

# Deng Xiaoping and China's Decision to go to War with Vietnam

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During the Cold War, the People's Republic of China (PRC) was involved in two large-scale military operations—one in Korea against the United States from October 1950 to July 1953, and the other against Vietnam in 1979. Regrettably, in China the war with Vietnam is forgotten history. The event is rarely discussed in the media, and scholars in China are prohibited from studying it. Until the mid-1970s, China and Vietnam had been close Cold War allies. Why, then, did the PRC decide in late 1978 to go to war with the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV)? Official Chinese sources have given no satisfactory answer to this question. Beijing's initial reasons included Hanoi's hegemonistic "imperial dreams" in Southeast Asia; the violation of China's borders and the subsequent incursion into Chinese territory; the mistreatment of ethnic Chinese living in Vietnam; and Vietnamese intimacy with the Soviet Union, which at the time was extending its sphere of influence into Southeast Asia.<sup>1</sup> Contemporaneous observers as well as several later studies claimed that Beijing's real objectives were to divert Hanoi's military pressure from Cambodia and tie down Vietnamese forces on a second front.<sup>2</sup> Other observers have contended that Beijing's use of military force against Vietnam was an attempt to discredit the Soviet Union as a reliable ally, in response to Vietnamese cooperation with the Soviet encirclement of China from Southeast Asia.<sup>3</sup>

China's decision to wage war on Vietnam was shaped in part by the dete-

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1. *Renmin ribao* [People's Daily], 19 March 1979. For an English version, see *Beijing Review*, 23 March 1979.

2. Harlan W. Jencks, "China's 'Punitive' War on Vietnam: A Military Assessment," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 19, No. 8 (August 1979), pp. 802–803; Steven J. Hood, *Dragons Entangled: Indochina and the China-Vietnam War* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1992), pp. 50–57; and Edward C. O'Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War: The Last Maoist War* (New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 6.

3. Robert S. Ross, *The Indochina Tangle: China's Vietnam Policy, 1975–1979* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 253; and Bruce Elleman, *Modern Chinese Warfare, 1785–1989* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 285.

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riorating relationship between Beijing and Hanoi, by Vietnam's new alliance with the Soviet Union, and by the SRV's regional hegemony, but it also stemmed from the PRC's endeavor to improve its strategic position in the world while also advancing a domestic agenda of economic reform. Three events took place in Beijing in December 1978 that also had an important impact on the Chinese decision to go to war: Deng Xiaoping's reascendance to the top leadership at the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Beijing's adoption of economic reform as the highest national priority, and the normalization of China's relationship with the United States. Deng, as a chief architect of China's national strategy in the immediate post-Mao era, played a dominant role in China's decision to attack Vietnam. Existing scholarship has recognized Deng's role in China's decision to go to war, but interpretations of the decision have varied widely.

Gerald Segal in his 1985 analysis believed that leadership politics played little part in China's decision and that high-level disagreements, if any, did not affect Chinese military operations.<sup>4</sup> King Chen offered a contrary argument that the decision was made after "repeated, prolonged debates" at the Central Work Conference in late 1978 and that Deng's leadership style was "an indispensable element in convincing" the deeply divided CCP Politburo to go along with the decision.<sup>5</sup> A relatively recent study by Andrew Scobell claims that Chinese civilian and military leaders were divided between supporters and opponents of military action against Vietnam and that decision-making on the war was part of the succession struggle in post-Mao Chinese politics.<sup>6</sup>

The study of China's decision to attack Vietnam is hindered by the lack of Chinese documentation, but this gap is partly offset by the increasing amount of Chinese-language source materials, particularly the memoirs of high-ranking military officers, as well as declassified U.S. documents.<sup>7</sup> In this article I first discuss how a proposal by the General Staff of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to use force in resolving border disputes with Vietnam

4. Gerald Segal, *Defending China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 225–226.

5. King Chen, *China's War with Vietnam, 1979* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1987), pp. 85–86, 152.

6. Andrew Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force beyond the Great Wall and the Long March* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 124–143.

7. The most notable memoirs are Zhou Deli, *Yige gaoji canmouzhang de zishu* [Personal Recollections of a High-Ranking Chief of Staff] (Nanjing: Nanjing chubanshe, 1992); *Xu Shiyou de zuihou yizhan* [The Last Battle of Xu Shiyou] (Nanjing: Jiangsu renmin chubanshe, 1990); and Zhang Zhen, *Zhang Zhen huiyilu* [Zhang Zhen's Memoirs] (Beijing: Jiefangjun chubanshe, 2003). In addition, Chinese Internet sites contain documents, memoirs, personal recollections, and excerpts from Chinese publications regarding the 1979 war with Vietnam. The most useful is "ZhongYue zhangzhen beiwanglu" [Memoranda of Sino-Vietnam War], <http://bwl.top81.cn/war79/index.html>.

evolved into a decision to launch a large-scale invasion. I then examine domestic and international factors that influenced the strategic thinking of Chinese leaders, particularly Deng, and shaped the decision to go to war. These factors include Beijing's new push for economic reform and its opening to the outside world, Vietnamese policies opposing China, the SRV's invasion of Cambodia, and the Soviet-Vietnamese alliance. Deng seemed convinced that Soviet-Vietnamese strategic cooperation was a threat to Chinese security. Not only did he hope that normalized relations with the United States would improve the PRC's strategic position and facilitate economic reform with U.S. support; he also expected that a Chinese attack on a Soviet ally would persuade the U.S. government that U.S. and PRC interests coincided. Deng's political victory at the CCP's Third Plenum consolidated his position in China and deterred anyone from challenging his decision for what eventually turned out to be a deadly and costly war. Unlike the discussions that preceded China's entry into the Korean War, no serious debates about Beijing's decision to go to war against Vietnam ever occurred at high levels.<sup>8</sup> However, the ongoing power struggle inside the party leadership did influence the decision.

## China's Response to Border Incidents

After North Vietnam's military victory over South Vietnam in 1975, CCP leaders became increasingly concerned about Hanoi's foreign policy. The Chinese came to worry about Soviet influence in Indochina as Hanoi moved ever closer to Moscow for material aid and ideological ties.<sup>9</sup> Chinese leaders were also irritated by Hanoi's efforts to forge special relations with Laos and Cambodia, the latter of which came under mounting military pressure from Vietnam.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps most important of all, Beijing and Hanoi clashed over territorial issues. In the past, China had invaded Vietnam several times to achieve regional domination but not to acquire territory. Vietnam, for its part, had

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8. For studies of China's decision on the Korean War, see Shu Guang Zhang, *Mao's Military Romanticism: China and the Korean War, 1950–1953* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1995), ch. 4; Chen Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), ch. 4; and Xiaoming Zhang, *Red Wing over the Yalu: China, the Soviet Union, and the Air War in Korea* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2002), ch. 3.

9. Ross, *The Indochina Tangle*, pp. 118–123, 127–128. The Chinese claimed that the PRC could not maintain the same level of assistance for Vietnam that it did during the war because the Chinese economy was facing great difficulties at the time. See Guo Ming, ed., *ZhongYue guanxi yanbian sisibinian* [The Development of Sino-Vietnamese Relations in Forty Years] (Nanning, China: Guangxi renmin chubanshe, 1992), p. 114.

10. Chen, *China's War*, pp. 35–36.

never challenged Chinese territorial claims. This situation began to change after 1975 when border disputes with Vietnam became a major issue for the PLA General Staff. The PLA ordered two border provinces and military regional and provincial commands to stabilize the border situation.<sup>11</sup> Despite Beijing's claims of wanting to resolve border disputes peacefully, violence on the border surged in 1978.

Historically, territorial disputes have been the most common reason for interstate wars.<sup>12</sup> The PRC's decision to attack Vietnam was intertwined with other factors, however. China's initial move toward war came when the PLA General Staff responded to mounting border incidents amid quarrels over the ethnic Chinese in the SRV in mid-1978. On 12 August, Vietnamese armed personnel launched a surprise attack on a Chinese border patrol squad near Youyi (Friendship) Pass in Guangxi Province. Two weeks later in the same area, more than 200 Vietnamese troops occupied a mountain ridge on the Chinese side of the border and fortified their hilltop positions with more troops.<sup>13</sup> PRC officials claimed that border clashes rose from 752 in 1977 to 1,100 in 1978.<sup>14</sup> The scale of the incidents increased as well. Until August 1978, most were small and involved few casualties. The August incidents became fierce and deadly, indicating the involvement of a large number of Vietnamese troops. By all indications, the escalating border clashes were what first spurred leaders in Beijing to consider using military force against Vietnam.

