exception of the USSR and Czechoslovakia).¹²¹ The USSR and Czechoslovakia jointly submitted a draft resolution on February 23rd which denounced only China for its invasion, demanded a Chinese withdrawal and war reparations to Vietnam, and called for an arms embargo against China, as Russia announced it would veto any resolution which did not specifically condemn China.¹²² China in turn submitted a resolution that required the immediate withdrawal of all Vietnamese troops from Cambodia.¹²³ While the United

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 410.

¹¹⁸ Brzezinski, interview by author, February 24, 2pm.

¹¹⁹ Masashi Nishihara, “The Sino-Vietnamese War of 1979: Only The First Round?” *Southeast Asian Affairs* (1980): 74.

¹²⁰ *UN Chronicle*, Vol. XVI, No. 3 (March 1979, 5-17, 42-46, in King C. Chen, “China’s War Against Vietnam,” 254-255.

¹²¹ Ibid., 5, in Ibid., 255.

¹²² Ibid., 46 in Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid., 46-49, in Ibid.

Nations was the host of contentious debate throughout the conflict, it did not play a role in the resolution of the dispute.

Throughout the conflict, the Soviet Union—which was, after all, in a formal military alliance with the Vietnamese—was quite active on the margins of the conflict, despite seeming passive and uninvolved. The Soviet Union sent TU-95D *Bear* reconnaissance flights southward from Vladivostok to monitor the conflict immediately after the outbreak of hostilities.¹²⁴ Additionally, the USSR deployed a Sverdlov-class cruiser and a Krivak-class destroyer to join a Soviet naval squadron of eleven vessels already off the coast of Vietnam.¹²⁵ The Soviets also sent additional military supplies, with six Antonov-22 transport aircraft arriving in Hanoi from the southern Soviet Union on February 23rd (one of which was possibly carrying high ranking military officials), and with two Soviet and Bulgarian flights reportedly flying from Calcutta to Hanoi on February 26th.¹²⁶ Additionally, Soviet electronic intelligence ships monitored the conflict.¹²⁷ These actions certainly made the Chinese acutely aware of the Soviet Union's interests in the conflict, but were of little practical military significance.

Initially, Chinese attacks—supported by heavy artillery—were successful.¹²⁸ However, as the invasion progressed, PLA units rapidly encountered difficulties. The mountainous terrain of the border area was not conducive to the movement of division-

¹²⁴ Nishihara, "The Sino-Vietnamese War of 1979," 74.

¹²⁵ Drew Middleton, "Vietnam Drive; Big Clash Seen," *The New York Times*, February 22, 1979, A1.

¹²⁶ Nishihara, "The Sino-Vietnamese War of 1979," 74, Henry Kamm, "Soviet Arms Airlift to Vietnam Hinted As Combat Goes On," *The New York Times*, February 23, 1979, A1, Agence Presse-France (Beijing), February 23, 1979, in Foreign Broadcast Information Service, February 26, 1979, A7 and Agence Presse-France (New Delhi), February 23, 1979, in Foreign Broadcast Information Service, February 26, 1979, K2 in Chen, "China's War Against Vietnam," 251-252.

¹²⁷ O'Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy*, 67.

¹²⁸ Chen, "China's War Against Vietnam," 249.

sized forces, and the Chinese lacked modern logistical equipment suitable to the terrain. Thus, the Chinese were required to use carts and in some cases donkeys for supply transportation.¹²⁹ Meanwhile, Vietnamese border forces fought with the aid of fortifications constructed with the experience of decades of conflict, utilizing tunnels, caves, trenches, booby traps, and bamboo stakes.¹³⁰ Despite Chinese expectations that five Vietnamese provincial capitals bordering China would be captured after one week of fighting, the major provincial capital the Chinese sought—Lang Son—was only captured three weeks after the initial outbreak of hostilities, on March 6th.¹³¹ Chinese advances came at a heavy price. While reliable casualty information is not available, estimates range from 20,000 to 62,500 Chinese casualties.¹³² Information about Vietnamese casualties is similarly murky, with estimates ranging from 35,000 to 50,000.¹³³ After the Chinese captured Lang Son on March 5th-March 6th, they declared victory and began to withdraw, with the last Chinese soldier returning to China on March 16th.¹³⁴ The fact that this conflict lasted just twenty-seven days, only seventeen days of which featured combat—yet resulted in such horrendous casualties on both sides—is a testament to the war’s savagery.

5A: The Results of the Conflict

Appropriately for such a complex conflict, the Sino-Vietnamese War ended ambiguously, with both sides possessing at least some claims to victory. The Vietnamese could claim they had defeated an invasion by a far more powerful neighbor without

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 247.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 248.

¹³¹ Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping*, 531-532.

¹³² For an adroit summary of various estimates, see O’Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy*, 45.

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping*, 532 and O’Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy*, 73.

having to surrender territory or retreat from Cambodia, while the Chinese could claim they had shown the Vietnamese that they were willing to use military force to secure their interests. Is either side correct in their assessment? If neither side is fully correct, which is more correct?

One school of thought holds that China was unambiguously defeated in the war. O'Dowd observes that "China launched its attack in an effort to force Vietnam to withdraw from Cambodia. The Chinese withdrew from Vietnam on March 16th, 1979, but the Vietnamese did not leave Cambodia until 1989."¹³⁵ China's efforts only drew some Vietnamese troops away from Cambodia, as Chinese troops had only fought against Vietnamese border troops and militia, as opposed to regular units—thus, an invasion intended to teach Vietnam's leadership that it could not sustain its military deployments in Cambodia did the exact opposite.¹³⁶ In the aftermath of the conflict, border tensions remained high, and Vietnam only increased its expulsion of Hoa.¹³⁷ Under this interpretation, China's assault served only to demonstrate its own military limitations and accomplished none of its objectives.

