The People’s Republic of China and Vietnam: A Complex Relationship

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The Vietnam War is a war that is often situated in the narrow lens of Eastern Communism versus Western Democracy. Typically, the major players are generalized as the Soviet Union (USSR) and the United States of America (USA) facing off in a “satellite” country, where the country itself did not really matter, only the two super powers of the time. What is often overlooked is the complexity of the international dimensions of the war. Many smaller countries, such as Canada, contributed mostly forgotten regiments, technology, and aid to the USA’s intervention in South Vietnam. On the other side, many people either do not know or downplay the significant role the People’s Republic of China (PRC) had in assisting the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRVN). This lack of recognition can be attributed to the tunnel vision of the American government and the Cold War rhetoric delivered to the American people to gain support for intervention in the Republic of Vietnam (RVN), also known as South Vietnam. However, it is extremely important to recognize the PRC’s influence on South East Asia issues as a whole. The PRC had a major impact on the development of Vietnam, both negatively and positively. First, the very creation of the PRC in 1949 set the stage for a major shift in the balance of power in Asia. Further, the PRC’s diplomatic strategy towards Vietnam had major impacts on its development in the years leading up to the American intervention. Alternatively, the DRVN’s political manoeuvres changed how the PRC handled Vietnamese issues. Moreover, the Sino-Soviet Split had major implications in the development of Vietnam. Finally, China’s intervention in the war between the US and DRVN ultimately influenced the outcome of the war. The People’s Republic of China’s involvement in the DRVN greatly impacted its growth, negatively and positively.

As a historical backdrop, China’s relationship to Vietnam has always been complex. Vietnam has a history of being ruled by the Chinese dynasties multiple times before the French took Vietnam (Indochina) as a colony. As a result, Vietnam has always struggled to be independent of imperialist rule, and this is why Vietnamese nationalism and eventually Ho Chi Minh and other nationalists would rise. The wars in Vietnam beginning in 1945 would be wars fought for a unified Vietnam, independent of foreign interference. Since Ho Chi Minh was a communist as well as a nationalist, when the Cold War began and separated the East from West in ideology, it put Vietnam in a unique position because under the Truman Doctrine, the US was unwilling to let another country become Communist. When neighbouring China fell to the Communists, it put Vietnam in an even more unique position, due to the historical imperialist actions of China towards Vietnam. Understanding historical relationships between the countries is important to understanding events in Sino-Vietnamese relations post 1949.

The fall of China to the Communist camp caused great concern in the Western world. The ideological Cold War had begun a few years before, and the creation of the PRC would have major effects on Vietnam, directly and indirectly, positively and negatively. Mao Zedong, the leader of the Chinese Communist Party, would be a force to be reckoned with from 1949 onward. His vision of China being the model for all Third World communist revolutions would be very influential in his foreign politics, including the policies surrounding Vietnam.

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2 Ibid, 24-5.
First, the creation of the PRC would result in the rise of the Domino Theory, changing the way the West viewed the issues in South East Asia. Metaphorically speaking, the “falling block” of China to Communism would lead to other countries in the region to fall in succession as well. This theory would be one of the primary thought processes used by American policy makers to advocate for intervention in Asia. China was the first “domino”, and the US was desperate not to have anymore “fall”. Under Mao Zedong’s leadership, the People’s Republic of China came into existence in 1949. As a Communist regime, it was initially supported by the USSR and had a policy of fighting imperialism and capitalism in Asia. As a result, the French war in Indochina would become a matter of “communist containment”, as opposed to helping France keep a colony. Due to this change of ideological thought regarding issues in Indochina, the very birth of the Communist China clearly had a major indirect impact.