In September 1978 the General Staff held a meeting in Beijing on "how to deal with our territory occupied by the Vietnamese forces." Deputy Chief of Staff Zhang Caiqian chaired the meeting with staff officers from the Guangzhou and Kunming Military Regions as well as those from the departments of operations and intelligence of the General Staff. At the outset, Zhang noted that the General Staff had to advise CCP leaders how to counter Hanoi's mistreatment of ethnic Chinese in Vietnam and the increasing provocations by Vietnamese military and security troops along the China-Vietnam border.<sup>15</sup> He was referring to a series of events in the summer of 1978. On 8 July, the General Political Bureau of the Vietnamese People's Army had or-

11. Luo Yuansheng, *Baizhan jiangxing Wang Shangrong* [The Biography of General Wang Shangrong] (Beijing: Jiefangjun wenyi chubanshe, 1999), pp. 375–377; and Yang Qiliang et al., *Wang Shangrong jiangjun* [General Wang Shangrong] (Beijing: Dangdai Zhongguo chubanshe, 2000), p. 626.

12. John Vasquez and Marie T. Henehan, "Territorial Disputes and the Probability of War, 1816–1992," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (2001), pp. 123–138.

13. Guo, ed., *Zhongyue guanxi yanbian sishinian*, p. 169; Zhou, *Yige gaoji canmouzhang de zishu*, pp. 241–242.

14. Han Huanzhi, chief ed., *Dangdai Zhongguo jundui de junshi gongzuo* [Contemporary Chinese Military Affairs] (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1989), Vol. 1, p. 659.

15. Zhou, *Yige gaoji canmouzhang de zishu*, pp. 239–240.

dered troops to pursue an “offensive strategy” against China and to launch “attack and counterattack within and beyond the border.”<sup>16</sup> Two weeks later, the Vietnamese Communist Party’s fourth plenary session had defined U.S. imperialism as a “long-term enemy” but branded China as the “most immediate, dangerous enemy” and a “new prospective foe.” At the same time, a new military district had been created in northwestern Vietnam along China’s Yunnan Province.<sup>17</sup> The PLA General Staff perceived a close correlation between Hanoi’s new animosity and the increasing border tension. Existing scholarship depicts the border issue as “more a venue for confrontation than a matter of serious dispute,”<sup>18</sup> but from a Chinese perspective the border issue was the starting point for contemplating an attack on Vietnam.<sup>19</sup>

From the time the PRC was founded, Chinese leaders had demonstrated a proclivity to use military force in territorial disputes with other countries. The PLA had been employed to uphold claims of sovereignty against India in 1962 and the Soviet Union in 1969. The PLA General Staff continued this tradition in proposing an operation against a Vietnamese regiment at Trung Khanh, a border county adjacent to Guangxi Province. The General Staff’s proposal was carefully designed to avoid escalation, which could threaten the PRC’s economic progress. Zhou Deli, the chief of staff of the Guangzhou Military Region, recalled later that the General Staff believed that the isolated location of Trung Khan would allow the PLA to separate the Vietnamese outpost from any reinforcements and easily wipe it out. After a day of reviewing intelligence about the prospects of a Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia and discussing the overall situation, the majority of the participants concluded that the current problem with the SRV was not just a border issue and that any military action must have a significant impact on Vietnam and the situation in Southeast Asia. They recommended a strike on a regular Vietnamese army unit in a larger geographic area. Despite ending without any specific decision, the meeting set the tone for China’s eventual war against Vietnam, linking the attack plan with the SRV’s own actions in Southeast Asia.<sup>20</sup>

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16. Han Lianlong, chief ed., *Dangdai Zhongguo waijiao* [Contemporary Chinese Diplomacy] (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1990), pp. 285–286.

17. Vietnamese National Defense Ministry, Military History Institute, *Yuenan renminjun wushinian* [Fifty Years of Vietnamese People’s Army], trans. by Liu Huanpu et al. (Beijing: Junshi Yiwu chubanshe, 1994), pp. 267–268.

18. Brantly Womack, *China and Vietnam: The Politics of Asymmetry* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 199.

19. A recent study notes that from 1949 through 2007 China had 23 territorial disputes with its neighbors on land and at sea and used force in six of them. See M. Taylor Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation: Cooperation and Conflict in China’s Territorial Disputes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 1–2.

20. Zhou, *Yige gaoji canmouzhang de zhisu*, pp. 242–243.

Unfortunately, no Chinese sources have been released that explain how the PLA General Staff modified its war plan in subsequent months. Apparently, officials in Beijing were concerned that local PLA commanders might become too aggressive in responding to the mounting border incidents and would jeopardize the central war planning. On 21 November, the CCP Central Military Commission (CMC) ordered the regional commands to comply with the main strategy against Soviet hegemony during their handling of border incidents and ordered all border units to stick to the maxim “on just grounds, to our advantage, and with restraint” (*youli, youli, youjie*), striking only after the enemy struck.<sup>21</sup> Two days later, the General Staff convened another meeting to discuss a new scheme of war. Taking into consideration the earlier recommendations, the General Staff broadened the scope and duration of operations, aiming to destroy one or two regular Vietnamese divisions in a three- to five-day operation near the border.<sup>22</sup> Some participants believed these operations would not go far enough because they were still limited to a remote area and posed no immediate threat to Hanoi. However, they voiced no dissent, deferring to the top commanders’ judgment. The General Staff ordered the Guangzhou and Kunming Military Regions to carry out the campaign and authorized the transfer of the PLA’s strategic reserves, the two armies of the Wuhan and Chengdu Military Regions, to reinforce the Guangxi and Yunnan fronts.<sup>23</sup> Subsequently, the war plan was significantly changed in response to the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia. But the fact that the PLA General Staff was planning a major military campaign even before Vietnamese forces crossed the Mekong suggests that at least initially the war was intended to force Vietnam to accommodate China’s demands on border disputes and the expulsion of ethnic Chinese.

## Deng’s Return to the Center of Power

How did Chinese leaders view the war plan? A speech by the CMC General Secretary, Geng Biao, on 16 January 1979 sheds light on Beijing’s delibera-

21. “Zhongguo Renmin Jiefangjun Tongjian” Editorial Committee, *Zhongguo renmin jiefangjun tongjian* [A General Record of the PLA of China, 1927–1996], 3 vols. (Lanzhou, China: Gansu renmin chubanshe, 1997), Vol. 2, p. 2173.

22. Unless cited otherwise, all detailed information about China’s invasion plan is provided by Cai Penggen, a history graduate student at Southwest University in China.

23. Zhou, *Yige gaoji canmouzhang de zishu*, pp. 244–245; Zhang Zhen, *Zhang Zhen junshi wenxuan* [Selected Military Works of Zhang Zhen] (Beijing: Jiefangjun chubanshe, 2005), p. 298; and Wang Hancheng, *Wang Hancheng huiyilu* [Wang Hancheng Memoirs] (Beijing: Jiefangjun chubanshe, 2004), p. 535. Both Zhang and Wang mention that the troops from Wuhan and Chengdu Military Regions were regarded as the PLA’s strategic reserves.

tions about how to counter the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia. In November 1978 Wang Dongxing, the CCP vice-chairman, and Su Zhenghua, the first political commissar of the navy and a CCP Politburo member, proposed that Chinese troops or a naval detachment be sent to Cambodia. Xu Shiyou, the commander of the Guangzhou Military Region, requested permission to attack Vietnam from Guangxi Province.<sup>24</sup> Geng Biao reported that after careful consideration CCP leaders rejected all of these recommendations.<sup>25</sup> King Chen contends that Geng Biao, who clearly would have been aware that the PLA had already marshaled troops along the Vietnamese border, was deliberately concealing Beijing's military plans.<sup>26</sup> Geng Biao's report also failed to reveal the role of Deng Xiaoping in the decision-making as he consolidated power while the political influence of Wang and Su was elapsing at the time.<sup>27</sup> The PRC's initial decision on Vietnam coincided with a new round of the power struggle inside the CCP.

Deng Xiaoping, a long-standing party leader and statesman of China, reemerged in China's political arena in July 1977 as CCP vice-chairman, vice-chairman of the CMC, deputy premier, and chief of the PLA General Staff. Deng's rehabilitation did not initially mean that he had overwhelming authority within the CCP. Hua Guofeng, as chairman of both the CCP and the CMC, assisted by Wang Dongxing, the CCP vice-chairman, remained in control of party and state affairs and continued to carry out many of the late Chinese leader Mao Zedong's ideas and policies.<sup>28</sup> Ye Jianying remained in charge of the CMC. Deng, who had just returned to high office, volunteered to take charge of science and education, spheres that were seen as less important than party and military affairs.<sup>29</sup> From August 1977 to December 1978,

24. This probably happened at a November CMC meeting in 1978. See Zhang, *Zhang Zhen huiyilu*, Vol. 2, pp. 165–66; and Jin Ye, Hu Juchen, and Hu Zhaocai, *Baizhan jiangxing Xu Shiyou* [Biography of General Xu Shiyou] (Beijing: Jiefangjun wenyi chubanshe, 1999), pp. 329–331.

25. Geng Biao, "Secret Report," 16 January, 1979, in *Studies on Chinese Communism*, No. 166 (15 October 1980), pp. 150–152.

