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**STRATEGY IN REGIONAL CONFLICT: A CASE STUDY OF CHINA
IN THE THIRD INDOCHINA CONFLICT OF 1979**

BY

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ABSTRACT

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TITLE: STRATEGY IN REGIONAL CONFLICT: A CASE STUDY OF CHINA IN THE
THIRD INDOCHINA CONFLICT OF 1979

FORMAT: Strategy Research Project

DATE: 08 April 2001

PAGES: 48

CLASSIFICATION: Unclassified

In February 1979 a very violent and strangely limited 28-day war between Asian communist combatants occurred in the remote northern border region of Vietnam. The purpose of this campaign study is to historically examine the People's Republic of China's (PRC) application of strategy in regional conflict and assess the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) operational performance during the Third Indochina Conflict. China's enduring policy of containing Vietnamese hegemony in Southeast Asia ultimately led the PRC leadership to select a carefully limited military response supported by other elements of national power. This integrated national strategic campaign achieved most of its political objective of punishing Vietnam, but the lack of early, conclusive battlefield success by the PLA cost the PRC prestige and negotiation leverage. PLA inadequacies in 1979 at the operational/joint level of war and in offensive tactical organization, doctrine and material have limited study of this event. This approach fails to recognize the Third Indochina Conflict as a recent and overall successful instance of Chinese strategic management of regional conflict and military campaigning in limited warfare. Finally, the conflict's results help explain China's late-20th century military reforms and remain relevant to understanding future PRC military potential and strategic/operational style.

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STRATEGY IN REGIONAL CONFLICT: A CASE STUDY OF CHINA IN THE THIRD INDOCHINA CONFLICT OF 1979

The post Cold-War world finds the United States facing a very unique, if temporary, strategic challenge in fulfilling a role as the world's sole superpower. Fifty years of global bi-polar contest has been replaced by a far less defined security environment in which proliferation of terrorism, transnational threats and Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) increase alongside the uneven and unpredictable spasms of rapid economic/cultural paradigm shifts based on the pervasive trend of globalization. As we enter the 21ST century the destabilizing effects of these emerging realities continue and expand the potential for regional conflict carried out in military terms.

A nation state's inherent potential to apply organized military power in such conflicts continues to be a capacity worthy of careful measurement by the United States military. This is especially true of conflicts in which strong regional nation states may interact. Beyond the well-defined opposition actors foreseen in our Major Theater War (MTW) scenarios, the United States also closely monitors the potential regional crisis actions of such leading states as Russia and China. It is only prudent to do so. Hostilities with either of these unique nation states carries a depth of risk and consequence that can quickly go well beyond those projected for even the worst case "simultaneous or Two MTWs" scenario most current Pentagon planning is based on. It is therefore instructive to study how these nations have dealt with regional conflict in the past and gain insight on how they might react in future regional conflict.

In the case of the People's Republic of China (PRC), study of the events of the late 1970s and early 1980s and its last land-based regional conflict with Vietnam provides just such an opportunity. The PRC's 1979 strategic decision-making and methods of applying military power and violence in this regional crisis remain very worthy of careful study. Analysis of the relative successes and failures of the PRC's military in this short, but very violent, military campaign against an experienced and veteran Vietnamese military still provides the most current insights available on: 1) large scale combat in Asia amongst Asian combatants; 2) the PRC's impressive performance at the strategic level of war and integration of military with the other elements of national power; 3) the PRC's poor showing at the operational and joint warfare levels of war; and 4) understanding how the PRC interpreted (and continues to interpret) and acted on the war's military and strategic ramifications, insights and lessons. It is from the latter that much of the PRC's military activities of the 1980s and 90s can be more fully understood and perception of their reaction to 21st century developments in the region be gained.

REGIONAL CONFLICT - THE STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT

No sooner had the Second Indochina War ended in 1975 with the victory of revolutions in Vietnam, Kampuchea and Laos, than the hitherto submerged antagonisms between the three parties -- China, Vietnam and Kampuchea -- came to the surface. These tensions ultimately led to open armed hostilities and ushered in the Third Indochina Conflict.

— David W. Elliott¹

In order to understand the Vietnam-China bilateral dynamic in 1978-79, a thorough understanding of both the historical pattern of the relationship, their modern regional rivalry for influence over Laos and Cambodia, as well as the globally strategic dynamic of US-Soviet-China relations of late 1970s is required. Finally, to understand the entwining of these two dynamics in the Third Indochina Conflict, it is important to chronologically follow the interplay and influence regional and global key events had during the critical years of 1975-1979.²

CHINA-VIETNAM RELATIONS - A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The roots of the China-Vietnam relationship are centuries old. From 700 B.C. through the 1850s there is a historical pattern of periods of Chinese invasion or dominant influence and Vietnamese defiant preservation of key aspects of their own culture (even as they absorbed China influences in administration, education and political systems), versus clear periods of vigorous reassertion of strong Vietnamese nationalism and independence of policy and action. The French invasion of 1857 and the following colonial period saw China become a friendly base for Vietnamese nationalist forces opposing the French. But, in the chaotic period of late 1930s through the aftermath of WWII, both the Chinese Nationalists and Chinese Communists would caveat and calibrate their degree of support for Vietnamese nationalist/communist forces consistent with the relationship described above. The Chinese were only consistent in their opposition to Japanese presence in Vietnam and in subsequent fear of western influence, French or US.³

Even the fellow-communist bond between the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Vietnamese communist leader, Ho Chi Minh, while initially strengthened by their shared, parallel survival struggles of 1946-1954 against the Chinese Nationalists and French respectively, was strained significantly at Geneva in 1954. The perceived Chinese "sellout" to western powers and agreement to a "two" Vietnam solution was seen by the Vietnamese Communists as a squandering of the Vietminh's decisive battlefield victory at Dien Bien Phu.⁴ It is therefore easy to understand why the Vietnamese were quick to interpret China's policies reference the events of 1972-1975 (US withdrawal, US negotiations in Paris, the fall of South Vietnam) as again driven by the old Chinese "nationalism" view which firmly sees Vietnam as

part of China's sphere of influence. As such Vietnam should therefore be weak, divided and pliant in its dealings with China. This Vietnamese animosity gave little credence to any notion that the Chinese positions in 1972-1975 were deeply concerned over USSR influence growing on its "southern front" in the aftermath of the 1969 Sino-Soviet border clashes.⁵

A historical pattern in the China-Vietnam relationship was again at work here. Over the course of the 2000 plus years of this relationship, when China is strong, the "pupil" Vietnam has paid tribute, literally and figuratively, to its respected "teacher" to the north. However, when China is weak, distracted or domestically focused, Vietnam has been active in its independence and resistance to domination. Especially with China's leadership crisis of 1976-1978 (the failing health and death of Mao Zedong, the rise and fall of the "Gang of Four", the death of the skilled statesman Zhou Enlai and the inexorable rise to power of one of his protégés, Deng Xiaoping) Beijing's foreign policy toward Indochina and, in particular, relationship with Vietnam often lacked attention, focus and precision.⁶

USSR-USA-CHINA SUPERPOWERS, 1973-1979

The question of whether the Third Indochina Conflict's main causes were regional issues between the countries involved or rather were truly caused by the playing out of superpower rivalries in the region is one with strong advocates on both sides. Untangling these often closely entwined global and regional concerns is indeed difficult. During Vietnam's "American" War from 1965-1973, the related rise of USSR presence and influence in Southeast Asia was very real. It continued to expand following the war's concluding events of 1975, culminating in the 3 November 1978 signing of a Friendship and Cooperation treaty between Vietnam and the USSR.⁷ Certainly, China's mid-70's foreign policy in Southeast Asia sought to counter this trend and primarily did so by opposition to Vietnam's influence and area hegemony through support to the anti-Vietnamese Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia and increased influence with Laos, Thailand and the Philippines (key members of the ASEAN or Association of South East Asia Nations).⁸ See Map 1- Regional Overview.