Additionally, the Korean War had a major impact on the Southeast Asia (SEA) issues. Although China demonstrated its strength very early, showing Mao was quite willing to engage in a fight if it suited his interest, the results of the Korean War had an impact on Indochinese affairs. As a direct point, the Korean War may not seem relevant to the development of Vietnam, but indirectly it is very important, as it would set an important precedent in the American intervention in 1965. It also had a major effect on Mao himself, and this would affect his policies regarding SEA. The Korean War demonstrated the stiff resistance to violent Communist expansion faced by the West, and exposed the shortcomings of the Chinese army, especially in terms of organization. The Korean War was a bitter blow to Mao’s new military, even though the Chinese essentially saved the Korean communists from being totally defeated. Mao understood the potential power of his foes after the war, and changed a lot of his policies towards peace rather than continuous and violent revolution. As a result, the Korean War changed the behaviour of the new Communist Chinese government early on, and thus influenced the Chinese diplomatic strategy forcing the Viet Minh to be more conceding in the 1954 Geneva Conference.

Last, as the Viet Minh were fighting the French imperialists at the time of the PRC’s birth, Mao tipped the balance of power more in favour of the Viet Minh. Mao believed in his vision of China’s place in the world, and it was an “international obligation and mission to assist a fraternal Communist party.” China lined up approximately 200 000 troops along the Indochinese border as a display of military strength, and provided large quantities of military and non-military supplies in a mere five months in 1950. This included “14,000 rifles and pistols, 1,700 machine guns and recoilless rifles, 150 mortars, 60 artilleries, and 300 bazookas, as well as munitions, medicine, communications materials, clothes and 2,800 tons of food.” The Viet Minh were glad to receive all this equipment, and it definitely helped their fight against the French, who had previously outmatched the Viet Minh in terms of technology and military equipment. In fact, it is arguable that “there would have been no victory at Dien Bien Phu

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5 Ibid.
6 Zhai, 4.
without the 105mm guns supplied by China.” As the balance of power shifted, it made a major difference in the outcome of the Viet Minh’s struggle. The assistance of the PRC in the fight against the French was very important, and was the first positive impact the new PRC would have on Vietnam.

The People’s Republic of China’s diplomatic strategy towards Vietnam was complex and always changing, but always had a major impact of some sort, good or bad. Historic conflicts between Vietnam and China were not forgotten, and China was always looking to put itself in a better position. In the years between 1954 and 1965, Chinese interests were always in the background of any peace talks and tactical arrangements regarding issues in Vietnam, and Indochina as a whole. Although China was the first country to recognize Ho Chi Minh’s government officially in 1950, Mao was not afraid to manipulate the situation for China’s benefit. Diplomatically, the PRC had a major influence in the development of Vietnam, negatively and positively.

To begin, China’s first diplomatic strategy with Vietnam can be seen in the very creation of the DRVN and RVN at the end of the Geneva Conference. Zhou Enlai, the premier and foreign minister Chairman Mao, held talks with Ho Chi Minh in Liuzhou, a city located on the Sino-Vietnamese border. Sources indicate that military regroupment zone borders was the dominate topic, and Ho had aimed for the sixteenth parallel. Zhou had suggested the seventeenth parallel, and had also motioned to let the French control both Haiphong and Hanoi. Ho was not happy with China’s suggestions, and instructed his ambassador, Pham Van Dong, not to give in to these points. Zhou would respond to Ho’s position by imploring “President Ho for permission to demonstrate flexibility on the diplomatic front.” Contemporary historian Qiang Zhai translated recently released Chinese documents that confirm the PRC essentially used its newfound power to play a stronger role in negotiations to the detriment of DRVN interests. Zhai asserts that the PRC did this to prevent US military intervention at that particular time and to enhance its own prestige internationally by looking like a peacemaker. In fact, Zhai suggests Beijing pressured Ho Chi Minh to abandon his “effort to unify the whole of Vietnam” entirely for the sake of China’s own interest. Stanley Karnow adds to this by stating that “[a] divided Vietnam suited the Chinese better than a unified neighbor – particularly one that had quarreled with China for two thousand years.” The end result was the partition at the seventeenth parallel, with the DRVN in the North under the rule of Ho Chi Minh in Hanoi, and the RVN in the South under the Ngo Dinh Diem regime in Saigon. Clearly, the PRC had a major diplomatic influence on the partition of Vietnam at the Geneva Convention.

