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EXPLAINING THE SINO-VIETNAMESE ALLIANCE AND CONFLICTS FROM 1950-1979

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Abstract
Since the end of the World War II, China and Vietnam had been “brotherly comrades,” yet they went to war in 1979. This paper argues that fluctuations in the Sino-Vietnamese relationship around the Vietnam War occurred largely as a result of converging and diverging core national interests of China and Vietnam. Chinese foreign policy, particularly toward Vietnam, was principally driven by security interests. During the first two Vietnam Wars, the presence of the capitalist powers, especially the United States, in Vietnam directly threatened China’s territorial security. Therefore, China actively collaborated with North Vietnam to fight against the so-called “containment” policy. However, mutual distrust and conflicting post-war ambitions in Indochina fueled tensions between the two countries, leading to the Sino-Vietnamese War in 1979.

Introduction and Argument
The Vietnam War (1955-1975) was one of the proxy conflicts during the Cold War era. It was fought officially between North Vietnam, with support from the Soviet Union (USSR) and the People’s Republic of China (PRC), and South Vietnam, with support from the United States. The war ended on April 30th 1975, when North Vietnam’s troops successfully toppled the Southern government and unified the whole country.

In the United States, the war is often perceived as a war of ideology, in which the U.S., representing capitalism, fought to prevent the spread of the communist movement. In Vietnam, the war is largely portrayed as a war for independence and liberation. Recently opened Chinese archives shed new light on the vital yet previously undermined role of China’s aid in the success of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). Drawing on these sources, a new generation of scholars argue that China’s extensive material and military support played a crucial role in the escalation and results of the war. However, after the Vietnam War ended in 1975, the alliance once claimed “between brotherly comrades” quickly deteriorated and finally collapsed in 1979, when China and Vietnam fell into an armed border conflict.

This paper will focus on the question: Given that China and Vietnam had worked closely together since the end of the Second World War, why did China and Vietnam go to war in 1979? My argument is that fluctuations in the Sino-Vietnamese relationship around the Vietnam War occurred largely as a result of converging and diverging core national interests of China and Vietnam. Chinese foreign policy, particularly toward Vietnam, was principally driven by security interests. When China and Vietnam shared the same goal, we saw close collaboration between two countries. When their priorities conflicted, Sino-Vietnamese relations experienced high tensions.

During the Cold War, China and Vietnam both considered the U.S. as a direct threat to their national security; thus, China strongly supported North Vietnam’s struggle against American imperialist forces in the south. However, after the Sino-Soviet split in 1960, China increasingly viewed the Soviet Union as a more prominent threat and the U.S. as a possible ally to counterbalance the USSR. The North Vietnamese government worried that China’s interest in

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1 The government of North Vietnam from 1945-1976, to be contrasted with the Republic of Vietnam government led by Ngo Dinh Diem in the south. In 1976, the two parts unified into the Socialist Republic of Vietnam or Vietnam in short today.
reconciling Sino-American relations would hamper their military struggle in South Vietnam, as had once happened before at the Geneva Conference in 1954, when China, for the sake of avoiding a confrontation with the U.S., pressured Vietnam to make major concessions. On the other hand, China was displeased to see Vietnam leaning toward the Soviet Union side in the Sino-Soviet split, worrying that Soviet influence in Vietnam would serve to contain China in the future.

In addition, postwar Sino-Vietnamese relations were quickly characterized by mutual distrust. Vietnam had historically doubted China’s invasion intention. China’s increasing support for the anti-Vietnam regime in Cambodia directly conflicted with Vietnam’s goal of establishing a hegemony in Indochina. This issue, combined with an immigration crisis of the Chinese ethnic group in Vietnam back to China in 1978, fueled anger between the two countries. Eventually, in 1979, China attacked the Vietnamese northern border, starting the Sino-Vietnamese war.
Historical background

Chinese late imperial history has greatly suffered from aggressive Western imperialism. Before the Industrial Revolution took place, China was one of the most powerful and wealthy countries in the world thanks to its highly demanded tea, silk, and porcelain goods. However, in 1842, after a series of conflicts over the illegal opium trade called the First Opium War (1839-1842), Qing China was decisively defeated by Britain, opening an era of foreign “spheres of influence,” when foreign powers such as Britain, France, Germany, Russia, and later Japan sought to informally control different parts of China. After the collapse of the Qing Dynasty in 1911, the Nationalist Party (Guomindang or GMD) rose to establish the Republic of China. However, the Republic failed to effectively control all of China and resist Japanese aggression, and quickly fell into competition with the emerging Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the early 1900s. After the Japanese surrendered in 1945, the two parties plunged into a civil war, and the CCP, under Mao Zedong, successfully seized power to create the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and pushed its opponent to Taiwan in 1949. Mao and his communist party’s ultimate goals were not only to lift China out of poverty, warlordism, and imperialist problems, but also to revive China’s greatness in Asia. National liberation and anti-imperialism were seen as the key to this mission.

Mao believed that Taiwan, Korea, and Indochina were three fronts vulnerable to imperialist incursion during the Cold War. The capitalist U.S., who not only had backed the GMD government in Taiwan, but also advanced its troops deep into China’s neighbor, communist North Korea, was perceived as the principal threat to China’s security. In October 1950, China decided to intervene in the Korean War (1950-1953) and fought a brutal war with the United States, causing the division of what are today North Korea and South Korea. In that context, the third front, Vietnam, which directly bordered southern Chinese provinces, came to be one of China’s strategic points in the struggle against imperialism. Much like in Korea, any direct imperialist expansion into Vietnam could pose an immediate security threat to China. Mao had sufficient reason to support the struggle of North Vietnamese government before and during the Vietnam War to protect China from containment.