Additionally, rather than weakening the Russo-Vietnamese relationship, China's invasion of Vietnam paradoxically had the opposite effect, strengthening the alliance between the two countries. Between April and July 1979, the Soviets refitted the 308th Division of the Vietnamese 1st Corps, along with other units, with new equipment, including 111 BMP-1 armored personnel carriers—which were highly mobile and carried anti-tank guided missiles, and thus represented a substantial advance over the hardware

¹³⁵ O'Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy*, 72.

¹³⁶ Worthing, *A Military History of Modern China*, 181 and O'Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy*, 73.

¹³⁷ Tretiak, "China's Vietnam War," 753.

hitherto available to either side.¹³⁸ The Soviets also sent military advisors to the units that received the new hardware.¹³⁹ The construction of Soviet naval and air facilities at Da Nang and Cam Ranh Bay were accelerated following the conflict, and contemporary observers felt that the USSR's military posture in East Asia was strengthened after the war.¹⁴⁰ After the conflict, numerous pro-China elements within the Vietnamese government were either arrested or defected to China.¹⁴¹ By forcing Vietnam once again to turn to Russia for help, China's military offensive—which was aimed at upsetting the ongoing Russo-Vietnamese relationship—only achieved the opposite.

However, other perspectives take substantial issue with this conventional wisdom. The Vietnamese were forced to maintain a large contingent of troops on the border with China for the foreseeable future, which caused the Vietnamese government noticeable financial (and subsequently economic) difficulties.¹⁴² Additionally, some scholars—such as Henry Kissinger—write admiringly of the deterrent effect that Chinese action had on the Soviet Union and Vietnam, precisely because it showed Moscow that China was willing and able to oppose their plans by force—and further demonstrated that the USSR was unwilling to take military action to stop this.¹⁴³ Lee Kuan Yew, the longtime Prime Minister of Singapore, stated that while “The Western press wrote off the Chinese punitive action as a failure...I believe it changed the history of East Asia.”¹⁴⁴

¹³⁸ Headquarters, Vietnamese First Corps, *Lich Su Quan Doan Mot, 1973-1998* (History of the First Corps, 1973-1998) (Hanoi: Military Publishing House, 1998), 123, in O'Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy*, 72.

¹³⁹ Ibid. in Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Jencks, “China's ‘Punitive’ War on Vietnam,” 815.

¹⁴¹ Mulvenon, “The Limits of Coercive Diplomacy,” 80.

¹⁴² Tretiak, “China's Vietnam War,” 753.

¹⁴³ Kissinger, *On China*, 370, 374-375.

¹⁴⁴ Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story—1965-2000* (New York: Harper Collins, 2000), 603.

Ultimately, all of these historical perspectives address the significance of the Sino-Vietnamese War for China, for Vietnam, for Russia, and for East Asia. However, regardless of whether or not the Sino-Vietnamese War was important for any of these parties or regions, the conflict did indeed constitute a historical moment of profound importance for the Sino-American covert relationship.

6. Existing Historical Perspectives on U.S. Involvement in the Conflict

As has been mentioned, nations involved in the Sino-Vietnamese War have had compelling motivations to make the conflict largely disappear from their respective public imaginations. Due to a variety of pressures the Sino-Vietnamese War, for all of its casualties and major military movements, has been called a “forgotten war” by one prominent historian of the period.¹⁴⁵ Existing scholarship on the Sino-Vietnamese War maintains that that the U.S. had, at most, a minor role in what was a minor Asian conflict. It is necessary to examine prevalent perspectives on the U.S. involvement—or lack thereof—in the Sino-Vietnamese War.

Present-day perspectives on U.S. involvement in the Sino-Vietnamese War have been irrevocably shaped by the perspective policymakers and academics had on the war at the time. In an interview, Zbigniew Brzezinski stated that the U.S. did not have strong interests in the conflict.¹⁴⁶ In the few years immediately following the conflict, there was a series of articles in Western journals on the war, prompted to no small extent by surprise among academics that two communist Asian states that had been so close for so long had come to blows.¹⁴⁷ Some scholarship focused on Chinese decision-making regarding the conflict, while other historical work focused on the military minutia of the war.¹⁴⁸ In almost all of this scholarship, the United States was scarcely discussed, except sometimes in the historical context of its war against Vietnam. The most forward-

¹⁴⁵ Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping*, 533.

¹⁴⁶ Brzezinski, interview by author, February 24, 2pm.

¹⁴⁷ For an example of such articles, see Tretiak, “China’s Vietnam War,” Duncanson, ““Limited Sovereignty,”” Burton, “Contending Explanations,” and Thee “Red East in Conflict.”

¹⁴⁸ Chen, *China’s War with Vietnam*, and Jencks, “China’s ‘Punitive’ War on Vietnam” are two such works.

thinking historical analysis of the period wrote that the U.S. “had at least some influence on the events leading up to the war” through its diplomatic recognition of China—nothing more, nothing less.¹⁴⁹ In a far more typical example from the time period of the small group of articles that referenced the United States at all, the author wrote that that U.S. policy towards Southeast Asia “has been marked by a passivity verging on paralysis.”¹⁵⁰ For the bulk of the 1980s, this view was dominant in scholarship and analysis regarding the conflict.

