

The Revolutionary Internationalism of the People's Republic of China in Vietnam, 1946-1973

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The Chinese Communist Party began its internationalist assistance to the Vietnamese revolution even before it liberated mainland China in 1949. This aid reached its highest levels in the late 1960s as 500,000 U.S. troops were fighting in South Vietnam. Despite the triumph of revisionism in the Vietnam Workers Party in the late 1960s and obstruction by Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping in the early 1970s, Chinese military aid to both South and North Vietnam continued through 1973 with Mao's support.

During the Korean War from 1950-1953, the CCP and the Chinese People's Volunteers defeated the serious threat of the U.S. military to Manchuria and to the Korean revolution. This victory allowed the People's Republic to focus its military and economic aid on Vietnam on its southern flank.

The Chinese Communist Party and the First Vietnam War, 1946-50

Even while civil war raged in China after World War II, units of the Vietminh (the League for the Independence of Vietnam) and the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) coordinated military operations against the French colonial rulers in Indochina. In 1946, after war broke out between the French and the Vietminh, a joint Vietnamese-Chinese unit, the Doc Lap Regiment, was created to engage in guerilla warfare in the Vietnamese-Chinese border area. As the forces of the Chinese Communist Party advanced in northern China in 1948, the PLA took part in operations with Vietminh units along the Vietnamese-Chinese border. As the PLA drove into southern China, it blocked Guomindang forces from setting up bases in northern Vietnam and Burma.¹ China's southern provinces became the strategic rear and sanctuary for the Vietminh.

In December 1949, two months after the proclamation of the People's Republic, China was the first country to recognize the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) as the legitimate government of Vietnam, four years before the defeat of the French army by the Vietminh. One month later, Ho Chi Minh recognized the People's Republic and exchanged ambassadors. In order to develop closer unity between the PRC and Vietnam's large overseas Chinese community, a Sino-Vietnam Friendship Association was formed in Beijing in February 1950.²

In early 1950, Ho Chi Minh traveled to Beijing to meet with CCP leaders to coordinate political and military strategy. As a result the PLA equipped and trained 20,000 Vietminh soldiers in China's Yunnan and Kwangsi Provinces. In addition a campaign was launched in the Vietminh to study the CCP's experiences in its wars against Japan and the Guomindang. By 1951, more than 30 books dealing with the Chinese Revolution and Mao's military strategy had been translated into Vietnamese.

¹ *China's Road to the Korean War: The Making of the Sino-American Confrontation* by Chen Jian (1994) 104-105.

² *The First Vietnam Crisis: Chinese Communist Strategy and United States Involvement* by Melvin Gurtov (1967) 9.

At battalion, division and regiment levels, 79 experienced military officers in the Chinese Military Advisory Group worked closely with Vietminh officers. At the request of Ho Chi Minh, Chen Geng, commander of the Yunnan Military District, and General Vo Nguyen Giap directed the Vietminh's summer 1950 border campaign, at the same time as the U.S. military invaded South Korea. Chen directed his troops to take good care of the U.S. weapons the PLA had captured from the Guomindang because "we need these weapons to carry out our internationalism." By September 1950, as the U.S. military was preparing to invade North Korea, the Chinese had delivered 14,000 rifles, 1,700 machine guns, 150 pieces of artillery and large amounts of captured supplies to the Vietminh.³

In July, Mao wired Chen Geng to stress that "this battle is of great significance, and you should try your best to assist the Vietnamese in making a military breach of [Indochina's] situation." After two months of combat preparation, the Vietminh opened their summer offensive with a surprise attack that routed five French battalions, and took control of a 250-mile-wide area adjoining China. The weapons lost by the French equipped a Vietminh division and armed new recruits from the peasantry.⁴

Two weeks after the outbreak of the Korean War, an editorial in People's Daily commented that both China's war of resistance against the Japanese in the past and the Vietnamese war of resistance against the French can be taken as evidence of a victorious future for the Korean people."⁵

How the Chinese People's Volunteers Fought in Korea

The Chinese People's Volunteers (CPV) fought in Korea following revolutionary principles of warfare that had achieved decisive victories over Japanese occupation forces during World War II and over Chiang Kai-shek's U.S.-supported Guomindang. Many of these principles that were developed on the battlefield in Korea were applied during the Vietnam Wars from 1950-1954 and from 1959-1973.

These included tactics of deception and fighting at night in close combat to neutralize U.S. artillery and air power; gaining the initiative by concentrating forces larger than the enemy; using flanking tactics and striking at the enemy's rear; overcoming logistical difficulties by traveling by foot over difficult terrain; conducting political work in the CPV to tell the soldiers about the just nature of the war and why it must be fought; knowing the strengths and weaknesses of the revolutionary forces and those of the enemy; and being willing to fight a protracted war on the basis of self-reliance. Mao, CPV Commander Peng Dehuai and other CPV commanders believed that these factors would bring victory to a technologically inferior but politically superior army in a protracted war in Korea.⁶

In late October 1950, the CPV lured the American forces deep into North Korea.. Several weeks later they launched devastating close combat attacks at night, equipped

³ *Mao's Military Romanticism: China and the Korean War, 1950-1953* by Shu Guang Zhang (1995) 43; Chen Jian 133.

⁴ Zhang 70; Chen Jian 133; Gurtov 13.