Vietnamese modern history was similar to its Chinese counterpart in many ways. Even though Vietnam was formerly a part of China’s tributary system, Vietnamese imperialist rulers had historically also exercised hegemony over neighboring Laos and Cambodia. In 1887, Vietnam was taken and colonized by France, and in 1941, when Japanese aggression expanded toward Indochina, Vietnam was effectively under the control of both France and Japan. Several struggles for national independence emerged during this span of time, out of which came the creation of the Indochina Communist Party (ICP) led by several Vietnamese revolutionists, including Ho Chi Minh. At the end of World War II, when both Japanese and French troops in Vietnam were relatively weak, the ICP seized the chance to rise up and create the government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, whose headquarters was in the north. Like the CCP, the ICP also sought to free its country from imperialism and to re-establish their past hegemonic power in Indochina.

However, after winning the second global war, French troops were deployed in Vietnam with the ambition of restoring their colonial control over Indochina, pushing the DRV to seek support from the Soviet Union and China. The First Indochina War between Hanoi and Versailles lasted nine years and ended with the Geneva Accords of 1954, in which North

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5 Ibid., 20.
Vietnam and South Vietnam agreed on a temporary demarcation line in the 17th parallel until a national election could be held two years later; major powers agreed to withdraw their troops from or not to deploy troops to Vietnam. However, the United States, committed to its anti-communist campaign, had agreed to support the South Vietnamese government, who later refused to follow the Geneva agreements. North-South struggle resumed to become the Vietnam War (1954-1975). The DRV leadership viewed the U.S. and its extensive military support to the South Vietnamese government as a major threat to their national security. Vietnam, once again, turned to the Soviet Union and China for help.

In short, from the 1950s to the early 1970s, both China and Vietnam, with similar yet conflicting motives, viewed the U.S. as an urgent and major threat to their national security. As we will see, this served as a principal driving force for the Sino-Vietnamese alliance from 1954 through 1960s but also provided a source of disputes after war, as the two countries have very different ideal approaches for their own interests.
Explaining collaboration

1. From 1950 to 1954: The First Indochina War and the peace settlement

In early 1950s’, after the Chinese Revolution, Beijing agreed to support Hanoi in its struggle against French invasion. Being the first to recognize the DRV’s legitimate rule in Vietnam, the CCP also dispatched a group of military experts called the Chinese Military Advisor Group to Vietnam with the mission to advise and train Viet Minh army commanders, along with a generous provision of non-military goods and the promise that China would “do its best” to satisfy Vietnamese military needs.

There are a number of explanations for China’s eager support of the Vietnamese independence movement. First, Mao perceived the Vietnam issue to directly affect the heart of China’s national security. Defeating the French in North Vietnam would immediately fortify Chinese southern border. Furthermore, a friendly relationship with the DRV could guarantee that China’s concern about the remaining GMD forces hiding in Vietnam would be resolved. Second, China’s active role in Indochinese independence movements served as a stepping stone for China to transform its image and identity as the leader of liberation struggles in “intermediate zone” countries. The success of the Vietnamese struggle, along with that of the Chinese Revolution, would prove the Chinese model of national liberation for underdeveloped countries around the world. These aspirations therefore shaped China’s foreign policy toward Vietnam until the late 1960s.

In 1954, the Geneva Conference took place to discuss the future of Korean and Indochinese issues with the participation of France, the DRV, the USSR, the PRC, the U.S., and the U.K.. At this point, the war between France and the DRV had been prolonged for nine years, and the Battle of Dien Bien Phu resulted in a decisive defeat of France. Both sides sought to agree on a peace negotiation. China especially played a major role in this first international conference in which it participated.

Having advised the DRV over the course of its revolution, Zhou Enlai, the PRC Premier and Foreign Minister, continued to urge DRV leaders to temporarily relinquish their national unification goal in exchange for a peace settlement and the withdrawal of French troops in Vietnam. After the Korean War, China had no desire to plunge in another direct confrontation with the U.S.. The CCP in the second half of the 1950s wanted to focus on recovering its domestic economy and the First Five Year Plan (1953-1957) to rapidly industrialize China. Mao did not mean to totally abandon the liberation struggle in Vietnam; instead, he believed that temporary peace would provide no excuse for the U.S. to carry out its imperialist campaign in Indochina, and thus, would give the CCP and the DRV time to consolidate power before re-engaging in the struggle.

To prepare for the Geneva Conference, on March 2nd 1954, Zhou Enlai directed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to draft the “Preliminary Opinions on the Assessment of and Preparation for the Geneva Conference,” in which Zhou discussed the importance of negotiating

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6 The army of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.
7 Qiang Zhai, China, 15-19.
8 Jian Chen, Mao’s China and the Cold War (University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 5. Mao theorized that between the U.S. and the USSR campaigns, there was an “intermediate zone” of several non-Western oppressed countries including China, and the U.S. had to control this zone to attack the USSR. Jian 5.
9 Qiang Zhai, China, 20-24.
10 Ibid., 50-54. See also William J. Duiker, China and Vietnam: the roots of conflict (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1987), 8-34.
with the West and using differences among the U.S., France, and Britain to push for peace settlements in Korea and Indochina. He stressed that China should “strive for some agreements, even agreements only temporary [in nature] and limited [in scope]” in order to prevent the U.S.’s “policy of blockade, embargo, and expanding armaments and war preparations.” The document contended that the strategy of “negotiating while fighting” would intensify French internal affairs as well as deepen Franco-American differences, which would benefit the liberation struggle in Indochina. Furthermore, it was noted that a north-south division at the 16th parallel would be the most favorable situation that required extensive negotiation. Thus, to achieve this goal, China should be prepared to discuss other questions such as economic relations, trade, relaxing the international tension, and breaking up U.S.’s blockade and embargo.11

Throughout the Geneva Conference, China presented itself as a peacemaker and endorsed the “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence,” which advocate for (1) mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty, (2) mutual non-aggression, (3) non-interference in each other's internal affairs, (4) equality and mutual benefit, and (5) peaceful co-existence. These principles emerged after a Sino-Indian meeting in 1953, and Chinese leaders claimed that they also applied to current international affairs.12