In the mid-1980s, the historical understanding of U.S. policy towards the Sino-Vietnamese War expanded with the publication of memoirs by senior Carter administration officials active in foreign policy during the time period—most notably books by former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, former Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, and former President Carter himself.¹⁵¹ These memoirs shed light on Deng’s meeting with Carter prior to the invasion, and showcased the U.S. diplomatic involvement in the conflict. However, with no accompanying release of diplomatic or intelligence records from the period, the contemporary historical understanding of U.S. involvement largely stopped here.

In the aftermath of the Cold War, as more information emerged (in the form of both firsthand accounts and diplomatic records), some scholarship began to examine the impact that U.S. diplomatic choices had on the context in which the conflict occurred. One scholar, exemplifying this reasoning (which was never dominant in scholarship on the conflict) labeled the United States’ role as “Unintended,” writing that U.S. decisions

¹⁴⁹ Burton, “Contending Explanations,” 719.

¹⁵⁰ Turley and Race, “The Third Indochina War,” 109.

¹⁵¹ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, Vance, *Hard Choices*, and Carter, *Keeping Faith*, respectively.

regarding normalization of relations with China had an impact on the climate in which China and Vietnam would go to war.¹⁵² This analysis assigns the U.S. a role only in the time period leading to the conflict, but does not maintain that the U.S. had any sort of an impact on the actual events of the war. However, much scholarship continued to posit that the U.S. had little interest in the conflict. The same author wrote in 1992 that at the time of the Sino-Vietnamese War, “The West, particularly the United States, has lost interest in the region, in part because of the cost of involvement in Vietnam during the past several decades.”¹⁵³

Contemporary historiography has for the most part continued to hold this view. One historian wrote in 2007 that the U.S. “was a mere witness to the coming collision, rather than an active participant with the means and motivation to influence its outcome.”¹⁵⁴ At first glance, this perspective appears to be prevalent for good reasons. In his memoirs, President Carter writes that while he was meeting with Deng in the White House, he had the strong impression that Deng had already made the decision to attack Vietnam, and would not allow the United States to sway his opinion one way or the other.¹⁵⁵ While the U.S. perhaps inadvertently gave political cover to China in the form of implied support—assuming that one discounts Secretary Blumenthal’s forceful comments denouncing China’s actions that were delivered in China during the course of the war—this hardly could be said to constitute coordinated assistance. The United States, unlike the Soviet Union, did not send reconnaissance flights, supplies, or naval vessels to aid any participant in the conflict. U.S. efforts in the United Nations, while

¹⁵² See Hood, “American Influence in the China-Vietnam War,” 31.

¹⁵³ Hood, *Dragons Entangled*, xvi.

¹⁵⁴ O’Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy*, 33.

¹⁵⁵ Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 208-209.

certainly existent, resulted in little more than diplomatic stalemate, and were wholly immaterial to the eventual Chinese decision to withdraw. However, this view of U.S. actions ignores substantial activity in the murky world of intelligence policy that clearly demonstrate that the U.S. was, in fact, providing the Chinese with highly consequential support that greatly facilitated Chinese strategic decisionmaking prior to and during the conflict—albeit support that was carefully hidden from public eyes.

7. The Status of the Sino-American Covert Relationship Prior to the Conflict

However, before the intelligence assistance that the U.S. provided China during the Sino-Vietnamese War can be examined, it is important to contextualize this intelligence assistance in light of ongoing and planned intelligence coordination between the two nations at the time. Intelligence assistance between the U.S. and China during the Sino-Vietnamese war did not emerge *deus ex machina*, but rather resulted in part from a history of U.S.-China intelligence cooperation in years prior. It is necessary to attempt to examine this prior intelligence cooperation in order to place U.S.-China intelligence cooperation during the Sino-Vietnamese War in its proper historical context.

U.S.-China intelligence cooperation began in the earliest stages of the U.S.-China relationship, with a meeting between Henry Kissinger (then National Security Advisor to President Nixon) and members of China's defense and foreign policy establishment on February 23rd, 1972 in which a highly detailed briefing on Soviet military forces bordering China was presented.¹⁵⁶ Two things about this briefing would set a significant precedent for the future U.S.-China covert relationship¹⁵⁷. Firstly, this briefing occurred outside of official diplomatic or military channels, between a single senior American official and members of Chinese leadership. This was partially due to the fact that relations had not yet been normalized between the U.S. and China, and many of these formal institutions were not yet in place for the Sino-American relationship. However, this also reflected a desire on the part of President Nixon (and the executive branch of the

¹⁵⁶ See The White House, "Memorandum of Conversation, February 23, 1972," www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB106/NZ-4.pdf, accessed April 29, 2014.

U.S. government more broadly) that the conversation be kept secret. In an earlier discussion with the Chinese, Nixon remarked that certain U.S. officials (such as his Secretary of State) would be provided only with “sanitized” transcripts of high-level meetings between U.S. and Chinese officials because “our State Department leaks like a sieve.”¹⁵⁸ The Kissinger briefings set a pattern for U.S.-China intelligence cooperation—such cooperation would occur outside of official channels and would take place between Chinese officials and a single, senior American official who could be more easily cultivated and influenced.¹⁵⁹ The National Security Advisor has traditionally played this role, and (in keeping with an emphasis by the Chinese leadership that China receive special treatment), China has welcomed White House engagement in the U.S.-China relationship.¹⁶⁰ Secondly, it is notable that this intelligence cooperation concerned the Soviet Union. As has been discussed, during the 1970s China felt extremely threatened by Russia, and the U.S. utilized this shared security interest as a foundational element for the U.S.-China relationship more broadly. While this pattern began under the Nixon administration, one journalist wrote that it would go on to reach its apex during the Carter presidency, when China became treated as “not so much a country as a military strategy,” with the anti-Soviet nature of U.S.-China ties becoming the dominant element in the broader U.S.-China relationship.¹⁶¹ These twin themes would define the covert U.S.-China relationship in the years to come.

