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China's Involvement in the Vietnam War, 1964–69*

Chen Jian

The Vietnam War was an international conflict. Not only were the Americans engaged in large-scale military operations in a land far away from their own, but the two major Communist powers, China and the Soviet Union, were also deeply involved. In the case of China, scholars have long assumed that Beijing played an important role in supporting Hanoi's efforts to fight the United States. Due to the lack of access to Chinese source materials, however, there have been difficulties in illustrating and defining the motives, decision-making processes, magnitude and consequences of China's involvement with the Vietnam War.¹

This article is based on Chinese sources available since the late 1980s. As the continuation of an earlier study dealing with China's connections with the First Indo-China War,² it aims to shed some new light on China's involvement with the Vietnam War. It will cover the five crucial years from 1964 to 1969, paying particular attention to an analysis of the failure of an alliance that was once claimed "between brotherly comrades."

Background: Chinese–North Vietnamese Relations, 1954–62

The Geneva agreement on Indo-China of 1954 concluded the First Indo-China War, but failed to end military conflicts in South-East Asia.

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1. Despite the difficulties involved in accessing Chinese sources, plausible studies do exist in the field. With privileged access to "information available to the author" drawing on "hard intelligence," Allen S. Whiting, in *The Chinese Calculus of Deterrence: India and Vietnam* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1975), ch. 6, draws an impressively accurate picture, judged by new Chinese sources, of the scope and nature of China's involvement with the Vietnam War from 1965 to 1968. In a recent article, "China's role in the Vietnam War," (in Jayne Werner and David Hunt (eds.), *The American War in Vietnam* (Ithaca: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, 1993), pp. 71–76), Whiting further checks the conclusions of his study in light of the opinion of Vietnamese scholars. The first three volumes of R. B. Smith's comprehensive study, *An International History of the Vietnam War* (London: Macmillan, 1983–91), offer an excellent treatment of the international dimension of the war, including the Chinese connection. Useful information and plausible analyses can also be found in William J. Duiker, *China and Vietnam: The Roots of Conflict* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, 1986); Robert S. Ross, *The Indochina Tangle: China's Vietnam Policy, 1975–1979* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); and Anne Gilks, *The Breakdown of the Sino-Vietnamese Alliance, 1970–1979* (Berkeley: Center for Chinese Studies, 1992).

2. Chen Jian, "China and the First Indo-China War, 1950–54," *The China Quarterly*, No. 133 (March 1993), pp. 85–110.

When it became clear that a peaceful reunification through the plebiscite scheduled for 1956 would be indefinitely blocked by Washington and the government in Saigon, the Vietnamese Communist leadership decided in 1959–60 to resume “armed resistance” in the South.³ Policy makers in Washington, perceiving that the battles in South Vietnam and other parts of South-East Asia (especially in Laos) represented a crucial contest against further Communist expansion, continuously increased America’s military involvement there. Consequently, the Second Indo-China War intensified.

Beijing was a main patron, as well as a beneficiary, of the Geneva Agreement of 1954. Chinese policy toward the settlement of the First Indo-China War reflected its strategic considerations at that time, which included the desire to focus on domestic problems after the end of the Korean War, the precautions against possible American military intervention in the Indo-China area, thus preventing another direct Sino-American confrontation, and the need to establish a new international image to correspond with its new claims of peaceful co-existence.⁴

Under the influence of these considerations, the Beijing leadership neither hindered nor encouraged Hanoi’s efforts to “liberate” the South by military means until 1962. After the signing of the Geneva agreement, the leaders in Beijing seemed more willing than their comrades in Hanoi to accept the fact that Vietnam would be indefinitely divided. In several exchanges of opinions between top Beijing and Hanoi leaders in 1955–56, the basic tone of the Chinese advice was that the urgent task facing the Vietnamese Communists was how to consolidate the revolutionary achievements in the North.⁵ In December 1955, Beijing’s Defence and Foreign Affairs Ministries decided that the Chinese Military Advisory Group, which had been in Vietnam since July 1950, would be called back to China. Peng Dehuai, China’s Defence Minister, informed his Vietnamese counterpart, Vo Nguyen Giap, of this decision on 24 December 1955, and all members of the group had returned to China by mid-March

3. For discussions of Hanoi’s adoption of a “southern revolution” strategy in 1958–60, see William J. Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1981), pp. 186–190; Smith, *An International History of the Vietnam War*, Vol. 1, chs. 8 and 10; and King C. Chen, “Hanoi’s three decisions and the escalation of the Vietnam War,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 90, No. 2 (Summer 1975).

4. For a more extensive analysis, see Chen Jian, “China and the First Indo-China War,” pp. 107–109; see also Zhai Qiang, “China and the Geneva Conference of 1954,” *The China Quarterly*, No. 129 (March 1992).

5. For example, in meeting Ho Chi Minh and Pham Van Dong on 18–22 November 1956, Zhou Enlai repeatedly emphasized that “the unification should be regarded as a long-term struggle,” and that “only when the North had been consolidated with extensive efforts, would it become possible to talk about how to win over the South and how to unify the country.” See Shi Zhongquan, *Zhou Enlai de zhuoyue fengxian (Zhou Enlai’s Outstanding Contributions)* (Beijing: CCP Central Academy Press, 1993), p. 286. See also Guo Ming et al., *Zhong Yue guanxi yanbian sishinian (Forty-Year Evolution of Sino-Vietnamese Relations)* (Nanning: Guangxi People’s Press, 1992), pp. 65–66.

1956.⁶ In the summer of 1958 the Vietnamese Politburo formally asked Beijing's advice about the strategies of the "Southern revolution." In a written response, the Beijing leadership emphasized that "the most fundamental, most important and most urgent task" facing the Vietnamese revolution was "how to promote socialist revolution and reconstruction in the North." "The realization of revolutionary transformation in the South," according to Beijing, "was impossible at the current stage." Beijing therefore suggested that Hanoi should adopt in the South a strategy of "not exposing our own forces for a long period, accumulating our own strength, establishing connections with the masses, and waiting for the coming of proper opportunities."⁷ The nation-wide famine following the failure of the Great Leap Forward forced the Beijing leadership to focus on dealing with domestic issues. During Zhou Enlai's meetings with Ho Chi Minh and Pham Van Dong, North Vietnam's Prime Minister, in Hanoi in May 1960, he advised the Vietnamese that they should adopt a flexible approach in the South by combining political and military struggles. He emphasized that even when military struggle seemed inevitable, it was still necessary for political struggle to take an important position.⁸ All this indicates that Beijing's leaders were not enthusiastic about their Vietnamese comrades starting military struggles in the South in 1959–60, and that "to resume the resistance" in the South was basically an initiative by the Vietnamese themselves.

However, Beijing took no active steps to oppose a revolution in South Vietnam. The relationship between Communist China and Vietnam was very close in the late 1950s and early 1960s.⁹ The close connection with Hanoi, as well as Beijing's revolutionary ideology, would not allow the Chinese to go so far as to become an obstacle to the Vietnamese cause of revolution and reunification. The late 1950s and early 1960s also witnessed in China the continuous propaganda that Beijing was a natural ally of the oppressed peoples of the world in their struggles for national liberation. It would be inconceivable, in such a circumstance, for Beijing to play too negative a role toward the Vietnamese revolution. Further, from a strategic point of view, as Sino-American relations experienced several crises during this period, especially in the Taiwan Straits in 1958, the Chinese leaders would not ignore the fact that intensifying revolutionary insurgence in South Vietnam could extend America's commitment, thus

6. The Editorial Group for the History of Chinese Military Advisers in Vietnam (ed.), *Zhongguo junshi guwentuan yuanyue kangfa douzheng shishi* (A Factual Account of the Participation of Chinese Military Advisory Group in the Struggle of Assisting Vietnam and Resisting France) (Beijing: People's Liberation Army Press, 1990), pp. 142–43.

7. Guo Ming et al., *Zhongyue guanxi yanbian sishinian*, p. 66; for a Vietnamese version of the story, see *The Truth about Vietnamo-Chinese Relations over the Past Thirty Years* (Hanoi: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1979), pp. 29–33.

8. Guo Ming et al., *Zhongyue guanxi yanbian sishinian*, p. 67; and the Institute of Diplomatic History under Chinese Foreign Ministry (eds.), *Zhou Enlai waijiao huodong dashiji, 1949–1975* (A Chronicle of Zhou Enlai's Important Diplomatic Activities) (Beijing: World Affairs Press, 1993), pp. 279–280.

9. See Huang Zheng, *Hu Zhiming yu Zhongguo* (Ho Chi Minh and China) (Beijing: People's Liberation Army Press, 1987), ch. 6.

improving China's position in its confrontation with the United States in East Asia.¹⁰

Under these circumstances and in response to Hanoi's requests, China offered substantial military aid to Vietnam before 1963. According to one highly reliable Chinese source, during the 1956–63 period, China's military aid to Vietnam totalled 320 million *yuan*. China's arms shipments to Vietnam included 270,000 guns, over 10,000 pieces of artillery, 200 million bullets of different types, 2.02 million artillery shells, 15,000 wire transmitters, 5,000 radio transmitters, over 1,000 trucks, 15 planes, 28 naval vessels, and 1.18 million sets of military uniforms.¹¹ Without a direct military presence in Vietnam, Beijing's leaders used these supports to show to their comrades in Hanoi their solidarity.

Beijing's Decision to Increase Aid to Hanoi, 1963–64

Beijing's policy towards Vietnam began to turn more radical in late 1962 and early 1963. In the summer of 1962, a Vietnamese delegation led by Ho Chi Minh and Nguyen Chi Thanh visited Beijing. The Vietnamese summarized the situation in South Vietnam, emphasizing the possibility that with the escalation of military conflicts in the South, the United States might use air and/or land forces to attack the North. The Chinese were very much alarmed by this assessment and offered to equip an additional 230 battalions for the Vietnamese.¹²

Beijing made general security commitments to Hanoi throughout 1963. In March, a Chinese military delegation headed by Luo Ruiqing, China's chief of staff, visited Hanoi. Luo said that if the Americans were to attack North Vietnam, China would come to its defence. The two sides also discussed how they should co-ordinate their operations in the event of an American invasion of North Vietnam. In May, Liu Shaoqi, the second most important leader in China, visited Vietnam. In his meetings with Ho

10. In late 1958, during the Taiwan Straits crisis, Mao Zedong introduced the concept of "noose strategy." According to this concept, overseas American military presence served as hangman's nooses for the United States. Every military commitment abroad would add one more noose to the Americans, and finally strangle the "U.S. imperialism." Mao therefore believed that the overextension of America's strength would lead to the final failure of the U.S. foreign policy in general and its policy toward China in particular. See Mao Zedong's speech to the Supreme State Council, 8 September 1958, *Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong wengao (Mao Zedong's Manuscripts since the Formation of the People's Republic, 8 vols.)* (Beijing: The Central Press of Historical Documents, 1987–93), Vol. 7, pp. 391–92. For detailed discussions of the "noose strategy," see Zhang Shuguang *Deterrence and Strategic Culture: Chinese-American Confrontations, 1949–1958* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), ch. 8.

