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As a Communist state bordering North Vietnam, the People's Republic of China (PRC) supported North Vietnamese President Ho Chi Minh's efforts against the United States and South Vietnam during the Vietnam War of 1965-1975. Western historians have long speculated about Chinese involvement in Vietnam but have no definite proof of the scale and impact of international Communist support. According to Shao Xiao and Xiaoming Zhang, China's role "remains inadequately studied due to a lack of archival access in both China and Vietnam" (1). In their article, Shao and Zhang indicate the level of Chinese economic and military aid to North Vietnam in 1964-1975, and give a true sense of how the Chinese supported Ho's military and political objectives in the war as a crucial and indispensable factor for the North Vietnamese Army (NVA)'s victory. Their study offers an in depth and detailed overview and the particulars of China's "massive military and economic aid" (3) to Ho's regime in terms of weaponry, logistics, technology, finance, and other aid during the war based on a foundation of multiple documents, memoirs, interviews, and secondary sources in China, Russia, and Vietnam (1).

In retrospect, international Communist assistance to North Vietnam proved to be the decisive edge that enabled the NVA to survive the American Rolling Thunder bombing campaign and helped the NLF/PLAVN prevail in the war of attrition and eventually defeat South Vietnam.¹ Chinese and Russian support prolonged the war, making it impossible for the United States to win. As two historians point out, "It was having China as a secure rear and supply depot that made it possible for the Vietnamese to fight twenty-five years and beat first the French and then the Americans."² The international perspective offered by Shao and Zhang may help students and the public in the West gain a better understanding of America's longest war.

Conventional texts have adopted a U.S.-Soviet centric approach, characterizing the Vietnam War as a by-product or a sideshow of the Cold War, a confrontation between two super-powers, as well as two contending camps: the free world and the Communists/socialists. Therefore, China's involvement in the Vietnam War has been described as an ideological conflict or part of international or Asian revolution. China's relations with Vietnam and the Soviet Union have been documented in the West. In one of the important research monographs, *Mao's China and the Cold War*, Chen Jian provides an excellent study of Communist China's Cold War experience from 1949 to 1972, the time when President Richard Nixon visited Beijing. Chen offers path-breaking insights into the calculations, decisions, and divergent views of Chairman Mao

¹ The People's Liberation Army of Vietnam (PLAVN) was the armed force of the NLF. For their publications on PAVN and PLAVN in English, see Colonel Dinh Thi Van (PLAVN, ret.), *I Engaged in Intelligence Work* (Hanoi: Gioi Publishers, 2006); General Hoang Van Thai (PAVN, ret.), *How South Viet Nam Was Liberated* (Hanoi: Gioi Publishers, 2005); General Phung The Tai (PAVN, ret.), *Remembering Uncle Ho; Memories in War Years* (Hanoi: Gioi Publishers, 2005).

² Jung Chang and Jon Halliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 357.

Zedong and other Chinese leaders toward the world in general and the United States in particular. Chen argues that although the global Cold War was characterized by confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union, China had a central position because of its interventions in the Korean and Vietnam Wars.³ The other significant book, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975* by Qiang Zhai, offers a comprehensive discussion of Mao's grand plans as well as the reasoning behind China's entry into the Vietnam War in 1965. Zhai carefully constructs a framework to effectively present Chinese leaders' concerns that American historians may have overlooked.⁴ However, the scale and focus of these works do not allow either author to provide specific details of China's intention, interests, and massive aid to Vietnam. While historians have spent much time bemoaning U.S. policy and the polemical battles of the Soviet Union, the authentic Chinese story has nearly been lost. Much less is known in the West as to how the Vietnam War helped China.⁵

In their article, Shao and Zhang provides a different interpretation of the origins and development of China's involvement in the Vietnam War. It explores some new trends in the geo-political history of modern Southeast Asia by revisiting Beijing's decision to send, or reduce, or stop aid to Hanoi in 1964-1975. With an emphasis on Chinese perspectives, it elucidates and identifies four non-Cold War factors, which were as important as the international Cold War factors. These China-centered factors were, and still are, in the DNA of Chinese security and geopolitical concerns. Their re-interpretations include the safety of Chinese southeast, border security for political legitimacy, strategic calculation to stop foreign invasions in neighboring countries, and China's status in Southeast Asia (1).

First, the co-authors point out that Mao "was increasingly pessimistic about... China's own security following the expansion of US involvement in Vietnam" (4). Mao believed that China was facing a possible U.S. invasion. With America's escalation, he "worried that China and America would clash in a direct military confrontation" (5). The Chinese leader warned his generals about a U.S. landing in North Vietnam, followed by an invasion of China. A possible amphibious landing of U.S. ground troops along the northern coast, similar to the Inchon Landing in Korea, would soon turn the Chinese offshore islands and coastal areas into a war zone. Beijing considered the Vietnam War to be different from the Korean War. China did not intend to fight another ground war with America in Vietnam, while facing a civil war against Taiwan in the southeast, and a perceived threat of Soviet invasion in the north.