While the superpower game was very much being played in the late 1970s in Southeast Asia, the direct issues involved in the Third Indochina Conflict were very much regional issues. A host of long-standing territorial disputes were central to the decision to fight, among them: the much-contested Spratly islands in the South China Sea, intense disagreement over border delineation and Gulf of Tonkin territorial waters/associated fishing rights, and the little publicized, but violently disputed, border problems between Pol Pot's Cambodia and

Vietnam. These territorial issues were complicated by Vietnam's very real aspirations to lead an "Indochina Federation" which would include Laos and Cambodia. Further, the economic and political mistreatment of hundreds of thousands of wealthy and industrious ethnic Chinese living in Vietnam and their mass exodus in May 1978 added a thorny refugee dimension to the mix.⁹

To fully appreciate the interplay of regional reality and global dynamics, the specific interaction and chronology of a number of key events must be understood (see Table 1):

THIRD INDOCHINA CONFLICT CHRONOLOGY¹⁰	
<u>DATE</u>	<u>KEY EVENT</u>
December 1973 - February 1974	Hanoi's inquiry to China about approving oil exploration in S. China Sea is ignored; PRC unilaterally seizes key Paracel islands from Saigon's control
30 April 1975	Saigon falls; Vietnam emerges as a single nation
May-June 1975	Cambodian and Vietnamese patrol boats exchange fire off the island of Phu Quoc; Vietnam seizes disputed oil rig vicinity Poulo Wai Island (continuation of long simmering border issues which now expand)%
September 1975	Acrimonious state visit by Vietnamese Le Duan to Beijing; China hard-line approach fails to change Vietnamese regional and global approach
January 1976	Zhou Enlai, PRC Politburo powerbroker and world renown statesmen, dies
April-May 1976	- Border negotiations between Vietnam-Cambodia render no clear results - In Mao's name Deng Xiaoping is purged by the Gang of Four - China tries to continue Zhou Enlai foreign policy of alignment with Cambodia without losing Vietnam relationship – it is ineffectively applied
September- October 1976	Chairman Mao Zedong dies in September; Revolt against the Gang of Four is successful and they are arrested
April - September 1977	Cambodian border raids/shelling as a negotiation tactic, slowly escalates into coordinated border raids up to 7km inside Vietnam in September %
July 1977	- Second rehabilitation of Deng Xiaoping - Vietnam-Laotian Friendship Treaty signed consolidating this link
December 1977- January 1978	Vietnam conducts division-size limited attack with air and armor into Cambodia; Khmer Rouge counterattacks and cross-border raids vicinity Ha Tien have unexpected success
February-April	Vietnamese latest negotiation proposal/terms rejected as one-sided; China

1978	provides new arms shipments and military railroad engineers to Cambodia; Vietnam increases subversion and propaganda as Khmer Rouge increases intensity of its border attacks in March and April. China's policy very split%
9-14 May 1978	Exodus of Chinese residents from northern Vietnam into southern China begins; China reduces aid to Vietnam and unilaterally announces 8 June arrival of transport ships for refugees in Haiphong; the ships are never filled
24 May 1978	So Phim, Vietnamese sponsored insurgent in Cambodia's Eastern zone, is forced to launch uprising prematurely and is routed by Pol Pot's forces%
25 June 1978	Renewed Vietnamese offensive by 80,000 troops, air and armor#
29 June 1978	Vietnam becomes first Asian member of USSR/Warsaw Pact Council for Economic Mutual Assistance (COMECON)
August 1978	China-Japanese Peace and Friendship Treaty signed
September 1978	Significant USSR arms shipments arrive in Camh Ranh Bay and Hanoi
3 November 1978	The USSR-Vietnam Treaty of Friendship & Cooperation signed in Moscow*
15 November-15 December 1978	Central Work Conference and expanded Politburo meetings in Beijing which solidify PRC's policy and plans*; Chinese press accelerates and amplifies periodic coverage of Vietnamese "bloody" border incursions
3 December 1978	Radio Hanoi announces the formation in Vietnam of a Kampuchean United Front for National Salvation in Cambodia (Heng Samrin organization)
15 December 1978	U.S. – China relations are officially normalized; date was moved up from 1 January 1979 at PRC leadership's request
25 December – 10 January 1979	Vietnam invades Cambodia; 7 January Phom Penh falls to Vietnamese forces; 10 January the Heng Samrin regime takes over in Phom Penh*
28 January – 5 February 1979	Deng Xiaoping travels to United States and publicly indicates that China must teach Vietnam "a lesson"; USSR naval task force arrives off Vietnam

TABLE 1: CHRONOLOGY

In summary the Sino-Vietnam war primarily grew out of the unique dynamics of the regional strategic environment, rather than the global strategic environments of USSR-PRC competition or superpower dynamics. Unfortunately the seeds of this war, like so many of those before it, were to be found in the countless burning villages along the region's contested borders in the latter 1970s.

REGIONAL CONFLICT - OPENING MOVES: CAMBODIA & VIETNAM 1975-1978

Indeed, the internal Indochina rivalry that was minor news in 1975 and would crescendo to open warfare of 1978 and 1979, was already in full swing before the end of the American war in Vietnam. As early as late 1971 significant clashes occurred between Vietnamese and Cambodian Khmer Rouge forces over specific use of areas along the Ho Chi Minh Trail and issues over the flow of aid and supplies. As the chronology in Table 1 indicated, the April 1975 victories of "liberation" in Saigon and Phnom Penh were quickly marked by fresh land skirmishes and patrol boat naval actions.¹¹

A flurry of diplomatic efforts stymied the fighting for nearly a year as the two communist regimes negotiated and attempted to gauge each other's true intentions. By April 1976 it became clear the diplomatic negotiations were at an impasse, confounded by key differences in the heritage of the Vietnamese and Cambodian communist movements and nationalist suspicions.¹² As 1977 began heavily armed patrolling resumed and the situation deteriorated throughout late 1977 and early 1978 as the Khmer Rouge continually conducted bigger, longer and bloodier cross-border artillery barrages and raids in the vain hope it would be an effective negotiating tactic. This eventually led Vietnam to a December 1977 border foray of major size, with at least 30,000 troops, armor and aircraft in a "divisional size" operation.¹³ Throughout the first four months of 1978 various Vietnamese calls for negotiations on their previously offered terms were rejected by Pol Pot, while the Khmer Rouge had unexpected success in counterattacks and major counterraides near Ha Tien, Vietnam.¹⁴