11. Li Ke and Hao Shengzhang, *Wenhua dageming zhong de renmin jiefangjun (The People's Liberation Army during the Cultural Revolution)* (Beijing: CCP Historical Materials Press, 1989), pp. 408–409. This work offers one of the best accounts of China's military development from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s. As the authors were alleged to have released confidential information without proper authorization, the book was withdrawn from circulation shortly after its publication.

12. Guo Ming *et al.*, *Zhongyue guanxi yanbian sishinian*, p. 69; Wang Xianguan, *Kang Mei yuanyue shilu (A Factual Account of Resisting America and Assisting Vietnam)* (Beijing: International Cultural Development Press, 1990), pp. 25–26; see also *Beijing Review*, 23 November 1979.

Chi Minh and other Vietnamese leaders, Liu promised them that if the war expanded as the result of their efforts to liberate the South, they “can definitely count on China as the strategic rear.”¹³ In October, Kaysone Phomvihane, general secretary of the Laos People’s Revolutionary Party (the Communist Party), secretly visited Beijing. He requested that China offer support to the Communist forces in Laos for their military struggles and base area build-up. Zhou Enlai agreed to these requests. As the first step, a Chinese work team, headed by General Duan Suquan, entered Laos early the next year “to investigate the situation there, as well as to prepare conditions for large-scale Chinese assistance.”¹⁴ At the end of 1963, after the Johnson administration demonstrated its intention to expand American military involvement in Vietnam, military planners in Beijing suggested that the Vietnamese strengthen their defensive system in the Tonkin delta area. Hanoi asked the Chinese to help complete the construction of new defence works there, to which the Chinese General Staff agreed.¹⁵

Beijing extended its security commitments to Hanoi in 1964. In June, Van Tien Dung, North Vietnam’s chief of staff and the person in charge of the military struggle in the South, led a delegation to Beijing. Mao told the delegation that China and Vietnam should unite more closely in the struggle against the common enemy, emphasizing that Vietnam’s cause was also China’s, and that China would offer “unconditional support” to the Vietnamese Communists.¹⁶ From 3 to 5 July, Chinese, Vietnamese and Laotian Communist leaders held an important meeting in Hanoi to discuss how to strengthen co-ordination between them if the war in Indo-China expanded.¹⁷ In assessing the possible development of the situation, the three delegations agreed that the United States would continue to expand the war in Vietnam by sending more land forces to the South and, possibly, using air force to attack important targets in the North. The Chinese delegation promised that China would increase its military and economic aid to Vietnam, help train Vietnamese pilots and, if the Americans were to attack the North, offer support “by all possible

13. Qu Aiguo, “Chinese supporters in the operations to assist Vietnam and resist America,” *Junshi shilin (The Circle of Military History)*, No. 6 (1989), p. 40.

14. Hu Zhengqing, *Yige waijiaoguan de riji (Diaries of a Diplomat)* (Jinan: Yellow River Press, 1991), p. 5; and Quan Yanchi and Du Weidong, *Gongheguo mishi (Secret Mission Dispatched by the Republic)* (Beijing: *Guangming ribao* Press, 1990), pp. 13–14.

15. Li Ke and Hao Shengzhang, *Wenhua dageming zhong de jiefangjun*, p. 418.

16. Qu Aiguo, “Chinese supporters in the operations to assist Vietnam and resist America,” p. 40.

17. Attending the meeting were Zhou Enlai, Chen Yi, Wu Xiuquan, Yang Chengwu and Tong Xiaopeng from the Chinese Communist Party; Ho Chi Minh, Le Duan, Truong Chinh, Pham Van Dong, Vo Nguyen Giap, Nguyen Chi Thanh, Hoang Van Hoan and Van Tien Dung from the Vietnamese Workers’ Party; and Kaysone Phomvihane, Prince Souphanouvong and Phoumi Vongvichit from the Laotian People’s Revolutionary Party. See *Zhou Enlai waijiao huodong dashiji*, p. 413.

and necessary means.”¹⁸ These promises indicate that Beijing’s leaders were more willing than ever before to commit China to the cause of the Vietnamese revolution.

There were profound domestic and international causes underlying Beijing’s adoption of a more aggressive strategy toward the escalating conflicts in South-East Asia. First, Beijing’s more enthusiastic attitude toward Hanoi has to be understood in the context of the rapid radicalization of China’s political and social life, as well as Mao Zedong’s desire to create strong dynamics for such radicalization, in the 1960s. Since the early days of the People’s Republic, Mao had never concealed his ambition to transform China into a land of universal equality and justice under the banner of socialism and Communism. In the late 1950s Mao’s grand plans of “transforming Chinese society” led to the Great Leap Forward, which turned out to be a nation-wide catastrophe. For the first time in Communist China’s history, the myth of Mao’s “eternal correctness” was called into question. Starting in 1960, the Beijing leadership, with Mao’s retreat to the “second line,” adopted more moderate and flexible domestic policies designed for economic recovery and social stability (such as allowing the peasants to maintain small plots of land for their families). Mao, however, would give up neither his revolutionary plans nor his position as China’s paramount leader. When China’s economy began to recover in 1962, Mao told the whole Party “never to forget class struggle” at the Party Central Committee’s Tenth Plenary Session.¹⁹ In early 1963, a “socialist education” movement began to sweep across China’s cities and countryside, which would finally lead to the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.²⁰

In order to justify and promote this process of revolutionizing China’s Party, society and population, Mao, informed by his previous experience,²¹ fully realized that the creation of a perception of China facing serious external threats would help strengthen the dynamics of revolutionary mobilization at home, as well as his authority and controlling position in China’s political life. On a series of occasions from late 1962

18. Li Ke, “Chinese people’s support in assisting Vietnam and resisting America will be remembered by history,” *Junshi ziliao (Military History Materials)*, No. 4 (1989), p. 30; interviews with Beijing’s military researchers in August 1993 and July 1994. Whiting reports that, according to the information offered by Vietnamese scholars, Beijing promised Hanoi in 1964 that it would provide North Vietnam with an air cover against American air attack, but it backed down from the promise in June 1965 (Whiting, “China’s role in the Vietnam War,” p. 73). Neither Chinese sources now available nor my interviews in Beijing can confirm this report. One Chinese military researcher points out that considering China’s limited air combat capacity in the 1960s, it is doubtful if Beijing would offer the Vietnamese any such promise in the first place.

19. Cong Jin, *Qizhe qianjin de shinian (The Decade of Tortuous Advance)* (Zhengzhou: Henan People’s Press, 1989), pp. 505–524.

20. *Ibid.* pp. 525–546.

21. For example, in the summer of 1958, when the Taiwan Straits crisis developed at the same time the Great Leap Forward was under way, Mao stressed that “besides its disadvantageous side, a tensed [international] situation could mobilize the population, could particularly mobilize the backward people, could mobilize the people in the middle, and could therefore promote the great leap forward in economic construction.” Mao Zedong’s Speech to the Supreme State Council, 5 September 1958, *Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong wengao*, Vol. 7, pp. 389–390.

to 1964, Mao emphasized repeatedly that China was facing an international environment full of crises, arguing that the international reactionary forces were preparing to wage a war against China. It was therefore necessary for China to prepare politically and militarily for this coming challenge.²²

In the meantime, Mao used the Party's international strategy in general and its Vietnam policy in particular to win an upper hand in a potential confrontation with other Party leaders who, in his view, had demonstrated a "revisionist" tendency on both domestic and international issues. He took Wang Jiaxiang, head of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) International Liaison Department, as the first target of his criticism. In June 1962, Wang submitted to the Party's top leadership a report on international affairs, in which he argued that China should not allow itself to be involved in another Korean-style confrontation with the United States in Vietnam.²³ Mao quickly characterized Wang's ideas as an attempt to conciliate imperialists, revisionists and international reactionaries, while at the same time reducing support to those countries and peoples fighting against imperialists. He stressed that the policy of "three conciliations and one reduction" came at a time when some leading CCP members had been frightened by the international reactionaries and were inclined to adopt a "pro-revisionist" policy line at home. He emphasized that his policy, by contrast, was to fight against the imperialists, revisionists and reactionaries in all countries, and, at the same time, to increase support to anti-imperialist forces in other countries.²⁴ Mao would later use these accusations to challenge and overwhelm his other more prominent "revisionist" colleagues at the Party's central leadership, especially Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping. It is not surprising, then, that with the re-consolidation of Mao's leadership role, there emerged a more radical Chinese policy towards Vietnam.

Beijing's new attitude toward the escalating Vietnam conflict was also closely related to the deteriorating relationship between China and the Soviet Union. The "honeymoon" between Beijing and Moscow in the 1950s faded quickly after the 20th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party in 1956. The divergences were political, economic, ideological and psychological. Mao strongly disagreed with Khrushchev's de-Stalinization, viewing it as evidence of capitalist restoration in the Soviet Union.

22. Zheng Qian, "The nation-wide war preparations before and after the CCP's Ninth Congress," *Zhonggong dangshi ziliao (CCP History Materials)*, No. 41 (April 1992), p. 205; and Cong Jin, *Quzhe qianjin de shinian*, pp. 502–504.

23. In this report, Wang argued that in its management of the Vietnam crisis, Beijing should learn from the lessons of the Korean War. During the initial stage of the Korean crisis, according to the report, Stalin encouraged China to enter the war by promising that the Soviet air force would cover Chinese ground troops in Korea; but when Beijing made the decision to enter the war, Stalin reneged on the promise. Wang warned that Khrushchev was repeating Stalin's trick by pushing China into another confrontation with the United States in Vietnam. See Wang Jiaxiang's report to the CCP Central Committee, 29 June 1962; the original of the document is kept at Chinese Central Archives. An abridged version of the report is published in *Wang Jiaxiang xuanji (Selected Works of Wang Jiaxiang)* (Beijing: People's Press, 1989), pp. 446–460, which, however, omits the part on Chinese policy towards Vietnam.

24. Cong Jin, *Quzhe qianjin de shinian*, pp. 576–77, 579.

Khrushchev's decision to withdraw Soviet experts from China, to cut Soviet assistance, to take a pro-New Delhi attitude during the Chinese–Indian border conflict in 1962 and not to share nuclear secrets with China further worsened the relationship.²⁵ In 1962 and 1963, the split between the two Communist giants surfaced, with Beijing and Moscow openly criticizing each other's policies. As far as the immediate impact on China's policy toward Vietnam is concerned, two points should be stressed. First, in order to guarantee that Hanoi would stand on Beijing's side, it became more necessary than ever for Beijing's leaders to give resolute backing to their Vietnamese comrades. Secondly, as Beijing's propaganda was then escalating its criticism of Moscow's failure to give sufficient support to revolutionary national liberation movements, Beijing's leaders must have realized that it would be seen as ridiculous if they themselves failed to offer support. In the context of the rapidly deteriorating relationship between China and the Soviet Union, Vietnam had become a litmus test for "true Communism."

