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## Reassessment of Beijing's economic and military aid to Hanoi's War, 1964–75

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### ABSTRACT

Although China's assistance to North Vietnam was substantial, playing a vital role in Hanoi's war against the United States, this policy was made based on Beijing's strategic calculation and ideological conviction rather than on Hanoi's needs. The Chinese leadership attempted to use aid to influence Hanoi's approach to the war, but achieved almost no effect. Instead, Beijing's manipulation made Hanoi suspicious about the Chinese leadership's real intentions in Indochina, and Beijing's effort to help Hanoi against the United States was arguably its biggest, unexpected foreign policy failure in the Cold War.

### KEYWORDS

China's aid to North Vietnam; Mao Zedong; Sino-Vietnamese relations; Vietnam War

On 30 April 1975, North Vietnamese tanks crashed through the Presidential Palace gates in Saigon. Their crews quickly raised a red-and-golden-star flag, ending Hanoi's decades-long war against American, French, and South Vietnamese forces. Though unquestionably a victory brought through their endeavours and great sacrifices, it reflected as well the contributions of others. As historian William J. Duiker concludes: 'It is difficult to imagine Hanoi's stunning victory without the firm support of its fraternal allies.'<sup>1</sup> Military analyst Jeff Record, a student of how the weak can defeat the strong, cautions: 'The weaker side's possession of superior will and strategy is hardly a guarantee of success. Substantial external assistance may be required to convert superior will and strategy into victory.'<sup>2</sup> Existing scholarship makes clear that the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Soviet Union provided ample assistance to North Vietnam from the 1950s to the mid-1970s.<sup>3</sup> Yet, their role remains inadequately studied due to a lack of archival access in both China and Vietnam.

Drawing on Chinese diplomatic sources, especially the documents concerning Beijing's aid to Hanoi, that, to our knowledge, have remained untapped, this article reassesses Beijing's aid to Hanoi from 1964 to 1975. It contends that China's policy to

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<sup>1</sup>William J. Duiker, "Foreword," in *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954–1975*, trans. Merle L. Pribbenow (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), xvi.

<sup>2</sup>Jeffrey Record, "Why the Strong Lose," *Parameters* 35, no. 4 (Winter 2005–2006): 22.

<sup>3</sup>Chen Jian, "China's Involvement in the Vietnam War, 1964–69," *The China Quarterly*, no. 142 (1995): 356–87; Xiaoming Zhang, "The Vietnam War, 1964–1969: A Chinese Perspective," *The Journal of Military History* 60 (1996): 731–62; Zhai Qian, *China & The Vietnam Wars, 1950–1975* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Sarin Oleg and Lev Dvorestsky, *Alien Wars: The Soviet Union's Aggressions Against the World, 1919–1989* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1996), 91.

assist North Vietnam reflected Beijing's strategic calculations rather than simply Hanoi's needs. Chinese official literature (almost always biased), claims wartime aid to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) was generous, enormous, and free from political conditions.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, China blamed Hanoi for 'ingratitude' after Vietnam adopted an anti-China policy in the mid-to-late 1970s. But in reality, Beijing always used its aid to serve China's own strategic interests.

Despite limited access to archives, Chinese scholars have offered insight into China's involvement in the Vietnam War. Li Danhui and Shen Zhihua focus on Sino-Soviet and Sino-American relations and their effects on the relationship between China and North Vietnam during the war, including the role Beijing's aid played in these relationships.<sup>5</sup> Yang Kuisong's studies of the Sino-Vietnamese relationship in the 1950s and 1960s are important, but still fail to address how Beijing's aid to Hanoi shaped China's policy toward Vietnam.<sup>6</sup> Regretfully, in the early 2000s, Beijing authorities again tightened up scholars' access to archives. Consequently, scholars' interest in China's role in the Vietnam War steadily dwindled. Although some continue to study the subject, their inquiries focus more on Sino-American antagonism and détente rather than Beijing's Vietnam policy and its aid to Hanoi.<sup>7</sup>

There are a number of English-language studies on the Vietnam War from non-Western perspectives. Russian historian Ilya V. Gaiduk has written a nuanced account of Soviet policy toward North Vietnam, arguing that Moscow feared for the spread of war beyond Indochina and thus pursued a two-pronged policy. On the one hand, it provided economic and military aid to Hanoi, and, on the other, it secretly made efforts to persuade North Vietnam to negotiate with South Vietnam.<sup>8</sup> Ang Cheng Guan conducted extensive research on Vietnamese, Chinese, and Soviet materials, contending that the Hanoi leadership was firmly in control of its own decision-making and conduct of war throughout the struggle for unification, even though North Vietnam depended on the two communist powers for support.<sup>9</sup> Lien-Hang T. Nguyen's *Hanoi's War* constitutes a trailblazing book that dismisses the traditional view that Ho Chi Minh and General Vo Nguyen Giap played prominent roles in running North Vietnamese war efforts, arguing convincingly that Party First Secretary Le Duan outmanoeuvred domestic dissidents, party rivals, and the communist superpowers, to dictate wartime party policy.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>In a 1963 report, Li Xiannian, vice premier, made it clear: "Our assistance to Vietnam and other countries is sincere with no political conditions attached and is a policy that really helps them to be economically self-reliant." China Social Science Academy and Central Archives, eds., *Selected Economic Archival Materials of the People's Republic of China, 1958–1965, Financial Volume* (Beijing: China Financial and Economic Press, 2011), 119.

<sup>5</sup>For example, see Li Danhui, "Conflict between China and the Soviet Union over the Issue of Assisting Vietnam and Opposing America," *Contemporary China History Studies*, no. 4 (2000): 44–57 and 5 (2000): 24–37; Shen Zhihua and Li Danhui, "Sino-U.S. Rapprochement and China's Diplomacy toward Vietnam, 1971–1973," *The Chinese Journal of American Studies*, no. 1 (2000): 98–116.

<sup>6</sup>Yang Kuisong, "Evolution of New China's Policy from the War of Assisting Vietnam and Opposing France to the Fight for Peace in Indochina," *Social Sciences in China*, no. 1 (2001): 193–204.

<sup>7</sup>Pan Yining, *Sino-American Antagonism in Indochina, 1949–1973: A History of International Relations During the Vietnam War* (Guangzhou: Zhongshan University Press, 2011); Lü Guixia, *Containment and Confrontation: Sino-American Relations During the Vietnam War, 1963–1973* (Beijing: Social Science Press, 2007).

<sup>8</sup>Ilya V. Gaiduk, *The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, Inc., 1996).

<sup>9</sup>Ang Cheng Guan, *The Vietnam War from the Other Side, The Vietnamese Communists' Perspective* (London: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>10</sup>Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

Chinese American scholars Chen Jian, Zhai Qiang, and Zhang Xiaoming enumerate supply of weapons and equipment and the hundreds of thousands of air defence and logistics support troops sent to North Vietnam.<sup>11</sup> Due to limited access to Chinese sources, their studies are necessarily incomplete. Zhang Shuguang argues that the Sino-Soviet split and rivalry over aid to North Vietnam played a major role in shaping Beijing's wartime policy toward Hanoi. Yet, despite his better archival access, his account of events in the late 1960s is incomplete and again misses China's aid to North Vietnam between 1973 and 1975.<sup>12</sup>

Lorenz Lüthi argues that the Chinese leadership confronted a policy dilemma in the early 1970s when it sought détente with the United States. Avoiding being accused of betrayal by Hanoi, Beijing continued to provide 'massive military and economic aid' to North Vietnam and supported Hanoi's pursuit of 'whatever strategy' it chose even if it 'diverged from Beijing's preferences'.<sup>13</sup> Despite China's 'renewed enthusiasm to aid North Vietnam' at the time, Kosal Path points out that Hanoi became increasingly suspicious of Beijing's intentions in Indochina and thus rejected the PRC proposal to send volunteers to help build projects in North Vietnam when President Richard Nixon escalated the war in the spring of 1970.<sup>14</sup>

Our study reveals that China's aid to North Vietnam fluctuated throughout the war, reaching heights in 1965, 1967, 1972, and 1974. These fluctuations reflected changes in Beijing's attitude toward the war. As a result, China periodically reduced or increased its aid to Hanoi. Sino-Soviet, Sino-American, and Sino-Vietnamese relations were the factors that played a significant role in shaping China's aid to Hanoi, which was manipulated by Beijing to serve its own interests. Inconsistency in Beijing's aid to Hanoi made the Vietnamese suspicious about Beijing's real intention to support their war efforts, especially at the time when Hanoi badly needed help. We conclude that, after three decades of supporting North Vietnam with human and material resources, China ultimately turned Vietnam into its own enemy.