26. Chen, *China's War*, p. 87.

27. Ye Yonglie, *Cong Hua Guofeng dao Deng Xiaoping: Zhongkang shiyijie sanzhong quanhui qianhou* [From Hua Guofeng to Deng Xiaoping: Around the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Party Committee] (Hong Kong: Tiandi Books, 1998), pp. 526–527; Sun Dali, "A Historical Turning Point of New China: The Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee," in Lin Zhijian, ed., *Xin Zhongguo yaoshi shuping* [Review of the Important Events of New China] (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1994), p. 498; and Xiao Jinguang, *Xiao Jinguang huiyilu xuji* [Xiao Jinguang Memoirs: Continuation Edition] (Beijing: Jiefangjun chubanshe, 1988), pp. 361–363.

28. The Third Plenum of the Tenth Central Party Committee, held from 16 to 21 July 1977, designated Hua as CCP chairman with full control of party, state, and military affairs. Ye was still in charge of the military, and Wang, who was promoted to vice chairman of the CCP one month later, was responsible for party organization, propaganda, and public security. See Ye, *Cong Hua guofeng dao Deng Xiaoping*, pp. 222, 227, 235–236, 240.

29. Deng Xiaoping, *Deng Xiaoping wenxuan* [Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping] (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1983), Vol. 2, p. 65.

the power struggle between Hua and Deng intensified.<sup>30</sup> As chief of the PLA General Staff, Deng was well aware of the war planning, but he seemed uncertain whether an attack on Vietnam would be supported by the full CCP Politburo. Furthermore, Deng needed to consider the goals the PLA would seek to achieve through military action beyond simply punishing Vietnam. During a visit to Singapore in early November 1978, in answer to Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's query whether China would use force against Vietnamese forces in Cambodia, Deng demurred. On one occasion, he told Lee that China would punish Vietnam, but on another occasion he merely responded, "it depends."<sup>31</sup>

The political scale tilted in favor of Deng soon after his return to Beijing. From 10 November to 15 December, the Central Work Conference was held with leaders from the provinces, military regions, and central party, government, and military organs in attendance. The original agenda focused solely on domestic affairs—agricultural development and economic policies for 1979 and 1980—and did not include the Indochina situation, contrary to what King Chen earlier claimed.<sup>32</sup> The meeting took an unexpected turn when Chen Yun, an economic planner for Mao, delivered a speech on 12 November insisting that they must address the legacies of the Cultural Revolution first. The agenda thereafter shifted to the rehabilitation of senior party cadres who had been persecuted during the Cultural Revolution and to criticism of the Hua-Wang alliance for continuously pursuing an ultra-left ideological policy. The meeting ended with the convocation of the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Party Congress, at which Chen Yun became a CCP vice-chairman, consolidating Deng Xiaoping's political position. With the change of political atmosphere in Beijing, Deng gradually became the preeminent decision-maker in China.<sup>33</sup>

One of Deng's first key decisions, announced at the Third Plenum, was to shift China's national priority to economic modernization and an opening to the outside world.<sup>34</sup> Under this program, the United States was deemed the main source of advanced ideas and technology and the most favorable mirror for modernization. A former PRC deputy foreign minister, Zhang Wenjin, re-

30. Ye, *Cong Hua guofeng dao Deng Xiaoping*, pp. 222–226; and Sun, "A Historical Turning Point of New China," pp. 478–480.

31. Lee Kuan Yew, *From the Third World to First: The Singapore Story, 1965–2000* (New York: Anchor Press, 2000), pp. 601–602.

32. Chen, *China's War*, p. 85.

33. Although Wang remained a CCP vice-chairman, he was no longer in control of the general office of the party or the central guard unit of the PLA. Ye, *Cong Hua Guofeng*, pp. 463–528.

34. Deng Xiaoping, *Deng Xiaoping wenxuan* [Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping], Vol. 3 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1993), p. 269.



called that Deng believed that if China opened merely to other countries but not to the United States, the new policy would be futile.<sup>35</sup> By December 1978, Beijing had invited several major U.S. corporations to help develop natural resources, petroleum, and other heavy industries in China. Foreign policy issues were not included in the agenda of the Central Work Conference or the Third Plenum, but a combination of domestic politics and the PRC's deteriorating relationship with Vietnam (symbolized by the SRV's new alliance with the Soviet Union) spurred CCP leaders to arrange a special meeting on the establishment of diplomatic relations with the United States.<sup>36</sup> The U.S. factor played a significant role in Chinese strategic thinking on the eve of China's invasion of Vietnam.

## The Soviet Factor

Qiang Zhai's study of China's relations with North Vietnam before April 1975 notes that unlike earlier Chinese leaders, who maintained close personal relationships with Vietnamese officials, Deng did not have any "deep individual attachment to the Vietnamese." By late 1978, Deng was so offended by what he saw as Hanoi's challenge to Beijing's interests that he had no "scruple to wage a war to teach Vietnam a lesson."<sup>37</sup> In 1979, Vietnamese leaders also accused Deng of having opposed Vietnamese interests even during the Vietnam War. Le Duan claimed that Deng not only had tried to persuade the North Vietnamese to downplay the revolution in the south, but had also discouraged the North Vietnamese from accepting Soviet aid, making this a condition of continued Chinese aid.<sup>38</sup>

All told, China provided Hanoi with \$20 billion worth of assistance over two decades, more than any other country supplied.<sup>39</sup> When Vietnamese

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35. Li Shenzhi, *Li Shenzhi wenji* [Collected Works of Li Shenzhi] (Beijing: n.p., 2004), p. 334.

36. Qian Jiang, *Deng Xiaoping yu ZhongMei jianjiao fengyun* [Deng Xiaoping and the Establishment of Diplomatic Relationship between China and the United States] (Beijing: Zhonggong dangshi chubanshe, 2005), p. 153; and Gong Li, *Deng Xiaoping yu Meiguo* [Deng Xiaoping and the United States] (Beijing: Zhonggong dangshi chubanshe, 2004), p. 236.

37. Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950–1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), p. 214.

38. "Comrade B on the Plot of the Reactionary Chinese Clique against Vietnam (1979)," trans. by Christopher E. Goscha, *The Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, No. 12/13 (Fall/Winter 2001), pp. 281, 284, 289. See also, Odd Arne Westad, et al, eds., "77 Conversations between China and foreign Leaders on the Wars in Indochina, 1964–1977," CWIHP Working Paper No. 22, Cold War International History Project, Washington, DC, p. 57.

39. This is China's official statistic, but how it was calculated is unclear. According to an authoritative Chinese source, China provided North Vietnam with a total of 4.26 billion RMB in military aid from 1950 to 1974. Li Ke and Hao Shengzhang, *Wenbua dagemin zhong de jiefangjun* [The PLA in the Cultural Revolution] (Beijing: Zhonggong dangshi ziliao chubanshe, 1989), p. 409.

officials began to force the repatriation of ethnic Chinese in northern Vietnam and to encroach on Chinese territory along the border, many Chinese were angered by what they regarded as Hanoi's ingratitude for China's aid and sacrifice. The PRC witnessed a public outpouring of anger against Vietnam, spurred on by official propaganda.<sup>40</sup> Those who had assisted the Vietnamese Communists in their wars against France and the United States felt particularly betrayed and were eager to "teach Vietnam a lesson." Vice Premier Li Xiannian characterized Chinese military actions as "a slap in the face of [Vietnam] to warn and punish them."<sup>41</sup> Deng Xiaoping was no exception. His annoyance with Vietnam's "ungracious" attitude can be traced back to the mid-1960s.<sup>42</sup> Although animosity between China and Vietnam intensified in the late 1970s, Deng became increasingly sentimental, even once calling Vietnam the *wangbadan* (literally "tortoise eggs" but can be translated as "son of a bitch") in front of a foreign leader.<sup>43</sup> As Raymond Aron pointed out, in a situation in which "hostile intentions [exist] on both sides, passion and hatred [are likely to] arise."<sup>44</sup> What Deng saw as Vietnam's "insolence," along with the escalating border clashes and ongoing exodus of Chinese residents, generated "passion and hatred" in Beijing, facilitating consideration of military options. The use of military force was also in line with the strategic thinking of China's highest leader.

After returning to power, Deng's foreign policy views initially remained under the influence of Mao Zedong's strategic thinking, which regarded Soviet global expansion and Soviet military force as the main threat to peace. Despite Moscow's attempt to reconcile with China in 1977 and 1978, Chinese leaders refused to trust the Soviet Union because of the long-standing animosity between the two countries.<sup>45</sup> The USSR continued a major military buildup near China and routinely conducted military exercises with live ammunition in simulated armed conflict on the borders.<sup>46</sup> Starting in the early

40. Guo, ed., *ZhongYue guanxi*, p. 106.

41. Luo, *Baizhan jiangxing Wang Shangrong*, p. 377.

42. See Westad et al., eds., "77 Conversations," pp. 94–98, 194–195.

43. Lee, *From the Third World*, p. 595.

44. Raymond Aron, *Peace and War: A Theory of International Relations* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1973), p. 19.

45. For example, in March 1978, the leader of the USSR Supreme Soviet sent a message to the Standing Committee of the Chinese National People's Congress proposing that the Soviet Union and China issue a friendly statement on principles guiding state relations. The Chinese publicly turned down this proposal.