Beijing's new attitude towards Vietnam also grew out of its understanding of the central role China was to play in promoting revolutionary movements in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Ever since the victory of the Chinese revolution in 1949, the Beijing leadership had believed that China's experience had established a model for the struggles of other oppressed peoples, and that the significance of the Chinese revolution went far beyond China's boundaries.²⁶ But in the 1950s and early 1960s, Beijing's interpretation was still subordinate to the "two-camps" theory, which contended that the centre of world revolution remained in Moscow. With the emergence of the Sino-Soviet split in the early 1960s, the Chinese changed their tone, alleging that the centre of world revolution had moved from Moscow to Beijing. Applying China's experience of "encircling the cities by first liberating the countryside" to the entire world, Beijing viewed Asia, Africa and Latin America as the "world's countryside." China, by virtue of its revolutionary past, was entitled to play a leading role in promoting revolutionary struggles against the "world cities."²⁷ Beijing's new policy towards Vietnam was certainly compatible with this line of thinking.

It is apparent that underlying Beijing's more radical policy towards Vietnam was the ambitious Maoist revolutionary programme of transforming China's state, society and international outlook. While the intensifying crisis situation in Vietnam in the early 1960s posed an increasing threat to China's security interests, Mao's primary concern lay in the interplays between the changing situation in Vietnam and his grand plan of promoting China's "continuous revolution," and the vision of Beijing's Vietnam policy was never restricted to Vietnam itself. The

25. *Ibid.* pp. 322–371; see also Allen S. Whiting, "The Sino-Soviet split," in Roderick MacFarquhar and John K. Fairbank (eds.), *The Cambridge History of China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), Vol. 14, pp. 478–538.

26. For a discussion, see Chen Jian, *China's Road to the Korean War: The Making of the Sino-American Confrontation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), ch. 1.

27. This idea was first openly suggested by D. N. Aidit, chairman of the Indonesian Communist Party, but was quickly widely adopted by Beijing.

policy seemed to have complicated aims: Mao and his comrades certainly hoped that the Vietnamese revolutionaries would eventually defeat the U.S. imperialists and their “lackeys,” and it was thus necessary for Beijing to support their struggles, but it would be against Mao’s interests if such support led to a direct Chinese–American confrontation, thus sabotaging his efforts of bringing about the Cultural Revolution at home. American expansion of warfare in Vietnam would threaten China’s security in a general sense, but the war’s expansion on a limited scale could provide Mao with a much-needed stimulus to mobilize the Chinese population. Beijing’s belligerent statements about war in Vietnam were certainly aimed at both Hanoi and Washington, but, in the final analysis, also at the ordinary people in China.

These complicated factors shaped Beijing’s response to the Tonkin Gulf Incident in August 1964. On 5 August, Zhou Enlai and Luo Ruiqing cabled Ho Chi Minh, Pham Van Dong and Van Tien Dung, advising them to “investigate and clarify the situation, discuss and formulate proper strategies and policies, and be ready to take action.” Without going into detail, they proposed closer military collaboration between Beijing and Hanoi to meet the American threat.²⁸ The same day, the Central Military Commission (CMC) and the General Staff in Beijing ordered the Military Regions in Kunming and Guangzhou (the two military regions adjacent to Vietnam) and the air force and naval units stationed in southern and south-western China to enter a state of combat readiness, ordering them to “pay close attention to the movement of American forces, and be ready to cope with any possible sudden attack.”²⁹ From mid-August, the Chinese air force headquarters moved a large number of air and anti-aircraft units into the Chinese–Vietnamese border area. On 12 August, the headquarters of the air force’s Seventh Army was moved from Guangdong to Nanning, so that it would be able to take charge of possible operations in Guangxi and in areas adjacent to the Tonkin Gulf.³⁰ Four air divisions and one anti-aircraft artillery division were moved into areas adjacent to Vietnam and were ordered to maintain combat readiness. In the following months, two new airports would be constructed in Guangxi to serve the need of these forces. Beijing also designated eight other air force divisions in nearby regions as second-line units.³¹

28. Li Ke and Hao Shengzhang, *Wenhua dageming zhong de jiefangjun*, p. 408; Qu Aiguo, “Chinese supporters in the operations to assist Vietnam and resist America,” p. 40; and *Beijing Review*, 30 November 1979, p. 14.

29. Wang Dinglie *et al.*, *Dangdai Zhongguo kongjun* (*Contemporary Chinese Air Force*) (Beijing: Chinese Social Sciences Press, 1989), p. 384.

30. Liu Yuti and Jiao Hongguang, “Operations against invading American planes in the Chinese–Vietnamese border area in Guangxi,” in Wang Renshen *et al.*, *Kongjun: huiyi shiliao* (*The Air Force: Memoirs and Reminiscences*) (Beijing: People’s Liberation Army Press, 1992), pp. 559–560. Liu was then the Seventh Army’s deputy commander and Jiao was deputy political commissar.

31. Wang Dinglie *et al.*, *Dangdai Zhongguo kongjun*, p. 384. Right after the Gulf of Tonkin Incident, it was noted by American intelligence that China had moved 36 MiG fighters to the newly built airfield at Phuc-Yen in North Vietnam, and had substantially strengthened its air strength in southern China. See Smith, *An International History of the Vietnam War*, Vol. 2, p. 300; and Whiting, *The Chinese Calculus of Deterrence*, p. 176.

Relying on American intelligence information, Allen Whiting argues that Beijing's transfer of new air units to the border area and the construction of new airports there were carefully designed to deter further American expansion of war in the South and bombardment in the North.³² While this interpretation certainly deserves credit (especially so far as the effect of these actions is concerned), it should be pointed out that Beijing's leaders also used these actions to assure their comrades in Hanoi of their backing, to allow themselves the time to work out the specifics of China's strategy towards the Vietnam War in light of Beijing's domestic and international needs, and, in a deeper sense, to turn the tensions caused by an external crisis into a new driving force for a profound domestic mobilization.

Not surprisingly, Mao immediately used the escalation of the Vietnam War in August 1964 to radicalize further China's political and social life, bringing about a "Resist America and Assist Vietnam" movement across China's cities and countryside. On 5 August, the Chinese government issued a powerful statement announcing that "America's aggression against the Democratic Republic of Vietnam was also aggression against China, and that China would never fail to come to the aid of the Vietnamese." From 7 to 11 August, over 20 million Chinese, according to the statistics of the Xinhua News Agency, took part in rallies and demonstrations all over China, protesting against "the U.S. imperialist aggression against Vietnam," as well as showing "solidarity with the Vietnamese people."³³ Through many such rallies and other similar activities in the following two years, the concept of "resisting America and assisting Vietnam" would penetrate into every part of Chinese society, making it a dominant national theme which Mao would use to serve the purpose of mobilizing the Chinese population along his "revolutionary lines."

Several of Mao's speeches further revealed his intentions. In mid-August 1964, the CCP's Central Secretariat met to discuss the international situation and China's response. Mao gave a lengthy address to the meeting on 17 August. He emphasized that the imperialists were planning to start a new war of aggression against China, and it was therefore necessary for China to undertake a fundamental restructuring of its economic framework. Mao paid particular attention to the fact that, as most industry was then located in coastal areas, China was economically vulnerable to sudden attacks. To safeguard the industrial base, Mao believed it necessary to move a large number of factories to the interior of the country, and to establish the Third Front (*san xian*, that is, the industrial bases located in the inner land).³⁴ Meanwhile, in order to cope with the situation in Indo-China, Mao called for the rapid completion of three new railway lines – the Chengdu–Kunming line, the Sichuan–Guizhou line and the Yunnan–Guizhou line. All China's economic

32. Whiting, *The Chinese Calculus of Deterrence*, pp. 176–78.

33. *Renmin ribao*, 7 and 12 August 1965.

34. For a comprehensive discussion of the emergence and development of Third Front phenomenon, see Barry Naughton, "The Third Front: defence industrialization in the Chinese interior," *The China Quarterly*, No. 115 (September 1988), pp. 351–386.

planning, Mao emphasized, should now be oriented toward China's national defence, to prepare for a coming war with the imperialists.³⁵

The escalation of the Vietnam War in late 1964 thus triggered a profound transformation of the entire structure of China's national economy. Following Mao's ideas, the CCP Central Committee discussed the need to establish a "Headquarters for National Economy and National Defence," with Mao Zedong and Liu Shaoqi as its co-commanders. By early 1965, a large portion of the coastal industry had begun to move into the inner areas, and the emphasis of China's economic development changed from agriculture and light industry to heavy industry, particularly in the sectors related to the military build-up.³⁶ All this touched upon the everyday life of a large portion of China's population (especially in coastal areas), further radicalizing China's society and politics and thus following Mao's intentions.

Working out the Specifics of China's Support to Vietnam, Late 1964 to Early 1965

The security commitments Beijing had previously offered Hanoi were given in general terms. It was thus necessary, in late 1964 and early 1965, for Beijing's leaders to define the specifics of China's support to Vietnam in light of both the country's domestic and international needs as perceived by Mao and the changing situation in Vietnam. While doing so, their thinking had been influenced by the lessons of the Korean War, as well as by the assumption that the Americans would also learn from their experience in Korea. Consequently, by the spring of 1965, when policy makers in Washington decided to send more troops to South Vietnam and began operation "Rolling Thunder," Beijing's leaders had decided on three basic principles in formulating China's strategy. First, if the Americans went beyond the bombing of the North and used land forces to invade North Vietnam, China would have to send military forces. Secondly, China would give clear warnings to the Americans, so that they would not feel free to expand military operations into the North, let alone to bring the war to China. Thirdly, China would avoid direct military confrontation with the United States as long as possible; but if necessary, it would not shrink from a confrontation.³⁷

Under the guidance of these principles, Beijing sent out a series of warnings to Washington in spring 1965. On 25 March, the official *Renmin ribao* (*People's Daily*) announced in an editorial that China was to offer "the heroic Vietnamese people any necessary material support, including the supply of weapons and all kinds of military materials," and that, if necessary, China was also ready "to send its personnel to fight together with the Vietnamese people to annihilate the American

35. Cong Jin, *Quzhe qiangjin de shinian*, p. 465; and Naughton, "The Third Front," p. 353.

36. Cong Jin, *Quzhe qiangjin de shinian*, p. 46.

37. Interviews with Beijing's military researchers, August 1992.

aggressors.”³⁸ Four days later, Zhou Enlai made the same open announcement at a mass rally in Tirana, the capital of Albania, where he was making a formal visit.³⁹ On 2 April, Zhou asked Mohammad Ayub Khan, Pakistan’s President, to convey the following message to Washington: China would not initiate a war with the United States, but China would definitely offer all manner of support to the Vietnamese; if the United States retaliated against China by starting an all-out war, China would meet it; even though the United States might use nuclear weapons against China, China was sure that the Americans would be defeated.⁴⁰ Beijing’s leaders anticipated that Washington would catch the meaning of these messages and, it was hoped, the expansion of the Vietnam War would be restricted.⁴¹

While sending out these warnings, Beijing’s leaders were also preparing for a “worst case” scenario. On 12 April, the CCP Central Committee issued “Instructions for Strengthening the Preparations for Future Wars,” a set of directives which would ultimately be relayed to every part of Chinese society and become one of the most important guiding documents in China’s political and social life for the rest of the 1960s. The document pointed out that the American imperialists were escalating their military aggression in Vietnam and directly invading the DRV’s airspace, a move which also represented a serious threat to China’s safety. In light of the situation, the Central Committee emphasized that it was necessary for China to strengthen further its preparations for a war with the United States, and it therefore called on the Party, the Army and the whole nation to be prepared both in thinking and in practice for this worst possibility. To support the Vietnamese people’s struggle to resist the United States and save their country, the document concluded, was to become the top priority in China’s political and social life.⁴² It is apparent that this document served the purpose of mobilizing China’s military and economic potential to deal with the possible worsening of the Vietnam War; simultaneously it also reflected Mao’s desire to radicalize China’s political and social life by inspiring a revolutionary atmosphere at home.