### China's response to the coming US war in Vietnam (1964)

From the early 1960s, the PRC regime increasingly turned toward political radicalism. First, Beijing openly condemned the Soviet leadership for having betrayed Marxism and Leninism by degenerating into revisionists. At the Tenth Plenary Session of the Eighth CCP Congress (held in September 1962), Mao declared that China must 'uphold the anti-imperialist banner' to support the armed struggles in South Vietnam and Laos as long as imperialism, reactionary, counterrevolutionary movements, and revisionism existed.<sup>15</sup> Second, Hanoi's resumption of the armed struggle in the South in 1959 provided an opportunity for Mao and other Chinese leaders to pursue their own revolutionary objectives, one they could not pass

<sup>11</sup>Chen, "China's Involvement;" Zhang, "The Vietnam War;" Zhai, *China & The Vietnam Wars*.

<sup>12</sup>Zhang Shu Guang, *Beijing Economic Statecraft during the Cold War, 1949–1991* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press / Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 207–40.

<sup>13</sup>Lorenz M. Lüthi, "Beyond Betrayal: Beijing, Moscow, and the Paris Negotiations, 1971–1973," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 11, no. 1 (2009): 106.

<sup>14</sup>Kosal Path, "Ha Noi's Response to Beijing's Renewed Enthusiasm to Aid North Vietnam, 1970–1972," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 6, no. 3 (2011): 102.

<sup>15</sup>Yang Kuisong, "Mao Zedong and the Indochina War," Li Danhui, ed., *China and the Indochina War* (Hong Kong: Cosmos Books Ltd, 2000), 38.

up. Indeed, Mao believed that not supporting Hanoi's struggle for national unification would both undermine China's international prestige and his personal reputation, both earned by hard-fought resistance to the United States and through aid to North Korea during the Korean War and afterwards. Beijing accordingly embarked on a new strategy simultaneously against both the United States and the Soviet Union.<sup>16</sup>

With increasing US involvement in South Vietnam in 1962, Mao closely followed events in Vietnam. During his meeting with Vo Nguyen Giap, Vietnamese minister of national defense, on 5 October 1962, Mao appeared enthusiastic, believing that the US would not dare to expand the war into North Vietnam. He told the Vietnam general: 'The situation, I see, is good. American imperialism does not readily [invade North Vietnam].' The Chinese leader encouraged Hanoi to continue to fight, predicting (quite correctly, in retrospect) that the United States 'would feel unable to continue the war [in South Vietnam] after five and 10 years of fighting'. Hanoi could then 'ask for a meeting at Geneva and [Americans] would likely have to comprise'. 'There is no hope for the U.S. to send more troops to Southeast Asia.' He assured Giap that China 'will never abandon' Vietnam and that both countries should help each other to defeat the US together.<sup>17</sup>

However, by June 1964, Mao was increasingly pessimistic about the world situation and China's own security following the expansion of US involvement in Vietnam. Believing that China was facing a possible US invasion, he repeatedly emphasised the Third Front construction, a major strategic programme designed to preserve China's industries in the event of an attack on its coastal areas. According to Mao, while focusing on the development of heavy industries in the southwestern and north-western hinterland areas, the provinces along the coast and in the border region should build their own ordnance factories and establish local forces.<sup>18</sup> Beijing also attached greater importance to cooperation between China and North Vietnam in any war against America. On 24 June 1964, Mao met the DRV military delegation headed by General Van Tien Dung, Vietnamese People's Army Chief of Staff, urging the two countries to be increasingly cooperative against their common enemy. He pointed out that each country should deem the problems of the other side as their own problems and the two countries should unconditionally support each other. The Chinese leader also conceded that Hanoi had a heavier burden than Beijing had at the time. He promised that China was ready to provide help. Contemplating that the United States could run the risk of attacking North Vietnam, Mao assured the Vietnamese that 'Chinese forces would cross the border ... as volunteers' to help defend North Vietnam. He further advised North Vietnamese generals that '[t]he more you are not afraid of [the US], the less it will not dare to bully you'.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup>Shen Zhihua, chief ed., *An Outline History of Sino-Soviet Relations, 1919–1991* (Beijing: Xinhua Press, 2007), 331–5; Shen Zhihua, *The Cold War and Sino-Soviet Alliance, 1945–1959*, vol. 2 (Beijing: Social Sciences Academy Press, 2013), 742; Niu Jun, "1962: the Eve of China's Foreign Policy Turning to Radicalism," *Historical Research*, no. 3 (2003): 23–40.

<sup>17</sup>Mao, "Make a Good Analysis of How the Enemy Attack and How We Respond," 5 October 1962, in CCP Central Document Research Department and PLA Military Science Academy, *Mao Zedong's Military Papers since the Founding of the Country*, vol. 3 (Beijing: Military Science Press, 2010), 151–3.

<sup>18</sup>Mao, "Speech on Strengthening the Third Line Construction," 8 June 1964; "Speech at the Meeting with the Members of Politburo Standing Committee and the First Secretaries of Regional Bureaus of the Central Party," 16 June 1964, and "On the Issues of Building Local Forces and Preparing for War," 15 July 1964, *ibid.*, 225–6, 229–30, 251–3.

<sup>19</sup>Mao, "Both Chinese and Vietnamese Parties and Countries should Jointly Oppose the Enemy," 24 June 1964, *ibid.*, 236–8.

On 3–5 July 1964, the Communist Party leaders of China, Vietnam, and Laos held a crucial meeting in Hanoi discussing how to cooperate should Washington expand the war across Indochina. They feared that the United States would send more ground troops to South Vietnam while launching air attacks against key targets in North Vietnam. Chinese leaders reassured that China would increase military and economic aid to North Vietnam, help train Vietnamese pilots, and offer support by ‘all possible and necessary means’ should the US attack the North.<sup>20</sup> Two weeks later, on 27 July, Mao repeated his assurance to a Vietnamese delegation that ‘[i]f the U.S. attacked North Vietnam, the matter will not be yours anymore’.<sup>21</sup>

Beijing’s concern about the United States’ increasing military involvement in Vietnam soon came true. On 2 August, while patrolling off North Vietnam, the destroyer *USS Maddox* skirmished with North Vietnamese torpedo boats. After another alleged incident with North Vietnam’s navy two days later, the US Congress passed a resolution authorising President Lyndon B. Johnson to use force against North Vietnam. In early 1965, the US sent combat units into South Vietnam and began air and naval bombardment of North Vietnamese targets.