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9 Zhai, 15.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
13 Pham Doan Nam. Hiep dinh Giongeo. 7.
14 Zhai, 57.
15 Ibid.
16 Karnow, 200-201
More diplomatic strategy can be seen in China’s pressuring of Ho Chi Minh to limit his liberation efforts of the rest of Indochina. This interpretation was reinforced by Zhai, again using recently available Chinese documents that suggest China pressured Ho to abandon Laos and Cambodia for the sake of faster negotiated settlements.\(^{17}\) Historian Christopher Goscha went so far as to suggest that the PRC manipulated Ho to “forestall Vietnamese domination of the Indochinese peninsula.”\(^{18}\) This correlates to the eventual Sino-Vietnamese split that would occur twenty years later that was the result of tensions of Soviet-Vietnamese relations and Chinese anger of Vietnamese “imperialism”. Although it may not seem this affects the development of Vietnam directly, the Chinese diplomatic strategy had an impact on Sino-Vietnamese relations. It is important in understanding that prior to heightened US escalation, China consistently sacrificed DRVN interests at the negotiating table for its own benefit, and this caused mistrust between the two nations, particularly from the DRVN towards China. Issues such as these became sources of tension. This is an example of negative impact on development.

Further, China pressured the DRVN to engage in peace talks or military conflicts depending on what was best for China in terms of Vietnam. At the Geneva Conference of 1954, many of the pushes made by Beijing were made for the prevention of internationalization of the war, as what happened in Korea.\(^{19}\) As previously mentioned, the Korean War had a major impact on Chinese politics. At the Conference, Beijing was pushing for peace, rather than a continued DRVN struggle, mainly because the PRC did not want to get into another war. Zhou Enlai allegedly told Nikita Khruschev, the leading contender for power of the Soviet Union at this point, that China could not afford to send troops en masse to help Ho Chi Minh because they “already lost too many men in Korea” and were “in no condition to get involved in another war at this time.”\(^{20}\) China’s interests were at the front of the Chinese involvement in the Conference, not really to help Ho. Beijing was not happy with any stalling from any side, even the DRVN’s. To emphasize this, Zhou himself stated that “all barriers, no matter where they are from, should be denounced”, clearly demonstrating the PRC’s commitment to settlement, even at the expense of the DRVN.\(^{21}\) This was not an isolated incident either. Hanoi had an optimism that Beijing would help push forward the elections for reunification that the Geneva Convention called for. Zhou had pledged support in July of 1955 for Ho; however, the optimism faded fast, as elections were not likely under the Diem regime, and the non-committal attitude from Beijing.\(^{22}\) Robert Brigham also suggested that China used the situation in Vietnam continually to its own foreign and domestic policy needs. The war was used as a way of generating “mass mobilization” or popularity for the Cultural Revolution in mid 1960s China.\(^{23}\) Duiker supports this idea by stating as early as 1958 the DRVN got better reception in Beijing as the PRC entered more “radical” phases in its domestic and foreign policy, although Mao still suggested patience on Vietnamese

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17 Zhai, 62.
19 Zhai, 53.
reunification. China manipulated the situations in Vietnam to its advantage constantly. As a result, the PRC directly negatively influenced the development of reunified Vietnam by diplomatically stunting its successes on the battlefield, or being non-committal to Ho Chi Minh whenever it suited them.