⁵ People's Daily, July 6, 1950 in *The Strained Alliance* by Robert Simmons (1975) 150.

only with light machine guns, mortars, grenades and bayonets. In just two months, the CPV routed the demoralized US/UN forces in North Korea and drove them below Seoul in January 1951. This was the first defeat that the U.S. imperialist military suffered in the 20th century.

In September 1953, Mao stated that the Korean War had shattered the myth of U.S. invincibility:

We fought U.S. imperialism, an enemy wielding weapons many times superior to ours; and yet we were able to win and compelled it to agree to a truce. ... This time we have taken the measure of the U.S. armed forces. If you have never taken them on, you are liable to be scared of them. We have fought them for thirty-three months and got to know them for what they are worth. U.S. imperialism is not terrifying, nothing to make a fuss about. 6

One year after the victory of the Chinese revolution, the willingness of the People's Republic to go head to head with the most powerful military machine in history, and to make extremely heavy sacrifices in men and material, inspired and riveted the attention of the oppressed in many countries, including Vietnam's revolutionaries.

The People's Republic and the First Vietnam War, 1950-1954

In May 1950, before Truman and Secretary of State Acheson dispatched U.S. troops to Korea and ordered the 7th Fleet to the Taiwan Straits, they sent significant amounts of military aid to the French army and to the three "Associated States" for Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia that France had set up to disguise its colonial rule. A U.S. Military Advisory Assistance Group was set up in Saigon. By March 1953 the program included heavy bombers, tanks and naval vessels.

Between 1946 and 1954, the U.S. provided \$2 billion in weapons and military supplies to the French colonialists, making up 80 per cent of their military expenditures in Indochina. In late 1953, U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles stated that the war would be over in a year with a French victory.⁷

In early 1954 the New China News Agency (NCNA) revealed that the U.S. had sent fifty B-26 bombers and that more than 600 U.S. military advisers were operating in north Vietnam. Describing the growing U.S. military intervention in Indochina, on March 26, 1954 NCNA stated that "it is a true old saying that those who refuse to learn their lessons will have to pay the penalty."⁸

Officials in both the Truman and Eisenhower administrations explicitly linked Korea and Indochina. In late 1953, Dulles told the American Legion that "A single Communist Chinese aggressive front extends from Korea in the north to Indochina in the region." In March 1954 Dulles described a growing threat to U.S. imperialist interests in Indochina: "Southeast Asia is an important part of the world. It is the so-called "rice

6 "Our Great Victory in the War to Resist U.S. Aggression and Aid Korea, and Our Future Tasks," 12 September 1953, *Selected Works, Volume V* 115, 117.

⁷ Gurtov 22-24, 50.

⁸ Ibid. 86-88.

bowl' and is rich in many raw materials [and strategic materials] . . . If the Communist forces were to win uncontested control over Indochina or any substantial part thereof, they would surely resume the same pattern of aggression against the other free peoples in that area. . . The entire western Pacific area, including the so-called 'off-shore island chain', would be strategically endangered." This analysis was taken up by Eisenhower and later Kennedy as the "falling dominos" theory."⁹

The People's Republic shipped large quantities of weapons and munitions to the Vietminh even while the CPV was fighting against U.S. aggression in Korea from 1950 to 1953. According to a study by the U.S. State Department, the PLA shipped 20-30 tons of military supplies monthly to the Vietminh in 1951, 250 tons in 1952, and 750 tons in 1953.

The Vietminh produced large quantities of weapons and munitions in homemade factories in its base areas. Peasants flocked to the Vietminh as the French uprooted and "resettled" them in fortified camps, and killed their water buffaloes.¹⁰ In 1953, General Henri Navarre made a famous early prediction of victory: "Now we can see it clearly—like light at the end of the tunnel."¹¹ U.S. General William Westmoreland repeated this infamous statement in South Vietnam in 1967.

After the Korean armistice was signed in July 1953, the PLA's shipments to the Vietminh grew rapidly. This included hundreds of pieces of heavy field artillery, 37 mm anti-aircraft guns, 75 mm recoilless rifles, and 4,000 tons of munitions in 1954, much of which the CPV captured from the U.S. in Korea. This provided important support for the Vietminh's decisive victory in 1954 over the U.S.-supported French and French-colonial army at Dienbienphu on the remote northwest border of Vietnam and Laos.

In early 1954, Ho Chi Minh told the Australian journalist Wilfred Burchett: "Dien Bien Phu is a valley, and it's completely surrounded by mountains. The cream of the French expeditionary corps are down there, and we are around the mountains. And they'll never get out."¹²

As the 56 day siege intensified in April 1954, joint PLA and Vietminh units rushed additional weapons and munitions on 1000 Russian and Chinese trucks and thousands of bicycles over 600 miles from supply depots at the Chinese border. Engineering experts who had fought with the CPV in Korea helped Vietnamese fighters dig trenches and underground tunnels, which gradually strangled the stationary French troops.

China provided hundreds of 37 mm anti-aircraft guns to deny French jets and bombers the ability to function in the Dienbiephu valley. Anti-aircraft guns were operated by Vietnamese soldiers with Chinese advisors who had fought in Korea. Anti-aircraft flak was so deadly that many French pilots refused to fly at parachute level. This meant that an increasingly amount of supplies were being dropped into areas controlled by the Vietminh. According to Dienbienphu HQ, on April 30, 1954, one-half of the total load of supplies fell into the hands of the Vietminh. These American supplies, particularly

⁹ Ibid. 32, 81-82.