In June, the Conference reached a gridlock. To come to an agreement and to prevent sabotage by the U.S., Zhou Enlai went so far as to bargain away Vietnam’s support of Pathet Lao’s and Khmer’s communist movements in Laos and Cambodia, respectively. Zhou proposed that the DRV had to withdraw the Viet Minh troops in both countries and recognize their royal governments.13 In his presentation in the Liuzhou Conference held with Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Giap14 on July 3rd-5th, Zhou discussed several crucial questions regarding the future of Indochina. He argued that if no agreement was made, the US would use supporting anti-communist forces in Laos and Cambodia as an excuse to establish a military base in Indochina, which “would not be favorable to [China], and [China] would lose the space of maneuvering as [its] rear and flanks would be exposed to [the enemy's] threats.” Therefore, neutrality in Laos and Cambodia must be promoted; the US would isolate itself in front of the international community if it attempted to sabotage the peace effort. Even though the DRV was not willing to either allow a division of Vietnam or give up its influence in Laos and Cambodia, dependence on China’s support led it to finally give in. 15

Clearly, Zhou’s relentless negotiation with both France and the DRV played a vital part in bringing a peace settlement in Indochina.16 However, his pressure and continuous compromises on the Vietnamese side for the sake of China’s interests had probably also invoked a sense of resentment and doubt among Vietnamese. This seed of dispute would later grow into several other Sino-Vietnamese conflicts, but for the moment, Vietnamese leaders suppressed their doubt in order to maintain the alliance.

13 Qiang Zhai, China, 55-56.
14 The military leader of the North Vietnamese Army, also known as the Viet Minh.
16 Qiang Zhai, China, 63.
2. From 1954 to 1975: Consolidating power and fighting the Vietnam War

After the Geneva Conference, China endorsed peaceful coexistence policy in order to prevent the United States from intervening in Indochina. However, Chinese foreign policy quickly shifted as the U.S. increased its activity in Vietnam, especially throughout 1964-1968. China increased aids to North Vietnam and even prepared for a U.S. strike in mainland China.

Post-Geneva DRV and PRC were still close allies. The DRV was dependent on China’s aids for its unification operation and economic development, while China used the DRV as the means to resist U.S. imperialism, which had grown more threatening with the creation of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization\(^\text{[17]}\) in September, 1954. Thus, China continued to support North Vietnam to reconstruct society and recover the economy. Hanoi received over $600 million aid from China to carry the Chinese development model of land reform, agricultural policy, administrative organization, and army/party members training, emphasizing strong social mobilization and class struggle.\(^\text{[18]}\) The model fueled great popular hostility, especially from the landlords and rich peasants who had sided with the DRV yet were affected. In 1958, the DRV announced that the model was not applicable in Vietnam’s situation.\(^\text{[19]}\)

On the other hand, Mao cautiously advised the DRV leaders to focus on power consolidation in the North rather than resuming war efforts in the South, reasoning that the situation was not ripe for larger operations. A revolution, according to Mao’s model, went through stages. In the first two stages, revolutionary forces would flexibly use a combination of guerrilla and conventional tactics chiefly due to power imbalance. Only in the third stage would the revolutionists gain more power compared to their enemy and be capable of carrying out combat operations to finish opponents off.\(^\text{[20]}\) From Mao’s perspective, because Vietnam had not yet achieved the power prerequisite for the third stage, it should concentrate on building up its economic and military power first.

It was not until 1957-1958 that Mao turned more aggressive in his foreign policies. The U.S.’s increasing military activities in Taiwan, an increase in Sino-Indian tensions over Tibet crisis, and the Soviet refusal to go against its peaceful coexistence policy to support China frustrated Mao. He decided to return to the national liberation emphasis in his policy. By the early 1960s, as the Sino-Soviet dispute grew more apparent, China found itself fighting a two-front war with both Soviet revisionism and American imperialism. With little hesitance, Mao decided to increase support to the DRV, which was not only to keep Vietnam within its orbit in the Sino-Soviet split, but also to prevent the U.S.’s military activities in South Vietnam.\(^\text{[21]}\)

Tension in South Vietnam escalated in 1963 when a Buddhist monk self-immolated himself in Saigon to protest the repressive, Catholic regime of Ngo Dinh Diem.\(^\text{[22]}\) DRV key officials met with the CCP’s leaders to analyze the situation, in which both sides agreed on a

\(^{17}\)An international organization created by the U.S. to block communist spread in Southeast Asia, with the participation of Australia, France, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand, and the UK.


\(^{19}\)Qiang Zhai, *China*, 75-76.


\(^{22}\)The event of monk Thich Quang Duc’s self-immolation happened in the context of Buddhist discontent eruption in protest to Diem’s discriminatory policies in South Vietnam, which had resulted in nine deaths. Images of the incident played an important role in drawing international criticism to Diem’s repressive government with support from the U.S.
common goal of anti-imperialism. After the assassination of Diem in November 1963, Mao agreed to send more military aids and assist the DRV with construction and naval bases in the northeast but not commit combat troops in the south.\footnote{Qiang Zhai, \textit{China}, 120.}

The following few years marked the peak of China’s aid to Vietnam, when the U.S. opened fire in the Gulf of Tonkin in 1964 and crossed the 17th parallel, the demarcation line in Vietnam, in 1965. The growing threat from the United States encirclement worried China, and in response, the PRC increased aids to the DRV. On July 5th-8th, Chinese leaders met with DRV and Pathet Lao to discuss the U.S.’s possible moves. China pledged to intervene and promised that if the U.S. sent troops to North Vietnam, China would do the same.\footnote{Ibid., 131.}