Moreover, the PRC was very willing to manipulate Vietnam in order to keep the US at arm’s length. Preventing the US from entering Vietnam in full military force at the time was China’s top priority. Zhou Enlai had predicted in 1953 that the French would fall in Indochina; as a result, he engaged in talks that would try to find a way to allow the French to keep a stake in Indochina to keep the US out. Mao and Zhou had suspicions that the US was determined to prevent a ceasefire, to eventually allow them to create an excuse to “make war in Asia.” Qian Jiadong, a member of the Chinese delegation at Geneva, recalled that Mao’s major concern was “after the DRV drove the French out, the United States would come in. Therefore, it would be better to stop the war at the moment and rest a few years before completing the reunification.” This explains the idea of France having a stake in Hanoi and Haiphong, the major cities of the North. China’s experience in the Korean War was another factor that would prompt a want for keeping the US contained. The PRC wanted to stabilize the region as quickly as possible. Historian Charles McGregor and other sources indicate that many of the Viet Minh were not really interested in negotiating, especially after the victory at Dien Bien Phu; they wanted to pursue a total military victory. Chinese interests were the driving force for bringing them to the negotiating table at Geneva, diplomatically stunting the success of Viet Minh forces. This clear manipulation had a negative impact towards the ultimate reunification goal of the Viet Minh.

Lastly, China was eager to flex its new political muscle, mostly to the detriment of the Vietnamese. Encouraged by the USSR, the new PRC was included in world peace talks, as the PRC came to be seen as the only country that could bring peace to Southeast Asia. As shown above, China made serious efforts to make peace for their own benefits over the Vietnamese. At Geneva, the PRC’s first major international conference, Zhou Enlai made a multitude of political manoeuvres behind the scene, demonstrating China’s new strength politically. Zhou likened the Geneva Conference to a drama, and stressed the idea of presenting “a civilized play” on the international “stage.” Zhou had private negotiations with the President of France, Mendès-France, in an effort to bring the prolonged conflict to an end, a goal of both parties. Zhou’s position was that the PRC was there to “re-establish peace, not to back the Viet Minh.” This is further evidence of the PRC actively working in its own interest, sacrificing those of the DRVN. The secret talks angered Pham Van Dong, who, at the end of the Conference, privately stated Zhou “double-crossed” them. Actively working against Ho Chi Minh’s desires behind his back and the partition was a source of much contention, and a huge example of negative impact of Chinese diplomacy on the development of Vietnam.

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24 Ibid.
25 Zhai, 54.
26 Ibid.
27 Cheng Hua, Zhou Enlai he tade mishumen (Beijing: Zhongguo guangbo dianshi chubanshe, 1992), 244.
28 Asselin (2010), 165.
29 Zhai, 50.
31 Karnow 201.
32 Karnow 204.
At the same time, Hanoi was not blind to the PRC’s manipulations, and tried to maintain a set of policies with China that benefitted the DRVN most. Ho and his party leaders engaged in a series of political manoeuvres that would both directly and indirectly affect what China did for the DRVN. Although Ho would be reliant on other countries to help fight against the US, he was above all a nationalist, and his party’s aim was to create an independent and unified Vietnam. He would not settle for letting other countries, such as China or the USSR, dictate what he would do. Hanoi’s policies towards the PRC and its affairs generated a large impact on the DRVN’s growth.

First and foremost, Ho Chi Minh was a nationalist, and made every effort he could to unify his country, including trying to manipulate China where possible. When Ho went to Moscow and Beijing to seek support to enforce or a reconvention at Geneva, he was met with less than enthusiastic responses, as both the USSR and PRC were seeking a reduction in Cold War tensions. Bitterly disappointed, Ho made a speech when he returned to Hanoi, warning his audience that “only through self-reliance” could their objectives be completed. The PRC was a major stake holder in Vietnamese affairs, and as such, not acting made a negative impact on the growth of the DRVN by stunting it.

Further, Ho Chi Minh steered a very carefully balanced course in the early days of the Sino-Soviet split. Leaning towards China in the dispute caused China to give far more support, but alternatively leaning on the Soviet Union would cause China to leave him. Ho was not going to have his country solely dependent on one or the other; he manipulated the Sino-Soviet split as much to his advantage as possible. Publicly, he instructed the NLF to praise and embrace the PRC, while silently seek help from the Soviets. Ho Chi Minh realized the extent of reliance the DRVN had on China, and though he sought to keep it under his control, he maximized all the benefits he could from China and the USSR. By catering to the PRC in its diplomatic strategies, the DRVN benefited from Chinese assistance.