¹⁰ Yang Kuisong, "Changes in Mao's Attitude Towards the Indochina War, 1949-1973," 3-5; Gurtov 81, 168, 170; "Burchett on Vietnam" by David Marr in Burchett Reporting 214.

¹¹ *Approaching Vietnam: From World War II to Dienbienphu* by Lloyd Gardner (1988) 152-153.

¹² Gardner 163.

artillery and anti-aircraft shells, were promptly put to use by the Vietminh. A detailed map with French positions in the valley was obtained from a misguided parachute drop.¹³

The U.S. military prepared a last-ditch attempt to break the siege at Dienbienphu with bombing raids by 200 planes from two aircraft carriers in the South China Sea and from Clark Airfield in the Philippines. Known as “Operation Vulture,” these raids did not take place due to their probable ineffectiveness against Vietminh tunnel complexes that were closing in on the French strongholds, and the possibility of Chinese military intervention if Vietminh-PLA military depots and Chinese airfields on the border were attacked. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and Vice-President Richard Nixon recommended using three tactical atomic weapons in “Vulture.”¹⁴

Out of the French garrison of 20,000 at Dienbienphu, 8,000 were killed or were listed as missing, 8,000 were captured and 4,000 were wounded. The most seriously wounded were repatriated to the French government. This devastating defeat for French colonialism, and for U.S imperialism behind it, led to the formation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), led by the Vietnam Workers Party (VWP), in 1954.

The French defeat at Dienbienphu took place at the beginning of the five-power Geneva Conference in May 1954, which was attended by the People’s Republic and the Soviet Union. Secretary of State Dulles’ most memorable contribution to the Conference was his refusal to shake hands with Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai.

Zhou and the CCP leadership won over Ho Chi Minh and Pham Van Dong, the DRV’s chief negotiator, to accept a temporary division of Vietnam. The Chinese believed that the supply lines for a Vietminh offensive in the South would be dangerously overextended, and that a new offensive in the South might lead to direct U.S. military intervention. Under these circumstances, Chinese military aid would be limited due to its heavy losses in Korea, and since the PRC needed to rebuild its economy under its First Five Year Plan (1953-1957).¹⁵

The DRV finally adopted the position that it was necessary to consolidate its power north of the 17th Parallel before it could undertake the liberation of the South. At a Central Committee meeting of the Vietnam Workers Party in July 1954, Ho criticized a “leftist tendency” that ignored the danger of American intervention and the importance of negotiations.¹⁶ The VWP also foresaw the potential that the 50,000-90,000 Vietminh fighters and sympathizers who went to the North after 1954 could be trained for future political work and military operations in their native villages.¹⁷

However, Zhou and Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov pushed the Vietnamese leadership to hold nationwide elections in 1956 instead of elections in six months, before the Vietminh forces withdrew to the North. Under these conditions, Ho Chi Minh and

¹³ *Hell in a Very Small Place* by Bernard Fall (1966) 226, 255, 266, 327-328, 347, 357

¹⁴ Zhang 70; *Mao’s China & the Cold War* by Chen Jian (2001) 134-136; Gurtov 98.

¹⁵ Gurtov 94-95, 135-136.

¹⁶ *China & the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975* by Qiang Zhai (2000) 50, 53; Gurtov 153-154.

¹⁷ *Mao’s China* 142.

¹⁸ Gardner 298, 311. Explaining why the U.S. opposed nationwide elections, Dulles claimed that South Vietnam was “politically immature. . .and was the scene of civil war and disruption [which would not] really reflect the will of the people.”

the Vietminh would have won the elections, or would have been able to politically isolate the American strategy in the international arena.¹⁸

When Zhou Enlai returned to Beijing, he told that Central People's Government Council that the "neutralization" of the three Indochinese states called for by the Geneva Declaration would avoid an East-West military confrontation there.¹⁹ Four years later, under pressure from Mao, Zhou was criticized for a "conservative and rightist tendency" in handling the PRC's foreign relations. This included wishful thinking concerning imperialism, especially the U.S. imperialists.²⁰

After Geneva, the U.S. pushed aside the French and installed a neo-colonial state in South Vietnam led by Ngo Dinh Diem, who the U.S. hoped would turn out to be a new and improved Chiang Kai-shek. Diem's main objective was to suppress Vietminh supporters in the South under the leadership of a U.S. military mission led by Colonel Edward Lansdale. Lansdale had engineered a defeat of the communist-led Hukbalahap insurgency in the Philippines. In 1956, the unpopular Diem regime proclaimed the formation of a "Republic of Vietnam," and both Diem and the U.S. blocked a vote. By the end of the decade, the U.S. provided \$850 million in military and economic aid to Diem, one of the largest American programs in the world.²¹

China's Military Assistance and Political Support for the Revolutionary Struggles in South and North Vietnam in the 1960s

During the Vietnamese war of liberation, China provided the largest amount of military and economic aid of any country and advocated a strategy of people's war in a country that, like pre-revolutionary China, was overwhelmingly rural.

In addition to its internationalist support for the people's struggles in Vietnam and Korea, the People's Republic provided political support and military assistance for revolutionary and national liberation movements in India, the Philippines, Palestine, the neo-colonial and white settler states in Africa, and many Latin American countries in the 1960s.

In the late 1950s, the majority of the VWP leadership stated that their primary task was to build socialism among 30 million people in the North, postponing the liberation of 14 million people in the South. Under the influence of the "peaceful transition to socialism" adopted by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956, the Third National Congress of the VWP in September 1960, led by Ho Chi Minh, held out the possibility of a "peaceful reunification of the South and North."