46. For Deng's views about the Soviet Union, see Memorandum of Conversation, Brzezinski-Deng, 21 May 1978, in China Vertical File, Jimmy Carter Library (JCL). See also Wang Zhongchun, "The Soviet Factor in Sino-American Normalization, 1969–1979," in William C. Kirby, Robert S. Ross, and Gong Li, eds., *Normalization of U.S.-China Relations: An International History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2005), pp. 165–166.

1970s, Mao pursued the strategy of a global “horizontal line” (*yitiaoxian*); that is, a strategic line of defense against the Soviet Union stretching from Japan to Europe to the United States. The basis of Mao’s “line” strategy was close cooperation between China and the United States. Washington, however, had not responded to this approach in a way that Beijing had expected. Chinese leaders concluded that the United States was still primarily interested in a policy of détente toward the Soviet Union.<sup>47</sup>

Chinese frustration continued during the early years of the presidency of Jimmy Carter, who had come to office vowing to give higher priority to U.S.-Soviet détente. Deng disliked the U.S. policy of seeking to ease international tension by negotiations. On 27 September 1977, he met with George H. W. Bush, the former director of the U.S. liaison office in Beijing, and criticized U.S. nuclear arms control agreements with the Soviet Union which had not prevented the USSR from achieving parity.<sup>48</sup> Several months later, the Chinese leader repeated the criticism to Zbigniew Brzezinski, Carter’s national security adviser, during Brzezinski’s visit to Beijing in May 1978. Deng warned him about Soviet intentions, which he said were malign toward the United States. The Chinese leader did not believe that agreements or cooperation with the Soviet Union would prevent Soviet expansion. Brzezinski, however, suggested that China’s policy was simply “rhetorical.” Deng disagreed, explaining that China had done whatever was within its capacity.<sup>49</sup> It is difficult to know for sure whether this exchange had a psychological influence on Deng, but he did later admit that he did not want other countries to perceive China as soft in confronting the Soviet-Vietnam alliance.<sup>50</sup> The Chinese military action was expected to prove that Beijing would not just pay lip service if China and the United States were united in opposing Soviet aggression.<sup>51</sup>

In November, several developments caused further anxiety in Beijing. First, Chinese leaders worried about the possible normalization or improvement of relations between the United States and Vietnam. On 3 November, Li Xiannian voiced displeasure in a conversation with U.S. Energy Secretary James Schlesinger, stating that closer ties with the SRV would not draw Viet-

47. Wang, “The Soviet Factor in Sino-American Normalization, 1969–1979,” pp. 158–164.

48. PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives, *Weiren de zuji: Deng Xiaoping waijiaohuodong dashiji* [The Footprints of a Great Man: The Record of Deng Xiaoping’s Participation in Important Foreign Events] (Beijing: Shijie zhishi chubanshe, 1998), p. 158.

49. Memorandum of Conversation, Brzezinski-Deng, 21 May 1978.

50. Kyodo News, 26 February 1979, in U.S. Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Reports: China (FBIS-PRC), 26 February 1979, p. A6.

51. Deng Xiaoping believed that the war against Vietnam would show that “China refuses to be taken in by fallacies [*buxinxie*].” See Deng Xiaoping, *Deng Xiaoping junshi wenji* [Collected Military Works of Deng Xiaoping] (Beijing: Junshi kexue chubanshe, 2004), Vol. 3, p. 177.

nam away from the Soviet Union.<sup>52</sup> The Chinese appeared more anxious than before to accelerate negotiations with the United States on the establishment of diplomatic relations, reviving talks that had stalled in early July 1978. Second, the strengthening of Soviet military ties with Vietnam after the signing of the Soviet-Vietnamese Treaty of Peace and Friendship on 3 November sparked alarm in Beijing. The Chinese assumed that the Soviet Union had backed Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia and the stirring up of tensions on China's southern borders.<sup>53</sup> For the PRC, Vietnam was becoming a serious military threat that accentuated the Soviet threat from the north. China needed to seek a strategic balance through military action to counter Vietnamese "regional hegemonism."

On 7 December the CMC met for several hours and decided to launch a limited war to "hit back" at Vietnam.<sup>54</sup> Some at the meeting expressed concern that the Soviet Union might respond with a retaliatory attack from the north, forcing China to fight a two-front war. The PLA General Staff's intelligence analysis indicated that the Soviet Union would have three military options in response to the invasion: (1) a large-scale armed incursion including a direct attack on Beijing; (2) instigation of armed ethnic minority émigrés to attack China's outposts in Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia; and (3) the use of skirmishes to foment border tensions between the two countries. Although 54 Soviet divisions were deployed along the borders with China and Mongolia, the PLA General Staff calculated that two-thirds of these divisions were undermanned and inadequately equipped and that the Soviet Union did not have enough troops to mount a large-scale military intervention in China. Any Soviet intervention would force Moscow not only to transfer a large number of troops from Europe, but also to place its own national security at great risk because of a possible U.S. response. The Soviet Union could not attack China from the north without taking this into consideration.<sup>55</sup> On 8 December the CMC ordered the Guangzhou and Kunming Military Regions to be ready for military action against Vietnam by 10 January 1979.<sup>56</sup>

52. Memorandum from Stansfield Turner to Brzezinski, 21 November 1978, in NLC-26-57-1-6-4, JCL.

53. Wang, "The Soviet Factor in Sino-American Normalization," p. 166. The existing Western scholarship offers no evidence of a Soviet role in Vietnam's decision to invade Cambodia. See Stephen J. Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia: Political Culture and the Causes of War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), pp. 215–217.

54. Min Li, *ZhongYue zhanzheng shinian* [Ten Years of Sino-Vietnam War] (Chengdu, China: Sichuan daxue chubanshe, 1993), p. 15.

55. *Ibid.*, pp. 16–17.

56. Zhou, *Yige gaoji canmouzhang de zishu*, p. 246.

## Normalization of China-U.S. Relations

As PLA forces prepared for an invasion of Vietnam, Deng Xiaoping decided to “quicken the pace” of the negotiations on normalizing relations with the United States, remarking that “it will be to our advantage.”<sup>57</sup> Zhu Qizhen, the Chinese ambassador to the United States, later recalled that the main sticking point was “the sale of [U.S.] weapons to Taiwan” and that “if we had insisted that the United States had to stop selling weapons to Taiwan, we might have lost the chance to establish diplomatic relations with the United States.”<sup>58</sup> He did not explain why the establishment of diplomatic relations with the United States was so crucial to China in December 1978. Chinese party historians have claimed that CCP leaders had to grasp the chance to make a decision because they were planning a limited war against Vietnam and decided to concentrate the party’s work on economic construction and modernization.<sup>59</sup> But these historians do not provide any details. One thing that is clear from available Chinese sources and from U.S. archival records is that Chinese leaders, particularly Deng, considered all the events as a whole.

November 1978 was a critical time in the history of normalization of China-U.S. relations when both sides appeared intent on securing an agreement by the end of the year. Deng took the lead in championing the establishment of diplomatic relations with the United States. At a meeting of the CCP Politburo on 2 November, he directed the Foreign Ministry to probe U.S. intentions on normalization. “We should accelerate the normalization of relations with the United States in terms of the economy,” Deng remarked.<sup>60</sup> In the meantime, the Chinese leader stressed to American visitors that normalization of relations with the PRC “would do more for American security than any number of arms control treaties signed with Moscow.”<sup>61</sup> At a special meeting on 27 November, Deng emphasized “the importance of not missing the opportunity” for normalized relations and gave instructions regarding the next round of negotiations.<sup>62</sup> He apparently had made up his mind by this

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57. Qian, *Deng Xiaoping*, p. 151.

58. Zhong Wen and Lu Haixiao, eds., *Bainian Deng Xiaoping* [Hundred Years of Deng Xiaoping] Vol. 2 (Beijing: Zhongyang wengxian chubanshe, 2004), p. 160. See also Gong Li, “The Difficult Path to Diplomatic Relations: China’s U.S. Policy, 1972–1978,” in Kirby, Ross, and Li, eds., *Normalization of U.S.-China Relations*, p. 315.

59. Gong, “The Difficult Path to Diplomatic Relations,” p. 140.

60. Leng Rong and Wang Zuoling, eds., *Deng Xiaoping nianpu* [Chronicle of Deng Xiaoping’s life, 1975–1979] (Beijing: Zhongyang wengxian chubanshe, 2004), Vol. 1, p. 417.

61. Patrick Tyler, *A Great Wall: Six Presidents and China—An Investigative History* (New York: A Century Foundation Book, 1999), p. 260.