With America’s escalation Mao increasingly worried that China and America would clash in a direct military confrontation. The Chinese leader had been concerned about a US invasion of North Vietnam, from where it could then assault China itself. Thus, while repeating that China would send troops to North Vietnam, Mao also felt it necessary to move cautiously and avoid any provocations that might escalate the growing crisis. On 13 August 1964, while speaking with Le Duan, Mao criticised the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) General Staff, stating: ‘It is not good to be too anxious to [send troops to Vietnam] and it will make [our] struggle against [America] difficult.’<sup>22</sup>

Mao inquired when and where the North Vietnamese wanted the PRC to send PLA troops, but also questioned if they truly wanted China to send troops to North Vietnam. He asked how Chinese troops would operate in Vietnam and how they could overcome language barriers. Without receiving any assured answers, Mao thus informed the Vietnamese leader that China had to be prudent, and, for the time being, the PLA would only be deployed to the border provinces near Vietnam.<sup>23</sup>

Drawing lessons China had learned from Korea for not deploying enough troops to the border at the early stage of war, Beijing subsequently ordered the deployment of PLA units to Yunnan, Guangdong, Guangxi, and Hunan, the four provinces adjacent to Vietnam: the Chinese leadership did not want to provoke the United States to go to war with China over Vietnam at the time, but had to prepare for the worst to happen. On 5 October 1964, Mao told Pham Van Dong, the prime minister of DRV, that: ‘It is necessary to prepare. However, [we] should also be careful not to be impatient ... Our air force and navy will remain inactive while conducting training exercises at home.’ He then advised the Vietnamese to do the same, especially not to be provocative.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup>Chen, ‘China’s Involvement,’ 360–11.

<sup>21</sup>CCP Central Document Research Department, *Chronicle of Mao Zedong’s Life, 1949–1976*, vol. 5 (Beijing: Central Documents Press, 2013), 378.

<sup>22</sup>Odd Arne Westad, Chen Jian, Stein Tønnesson, Nguyen Vu Tung, and James G. Hershberg, eds., *77 Conversations between Chinese and Foreign Leaders on the Wars in Indochina, 1964–1977* (Washington, DC: Cold War International History Project, Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars, 1998), 73–4.

<sup>23</sup>Mao, ‘Must Be Ready for the United States to Expand the Vietnam War,’ 5 October 1964, *Mao Military Papers* 3: 267–8.



Mao's change of attitude toward Hanoi's war against the United States was probably ascribed to the lessons China had learned in the early 1950s, that is, to avoid a recurrence of the circumstances of the Korean War. Mao was also affected by the fact that Washington was exercising caution as well to avoid being over-aggressive against North Vietnam. While assuring American journalist Edgar Snow he had not ordered deployment of Chinese troops inside South Vietnam, the Chinese leader admitted that his early remarks on sending troops to Vietnam were 'empty talk'. According to Mao, 'China has to support revolution no matter where it is', and the Chinese 'like to talk big but will not send out troops [to Vietnam]'.<sup>25</sup>

Despite his restraint, Mao encouraged Hanoi to persevere in fighting against America. When he learned that Moscow had facilitated talks between Hanoi and Washington, Mao appeared disapproving, noting that China had talked with the United States on the Taiwan and Sino-American relationship issues for more than nine years. He probably implied that China's talks with America had not yet yielded any results, and North Vietnam should not expect anything from the talks.<sup>26</sup> In Mao's view, imperialism was the root of war. He, however, did not want to fight a war in China or a world war. For him, the prevention of war depended upon the development of China's own strength and its support for national independence movements in other countries. Vietnam was one area that the Chinese leader believed would thwart US imperialism and its efforts to launch a world war.<sup>27</sup>

After the summer of 1962, China increased its efforts to support the guerrilla warfare in South Vietnam by supplying the DRV with 90,000 rifles and guns, that is, enough for equipping 230 infantry battalions.<sup>28</sup> However, China's aid to North Vietnam was moderate at this time. From 1956 to 1963, China's military assistance to North Vietnam totaled 320 million RMB.<sup>29</sup> According to Chinese foreign affairs documents, Beijing and Hanoi signed two agreements on 28 May and 7 December 1964, respectively, to grant one million US dollars and 10 million rubles to the DRV.<sup>30</sup> China's aid to North Vietnam, however, dramatically soared in 1965 after the United States escalated its military intervention in South Vietnam and the Soviet Union began to aid Hanoi's war efforts.

## US escalation and China's assistance for Hanoi (1965–6)

While worrying about the escalation of US involvement in South Vietnam, the Chinese leadership perceived a new Soviet policy toward Vietnam that also came to challenge China's role in the Vietnam War. Prior to the Tonkin Gulf incident, Soviet policy toward Indochina was equivocal at best. Following the ouster of Khrushchev in October 1964, the new Soviet leadership abandoned Moscow's lukewarm support of

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 270.

<sup>25</sup>Mao, "Conversation with Edgar Snow," 9 January 1965, *ibid.*, 285.

<sup>26</sup>"Mao Zedong and Pham Van Dong," in 77 *Conversations*, 76.

<sup>27</sup>PRC Foreign Ministry and CCP Central Documents Research Department, *Selected Diplomatic Papers of Mao Zedong* (Beijing: Central Historical Documents Press, 1994), 529–33.

<sup>28</sup>Han Huaizhi and Tan Jingqiao, *Contemporary Chinese Army's Military Work*, vol. 1 (Beijing: China Social Science Press, 1989), 577.

<sup>29</sup>Li Ke, "Chinese People's Support in Assisting Vietnam and Resisting America Will Be Remembered by History," *Military History Materials*, no. 4 (1989): 31.

<sup>30</sup>PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ed., *Collections of Treaties of the People's Republic of China, 1974*, vol. 21 (Beijing: People's Press, 1981), 248–51.

North Vietnam. On 3 December, Leonid Brezhnev, secretary general of the Soviet Communist Party, announced that Moscow could not be indifferent to the US invasion of Vietnam and would provide all necessary support to Hanoi.<sup>31</sup> On 6 February 1965, new Soviet Prime Minister Alexis Kosygin visited Hanoi. Following a series of negotiation meetings between the Soviets and the Vietnamese, a joint communique declared that measures would 'be taken to strengthen the defensive potential of North Vietnam'. Shortly after, Soviet-made air defence systems arrived in Hanoi. Two months later, in April, Le Duan and Vo Nguyen Giap visited Moscow. While expressing their satisfaction with the assistance that the Soviet Union had provided to North Vietnam, Vietnamese leaders requested that Moscow continue to aid Hanoi and permit Soviet citizens to fight in Vietnam. Soviet leaders agreed.<sup>32</sup>

The new Soviet policy toward Vietnam created mounting pressure on the Beijing leadership. Beijing's assistance of Hanoi's war efforts signified the Chinese leadership's role in and influence on the world communist movement. Beijing needed supporters for this revolutionary cause and considered Hanoi as a key ally to draw to its side so as to allow the CCP to be in a better position to compete with the Soviet Union for being the leader of the world revolution. On 10 February 1965, all Chinese leaders attended a rally at Tiananmen Square with 1.5 million people denouncing the US aggression against Vietnam. Three days later, Mao and other Chinese leaders jointly sent a letter to the Soviet leadership, stating that the two countries should be joined together to support the Vietnamese people's war against America.<sup>33</sup> Mao again changed his mind, believing that it was time for China to send troops to Vietnam.

After the US began ground operations in South Vietnam and the Operation Rolling Thunder bombing campaign against North Vietnam, the Chinese leader was increasingly agitated, thinking that the war was inevitable and that it would be better to fight the war sooner than later. He also found that China had no choice to avoid confronting the US in Vietnam after making so many announcements promising that China would not ignore US attacks on North Vietnam and would provide help for Hanoi. Mao subsequently ordered the entire country to prepare to fight the war in 1965 as well as in the coming years.<sup>34</sup> At a public rally in Tirana, Albania, on 29 March, Zhou Enlai declared that China was determined to provide the Vietnamese people with all necessary assistance, including weapons and other war materials.<sup>35</sup> A week later, the CCP Central Assisting Vietnam Leadership Group was created, with Zhou as its head, to manage Beijing's aid to Hanoi.