However, the growing repression of Diem's police and army, and a number of powerful peasant uprisings in the South, forced their hand.²² This led to the formation of

¹⁹ "Report on the Work of the Government, August 11, 1954 in *Zhou Enlai and the Foundations of Chinese Foreign Policy* by Kuo-kang Shao (1996) 218-221.

²⁰ Mao's China 73.

²¹ Ibid. 292-297, 340.

²² Communist Road to Power 190-193; *Ho Chi Minh* by William Duiker (2000) 510-514, 518-519, 523.

the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (NLF) in the South in December 1960, and its armed wing, the People's Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF), in 1961. While the NLF was led by the VWP, the majority of its members were nationalist and non-communist, and the NLF called for a national democratic revolution in the South.

The NLF distributed land among the South's poor peasantry, who joined the Front and volunteered for local guerilla forces, village self-defense units and the regular forces of the PLAF. The NLF believed that military action required broad-based political mobilizations and a strong political base in the villages where 80 percent of the population lived.²³

Far from the 17th Parallel dividing South from North Vietnam, the NLF and its military forces practiced political, economic and military self-reliance. They began with indigenous weapons, employed mines manufactured in jungle arms factories, traps with bamboo and steel spikes, and increased their firepower with U.S. weapons captured from the ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) and with large numbers of portable Chinese weapons.²⁴

Relying on superior intelligence, closely coordinated PLAF and guerilla forces chose when and where to fight against the increasingly demoralized conscripts in the ARVN. In order to neutralize ARVN air power, they dug tunnel complexes, fought at night and used captured U.S. 37mm machine guns to shoot down helicopters.²⁵

As the number of U.S. Green Beret "advisers" under the Kennedy administration steadily grew in the early 1960s,²⁶ the NLF and VWP stated that the revolutionary and anti-U.S. struggle in the South would be protracted. In December 1963, the Ninth Plenum of the VWP took a position supporting Mao's theory of revolutionary war, based primarily on revolutionary work among the peasantry and a strategy of organizing the rural areas to encircle the cities in order to take power in South Vietnam.²⁷

In support of people's war in the South, China increased its arms shipments. At a 1963 meeting in Beijing between Mao and Vo Nguyen Giap, the commander of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA), Mao offered to equip 230 PLAF and NVA battalions with Chinese weapons.²⁸ Mao and Giap also discussed plans for countering a likely

²³ Kolko 138-142; Ho Chi Minh 528.

²⁴ According to a 1965 U.S. State Department White Paper, the PLAF was equipped with new Chinese 7.62 assault rifles and light machineguns, mortars, rockets and anti-tank grenade-launchers. *Vietnam Documents* edited by George Katsiaficas (1992) 67.

²⁵ *Vietnam: Inside Story of the Guerilla War* by Wilfred Burchett (1964) 27-95. This Australian journalist visited the liberated areas and battlefronts of South Vietnam in 1963 and early 1964.

²⁶ There is a stubborn myth that President Kennedy was planning to extricate U.S. military forces from South Vietnam before he was assassinated in late 1963. In fact, Kennedy supported U.S. military escalation there until the end. In a televised interview on CBS on September 2, 1963, Kennedy stated that "Those people who say that we ought to withdraw from Vietnam are wholly wrong, because if we withdraw from Vietnam, the Communists would control Vietnam. Pretty soon . . . all of Southeast Asia would be under the control of the Communists and under the domination of the Chinese." *A Vietnam Reader* edited by George Moss (1991) 67. Kennedy was not killed for his Vietnam policy, but more likely due to his decision to not provide air cover to the CIA-backed invasion force that met defeat at Cuba's Bay of Pigs in 1961.

²⁷ Zhai 125.

²⁸ Mao's China 207.

introduction of U.S. combat troops in South Vietnam, and a possible U.S. ground attack on North Vietnam.

During the early 1960s, Soviet military and economic aid to North Vietnam was reduced significantly by Premier Nikita Khrushchev so the revisionist Soviet Union could pursue détente with the U.S. imperialists. Just as it had done with China in 1960, the Soviet Union demanded in 1963 that the DRV pay back its debts for foreign “aid.”²⁹

In 1964, the Chinese government extended its military commitments to North Vietnam. In a meeting with Hanoi’s Ambassador to the PRC on July 27, 1964, Mao assured the DRV that if the U.S. military and its South Vietnamese puppet regime expanded the war into North Vietnam, the People’s Liberation Army was prepared to intervene: “We must be prepared. Both North Vietnam and China must be prepared. . . . If the United States attacks North Vietnam, that is not just your problem. They will have to remember that we Chinese also have legs. The Americans can dispatch their troops. Cannot we Chinese also dispatch our troops? From our country to your country, we take one step and we are already there.”³⁰

In mid-1964, the U.S. was losing the war. The NLF controlled over one-half the population and more than half the land area of South Vietnam.³¹ The Johnson administration made a decision to escalate the war, eventually sending 500,000 ground troops to the South, and ordered the U.S. Navy and Air Force to bomb both military and civilian targets throughout North Vietnam, as well as Laos and Cambodia. A pretext was provided in the first week of August 1964 after North Vietnamese torpedo boats allegedly attacked two U.S. destroyers. (In fact, these ships had been conducting electronic surveillance off the coast of North Vietnam.) As the U.S. escalated the war in the South and bombed the North, the DRV leadership sent increasing numbers of troops and weapons down the “Ho Chi Minh Trail” to support the NLF/PLAF forces.