62. Wang Taiping, ed., *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo waijiaoshi* [Diplomatic History of the PRC] (Beijing: Shijie zhishi chubanshe, 1999), Vol. 3, p. 378.

point even though some nettlesome questions were not yet resolved. In early December, Deng told the party leaders in some provinces and the commanders of several military regions that China and the United States would establish diplomatic relations on 1 January 1979. He did not want to see the Americans “stick their tails up” (*qiaoweiba*) and therefore would not get directly involved in the negotiations until the Central Work Conference was over.<sup>63</sup>

The chief point of contention remained the question of U.S. arms sales to Taiwan after relations with China were normalized. The Chinese side understood from President Carter’s forceful statement to Chai Zemin, the director of the Chinese Liaison Office in Washington, in September 1978 that the United States would continue to provide Taiwan with defensive weapons.<sup>64</sup> On 4 December, the Chinese negotiator registered the PRC’s “emphatic objection” to this position. U.S. officials believed that this opposition pertained only to the issue of arms sales and that the Chinese would not seek to prevent normalization of relations.<sup>65</sup> This belief soon created confusion in Washington as well as in Beijing.

In November, U.S. policymakers tried to determine how to work out the final terms of the agreement on the establishment of diplomatic relations. High-ranking Chinese officials, for their part, were intent on eliminating ultra-leftist forces at the Central Work Conference, and Deng himself was mulling over policy guidelines that would push for domestic reform and an opening to the world.<sup>66</sup> In early December, the Chinese leader also signed an order to mobilize PLA forces for an attack on Vietnam.<sup>67</sup> Against the backdrop of these events, Deng took the negotiations into his own hands, holding four talks with Leonard Woodcock, director of the U.S. liaison office in Beijing, from 13 to 15 December 1978. According to Woodcock’s reports of the discussions, Deng gave no indication that he would acquiesce in U.S. arms sales to Taiwan. When Woodcock stated that the United States would “refrain from selling weapons to Taiwan” after the U.S.-Taiwan Defense Treaty became invalid in 1979, Deng mistakenly assumed that this meant the United States would never again sell arms to Taiwan.<sup>68</sup>

63. Qian, *Deng Xiaoping*, p. 156.

64. Memcon, Carter-Chai, 19 September 1978, in China Vertical File, JCL.

65. Memorandum from Brzezinski to Carter, 5 December, 1978, in China, Box 9, Brzezinski File, JCL.

66. On 5, 9, and 11 December, Deng spent half the day with his speechwriters going over the final address he would deliver at the Central Work Conference, scheduled for 13 December. See Leng and Wang, eds., *Deng Xiaoping nianpu*, Vol. 1, pp. 448–449.

67. Min, *ZhongYue zhanzheng shinian*, p. 18.

68. Woodcock to Vance, 13 December 1978, and Woodcock to Brzezinski, 14 December 1978, in China Vertical File, JCL.

On the eve of unveiling the normalization agreement, Deng found out that the United States intended to continue selling arms to Taiwan after relations were established with China. The Chinese leader strongly objected but agreed to accept the U.S. negotiator's recommendation that both sides could "continue to discuss this question later on without affecting the issuance of the communiqué."<sup>69</sup> Chinese scholars argue that Deng's decision not to "quibble" over the arms sales issue was in keeping with his strategic and domestic objectives.<sup>70</sup> The PLA's preparations for an invasion of Vietnam were designed in part to promote Deng's "horizontal-line" strategy against Soviet expansionism. Li Shenzhi, Deng's foreign policy adviser, later explained that the Chinese leader regarded the attack on a Soviet ally as "a vital move" to prove that China's national interests were consistent with those of the United States.<sup>71</sup> From Beijing's perspective, the establishment of diplomatic relations on 1 January 1979 with Washington had altered the global balance of power in China's favor.<sup>72</sup>

## Deng Xiaoping Makes a Decision

Some scholars have claimed that a few Chinese leaders opposed the decision to attack Vietnam, but they disagree about which leaders and what form the opposition took.<sup>73</sup> Chinese archives on the matter are inaccessible, and existing Chinese publications offer few clues. In 1978, in addition to Hua, Deng, Chen, and Wang, other powerful Chinese leaders included Marshall Ye Jianying and Li Xiannian, as well as Marshals Xu Xiangqian and Nie Rongzhen, who were vice-chairmen of the CMC. Unfortunately, the published biographies and records of their lives make no mention of the roles that Ye, Li, and Nie played in China's war against Vietnam, even though all of them had long careers with the PLA.<sup>74</sup> In interviews with foreign journalists, Li was a vocal

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69. Woodcock to Brzezinski, 15 December 1978, in China Vertical File, JCL.

70. Li Jie, "China's Domestic Politics and the Normalization of Sino-U.S. Relations, 1969–1979," in Kirby, Ross, and Li, eds., *Normalization of U.S.-China Relations*, p. 87.

71. Li, *Li Shenzhi wenji*, p. 335.

72. Geng, "Secret Report," p. 149.

73. Chen, *China's War*, pp. 85–87; Ross, *Indochina Tangle*, pp. 23–31; and Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force*, pp. 130–132.

74. For examples, see Liu Jixian et al., eds., *Ye Jianying nianpu* [Chronicle of Ye Jianying's Life] (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 2007); Fan Shuo, chief ed., *Ye Jianying zhuan* [Biography of Ye Jianying] (Beijing: Dangdai Zhongguo chubanshe, 1997); Zhuo Junlun, chief ed., *Nie Rongzhen nianpu* [Chronicle of Nie Rongzhen's Life] (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1999); and Zhu Yu, chief ed., *Li Xiannian zhuan, 1909–1949* [Biography of Li Xiannian] (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1999).

supporter of the war.<sup>75</sup> But some other veteran revolutionaries were uncomfortable with the drastic change in China's foreign policy. The authors of Marshal Xu's biography indicate that the minister of defense opposed the horizontal-line strategy of alignment with the United States.<sup>76</sup> Marshal Ye, for his part, reportedly opposed Deng's decision to use military force against the SRV.<sup>77</sup> As a result, Ye traveled to Shanghai and did not attend the enlarged CCP Politburo meeting on New Year's Eve, when Deng's war proposal was scheduled to be discussed.<sup>78</sup>

The CCP's Third Plenum had positioned Deng as number three among Chinese leaders behind Hua, who was nominal leader of the party, and Ye, who was aged and had transferred his military responsibilities to Deng. After Mao, Zhou Enlai, and Zhu De all died, Deng, like Marshals Peng Dehuai and Lin Biao earlier, was seen by PLA officers as the commander-in-chief.<sup>79</sup> Even Ye had once acknowledged that Deng was not only a *lao shuai* (old marshal) but also the "foreman of old marshals."<sup>80</sup> Deng's seniority and prestigious status in the CCP and the military meant that his decisions as chief architect of the invasion of Vietnam were unlikely to be challenged. Ye shared Deng's strategic views and echoed China's support for Cambodia with the same rhetoric used by the Chinese government.<sup>81</sup> Xu's opposition to the one-line strategy received no support, and he ended up backing the war decision and getting involved in war planning. Furthermore, Deng's control of the PLA General Staff provided him with a convenient vehicle for military planning, which he pushed through the CMC a month before the central CCP leadership made a formal decision.<sup>82</sup>

75. China News Agency International Reference Group, *Woguo dui Yuenan ziwei huanjizhan ziliaoji* [Collected Materials of Our Country's Self-Defense Counterattack against Vietnam, 17 February–19 March 1979] (Beijing: China News Agency International Reference Group, 1979), pp. 16–17.

76. Liu Zhi and Zhang Lin, eds., *Xu Xiangqian zhuan* [Biography of Xu Xiangqian] (Beijing: Contemporary China Press, 1997), pp. 549, 553–554.

77. My sources informed me that Ye's opposition to the war against Vietnam was spurred by one of his family members.

78. Liu et al., eds., *Ye Jiaying nainpu*, p. 1165.

79. At the 1977 PLA Day evening party, when Deng's picture was projected on the big screen, all participants cried out for joy and responded with warm applause. Because Deng was not the commander-in-chief, the Central Leadership considered his reception to be a serious political incident and issued a circular criticizing it as an action that had ignored the party's rules and discipline. Reportedly, the General Political Department refused to transmit the circular to subordinate units. Zhang Sheng, *Cong zhanzheng zhong zoulai: Liangdai junren de duihua* [Coming from the War: A Dialogue between Two Generations of Soldiers] (Beijing: China Youth Press, 2007), pp. 412–413.

80. Ye, Cong Hua Guofeng, p. 212.

81. Liu et al., eds., *Ye Jiaying*, pp. 1158, 1165.

82. Liu Huaqing recalls that when he was assistant chief of the General Staff in early 1979, the General Staff would always send important documents to Deng for approval. See *Liu Huaqing huiyi lu* [Memories of Liu Huaqing] (Beijing: PLA Press, 2004), p. 394.



Despite his power and prestige within the party, Deng still needed to convince his colleagues why China should use force against Vietnam. He offered three reasons.

First, the current international anti-hegemony struggle against the Soviet Union was weakening because the United States, Japan, and Europe were afraid of starting a war. In light of Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia and provocations along China's border, the PRC itself must take the leading role in the struggle. The "self-defense counterattack," Deng argued, was aimed not at a mere border dispute but at the wider situation in Southeast Asia and even the entire world.