In response to the air strike in the Gulf of Tonkin, China also increased its internal military preparations and instructed Kunming and Guangzhou Military Regions to be ready for combat. Fifteen MIG-17 and MIG-17 jets were sent to Hanoi, and China agreed to not only train Vietnamese pilot, but also to build new airfields along the Sino-Vietnamese border to serve as sanctuaries for Vietnamese pilot fighters.\footnote{Ibid., 132.} On October 5th, Mao Zedong advised Pham Van Dong\footnote{The North Vietnam’s Prime Minister from 1956-1976 and the Prime Minister of Vietnam from 1976-1987; one of Ho Chi Minh’s closest allies and lieutenants.} and Hoang Van Hoang\footnote{A long-standing party member of the DRV, who served as the ambassador to China from 1950-1957, and Vice Chairman of the DRV National Assembly Standing Committee in the 1960s.} to restrict the war within South Vietnam. Mao believed that it was highly unlikely that the U.S. would expand the war to North Vietnam in risk of confronting China, especially because this required the U.S. to mobilize its worldwide scattered troops to Vietnam to engage in an offensive, which at the same time would weaken the U.S.’s presence elsewhere. If it was the case, Mao advised the DRV to construct Korean-war-style defensive works along the coast to protect the interior land while avoiding direct confrontation to preserve main force.\footnote{Discussion between Mao Zedong and Pham Van Dong, October 5, 1964, access November 4, 2017, \url{http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/113053}.}

The U.S. showed signs of choosing this option. In February 1965, American aircrafts advanced beyond the 17th parallel, prompting Vietnam to request more aids from China. On April 8th, Le Duan\footnote{A revolutionary leader from South Vietnam that rose to power in the Communist Party of Vietnam in late 1950s, and was the top decision-maker in the party from 1960s until his death in 1986.} asked Liu Shaoqi for more “volunteer pilots, volunteers soldiers…and other volunteers, including road and bridge engineering units” to restrict U.S. bombing, to defend Hanoi and several crucial transportation lines, and to raise morale of the Vietnamese.\footnote{Discussion between Liu Shaoqi and Le Duan, April 8, 1965, access November 4, 2017, \url{http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/113058}.} While China did not eventually send any pilot volunteers, it did dispatch forces to help operate anti-aircraft guns, build and repair road construction, and construct factories so that the DRV could send more troops to the South. From June 1965 to March 1968, the total number of Chinese troops in Vietnam reached over 320,000. In one agreement between the Chinese Kunming Military Region and Vietnamese North Western Military Region in June 1967, China agreed to send 687 different material items for both military and non-military use.\footnote{Qiang Zhai, \textit{China}, 135.} Simultaneously, China continuously sent deterrent signals against a U.S. invasion of North Vietnam through the
Pakistan and Tanzanian presidents, warning that “Chinese people will not sit idly by and we know how to deal with your aggression,” and that “China will not provoke war with the United States,” but “if the United States bombs China[,] that would mean war and there would be no limits to the war.”

Besides increasing aids to the DRV’s struggle in the south, there were other evidences of China’s sense of insecurity when facing the American northward advancement. For example, on April 25th 1964, the War Department of the People’s Liberation Army General Staff made a report about ways to prevent a surprise attack on China’s economic system. The proposal was quickly approved by Mao, and the CCP instantly launched the defensive Third Front project involving construction of alternative industrial bases in remote provinces to enable production in case of American attacks on Chinese metropolitans. On April 12, 1965 Li Shaoqi chaired a politburo meeting regarding the situation in Vietnam and concluded with a directive, pointing out that the U.S. expansion of war in Vietnam “are seriously threatening the security of our country [...] We are ready at any time to fight together with the Vietnamese people. We must also be prepared to deal with the spread of the war by U.S. imperialism to our territory.”

In summary, American aggression had been the principal force that drove China and Vietnam close together. China supported Vietnam throughout two wars with France and the U.S. chiefly to secure its southern borders from imperialist containment. During the Geneva Conference, China supported a peace agreement to prevent war tensions in Indochina and potentially another direct military confrontation with the U.S.. As the Vietnam War resumed and escalated in 1960s and as the Sino-Soviet relationship deteriorated, China once again increased massive aids and worked closely with the DRV against their common threat: the U.S. China’s aid program continued until throughout the early 1970s, but by then changes in Sino-American and Sino-Soviet relations would also shift Sino-Vietnamese policies.

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32 Ibid., 138.
33 Ibid., 141-142.
34 Ibid., 143-144.
Explaining tension

By 1979, accumulated tension between China and Vietnam erupted as a result of major security concerns, including (1) conflicting priorities in the Geneva Conference, (2) a shift in alliance in the late 1960s, early 1970s, and (3) postwar distrust and competing interests in Cambodia. China’s foreign policies during these disputes were directly shaped by concerns about American imperialism, Soviet revisionism, border security, and competition for influence in Asia. Sino-Vietnamese conflicts had emerged even before the Vietnam War, but only became dominant after the war had ended, when two countries sought to restore their respective power in the region.

1. Chinese interest to keep the U.S. at bay v.s Vietnamese desire of national unification in the Geneva Conference 1954

As I have discussed above, the Geneva Conference in 1954 planted a seed of dispute between the PRC and the DRV. From China’s perspective, it was most important to prevent the United States from having legitimate reasons to intervene in Indochina, which would immediately threaten China’s border security and hamper the spreading influence of the communist campaign in Asia. Vietnam, however, generally prioritized national independence and unification over the bigger operations of global power and ideology. China’s pressure to establish a demarcation line in Vietnam directly conflicted with the DRV’s principal goal in the Geneva Conference and demonstrated that China, as an emerging major power, undermined small countries’ national interests for the sake of its own benefit.35

Vietnam later accused China of using aids to pressure the DRV to accept a negotiated settlement. Between 1951 and 1952, there was evidence that China constrained aids to Vietnam in order to avoid provoking further American involvement. This changed in 1953 and 1954, when China significantly increased support to push for a decisive victory in the Dien Bien Phu battle, which not only prompted France to accept a settlement of war, but also granted Vietnam and the communist side a greater stance on the negotiation table.36

In the White Paper prepared by the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1979, Vietnam also charged Zhou Enlai for conspiring with the West to divide Vietnam. While the accusation was directed at condemning China in the context of Sino-Vietnamese dispute, part of the argument could be justified by looking at the historical complicated relationship between China and Vietnam, in which Vietnam used to be a part of the imperialist Chinese tributary system for a thousand years. While the Vietnamese ruling class frequently accepted China’s superiority and influence, Vietnam often quickly and stubbornly resisted whenever Chinese attempted to re-establish ruling relations. Vietnam’s historical suspicion of China’s ambition in Indochina might have been rekindled in the Geneva Conference.37

Zhou Enlai’s active pressure on the DRV leaders to make concessions might have displeased the DRV leaders as well. Not only was China willing to compromise a demarcation line in Vietnam, which directly conflicted with the DRV’s top priority, but it was also ready to give up Vietnam’s influence in Laos and Cambodia. The telegram that Zhou Enlai sent to Mao Zedong, Liu Shaoqi, and the CCP Central Committee in June 19th demonstrated that the Vietnamese Workers Party38 Central Committee was stubborn to follow China’s agenda.