In response to the U.S. escalation, the Chinese and Vietnamese leaders agreed that the PLA would send road and rail engineering and anti-aircraft units to North Vietnam that would allow the NVA to send additional divisions to the battlefields of the South. In May 1965, Ho Chi Minh met with Mao in Beijing to firm up their arrangement that the Vietnamese would fight the war with their own forces, while China would provide large-scale logistical support and defend the North from U.S. attacks.³²

As a result of this agreement, between 1965 and 1973 the People’s Republic sent a total of 320,000 soldiers in rotation to defend North Vietnam.³³ 80,000 Chinese road and rail construction troops linked major routes in southern China with the 12 main roads

²⁹ *Vietnam Triangle: Moscow, Peking, Hanoi* by Donald Zagoria (1967) 43; Zhai 124.

³⁰ Mao’s China 209.

³¹ Communist Road to Power 228.

³² Zhai 135.

³³ Mao’s China, 218-229.

to Hanoi. Drawing on the extensive tunneling experience of the CPV in Korea, Chinese engineers constructed a permanent underground defense installation in the Red River delta area, and built underground plane shelters for Hanoi's airport. A Chinese communication engineering brigade also erected 900 kilometers of telephone lines to link strategic areas of the DRV. From 1964 to 1965, the Chinese supply of weapons increased 2.8 times, reaching a total of 220 million guns and over 4 million artillery pieces.³⁴

Beginning in late 1964, the government and people of North Vietnam were facing intense U.S. aerial bombardment. In response, China sent 16 divisions of anti-aircraft units, with a total strength of 150,000. The main objective of these units was to neutralize B-52 bombers based in Thailand and jets based on U.S. carriers in the Gulf of Tonkin. In 1965, the NVA and the PLA set up a uniform radar system that enabled them to direct anti-aircraft fire from Hanoi and Haiphong up to the Chinese border. In the course of the war, China lost over 1,100 of its soldiers and 4,200 had been wounded defending North Vietnam from U.S. bombing.³⁵

In addition, four Chinese air divisions were deployed to newly built airfields in the southern and coastal areas of China. These bases served as sanctuaries for North Vietnamese MiG-15 and MiG-17 fighters, and allowed the PLA air force to engage U.S. planes that crossed into Chinese airspace. In January 1965, Chinese and North Vietnamese jet fighters conducted joint air exercises in an area 12 miles south of the Chinese-Vietnamese border.

In the midst of the U.S. escalation in the summer of 1965, Chinese and North Vietnamese military leaders agreed that if U.S. and South Vietnamese ground forces were used to attack North Vietnam, the PLA would be deployed as a strategic reserve in the north, and it would conduct military operations against U.S. forces if necessary. In addition, great emphasis was placed on building up the People's Militia. Mao stated: "We must not only have a strong standing army but also must build up militia divisions. Only in this way can we pin down imperialism should it invade our country."³⁶

On June 1, People's Daily stated: "The United States raises a howl about how China is assisting Vietnam. Why all the fuss? The United States, all the way from the other side of the ocean, has sent troops to China's neighboring country, threatening China's security daily. Why should socialist China not give all-out support to socialist, fraternal Vietnam?" In December 1965, Zhou Enlai linked the Vietnam and Korean Wars: "The Chinese people have been long prepared. Should U.S. imperialism insist on going along the road of war expansion and on having another trial of strength with the Chinese people, the Chinese people will resolutely take up the challenge and go along with it to the very end. Come what may in the future, the Chinese people will unswervingly side with the fraternal Vietnamese people."³⁷

³⁴ *The East Wind Subsides* by Andrew Wedeman (1987) 77-78, quoting Mao from the Changsha Domestic News Service, May 4, 1965.

³⁵ *The Chinese Calculus of Deterrence: India and Indochina* by Alan Whiting (1975) 184, 191.

³⁶ Mao's China 227-229; Zhai 134-135; Whiting 180.

³⁷ Mao's China 214; "China and the Vietnam Wars" by Chen Jian in *The Vietnam War* (1998) 67.

While Secretary of State Dean Rusk asserted in mid-1965 that the U.S. military would not observe “sanctuaries” in China, the rapid military buildup of the People’s Republic in southern China, and its internationalist deployment of a total of 320,000 troops to North Vietnam in the 1960s, was a credible and successful deterrent to American expansion of the ground war into North Vietnam and the U.S. air-naval war into China.

As the U.S. sent hundreds of thousands of troops to South Vietnam in 1965, the CCP leadership issued an authoritative statement on the role of people’s war and the global significance of the revolutionary struggle in Vietnam:

Vietnam is the most convincing current examples of a victim of aggression defeating U.S. imperialism by a people’s war. The United State has made south Vietnam a testing ground for the suppression of people’s war. . . The U.S. aggressors are in danger of being swamped in the people’s war in Viet Nam. They are deeply worried that their defeat will lead to a chain reaction. They are expanding the war in an attempt to save themselves from defeat. . . The people in other parts of the world will see still more clearly that U.S. imperialism can be defeated, and that what the Vietnamese people can do, they can do too.³⁸

In the wake of the “Gulf of Tonkin Incident” fabricated by the Johnson administration, Mao called for a nationwide “Resist America and Aid Vietnam Movement.” Over 20 million people took part in rallies and demonstrations all over China in one week in August 1964. They protested “U.S. imperialist aggression against Vietnam,” and demonstrated their solidarity with the Vietnamese people. Through many such activities in the following years, the concept of Resisting America and Assisting Vietnam would penetrate into every part of Chinese society.