Second, Deng insisted that China needed a safe, reliable environment for its four modernizations. The PRC could not allow itself to be menaced by the Soviet Union from the north and Vietnam from the south, which would "wedge us in." China, he believed, should expose the hollowness of Vietnam's boast of being "the world's third strongest military power" and of "being ever victorious." If China failed to act, Deng claimed, it would simply fuel Vietnam's aggression and might encourage the Soviet Union to move in from the north. China's counterattack would thus also send a warning to the Soviet Union.

Third, Deng argued that because the PLA had not fought a war in thirty years, Chinese leaders could not be "sure that our military is still good enough." He agreed with the CMC's recent decision to increase troop training but believed that real combat would be even more beneficial. Deng worried about the PLA's reputation, which had suffered a great deal in recent years as a result of the Cultural Revolution. He was convinced that a successful war against Vietnam would help to restore the PLA's reputation and provide more officers with war experience.<sup>83</sup>

At an expanded CCP Politburo meeting on 31 December 1978, Deng formally proposed a punitive war against Vietnam.<sup>84</sup> Apparently influenced by Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia, the other participants not only accepted Deng's proposal for attacks on Lang Son, Cao Bang, and Lao Cai, but also made several changes to the original war plan by including a deployment of two additional armies to attack Dien Bien Phu from Mengla, Yunnan, via Laos in order to pose a more direct threat to Hanoi. The Politburo also decided to extend the operations by fifteen to twenty days in order to obliterate three to five Vietnamese divisions.<sup>85</sup> By all indications, the participants, in-

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83. Deng made these remarks at a meeting of the CCP Central Committee on 16 March 1979 that discussed the need for a counterattack along the China-Vietnam border. The full text is available at <http://wenku.baidu.com/view/d4c5afeb172ded630b1cb607.html>. An excerpt is available in *Deng Xiaoping nianpu*, Vol. 1, pp. 492–493.

84. Zhang, *Huiyilu*, Vol. 2, p. 166.

85. The two additional armies were the 50th from the Chengdu Military Region and the 54th from

cluding Hua Guofeng, unanimously supported Deng's proposal.<sup>86</sup> At the meeting, Deng appointed Xu Shiyou to command operations from Guangxi in the east and Yang Dezhi (the commander of the Wuhan Military Region) to command operations from Yunnan in the west, sidestepping Wang Bicheng, the commander of the Kunming Military Region.<sup>87</sup>

The reason for the change of command in Yunnan was not disclosed.<sup>88</sup> After returning to power, Deng became increasingly worried about the political quality of the PLA, especially about the loyalty of senior military officers. The political purges since the late 1950s and the ten years of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) had sown divisions within the ranks of the old generals and caused many to nurse grievances against the others. From 20 December 1978 to 3 January 1979 an enlarged CMC meeting attended by senior officers from three headquarters and from all the services and military regions dissolved into acrimony when participants exchanged bitter accusations. Marshal Xu failed to keep the meeting in order, and Deng brought it to an end without reaching any consensus.<sup>89</sup> One participant—Zhang Sheng, who was an officer on the General Staff and son of General Zhang Aiping, a senior military leader of the PLA—later argued that if not for the war with Vietnam a few weeks later, the turmoil among senior military officers might have continued. The PLA in 1979 was clearly not the capable military force that had fought in the Korean War and in border clashes with India and the Soviet Union. Zhang claims that Deng probably used the war against Vietnam to reassert control over the military.<sup>90</sup>

A series of changes in the PLA leadership in the early 1980s might at first glance suggest that the 1979 war with Vietnam inspired this reorganization, but in reality the streamlining of the PLA and its command system had been

the Wuhan Military Region. Both received mobilization orders on 5 January 1979. Cai Pengcen, "Those Events Happened in 1979," [http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_476745f601008im7.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_476745f601008im7.html).

86. Ye Jianying was on vacation in Shanghai at the time of the meeting and therefore did not participate. See Liu Jixian et al., eds., *Ye Jianying nainpu*, p. 1165.

87. Jin, Hu, and Hu, *Baizhan jiangxing Xu Shiyou*, p. 332; and Wang Xuan, *Mao Zedong zhi jian: Minjiang zhixing Xu Shiyou* [The Sword of Mao Zedong: A Star General Xu Shiyou] (Nanjing: Jiangsu renmin chubanshe, 1996), p. 132.

88. The change of command was rumored to be partly attributable to bad personal relations between Xu and Wang. The two generals had contended for a major victory against a key Nationalist unit during the civil war period. Then in 1966 during the Cultural Revolution, when Wang was Xu's deputy commander in the Nanjing Military Region, he openly supported the local political faction against Xu. Xu apparently was still resentful and advised Deng to make a change of command.

89. After an oral briefing about the conference from Xu, Yang Yong, and Wei Guoqing (director of the general political department), Deng made four points. First, the members of the leading group must be united; second, the problem of factionalism within the leadership must be eliminated; third, all issues must be handled by CMC business meetings; and fourth, the policies for rehabilitation must be implemented. See Leng and Wang, eds., *Deng Xiaoping nianpu*, Vol. 1, pp. 459–460.

90. See Zhang, *Cong zhanzheng zhong zoulai*, p. 415.

under consideration well before the war. The PLA's dismal performance in the war merely confirmed the need for sweeping changes.<sup>91</sup> This later reorganization was not connected with the change of command on the eve of the war, when Deng sent two of his deputy chiefs to Kunming to supervise the transition and war preparations.<sup>92</sup> In Beijing, the Chinese leader designated two aides, Yang Yong and Wang Shangrong, to coordinate the military operations of the two military regions, which would carry out their missions independently.<sup>93</sup>

Even though Deng was increasingly seen as the supreme leader akin to Mao, he was still obliged to consult trusted senior colleagues before making a decision. They were mindful of several key risks—that the Soviet Union would launch a retaliatory attack on China; that the United States would seek to profit from the situation; that world opinion would condemn the PRC; and that the war with Vietnam would impede China's new drive for economic modernization.<sup>94</sup> Deng invited one of his closest colleagues, Chen Yun, to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of a war against Vietnam. After contemplating the matter, Chen not only offered his full endorsement but also struck a reassuring tone.<sup>95</sup> He evidently helped to convince Deng that a defensive, limited, and brief military action against Vietnam would not provoke Moscow's intervention and would have little impact on domestic economic reform.

To prevent the situation from spinning out of control, the CCP Politburo subsequently decided that no matter what results were achieved on the battlefield after the seizure of two Vietnamese border provincial capitals—Lang Son and Cao Bang—the PLA forces would halt their advance, disengage from the fighting, and withdraw.<sup>96</sup> The promise of a short war was designed to allay concerns and undercut domestic opposition. Nevertheless, Chinese leaders could not lower their guard, and they ordered troops in the northern and northwestern military regions to step up combat readiness for possible Soviet strikes. They also stressed that if Soviet forces invaded, Chinese troops must “hold out firmly while not giving the impression of weakness.”<sup>97</sup>

91. Leng and Wang, eds., *Deng Xiaoping nianpu*, Vol. 1, p. 492.

92. “Lecture Notes on the 1979 Counterattack in Self-defense on the Sino-Vietnamese Border,” in “Zhongyue zhangzhen beiwangu.”

93. Jiang Feng et al., *Yang Yong jiangjun zhuan* [Biography of General Yang Yong] (Beijing: Jiefangjun chubanshe, 1991), p. 495; and Luo, *Wang Shangrong*, p. 377.

94. Zhou, *Xu Shiyou de suihuo yizhan*, p. 16.

95. Zhu Jiamu, *Chen Yun nianpu* [A Chronicle of Chen Yun's Life, 1905–1995] (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 2000), Vol. 2, pp. 235–236.

96. Zhang, *Huiyilu*, Vol. 2, p. 166.

97. Min, *Zhongyue zhanzheng shinian*, p. 17; and Jin Hui and Zhang Huisheng, *Zhongyue zhanzheng*

The New Year's Eve meeting deferred the timing of military action. Some Western analysts have argued that the PRC was still inhibited by concerns about the international reaction and that Deng's scheduled trips to the United States and Japan were intended to "test the waters."<sup>98</sup> In fact, Chinese leaders were mainly worried about whether their forces had enough time to make adequate preparations for the invasion. The initial orders to Guangzhou and Kunming were that "all units must reach their designated positions by 10 January 1979 and complete combat preparations at once."<sup>99</sup> However, Chinese soldiers had not engaged in any warfare since 1969, and many of them could not comprehend going to war against a traditional ally and small neighboring state.<sup>100</sup> Shortly after the New Year's Eve meeting, Deng sent Yang Yong, the deputy chief of the General Staff, Wei Guoqing, the director of the PLA's General Political Department, and Zhang Zhen, director of the PLA General Logistic Department, to inspect the troops' combat readiness at Yunnan and Guangxi.