Further, although good relations with China were desired, the Vietnamese did not want China to essentially take over again as they had in the past. Ho Chi Minh had grown increasingly suspicious of Chinese intent, given the lack luster international support and reconciliation attempts with the West. Hanoi began a subtle anti-Chinese propaganda campaign, prompting Deng Xiaoping to suggest removing all Chinese troops from the DRVN immediately in 1966. The DRVN knew China had its own interests in mind when it came to reunification of Vietnam, and knew China could not easily be trusted. The talks between the Nixon administration in the 1970s and going back to the Geneva Conference in 1954 is all the DRVN needed to be aware of China’s true feelings. In the early 1970s, Hanoi defied Beijing by pursuing its own secret talks with Washington, much to the chagrin of the PRC. Pierre Asselin noted that the DRVN did not like the Chinese politically bullying them, “and reminded the Chinese that the PRC had goaded

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33 Duiker, 57.
34 Ibid.
36 Duiker, 58.
37 Ibid.
them into accepting the compromises in the 1954 Geneva Accords, which had cost Hanoi the fruits of its victory at Dien Bien Phu.”

Le Duc Tho, Vietnam Workers’ Party Politburo member and DRV “special envoy” to the Paris peace talks, said “[w]e will always remember the experience of 1954, because both the Soviet Union and China exerted pressure, the outcome became what it became.”

The Hoc Tap, the Lao Dong’s journal, made several criticisms of Chinese politics, including the deification of Mao, the Cultural Revolution, and Mao’s idea of “continuous revolution” in a propaganda bid to win some Soviet support. Chen Jian made the observation that “too intimate a tie created more opportunities for conflict.”

The negative Chinese impact on the DRVN was obviously great enough for the Vietnamese to want to push it back.

The Sino-Soviet Split had a particularly complex affect on the development of the DRVN and Chinese relations. The Sino-Soviet Split was the disintegration of Chinese and Soviet relations in the 1950s. This split came about from a clash in ideologies. The PRC charged the Soviets with “revisionism” of Marxist-Leninist theory, especially after Nikita Khrushchev’s denunciation of Stalin and reconciliation movements with the West. China followed much closer to Leninist ideas, and Mao had a firm belief that the East and West could not live peacefully together unless the West became socialist, and that China would be the vanguard for all socialist revolutions in the world. This split put Hanoi in a huge predicament. On one hand, the USSR could supply a lot of money and technology to the country. On the other hand, the USSR seemed noncommittal and was unwilling to potentially increase tensions with the West. Alternatively, the PRC offered ground troops, and due to geographical location, could easily control any flow of Soviet assistance. However, due to historical Chinese-Vietnamese events, the PRC was not exactly a force that Ho wanted to rely too heavily on. Either way, the Sino-Soviet split had a major impact on the development of Vietnam.

The Sino-Soviet dispute’s first major effect on the DRVN lay in the difficulty of Ho essentially being bullied into choosing sides. As a neighbouring country, China had the ability to hinder any major trade with the USSR, and provide protection in the form of sheer manpower. However, the Chinese were recovering from war with the US in North Korea at this time, and Mao was concerned about getting his new country through his economic and land reforms. The PRC lacked the large expendable funds and advanced technology the Soviet Union possessed.

Both sides pushed Ho; Khrushchev “rebuffed his plea to adopt a conciliatory posture” and Chinese Foreign Minister Chen Yi suggested “Ho was unable to stand up to the Soviets.” By the time the American intervention came around, the split became increasingly difficult for Hanoi to steer a balanced course. Many prominent Lao Dong leaders, including Vo Nguyen Giap, felt that the Soviets could offer far more to help balance the fight in terms of money and technology, particularly anti-aircraft equipment. Ultimately, Hanoi had to choose whichever side was more beneficial for the DRVN at the particular moment. The coercion for Hanoi to pick

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41 Brigham, 59.
43 McGregor, 9.
44 Duiker, 58.
45 Brigham, 59.
sides was critical in the development of Vietnam because poor political plays could have left the DRVN totally deserted; the expert political plays for careful neutrality worked well, though not as well as Ho Chi Minh might have hoped.