In May 1970, Nixon ordered American troops to conduct a large-scale cross-border operation to eliminate NVA-PLAF bases in Cambodia. Protests targeting the U.S. government’s war against the Vietnamese people were held in major Chinese cities, including a rally of a million people at Tienanmen Square in Beijing on May 20. At this rally, Mao issued a statement titled “People of the World, Unite and Defeat the U.S. Aggressors and All Their Running Dogs”:

A new upsurge in the struggle against U.S. imperialism is now emerging throughout the world. . . . The situation is getting better and better in the war of resistance against U.S. aggression and for national salvation waged by the people of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. . . . U.S. imperialism, which looks like a huge monster, is in essence a paper tiger, now in the throes of its death-bed struggle. Innumerable facts prove that a just cause enjoys innumerable support while an unjust cause finds little support. A weak nation can defeat a strong, a small nation can defeat a big. The people of a small country

³⁸ “Long Live the Victory of People’s War’ in September 1965 by Defense Minister Lin Biao. Lin acknowledged that this article was a summary of Mao’s thinking of people’s war. On Vietnam, see Section 9, www.marxists.org/linbiao.

can certainly defeat aggression by a big country, if only they dare to rise in struggle, dare to take up arms and grasp in their own hands the destiny of their country.”³⁹

The People’s Republic Meets a Growing Soviet Threat in the late 1960s- -and the North Vietnamese Leadership Aligns Itself with the Soviet Imperialists

Chinese military aid to North and South Vietnam was substantial from 1959 to 1968. However, the Chinese anti-aircraft and engineering troops in North Vietnam were withdrawn from 1969-1970 in order to meet a serious Soviet threat on China’s northern border that had been developing since 1966. By early 1969, the Soviet Union had massed one million troops, including SS-4 and SS-5 medium range missiles, in an area of historically Chinese territory that had been seized by the Tsarist empire in the 19th century.

In March 1969, two pitched battles were fought between Soviet and Chinese forces on Zhenbao Island on the Ussuri River. In August 1969, Soviet diplomats were sounding out their European communist allies on the possibility of a Soviet pre-emptive attack on China’s nuclear facilities (where it had detonated its first nuclear bomb in 1964) as well as possible thrusts of Soviet conventional forces into China. Ominously, the Soviet Air Force flew bomber units to bases in Mongolia and Siberia, where they carried out simulated attacks on nuclear facilities.⁴⁰

In the face of these serious and growing threats to the People’s Republic, the leaders of North Vietnam were silent. The Soviet Union was now the main military danger to socialist China, but the DRV adopted a bourgeois nationalist line that replaced proletarian internationalist solidarity with socialist China with a pragmatic dependence on military aid from the imperialist Soviet Union.

After Khrushchev was ousted by Leonid Brezhnev in October 1964, the Soviet Union adopted a new policy of “armed revisionism” that replaced collaboration with the U.S. with armed contention with the U.S. imperialists. This led to a major realignment in the Vietnam Triangle—the strategic relationships among North Vietnam, China and the Soviet Union. In February 1965, Soviet Premier Kosygin, accompanied by a group of missile experts, travelled to Hanoi where he reached the first in a series of agreements with the DRV to supply it with SAM-7 surface-to-air missiles, MiG-17 jet fighters and other advanced weapons that required large numbers of Soviet and Eastern European technicians and operators.⁴¹

This provision of Soviet weapons led the North Vietnamese leadership to pragmatically side with the CPSU in the ongoing polemics between socialist China and the Soviet Union, where capitalism had been restored for nearly a decade.

To take one notable example, the leaders of the VWP took a negative view of Mao and the Cultural Revolution that was in line with the Soviet revisionists. According

³⁹ *People’s China: 1966-1972* edited by Milton, Milton and Schurmann (1974) 419-421.

⁴⁰ *White House Years* by Henry Kissinger (1979) 184; “The Soviet-Chinese Conflict of 1969,” by Igor Sutyahin www.nato.int/acad/fellow/94-96/sutyagin/02-03

⁴¹ *Communist Road to Power* 240-241.

to VWP Secretary Le Duan; “After 1967-1968 and the Cultural Revolution, we no longer looked on the Chinese leaders who succeeded one another in the long power struggle as socialists. ... Non-socialists have eliminated the outstanding militants. Those who fought against Mao after 1966 were in general the best of the lot.”⁴² “Those who fought against Mao” could only mean the leading pro-Soviet capitalist roaders in the CCP, Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping.⁴³ Liu had attempted to send a Chinese delegation to the CPSU’s 23rd Congress in March 1966 with the objective of reactivating the Sino-Soviet alliance. Le Duan attended this Congress, at which he described the Soviet Union as his “second motherland.”⁴⁴

While the leaders of the VWP hailed Brezhnev and the Soviet Union as the leading force in an anti-U.S. “socialist camp,” even after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, China identified the USSR as a country that had developed into a social-imperialist superpower. In an article in April 1970 titled “Leninism or Social Imperialism?” the editors of People’s Daily quoted Mao:

Representatives of the bourgeoisie who have sneaked into the Party, the army and various spheres of culture ... once conditions are ripe will seize political power. From this stratum, there has emerged a bureaucrat monopoly class, namely, a new type of big bourgeoisie which dominates the whole state machine and controls all the social wealth. ... In order to extract maximum profits and maintain its reactionary rule, this new type bureaucrat monopoly class not only exploits and oppresses the people of its own country, but it necessarily engages in rabid expansion and aggression, joins the company of world imperialism in re-dividing the world, and pursues the most vicious social-imperialist policies.”⁴⁵