¹⁵⁸ The White House, “Memorandum of Conversation, February 22, 1972,” www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB106/NZ-1.pdf, accessed February 29, 2014, 3.

¹⁵⁹ James Mann, *About Face: A History of America’s Curious Relationship with China, From Nixon to Clinton*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999, 80.

¹⁶⁰ The National Security Council Project, “China Policy and the National Security Council: Oral History Roundtable,” The Center for International and Security Studies at Maryland and the Brookings Institution: November 4, 1999, 5.

¹⁶¹ Mann, *About Face*, 97, 96.

The advanced working theory of a U.S.-China covert relationship during the Cold War would originate with a China scholar named Michael Pillsbury, who was then studying at Columbia University. Pillsbury visited the United Nations on November 28th, 1972, and rapidly established a relationship with a PLA general named Zhang Wutan who had just recently been reassigned to the United Nations due to China's new role on the UN Security Council.¹⁶² In early 1973, Pillsbury began work as a China analyst at the Rand Corporation, and continued to keep a relationship with his contacts at the United Nations. It is likely at this time that Pillsbury began being managed by the U.S. Department of Defense, writing memos that would reach the CIA and other high level U.S. national security and military agencies.¹⁶³ After repeated discussions with Chinese officials, in 1974 Pillsbury would write a memo, L-32, which would propose that the U.S. enter into a military relationship with China. In the fall of 1975 this memo would be rewritten and published by Pillsbury in *Foreign Policy* as "U.S.-Chinese Military Ties?"¹⁶⁴ The article's logic centered on the value of the People's Republic of China as a counterweight to Soviet military strength. Pillsbury wrote that

Increased Chinese military capabilities, especially if deployed near the Sino-Soviet border, could induce even greater Soviet deployments to military districts on the Chinese border than presently exist, tying down a greater percentage of Soviet ground, naval, and air forces...Increases in Chinese

¹⁶² Ibid., 57-58.

¹⁶³ Ibid and S. Mahmud Ali, *US-China Cold War Collaboration, 1971-1989*, New York: Routledge, 2005, 81.

¹⁶⁴ Mann, *About Face*, 59.

military forces will bring corresponding decreases in Soviet forces available for combat against U.S. allies.¹⁶⁵

To ignore the very real shared interest the U.S. and China possessed in curbing Russian influence and ability to project power in the 1970s would have been naïve. However, it is nevertheless important to note that at no point does Pillsbury seriously attempt to understand Chinese geopolitical interests in their own right independent of the Soviet Union.

In his article, Pillsbury proposed a series of measures to begin a Sino-American covert relationship, including a formal exchange of military delegations, intelligence exchanges concerning the Soviet Union, “limited military assistance” (which was poorly defined), and transfers of technology through U.S. allies to China.¹⁶⁶ All of Pillsbury’s recommendations would eventually come to be implemented by U.S. policymakers, in some form or another. In 1978, a U.S. delegation of civilian officials led by James Schlesinger (then Carter’s Secretary of Energy) with at least one intelligence agent—James Lilley, then leading U.S. intelligence officer in China (a fact which was known to the Chinese, his status having been declared by Henry Kissinger in 1973 so he could more easily serve as a channel for communication)—toured a Chinese diesel submarine in the coastal city of Dalian, in a visit that was possibly approved by Deng himself.¹⁶⁷ This tour was likely intended to serve as an indication of growing U.S.-China collaboration to the Soviet Union.¹⁶⁸ Similarly, technology transfers would later occur between the U.S. and China, with the U.S. granting NATO allies permission to sell China

¹⁶⁵ Michael Pillsbury, “U.S.-Chinese Military Ties?” *Foreign Policy* No. 20 (Autumn 1975): 58.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁶⁷ Lilley, *China Hands*, 162, 206-207.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 207.

weapons (which will be discussed later on at length). However, it was in the realm of joint intelligence that the Sino-American covert relationship would make the most progress.

One major intelligence venture between China and the U.S. aimed at Russia during the Cold War was a jointly operated signals intelligence facility located in Western China that was designed to gather information on Soviet missile tests in modern day Kazakhstan. This idea appears to have first been proposed by James Lilley in 1975 while he was with the Central Intelligence Agency, and was initially named Project Wallabee.¹⁶⁹ Senior Chinese leaders were briefed on the idea by Kissinger (who was then Secretary of State) in 1975. Deng Xiaoping reportedly responded favorably, but stated that the idea should wait until relations were formally normalized.¹⁷⁰

In 1979, the logic behind this collaborative project acquired a new urgency, as the Islamic revolution in Iran closed U.S. signals intelligence stations (known as Tacksman) in northern Iran that were being used to monitor Soviet activities in Central Asia.¹⁷¹ During Deng's 1979 visit to the U.S., an agreement between Carter, Brzezinski, and Deng was reached to covertly establish collection facilities in Xinjiang to monitor the Soviet Union in an operation that was now labeled "Project Chestnut."¹⁷² These facilities, which reportedly began operation in late 1980 or early 1981 in the Xinjiang towns of Qitai and Korla, placed American technicians (primarily from the CIA and

¹⁶⁹ Lilley, *China Hands*, 214-215.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 215.