35 Ibid., 49-63. See also William Duiker, China and Vietnam, 8-34.
36 William Duiker, China and Vietnam, 8-34.
37 Ibid., 8-34.
38 The communist party that controlled the DRV until 1875.
According to Zhou, the VWP had failed to touch important points and was not prepared to make concessions on Laos and Cambodia, which would hinder negotiation progress and China’s long-term interests. The telegram acutely pointed out that the new French administration under Mendes France was determined to terminate the Indochina War, and a ceasefire would further distance France from the United States. Zhou contended that it was important for the DRV to halt its influence in Laos and Cambodia, and asked the Chinese Central Committee to set up a personal meeting between Zhou and the VWP top leaders to discuss the situation. Even though both countries held the same interest against imperialism, and even though China’s continuous urge for a concession of DRV’s national interests was successful, it created a crack in the Sino-Vietnamese relationship. The DRV leaders learned that China would undermine Vietnam’s objectives in the pursuit of its own interests.

2. From 1960 to 1975: Shifts in alliance in response to the Soviet and American threats

2.1. Vietnam in the Sino-Soviet split

Since the late 1950s, the Sino-Soviet relationship had been deteriorating. On October 2nd 1959, Khrushchev met with Mao Zedong and the CCP Central Committee to discuss current situations in Tibet, India, Indochina, and Taiwan. Throughout the conversation, Khrushchev promoted concessions in Taiwan with the U.S. to avoid war, sided with India in the Sino-Indian dispute, and only agreed with Mao that the Vietnam War should not be expanded to Laos, which might trigger further American involvement. Mao was clearly displeased with the lack of support from the Soviet Union.

As the Sino-Soviet discords became more apparent, China increasingly viewed the Soviet Union as a more prominent threat. In the competition between the two communist parties, the CCP sought to persuade Vietnam to side with China. Besides responding to the U.S. threat in South Vietnam, China’s decision to increase aids in the Vietnam War was also to keep the DRV within its orbit. Especially in the early 1960s, when Khrushchev showed little sign that he wanted to support the Vietnamese struggle in pursuit of easing tensions with the U.S., Vietnam had no choice but to depend on China. However, the new Soviet government under Alexei Kosygin in 1964 changed its view and reached out to offer aids to North Vietnam. China, in response, refused to allow Soviet troops to cross Chinese mainland to Vietnam and criticized Soviet aids transportation, reasoning that the Soviet Union was plotting an invasion of China under the cover of aiding Vietnam, especially because Soviet weaponry sent to Vietnam was too modern for Vietnamese troops’ skills at the time, and because the Soviet Union unilaterally sent troops without discussion with either China or Vietnam beforehand. A Vietnamese source in 1979 indicated that in the mid-1960s, China proposed a billion yuan of aid if the DRV rejected all Soviet help. On November 10th 1966, the Soviet ambassador Ilya Shcherbakov noted that Ho Chi Minh promised China not to talk with the U.S. or request volunteers from other socialist

41 Qiang Zhai, China, 122-129.
countries before consulting with China beforehand in exchange for 700 million yuan of military and nonmilitary aid.\textsuperscript{44}

From 1965, China also explicitly rejected peace talk between Vietnam and the U.S. promoted by the Soviet Union and continuously discredited the USSR to the DRV. This policy fulfilled two objectives: (1) to drain the U.S. of resources so it could hardly interfere elsewhere in the world, and (2) to limit the Soviet influence in Indochina, for China feared being left out in the negotiation while the USSR and the US collaborated to reach a settlement in Vietnam.\textsuperscript{45} China seized every chance to condemn and charge the Soviet Union of using Vietnam as a bargain coin in its negotiation with the U.S.. For example, in the \textit{Report on Meetings with Party Leaders of Eight Socialist Countries} on February 27\textsuperscript{th}, Vietnamese delegate Le Thanh Nghi noted Chinese efforts to create dispute in Soviet-Vietnamese relations. Zhou Enlai criticized the Soviet Union for insincerity in aiding Vietnam because they “gave Indonesia 800 million dollars, they gave India 900 million rubles, and they gave Egypt 1.2 billion rubles. Vietnam is on the front line, but the Soviet Union gives it less, and that is so that Vietnam will not be able to fight big battles, so that it will not be able to start a war.” Zhou went on to claim that the USSR persuaded Vietnam to ceasefire in the U.S.’s favor and to eventually advise a “firm, resolute attitude” over “agreements with the U.S.”\textsuperscript{46} On the same day, Chinese diplomat Liu Xiao made an oral statement, explaining that China believed an international conference on Indochina matter would make communist countries look weaker and encourage American imperialism; instead, it was important to compel the U.S. to strictly adhere to the Geneva Agreements and withdraw all troops in Indochina.\textsuperscript{47} These lines appeared in several other Chinese messages or statements throughout 1965.