Second, as Beijing did not want a North Vietnamese withdrawal or collapse, it believed that it would best serve China's interests by backing up North Vietnam. In 1965-1966, according to Shao and Zhang, "Beijing expedited its assistance to Hanoi" (8) by increasing its economic and military aid in 1967-1968 (9-10). Meanwhile, "Chinese leaders now enthusiastically embraced sending Chinese troops to Vietnam" (8). As the Vietnamese faced increasing difficulties in the war against American forces, Chinese leaders were ready to help the NVA fight American forces both in North and South Vietnam and seemed willing to accept most of the Vietnamese requests for Chinese supplies and troops and to take immediate action in the Vietnam War. In retrospect, the employment of armed force had explicitly demonstrated Beijing's determination, as well as triggering and encouraging possible restraint on Washington. The PLA's intervention in June 1965 possibly deterred any U.S. attempt to send American ground troops to North Vietnam, for fear of provoking China and

³ Chen Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 2-4.

⁴ Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

⁵ For Beijing's Cold War diplomacy, see Robert Sutter, *Chinese Foreign Policy: Power and Policy since the Cold War*, 4th ed. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016); Robert Ross and Jiang Changbin, eds., *Re-examining the Cold War: U.S.-China Diplomacy, 1954-1973* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Odd Arne Westad, *Brothers in Arms: The Rise and Fall of the Sino-Soviet Alliance, 1945-1963* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin's Cold War: From Stalin to Khrushchev* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996); Thomas W. Robinson and David Shambaugh, eds., *Chinese Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice* (London: Clarendon Press, 1994); John Garver, *Foreign Relations of the People's Republic of China* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1993); Gordon Chang, *Friends and Enemies: The United States, China, and the Soviet Union* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990); Ross, *The Indochina Tangle: China's Vietnam Policy, 1975-1979* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

converting a regional war into a Cold War showdown. The administration ordered renewed attention concerning Beijing's likely response to alternative scenarios for increasing the American ground presence in Vietnam.⁶

Third, in the meantime, Beijing made it clear to Hanoi that it was a Vietnamese, not a Chinese war. North Vietnam could win the war with China's help. To keep the NVA fighting effectively on the front, the PLA was willing to provide more military aid and to send supporting forces to Vietnam. NVA leaders, however, had a different view. They believed that the Chinese would play a key role, thus guaranteeing victory. The authors state that "Inconsistency in Beijing's aid to Hanoi made the Vietnamese suspicious about Beijing's real intention to support their war efforts, especially at the time when Hanoi badly needed help" (3).

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Fourth, by involving in the Vietnam War, China's political position changed from peripheral in the 1950s to central through the 1960s. Mao tried to establish China as "a self-promoted champion of the world Marxist-Leninist revolution" (14) by supporting Communist movements in his neighboring countries like Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. China regained its dominant power status in East and Southeast Asia and created favorable international conditions in which it could survive and eventually succeed. Throughout the Cold War from 1945-1991 and beyond, international relations in East and Southeast Asia began with China. Russia, America, the European Union, and everyone else had to deal with China. This is the legacy of China's war for Vietnam. China's participation in the Cold War contributed significantly to shaping post-Cold War international relations. Unfortunately for Beijing, the co-authors conclude, "China ultimately turned Vietnam into its own enemy" (3).

In the meantime, the active military role that China played in Southeast Asia turned this main Cold War battlefield into a strange "buffer" between Moscow and Washington. With China and Southeast Asia standing in the middle, it was less likely that the Soviet Union and the United States would become involved in a direct military confrontation.⁷ Chinese and Soviet military assistance to North Vietnam between 1965 and 1973 did not improve Sino-Soviet relations, but rather created new competition as each attempted to gain leadership of the Southeast Asian Communist movements after the Sino-Soviet split. Each claimed to be a key supporter of the Vietnamese Communists' struggle against an American invasion.

Gradually, China shifted its defense focus and national security concerns from the United States to the Soviet Union in 1969-1971. The Chinese high command saw the United States as a declining power because of its failures in Vietnam and serious problems in other parts of the world. As the United States tried to withdraw from Asia, the Soviet Union filled the power vacuum, replacing the United States as the 'imperialist' aggressor in the region. The co-authors, nevertheless, have not provided new sources and details on the strategic shift of Beijing during the years under their examination, nor have they explained why Chinese leaders shifted their policy "from 'anti-imperialism and anti-revisionism' to 'allying the U.S. against the Soviet Union'" (12).

The Chinese-Russian rivalry in Vietnam from 1965-1968 worsened the Sino-Soviet relationship and eventually led to Sino-Soviet border clashes in 1969-1972. These conflicts, which had pinned down one million Russian troops along the Chinese and Soviet border, continued after U.S. President Richard Nixon visited Beijing in 1972. Meanwhile, North Vietnam "could no longer count on" China's support (15), since the "national interests [of the two states] were far apart" (18). The authors conclude that "China ultimately turned Vietnam into its own enemy" (3).

⁶ James G. Hershberg and Chen Jian, "Informing the Enemy: Sino-American 'Signaling' and the Vietnam War, 1965," in *Behind the Bamboo Curtain: China, Vietnam, and the World beyond Asia*, ed. by Priscilla Roberts (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 218.

⁷ Chen Jian and Xiaobing Li, "China and the End of the Cold War," in *From Détente to the Soviet Collapse: The Cold War from 1975 to 1991*, edited by Malcolm Muir, Jr. (Lexington: Virginia Military Institute, 2006): 120-122.

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