During these turbulent years China's policy was weak and fragmented. Distracted by major domestic issues, the PRC was inconsistent in its backing of the Cambodians, and endeavored to maintain a status quo relationship with Vietnam. Some Chinese arms sent to the Cambodia in January 1978, including 130mm artillery, were employed by the Khmer Rouge and used against Vietnamese troops and villages.¹⁵ By April 1978 the Vietnamese anti-Beijing rhetoric grew significantly harsher and May brought the previously mentioned mass exodus of ethnic Chinese from Vietnam, claiming economic and political persecution. Global, regional, and Chinese protests brought no change in Vietnamese actions with regard to what grew to be 100,000 ethnic Chinese refugees, many of whom were streaming across an increasingly tense Sino-Vietnamese common border.¹⁶

Following another round of Khmer Rouge attacks, the Vietnamese once again struck deep into Cambodia in June 1978. This time the incursion force numbered 80,000 men with elements of six divisions with air and armor, and advancing 65 miles into Cambodia before beginning a withdrawal.¹⁷ The summer also brought economic warfare as China responded to Vietnam

inaction on Chinese refugees and Vietnam's joining the Warsaw Pact COMECON economic group by simultaneously canceling the last Chinese oil sales and aid to Vietnam of any kind, as well as recalling the Chinese ambassador. The PRC also began a marked military buildup of military forces in southern China.¹⁸ Vietnam's response was to increase its armed forces by 350,000 men and to conduct a major Soviet provided arms build-up of its own in September and October 1978.¹⁹ Therefore the 3 November 1978 signing of the USSR-Vietnam Friendship and Cooperation treaty and the 3 December Radio Hanoi announcement of the formation of the KNUFNS (Kampuchean National United Front for National Salvation) under would be Pol Pot opponent Heng Sarmin, simply set the table for what was to come:

"...the situation was ripe for a Chinese-Vietnamese confrontation on two fronts: by proxy along the Vietnam-Cambodian frontier with Cambodia, and through direct battle along the Sino-Vietnamese border."²⁰

Despite Vietnamese and Chinese assurances to outside powers that they sought to avoid conflict in Cambodia and Vietnam respectively, each of these confrontations was being feverishly planned and prepared.

VIETNAM INVASION - DECEMBER 1978

When the invasion of Cambodia came on 25 December 1978, it came in the form of 12 regular force Vietnamese divisions attacking across border on a wide front. The Vietnamese divisions of 9 - 10,000 men each formed a force of approximately 120,000 troops with tanks, armored vehicles, artillery and effective air cover. Opposing them was Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge Army of 60,000 men organized in 4 divisions and 3 independent regiments comparatively lightly armed with a non-standard mix of equipment (Soviet, Chinese and American). Initial Khmer Rouge resistance was intense in some areas, but largely melted away and several provincial capitals fell to the Vietnamese invaders in quick succession. The Khmer Rouge forces did not stand and fight this "blitzkrieg," falling back instead away from their urban areas and into the deep countryside for organized guerilla warfare.²¹

The invasion sent a shock wave through much of Asia. Many ASEAN countries (Association of South East Asian Nations – Thailand, Philippines, Malaysia and Singapore among them) had been recently assured by Hanoi that no such military action was envisioned.²² ASEAN and the United Nations both called for immediate withdrawal to no avail. Phnom Penh was captured on 7 January and the government of Heng Sarmin installed. By early February it was clear to most observers there would not be a rapid withdrawal of Vietnamese forces this time and the fighting gravitated to the vicinity of the Thailand border.²³ Even the revelations to

the world of the truly horrific nature of the Pol Pot regime was not enough to help Vietnam avoid condemnation.

CHINA'S REACTION

One national capital that was not surprised by this action was Beijing. Indeed as early as August 1978 the PRC leadership had reliable knowledge of Vietnam's intent to invade Cambodia and to oust the Pol Pot regime and had begun to consider the Chinese response.²⁴ It is likely the PRC leadership had decided on military action against Vietnam as early as mid-November 1978 and did so to fundamentally reassert China's regional preeminence in Southeast Asia.²⁵ To understand the PRC response to the invasion of Cambodia, in fact, the entire Chinese approach to this multi-dimensional conflict with Vietnam, the global and regional statesmanship and national leadership of Deng Xiaoping must be acknowledged. It was during the 15 November to 15 December 1978 Central Working Conference and the 3rd Plenum of the 11th Central Committee meeting on 18-22 December 1978, that Deng Xiaoping firmly consolidated his power. At these meetings it is likely China's military response to Vietnamese "hegemony" and normalization of relations with US were decided and timing possibilities mapped out.²⁶

The timing of the "Normalized Relations" official signature ceremony between the US and the PRC, relative to any Chinese military response to Vietnam's anticipated actions was key. It had to be done well ahead of any Chinese military action against Vietnam. Proper synchronization of the military and diplomatic elements of power was required. The documents were signed on 15 December 1978.²⁷ This diplomatic success allowed Xiaoping and the PRC leadership to initially publicly react to the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in a low-key manner, allowing the world and regional opinion to react much more sharply. Subsequently, as Vietnam's true intentions were on display in Cambodia, Xiaoping was then able to build on this world-opinion through his ominous rhetoric in Washington and Japan about the need to "punish" or "teach a lesson" to Vietnam.²⁸

Within the context of this decision to use military force, China also began to consider the full range of military options available to it. One option that was obvious, and evidently did receive a full hearing in these meetings, was to directly ship or move PLA troops to Cambodia itself, directly assisting the Khmer Rouge and opposing Vietnam's attempt at regional hegemony in Indochina. This particular debate was decided on the very fundamental socialist political principle that dispatching troops and planes from one nation to another, smacked of the same imperialism the PRC had long opposed, and would therefore severely weaken China's position

in the UN and in world opinion. Equally important such an option so committed China that it could become a quagmire, much as Korea had been in 1952-54 and as Afghanistan would become for the USSR.²⁹

Deng Xiaoping and the Politburo selected a military course of action akin to its 1962 border war with India – a limited “self-defense counterattack” to punitively strike at Vietnam across their common border. Some authors have theorized that in periods requiring conflict management, such as Korea 1950, the 1962 border war with India, and escalation of support to Vietnam’s American War in 1964-65, China’s actions have followed a clear pattern. This conflict management pattern, or model, moves through five predictable and escalating phases: probe, warning, demonstration, attack, and détente. At each phase a series of Chinese actions are applied which are calculated to pressure the opponent into changing his behavior, or, following an assessment of the opponent’s reaction, escalating the actions to the next stage. This model is a very workable lens through which to view Deng Xiaoping’s and the PRC leadership’s careful conflict management in this crisis of 1978 and 1979 as well.³⁰ By December of 1978, China had already passed through the “probing” phase including years of rhetoric with the Vietnamese leadership and increased military activity such as the heavy border patrolling and the troop and ship movements of summer and fall. By January 1979 the PRC was firmly in the “warning” phase, delivering clear, unambiguous warnings to the opponent in the form of daily propaganda, as well as official pronouncements in the United Nations or from the platform of a state visit to Washington D.C.³¹ The Chinese regional strategy (with global considerations embedded) of containing Vietnamese hegemony in Southeast Asia guided the PRC to select a carefully defined, limited military response to achieve very specific political objectives. China was ready for its third and fourth phases – demonstration and attack.