In April 1965, the two countries held a series of negotiation meetings in Beijing. Vietnamese leader Le Duan requested that China send 'volunteer pilots, volunteer fighters' and 'engineering units for constructing and repairing railroads, highways, and bridges'. He noted that the Chinese forces would help defend Hanoi and areas as far north as the Chinese border from US air bombardment and that China's support would also bolster morale and increase the confidence of the Vietnamese people fighting against the United States and the South Vietnamese regime.<sup>36</sup> In response, Chinese

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<sup>31</sup>Xia Yishan, *The Chronicle of Soviet Diplomacy in Sixty-Five Years: Brezhnev Period, 1964–1982* (Beijing: World Knowledge Press, 1987), 9–10.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, 18, 25.

<sup>33</sup>CCP Central Document Research Department, *Chronicle of Mao*, 5: 477–9.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, 487.

<sup>35</sup>Li Ping and Ma Zhisun, chief eds., *Chronicle of Zhou Enlai's Life*, vol. 2 (Beijing: Central Documents Press, 1997), 721–2.



leader Liu Shaoqi reaffirmed Beijing's position that assisting Vietnam against the United States was 'an unshakable duty of the Chinese people and the Communist Party'. The Chinese, Liu continued, would make their best effort to furnish North Vietnam with anything Hanoi requested, even granting Vietnamese leaders the authority to decide what PLA units they wanted to come into Vietnam.<sup>37</sup>

Apparently affected by increasing Soviet aid to North Vietnam, Beijing also expedited its assistance to Hanoi. In 1965, Beijing signed at least five treaties to provide supplies and services. The day after the Soviet Union concluded an aid agreement with North Vietnam, on 12 July, Beijing granted Hanoi one billion RMB for economic and technical assistance, which became effective immediately. In order to counter Soviet influence, Beijing also agreed to appropriate US\$20 million and 85 million Russian rubles from China's own limited foreign reserves for Hanoi to purchase equipment, which China was unable to supply, from international markets.<sup>38</sup> More importantly, on 30 May, the Chinese government signed a treaty with the Hanoi regime to build 12 highways with a total length of 1785 kilometres with a schedule to be completed in 1966. The project would improve the movement of North Vietnamese troops and supplies in the North so that Hanoi would be able to support its war efforts effectively in the South.<sup>39</sup>

Beijing also took appropriate measures to enhance its military aid to Hanoi. The supplies of Chinese weapons to North Vietnam significantly increased, respectively: from 80,500 firearms in 1964 to 220,767 in 1965; from 25,240,000 bullets in 1964 to 114,010,000 in 1965; from 1205 cannons in 1964 to 4439 in 1965; and from 335,000 shells in 1964 to 1,800,000 in 1965.<sup>40</sup> At the same time, Chinese leaders now enthusiastically embraced sending Chinese troops to Vietnam. Beginning in June 1965, PLA engineering units and anti-air artillery divisions were deployed to North Vietnam. Between 1965 and 1969 (the entire period of the American Rolling Thunder air campaign), a total of 320,000 Chinese troops served in North Vietnam. The greatest number in the country at any one time was 170,000, equivalent to more than 10 divisions.<sup>41</sup> Although these forces consisted of air defence, engineering, railway, and logistics units, their deployment enabled Hanoi to free up a large number of its own men and resources to embark on further expansion of fighting in the South. The Vietnamese were appropriately grateful and appreciative of the aid and sacrifice of PLA personnel, with Le Duan noting that, even though a small number of Chinese perished, their sacrifice might have saved two or three million Vietnamese lives.<sup>42</sup>

However, China's national power was limited and the government was unable to sustain a large scale of assistance to the DRV for a long period of time. The beginning of the Cultural Revolution in May 1966 threw the entire nation into chaos, and China's own economic development was severely undermined. China's aid to North Vietnam also decreased in 1966; with only two agreements signed, one was the 600 million RMB economic and technical package and the other was US\$15 million. Nevertheless, Beijing

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<sup>36</sup>Li Ke and Hao Shengzhang, *The People's Liberation Army in the Cultural Revolution* (Beijing: CCP Party History Material Press, 1989), 89–90.

<sup>37</sup>Han and Tan, *Contemporary Chinese Army*, 539–40.

<sup>38</sup>*Collections of Treaties* (1974), 251–2, 254–9.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 252–4.

<sup>40</sup>Li and Hao, *People's Liberation Army*, 416.

<sup>41</sup>Han and Tan, *Contemporary Chinese Army*, 539–40.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, 556–7.

found itself only able to fulfil one-sixth of its commitment (100 million RMB) and appropriate US\$5 million to Hanoi in 1966. The outstanding amount would be honoured in the following year.<sup>43</sup> China's aid to North Vietnam in 1966 was drastically lower than that in 1965. Chinese military supplies also dropped conspicuously in 1966. For example, firearms, artillery pieces, and shells accounted for 64%, 75.7%, and 59%, respectively, of what China had supplied to North Vietnam in 1965.<sup>44</sup> The domestic political upheaval halted the growing momentum of China's assistance for North Vietnam. Political radicalism continued to motivate the Chinese leadership to support Hanoi's war effort. To support Hanoi's Tet Offensive in early 1968, China's aid again surged in 1967.

### The Tet Offensives and China's Vietnam policy (1967–70)

Despite the decrease in its aid to Vietnam in 1966, China's foreign policy turned increasingly radical because of the unfolding Cultural Revolution. In 1967, obsessed with spreading revolution into other countries, Beijing bolstered its support for communist movements in Malaysia, Burma, India, and Thailand. At home, 'Red Guard' youth formations attacked Indian, Burman, and Indonesian embassies and burnt the United Kingdom's mission. Chinese historian Yang Kuisong characterises China's diplomacy at the time as 'the wholehearted devotion to promoting the world revolution'.<sup>45</sup> Political radicalism thus played a critical role in China's involvement in the Vietnam War.

First, as relations with the Soviet Union grew increasingly strained, the Beijing leadership fretted over the extent of Soviet aid to – and hence influence in – Vietnam, a traditional sphere of Chinese rather than Russian influence. China's leaders perceived the aid as both undercutting their country's self-promotion of the Mao regime as leader of the global struggle against US imperialism and constituting an attempt to nudge the DRV out of China's orbit and into that of the Soviet Union. In his talk with Vietnamese leaders, Zhou expressed his increasing concern over Moscow's involvement in Vietnam, arguing that the Soviet Union had not been 'wholehearted' in helping the Vietnamese and that China was 'always afraid of the revisionists standing' between the two countries. According to the Chinese premier, Soviet aid to Vietnam sought to isolate China, improve Soviet-US relations, and manage 'subversive activities' as well as 'acts of sabotage', all of which would likely cause problems for both China and Vietnam.<sup>46</sup>

Secondly, Beijing insisted North Vietnam fight against America all the way to the end; thus, Chinese leaders strongly opposed Hanoi negotiating with the United States, believing Soviet involvement in Vietnam was an effort to encourage Hanoi to reach a political settlement of the Indochina conflict, further evidence that the Soviet leadership were revisionists intent on betraying true Marxism. The decrease in China's aid to Vietnam in 1966 proved transient, and China's assistance to North Vietnam resurged in 1967.

A total of four agreements were signed between the PRC and the DRV that year. China's largest package was an appropriation of 750 million RMB in August for Hanoi to pay for Chinese supplies and equipment. Together with the 500 million RMB aid that

<sup>43</sup>*Collections of Treaties* (1974), 259–60.

<sup>44</sup>Li and Hao, *People's Liberation Army*, 416.

<sup>45</sup>Yang Kuisong, "Change of Direction in China's Foreign Policy in the 1960s, Part II," *Literature and History of Jianghuai*, no. 1 (2013): 33, 36.