In the meantime, Beijing and Hanoi were endeavouring to achieve agreement on the specifics of Chinese–Vietnamese co-operation over the escalating war. In early April 1965, a Vietnamese delegation led by Le Duan, the Vietnamese Party’s first secretary, and Vo Nguyen Giap

38. *Renmin ribao*, 25 March 1965.

39. *Ibid.* 30 March 1965.

40. Zhou Enlai’s conversation with Ayub Khan, 2 April 1965, *Zhou Enlai waijiao wenxuan* (*Selected Diplomatic Papers of Zhou Enlai*) (Beijing: The Central Press of Historical Documents, 1990), pp. 436–443.

41. Policy makers in Washington did note these messages, and thus felt the pressure to act with extreme caution in attacking the North, lest a direct confrontation with China should take place. See Whiting, *The Chinese Calculus of Deterrence*, ch. 6.

42. Zheng Qian, “The nation-wide war preparations before and after the CCP’s Ninth Congress,” p. 205; Qu Aiguo, “Chinese supporters in the operations to assist Vietnam and resist America,” p. 41; and Wang Dinglie *et al.*, *Dangdai Zhongguo kongjun*, p. 412.

secretly visited Beijing.⁴³ On 8 April, Liu Shaoqi, on behalf of the CCP Central Committee, met Duan and Giap. Duan, according to the Chinese record, told his hosts at the beginning of the meeting that the Vietnamese “always believed that China was Vietnam’s most reliable friend,” and that “the aid from China to Vietnam was the most in quantity, as well as the best in quality.” Liu thanked Duan and told him that “it was the consistent policy of the Chinese Party that China would do its best to satisfy whatever was needed by the Vietnamese.” Duan then stated that the Vietnamese hoped China would send volunteer pilots, volunteer troops and other volunteers – such as engineering units for constructing railways, roads and bridges – to North Vietnam. He emphasized that the dispatch of these forces would allow Hanoi to send its own troops to the South. Duan further expressed the hope that the support from China would achieve four main goals: restrict American bombardment to areas south of either the 20th or the 19th parallels; defend Hanoi and areas north of it from American air bombardment; defend North Vietnam’s main transportation lines; and raise the morale of the Vietnamese people. Following Mao’s instructions, Liu agreed to most of Duan’s requests. He told Duan that the CCP had made the decision that “it is our policy that we will do our best to support you. We will offer whatever you are in need of and we are in a position to offer.” Liu also stressed that “if you do not invite us, we will not come; and if you invite one unit of our troops, we will send that unit to you. The initiative will be completely at your disposal.”⁴⁴

In spite of these promises, there are clues that divergences existed between the two sides. First, although Duan asked for the dispatch of the Chinese air force (in the form of volunteer pilots) to Vietnam, the Chinese were reluctant to do this, at least at this stage.⁴⁵ Secondly, Duan invited the Chinese to play a role in defending Vietnam’s transportation system and important targets in areas up to the 19th parallel, whereas the Chinese, as was made clear later, would in most circumstances not let their anti-aircraft troops go beyond the 21st parallel. Thirdly, Duan requested China’s assistance in constructing, maintaining and defending

43. It seems that the visit was divided into two parts. In early April, Le Duan and Vo Nguyen Giap arrived in Beijing secretly, and met Liu Shaoqi and other Chinese leaders on 8 April. The Vietnamese delegation then travelled to Moscow on 10 or 11 April, and stayed there until 17 April to hold a series of talks with Soviet leaders. They then came back to Beijing on 18 April to continue their visit to China in an open manner. For a summary of the delegation’s visit to the Soviet Union and the second half of its visit to China, see Smith, *An International History of the Vietnam War*, Vol. 3, pp. 92–97.

44. Li Ke and Hao Shengzhang, *Wenhua dageming zhong de jiefangjun*, p. 415; Wang Xiagen, *Kang Mei yuanyue shilu*, p. 44; Han Huaizhi et al., *Dangdai Zhongguo jundui de junshi gongzuo (The Military Affairs of the Contemporary Chinese Army)* (Beijing: Chinese Social Sciences Press, 1989), Vol. 1, pp. 539–540; Shi Yingfu, *Mimi chubing yare conglin (Sending Troops Secretly to the Sub-tropical Jungles)* (Beijing: People’s Liberation Army Literature Press, 1990), pp. 14–16.

45. In the spring and summer of 1965, the Beijing leadership ordered Chinese air units that had entered the Chinese–Vietnamese border area not to cross the border under any circumstances. See Liu Yuti and Jiao Hongguang, “Operations against invading American planes in the Chinese–Vietnamese border area in Guangxi,” p. 563.

both railways and roads in Vietnam, but, for whatever reason, his discussions with Liu involved only railways.

With the need to clarify further the scope and nature of support from China, Ho Chi Minh secretly visited China in May and June 1965. On 16 May, he met Mao Zedong in Changsha, the capital city of Mao's home province Hunan. Ho expressed his gratitude for China's support and his satisfaction with the achievements of Le Duan's visit a month earlier. Then he clarified that Hanoi was determined "to take the main burden of the war by themselves." What the Vietnamese needed, Ho stated, was China's material and military support, so that Hanoi could send its own people to fight in the South. Mao was ready to provide such assistance, and he promised Ho that China would offer "whatever support was needed by the Vietnamese." Ho then asked Mao to commit China's resources to building 12 new roads for Vietnam. Mao gave his consent immediately.⁴⁶

On the basis of Ho's trip, Van Tien Dung visited Beijing in early June 1965. His meetings with Luo Ruiqing finalized the guiding principles and concrete details of China's support to Vietnam under different circumstances. If the war remained in its current status, that is, the United States was directly involved in military operations in the South while using only air force to bombard the North, the Vietnamese would fight the war by themselves, and China would offer military and material support in ways that the Vietnamese had chosen. If the Americans used their naval and air forces to support a South Vietnamese invasion of the North, China would send its air and naval forces to support North Vietnamese operations. If American land forces were directly involved in invading the North, China would use its land forces as the strategic reserves for the Vietnamese, and carry on operation tasks whenever necessary. Dung and Luo also had detailed discussions about the actual form China's military involvement would take in different situations. If the Chinese air force was to enter the war, the first choice would be to use Chinese volunteer pilots and Vietnamese planes in operations; the second choice would be to station Chinese pilots and planes on Vietnamese air fields, and enter operations there; and the third choice would be to adopt the "Andong model,"⁴⁷ that is, when engaging in military operations, Chinese pilots and planes would take off from and return to bases in China. If Chinese land forces were to be used in operations in Vietnam, they would basically serve as a reserve force; but if necessary, Chinese troops would participate in fighting. Luo emphasized that the Chinese would enter operations in any of the above forms in accordance with the actual situation.⁴⁸

46. Wang Xianguan, *Kang Mei yuanyue shilu*, pp. 39–44; and Li Ke and Hao Shengzhang, *Wenhua dageming zhong de jiefangjun*, p. 422.

47. Andong is a border city on the Yalu. During the Korean War, Chinese and Soviet air forces used bases on the China side of the Sino-Korean border to fight the American air force over northern Korea. This was known as the "Andong model."

48. Li Ke and Hao Shengzhang, *Wenhua dageming zhong de jiefangjun*, p. 417. Whiting reports that Vietnamese scholars claim that the Chinese informed Hanoi in June 1965 that "it would be unable to defend the North against U.S. air attack" (Whiting, "China's role in the Vietnam War," p. 73). The Chinese sources cited here clearly defer from this Vietnamese claim.

In order to co-ordinate China's military and material support to Vietnam, from late May Zhou Enlai chaired a series of meetings attended by governmental and military officials, who decided to establish two authorities in Beijing to take charge of making and implementing the policy towards Vietnam. The first body was a seven-person committee called "the Leading Group on Vietnamese Affairs." Its initial members included Li Xiannian, a Politburo member and Vice-Premier in charge of economic and financial affairs; Bo Yibo, a Politburo member and Vice-Premier in charge of economic planning; Luo Ruiqing, Chief of Staff; Liu Xiao, deputy Foreign Minister; Yang Chengwu, deputy Chief of Staff; Li Qiang, Minister of Foreign Trade; and Li Tianyou, another deputy Chief of Staff. Luo Ruiqing, until his purge in December 1965,⁴⁹ was appointed as the head of the group.⁵⁰ Its main tasks were to carry out the central leadership's grand strategy, to make decisions and suggestions on matters associated with Vietnam, and to examine and determine if any new support to Vietnam was necessary.

The second authority was called the "Group in Charge of Supporting Vietnam under the Central Committee and the State Council." This was composed of leading members from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Railway, Transport, Postal Service, Material Supply and Foreign Trade; the Commissions of Economic Affairs, State Economic Planning and Foreign Economic Affairs; and the People's Liberation Army's General Political Department, General Logistics Department, General Staff, and different arms and branches. Yang Chengwu was appointed as the head of the group and Li Tianyou the deputy head. The main tasks were to co-ordinate and implement the decisions by the Party and the State Council (through the aforementioned first group) as they concerned support for Vietnam.⁵¹

Chinese-Vietnamese co-operation during the Vietnam War demonstrated some notable features from the very beginning. First, unlike the First Indo-China War, in which Chinese military and political advisers were directly involved in Viet Minh decision-making and Beijing was well aware of every important move, the Vietnamese Communists did not let the Chinese interfere in decision-making. If necessary, Beijing would be consulted or informed, but decision-making was now completely in

49. For a discussion of Luo Ruiqing's purge and its possible connections with Beijing's strategies toward the Vietnam War, see Harry Harding and Gurtov Melvin, *The Purge of Lo Jui-ch'ing: The Politics of Chinese Strategic Planning* (Santa Monica: The Rand Corp., R-548-PR, February 1971).

50. After Luo Ruiqing's purge, Li Xiannian became the real head of the group. During the years of the Cultural Revolution, both Bo Yibo and Liu Xiao were purged, and thus were unable to play a role in the group. Some members, such as Ji Dengkui, a Cultural Revolution star, were added. Zhou Enlai frequently took charge of the group's activities himself. Wang Xianguan, *Kangmei yuanyue shilu*, p. 48; Li Ke and Hao Shengzhang, *Wenhua dageming zhong de jiefangjun*, p. 413; and interviews with Beijing's military researchers, August 1992.

51. Wang Xianguan, *Kang Mei yuanyue shilu*, p. 48.

Hanoi's own hands. Communist North Vietnam was a much more mature, independent and self-confident international actor than the Viet Minh had been during the First Indo-China War. Secondly, Beijing and Hanoi appeared to have reached a fundamental agreement in the spring and summer of 1965 that the Vietnamese would fight the war with their own forces; China's main role would be to guarantee logistical support and defend the North, allowing the Vietnamese to send as many troops to the South as possible. Thirdly, although top Chinese and Vietnamese leaders did consider the possibility of large-scale direct Chinese military involvement in Vietnam, the consensus seems to have been that unless the American land forces directly invaded the North, Chinese land forces would not be used in operations in Vietnam.