REGIONAL CONFLICT - THE MILITARY RESPONSE

With the decision to apply military power to this strategic problem made, planning activities, most likely leveraging some level of existing contingency plans for conflict with Vietnam,³² were clearly underway following the events of late December 1978. The absence of key military commanders from normal, scheduled public appearances and the none-too-subtle massing of troops in the border areas of southern China were well noted by all interested observers, from the US and abroad and certainly from Vietnam.³³

FORCES AND DISPOSITION

The PRC and the People's Liberation Army and Air Force (PLA and PLAAF) leadership set about its military organization with clear thinking, organization and planning. Careful considerations were made for the military strategic and operational characteristics of the coming conflict. The regional military postures and potentialities of the USSR, Laos, and Cambodia, in addition to that of the Vietnamese were carefully considered, as were the realities of actual geography, terrain, the relative military force capabilities and material of each side, and the political and military aspects of operational timing.³⁴ The non-participation of the United States was also a fundamental assumption.

Geographically it seems the Theater of War was assessed as being all the military regions comprising the Southern China region, and not simply limited to the 1300 km long China-Vietnam border (See Map 2-Campaign Map). Additionally, portions of the South China Sea, specifically the waters adjoining Hainan Island to the Paracel Island of Xisha, where the Chinese Southern fleet and supporting aircraft operated, were considered in the Theater of War.³⁵ The Cambodia-Laos areas were well understood to be within the Area of Interest (and possibly the Area of Influence given coordinated action by the Khmer Rouge).³⁶ It is apparent that for the looming war the PRC war leadership carefully considered its military strategic battlespace in large and comprehensive terms - matching their scrutiny of the global and regional diplomatic landscape.³⁷

Operationally, the PLA generally assessed the geography and terrain of Northern Vietnam with the practiced eye of a neighbor who had often operated over the terrain, from numerous past invasions to recent support efforts during Vietnam's American War years. There was a healthy appreciation for the possible lines of operation in the severely cross-compartmented terrain (See Map 2). The cross-compartment terrain was worse in the west, but several valleys did feed into the valley leading to Lao Cai (and subsequently southeast to Hanoi), while the terrain is slightly more open terrain in the east, with a more direct line of operation from the border's Friendship Pass or Cao Bang to Lang Son, beyond which the terrain generally opened up to rice-filled plains for the remaining 85 miles to Hanoi. As one author put it:

The terrain in the northern part of Vietnam is hilly and tortuous with very few roads. There are hundreds of jagged limestone peaks, steep, inhospitable sparsely settled valleys, and thick jungles in the northwest. Elevations range from 3,000 to 10,000 feet, with Vietnam's highest peak, Fan Si Pan, rising to 10,308 feet...approximately 20 miles southwest of Lao Cai. Lang Son lay astride the junction of Route 4 (*sic* Highway 1) and the road to the main pass, Friendship pass into China 15 miles to the north. This was the historical invasion route...³⁸

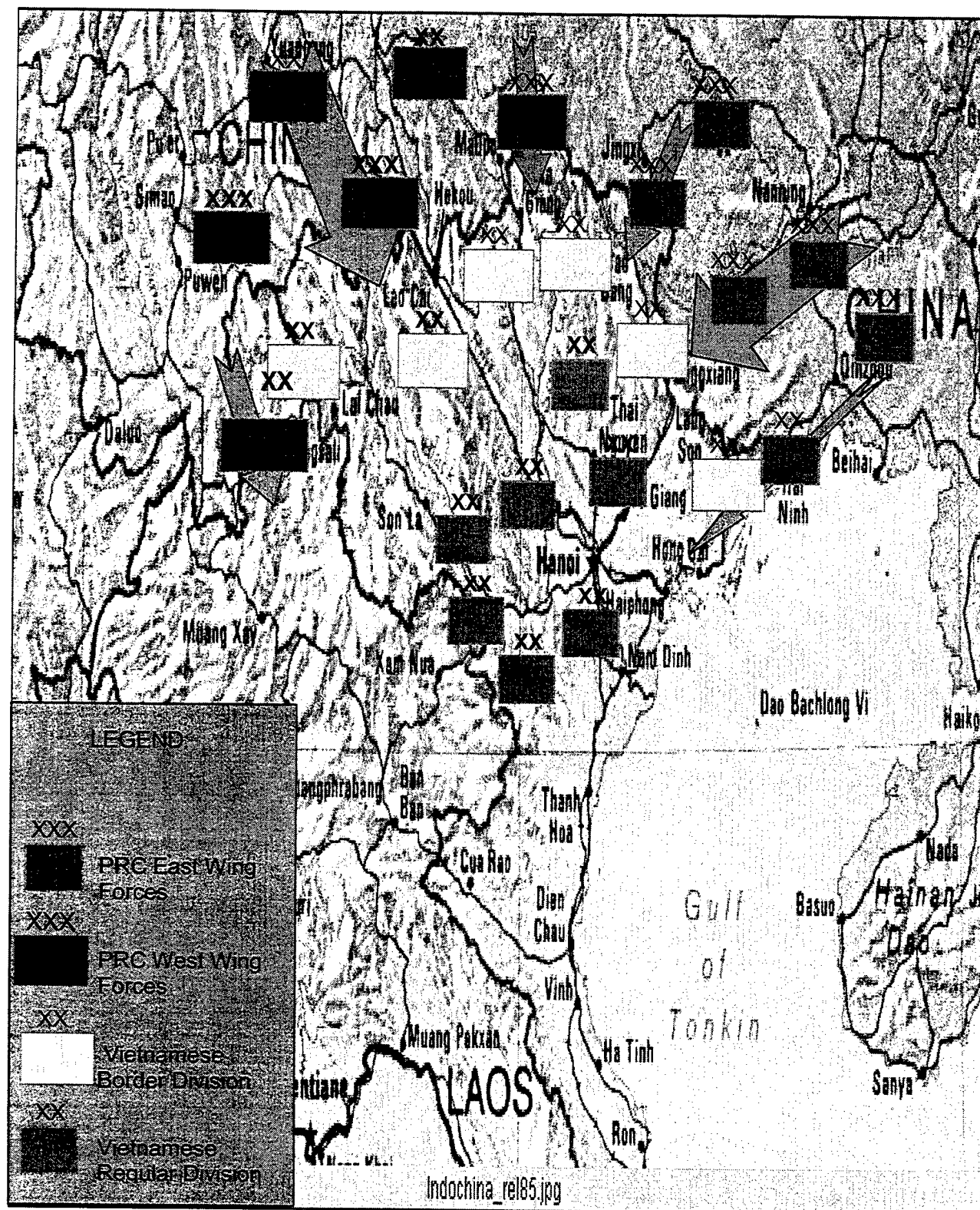


FIGURE 2: CAMPAIGN MAP

Additionally the PLA had a healthy "weapons geography" understanding of the terrain. Their ground forces were vulnerable to the relatively more modern Vietnamese aircraft if they got beyond the 50KM slant range coverage of their relatively immobile SA-2 air defense systems. This military reality coupled with political guidance may have gone a long way to defining the limited depth of their operations into Vietnam.³⁹