Nevertheless, the DRV leadership frequently adopted a neutral stance and even showed signs of veering away from Mao’s model. On July 9\textsuperscript{th} 1966, notes on a conversation with Sverev, the First Secretary of the Soviet Embassy in Hanoi pointed out that Hanoi’s propaganda shifted to emphasize unity in the communist camp and the anti-”modern revisionism” blocs in the VWP had potentially been purged. Furthermore, the document recorded that Hanoi had stopped publishing new Chinese literature after 1965, and appeared to suspect the validity of China’s claims against the U.S., China meanwhile restrained its forces and reduced aids to the DRV to only food. Both sides, as noted, also had increasing conflicts over the fundamental question of negotiation with the U.S., for China supported a prolonged and even expanded war in Vietnam, whereas the DRV desired to prevent an expansion. Finally, the document noted a cooling Sino-Vietnamese relationship, and claimed that the DRV took a divergent path from Mao’s ideology.\textsuperscript{48} Indeed, in November, Le Duan told Mao that the DRV, like any other country, had to follow its own economic policy, using the example that the German Democratic Republic had

\textsuperscript{44} Note on a Talk with the Soviet Ambassador, Comrade [Ilya] Shcherbakov, on 28 October 1966 in the Soviet Embassy in Hanoi, November 10, 1966, access November 4, 2017, \url{http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/117732}.

\textsuperscript{45} Qiang Zhai, \textit{China}, 157-174.


\textsuperscript{48} Note on a Conversation with the First Secretary of the Soviet Embassy, Comrade Sverev, on 8 July 1966 from 11:00 a.m. to 12:40 p.m. at the Soviet Embassy in Hanoi, July 09, 1966, access November 4, 2017, \url{http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/117734}. 
independently constructed the Berlin Wall to protect its economy from West German imperialism. He also expressed disapproval of “revisionism,” which he stated would not long be a problem anyways in the Soviet Union. Later in 1979, Le Duan reflected on the Sino-Vietnamese relationship during the 1960s and charged China of dividing the socialist camp and “forbidding [Vietnam] from going with the USSR’s [side] any longer.” Vietnam, according to him, struggled to balance between China and the USSR because of its reliance on China’s assistance.

2.2. Vietnam and the Sino-American rapprochement

In 1969, Mao readjusted China’s foreign policies in response to increasing Soviet threat and American friendliness. The Soviet Union’s deployment of troops to Siberia and Outer Mongolia was perceived as a substantial threat to China’s security. On the other hand, Nixon’s decision to withdraw 25,000 troops in Vietnam and terminate the travel ban in China as well as the patrols of the Seventeenth Fleet in the Taiwan Strait signaled a desire for an improvement in Sino-American relations. The CCP started to consider using the U.S. to counter the Soviet Union, and in 1969, China signaled willingness to mend the relationship.

Even though Beijing did not immediately make substantial improvements in Sino-American relations, in 1970 and 1971, China clearly changed its attitude toward encouraging a peace talk to end the Vietnam War. Nixon’s visit in Beijing was scheduled to be in February of 1972, right before North Vietnam was to launch the Easter Offensive. From the end of December 1972 throughout 1973, Zhou Enlai frequently encouraged the VWP senior officials to cease fire and conduct a peace talk with the U.S., reasoning that North Vietnam should take time to consolidate power and build their forces, preparing for a protracted struggle. To reassure their Vietnamese allies, the CCP increased weapon aids in 1971 and informed the VWP that China had refused Kissinger’s proposal to pressure Vietnam to negotiation in July 1971; China’s willingness to improve Sino-American relations did not mean Mao was ready to push Vietnam toward the Soviet camp in the Sino-Soviet race.

Vietnam, however, considered the rapprochement “betrayal,” in historian William Duiker’s words. The DRV believed that China’s moves severely undermined their interests for the sake of Chinese benefits, similar to what had happened in the Geneva Conference in 1954. China’s open policy would weaken the Vietnamese plan to condemn the U.S. and raise international support for North Vietnam. Even worse, the alliance between Vietnam’s current enemy, the U.S., and Vietnam’s past conqueror, China, might have fueled doubts among Vietnamese leadership that Beijing and Washington would collaborate to divide up and take over Vietnam.

As Sino-Vietnamese relations inescapably deteriorated during the remaining years of the decade, Vietnam’s distrust of China increased, and conflicts during and after the war became

50 Speech, Comrade B on the Plot of the Reactionary Chinese Clique Against Vietnam.
51 Richard Nixon was the U.S. president from January 1969 to August 1974.
52 Qiang Zhai, China, 181-182.
53 Ibid., 193-197.
54 William Duiker, China and Vietnam, 59.
55 Qiang Zhai, China, 193-202.
more visible. In September 1975, the Deputy Premier Deng Xiaoping, confronted Le Duan about a Vietnamese newspaper that implied China as the threat from the North. Deng recounted a meeting with Ho Chi Minh, in which Ho accused Chinese troops in the border of threatening Vietnam. Deng’s accusation was not totally unjustified. Vietnam’s wariness of China re-emerged in the Geneva Conference and had been kept at bay when the two countries were close allies, but was not invisible. For example, in 1966, Deng had once angrily charged that North Vietnam suspected China for “over-enthusiasm,” pointing to Vietnam’s mistreatment of Chinese troops and Vietnam local officials’ declination to provide Chinese ships a hiding place from American planes in Vietnam. Later in the same year, Zhou Enlai criticized a Vietnamese press revoking Chinese aggression toward Vietnam in the past to Pham Van Dong.

During the war, the North Vietnamese leadership, namely Le Duan and Pham Van Dong, always expressed total trust in China; yet, after 1975, their attitude drastically shifted. In 1979, in the midst of the heating Sino-Vietnamese conflict, Le Duan delivered a speech, accusing China of plotting to invade Vietnam. The speech started off with charging Zhou Enlai of dividing Vietnam into two parts in the Geneva Conference. Le Duan claimed that Chinese principal goals when sending troops to build roads in Vietnam were not to support the Vietnamese struggle but to investigate Vietnam’s situation, which would serve its later invasion of Vietnam and Southeast Asia. Furthermore, the speech claimed that China did not sincerely help Vietnam in the Vietnam War, but instead conspired with the U.S. to invade Vietnam. Therefore, the speech contended, China opposed Vietnam’s negotiation with the U.S. which was in Vietnam’s favor, and later supported a peace talk to facilitate American withdrawal from South Vietnam. The speech reflected top Vietnamese leaders’ anti-China views in the wake of the 1979 crisis.