¹⁷¹ Gates, *From the Shadows*, 122-123.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 123 and Ali, *US-China Cold War Collaboration*, 133.

NSA) and technology on Chinese territory, in a landmark agreement.¹⁷³ The United States would reportedly maintain these installations until the early 1990s.¹⁷⁴

Project Wallabee/Chestnut serves as an important example of U.S.-China intelligence cooperation in several regards. First, it indicates the continuity in the U.S.-China security relationship across administrations. An idea that was originally proposed in the Ford administration was conveyed to the Chinese by the quintessential Nixonian China official (Kissinger), then was negotiated and implemented during the waning days of the Carter administration, subsequently surviving the Reagan administration. Secondly, Project Wallabee/Chestnut indicates a specific subfocus of the U.S.-China security relationship—signals intelligence. The People’s Republic of China did not possess the capacity to manufacture advanced military or intelligence equipment at this time—as one journalist has written, when U.S.-China relations began, Chinese intelligence technology was so rudimentary, the Chinese “had barely even known what was technically possible.”¹⁷⁵ Thus, the U.S. stepped in at certain junctures to supply important equipment related to fields such as signals intelligence where Chinese equipment was insufficient or nonexistent. For example, in the spring of 1978, Brzezinski led an effort within American government to give China permission to buy infrared scanning equipment.¹⁷⁶ Similarly, in the aftermath of the Soviet invasion of

¹⁷³ Gates 123, Ali, *U.S. China Cold War Collaboration*, 148-149, Mann, *About Face*, 90 and Ross, *Negotiating Compromise*, 150. It is interesting to note that at least one author states the West German foreign intelligence service, the Bundesnachrichtendienst (or BND) was involved in establishing and manning these stations as well. For more on this allegation, see Erich Schmidt-Eenboom, “The Bundesnachrichtendienst, the Bundeswehr and Signint in the Cold War and After,” in *Secrets of Signals Intelligence During the Cold War and Beyond*, edited by Matthew M. Aid and Cees Weibes, 129-242, Portland: Frank Cass Publishers, 2001.

¹⁷⁴ Schmidt-Eenboom, “The Bundesnachrichtendienst,” 157.

¹⁷⁵ Mann, *About Face*, 65.

¹⁷⁶ Lilley, *China Hands*, 209.

Afghanistan in 1980, the U.S authorized the sale of Landsat satellite photo reconnaissance equipment, more sophisticated air radar equipment, radio and communications devices, and transport helicopters to China.¹⁷⁷ These technology transfers were slow to occur in spite of substantial efforts from Brzezinski within U.S. government (owing simply to the fact that the State Department, which was led by Vance who was an opponent of establishing explicit military ties with China, had by this time established a strong bureaucratic grip over authorizations regarding exports), and never reached the level of “lethal” military assistance—however, the Carter administration did relax U.S. policy on allowing other NATO nations to sell military hardware to the PRC, a policy shift which had the effect of encouraging the sale of lethal military equipment to China.¹⁷⁸

U.S.-China intelligence and military ties during the Carter administration were defined by the personality of Zbigniew Brzezinski, much as they were defined during the Nixon administration by the personality of Henry Kissinger. A U.S. official writes in his memoirs that by 1978, Brzezinski (following Kissinger’s tradition) had firmly ensconced Carter administration China policy within his own office, over the objections of Secretary of State Cyrus Vance.¹⁷⁹ As a result of this personalized approach to diplomacy, Carter administration policy towards China was heavily influenced by Brzezinski’s ardent anti-Soviet views.¹⁸⁰ Brzezinski’s domination of U.S.-China relations during the process was so total, James Lilley, then the national intelligence officer on China at the CIA, was for quite some time unaware of the status of negotiations on normalization of U.S.-China

¹⁷⁷ Mann, *About Face*, 111.

¹⁷⁸ Ross, *Negotiating Compromise*, 147, Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 422-423 and Vance, *Hard Choices*, 390.

¹⁷⁹ Lilley, *China Hands*, 209 and Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 203-204.

¹⁸⁰ Mann, *About Face*, 79 and Lilley, *China Hands*, 209.

relations.¹⁸¹ During Deng's visit to the U.S., Carter authorized Brzezinski to initiate special negotiations with the Chinese.¹⁸² While Brzezinski is vague on what these negotiations concerned, it appears likely that Project Wallabee/Chestnut would have been a topic of conversation. While the start of the Carter administration did, in a very real sense, represent a new beginning in U.S.-China relations—one no longer dominated by the Nixon/Kissinger foreign policy establishment—it is clear that key elements of the Nixon/Kissinger policy towards China nevertheless were perpetuated. It is in this context that the U.S.-China relationship was to face the Sino-Vietnamese War.

¹⁸¹ Lilley, *China Hands*, 210.

¹⁸² Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 419.