China's Aid to North Vietnam, 1965–69

From 1965 to 1969, China's support of Vietnam took three main forms: the engagement of Chinese engineering troops in the construction and maintenance of defence works, air fields, roads and railways in North Vietnam; the use of Chinese anti-aircraft artillery troops in the defence of important strategic areas and targets in the northern part of North Vietnam; and the supply of large amounts of military equipment and other military and civil materials.

The dispatch of Chinese engineering troops. In his visit to China in April 1965, Le Duan made it clear that to strengthen Vietnam's war potential it was essential to improve and expand the railway system in the North and to keep the system working under American air attack. He asked the Chinese for assistance both in constructing new railways and maintaining and defending the railway system. On 17 April 1965, when Le Duan's delegation was in Moscow, the North Vietnamese General Staff cabled the Chinese General Staff, requesting that Chinese engineering troops be sent to the offshore islands in the Tonkin Gulf area, to take responsibility for constructing the defence system there.⁵² The Chinese General Staff, following the order of the CMC, decided the next day to establish the "Chinese People's Volunteer Engineering Force" (CPVEF), which would be composed of some of China's best engineering units,⁵³ and would carry out the tasks of building and rebuilding railways, building defence works and constructing air fields in Vietnam.⁵⁴ On 21 and 22 April, Luo Ruiqing and Yang Chengwu respectively met Vo

52. Li Ke and Hao Shenghang, *Wenhua dageming zhong de jiefangjun*, p. 418.

53. Mao Zedong ordered in 1965 that only the best Chinese engineering and anti-aircraft artillery troops should be sent to Vietnam. See *ibid.* pp. 409–410.

54. Qu Aiguo, "Chinese supporters in the operations to assist Vietnam and resist America," p. 41; Wang Xiangen, *Kang Mei yuanyue shilu*, p. 45; and Li Ke and Hao Shengzhang, *Wenhua dageming zhong de jiefangjun*, p. 418.

Nguyen Giap, further confirming that Chinese engineering troops would soon be sent to Vietnam.⁵⁵

After a series of discussions, on 27 April the Chinese and Vietnamese governments signed an agreement which provided that China would help Vietnam construct new railways and supply Vietnam with transport equipment. According to this and a series of supplementary agreements thereafter, China was to offer assistance on a total of 100 projects. Among the most important were: rebuilding the Hanoi–Youyiguan and Hanoi–Thai Nguyen railways, which involved transforming the original metre-gauge rail to one of standard gauge, and adding dozens of new stations, bridges and tunnels; building a new standard-gauge railway between Kep and Thai Nguyen to serve as a circuitous supplementary line for both the Hanoi–Thai Nguyen and Hanoi–Youyiguan lines; constructing a series of bridges, ferries, temporary railway lines and small circuitous lines in the northern part of North Vietnam; and reinforcing eleven important railway bridges to make sure they had a better chance of surviving air attacks and natural flooding.⁵⁶

During Ho Chi Minh's meeting with Mao Zedong in Changsha on 16 May 1965, Ho personally asked Mao to commit China's strength to the construction of 12 roads in North Vietnam, to which Mao agreed.⁵⁷ Following Mao's instructions, the Chinese General Staff quickly worked out a preliminary plan to send around 100,000 Chinese engineering troops to Vietnam for road construction. On 25 May, Zhou Enlai chaired a meeting to discuss the plan. He told the participants that as the Americans were expanding the war in Vietnam, they would naturally increase their efforts to cut off the North's support to the revolutionary forces in the South. It was therefore necessary for Hanoi to send more of its own people to reinforce the transportation corridors in lower Laos. For this reason, it was also necessary for China to take over the main responsibility of consolidating and expanding the road capacities in North Vietnam, the northern part in particular. Yang Chengwu then reported to the meeting that the Chinese General Staff had two different plans for dispatching troops to Vietnam. The first was to follow the suggestion of Ho Chi Minh and start the construction of all 12 roads at the same time, which would require more than 100,000 engineering troops. The second plan was to concentrate first on the construction of five to seven of the most needed roads, which would require an initial dispatch of around 80,000 troops. Yang recommended the second plan, which Zhou also favoured. The meeting decided that the two plans would be presented to the Vietnamese simultaneously, but the Chinese would make it clear that they favoured the second.

A Vietnamese governmental delegation for transportation affairs vis-

55. Wang Xianguan, *Kang Mei yuanyue shilu*, p. 45.

56. Han Huaizhi et al., *Dangdai Zhongguo jundui de junshi gongzuo*, Vol. 1, p. 545; Li Ke and Hao Shengzhang, *Wenhua dageming zhong de jiefangjun*, p. 421; and Wang Xianguan *Kangmei yuanyue shilu*, pp. 100–101.

57. Wang Xianguan, *Kang Mei yuanyue shilu*, p. 46; and Li Ke and Hao Shengzhang, *Wenhua dageming zhong de jiefangjun*, p. 422.

ited Beijing in late May, and insisted on their original plan. The Chinese quickly yielded. On 30 May, the Chinese and Vietnamese delegations signed a formal agreement stipulating that China would send its engineering troops to build and rebuild 12 roads in North Vietnam, and link them to China's road system. During construction, China would also be responsible for defending its engineering units against American air attack.⁵⁸

Following these agreements, the CMC and Chinese General Staff issued a series of orders to mobilize Chinese troops in May and June 1965.⁵⁹ Starting in early June 1965, seven divisions of CPVEF units entered Vietnam during different periods.

The first division of the CPVEF was composed of six regiments of China's best railway corps (with another two joining after August 1968), one railway prospecting team and around a dozen anti-aircraft artillery battalions. The total strength of the division reached 32,700 at its peak. It began arriving in Vietnam on 23 June 1965 and most of its units stayed until late 1969. According to Chinese statistics, when the last unit left Vietnam in June 1970, the division had completed 117 kilometres of new railway lines, rebuilt 362 kilometres of old lines, built 39 new rail bridges and 14 tunnels, and established 20 new railway stations.⁶⁰

The second division of the CPVEF consisted of three engineering regiments, one hydrology brigade, one maritime transportation brigade, one communication engineering brigade, one truck transportation regiment, and a few anti-aircraft artillery units, with a total strength of over 12,000. It entered Vietnam on 6 June 1965 and was the first group of Chinese engineering troops to assume responsibilities in Vietnam. Its main tasks were to construct permanent defence works and establish communication systems in 15 offshore islands and eight coastal spots in the Tonkin Gulf area. The division was also called on to fight together with North Vietnamese troops should the Americans invade the North. All units of this division left Vietnam in several groups between July and October 1966, as a result of the deepening divisions between Beijing and Hanoi (see below).⁶¹

The CPVEF's third division was mainly comprised of Chinese air force engineering troops. Its main task was to build in Yen Bay a large air base complex that would allow the use of jet planes, together with a large-size underground plane shelter. The Vietnamese originally requested this project in January 1965. In May, the advance team of the third division arrived in Yen Bay to make surveys. The main force of the division

58. Han Huaizhi *et al.*, *Dangdai Zhongguo jundui de junshi gongzuo*, Vol. 1, p. 548.

59. Qu Aiguo, "Chinese supporters in the operations to assist Vietnam and resist America," p. 41.

60. Han Huaizhi *et al.*, *Dangdai Zhongguo jundui de junshi gongzuo*, Vol. 1, pp. 545–47; and Qu Aiguo, "Chinese supporters in the operations to assist Vietnam and resist America," pp. 41–42.

61. Li Ke and Hao Shengzhang, *Wenhua dageming zhong de jiefangjun*, pp. 418–19, and Han Huaizhi *et al.*, *Dangdai Zhongguo jundui de junshi gongzuo*, Vol. 1, pp. 540–41.

entered Vietnam in November 1965. The air base was completed in May 1969, and the underground plane shelter in October of the same year; then the division quickly left Vietnam.⁶²

The fourth, fifth, and sixth divisions of the CPVEF were all highway construction engineering troops, under the command of an independent "Highway Construction Headquarters under the CPVEF," and totalled over 80,000 soldiers. The five engineering regiments of the fourth division were from the Guangzhou Military Region. They were given the task of rebuilding the main road linking Pingxiang and Jinxi, both in China's Guangxi province, to Cao Bang, Thai Nguyen and Hanoi. The five regiments of the fifth division were offered by the Shenyang Military Region. Their main task was to construct a new road from Lao Cai, a town bordering China's Yunnan province, to Yen Bay, and link it with the road to Hanoi. The six regiments of the sixth division were from the Kunming Military Region and the Railway Corps. They were responsible for the construction of a new road from Wenshan in Yunnan to link the road constructed by the fifth division. They were also assigned to construct a new road along the Vietnamese–Chinese border, so that all north–south main highways would be connected. All these divisions had their own anti-aircraft artillery units. They entered Vietnam in October–November 1965, and returned to China by October 1968.⁶³ The statistics offered by an official Chinese military source shows that they had accomplished the building and rebuilding of seven roads with a total length of 1,206 kilometres, 395 bridges with a total length of 6,854 metres and 4,441 road culverts with a total length of 46,938 metres. The entire cubic metres of earth and stone involved in completing these projects reached 30.5 million.⁶⁴

The CPVEF's seventh division was to replace the second division, and entered Vietnam in December 1966. It was composed of three construction and engineering regiments and several anti-aircraft artillery battalions, and had over 16,000 soldiers. Its main tasks were to construct permanent underground defence works in the Red River Delta area and build underground plane shelters for Hanoi airport. The division completed these tasks and left Vietnam in November 1969.⁶⁵

In addition to the dispatch of these engineering troops, in accordance with the agreement between Beijing and Hanoi reached in July 1965, China sent a communication engineering brigade to Vietnam in October of the same year. The brigade was mainly engaged in the repair and

62. Li Ke and Hao Shengzhang, *Wenhua dageming zhong de jiefangjun*, p. 420; and Han Huaizhi *et al.*, *Dangdai Zhongguo jundui de junshi gongzuo*, Vol. 1, p. 543; for discussions of American knowledge of Chinese involvement in the construction of the air base, see Whiting, *The Chinese Calculus of Deterrence*, p. 188; and "China's role in the Vietnam War," p. 75.

63. Han Huaizhi *et al.*, *Dangdai Zhongguo jundui de junshi gongzuo*, Vol. 1, p. 548; Qu Aiguo, "Chinese supporters in the operations to assist Vietnam and resist America," pp. 41–42.

64. Han Huaizhi *et al.*, *Dangdai Zhongguo jundui de junshi gongzuo*, Vol. 1, p. 550.

65. *Ibid.* pp. 540–41; and Qu Aiguo, "Chinese supporters in the operations to assist Vietnam and resist America," p. 42.

construction of the communication system in the Lai Chau–Son Lau–Dien Bien Phu area. Before the brigade returned to China in July 1966, according to Chinese sources, it erected a total of 894 kilometres of telephone lines and constructed four carrier telephone stations.⁶⁶

In short, Beijing's dispatch of Chinese engineering troops to Vietnam occurred mainly between late 1965 and late 1968. These troops were assigned the tasks of constructing defence works, roads and railways in the northern part of North Vietnam. Most of their projects were located in areas north of Hanoi and none of them was south of the 20th parallel. The majority of the troops left Vietnam before the end of 1969, and by July 1970 all of them had returned to China.