An obviously critical aspect of campaign planning (or understanding its results after the fact) is to have a clear appreciation of the relative qualitative and quantitative military forces available to both sides. Table 2 provides a quantification of the forces available to China and Vietnam respectively and how they were allocated to this war as well as other major requirements the nation faced. In China's case the People's Liberation Army (PLA) was respected on a quantitative basis for the sheer size in manpower, formations and artillery, though dated. The main force PLA divisions had a deserved reputation for excellence in infantry – from small unit tactics to individual soldier toughness and fighting skills. Even the militia, once dismissed by Khrushchev as a mere "heap of human flesh," had markedly improved in the 1970s due to an infusion of aging regular force cadres and arrival of adequate, domestically produced small arms. However the PLA's total power in 1979 was mitigated by shortage of firepower and mobility, primarily due to obsolete equipment from tanks, to artillery to logistics assets.⁴⁰ The People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) and the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) were forces even more defensive in nature with the air forces featuring few all-weather capable aircraft, poor avionics and air defenses based on 1950s technology. The PLAN lacked modern surface vessels, submarines or a sizable marine force, and could only rely upon a doctrine of numerous small fast attack vessels to deny coastal waters to an aggressor.⁴¹ In 1979 the military forces had come out of a turbulent 15 year period in which the Sino-Soviet split of the 1960's cost a key source of modern weapons technology and the Cultural Revolution and political machinations of Defense Minister Lin Biao had politicized and factionalized both the military region/militia structure and many main force headquarters. The effectiveness the military was in some doubt.⁴²

The PRC organized its forces for war from the top down as envisioned by the Politburo and Central Authority. The Politburo formally appointed Deng Xiaoping as the wartime commander, and both deputy commanders and Geng Biao, his Chief of Staff, were also drawn from the Politburo.⁴³ In turn Xiaoping activated wartime fronts or theaters of war in the north and south built around multiple military regions. The Northern Front, focused on the USSR air-land threat was placed under command of Li Desheng, the Shenyang Military Region commander, and included the Beijing, Jinan, Lanzhou and Xinjiang military regions.⁴⁴ The

Southern Front (for action in Vietnam) was commanded by the 73-year-old commander of the Guangzhou (Canton) military region, Xu Shiyu. He also commanded the Eastern Theater of Operation or Eastern Wing forces. The Western Theater of Operations (Western wing) was ably commanded by Yang Dezhi, with the principal forces coming from the Kunming military region, though nearly every military region contributed some troops to the Southern Front.⁴⁵

Vietnam's forces had to be carefully considered. Their army was respected for its experience earned in 25 years of war preceding this conflict. Defeat of the French, the Americans and the Khmer Rouge were still fresh in the institutional dynamic.⁴⁶ The presence of over 3,000 Soviet advisors in Vietnam was a source of technology, professionalism and friction. The Vietnamese Air Force was small but quite modern and experienced, while their Navy was a smaller version of China's, with hopes for Soviet modernization and training.⁴⁷ As the crisis unfolded Vietnam called upon the leadership of the hero of Dien Bien Phu and the American War, General Vo Ngyuen Giap, to command the forces reacting to the crisis. He intuitively understood the regional issues at stake, as well as the carefully "limited" dynamics of the conflict, and Vietnam's military situation with forces widely dispersed throughout Indochina.⁴⁸ Unfortunately for Giap, as the defender he initially could not take the initiative, having to await the operational timing decisions of his opponent instead.

FORCES EMPLOYED – CHINA and VIETNAM⁴⁹	
China	Vietnam
<u>NATIONAL CAPABILITY:</u> Land: Armed forces 4.3M in 11 military regions; PLA 3.6M, 175 divisions; 9,000 T59 tanks, 20,000 guns most outdated Air: 5000 combat aircraft – most obsolete; (primarily MiG-19s, also Mig 17s, Il-28s, and a few F-6bis and Mig-21s) Sea: 1050 vessels (including 14 destroyers/ escorts, 140+ fast patrol boats, 70+ WWII era submarines) in three fleets	<u>NATIONAL CAPABILITY:</u> Land: Armed forces 1.5M; 615,000 well trained regulars in 25 divisions; assorted special brigades (armor, engineer, etc...) Air: 300 combat aircraft - MiG-17s/ -19s, SU-7s*, MiG-21s & -23s%veteran air defenses - SAMs (SA 3,6,7s) and guns (ZU-33, ZSU-23-4, ZSU 57-2) Sea: 2 Petya destroyers, 32 fast patrol boats [Note: 3,000+ Soviet advisors in country]*
<u>OTHER THEATERS:</u> (PRC Northern Front) On Sino-Soviet Border - Fully mobilized prior to war's onset; 300,000 non-combatants	<u>OTHER THEATERS:</u> (Cambodia/Laos Front) In Laos – 6 regular force divisions

evacuated Exact number of division's unknown – but Beijing normally protected by 55 divisions & 4,700 tanks and 3 other military regions also provided forces# USSR Forces- 44 Soviet Divisions (one third fully manned)^; Soviet Air Command on the Sino-Soviet border 2000 "advanced" aircraft%	In Cambodia – 12 regular force divisions* (18 of 25 total) Khmer Rouge Forces- 60,000 troops in 4 divisions and 3 independent regiments; mixed Soviet, Chinese and American equipment
<u>THEATER OF WAR:</u> China Southern Front: Commander: Xu Shiyou (also East Wing Cdr) Air: 984 aircraft in 15 bases; Air Defense – SA2s from border cover 50km into Vietnam Sea: South Sea fleet - 2 missile destroyers, 31 destroyer escorts/fast patrol boats, 20 subs <u>Invasion Force</u> – 2 Wings; 8 Armies (corps equivalent) and 7 separate divisions (31 divisions); 330,000 troops (later rose to 400,000); 1200 tanks# <u>Western Wing:</u> [3 Armies, 2 Divisions, 1 Arty & 1 Anti-Air Divisions](key LOA:Lao Cai-Hanoi; secondary Lai Chau/Hia Giang - Lao Cai) <u>Eastern Wing</u> : [5 Armies, 1Arty and 1 Anti-Air Divisions] (key LOA: Friendship Pass-Lang Son-Hanoi; secondary Cao Bang-Lang Son)	<u>THEATER OF WAR:</u> Vietnam Northern Front: Commander: Vo Nguyen Giap Air: Air power available in north but not used; Air defenses – not challenged by PLAAF Sea: negligible action; likely due to USSR 14 ship task force in Vietnamese waters <u>Defense in Depth</u> – Border Security Forces: 70,000 troops and 50,000 militia troops* [includes six regional divisions and one regional regiment] Regular Forces: [2 Divisions vicinity Lang Son] <u>Reserve</u> – Positioned near Hanoi – [5 regular divisions & 4 special brigades –1 Armor Bde, 1Artillery Bde, 1 Engineer Bde, 1Air defense Bde]