8. The Impact of the U.S.-China Relationship on the Sino-Vietnamese War

The Sino-Vietnamese War indisputably strengthened ongoing U.S.-China intelligence and military ties because the Sino-Vietnamese War put the U.S.-China covert relationship through an actual test. The abstract theories of Kissinger and Pillsbury regarding a nebulous balancing effect that U.S.-China cooperation might have on the Soviet Union was irrelevant—here was an international crisis wherein China was using force to invade Vietnam, a nation which (contrary to China’s assertions) was no more guilty of violating China’s territorial sovereignty than China was of violating Vietnam’s. Given that China was being condemned harshly by U.S. public statements during its invasion of Vietnam—Secretary Blumenthal’s comments, to say nothing of President Carter’s, come to mind—it seems only natural that the Sino-American covert relationship might encounter obstacles.

However, all ongoing U.S.-China intelligence cooperation continued. Progress on Project Wallabee/Chestnut continued unabated, as did U.S. efforts to transfer technology with military applications to China. Admittedly, this was become some decisions on Sino-American military collaboration (particularly those concerning technology transfer) had been undertaken prior to the outbreak of hostilities.¹⁸³ However, Brzezinski states that U.S. policy towards China—including the U.S.-China military relationship— was not altered by the conflict.¹⁸⁴ The fact that no reassessment of the Sino-American covert

¹⁸³ Brzezinski, interview by author, February 24, 2pm.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

relationship occurred in the aftermath of the Sino-Vietnamese War is nevertheless striking.

However, the Sino-Vietnamese War not only did not disrupt ongoing Sino-American covert cooperation, it also spurred new cooperation. It has been speculated that the U.S. and China shared intelligence during the conflict, with anonymous reports suggesting that Brzezinski met with the Chinese ambassador to the U.S., Chai Zemin, “virtually every night throughout the military conflict” to discuss intelligence related to Soviet troop movements during the conflict.¹⁸⁵ Brzezinski has confirmed that, while this cooperation was taking place at a smaller scale than the aforementioned anonymous reports suggest, it was indeed taking place. Furthermore, this U.S. assistance appears to have played a larger role in the Chinese decision to invade Vietnam that has generally been known.

While the USSR’s response to the Sino-Vietnamese War has been referenced earlier, it is easy to forget that the possibility that the USSR might undertake military action in response to China’s invasion of Vietnam was a very real one. As has been mentioned, in 1969 the two nations had briefly skirmished over their shared border, and while casualties were not high, open conflict between the two nations was not unprecedented by the time of the Sino-Vietnamese War. Similarly, the 1978 treaty Russia had signed with Vietnam was explicitly a military alliance, making a Russian intervention entirely possible. Analysts at the time noted that when China began its invasion, it had no assurance that Russia would not counter attack.¹⁸⁶ While Brzezinski states that, in his presence, Deng was dismissive of the possibility of a Soviet intervention

¹⁸⁵ Mann, *About Face*, 100.

¹⁸⁶ Tretyak, “China’s Vietnam War,” 748.

in the conflict, reliable evidence indicates this may have been at least something of a bluff.¹⁸⁷ As has been mentioned, Deng thought Soviet intervention was enough of a possibility that he ordered 300,000 Chinese civilians to evacuate from Yili in the north near the Soviet border prior to the Chinese invasion.¹⁸⁸ Additionally, as has been mentioned previously, Deng maintained a robust Chinese military presence on China's border with Russia for the entirety of the conflict, all while troops from other regions were being moved closer to Vietnam.¹⁸⁹ As has been referenced, in a speech given at the conclusion of hostilities, Deng declared that a potential Soviet military retaliation to China's invasion of Vietnam had been a major concern for himself and other Chinese policymakers.¹⁹⁰ Indeed, prior to the invasion on December 7th, the PLA General Staff presented an intelligence analysis that indicated that the Soviet Union would have three military options in response to China's invasion of Vietnam: a large-scale invasion, with designs on capturing Beijing, the arming of ethnic minorities to attack Chinese facilities in Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia, and an increase in minor cross-border skirmishes.¹⁹¹ PLA analysis calculated that two thirds of the fifty four Soviet divisions deployed on the border with China were undermanned and poorly supplied, and that thus the USSR could not mount any large-scale military action in China without moving in troops from Europe.¹⁹² Any decision to move additional divisions from Europe would take time to implement, which was a large part of the Chinese rationale for a limited military

¹⁸⁷ Brzezinski, interview by author, February 24, 2pm.

¹⁸⁸ Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping*, 528.

¹⁸⁹ O'Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy*, 53.

¹⁹⁰ "Deng Xiaoping zai Zhong-Yue," March 16 1979, unpublished speech available in the Fairbank Collection, in Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping*, 819.

¹⁹¹ Min Li, *ZhongYue zhanzsheng shinian* (Ten Years of Sino-Vietnam War) (Chengdu, China: Sichuan daxue chubanshe, 1993), 215-217, in Zhang, "Deng Xiaoping," 14.

¹⁹² Ibid. in Ibid.

intervention in Vietnam—explicitly modeled after their thirty three day attack on India in 1962.¹⁹³

However, Deng could nevertheless not be certain that the Soviet Union would not attempt a faster strike, supported by what was both a qualitatively and quantitatively superior missile and air force to achieve rapid gains. The U.S. stepped in at this stage to provide intelligence to reassure Deng and the Chinese. Deng told the Chinese Communist Party's Central Committee in March 1979 that the United States had briefed Deng on intelligence that none of the fifty-four Soviet divisions on the Sino-Soviet border was at full strength.¹⁹⁴ It appears highly likely that the U.S., with its far more advanced satellites and signals intelligence capability, had been the source of the PLA General Staff's knowledge regarding Soviet force strength in December. Additionally, Zbigniew Brzezinski confirms that he did indeed meet with Chinese officials during the conflict in what he terms “diplomatic consultations.”¹⁹⁵ Brzezinski states that the U.S. informally notified the Chinese that they would monitor for Soviet actions, as best they could.¹⁹⁶ While this might not constitute formal intelligence coordination according to textbook definitions, the effect is clearly very similar. Brzezinski says that as far as he could judge at the time, the effect this intelligence had on Chinese decisionmaking was quite limited—however, this is likely simply because Russian troop movements were themselves quite limited. Had the Russians mobilized in large numbers, or greatly