<sup>46</sup>Westad et al., eds., *77 Conversations*, 88.

China had promised in 1966, the total amount of China's assistance to Vietnam reached 1.25 billion RMB in 1967. As the Rolling Thunder bombardment considerably worsened living conditions in North Vietnam, China also agreed to provide 30 million RMB of food and daily necessities, i.e. 450,000 metric tonnes of food and 10,000 metric tonnes of seeds for rice and other crops.<sup>47</sup>

That Hanoi launched the Tet Offensives in January 1968 made Mao feel that Hanoi's countrywide attacks in South Vietnam demonstrated that the North Vietnamese leadership was in support of Beijing's anti-American strategy. On 7 February 1968, the Chinese leader told Ho Chi Minh that Hanoi should create several field army corps with 30,000 to 40,000 men each, fighting battles like that fought at Dien Bien Phu to deliver a fatal blow to the enemy.<sup>48</sup> China took the opportunity to augment military supplies to North Vietnam. The Tet Offensive was primarily carried out by Viet Cong guerrilla fighters, though the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) units fought as well. The bulk of Chinese military supplies consisted of rifles, machine guns, artillery pieces, and ammunition in 1967 and 1968, including 366,499 firearms of all types, and 11,071 artillery guns, along with hundreds of thousands of rounds of ammunition. The Tet operations marked the first time Hanoi fought a larger-scale and more intensified war in South Vietnam. In response, China had to increase military supplies to North Vietnam in 1968, accounting for, respectively, 50%, 68.7%, 78%, and 53% more guns, artillery, small arms ammunition, and shells than China had furnished in 1967.<sup>49</sup> In addition, on 23 March 1968, China pledged to provide 120 million RMB worth of economic and technical assistance immediately to North Vietnam.<sup>50</sup>

However, the Tet Offensive did not go as well as both the Chinese and Vietnamese leaders had expected. In two months of fighting, the communist forces suffered substantial defeat with approximately 32,000 dead and 5800 captured. Particularly, the Viet Cong lost 30% of its cadre corps, with many of them killed, wounded, and captured, demoralised into surrendering, or simply quitting.<sup>51</sup> Confronting such a difficult situation, the North Vietnamese leadership amended its strategy. Without consulting with the Chinese leadership, on 3 April, Hanoi announced that it was willing to negotiate with Washington for peace.<sup>52</sup> The Chinese leadership was angry with this dramatic change in Hanoi's war strategy. Beijing had long been disgruntled with Hanoi's favourable attitude toward the Soviets. It was even more annoyed with the Vietnamese decision to negotiate with Americans at a time when 'the revolution situation', as Chinese leaders perceived, 'was excellent'. Consequently, on 13 April 1968, during his meeting with Pham Van Dong, Zhou criticised the Hanoi leadership for being too 'easy to compromise'.<sup>53</sup>

Although Chinese leaders failed to prevent North Vietnamese leaders from negotiating with the Americans, they continued with attempts to undercut Hanoi's hope for peace talks. The initial talks were held on 16 May in Paris and did not did not go

<sup>47</sup>*Collections of Treaties* (1974), 265–70, 272–4.

<sup>48</sup>Mao, "The Victory of the Vietnamese People Is Certain," 7 February 1968, *Mao Military Papers*, 341–2.

<sup>49</sup>Li and Hao, *People's Liberation Army*, 416.

<sup>50</sup>*Collections of Treaties* (1974), 274–6.

<sup>51</sup>William J. Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), 295; Warren I. Cohen, *The Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations: America in the Age of Soviet Power, 1945–1991*, vol. 4 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 170–1.

<sup>52</sup>Luu Van Loi and Nguyen Anh Vu, *Le Duc Tho-Kissinger Negotiations in Paris* (Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 1996), 16.

<sup>53</sup>Westad et al., eds., *77 Conversations*, 125.

smoothly. In order to maintain their influence on Hanoi, China signed three additional agreements for providing more assistance to North Vietnam. The first was 120 million RMB of economic and technical aid. The second amounted to 70 million RMB of food and other supplies to Viet Cong in the south. The third was an economic and technical assistance package worth 770 million RMB. Yet another furnished US\$25 million cash to Hanoi for rebuilding the Viet Cong after its heavy Tet losses.<sup>54</sup> On 30 September 1968, both countries signed two additional agreements, which specified that only 50 million of 770 million RMB would be spent immediately for Hanoi to purchase equipment, and the rest would be honoured in 1969.<sup>55</sup> This meant that China had made a huge commitment to Hanoi in 1968, but the actual amount the latter received was only 240 million RMB. Beijing once more found that the commitments it made to Hanoi had transcended China's own capability, especially at a time when the political upheaval continued to take a toll on the Chinese economy. This might also suggest that Beijing probably expected these 'blank cheques' to serve as incentives to shape Hanoi's policy. If Hanoi followed Beijing's advice, China could render more help than it actually did for North Vietnam at the time.

Nonetheless, the Vietnamese-American peace talks continued. On 8 September, a secret meeting was held between the two sides at the residence of the Vietnamese delegation in Paris.<sup>56</sup> The Chinese leadership's dissatisfaction with Hanoi's new approach to the war continued. On 17 November, Mao met Pham Van Dong and other Vietnamese leaders. While saying that he was in favour of Hanoi's policy of fighting while talking, the Chinese leader believed that the United States would deceive the Vietnamese comrades because Washington never kept its word.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, Hanoi's peace talks with the United States also implied that North Vietnamese leaders were increasingly pro-Soviet. For the Chinese leader, the Soviet Union had supported a political settlement of the Indochina conflict for a long time. Mao took the opportunity to register his displeasure by informing Pham Van Dong that Hanoi should consider allowing China to withdraw some of its troops from North Vietnam.<sup>58</sup> Shortly after this, China began to pull Chinese troops out of North Vietnam and completed the withdrawal in July 1970.

China's military supplies to North Vietnam steadily declined over these years. Chinese records show that China's firearms sent to Vietnam numbered 219,899 in 1968 but fell to 139,900 in 1969 and 101,800 in 1970; artillery deliveries dropped from 7087 in 1968 to 3906 in 1969 and 2212 in 1970; shells came down from 2.08 million in 1968 to 1.35 million in 1969 and 397,000 in 1970; bullets reduced from 247.9 million in 1968 to 119.17 million in 1969 and 29.01 million in 1970.<sup>59</sup> Meanwhile, China also curtailed its economic and technical aid to North Vietnam considerably. Beijing concluded an aid agreement with Hanoi in 1969, amounting to 470 million RMB less than what China agreed to offer Vietnam in 1968.<sup>60</sup> China's less-than-enthusiastic aid to North Vietnam continued into 1970. By October, China had signed only two

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<sup>54</sup>*Collections of Treaties* (1974), 276–9, 282–3.

<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.*, 280–2.

<sup>56</sup>Luu and Nguyen, *Le Duc Tho-Kissinger*, 28.

<sup>57</sup>Mao, "In Favor of Vietnam's Policy of Fighting While Negotiating," 17 November 1968, *Mao Military Papers*, 347.

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup>Li and Hao, *People's Liberation Army*, 416.

<sup>60</sup>*Collections of Treaties* (1974), 284–5.

agreements with North Vietnam, allocating only US\$5 million to Hanoi and US \$10 million to the Viet Cong. Moreover, the contract specified that the US\$5 million should be used to buy 25,000 tonnes of food for the newly created Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) in the south.<sup>61</sup>

In retrospect, China's aid to Vietnam peaked in 1967. The defeat of the Tet Offensive and the subsequent peace talks between Vietnam and the United States had a significant impact on China's policy toward Vietnam. China not only cut back its aid to Vietnam considerably, but also began to withdraw its troops from North Vietnam. The change in Beijing's policy failed to affect Hanoi's peace talks approach and cast a dark shadow on Sino-Vietnamese relations at the time. The upcoming Sino-American détente further alienated Hanoi's leadership.