Mao’s Continuing Support for the Vietnamese People’s Struggle in the 1970s—and the Withdrawal of Support by Zhou and Deng

For 30 years, Vietnam was a storm center of revolutionary struggle against French and U.S. imperialism and their dependent neo-colonial regimes. The Vietnamese people and their military forces inflicted devastating defeats on the overconfident French and American armies, and attracted political support and sympathy from millions all over the world. Yet from the late 1960s to the final defeat of the U.S. backed regime in Saigon in

⁴² Le Duan quoted in The Manchester Guardian, October 29, 1978; “Vietnam: Miscarriage of a Revolution,” *Revolution*, July-August 1979, 4. See the Vietnam page, www.bannedthought.net.

⁴³ Deng not only led the CCP in restoring capitalism between 1976-1978, he presided over the development of a powerful capitalist economy that would grow into a monopoly capitalist-imperialist economy after his death in the 1990s. For a detailed description of this process, see *Is China an Imperialist Country? Considerations and Evidence*, N.B. Turner, et al. (March 2014) www.red-path.net.

⁴⁴ People’s China 388; Mao’s China 232.

⁴⁵ People’s China 455-456.

1975, the anti-imperialist revolution of the Vietnamese people and its goals of national independence and socialism were betrayed from within, and Vietnam was delivered into the hands of the Soviet imperialists.

By 1970, the NVA command relied on advanced Soviet weapons, which were employed by its main-force units in Laos in 1971 and its 1972 Spring Offensive in the northern provinces of South Vietnam.⁴⁶ In early 1975, the NVA launched an offensive that crossed the 17th Parallel with mechanized armored forces provided by the Soviet military. Combined NVA-PLAF forces crushed the decaying Thieu regime and liberated South Vietnam in four months. In a demonstration of the extent of Soviet influence over the North Vietnamese leadership, the meeting of the VWP Politburo that planned and monitored the 1975 offensive was attended by a high-ranking Soviet military adviser, resulting in a sharp increase in Soviet military shipments.⁴⁷

Large-scale military aid from the Soviet Union after 1968 enabled the North Vietnamese leadership to discard the strategy of people's war, to adopt conventional and positional warfare that was aimed at a quick victory, and to align their international positions with those of the Soviet imperialists. While the advanced Soviet weapons that were employed in force by NVA units beginning in 1971 brought their victory closer, Vietnam's revolutionary forces could have fought with captured U.S, indigenous and Chinese weapons, and could have defeated both the U.S. and its puppet South Vietnamese forces with the support of the NLF and the masses of people in the South. Such a strategy might have taken longer to implement. However, it would have supported the ability of revolutionary forces in the North and South Vietnamese leaderships to maintain their independence from the Soviet imperialists both before and after they liberated South Vietnam.

Even while the revisionist leaders of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) tied themselves more closely to the Soviet imperialists, Mao and his four most prominent allies in the Politburo of the CCP maintained a principled internationalist position of political and military support for the DRV and the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam.

On the eve of U.S. Secretary of State Kissinger's secret visit to Beijing in 1971, the CCP Politburo met and agreed that in addition to relieving the Soviet military pressure on their northern border, talks with the U.S. government would facilitate the final withdrawal of U.S. military forces from Vietnam and promote the ongoing peace negotiations in Paris between the North Vietnamese and U.S. governments.⁴⁸

In his talks with Kissinger in Beijing in October 1971, Mao made U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam a priority. After a meeting between Zhou and Kissinger, Mao said that "We are not in a hurry on the Taiwan issue because there is no fighting there. But there is a war in Vietnam and people are being killed there. We should not invite Nixon to come just for our own interests." After decades of pressing China's claim for Taiwan, Mao told

⁴⁶ Ibid. 278-280.

⁴⁷ Zhai 141.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 195.

Kissinger that he would be satisfied if the Shanghai Communique acknowledged that Taiwan was part of the People's Republic.⁴⁹

After listening to Zhou's report on his meeting with Kissinger on October 23, 1971, Mao told Zhou that "it is desirable to let each side speak out for itself. If the American side wanted to talk about "peace, security and no pursuit of hegemony," Mao continued, then the Chinese side should emphasize "revolution, the liberation of the oppressed peoples and nations in the world, and no rights for big powers to bully and humiliate small countries."⁵⁰ At the U.S.-China summit in Beijing in February 1972, Mao told Zhou to tell Nixon and Kissinger that normalization of relations between China and the U.S. required that the U.S. military withdraw from Vietnam. Mao rejected Nixon's request that China put pressure on the Vietnamese to make concessions in the ongoing Paris Peace Talks between the U.S. and North Vietnam.

In the Shanghai Communique of February 1972, the Chinese position, shaped by Mao, stated: "It firmly supports the struggles of all the oppressed peoples and nations for freedom and liberation ... and opposes foreign aggression, interference, control and subversion. All foreign troops should be withdrawn to their own countries [and gives] its firm support to the seven-point proposal of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam."⁵¹ In order to convince the North Vietnamese that China's strategic opening to the U.S. imperialists would not undermine their war effort, the PRC raised its military assistance to the DRV from 1971 to 1973, which had declined between 1969 and 1970 in order to meet the threat from the Soviet imperialists.⁵²

In 1972, Nixon sent hundreds of B-52s to bomb more extensive targets in North Vietnam. The U.S. also mined the port of Haiphong and other harbors. In response, between July 1972 and August 1973, the PLA Navy sent twelve minesweepers to North Vietnam. China also built five oil pipelines from southern China to the DRV. Chinese military aid to North Vietnam in 1973 reached 1968 levels.⁵³ This was a sign that the Maoist forces in the leadership of the CCP still had substantial political influence over the level of military aid to the Vietnamese people.