The use of anti-aircraft artillery troops in defending important North Vietnamese targets and covering Chinese engineering troops. During both Le Duan's visit to China in April 1965 and Ho Chi Minh's meeting with Mao Zedong on 16 May 1965, the Vietnamese requested that China send anti-aircraft artillery troops to Vietnam. In Van Tien Dung's meetings with Luo Ruiqing in early June 1965, Dung further requested that China send two anti-aircraft artillery divisions to defend Hanoi and the areas north of Hanoi should the American air force strike there. Luo agreed.⁶⁷

On 24 July 1965, the Vietnamese General Staff telegraphed the Chinese General Staff, formally requesting that China send "the two anti-aircraft artillery divisions which have long completed their preparations for operations in Vietnam. The earlier the better. If possible, they may enter Vietnam on 1 August." The next day, the Chinese General Staff cabled the Vietnamese General Staff, saying that China would send two anti-aircraft artillery divisions and one regiment to Vietnam immediately, and that these units would take the responsibility of defending the Bac Ninh–Lang Son section of the Hanoi–Youyiguan railway and the Yen Bay–Lao Cai section of the Hanoi–Lao Cai railway, the two main railways linking China and North Vietnam. On 1 August 1965, the 61st and 63rd divisions of the Chinese anti-aircraft artillery forces entered Vietnam from Yunnan and Guangxi respectively.⁶⁸

The 61st division arrived in Yen Bay on 5 August. Four days later, it was put into action against American F-4 fighter-bombers for the first time. Using 37mm and 85mm anti-aircraft guns, they shot down one F-4, which, according to the Chinese record, was the first American plane to be downed by Chinese anti-aircraft units. The troops of the 63rd division entered the Kep area and engaged in their first battle with the Americans on 23 August. They, reportedly, shot down one American plane and damaged another.⁶⁹

66. Li Ke and Hao Shengzhang, *Wenhua dageming zhong de jiefangjun*, p. 420; and Qu Aiguo, "Chinese supporters in the operations to assist Vietnam and resist America," pp. 41–42.

67. Li Ke and Hao Shengzhang, *Wenhua dageming zhong de jiefangjun*, p. 423.

68. *Ibid.* and Han Huaizhi *et al.*, *Dangdai Zhongguo jundui de junshi gongzuo*, Vol. 1, p. 550.

69. Han Huaizhi *et al.*, *Dangdai Zhongguo jundui de junshi gongzuo*, Vol. 1, p. 551; and Wang Dinglie *et al.*, *Dangdai Zhongguo kongjun*, p. 397.

From early August 1965 to March 1969, a total of 16 divisions (63 regiments) of Chinese anti-aircraft artillery units, with a total strength of over 150,000, engaged in operations in Vietnam. These units, which entered Vietnam in eight separate stages, were mainly from the artillery forces, the air force, the navy and, in some cases, the Kunming and Guangzhou Military Regions. Following their experience during the Korean War, the Chinese military leadership adopted a rotation strategy for these troops – usually a unit would stay in Vietnam for around six months and then be replaced by another. Their tasks were to defend strategically important targets, such as critical railway bridges in the Hanoi–Youyiguan and Hanoi–Lao Cai lines, and to cover Chinese engineering troops. There is no evidence that any of these units were engaged in operations south of Hanoi or in the defence of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The last unit of Chinese anti-aircraft artillery forces left Vietnam in mid-March 1969. The Chinese statistics claimed that these troops had fought a total of 2,154 battles, and were responsible for shooting down 1,707 American planes and damaging another 1,608.⁷⁰

It is interesting that the Chinese air force was never directly engaged in operations over Vietnamese territory while Chinese anti-aircraft artillery troops were sent there, although there was evidence that this had been discussed by Chinese and Vietnamese leaders in the spring and summer of 1965. Was this non-involvement a product of Hanoi's reluctance to allow the Chinese air force access to Vietnamese airspace or a reflection of Beijing's desire to restrict China's military involvement in Vietnam? Or were there more complicated or hidden factors at work? Unfortunately, Chinese source materials now available suggest no definite answer to these questions.

It is known, though, that Beijing's policy towards American planes invading Chinese airspace underwent a major change in early 1965. Before the end of 1964, the guideline of Chinese policy toward invading American planes was to avoid direct confrontation. A CMC order dated 25 June 1963, for example, made it clear that when an American military vessel or plane entered Chinese territorial water or airspace, the Chinese commanding officer should pay more attention to the political, rather than the military, aspect of the incursion. They should therefore be cautious in taking action, to avoid putting China in a politically and diplomatically disadvantageous position even at the expense of losing military opportunities. As late as January 1965, when the Chinese air forces on the Chinese–Vietnamese border area entered combat readiness as the result of the worsening situation after the Gulf of Tonkin Incident, the CMC reiterated its previous instructions. An order dated 11 January 1965 emphasized that Chinese air units in southern China should be restrained when American military planes entered China's

70. This summary of the operations of Chinese anti-aircraft artillery forces in Vietnam is based on the following sources: Han Huaizhi *et al.*, *Dangdai Zhongguo jundui de junshi gongzuo*, Vol. 1, pp. 550–53; Qu Aiguo, "Chinese supporters in the operations to assist Vietnam and resist America," p. 43; and Wang Dinglie *et al.*, *Dangdai Zhongguo kongjun*, ch. 17.

airspace, and that they should take off to monitor the movement of the American planes, but not to attack them.⁷¹

The situation changed in early April 1965. On 8 and 9 April, two groups of American fighters invaded the airspace over China's Hainan Island. Following the CMC's instructions, four Chinese planes took off to monitor the Americans, and the Americans reportedly opened fire on the Chinese. On 9 April, Deputy Chief of Staff Yang Chengwu reported the two incidents to Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong, suggesting that Chinese air force should "give a firm strike" to American planes invading China's airspace. That afternoon Mao ordered that the air force and the navy should send their best units to southern China and South China Sea, unify their command system and strike the Americans firmly if they invaded China's air.⁷² On 17 April, the CMC issued a new order formally implementing Mao's new instructions.⁷³ From this time to November 1968, according to Chinese statistics, Chinese air forces were engaged in 155 operations against American planes invading China's airspace, shooting down 12 American fighters and other planes (unmanned reconnaissance planes not included).⁷⁴ Although the exact motive behind this change of Chinese attitude is not clear, the effect of the new policy seems evident. By responding firmly to incursions into Chinese airspace, Beijing sent a clear signal to the Americans, while at the same time demonstrating to their comrades in Hanoi the firmness of their stand in dealing with the American threat.

Military and other material support to Vietnam. When Chinese troops entered Vietnam, China's military and other support increased dramatically. Mao issued explicit instructions that supporting Vietnam should be given top priority. On 16 June 1965, Mao made it clear that China's economic structure should be further transformed in order to meet the need of "preparing for coming wars." Late the next month, in the context of the escalating military conflicts in Vietnam, China's State Planning Council further decided to make the strengthening of national defence and "preparing for an early and major war with the imperialists" the central task of the Third Five-Year Plan. The council decided also that the Chengdu–Kunming railway, which was designed to improve China's connection with Vietnam, should be completed no later than 1969.⁷⁵

One Chinese source reveals the contents of an agreement signed on 11 June 1967 by Liao Kaifen, deputy director of the Logistical Department of the Kunming Military Region, and his Vietnamese counterpart, the

71. Li Ke and Hao Shengzhang, *Wenhua dageming zhong de jiefangjun*, p. 341.

72. Yang Chengwu's report to Zhou Enlai and the CCP Central Committee, 9 April 1965, and Mao Zedong's remarks on Yang Chengwu's report, 9 April 1965, *Mao Zedong junshi wenji* (A Collection of Mao Zedong's Military Papers) (Beijing: Military Science Press, 1993), Vol. 6, p. 403.

73. Li Ke and Hao Shengzhang, *Wenhua dageming zhong de jiefangjun*, pp. 341–42.

74. *Ibid.* p. 344; and Wang Dinglie *et al.*, *Dangdai Zhongguo kongjun*, p. 392; for a comparison between American and Chinese records, see Whiting, *The Chinese Calculus of Deterrence*, p. 179.

75. Cong Jin, *Quzhe qianjin de shinian*, p. 467.

deputy head of the logistical bureau of the PANV's North-Western Military Region, in which China offered material support to Vietnamese troops stationed in upper Laos in 1967. The total number of Vietnamese troops there, as claimed by the Vietnamese side, was 1,870. In addition to weapons and other military equipment, China pledged to equip the Vietnamese forces right down to the level of supplies for personal hygiene: 5,500 sets of uniforms, 5,500 pairs of shoes, 550 tons of rice (0.8 kilogram per person daily), 55 tons of pork meat (2.4 kilogram per person monthly), 20 tons of salt, 20 tons of fish, 20 tons of sesame and peanuts, 20 tons of white sugar, 6.5 tons of soy sauce, 8,000 toothbrushes, 11,000 bottles of toothpaste, 24,000 pieces of regular soap, 10,600 pieces of scented soap, and 74,000 cases of cigarettes. Altogether, the agreement covered 687 different items, including such things as ping pong balls, volley balls, pens, mouth organs and sewing needles.⁷⁶ It reflects the magnitude of China's support for the Vietnamese.

The trend of China's military support to Vietnam is shown in Table 1. China's supply of weapons and other military equipment to Vietnam sharply increased in 1965. Compared with 1964, the supply of guns increased 1.8 times, from 80,500 to 220,767; gun bullets increased almost 5 times, from 25.2 million to 114 million; pieces of different types of artillery increased by over 3 times, from 1,205 to 4,439; and artillery shells increased nearly 6 times, from 335,000 to 1.8 million. The amount of China's military supply fluctuated between 1965 and 1968, although the total value of material supplies remained at roughly the same level. But then in 1969–70, a sharp drop occurred, at the same time that all China's troops were pulled back. Not until 1972 would there be another significant increase of China's military delivery to Vietnam, but for reasons very different from the factors behind China's support from 1965 to 1969.⁷⁷

To summarize, although Beijing's decision to support Vietnam had its own logic and considerations, China's aid to Vietnam during 1965–69 was substantial. Beijing provided the Vietnamese with large amounts of military and other material assistance. Over 320,000 Chinese engineering and anti-aircraft artillery forces (the peak year was 1967, when 170,000 Chinese troops were present in Vietnam) were directly engaged in the construction, maintenance and defence of North Vietnam's transport system and strategically important targets, especially in areas north of the 21st parallel.⁷⁸ Such support allowed Hanoi to use its own manpower for more essential tasks, such as participating in battles in the South, and maintaining the transport and communication lines between the North

76. Li Ke and Hao Shengzhang, *Wenhua dageming zhong de jiefangjun*, pp. 410–11.

77. For a detailed discussion, see John W. Garver, "Sino-Vietnamese conflict and the Sino-American rapprochement," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 96, No. 3 (Fall 1981), pp. 445–464.

78. In his study, Whiting points out that a total of 50,000 Chinese troops were sent to Vietnam, but Vietnamese sources claim that there had only been 20,000 (see Whiting, "China's role in the Vietnam War," p. 74).