### The Sino-American détente and China's aid to North Vietnam (1971–3)

Following Moscow's increasing involvement in the Vietnam War in the late 1960s, Chinese leaders pondered their own strategy and security in 1970. First, they felt an increasing Soviet military threat to China. For them, there was ample evidence of the Soviet military build-up in the Far East between 1965 and 1969. Secondly, Moscow's August 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia further convinced the Chinese leaders that the 'Socialist imperialist' Soviet Union might be more dangerous than the United States to China's security: the Brezhnev regime clearly had few qualms about deploying military forces outside its own borders.<sup>62</sup> Thirdly, border incidents between the two countries doubled from 1963 to 1969, culminating in a March 1969 exchange of fire between Chinese and Soviet border patrol units at Zhenbao/Damansky Island, on the far reaches of China's northeastern frontier.

The latter incident convinced the Chinese leadership the Soviet Union posed a great threat to China's future, and Mao now feared a combined Soviet-American attack, the Soviets from the North and the Americans from North Vietnam, forcing China to fight a two-front war. With some emotion, on 22 March 1969, Mao told Foreign Minister Chen Yi: 'Détente is better than [tension]. We are now isolated, and no country is on our side.'<sup>63</sup> Since the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, Beijing had suspended its diplomatic relations with foreign countries. To end its isolation, Beijing had re-sent Chinese diplomats to their overseas missions and re-opened Chinese embassies there. Meanwhile, Chinese leaders re-evaluated Sino-American and Sino-Soviet relations, beginning to shift its policy from 'anti-imperialism and anti-revisionism' to 'allying the U.S. against the Soviet Union'.<sup>64</sup>

This adjustment contradicted Mao's long-held revolutionary line that a true revolutionary must oppose imperialism. One major reason for the Sino-Soviet split in the late 1950s and early 1960s was Moscow's détente with the United States. Support of Hanoi's war against the United States signified Mao's rightness in China's ideological rivalry with the

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<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 286–8.

<sup>62</sup>Niu Jun, "An Outline for Studying Mao Zedong's 'Three-World' Theory," in *Mao Zedong in His Later Years*, ed. Xiao Yanzhong (Beijing: Spring and Autumn Press, 1989), 81.

<sup>63</sup>*Chronicle of Mao*, 6, 237, Central Document Research Department.

<sup>64</sup>Shen Zhihua, chief ed., *The Selected Documents from Russian Archives: Sino-Soviet Relations*, vol. 1 (Shanghai: East Publication Center, 2014), i.

Soviet Union. Beijing's new détente policy with the United States made it questionable for China to remain a self-claimed champion of the world revolution, especially after the United States expanded the war into Cambodia following a March 1970 coup overthrowing Prince Norodom Sihanouk. A new challenge emerged for the Chinese leader to continue to support Hanoi's ongoing war against America while pursuing a policy that was considered détente with the United States.<sup>65</sup>

With this change in China's foreign policy, Beijing now accepted peace talks between Hanoi and Washington. On 23 September 1970, Mao received Pham Van Dong, praising the Paris talks while retracting his earlier concern about the negotiation. He praised Hanoi's war strategy, noting that North Vietnam fought 'very well on the battlefield' and followed a correct 'policy for the diplomatic struggle'. The Chinese leader then acknowledged China 'must give [the Vietnamese] what [they] want'.<sup>66</sup> On 6 October, China pledged 1.2 billion RMB in economic aid along with US\$60 million for Hanoi to spend in 1971. This amount constituted the largest aid package Beijing had offered to the DRV since 1965.<sup>67</sup>

On 8 February 1971, South Vietnamese forces launched Operation Lam Son 719, invading Laos to interrupt the flow of supplies down the Ho Chi Minh trail. A week later, China and North Vietnam executed a supplement aid agreement for an additional 400 million RMB in economic and military aid to Hanoi.<sup>68</sup> According to Vietnamese records, Chinese aid to North Vietnam surpassed Soviet aid by 17% in 1971.<sup>69</sup>

But China's new strategy quickly unravelled, as it appeared both inconsistent and contradictory. In July and then October 1971, US National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger made two trips to China that eventually led to President Nixon's 1972 visit to China. The Vietnamese leadership, long worried about Sino-American détente, suspected that Beijing might strike a deal with the United States, betraying Hanoi. Thus, the DRV leadership made a direct request to the Chinese leadership to cancel Nixon's visit.<sup>70</sup> Fully aware of North Vietnam's concerns, Zhou Enlai travelled to Hanoi several times to brief the North Vietnamese leadership about the talks between Chinese leaders and President Nixon and Kissinger.<sup>71</sup> He reassured Hanoi's leadership that China remained fully committed to the war and would never let its new strategic priorities work against Vietnam's national interests.<sup>72</sup> As a pledge of its faith, on 27 September 1971, Beijing agreed to provide 1.8 billion RMB and US\$80 million in economic aid to North Vietnam in 1972.<sup>73</sup>

Given that Hanoi regarded Washington as its most dangerous enemy, the Vietnamese may, at last, have realised that Chinese assistance to North Vietnam would soon run out. Hanoi treated all these newly signed agreements and supplementary aid packages 'as palliatives for détente and rapprochement'.<sup>74</sup> Vietnamese leaders were further agitated by the scheduled summit between Nixon and Brezhnev in

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<sup>65</sup>Path believes that the US escalation of the war in Indochina in 1970 was the major reason to reenergise Beijing's enthusiasm to aid North Vietnam at the time. Path, "Ha Noi's Response," 106–7.

<sup>66</sup>Westad et al., eds., *77 Conversations*, 177–8.

<sup>67</sup>*Collections of Treaties (1974)*, 289–91.

<sup>68</sup>*Ibid.*, 298–301.

<sup>69</sup>Path, "Ha Noi's Response," 107.

<sup>70</sup>Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, 198.

<sup>71</sup>Wang Taiping, *Diplomatic History of the PRC*, vol. 3 (Beijing: World Knowledge Press, 1999), 50–1.

<sup>72</sup>Hoang Van Hoan, *Ties of Friendship between Vietnam and China Is Deep* (Beijing: People's Press, 1990), 26.

<sup>73</sup>*Collections of Treaties (1974)*, 303–4.

<sup>74</sup>Nguyen, *Hanoi's War*, 232.



May 1972, which was also regarded as a betrayal by their other big-power patron. In order to place itself in a better position against collusion between the superpowers, Hanoi's leadership decided to rely on their own military capabilities and strategies in the war while seeking to maximise more aid from both Beijing and Moscow.<sup>75</sup> They expected that a new offensive campaign (the Easter Offensive) in South Vietnam could force a political settlement at the negotiation table on Hanoi's terms should the South Vietnamese military collapse on the battlefield.