The position of Mao and his allies on the level of Chinese military aid to Vietnam and its objectives was opposed in the top leadership of the CCP. In 1972, Congressman and future U.S. President Gerald Ford returned from China after holding conversations with Premier Zhou Enlai and Foreign Minister Qiao Guanhua. In his report to President Nixon, Ford stated that China encouraged a U.S. presence in the Pacific to counter the Soviet military threat.⁵⁴

Thus, at least by 1972 there were sharp differences in the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party around its approach to the Vietnam War. The former Vietnamese ambassador to Beijing describes a meeting held after the signing of the Paris Peace Accords in 1973 between Mao, Zhou Enlai, Le Duan and North Vietnamese Premier Pham Van Dong: "At this meeting, Zhou stated that "Vietnam should win a spell of time to get prepared ... After a period of armistice, it would be difficult for the United

⁴⁹ Zhai 267.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 271.

⁵¹ People's China 599.

⁵² Zhai 195.

⁵³ Ibid. 203. See Table I on "China's Military Aid to the DRV, 1964-1975," 136.

⁵⁴ *The Sino-Vietnamese Conflict* by Eugene Lawson (1984) 250.

States to barge in.”⁵⁵ At the same meeting, Mao stated that “The problem of [Thieu’s] troops can only be solved by war ... to liberate the South.”⁵⁶ Differing with Zhou, Mao rejected any “preparation” period for the Vietnamese people to pursue their revolutionary struggle to victory.

Zhou’s cautionary statements around the revolutionary struggle in Vietnam were a product of his position that the Soviet Union was not just the main danger to China, but to the whole world. In September 1975, Deng Xiaoping described this theory to VWP Secretary Le Duan. Based on his support for the Soviet imperialists, Le Duan rejected Deng’s lecture out of hand. The revisionist Chinese leadership grouped around Zhou and Deng sharply reduced China’s aid to the DRV in 1974 and 1975.⁵⁷ They also undermined socialist China’s political standing in Vietnam and throughout the Third World and the imperialist countries, including in the U.S., the chief enemy of the Vietnamese people.

Both the increasing influence of the pro-U.S. Three Worlds Theory in the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party and the enlistment of North Vietnam in the Soviet bloc were counter-revolutionary positions whose main difference was that they supported rival imperialist superpowers.

It was a great disappointment and politically disorienting to people around the world who supported the struggle of the Vietnamese people against U.S. imperialism and its puppet regimes in Saigon to see the leaders of the reunited Vietnam after 1975 build state capitalism and join COMECON, the instrument of Soviet economic domination of its Eastern European satellites and Cuba. In 1977, as part of the Soviet Union’s “international division of labor,” Vietnam rapidly expanded imports of heavy machinery and technology from the Soviet bloc. In order to pay for these industrial imports, the Vietnamese government oriented its economy toward exports like coal, cotton, coffee, rubber and fruit and vegetables as part of COMECON’s “socialist” division of labor.⁵⁸

In 1976, in his Political Report to the Fourth Congress of the renamed Communist Party of Vietnam, Le Duan stated: “The decisive factor for the success of the process of advancing to large-scale socialist productivity is the constant increase of social labour productivity and economic efficiency.” This statement can be found in any manual of the U.S. National Association of Manufacturers on increasing labor productivity and profitability. It is a hallmark of state capitalism.

⁵⁵ Ibid. 235-236; Zhai 207. According to a U.S. intelligence report, a DRV delegation to Beijing in 1975 was “politely advised” (undoubtedly by the Zhou-Deng forces who were in command of Chinese foreign policy at that time) that it should not renew the fighting. Lawson 239.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 235, citing the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, June 15, 1979.

⁵⁷ Zhai, Table 1, 136.

⁵⁸ “Vietnam on the Aid Trail,” by Francois Nivolon, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, December 9, 1977

The Vietnamese revisionists also signed a 20 year military alliance of “Friendship and Cooperation” with the Soviet Union in 1978. In line with this treaty, the Vietnamese government provided the Soviet Union with a naval base at the U.S.-built base at Danang in order to maintain and refuel long-range Soviet reconnaissance aircraft. In 1979 several hundred Soviet naval experts arrived at the former multi-billion dollar U.S. naval port of Cam Ranh Bay, which they transformed into a major Soviet naval installation.⁵⁹

With the final collapse of the Soviet imperialist empire in 1989-1991, the leaders of the Communist Party of Vietnam changed their course to pragmatically seek economic integration into the Western imperialist bloc and political rapprochement with the U.S. imperialists. As wages in China have increased due to a wave of strikes, many Chinese factories have relocated to Vietnam, where the minimum wage is less than half that of China. Vietnamese workers, who fought against French and U.S. imperialism for more than seven decades, are now super-exploited by U.S., European, Japanese, Chinese, and their own capitalists.

⁵⁹ “Vietnam: The Miscarriage of the Revolution,” at www.bannedthought.net.