Appalled by the lack of preparations, Zhang immediately recommended the postponement of the war for a month. He later recalled that the CMC agreed to defer military action until the middle of February.<sup>101</sup> On 22 January, Deng met at home with the chief leaders of the CMC: Xu Xiangqian, Nie Rongzhen, and Geng Biao. Yang reported on his recent trip to the front and offered suggestions for the war.<sup>102</sup> It was most likely at this gathering that the Chinese leaders not only reaffirmed the war decision, but also decided to suspend the plan to attack Vietnam from Yunnan via Laos. The Vietnamese forces had already occupied the major portion of Cambodia by mid-January. CCP leaders did not believe that a PLA attack from the north would significantly influence Hanoi's operations in the south. Two days later, the General Staff summoned the chief of staff of the Guangzhou Military Region to Beijing to finalize the war plan, conveying Deng's instruction that troops must be ready by 15 February 1979 to embark on their mission of eliminating enemy forces at Lang Son and Cao Bang. To assist the operation, the two additional armies freed from the abandoned invasion plan from the northwest were transferred to reinforce the attacks from Guangxi. The participants in

*milu* [The Secret Account of the China-Vietnam War] (Beijing: Jiefangjun chubanshe, 1991), pp. 27–28.

98. See, for example, Segal, *Defending China*, p. 214.

99. Zhou, *Yige gaoji canmouzhang de zishu*, p. 246.

100. The General Office of the General Political Department, *ZhongYue bianjing ziwei huanji zuozhan zhengzi gongzuo jingyan xuanbian* [Compilation of Materials on Political Work and Experience in the Counterattack in Self-defense on the China-Vietnamese Border] (Beijing: Guangxi renmin chubanshe, 1980), Vol. 1, pp. 2–19.

101. Zhang, *Huiyilu*, Vol. 2, pp. 170–171.

102. Jiang Feng et al., *Yang Yong*, p. 495.

the meeting characterized the forthcoming operation as a “self-defense counterattack against Vietnam.”<sup>103</sup>

## Seeking Washington's Support

On 28 January 1979, as Chinese troops prepared for war against Vietnam, Deng Xiaoping boarded a Boeing 707 to Washington for his historic visit to the United States. He sat taciturn in his own cabin, evidently immersed in thought and aware of the gravity of the trip.<sup>104</sup> His visit would complete a journey initiated by Mao nearly a decade earlier to forge a strategic relationship with the United States. Deng appeared unsure how the Americans would react to the planned war against Vietnam. Chinese leaders apparently assumed that China and the United States had similar strategic aims and would form a united front against Soviet hegemony. One of the major (if unstated) purposes of Deng's trip was to ally the United States with China in countering the Soviet-Vietnamese alliance in East Asia.<sup>105</sup> Deng's trump card was the Chinese military plan against Vietnam, for which he wanted to win U.S. support. According to Geng Biao, Deng proposed that the United States dispatch its naval ships to the South China Sea to contain Soviet naval activities while helping China with intelligence about Vietnamese vessels. Chinese leaders seemed convinced that giving the U.S. Navy access to the naval base at Yulin on Hainan Island “will be conducive to the stability of Southeast Asia.”<sup>106</sup>

Deng's schedule in Washington included three official meetings with President Carter. During the first two meetings, Deng and Carter exchanged views about world issues, and at the third session they planned to discuss the development of bilateral relations.<sup>107</sup> On the evening of 28 January, a few hours after arriving in Washington, Deng requested a special meeting with Carter to discuss the Vietnam issue, which came as a surprise to his American hosts.<sup>108</sup> The meeting, held in the Oval Office in the late afternoon on the 29th immediately after the second official session, was attended by Deng, For-

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103. Zhou, *Yige gaoji canmouzhang de zishu*, pp. 257–258; and Zhang, *Huiyilu*, Vol. 2, p. 171.

104. Qian, *Deng Xiaoping*, p. 211.

105. Gong, *Deng Xiaoping*, p. 255; Tao Wenzhao, “Deng Xiaoping and China-U.S. Relations, 19770–1991,” *Shehui kexue yanjiu* [Social Science Studies], No. 5 (2005), pp. 11–18; and Li Xiangqian, “The Establishment of China-U.S. Diplomatic Relations and the Strategic Shift in the Emphasis of Party Work,” *Zhonggong dangshi yanjiu* [Studies of the CCP Party History], No. 1 (2000), pp. 44–51.

106. Geng, “Secret Report,” p. 156.

107. Memorandum from Brzezinski to Carter, n.d. [1979], in China, Box 9, Brzezinski File, JCL.

108. Memorandum from Michael Oksenberg to Brzezinski, 29 January 1979, in China, Box 9, Brzezinski File, JCL.

eign Minister Huang Hua, and Deputy Foreign Minister Zhang Wenjin on the Chinese side and Carter, Vice President Walter Mondale, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, and Brzezinski on the U.S. side.<sup>109</sup> Brzezinski in his memoirs recounts that the Chinese leader spoke “in a calm, determined, and firm way” about China’s decision to attack Vietnam. Deng informed the Americans that to counter Soviet expansion, China “considers it necessary to put restraints on the wild ambitions of the Vietnamese and to give them an appropriate limited lesson.” Without divulging specific details of China’s plan, Deng outlined possible Soviet responses and the ways to counter them. He said that if “the worst possibility” were to happen, China “would hold out” and would simply ask for U.S. “moral support” in the international arena. Carter did not offer an immediate response and instead merely reminded his Chinese guest to be restrained in dealing with such a difficult situation.<sup>110</sup>

The next day, Deng received a handwritten note from Carter, who sought to discourage a Chinese attack on Vietnam. The president argued that a limited punitive war would have no effect on Vietnam’s occupation of Cambodia, and he warned that it might drag China into a quagmire. Carter also predicted that an invasion of Vietnam would stymie China’s effort to foster a peace-loving image in the world and might cause Americans to worry that Chinese military action in the future would impair U.S. interests in the region.<sup>111</sup> On 30 January 1979 at another private meeting with Carter, Deng was determined and tough, insisting that China must punish Vietnam and that the PLA would limit its action to a short operation. He acknowledged that international reaction could be divided at the time, but he was confident that opinion would favor China in the long run.<sup>112</sup> The potential international backlash would not deter the Chinese leader because he would yield to nothing once he had made up his mind.<sup>113</sup> Despite Carter’s unsupportive comments, Deng did not believe that the United States would endorse a condemnation of China for its military action.<sup>114</sup>

Before leaving Washington for a tour of other parts of the United States, Deng was surprised to learn that the United States was interested in a joint U.S.-China listening base in China’s Xinjiang area targeted against the Soviet

109. Memorandum of Conversation, Carter–Deng, 29 January 1979, in China Vertical File, JCL.

110. Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser, 1977–1981* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983), p. 409.

111. Letter from Carter to Deng, 30 January 1979, in China, Box 9, Brzezinski File, JCL.

112. Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 410.

113. Many of Deng’s subordinates have recalled that he normally did not change his mind once he made a decision. For example, see Chen Zaidao, *Chen Zaidao huiyilu* [Chen Zaidao Memoirs] (Beijing: Jiefangjun chubanshe, 1991), p. 462.

114. Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 410.

Union. The Islamic revolution that was gathering pace in Iran had cast doubt on the future of U.S. bases there. According to Brzezinski, the proposed installation in China was intended to help the United States verify Soviet compliance with the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty. Unlike Mao, who in the 1950s had rejected the Soviet Union's proposal for a joint long-wave radio transmission center and a long-wave receiving station in China, Deng showed great interest in the idea and agreed to consider the proposal.<sup>115</sup> Apparently during this final private discussion among Carter, Brzezinski, and Deng, the two sides reached a tacit understanding that the United States would help China with intelligence monitoring of Soviet forces in the Far East.<sup>116</sup> Deng told the CCP Central Committee in March 1979 that the United States publicly "spoke with an official tone" (*daguanqiang*) against China's military action but "in private had spoken [to him] differently" and "informed us of some intelligence" showing that none of the 54 Soviet divisions on the Sino-Soviet border were at full strength.<sup>117</sup> On the trip home, Deng was relaxed.<sup>118</sup> He sensed that a new strategic relationship between China and the United States was developing on the basis of the two countries' shared interest in countering Soviet expansionism. On the issue of Vietnam, the U.S. side had not rejected or directly criticized the Chinese plans and had instead called for future intelligence cooperation.

## **Conclusion: Assessing China's Decision to Go to War**

On 11 February 1979, two days after Deng returned to Beijing, the CCP Politburo met in an enlarged session. Deng explained the nature and goals of the attack on Vietnam. Afterward, the local military commands in Guangxi and Yunnan received orders to launch attacks on Vietnam.<sup>119</sup> On 14 February the CCP Central Committee sent a circular to the party organizations of provinces, military regions, PLA general departments, and government ministries explaining its decision to launch the self-defense counterattack. The purpose of the circular was to let the party organizations know about the imminent war and to require them to inform party members at provincial and military regimental levels. To counter any opposition and concerns, the circular

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115. Chen, *Mao's China*, pp. 73–74; and Tyler, *A Great Wall*, pp. 276–277.