¹⁹³ Brzezinski stated that the Chinese told him that because the conflict would be so short, any Soviet military assistance to Vietnam would still be sitting on the tarmac when the conflict ended. See Brzezinski, interview by author, February 24, 2pm. For more on China's decision to pursue a brief intervention in Vietnam, see Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping*, 528, and Hung, “The Sino-Vietnamese Conflict,” 1049.

¹⁹⁴ Deng Xiaoping, “Remarks made at a meeting of the CCP Central Committee,” March 16, 1979, in Zhang, “Deng Xiaoping,” 25.

¹⁹⁵ Brzezinski, interview by author, February 24, 2pm.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

altered their force posture on their border with China, surely the Chinese reaction to this American intelligence would have been quite different.

As has been previously discussed, while there were some ways the Chinese could monitor Soviet force structure—by utilizing observation from human intelligence sources located near or within Russia, to pick one example—they lacked the technology to monitor large Soviet force movements from great distances. It is entirely likely that, had the Soviet Union made the decision to move troops from Europe to China, the Chinese intelligence and military services might have been caught entirely off guard, had the U.S. not offered its intelligence assistance. Deng’s decision to invade Vietnam was made to take a carefully calculated risk about Soviet military intervention—however, it was U.S. intelligence that allowed Deng and Chinese leadership to make this calculation in the first place. In this way, far from being entirely inconsequential, U.S. intelligence aid to China during the Sino-Vietnamese War was in fact quite significant.

The Sino-Vietnamese War not only failed to disrupt the previously existing Sino-American covert relationship, but in fact strengthened it and enhanced it in tangible ways. While U.S.-China intelligence coordination during the conflict was valuable in helping Chinese leadership monitor Russian troop movements, there is at least some evidence that the Chinese wanted it to progress even further. According to one source, immediately prior to the conflict Deng Xiaoping offered U.S. decision makers access to naval facilities on Hainan Island so that the U.S. might dispatch naval vessels to the South China Sea to contain Soviet naval activities there and gather intelligence on Vietnamese naval operations.¹⁹⁷ This offer was obviously not taken up by the United

¹⁹⁷ Geng Biao, “Secret Report,” January 16, 1979, in *Studies on Chinese Communism*, No. 166 (October 15, 1980), 150-152, in Zhang, “Deng Xiaoping,” 23.

States for unknown reasons. The Sino-Vietnamese War brought the Sino-American covert relationship to new levels in terms of significance and impact. The fact that the Sino-Vietnamese War spurred, rather than inhibited, U.S-China security collaboration speaks to the underlying drivers of U.S.-China security collaboration—a strong motivation to curb Soviet influence and ability to project power.

9. The Legacy of U.S.-China Intelligence Collaboration and the Sino-Vietnamese War + Conclusion

The Sino-Vietnamese War was a tremendously significant event in the Sino-American covert relationship. The U.S. was supplying China with intelligence that affected Chinese strategic decisionmaking at the highest possible levels, all while existing U.S.-China security cooperation continued unabated. Brzezinski states that the war was primarily significant insofar as it tested the U.S.-China relationship—and the U.S.-China relationship passed with flying colors.¹⁹⁸ It is not surprising that in 1983, in a meeting with Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives Thomas “Tip” O’Neil, Deng asserted that U.S.-China relations had peaked in 1979—in no small part due to this behind the scenes cooperation.¹⁹⁹ However, what was the lasting legacy of this cooperation?

If the Sino-Vietnamese War represented such a remarkable height for the Sino-American covert relationship, the question might naturally be asked—why did this relationship not continue until the present day? While an assessment of the gradual conclusion of the Sino-American covert relationship is beyond the scope of this project, it can largely be attributed to three factors—the ascendancy of Ronald Reagan to the presidency of the United States, outrage among U.S. policymakers related to the Tiananmen Square massacre and other Chinese human rights abuses, and, most importantly, the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

The election of Ronald Reagan to the office of the Presidency put a significant short-term chill on U.S.-China security cooperation for a host of reasons, many related to

¹⁹⁸ Brzezinski, interview by author, February 24, 2pm.

¹⁹⁹ *Japan Times*, March 31, 1983, 4, in Jonathan D. Pollack, *The Lessons of Coalition Politics: Sino-American Security Relations* (The Rand Corporation: February 1984), 6.

his stance on a significant issue affecting U.S.-China relations—the question of Taiwan. In April 1978, Reagan had embarked on a foreign policy trip aimed at burgeoning his credentials as a presidential candidate in which he visited Taiwan, declaring in Taipei that ““It is hard for me to believe that any sensible American who believes in individual liberty and self-determination would stand by and abandon an ally whose only ‘sins’ are that it is small and loves freedom.””²⁰⁰ In taking this tone, Reagan reopened an issue that American and Chinese officials thought had been settled (at least in a certain fashion).²⁰¹ Reagan had always taken a harsher stance on China than more mainstream American politicians, opposing normalization of relations with China during his unsuccessful 1976 campaign against President Ford for the Republican nomination.²⁰² Reagan had additionally advocated for the reestablishment of what he termed ““official relations”” with Taiwan during his campaign for the Presidency in 1980.²⁰³