In summary, Vietnam’s leaning toward the Soviet Union and China’s reconciliation with the United States fuels a sense of insecurity and mutual distrust between both sides. Vietnam viewed the Soviet Union as a potential supporter and strived to take a neutral position in the Sino-Soviet split, whereas China increasingly believed that the USSR wanted to pursue a “containment” of China. On one hand, as Beijing growingly showed signs to improve relations with Washington while Hanoi was in a desperate struggle, Hanoi felt more threatened that it may be abandoned, and China and the U.S. would ally together to crush the Vietnamese liberation movement. On the other hand, China saw the imperialist threat less concerning than the revisionist one. The U.S. became a more agreeable potential ally to balance against the Soviet Union. Thus, China was displeased that Vietnam veered away from China and leaned toward the Soviet camp for support. As the alliance changed, Sino-Vietnamese attitudes also shifted to opposite poles.

3. 1975 onward: the Cambodian question and sea territorial disputes

Sino-Vietnamese relations in the post-Vietnam-War era was characterized with not only intense mutual distrust as described above, but also rivalry for influence, because both countries desired to rejuvenate and expand their pre-colonization power in the region - China wanted to revitalize its dominant role in Asia, and Vietnam its hegemony in Indochina. While Laos quickly subordinated to Vietnam, the anti-Vietnamese Cambodian authority fiercely resisted. As China increasingly saw Vietnam as an ungrateful Soviet ally, harming its interest in advancing to be the leader in Asia, its support shifted from Vietnam to Cambodia in order to counterweight Vietnamese ambition in Indochina. As rivalry in Cambodia escalated in 1979, Chinese troops crossed northern Vietnamese border to punish Vietnam’s aggression toward Cambodia, making the Sino-Vietnamese War.

The Cambodian issue was a complex question. During the 1950s and 1960s, both China and Vietnam, still allies, sought to maintain good relations with the Khmer Sihanouk regime, who was willing to use American aids to maintain political neutrality. Although this decision was frequently criticized by China, Cambodia remained an important ally in the Sino-Vietnamese campaign against the United States. China was chiefly concerned about the possibilities of the Khmer regime falling in American camps if the Vietnam War was expanded to Cambodia, harming the outcome of the war itself. Furthermore, the neutral Sihanouk was a potential buffer against Vietnam’s future predominance in the region. For the DRV, the Sihanouk regime was also useful, since the eastern territories of Cambodia served as sanctuary for the revolution in the south.

Vietnam, however, had more ambitions in Cambodia. Over the span of history, Vietnam had long considered Cambodia to be a part of the Vietnamese hegemony. In early years of the Cold War, the communist Kampuchean People’s Revolutionary Party (KPRP) was largely supported by the ICP. During the Vietnam War, the VWP restrained the KPRP from carrying out armed struggles against the Phnom Penh regime, chiefly to preserve Cambodia’s assistance in the war and to prevent the U.S. from expanding the war to Cambodia. Like China in the Geneva Conference of 1954, the DRV had prioritized its national interests over those of its smaller ally. Consequently, a dissident faction that distrusted Hanoi’s long-term intention in Cambodia emerged in the KPRP. In 1968, this faction, led by Pol Pot, successfully toppled the pro-Hanoi leadership and reorganized the KPRP to the Kampuchea Communist Party.

In 1970, an increase in Vietnam’s presence in Cambodia concerned Sihanouk and led him to seek assistance from western power. While Sihanouk was in France, the rightist, pro-U.S. group of General Lon Nol staged a coup and took power. Immediately after that, Lon Nol ordered withdrawal of all Vietnamese troops in Cambodia, posing a challenge to the DRV’s liberation efforts. With China’s coordination and monitoring, the DRV and Sihanouk cooperated to lead an anti-Lon Nol campaign and counter the anti-Vietnam factions in Cambodia. Vietnam, however, could not ignore the increasing presence of China in its perceived subordinated region.

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62 Ibid.
63 Ibid.
In 1975, as the leftist, anti-Vietnam forces of Pol Pot successfully seized power in Cambodia, Cambodia immediately took on territorial conflicts with Vietnam over the Wai Island and the Gulf of Thailand. One reason for Pol Pot’s bold moves was because his forces were blessed with Chinese support. As Sino-Vietnamese relations kept worsening, Beijing declined to provide further support for Vietnam’s reconstruction projects, reasoning that the South Vietnamese regime had left a large number of resources for Hanoi. At the same time, Beijing warmly welcomed the Cambodian deputy premiers and promised $1 billion of aid over five years.64

China’s policies toward Cambodian-Vietnamese conflicts had to take into consideration the Sino-Soviet disputes and the Sino-Vietnamese race for power in postwar Indochina. Since the end of the Vietnam War, the Soviet Union’s presence in Vietnam had significantly increased with materialistic aid and political support. By 1975, Vietnam had departed from China’s orbit to the Soviet’s camp. Le Duan’s visit in Beijing in September did not yield any customary joint communique, while in October, Moscow and Hanoi signed an agreement in which Moscow agreed to provide more than $3 billion assistance for over 400 projects in Vietnam’s Five-Year Plan, and Hanoi publicly declared support of Soviet international positions.65 In 1978, Vietnam announced its participation in the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance led by the Soviet Union. China’s decision to support the Pol Pot regime and cut assistance to Vietnam was a reaction to Vietnam’s new foreign direction. It served not only to counterbalance Vietnam’s aggressive ambition in Indochina, using Cambodia, but also to prevent the influence of the Soviet Union, especially in China’s southern neighborhood.