On 30 March 1972, Hanoi sent 14 regular force divisions and 26 independent regiments, a total of 125,000 troops, to cross the 17<sup>th</sup> Parallel. Headed by more than 200 Soviet-made tanks, they attacked South Vietnam from three directions.<sup>76</sup> But the Easter Offensive once again failed to bring military victory to Hanoi, with the PAVN losing approximately 100,000 troops. By comparison, South Vietnam's casualties were 25,000.<sup>77</sup> Vietnamese leader Le Duan laid the blame on the Chinese leadership for Hanoi's losses and suffering, regarding China's contact with the United States as 'throwing a life buoy to Nixon, who had almost been drowned' and, worse, holding the Beijing regime responsible for the massive US air campaign against North Vietnam.<sup>78</sup>

Confronted with Hanoi's misgivings and blame, the Chinese leadership found itself trapped. Beijing's rapprochement policy toward the United States weakened its credibility for a self-promoted champion of the world Marxist-Leninist revolution. While urging Hanoi to continue to negotiate with the United States, Chinese leaders also advised North Vietnamese leaders to take a flexible attitude toward the South Vietnamese leadership's role in post-war Vietnam so that the United States could easily accept a peaceful resolution. Hanoi's negotiators were adamant, insisting that South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu must step down.<sup>79</sup> Beijing found it had no choice but to continue to provide additional economic and military assistance to the DRV as President Nixon further commenced air raids over North Vietnam and the mining of its harbours to limit supplies going to the PAVN as it waged its Easter Offensive. Even while Beijing at the time believed that Hanoi should have asked for Soviet assistance against US mining operations, the Chinese leaders had to commit their own poorly equipped navy to North Vietnam, conducting minesweeping operations along the Haiphong approaches.<sup>80</sup> Meanwhile, China built a temporary pipeline, 159 kilometres long, from the border of Guangxi to Vietnam for delivery of oil as an urgent response to the US mining campaign against principal North Vietnamese ports. From 31 May 1972 to 12 February 1973, more than 41.2 million gallons of gasoline and diesel were transshipped to North Vietnam.<sup>81</sup> In June,

<sup>75</sup>Path, "Ha Noi's Response," 117.

<sup>76</sup>Nguyen Phu Duc, ed. Arthur J. Dommen, *The Viet-Nam Peace Negotiations: Saigon's Side of the Story* (Christiansburg: Dalley Book Service, 2005), 279; Phillip B. Davidson, *Vietnam at War: The History: 1946–1975* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 673.

<sup>77</sup>George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975*, 2nd ed. (New York: Newbery Awards Records, Inc., 1979), 249.

<sup>78</sup>Guo Min et al., *Forty-year Evolution of the Sino-Vietnamese Relations* (Nanning: Guangxi People's Press, 1992), 102; Le Duan, "Comrade B on the Plot of the Revolutionary Chinese Clique against Vietnam," trans Christopher E. Goscha <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/112982> (accessed 2 March 2017).

<sup>79</sup>Westad et al., eds., 77 *Conversations*, 182–4.

<sup>80</sup>Lai Zhuguang, "Primer Zhou's Management of Mine Sweeping Operations in Vietnam," in *Assist Vietnam and Resist America: Chinese Support Troops in Vietnam*, ed. Qu Aiquo, et al. (Beijing: Military Science Press, 1995), 297.

<sup>81</sup>Han and Tan, *Contemporary Chinese Army*, 554–6.

Beijing also allocated 207 million RMB, together with US\$20 million cash, for North Vietnam's purchases of additional economic and military supplies.<sup>82</sup>

Hanoi's defeat in the Easter Offensive convinced Vietnamese leaders that they could not win the war by military means as long as US forces remained in South Vietnam. They also found that Kissinger's 'decent interval' approach was very appealing. As long as North Vietnam did not launch attacks on South Vietnam in a period of time following the withdrawal of US military forces from Indochina, Washington was willing to accept Saigon's eventual destiny.<sup>83</sup> Following a few clandestine talks between the DRV and the United States, both sides reached a basic agreement for how to end the war in Vietnam in October. On 26 November, China consented to a new aid deal worth 1.35 billion RMB in economic and military assistance along with US\$100 million in cash to Hanoi in 1973.<sup>84</sup> According to Chinese records, during the last four years of US forces in South Vietnam, Beijing's aid to Hanoi was substantial, amounting to approximately 507.9 million RMB in 1970, 1.746 billion RMB in 1971, 2.231 RMB in 1972, and 1.552 billion RMB in 1973.<sup>85</sup>

Meanwhile, Hanoi became increasingly confident of winning the war with its own military capability and strategies. Since 1970, North Vietnamese regular forces were committed consistently to fight the war in South Vietnam. China's military aid to North Vietnam played a critical role in compensating Hanoi's heavy losses on the battlefield. The supplies of heavy weapons reached an all-time high over the years of 1971 and 1973, including 27,048 guns along with 6.319 million rounds of shells, 13,979 trucks, 420 tanks, and 100 naval vessels. Because Hanoi's demands often exceeded China's production capability, Beijing transferred arms and equipment directly from the PLA to Hanoi's inventory.<sup>86</sup> The real problem for the Chinese leadership was that too much had been promised for too long, and any reduction or hesitation in responding to Hanoi's request could have fatally undermined China's remaining credibility and prestige in Vietnam.

Vietnamese leaders likewise understood that North Vietnam could no longer count on either China or the Soviet Union's support unconditionally, especially when it maintained an intransigent position in Paris.<sup>87</sup> Operation Linebacker II in December 1972 brought the full fury of American air power into Hanoi itself. On 18 December 1972, US President Nixon ordered the biggest, most concentrated air bombardment against selected military and regime targets in the capital city of Hanoi. The shattering bombardment played a major role in forcing North Vietnam back to the peace table in Paris. A few days later, on 27 January, Hanoi signed the Paris Peace Accords along with three other signatories – the United States, South Vietnam, and the communist-supported PRG of South Vietnam. America's direct involvement in the Vietnam War came to an end.

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<sup>82</sup>*Collections of Treaties* (1974), 308–9.

<sup>83</sup>"Memorandum of Conversation (USSR)/Moscow, May 27–28, 1972," in *Soviet-American Relations: The Détente Years, 1969–1972*, ed. Edward C. Keefer, David C. Geyer, and Douglas E. Selva (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 2007), 965–7; Jussi Hanhimäki, "Selling the 'Decent Interval': Kissinger, Triangular Diplomacy, and the End of the Vietnam War, 1971–73," in *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 14, no. 1 (March 2003): 175–6.

<sup>84</sup>*Collections of Treaties* (1974), 312–14.

<sup>85</sup>*Ibid.*, 284–324.

<sup>86</sup>Li and Hao, *People's Liberation Army*, 412, 416.

<sup>87</sup>Nguyen, *Hanoi's War*, 288.

## China's assistance after the Paris Peace Accords (1974–5)

Despite the signing of the Paris Peace Agreement, Beijing continued to provide Hanoi with considerable assistance. In 1974, China's economic and military aid to Hanoi accounted for 2.5 billion RMB along with additional 2 billion RMB for the PRG, a new high.<sup>88</sup> China's security circumstances had changed. As the US threat to China from Vietnam dramatically diminished, so did the years of rivalry with the Soviet Union for dominance in Vietnam come to a halt. Beijing anticipated a relatively stable situation in Southeast Asia after the departure of US forces.

For Beijing, stability in Indochina was more important than Hanoi's ongoing struggle for national unification. According to Chinese leaders, after the Paris Peace Agreement, Hanoi 'should take time to relax and build their forces' while other Indochina countries (South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia) 'should build peace, independence, and neutrality' during the next five to 10 years.<sup>89</sup> Vietnamese leaders realised that Beijing's 'funds would soon run out for the Vietnamese cause'.<sup>90</sup> They accepted China's advice, promising that Hanoi would not push for national unification in a hurry by incorporating 'South Vietnam into a socialist entity'.<sup>91</sup> Such an attitude taken by the Hanoi leadership was to satisfy Washington's 'decent interval' requirement on the one hand and also to use its promise to extract extraordinarily large aid, worth 8.1 billion RMB, from Beijing for the year 1974. Chinese leaders believed that this petition was not only unrealistic, but also exceeded China's capability. At the end, China only agreed to provide Hanoi with 2.5 billion RMB, which was much less than the Vietnamese had initially requested.<sup>92</sup> Understandably, both countries found this outcome not only dissatisfactory, but also traumatic for their relationship.