Deng Xiaoping was understandably irate about Reagan’s proposals and tone. In an August 22nd, 1980 meeting with George H. W. Bush, then Reagan’s running mate, who had been sent to China to reach out to Chinese officials, Deng erupted and told Bush that Reagan’s proposals would set the clock back substantially on U.S-China relations.²⁰⁴ While Reagan did not follow through on his campaign promises to lend official recognition to Taiwan, much of his administration’s policy on China was consumed by contentious debates regarding the status of U.S. arms agreements with Taiwan.²⁰⁵ This ongoing dialogue left little room to plot the expansion of the Sino-American covert

²⁰⁰ The Associated Press, April 21, 1978, PM cycle, in Mann, *About Face*, 115.

²⁰¹ Mann, *About Face*, 116.

²⁰² *Ibid.*

²⁰³ Don Oberdorfer, “Two Top Reagan Advisers Are on Taiwan’s Payroll,” *The Washington Post*, June 6, 1980, 1.

²⁰⁴ Mann, *About Face*, 117.

²⁰⁵ For more on this issue, see Mann, *About Face*, Chapter 6: Ronald Reagan and Taiwan.

relationship. While the Sino-American covert relationship would continue on a host of areas related to technology transfer and support for the anti-Soviet mujahedeen in Afghanistan, there was little growth of the relationship.

Additionally, the international outcry following the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, where Chinese dissidents were forcibly dispersed by PLA troops utilizing live ammunition, brought along with it a wave of restrictions—both formal and informal—which inhibited further U.S.-China security collaboration. In the aftermath of the suppression of the protests, the U.S. imposed an arms embargo on China that has eliminated the possibility of weapons sales and military assistance up to the present day. Perhaps more important, the European Union passed arms sanctions that, given the informal U.S. policy of encouraging NATO nations to sell select weapons systems to China to help China meet its security needs, may have well had a greater effect than U.S. sanctions. While technology transfers between the U.S., U.S. allies, and China are largely outside the scope of this examination of the Sino-American covert relationship, the effect of the Tiananmen Square massacre was nevertheless chilling.

The Tiananmen Square massacre additionally caused a comprehensive rethinking of the Sino-American covert relationship inside both the Chinese and American governments. Michael Pillsbury was in Beijing on a military mission in early May 1989, right as the Tiananmen protests became to cohere. Pillsbury noted that Chinese authorities tended to blame the U.S. for helping foment the dissent, describing the United States as ““a mortal enemy, an evil force”” that was intent on disrupting Chinese

stability.²⁰⁶ Similarly, following the Tiananmen Square massacre the opinions of Pillsbury and others within the U.S. national security establishment on China became decidedly more negative.²⁰⁷ It is little wonder that after the Tiananmen Square incident, Project Wallabee/Chestnut was ended, and U.S. personnel were withdrawn.²⁰⁸

However, the ultimate death knell to the Sino-American covert relationship came when the Soviet Union collapsed. As has been demonstrated, the Sino-American covert relationship was centered solely around one shared concern—the Soviet Union. Once the Soviet Union collapsed, the question of where the Sino-American covert relationship would go was an open one. Brzezinski has stated that he believes that 1979 helped lay the foundations for a healthy U.S.-China relationship in the future.²⁰⁹ However, even Brzezinski himself admits that the informal anti-USSR alliance between China and the U.S. that had been solidified in 1979 necessarily could not survive the dissolution of the USSR.²¹⁰ By making the U.S.-China security relationship so incredibly centric on one issue, pressing though it was, prospects for the continuation of the U.S.-China security relationship were necessarily limited. A shared interest in curbing Soviet power was the one major commonality between the U.S. and China. Once the Soviet Union was no more, the differences between the two nations—on democracy, on human rights, on economic issues and trade—rapidly came to the forefront.

The Sino-Vietnamese War of 1979 was a moment when the Sino-American covert relationship could have been completely derailed. The People's Republic of China

²⁰⁶ Neil King Jr., "Inside Pentagon, A Scholar Shapes Views of China," *The Wall Street Journal*, September 8, 2005, <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB112613947626134749>, accessed April 10, 2014.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Schmidt-Eenboom, "The Bundesnachrichtendienst," 157.

²⁰⁹ Brzezinski, interview by author, February 24, 2pm.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

had invaded another country with little substantial provocation, and under another administration, at another moment in history, this aggression might easily have caused the U.S. to rethink the security assistance it was providing China. However, as this thesis has demonstrated, the Sino-Vietnamese War in fact provided new opportunities for the Sino-American covert relationship to expand and grow, and can accurately be described as the apex of not just the Sino-American covert relationship, but of the Sino-American relationship more broadly.

However, the Sino-American relationship was doomed to peak there. The U.S. and China were only brought together to collaborate by the threat posed by the Soviet Union. However, once that threat had passed, the two nations had little in the way of a diplomatic or security relationship built around more durable shared interests.

Ultimately, the Sino-Vietnamese War, when viewed in the broader context of existing Sino-American security collaboration, provides revealing insight into the direction that the Sino-American covert relationship took, ways in which this affected Chinese strategic decision-making, and—most importantly of all—ways in which this collaboration limited, and continues to limit, the overall course of U.S.-China relations even today.

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