The Pol Pot, emboldened with China’s backing, ignored China’s advice to seek a negotiated settlement and pursued radical policies against Vietnam. By the end of 1977, as Vietnam and Cambodia failed to reach an agreement, the Vietnamese government mentioned the possibility of using the rebel leader So Phim to overthrow Pol Pot, because of which, China totally lost all trust in Vietnam’s intention and discussed an increase in military and economic aid to Cambodia within the CCP. This in turn pushed Vietnam to believe that China would commit to support Cambodia and thus resorted to military actions. Both countries were now entrapped in the distrust spiral.66

The Sino-Vietnamese War in 1979 erupted in the context of the Cambodian crisis, along with sea territorial conflicts and the Hoa migration issue that inescapably widened the gap between the CCP and the VWP. The sea territorial dispute over the Spratly and Paracel islands emerged after the Geneva Accords in 1954, but both countries decided to maintain the status quo until after the Vietnam War, when both again claimed to have once discovered and administered these islands. In the first round of negotiation, Vietnam desired to keep the boundary set by the Sino-French agreement in 1887, while China denied that such terms were included in the agreement. Negotiation reached deadlock, and border clash continued to intensify. The mass immigration of the Vietnamese-citizenship-held Hoa people67 in Vietnam back to Chinese territories through land triggered another round of denouncement exchange, in which China accused Vietnam of harassments, mistreatment, and discriminatory policies to Hoa people to whom Vietnam had promised to treat nicely; in addition, among 140,000 refugees that passed

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64 Qiang Zhai, China, 213.
65 Ibid., 214. See also William Duiker, China and Vietnam, 95-115.
67 The Chinese ethnic group living in Vietnam.
Chinese-Vietnamese border were Vietnam’s spies and “bad elements” to harm China. In response, Vietnam denounced China for arranging pick-up of the Hoa people without negotiating with Vietnam beforehand, as well as nurturing hegemonistic ambitions towards Vietnam; supporting Pol Pot regime was a part of its plan.

By the end of 1978, as So Phim was captured and executed, Hanoi decided to launch an invasion to overthrow Pol Pot’s regime. Vietnam had launched a general offensive at several points along the Vietnamese-Cambodian border; with larger numbers of troops and better technology, Vietnamese forces quickly forced Pol Pot to retreat to the Cardamom Mountains and announced the Vietnamese-friendly Heng Samrin as the new leader of Cambodia, triggering the CCP leadership to take military steps to punish Vietnam. In spring 1979, about 60,000-80,000 Chinese troops, equipped with outdated MiG-17s and MiG-19s, advanced toward northern Vietnam. China had no intention to seize Hanoi; its troops only conducted limited war in border area and, at the most heated point, seized Lang Son city. In Deng Xiaoping’s word, the Sino-Vietnamese war in 1979 was “to teach Vietnam a lesson.” Though it was seen as a failure because it neither dealt major damage to Vietnam nor halted Vietnamese operation in Cambodia, the war marked the official end of the Sino-Vietnamese alliance.

In summary, the Sino-Vietnamese war in 1979 erupted due to China’s and Vietnam’s conflicting security interests on several fronts, including Cambodia, sea territory, and the Hoa mass immigration. In the case of Cambodia, China sought to counterbalance Vietnam’s expansion of hegemony as Vietnam was increasingly seen less as an ally and more as an enemy from the Soviet side. In the other two cases, China’s security and power were directly called into question. The contest in the sea continued to be a heated matter until today, as China claimed ownership of a vast area of sea within the Nine-Dash Line, including territories claimed by Brunei, Taiwan, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam. The mass movement of the Hoa people suggested an issue of discrimination and distrust between China and Vietnam, which had long existed for a thousand years. China’s ambition to restore its hegemonic role in Asia directly clashed with Vietnam’s desire to be not only independent but also predominant in Indochina. With a shift in alliance and their begone common enemy, the United States, China and Vietnam plunged into conflicts for territory and power.


70 William Duiker, China and Vietnam, 95-115.

71 Qiang Zhai, China, 214.
Conclusion

Since the end of the Second World War until 1979, Sino-Vietnamese relations had experienced fluctuations, which were mainly driven by their similar or conflicting principal security goals. The Chinese Communist Party, under Mao Zedong’s and later Deng Xiaoping’s leadership, was committed to rejuvenate China’s historically dominant power in the world. The key to this mission was the struggle against imperialism, referring to the United States, and later revisionism, referring to the Soviet Union. Likewise, the Communist Party of Vietnam, under Ho Chi Minh’s, Pham Van Dong’s, and Le Duan’s leadership, chiefly desired to restore Vietnam’s independence and influence in Indochina. This could only be achieved through victory against imperial and colonial powers in Vietnam, referring to France and later the United States.

Throughout the two first Indochina Wars, China and Vietnam cooperated against their common enemy, the United States, whose presence in South Vietnam posed a major threat to Chinese and Vietnamese national security and independence. Therefore, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam received massive support from China in its struggle against the United States in the south, especially during the intense and turbulent years of 1964-1968. China’s active role in the Vietnam War served to strengthen China’s southern border, secure Vietnam’s support in the Sino-Soviet crack, and present a new image of China as the safeguard of repressed countries in front of the international community.

Sino-Vietnamese discords were rooted in conflicting interests between two countries and only became more visible and prominent in the 1970s. Due to China’s historical aggression toward Vietnam, Vietnam held a long distrust of China’s intention in intervening in the Vietnam War. This doubt was rekindled during the Geneva Conference in 1954, when China pressured Vietnam to make major concessions over the latter’s own national interests. At the end of the Vietnam War, global alliances shifted; the Soviet Union became a more threatening enemy and the United States a more potential friend to China. China seized every chance to minimize and denounce Soviet assistance for Vietnam. As China grew friendlier with the United States, the DRV was convinced that the Sino-American rapprochement would only harm its struggle against American imperialism in South Vietnam, and thus, gradually moved away from China to the Soviet Union’s orbit. After the Vietnam War, disputes between the two Asian countries erupted as they competed for influence in Cambodia and maritime territories, along with a refugee crisis around Sino-Vietnamese land border. In 1979, China attacked Vietnam as punishment, making the Sino-Vietnamese War.
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