TABLE 2: FORCES EMPLOYED

Key military timing considerations for conducting the operation in mid-February 1979 were built around both diplomatic realities and military aspects of weather, logistics and tactical surprise. Politically, February 1979 was the correct time for this limited war not only because of the tide of world opinion flowing against Vietnam following the invasion of Cambodia and the critically completed round of diplomacy in the US, but also because of the dampening effects on the USSR's response options the ongoing final stages of negotiations of the SALT II Treaty represented. Military aspects of the timing selection had to include the facts that not only were the Vietnamese greatly extended with major forces in both Laos and now Cambodia, but

Vietnam was at a logistical low point based on loss of 50 % of their monthly oil imports based on China's delivery cutoff in November 1978. Additionally, the coinciding February weather conditions in northern China and northern Vietnam were both favorable for only a window of weeks. The April rains in northern Vietnam would be avoided, while the thawing of ground and key rivers on the Sino-Soviet border would not begin until April. Rapid conduct of the limited war would end it under favorable weather for subsequent Chinese defense in the north, if needed. Finally there was an opportunity to gain some tactical surprise by beginning the war against Vietnam during the first visit to Beijing by an Indian cabinet official, Foreign Minister Vajpayee, since the 1962 border war with India. Vietnam was closely following this event and probably would not expect an attack while it was underway.⁵⁰

THE MILITARY CAMPAIGN (17 FEBRUARY - 16 MARCH)

In prosecuting this war China sought some clearly defined theater strategic objectives and others that were not publicly acknowledged. Those objectives included:

- Punishing the Government of Vietnam (not the people) and to "explode the myth of an invincible Vietnam."⁵¹
- Extract some measure of flexibility from Hanoi on crucial strategic issues; demonstrate the gravity with which Beijing viewed Hanoi's obstinacy and China's potential to do something about it.⁵²
- Defeat the "Asian Cuba," thereby discrediting USSR as a reliable ally.⁵³
- Not stated - avoid demand for quid-pro-quo withdrawal from Cambodia in order to reduce possibility of escalation and endless test of national wills.⁵⁴
- Not stated (hotly denied, even) - demonstrate China's regional military power.⁵⁵
- Not stated - test the Chinese military to see if the PLA had recovered from Lin Biao's factionalism and ascertain what modernization initiatives were needed.

Vietnam's strategic objectives, while less well publicized included:

- Preserve gains/activities in the greater Indochina Federation (i.e., Laos and especially Cambodia).⁵⁶
- Focus world opinion on China's aggression and subsequent lack of military results
- Exercise USSR treaty obligations to the maximum extent possible (advisors, resupply of key arms, and naval presence).⁵⁷
- Tactically/operationally defeat the Chinese invasion force without major commitment of regular forces, withdrawal of forces from Cambodia or extensive (expensive) mobilization.

Phase I - Stubborn Border Defense (17-22 February)

The campaign began at 5:00 am on 17 February 1979, following an intense artillery barrage with powerful attacks by 100,000 PLA troops at various points all along the Vietnam border (see Map 2). Together the East and West Wings of the Southern Front launched five major columns across the border with actual crossings occurring in as many as 26 different locations.⁵⁸ By attacking in such a dispersed manner, the PLA kept the Vietnamese off balance as to their real objectives and at the same time indicated they sought something other than decisive military victory.⁵⁹ In the west one major column (13th Army and 11th Army) was oriented directly on Lao Cai, with supporting attacks by their divisions oriented on the provincial capitals of Lai Chau and Hai Giang respectively. In the East the 41st Army oriented on Cao Bang and Dong Khe, while the 42nd Army attacked through Friendship Pass, towards Dong Dang and then Lang Son, as one Division advanced towards Mon Cai along the coast.⁶⁰

The operational level objectives of the Southern Front were: 1) the rapid capture of up to a 50 kilometer stretch of Vietnamese territory and provincial capitals (especially Lao Cai and Lang Son); 2) the engagement and destruction of a few frontline Vietnamese divisions; and 3) the scorched earth destruction of "gun emplacements and installations that threatened China."⁶¹ From the beginning the PRC leadership strictly limited the goals, scope and duration of the military campaign.⁶² Most notable was Deng Xiaoping's February 19, 2001 conversation with the Secretary General of the Organization of American States in which he explained that the Chinese would withdraw from Vietnam immediately after its limited objectives were met.⁶³ Vietnam's operational objectives were to: 1) slow and bloody the PLA's initial assaults inside the tough provincial border defense zones; while 2) assembling their Regular Army in the plains area south of Cao Bang and Lang Son; in order to 3) defeat the weakened Chinese in a major battle at or just beyond the 50 kilometer range of artillery coverage from the Chinese border.⁶⁴

The terrain, logistics and the border defenses, soon mitigated the initial momentum of the PLA's attack. The mountainous terrain, with thick jungles and lack of roads along the selected attack axes, soon overtaxed the less-than-modern Chinese logistics effort. Especially important, though was the unexpectedly staunch Vietnamese border defense: regional divisions and local militia troops behind a labyrinth of tunnels, caves, trenches, land mines, booby traps, punji stakes and well prepared killing zones with concentrated artillery fires. The Chinese were constantly forced to divide into smaller and smaller units (battalion, then company and then platoon) to make any advance; it soon became tunnel-by- tunnel and hill-by-hill fighting.⁶⁵ It took the PLA several days to finally force the frontier passes and progress roughly 5 miles to reach the Vietnamese interior road network. They then paused and waited for ammunition and

reinforcements. The Vietnamese mounted two counterattacks. The first at Lao Cai, seized a stretch of road for two days and ambushed resupply convoys while the other enjoyed little success on the coastal road west of Mon Cai.⁶⁶

On 21 and 22 February a short pause ensued which some feel marked the end of the PRC's demonstration phase, during which the PRC assessed Vietnam's reaction and propaganda, USSR intentions, and overall global reaction.⁶⁷ Meanwhile, each side was making counterclaims of success to the international press. Vietnamese claims of inflicting high casualties in the vicinity of Cao Bang and destroying four battalions, numerous tanks and vehicles, were said to have been accomplished entirely with border defense troops with no commitment of regular forces. The Chinese claimed to have inflicted 10,000 Vietnamese casualties at a cost of less than 3,000 of their own.⁶⁸ Given the isolation of the war zone, the totalitarian nature of the two regimes with their propaganda machines in full operation, along with additional USSR disinformation, sources of accurate battlefield results were at best secondary and always suspect. As a result there were wild swings in estimates of forces involved, even by Asian-based news sources and such details continue to escape even the most scholarly of investigations of this war by historians.⁶⁹

Phase II - PLA Drive to Lang Son (22-27 February)

On 22 February battlefield activity intensified once again and the PLA, using two fresh divisions, resumed their attacks amid increasing reports of Vietnamese regular forces beginning to move north.⁷⁰ In the heaviest fighting of the six day old war, PLA troops launched additional attacks on Highway 1 north of Lang Son and completed their capture of the provincial capitals of Lao Cai and Cao Bang, as well as territory throughout four key northern provinces. On 23 February the PLA clashed for the first time with the well-equipped regiments of the two Vietnamese Regular Army divisions in the vicinity of Lang Son (see Table 2).⁷¹ A clear focus of action was developing around Lang Son for both sides.