Beijing attempted to treat the PRG as an independent political entity with no anticipation for a unified Vietnam in the immediate future after the Paris Peace Accords. Prior to 1973, China's aid to the PRG was always handled by Hanoi. Beginning in 1973, Beijing regarded China's aid to the provisional government as a separate transaction, which should not be controlled by Hanoi. According to an urgent and supplementary aid agreement signed between the PRC and the PRG on 19 July 1973, it was clear that all transactions of Chinese supplies should go directly from the Chinese Foreign Trade Ministry to the Financial and Economic Ministry of the PRG.<sup>93</sup> Hanoi protested against Beijing's decision that treated the PRG as an independent entity. In the later signed agreements, Beijing had to reverse this procedure, continuing to provide aid to the PRG via Hanoi.<sup>94</sup> Nevertheless, China's attempt, which was contrary to the strategic goal of national liberation that the North Vietnamese leaders had been pursuing, was bound to cause the latter's discontent and even hostility.

Finally, China's military aid to Vietnam plummeted. By comparison to 1973, the supplies in 1974 and 1975 accounted for, respectively, 70% and 60% (firearms), 75% and 50% (bullets), 64% and 49% (cannons), and 62% and 43% (artillery shells). In 1974, China only provided Vietnam with 80 tanks and 506 aircraft, which, however, were 120

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<sup>88</sup>*Collections of Treaties (1974)*, 317–18, 323–4.

<sup>89</sup>Westad et al., eds., *77 Conversations*, 187–8.

<sup>90</sup>Nguyen, *Hanoi's War*, 232.

<sup>91</sup>Westad et al., eds., *77 Conversations*, 189.

<sup>92</sup>Li and Ma, *Chronicle of Zhou*, 598.

<sup>93</sup>*Collections of Treaties (1974)*, 318–19.

<sup>94</sup>*Ibid.*, 44–5, 323–4.

and 1210, respectively, in 1973.<sup>95</sup> For China, the Vietnam War was over, and Hanoi's needs for weapons should have been reduced. More importantly, the Chinese leadership's enthusiasm for assisting Hanoi was steadily evaporating.

Military action by Hanoi soon disrupted the peace and stability that Chinese leaders had hoped to be upheld in Indochina. In summer 1974, North Vietnamese forces launched a series of probing attacks on South Vietnamese positions. China's attitude toward aid to Vietnam now became notably less enthusiastic. On 3 August 1974, ailing Chinese premier Zhou Enlai met Le Thanh Nghi, vice premier of the DRV, to discuss China's aid to Vietnam. According to Zhou, aid to North Vietnam had accounted for nearly half of all Chinese foreign aid. After handling the matter for more than two decades, he believed that it was time for him to call it quits.<sup>96</sup> It was a startling turnabout: just one year before, Zhou had reassured Le Duan that China's assistance to Hanoi would not change for five years.<sup>97</sup>

In reality, despite Zhou's pronouncement, China briefly continued to send aid to Vietnam, but much less than in previous years. On 26 October 1974, China and Vietnam signed one final agreement to provide Hanoi with 850 million RMB in economic and military goods and US\$50 million in cash for the year 1975.<sup>98</sup> On 31 May 1975, after the fall of Saigon – at a time when Beijing was facing serious domestic economic problems after years of agricultural and industrial stagnation – Beijing agreed to send Hanoi 21 million RMB. But then, in August 1975, Beijing rejected Hanoi's request for further aid, claiming that the South Vietnamese defeat had left 'large quantities of weaponry and ammunition' for Hanoi and, invoking history, noting that the Saigon regime had 'served' as a much better supplier for the Vietnamese communists than Chiang Kai-shek had for the CCP during the Chinese Civil War.<sup>99</sup> For the Chinese leadership, Hanoi was not 'the poorest under heaven'; instead, China was the poorest with a 'population of 800 million'.<sup>100</sup> The time had come to attach conditions on any further monies. Thus, on 25 September 1975, Beijing pledged 100 million RMB to Hanoi for 1976, but as a loan, not as a gratis sum – and China wanted Vietnam to pay it back in 10 years, starting in 1986.<sup>101</sup> Despite Hanoi's continued appeals for more aid, no evidence in Chinese official records suggests that any new aid agreements were ever signed between the two countries thereafter.

## Conclusion

According to official Chinese history, China provided all kinds of assistance to Vietnam, amounting to more than 20.36 billion RMB, of which 1.4 billion RMB were interest-free loans, from the 1950s to the end of the war in 1975. Adding the expenditure of Chinese military deployment in North Vietnam, the total amount of Chinese assistance to the DRV exceeded US\$20 billion in then-year values based on contemporary exchange rates.<sup>102</sup> Chinese assistance to North Vietnam was substantial when China's own

<sup>95</sup>Li and Hao, *People's Liberation Army*, 416.

<sup>96</sup>Li and Ma, *Chronicle of Zhou*, 674.

<sup>97</sup>Westad et al., eds. *77 Conversations*, 188.

<sup>98</sup>*Collections of Treaties* (1974), 41–2, 44–5.

<sup>99</sup>Li and Ma, *Chronicle of Zhou*, 717.

<sup>100</sup>Westad et al., eds. *77 Conversations*, 194.

<sup>101</sup>*Collections of Treaties* (1975), vol. 22, 56–8.

national power was still limited. More importantly, with China's assistance, the Hanoi government was able to commit more of its own people and resources to engage in the direct fight against the United States in the south, while worrying less about a US invasion. In 1964, the Vietnamese People's Army had 300,000 men; by 1975 it had expanded to 1.2 million soldiers.<sup>103</sup> China's contribution to Hanoi's final victory in the war was undeniable. As historian Chen Jian noted: 'Although Beijing's support may have been short of Hanoi's expectations, without the support, the history, even the outcome, of the Vietnam War might have been different.'<sup>104</sup>

Notwithstanding, China's aid to Vietnam, despite official claims otherwise, was never purely altruistic. The two countries signed several aid agreements each year. The amount and the types of assistance were determined by China in the light of its own national security interests and industrial capability at the time. Vietnam was regarded as a vital part of Mao's grand strategy; it did not just serve as a buffer for China's own security and an attestation that China played the leadership role in the world revolution. After perceiving an increasing Soviet menace, Mao sought rapprochement with the United States, alarming Hanoi. Responding to Hanoi's protestations, China increased its aid to the DRV to affirm its continuous support for Hanoi's war efforts against the United States. But as well, when it decided to, China also used aid reductions to express its own dissatisfaction, as with Hanoi's approach to the United States for peace negotiations in 1968 and 1969 and as Zhou expressed in 1974.

Even though Beijing and Hanoi shared the same ideology, their national interests were far apart. From a Chinese perspective, China's aid to the DRV should have provided Beijing with some leverage over Hanoi's approach to war. But no evidence exists that China's aid influenced Hanoi's decisions and execution of the war. Instead, Hanoi skillfully manipulated its relationship with Beijing to obtain substantial aid. After the withdrawal of US forces from Vietnam and the subsequent collapse of the South Vietnamese regime, Hanoi no longer had to hide its long-standing historical suspicions of China. It subsequently launched its own territorial and border disputes with China and a cleansing campaign against the ethnic Chinese living inside Vietnam, soon becoming China's new adversary; in 1979, both nations would go to war.<sup>105</sup> In retrospect, China's support for assisting Vietnam and resisting America constituted a major diplomatic blunder, arguably its biggest foreign policy failure in the Cold War.

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<sup>102</sup>Wang, *Diplomatic History*, 51–2.

<sup>103</sup>Military History Institute of Vietnamese National Defense Ministry, *Fifty Years of the Vietnamese People's Army, 1944–1994* (Beijing: Military Translation Press, 1996), 455.

<sup>104</sup>Chen, "China's Involvement," 380.

<sup>105</sup>Xiaoming Zhang, *Deng Xiaoping's Long War: The Military Conflict between China and Vietnam, 1979–1991* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

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