Table 1: China's Military Supply to Vietnam (1964–75)

	1964	1965	1966	1967	1968	1969	1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975
Guns	80,500	220,767	141,531	146,600	219,899	139,900	101,800	143,100	189,000	233,500	164,500	141,800
Artillery	1,205	4,439	3,362	3,984	7,087	3,906	2,212	7,898	9,238	9,912	6,406	4,880
Bullets (thousands)	25,240	114,010	178,120	147,000	247,920	119,170	29,010	57,190	40,000	40,000	30,000	20,060
Artillery shells (thousands)	335	1,800	1,066	1,363	2,082	1,357	397	1,899	2,210	2,210	1,390	965
Radio transmitters	426	2,779	1,568	2,464	1,854	2,210	950	2,464	4,370	4,335	5,148	2,240
Telephones	2,941	9,502	2,235	2,289	3,313	3,453	1,600	4,424	5,905	6,447	4,633	2,150
Tanks	16	—	—	26	18	—	—	80	220	120	80	—
Military vessels	—	7	14	25	—	—	—	24	71	5	6	—
Planes	18	2	—	70	—	—	—	4	14	36	—	20
Automobiles	25	114	96	435	454	162	—	4,011	8,758	1,210	506	—
Uniforms (thousand sets)	—	—	400	800	1,000	1,200	1,200	1,200	1,400	1,400	1,400	—

Source:

Li Ke and Hao Shengzhang, *Wenhua dageming zhong de jiefangjun*, p. 416

and the South. Moreover, Beijing's support, as both Allen Whiting and John Garver have pointed out, played a role in deterring further American expansion of war into the North.⁷⁹ It is therefore fair to say that, although Beijing's support may have been short of Hanoi's expectations, without the support, the history, even the outcome, of the Vietnam War might have been different.

The Widening Gap between Beijing and Hanoi, 1966–69

Any analysis of China's involvement in the Vietnam War must ultimately address a single, crucial question: why did Beijing and Hanoi enter the war as close allies – “brotherly comrades” in the oft-repeated words of Ho Chi Minh – yet became bitter adversaries a few short years after the war's conclusion?

In retrospect, the foundations of the co-operation between Beijing and Hanoi in the 1960s proved tenuous as the considerations underlying their respective policies were driven by distinct priorities. While how to unify their country by winning the war was for the Vietnamese the overriding aim, the orientation of China's Vietnam strategy, as discussed earlier, had to include such complicated factors as Mao's desire to use the Vietnam conflict to promote China's “continuous revolution.” Not surprisingly, when large numbers of Chinese engineering and anti-aircraft artillery troops entered Vietnam in late 1965, problems between the two countries began to develop. As the Vietnam War went on, differences of opinions turned into friction, sometimes confrontation. The strifes between the Communist neighbours continued to escalate until Beijing, offended by Hanoi's decision to begin negotiations with the United States in Paris, recalled all its troops from Vietnam.

The first sign of disharmony appeared over differences regarding the role that the Chinese troops were to play in Vietnam and the proper relationship between Chinese troops and local Vietnamese. When Chinese troops entered Vietnam, they were exhorted to “use every opportunity to serve the Vietnamese people.” The underlying assumption was that China's support to Vietnam was not only a military task, but also a political mission. It was therefore important for Chinese soldiers to play a model role while in Vietnam, thus promoting the image of China as a great example of proletarian internationalism. Efforts to put such principles into practice, however, were often thwarted by Vietnamese authorities. The Chinese units found that the service they intended to provide to local Vietnamese people, especially that offered by Chinese medical teams, was intentionally blocked by Vietnamese officials.⁸⁰ Several such incidents were reported to Mao in late August 1965, only two months after the first Chinese units had entered Vietnam. Mao then instructed

79. Whiting, *The Chinese Calculus of Deterrence*, pp. 194–95; and Garver, “Sino-Vietnamese conflict and the Sino-American rapprochement,” pp. 447–48.

80. Wang Xianggen, *Kang Mei yuanyue shilu*, pp. 61–72.

Chinese troops in Vietnam “not to be too enthusiastic [in offering service to the Vietnamese].”⁸¹

As it turns out, however, such precaution did little to improve the situation. The feeling of solidarity between Beijing and Hanoi waned quickly. This subtle change in attitude is illustrated by the personal experiences of the commanding officers of the CPVEF’s second division. In June 1965, when the division entered Vietnam, the commanding officers were invited to Hanoi, where they were warmly received by Ho Chi Minh, Pham Van Dong and Vo Nguyen Giap. But when the division finally left Vietnam in October 1966, the division representatives found in Hanoi that the atmosphere had cooled significantly. They felt that “something was wrong in the Chinese–Vietnamese relationship.”⁸²

The deteriorating relationship between Beijing and Moscow, together with the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in China, further triggered tension and conflict between Beijing and Hanoi. Until the mid-1960s, Beijing assumed that the Vietnamese Workers’ Party was on China’s side in the struggle against the “Soviet revisionism.”⁸³ But ties between Hanoi and Moscow increased as the Vietnam War progressed. After Khrushchev was ousted by his colleagues in October 1964, Moscow began to provide Hanoi with substantial support while at the same time calling on socialist countries to adopt a unified stand in supporting Vietnam.⁸⁴ On 11 February 1965, the Soviet Prime Minister A.N. Kosygin stopped in Beijing on his way back from Vietnam to meet Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai. He suggested that China and the Soviet Union should stop the polemic between them, so that they could take joint steps to support the struggle of the Vietnamese people. Mao refused Kosygin’s suggestion, claiming that his debates with the Soviets would last for another 9,000 years.⁸⁵ Hanoi had since become silent in its criticism of “revisionism.”

Mao’s linking of the polemic against Moscow to the inner-Party struggle in China further complicated the situation. In February and March 1966, a high-ranking Japanese Communist Party delegation headed by Miyamoto Kenji, the JCP’s General Secretary, visited China and North Vietnam, attempting to promote an “anti-imperialist international united front” including both China and the Soviet Union. Learning that Hanoi had demonstrated great interest in this idea, the Chinese Party delegation headed by Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping managed to work out an agreement with Miyamoto, according to which China would virtually join this “international united front.” However, Mao intervened

81. *Ibid.* p. 74.

82. *Ibid.* p. 255.

83. For a discussion, see Smith, *An International History of the Vietnam War*, Vol. 2, ch. 12 and Vol. 3, ch. 9; and King C. Chen, “North Vietnam in the Sino-Soviet dispute, 1962–1964,” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 4, No. 9 (September 1964), pp. 1023–1036.

84. Recent Russian scholarship confirms that after 1965, Soviet military and economic support to Vietnam increased steadily and, as a result, the relationship between Hanoi and Moscow became much closer. See Ilya V. Gaiduk and Oganez V. Marinin, “The Vietnam War and Soviet-American relations,” paper presented at international conference on New Sources on the Cold War, Moscow, January 1993, pp. 8–9, 12–13.

85. For a more detailed description of Mao’s conversation with Kosygin, see Cong Jin, *Quzhe qianjin de shinian*, pp. 607–608.

suddenly at the very last moment, claiming that neither Liu Shaoqi nor Deng Xiaoping had been authorized to speak for the Chinese Party. He insisted that the Soviet Union had become the most dangerous enemy of the peoples of the world and called for the establishment of an “anti-imperialist and anti-revisionist international united front.”⁸⁶ Mao would later relate this event to his earlier criticism of Wang Jiaxiang, charging that both Liu and Deng had become China’s “revisionists.” Mao’s criticism of Liu’s and Deng’s handling of the Miyamoto mission became the first sign to the outside world that profound division had emerged among top CCP leaders. As it soon turned out, both Liu and Deng would become the main targets of the Cultural Revolution.

So far as its impact on Chinese–Vietnamese relations is considered, the failure of the Miyamoto mission further distanced Hanoi from Beijing. Beijing’s leaders, while feeling increasingly uneasy about Hanoi’s lack of interest in keeping a distance from Moscow, noted with surprise that the Vietnamese media began to use China’s invasion of Vietnam in the past to spur patriotism among ordinary Vietnamese people. Convinced that the Vietnamese were in fact inclined toward Moscow, Beijing’s leaders were genuinely offended.⁸⁷

Among Chinese sources now available, two cases indicate that sharp differences had emerged in 1966 between Beijing and Hanoi as the result of Hanoi’s improving relations with Moscow. The first details China’s reaction to Hanoi’s gestures of friendship toward Moscow. In March 1966, Le Duan led a Vietnamese Party delegation to attend the Soviet Party’s 23rd Congress. He reportedly once described the Soviet Union as his “second motherland.” When Beijing’s leaders learned of this, they were “angrily shocked.” A few months later, the Vietnamese requested that the second division of the CPVEF stay longer in Vietnam after it had completed its original assignments, but the Chinese turned down the request and the second division returned to China in July 1966. One Chinese source points out that this move was designed to demonstrate Beijing’s anger toward Le Duan’s praise of the Soviets in Moscow.⁸⁸

The second case more directly reveals Chinese resentment of Hanoi giving any priority to the Soviets. In early 1966, a Chinese cargo ship, *Hongqi* (*Red Flag*), was assigned to carry materials in aid to Vietnam. As the ship approached the Hai Phong port it was stopped so that a Soviet cargo ship, which arrived later than the Chinese, could enter the port first. As the result of this delay, *Hongqi* was exposed to an American air raid and was severely damaged. During a visit to China in April, Le Duan

86. For a detailed record of Miyamoto’s visit to China and Vietnam in spring 1966, see Masaru Kojima (ed.), *The Record of the Talks between the Japanese Communist Party and the Communist Party of China: How Mao Zedong Scrapped the Joint Communiqué* (Tokyo: The Central Committee of the Japanese Communist Party, 1980).

87. In a meeting with Lu Duan in April 1966, Zhou Enlai mentioned that the Chinese had noted that the Vietnamese media had recently strengthened the propaganda about China’s invasion of Vietnam in the past. Zhou warned that such propaganda had violated the fundamental interests of the Vietnamese and Chinese people in their common struggle against the U.S. imperialists. Guo Ming *et al.*, *Zhong-Yue guanxi yanbian sishinian*, p. 102.