In the first 10 days of the war it was apparent that the PLAAF's capabilities and use would be severely limited during this conflict.⁷² While certainly this could be justified on a political basis, such as corresponding to the limited aims of the war and desire not to escalate, it is apparent it had a much more practical military basis. Despite the large number of Chinese aircraft on hand and within range of the battle (see Table 1), the threat of sophisticated aircraft flown by veteran pilots and, in particular, the imposing array of the Vietnamese air defenses of Soviet origin (SA3, SA6 missiles, ZSU-23-4s and ZSU-57-2 guns) caused the PRC and PLAAF leadership to proceed cautiously. The result was a very limited number of PLAAF cross-border

aircraft sorties, practically all of it "air cover" in nature and very little air-to-ground support to help suppress the stubborn, deadly Vietnamese defenses or facilitate offensive breakthroughs. Meanwhile, the PLA was suffering heavy casualties on the ground.⁷³

Even as this bloody fighting rose in intensity and with both sides poised for a climatic battle, China continued its diplomatic signaling of limited intentions. On 23 February Geng Biao, Minister of External Liaison and Deng Xiaoping's Chief of Staff for the war, advised key western ambassadors that the war would last about another week to ten days and that China would pull out as soon as its objectives were met. At the same time Deng Xiaoping gave this message to the chairman of the European Economic Community as well as the president of the Japanese Kyodo News Service. On 25 February PRC Deputy Prime Minister for Industry, Weng Chan, also stated outright that there was no intention of moving on to Hanoi. The USSR carefully viewed all this, but beyond selected naval moves in the South China sea, resupply flights to Vietnam, and ominous rhetoric demanding that China "take its hands off" Vietnam, the Soviet Union quietly informed several western and asian diplomats in Moscow, that as long as the war remained limited the USSR would not intervene.⁷⁴

By 26 February more and more Chinese troops were assembling in the vicinity of Lang Son.⁷⁵ Once again the PRC leadership assessed the situation, from tactical dispositions to global reactions. With China's "demonstration" phase not evoking the desired response from Vietnam, the PRC leadership moved their action up to the "attack phase." This phase is described as a large-scale ground action designed to inflict severe damage on the enemy's forces, with objectives beyond the more limited objectives of the demonstration phase.⁷⁶ The focus of this major battle would be the provincial capital of Lang Son and the Vietnamese forces, including regular forces, assembling there. Even as they began to raise the intensity to a new level, the PRC leadership was careful to send the "limited war" signal to all audiences. On 26 February Vice Premier Deng once again told the Kyodo News Service in Japan that the Chinese invasion would end in about 10 days.⁷⁷

Phase III - The Battle for Lang Son/Defense to Destroy (28 February - 5 March)

On 27 February the Chinese reinforced its next major effort by pushing two more divisions to Lang Son from the PLA forces that had captured Dong Dang and Loc Binh, as well as sending new units across the border.⁷⁸ Anticipating the coming key events, General Giap had already committed Vietnamese regular divisions to Lang Son, including the 308th division of Dien Bien Phu fame. He now also sent one regular division from Da Nang to Mon Cai and

withdrew one from Laos to move to the battle at Lao Cai, while withholding most of the 5 regular division reserve around Hanoi from the battle.⁷⁹

The Southern Front's East Wing attack to seize Lang Son featured a main attack along Highway 1A in which casualties were extensive on both sides (reportedly thousands of corpses scattered along the Highway), while extensive secondary attacks occurred throughout the countryside surrounding the city.⁸⁰ The fighting frequently occurred at night, at close quarters with PLA regiments seeking to move around the flanks of the extensive Lang Son defenses. The Chinese determinedly set out to cut off all secondary routes of movement and reinforcement for the defending Vietnamese, thus avoiding the protracted battle of resupply and reinforcement that the Vietnamese Army commander's sought.⁸¹ The PLA's attacks on the surrounding hill complexes were fiercely resisted but were finally successful by end of the day on 2 March. Lang Son was surrounded except for the key position on Khua Ma Son mountain.⁸² The extent of the defenses may have been unanticipated, because the Chinese falsely reported the fall of Lang Son three days in a row, while the fighting, "saw the most brutal sort of combat, as defenders were dislodged house by house, bunker by bunker and tunnel by tunnel."⁸³

During this same pivotal period secondary fighting continued across northern Vietnam southeast of Lao Cai and south of Cao Bang and in the vicinity of Mon Cai. To draw off some of the pressure the Vietnamese launched successful cross border raids into two Chinese towns in Guangxi province, taking advantage of the noncontiguous nature of the Chinese attacks into Vietnam and exposing Chinese vulnerability in the rear area.⁸⁴

On 3 March the final assaults of the battle of Lang Son were launched to secure Khua Ma Son mountain. A powerful Chinese tank-infantry assault seized Hill 303 as the staging area for the final assault, drawing a swift barrage of Vietnamese artillery. Nonetheless the tanks and infantry resumed the attack, eliminating the six Vietnamese firing positions on the mountain one-by-one. Hours after the fall of the mountain position, the PLA entered the city of Lang Son.⁸⁵ As an integral part of its actions from 1 to 5 March, the PLA units consolidated their captured terrain and resupplied their forward units. Some analysts saw the intensity of effort as PLA anticipation and even desire for a large Vietnamese counterattack with regular forces. This would permit the PLA to further their objective of destroying, "main force units...and to attain their objective of severely blooding the Vietnamese," as well as giving the kind of ending to the PRC's "self-defensive counterattack" the leadership desired.⁸⁶

Phase IV - PLA Withdrawal (6-16 March)

With the expected (and desired) Vietnamese counterattack not developing in the vicinity of Lang Son, on 5 March the PRC leadership assessed a sufficient level of accomplishment of their objectives and moved into the "détente phase," publicly announcing their intent to begin rapid withdrawal of the invasion forces.⁸⁷ Simultaneously the PRC sent diplomatic requests to begin talks on the crisis and the issues, as well as issuing a threat about Vietnamese harassment or engagement of the withdrawing forces.⁸⁸ The Vietnamese response was two-fold, first, dismissing the requested talks as a trick and issuing a national call for full mobilization, and, secondly, taking a "red carpet approach" of allowing the PLA units to back out of northern Vietnam unmolested.⁸⁹