The dispute had further implications. The PRC had almost total control of what the Soviet Union could send to the DRVN; even as trading partners, the PRC seriously hindered economic and general trade relations between the USSR and the DRVN due to its geographical position and the risk posed by American interference with nautical operations. The United States was ready to intercept Soviet vessels and had mined Haiphong Harbour, making shipping by naval means unfeasible. China rejected Soviet proposals to help a fraternal, developing Communist country by letting the USSR ship materials by plane, road or sea. China limited Soviet aid to the DRVN by rail, which was less than optimal for both the Soviets and the Vietnamese, and only under the condition that Hanoi viewed this as a “tremendous favour.” The Chinese deliberately stunted the growth of the DRVN by virtually sabotaging Soviet assistance.

As an end result, the Sino-Soviet dispute would ultimately determine what kind of relationship China would have with the Vietnam, leading to a Sino-Vietnamese split in the late 1970s. When Hanoi started to lean towards the Soviet Union for support instead of China, it created a large crack in Sino-Vietnamese relations. When the Treaty of Friendship and Co-operation treaty was signed between Vietnam and the Soviet Union in 1978, the Soviets would have air and naval bases established in Vietnam. The Sino-Soviet split would eventually have China viewing the USSR as its primary enemy instead of America, possibly as early as 1964. As a result, the addition of bases in Vietnam was viewed as a threat. The result was a brief war, where 85 000 Chinese troops crossed the Sino-Vietnamese border while the Vietnamese army was fighting the Chinese aligned Khmer Rouge Cambodia. The skirmish lasted twenty-seven days, and resulted in the Chinese troops withdrawing to China. The Sino-Soviet split contributed to the Sino-Vietnamese split, and even though the PRC arguably “lost” the skirmish, a trail of devastation was left on the country by the Chinese. This would be the climax of negative impact China would have on Vietnam.

When the American intervention in Vietnam deepened in 1965, China continued to play a monumental role in Vietnamese issues, militarily and politically. However, this role was not publicly promoted, although Mao did not attempt to hide his assistance. The PRC stayed virtually behind the scenes, instead pass the blame to the Soviet Union and silently acting as a major deterrent to full-scale American invasions of the DRVN. Despite the PRC being mostly indirect, the impact it had was still enormous. This influence was not entirely unnoticed though, especially by the North Vietnamese or the American administration. Ultimately, China’s impact on Vietnam influenced the outcome of the war.

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46 Zhai, 203.
47 Brigham, 59.
48 McGregor, 4.
50 McGregor, 4.
52 Karnow, 452.
First, Mao publicly supported and encouraged the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) to fight a protracted guerilla war. This is indicative of more Chinese diplomatic manipulation of a beleaguered DRVN. It is also significant, because normally China’s policy was to encourage patience rather than military conflict, demonstrating a new phase of China’s political attitude. Throughout the war, China rejected attempts at peace from Britain, the Soviet Union, and France, and kept pressuring the DRVN to fight.\(^5\) Recently translated documents reveal Mao strongly opposing peace talks and pushing the NVA to fight by exonerating them, and suggesting that negotiating will not get them far, rather, fighting is a better idea. He reminds the DRVN of the help the PRC has committed to them in the past, and pledged his support for the war against America.\(^5\) Mao noted that while negotiations can go on, the DRVN “should not lower its tones”, but raise the tones and be ready for enemy deception.\(^5\) Mao repeats this in 1968, where he said “I am in favour of your policy of fighting while negotiating”, as opposed to just relying on negotiating, and notes that Johnson had once said publicly some agreements cannot be honoured.\(^5\) Mao and Zhou closely monitored the events in the Vietnam War, in accordance to the ultimatum delivered by Zhou to the US. When the Nixon administration took over and Hanoi started to hold secret talks, Beijing was dismayed, and subsequently slowed support.\(^5\) Mao continued to believe that the DRVN’s “main energy should be put on fighting”, despite the DRVN suffering staggering loss of life by 1970.\(^5\) Politically, China supported the DRVN, and the politics of China would cause a strain in the way the US fought the war, giving the DRVN massive military benefits.