88. See Wang Xianguan, *Kang Mei yuanyue shilu*, p. 225.

found that this question was the first on Zhou Enlai's agenda. Zhou insisted that Duan explain why Vietnam had given the Soviet cargo ship an unfair priority. Duan, according to Chinese sources, was greatly embarrassed. He had to promise that the Vietnamese would not allow the same thing to happen again, as well as repeatedly praise the importance of the Chinese support, before Zhou would turn to other topics.⁸⁹

The gap between Beijing and Hanoi widened as North Vietnam received more support from Moscow. Beijing would not agree to cooperate with the Soviets in establishing a united transport system, as suggested by Moscow, to handle Soviet materials going through Chinese territory.⁹⁰ China did help deliver Soviet materials to Vietnam, but only on the condition that the operation be placed under Beijing's direct control and be interpreted as a favour from Beijing to Hanoi.⁹¹ The Vietnamese obviously did not appreciate such an attitude. By 1968, it became evident to the Chinese that Hanoi was growing closer to Moscow than to Beijing. When a series of conflicts occurred between Chinese troops and Soviet military personnel in Vietnam, the Vietnamese authorities stood on the side of the Soviets, alleging that the Chinese "had impinged upon Vietnam's sovereignty."⁹²

Hanoi's deep involvement in other parts of Indo-China, especially in Laos, was another reason for suspicion and friction between the Chinese and the Vietnamese. Historically the relationship between Communists in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia had been very close (they once belonged to the same Indo-China Communist Party). This was not a problem to the Chinese during the First Indo-China War. But the situation became quite different during the second war. When a Chinese working team arrived in Laos in early 1965, they reported to Beijing that the Vietnamese virtually controlled the Laotian People's Revolutionary Party, and viewed the presence of the Chinese team as a threat to Hanoi's interests there.⁹³ Finally, in September 1968, apparently under pressure from Hanoi, Kaysone Phomvihane suggested that Li Wenzheng, the head of the Chinese team at that time, should take a vacation back in China. Beijing interpreted this suggestion as an indication that the continuous presence of the Chinese team was no longer appreciated and ordered the with-

89. *Ibid.* pp. 255–56.

90. Zhou Enlai made it clear in his meeting with Le Duan in April 1966 that as China's own railway system was overloaded the Chinese were not in a position to establish a united transport system with the Soviets in handling Soviet materials going through Chinese territory. *Ibid.* p. 226.

91. According to official Chinese sources, during the entire period of the Vietnam War, China "helped transfer 5,750 train trucks of materials in aid from other socialist countries to Vietnam, including materials from the Soviet Union." *Ibid.*

92. Here is an example: in April 1968, a Chinese unit stationed in Dien Bien Phu area ran into a confrontation with a group of Soviet officers there. Chinese soldiers temporarily detained the Soviets, and, following the practice of the Cultural Revolution, held a denunciation meeting criticizing the "Soviet revisionists." The local Vietnamese authorities were greatly offended, and protested to the Chinese in strong words, including the allegation that the Chinese "had impinged upon Vietnamese sovereignty." The Chinese denied this allegation immediately. See *ibid.* pp. 229–235.

93. Quan Yanchi and Du Weidong, *Gongheguo mishi*, pp. 249–251; and Hu Zhengqing, *Yige wajiaoguan de riji*, pp. 161–66.

drawal of the team.⁹⁴ As a result, the distrust between Beijing and Hanoi deepened.

The changing situation in China in 1968–69, as well as China's new relationship with the two superpowers, made the Beijing leadership feel less obliged to continue the same level of support to Vietnam. As discussed above, when Mao decided to commit a large portion of China's military and other material sources to backing the Vietnamese Communists in 1964 and 1965, he was preparing to start the Cultural Revolution, which began to sweep across China in the summer and autumn of 1966. But China's domestic situation and Mao's needs had changed by 1968 and 1969. The ongoing Cultural Revolution destroyed Mao's perceived opponents within the Party leadership. At the same time, however, it had brought Chinese society, as well as the Communist state and Party apparatus, to the verge of total disintegration. Mao therefore had to call the country back to order.⁹⁵ In the meantime, the relationship between Beijing and Moscow deteriorated throughout the period, leading eventually to a border clash between the two countries in March 1969. The perception that the Soviet Union was China's most dangerous enemy gradually came to dominate Beijing's strategic thinking. Starting in late 1968, Beijing's top leaders, Mao and Zhou in particular, began to reconsider the role the United States could play in China's security needs.⁹⁶ These changing domestic and international conditions significantly altered the underlying assumptions of Beijing's policy toward the Vietnam War, making a radical approach obsolete.

Consequently, all the accumulated tensions between Beijing and Hanoi were gathered into one crucial question: whether or not Hanoi should engage in negotiations with the United States for a possible peaceful solution of the war. From the moment Hanoi demonstrated an interest in negotiating with the Americans Beijing expressed a strong objection. In several conversations with Vietnamese leaders in late 1967 and early 1968, Beijing's top leaders advised Hanoi to stick to the line of military struggle.⁹⁷ When Pham Van Dong visited Beijing in April 1968, for example, Mao and other Chinese leaders repeatedly emphasized to him that "what could not be achieved on the battlefield would not be achieved at the negotiation table."⁹⁸ But Beijing now found that its influence over Hanoi's policy decision had become so limited that Hanoi would go its own way. Zhou Enlai commented during a talk with a Vietnamese

94. Quan Yanchi and Du Weidong, *Gongheguo mishi*, pp. 250–51.

95. For a good discussion of Mao's changing domestic agenda in 1968 and 1969, see Wang Xiangyi, *Dadongluan de shinian (The Decade of Great Chaos)* (Zhengzhou: Henan People's Press, 1989), chs. 8 and 9.

96. In early 1969, with Mao's approval and under Zhou's direct supervision, Beijing started to reassess its relations with the United States. For a more detailed discussion, see Xiong Xianghui, "The prelude to the opening of Sino-American relations," *Zhonggong dangshi ziliao*, No. 42 (June 1992), pp. 56–96. See also Garver, "Sino-Vietnamese conflict and the Sino-American rapprochement."

97. Guo Ming *et al.*, *Zhong-Yue guanxi yanbian sishinian*, p. 68; see also Garver, "Sino-Vietnamese conflict and the Sino-American rapprochement," pp. 448–450.

98. The Institute of Diplomatic History under Chinese Foreign Ministry (comp.), *Zhou Enlai waijiao huodong dashiji, 1949–1975*, p. 524.

delegation headed by Xuan Thuy in early May that Hanoi's agreement on starting negotiations with the Americans was "too fast and too hurried."⁹⁹ Not surprisingly, Beijing maintained a displeased silence toward the initial exchanges between Hanoi and Washington in early 1968. At about the same time, Chinese engineering troops and anti-aircraft artillery units began to leave Vietnam.

The Failure of an "Alliance between Brotherly Comrades"

By late 1969, except for a small number of engineering units engaged in the final stage of construction projects that had lasted for years, all Chinese engineering and anti-aircraft artillery troops had left Vietnam. In July 1970, the last Chinese units returned to China.¹⁰⁰ China's military and material support to Vietnam continued, but the quantity began to drop in 1969 and 1970 from the peak year of 1968 (see Table 1). In Beijing's and Hanoi's open propaganda, the assertion that China and Vietnam were "brotherly comrades" could still be heard from time to time, but the enthusiastic devotion to such discourses disappeared.

Before the Paris Peace Accords were finally reached in January 1973, there was another wave of support by Beijing for Hanoi. In May 1972, Beijing responded positively to Hanoi's request for more military support when the Nixon administration started another round of bombardment of key North Vietnamese targets and mined the Hai Phong harbour.¹⁰¹ But this episode was short lived. Chinese–Vietnamese relations again cooled after the signing of the Paris peace agreement, and immediately fell into a series of crises after the Vietnamese Communists won their country's unification in 1975. Four years later, when Vietnamese troops invaded Cambodia, Beijing responded by using its military forces to attack Vietnam "to teach Hanoi a lesson." It turned out that after committing much of China's resource to supporting the Vietnamese Communists, Beijing had created for itself a new enemy, and comprehensive confrontation would characterize the relationship between Beijing and Hanoi throughout the 1980s. In this sense, the Vietnam War was also a "lost war" for Beijing.

What were the causes? One may argue that Chinese–Vietnamese relations had been under a heavy historical shadow of the conflicts between the two countries. One may point out that from a geopolitical perspective there existed potential conflict between Beijing's and Hanoi's interests in South-East Asia. One may also refer to the escalating Sino-Soviet confrontation which made the maintenance of the solidarity between Beijing and Hanoi an extremely difficult goal. One may even

99. *Ibid.* pp. 524–25.

100. Qu Aiguo, "Chinese supporters in the operations to assist Vietnam and resist America," p. 43.

101. *Ibid.*; Yang Guoyu *et al.*, *Dangdai Zhongguo haijun (Contemporary Chinese Navy)* (Beijing: Chinese Social Sciences Press, 1988), pp. 421–29; and Ma Faxiang, "Zhou Enlai directs the operations of helping Vietnam sweep mines," *Junshi lishi (Military History)*, No. 5 (1989) pp. 35–37.

find the “brotherly comradeship” itself a source of confrontation: if Beijing and Hanoi had not been so close, they would have had fewer opportunities to experience the differences between them; too intimate a tie created more opportunities for conflict and confrontation.

However, a more fundamental reason can be found in the logic of the dynamics underlying China’s foreign policy and security strategy. As argued in this article, Mao’s foreign policy was always an integral part of his theory and practice of “continuous revolution,” which aimed to promote the revolutionary transformation of China’s “old” state and society and to pursue new China’s *central* (but not *dominant*) position in the international community. Beijing’s support of Hanoi had a profound connection with Mao’s desire to use the tensions caused by the crisis in Vietnam to stimulate the mass mobilization that was essential for the making of the Cultural Revolution, and to spur revolutionary China’s influence and reputation in South-East Asia and other parts of the world. When Beijing tried to carry out a Vietnam policy designed for these purposes, it encountered immediately a paradoxical scenario. On the one hand, in order to create the momentum for the ongoing “continuous revolution,” as well as to establish Beijing as a model of international anti-imperialist struggles, the Beijing leadership stressed the danger of a coming war with the United States and its determination to fight against it, claiming repeatedly that China would support Vietnam by any means, “even at the expenses of heavy national sacrifices.” On the other hand, however, Beijing’s real policy choices were limited: at a time when the Cultural Revolution was to throw China into nation-wide turmoil, it was simply impossible for Mao and his comrades to allow China to enter a direct confrontation with the United States (unless American land forces invaded the territory of North Vietnam or China), and Mao’s idealism had to yield to the reality. From a Vietnamese perspective, though, between Beijing’s words and deeds (in spite of China’s enormous military and material support) there existed a huge gap, one that would increase with the development of the Vietnam War.

From a historical-cultural perspective, Beijing’s seemingly revolutionary and idealistic policy towards Vietnam had been, ironically, penetrated by the age-old Chinese ethnocentrism and universalism. While Beijing’s leaders, Mao in particular, emphasized repeatedly that the Vietnamese should be treated as “equals,” the statement itself revealed a strong sense of superiority on the part of the Chinese revolutionaries, implying that they had occupied a position from which to dictate the values and codes of behaviour that would dominate their relations with their neighbours. In the realm of Chinese–Vietnamese relations, although Beijing had never pursued political and economic control in Vietnam (which was for the Chinese too inferior an aim), and its huge military and material aid was seldom accompanied by formal conditions, Beijing asked for something bigger, that is, the Vietnamese recognition of China’s morally superior position. In other words, what Beijing intended to materialize was a modern version of the relationship between the “Central Kingdom” and its subordinate neighbours. This practice effectively reminded the Viet-

name of their problematic past with the Chinese. When Beijing reduced its support to Hanoi in the wake of China's changing domestic and international situations, the Vietnamese suspicion of China developed into aversion. And when Vietnam's unification made it possible for the regime in Hanoi to confront China's influences, the aversion further turned into hostility. The Chinese, on the other hand, found it necessary to "punish" their former comrades in order to defend their heavily wounded sense of superiority. The result was the final collapse of the "alliance between brotherly comrades."