116. Tyler, *A Great Wall*, pp. 277–278.

117. Deng's speech at the CCP Central Committee plenum, 16 March 1979 (see note 83 supra).

118. Deng even invited some of his colleagues to play bridge with him on the plane. Qian, *Deng Xiaoping*, p. 291.

119. Zhou, *Yige gaoji canmouzhang de zishu*, pp. 259–260; and Jiang Feng et al., *Yang Yong*, pp. 496–497.

stressed that the war would be limited in space, time, and scale. Citing the Chinese-Indian border conflict of 1962 and the Chinese-Soviet border clashes of 1969, the memorandum insisted that China would not take a single inch of Vietnamese territory and would not allow the SRV to occupy a single inch of Chinese land. The document concluded by noting that the military action would bolster peace and stability along the border and would facilitate China's "four modernizations."<sup>120</sup>

The 17th of February was the day that third-party observers had long anticipated. They had suspected that the timing of a strike would be closely related to weather factors. The PRC would not want to conduct military operations in the rainy season, usually beginning in April, or to attack too early when the Soviet armed forces could still cross the frozen rivers along the Sino-Soviet border.<sup>121</sup> Deng and other Chinese leaders had weighed all the alternatives as well as the likely consequences once their troops crossed the Vietnam border, including a possible confrontation with the Soviet Union. They were confident that the limited scope and duration of the war, which they described as a "self-defense counterattack," would forestall negative reactions at home and abroad. No one, however, seemed to anticipate that the 1979 war would trigger continuous military confrontations on the PRC-SRV border for almost a decade.

According to Chinese scholars, the PRC's decision to wage war against Vietnam was influenced by Chinese leaders' overreaction to the Soviet military threat, which caused them to pursue strategic cooperation with the United States against the Soviet Union. Because this policy emphasized confrontation, Beijing's approach to the region became rigid and militant. Chinese policymakers believed that a punitive attack on Vietnam would deal a blow to the USSR's global expansion strategy.<sup>122</sup> Nevertheless, these studies do not adequately explain why Chinese leaders were prone to exaggerate the Soviet threat or why Deng was eager to inform the Carter administration about the decision to attack Vietnam, something that normally would happen only between two closely allied countries.<sup>123</sup> Although the Soviet factor was influ-

120. The complete circular is in Min, *ZhongYue zhanzheng shinian*, p. 34.

121. Harlan W. Jencks, "China's 'Punitive' War on Vietnam: A Military Assessment," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 19, No. 8 (August 1979), pp. 804–805; Herbert Yee, "The Sino-Vietnamese Border War," *China Report*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (January–February 1980), p. 22; and Segal, *Defending China*, p. 214.

122. Gong Li, "A Triangular Relationship of U.S.-China-Soviet Union during the 1979 China-Vietnam Border Conflict," *Guoji guancha* [International Observer], No. 3 (2004), pp. 66–72; and Wang, "The Soviet Factor," p. 173. Wang argues that China's exaggeration of the Soviet military threat was intended to prevent the PRC from falling into "a strategically weak position."

123. Gong Li mistakenly claims that Deng notified Carter of China's decision to invade Vietnam at an official meeting on 29 January 1979, and he gives the misleading impression that Deng made his sur-



ential in Chinese decision-making, other factors, including domestic politics, also played a role.

The PRC's policy toward Vietnam was guided by manifold considerations, ranging from historical tradition to revolutionary ideology and national security. The Chinese leaders' sense of superiority dominated their perceptions of China's relationship with Vietnam.<sup>124</sup> Although officials in Beijing repeatedly declared that Vietnam should be treated as an "equal," Chen Jian observes that such rhetoric reflected their strong belief that "they had occupied a position from which to dictate the values and codes of behavior that would dominate their relations with their neighbors."<sup>125</sup> The PRC claimed that it had never imposed political and economic conditions on its military aid to Hanoi over the previous two decades, but it demanded that Hanoi recognize China's leading role in supporting national liberation movements.<sup>126</sup> Vietnam's "misbehavior" toward China, particularly its alliance with the Soviet Union, had come as an affront to the Chinese, who wanted to punish their treacherous erstwhile ally. This sentiment played a significant role in generating a broad consensus among Chinese political and military leaders to support Deng, the key figure pushing for military action against Vietnam. On questions of territorial sovereignty, which often stir emotions among the Chinese, the military view seemed to be the determining factor in decisions to initiate actual hostilities. The September 1978 General Staff meeting, which produced recommendations for how to remedy the deteriorating relationship with Vietnam, was the starting point of a major military operation. Deng used these recommendations for both strategic and domestic objectives.

The historical-cultural element, along with national sentiment, induced Chinese leaders to launch a war that would "teach Vietnam a lesson." However, Beijing's new economic agenda and the existing Soviet threat, plus the upcoming rainy season in Vietnam, caused the CCP Politburo to want only a short and limited campaign. The war was designed to present no substantial risk to Hanoi and merely to erode Vietnam's will to occupy Cambodia. The Khmer Rouge hoped that the PLA could strike deeply into Vietnamese terri-

prising revelation during a normal talk as the two leaders presented their views of the world. See Gong, "A Triangular Relationship," p. 68.

124. He Di, "The Most Respected Enemy: Mao Zedong's Perception of the United States," in Michael Hunt and Liu Jun, eds., *Toward a History of Chinese Communist Foreign Relations, 1920s–1960s: Personalities and Interpretative Approaches* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars Asian Program, 1995), pp. 27–66; and Chen Jian, "China's Involvement in the Vietnam War, 1964–1969," *The China Quarterly*, No. 142 (June 1995), pp. 356–387.

125. Chen, *Mao's China*, p. 237.

126. Xiaoming Zhang, "China's Involvement in Laos during the Vietnam War, 1963–1975," *Journal of Military History*, No. 60 (October 2002), pp. 1141–1166.

tory, but nothing of the sort actually happened. Nonetheless, China's "symbolic" attack helped the Khmer Rouge to escape total annihilation and enabled them to sustain their resistance against the Vietnamese occupation forces. Was the punitive nature of the war a true objective, or was it just rhetoric and a reflection of Beijing's anger toward Hanoi and the invasion of Cambodia? If teaching a lesson was China's main objective, the PLA should have struck hard to achieve significant military results. But in an interview with Japanese journalists in the middle of the war, Deng asserted that he would not "need military achievements."<sup>127</sup> He later explained: "Teaching Vietnam a lesson was not based on a consideration of what was happening between China and Vietnam or in Indochina, but based on a contemplation of the matter from the angle of Asia and the Pacific, and in other words, from the high plane of global strategy."<sup>128</sup> Ultimately, his calculus was dominated by two priorities: improving China's external security environment and reforming and opening up China's economy.

In the late 1970s, Chinese leaders' strategic thinking still reflected Mao's view that the Soviet Union posed the greatest danger to world peace and to China. The new Soviet-Vietnamese military relationship, the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, and Vietnam's growing hostility toward China stoked Beijing's concern about an increasing Soviet threat to China. Although Deng abandoned Mao's radical domestic policies, he adhered staunchly to the late Chinese leader's "horizontal line" strategy of forming a common front with the United States against the Soviet Union. The inception of China's market-oriented economic reform reinforced the importance of pragmatic power politics to Chinese strategic thinking. Deng staked the success of economic reform on Western technology and foreign investment, particularly from the United States. Deng's decision to accept U.S. terms in mid-December 1978 was crucial in achieving these two strategic objectives externally and internally. Despite Deng's pragmatic calculation of national interests with few ideological restraints, he harbored the naïve hope that the issue of arms sales to Taiwan would resolve itself as China developed more favorable relations with the United States.<sup>129</sup> China's decision to launch a punitive war against Vietnam was intended to display Beijing's usefulness in countering Soviet ex-

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127. Kyodo News, 26 February 1979, in FBIS-PRC, 26 February 1979, p. A5.

128. This explanation was made in front of the members of the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations in Beijing on 19 April 1979. Gong, "A Triangular Relationship," p. 70.

129. Rosemary Foot points out that no one expected that the Taiwan arms sales issue would remain "a central point of tension in U.S.-China relations to today." See Rosemary Foot, "Prizes Won, Opportunities Lost: The U.S. Normalization of Relations with China, 1972-1979," in Kirby, Ross, and Li, eds., *Normalization of U.S.-China Relations*, p. 109.

pansionism. The PRC's acceptance of the U.S. proposal to set up two electronic monitoring stations in western China created a treasured asset for both countries but also a liability for U.S. policy toward China for years to come.<sup>130</sup> In view of all these factors, the objective of China's decision to use force to teach Vietnam a lesson was not as important as many initially had thought. The decision to go to war is hard to assess without a careful evaluation of the geopolitical circumstances and China's drive for economic reform—conditions that in 1979 were fundamentally different from those in 1950. Whatever the rationale for the war, Deng's dictatorial leadership style allowed him to dominate Beijing's decision-making, and therefore the wisdom of his decision to attack Vietnam is still debatable.

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130. After 1980 the United States began to sell defensive weapons systems to China, including air defense radars, long-distance communications equipment, and military helicopters. See Gong, "A Triangular Relationship," p. 71.