Additionally, though the Chinese opted not to publicly assist the DRVN, they did contribute a large number of ground troops and substantial equipment to the NLA. At the onset of the war, Mao was very concerned about the American intervention and what it meant to the PRC. He was willing to help Ho Chi Minh because it “served Mao’s purpose of weakening American influence in Southeast Asia and rolling back Washington’s containment of China.”\(^5\) China supplied up to (approximately) 320 000 soldiers (with a peak of 170 000 in country in 1967), and contributed to the construction of basic infrastructure, such as railroads, roads, and bridges to assist in the war.\(^6\) The PRC was also a major military equipment provider for the DRVN and supplied the NVA with “90,000 rifles and machine guns, 446 pieces of artillery, 21 million bullets, and 76,400 artillery shells.”\(^6\) Mao had a vested interest in seeing the Americans

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\(^{55}\) Ibid.

\(^{56}\) PRC Foreign Ministry, and the Chinese Communist Party Central Documentary Research Office “Mao’s Conversation with Pham Van Dong, 17 November 1968”.


\(^{59}\) Zhai, (1997) 3.

\(^{60}\) Brigham (1999), 412.

defeated, and in 1964 told the chief of staff of the People’s Army of Vietnam, General Van Tien Dung, that “[o]ur two parties and two countries must cooperate and fight the enemy together. Your business is my business and my business is your business. In other words, our two sides must deal with the enemy together without conditions.” China also established a secret coastal route to make easier the shipment of goods and equipment to those fighting in the South. Further, Beijing “operated a costly transportation line through Cambodia to send weapons, munitions, food, and medical supplies” as well as enough weapons for 50,000 soldiers in the North Liberation Front (NLF). Beijing’s positive contribution to the DRVN directly was substantial, and made a significant difference to the war effort.

Further, there was a major change in Beijing’s politics, since a vast majority of the political manoeuvres China made were done to stave off the US from interfering militarily in SEA. The PRC started making more concessions to the DRVN’s pleas for help, and started working much closer with Hanoi after increased American escalation before the war. When the intervention happened and could not be stopped, China made a subtle, but huge impact. The American intervention in Vietnam was the most critical point of the PRC’s impact on the development of Vietnam, because it determined how the Chinese evaluated the US, the USSR, and a reunified Vietnam as threats. China’s intervention in the war was not made public, or promoted in the West, where political rhetoric blamed the Soviet Union. The US was mocked in recently translated documents in their unwillingness to distinguish the Chinese in the war. Mao noted in 1968 that America was afraid or unwilling to publicly acknowledge the help that the Chinese were providing the DRVN. Mao did not fear the US, but knew the US feared China. Mao stated in 1965 that the biggest lesson from fighting America in Korea was that America was not invincible as they like to think. In his speech to the DRVN he said “[t]he Americans can be fought and can be defeated,” clearly demonstrating no fear and encouraging the NVA. The impact of Chinese exoneration was a huge moral boost, and Chinese support was beneficial to the DRVN and detrimental to the American strategy.

As previously mentioned, the Sino-Soviet split had a major effect on the development of Vietnam, this time during the war. Sino-Soviet relations during the American intervention seriously hindered the DRVN’s war effort. Although he pledged assistance to the DRVN, the USSR president Alexei Kosygin attempted to get a peace settlement for the DRVN with the US by going through Beijing. This backfired, prompting Beijing to warn the USSR “not to use the Vietnam issue to bargain with the Americans” and claimed Moscow was just trying to “cut a

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62 Ibid, 503.
63 Ibid, 506.
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid, 503.
67 Ibid.
When asked about Vietnam by the US, the PRC blamed the USSR for the main military stake in Vietnam; Anatoly Dobrynin, a later Soviet Ambassador to the US, reported that Henry Kissinger had approached him after trying to talk to the Chinese. Along with the political roadblocks, China also presented a physical roadblock. The Sino-Soviet dispute affected how China controlled Soviet exports to the DRVN. As a result, China refused most conventional ways of transporting weapons to the DRVN and placed a chokehold of sorts on the exports by allowing only certain goods to go by rail. Beijing played a major diplomatic game that completely broke a potential earlier peace process that could have benefitted the DRVN, and hampered the economic and military aid Kosygin pledged to the DRVN as well.

Last and most importantly, the PRC’s threat of full-scale retaliation to America if they pursued a ground invasion of the DRVN acted as the most powerful deterrent in the war. Here, the precedent set by the Korean War is fully realized. Just as the Soviet Union had its buffer zone with the countries in the Warsaw Pact, China made its own buffer zones out of North Korea and the DRVN. Although Beijing’s official public position was to avoid direct confrontation, the Chinese would not back down from a fight with the Americans again. Zhou Enlai wanted to make it perfectly clear what the PRC’s intention was when it came to attacks on the DRVN. He gave a four point message to the president of Tanzania to deliver to the US. These four points were:

1) China will not take the initiative to provoke a war with the United States. (2) The Chinese mean what they say. In other words, if any country in Asia, Africa, or elsewhere meets with aggression by the imperialists headed by the United States, the Chinese government and people will definitely give it support and assistance. Should such just action bring on American aggression against China, we will unhesitatingly rise in resistance and fight to the end. (3) China is prepared. Should the United States impose a war on China, it can be said with certainty, that, once in China, the United States will not be able to pull out, however many men it may send over and whatever weapons it may use, nuclear weapons included. (4) Once the war breaks out, it will have no boundaries. If the United States bombards China, China will not sit there waiting to die. If they come from the sky, we will fight back on the ground. Bombing means war. The war cannot have boundaries.

This was the most serious warning sent to the US government, and is one of the most important aspects of the war in Vietnam that cannot be overlooked. Post military strategists who analyze the war trying to figure out how it could have been won cannot overlook the threat of China. The message the Chinese sent forced the Americans, in the early stages of the war anyway, to be extremely careful in tactics and bombing campaigns, otherwise a potential World War Three could ensue. This threat ultimately influenced how the war in Vietnam was fought, and truly constrained the US. President Lyndon Johnson had to conduct the war in an extremely controlled and exact manner, and Hanoi knew that China was its biggest weapon. Historian John Garver asserts “[b]y helping to induce Washington to adopt this particular strategy, Beijing contributed substantially to Hanoi’s eventual victory over the United States.”

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71 Zhai (2008), 504.
73 Karnow, 323.
forced to respect the boundaries that China set. Here, China made the greatest impact on the
development of a reunified Vietnam, by influencing how the war itself was fought and arguably
ultimately changing the outcome of what was supposed to be an easy war.

The People’s Republic of China played a complicated, but major role in the development
of Communist Vietnam, for both positive and negative results. First, the birth of the PRC shifted
the balance of power in the world. Additionally, China’s foreign policy and diplomatic strategy
had a major impact on the development of the DRVN. Furthermore, Hanoi’s own political
decisions with China had a major impact on its growth. Moreover, diplomatic strategies during
the Sino-Soviet dispute had a major impact on the DRVN. Finally, Chinese involvement in the
American intervention had huge consequences. China’s influence on Vietnam has been heavy
throughout the two country’s histories, and continues to today. Although China’s growth as a
world super power has been downplayed in favour of Soviet/US relations, it is important not to
underestimate China’s influence worldwide and current strength. The PRC is only getting bigger,
and its role in world politics will only have deeper effects. It would be wise to learn its political
and military history in the lens of Vietnam.
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