The PLA's actual withdrawal was systematic and conducted with full security, using a bounding technique with rear guard units. In this manner while conducting very specific destruction of infrastructure as they went, the PLA retraced its invasion route and exited Vietnam relatively unmolested, completing the maneuver by 16 March.⁹⁰ The PLA's penetrations measured from 18 to 25 miles, with the deepest on the Lao Cai axis of advance. Their implementation of the scorched earth policy was extensive and effective. Every bridge, road, power line, irrigation channel, and building inside the occupied area was damaged or destroyed. Hanoi alleged the Chinese had razed over 320 villages in six provinces, as well as the provincial capitals of Lao Kai, Lang Son, and Mon Kai.⁹¹

These would not be the final hostilities of the Third Indochina Conflict. Just a few weeks after the Chinese withdrawal from Northern Vietnam, the Khmer Rouge resumed their pressure by launching relatively successful raids-in-strength against nearby Vietnamese provincial capitals in the spring of 1979.⁹² Indeed as the period 1980-1983 would show, the military situation in Cambodia would remain unresolved and continue to echo along the Sino-Vietnamese border for some time to come.

RESULTS AND MILITARY ASSESSMENT

The "results" outlined in Table 3 provide the best analysis of the conflicting and inflated reporting of the facts surrounding February-March 1979 war losses for China and Vietnam.

RESULTS: Human and Material Losses ⁹³		
Category	China	Vietnam
Human Losses:		

Killed in Action(KIA)	26,000	30,000
Wounded in Action(WIA)	37,000	32,000
Prisoners of War(POW)	260	1,638
Equipment Losses:		
Tanks, armored vehicles	420	185
Heavy mortars and guns	66	200
Missile Stites	0	6
{Note – no aircraft/naval losses for either side}		
Infrastructure Losses:	Various villages and towns inside China raided by counterattack forces.	3 province capitals and 320 villages razed –buildings, bridges, irrigation canals, power/ telephone lines destroyed

TABLE 3: MILITARY RESULTS

Perhaps the most universally accepted “result” of this 18 day “limited” war, was that it was violent and bloody. A more total understanding of the conflict and its “results” may be gained by first examining both the military aspects of China’s performance in 1979, then outlining the unfolding strategic aftermath of the conflict in the events of 1980s and 1990s, to include the PRC’s approach to change to its military in this period.

Analysis of China’s performance in the regional conflict and the military campaign itself renders three broad strategic judgments and three military specific judgments. First, analysis of the strategic aftermath of this regional conflict will show, the Chinese military campaign eventually achieved its assigned objective of punishing Vietnam - militarily, economically and diplomatically. Second, review of the strategic aftermath will also indicate the degree to which the lack of early, convincing battlefield success by the PLA cost the PRC prestige and negotiation leverage allowing the Vietnamese to successfully delay concessions and defer actions in Cambodia. The most pertinent strategic judgment however is that the extent of PRC success achieved in handling regional conflict was nearly exclusively attributable to the sophisticated performance by the PRC in the realm of national strategic campaigning. At this level China skillfully integrated and synchronized all elements of national power with its military action - from economic actions against Vietnam, to extensive global and regional diplomacy, to a highly effective public information campaign. In particular this enabled China to carefully wield

the blunt instrument of war, largely due to its ability to link strategic goals to military operational methods and end states in a highly defined manner. Ultimately the PRC's strategic performance, should be judged an effective military campaign in a limited war (though, judged by western standards, tragically inefficient in its high cost in human life). As the most recent example of Chinese regional conflict in a land-power context, the Third Indochina Conflict deserves more careful study by western armies in particular. It is likely this has not happened because this value is often hidden by China's poor or incomplete performance in the operational to tactical levels of war in February-March 1979.

Indeed, careful analysis on the specific military merits of the campaign must judge the performance of the PLA as "mixed results" at best. First, the PLA and its associated arms were unable to conduct rudimentary joint warfare -- air, sea, land coordination -- due to stark limitations of equipment and modern warfighting know-how. At the tactical level of war, despite good soldiers and battalion and below leadership, the PLA lacked coherent combined arms doctrine, higher unit command and control capabilities, and modern logistics capability. The net result was that the PLA of 1979 was ineffective as a modern offensive threat and therefore the PRC of the 1980s fails as a coherent regional offensive military threat due to these cumulative deficiencies at the operational level of war. These deficiencies, confirmed to Deng Xiaoping and the PRC leadership by the results of February-March 1979, would shape much of the PLA's reforms and modernizations in the 1980s and early 1990s. But, as with all matters, the Chinese military needs would be weighed against the other competing modernization needs of the country, particularly economic needs, and weighed against the regional and global strategic aftermath of the Third Indochina Conflict.

REGIONAL CONFLICT- STRATEGIC AFTERMATH FOR THE 1980 AND 90S

"... a case study of the failure of diplomacy...the tragedy of the Third Indochina conflict is that everyone lost and no one gained."

—David W. P. Elliott⁹⁴

The aftermath of this war can best be measured in the effects it generated for the main players regionally and globally, and the lasting effects it brought about for the PRC's armed forces. In the immediate years following this war the essential elements of the situation continued unchanged. Indeed, for China, Vietnam, Cambodia and the ASEAN nations (especially Thailand) the issues, and the sources of violence and insecurity arising from them, only worsened, becoming more intractable after the Chinese "self-defense counterattack" of 1979 than before it.

EFFECTS - GLOBAL AND REGIONAL

In retaliation for the spring of 1979 Khmer raids, Vietnamese units had pressed the Khmer Rouge into the northwest portion of Cambodia, placing Vietnamese forces in dangerously close proximity to the Thailand border, causing long-term complications and tensions. In this position the Khmer Rouge, resupplied from China over a "Ho Chi Minh trail-like network via Thailand," were able to wage successful guerrilla war against the Vietnamese forces with impunity.⁹⁵ In turn, this simply fostered a reoccurring cycle of violence in which the Vietnamese in northern Cambodia applied military pressure and forayed into Thailand, causing China to repeatedly apply military pressure along the Sino-Vietnam border. This Chinese pressure ranged from significant improvements to its southern air and sea forces and military roads in the region, to actively supporting dissident movements in Vietnam and Laos, and periodically firing cross-border artillery as well as occasional launching regimental and larger military incursions into Vietnam.⁹⁶

For Cambodia the 1980s and the early 1990s were a time of Vietnamese occupation and sustained low-level war that, in conjunction with the legacy of murder and butchery of Pol Pot's period of rule, left it one of the most destitute countries in the world. Therefore, the long-term effect of the Third Indochina Conflict was to save Cambodia, first, from a Pol Pot-imposed national suicide and, then, from a subsequent loss of identity in an Indochina Federation, but at such a high cost in human life, national infrastructure and societal coherence as to question if some earlier accepted form of outside imperialism leading to independence would have been better.

For the ASEAN nations of Southeast Asia the Third Indochina Conflict saw Laos' and Thailand's unsuccessful attempts to avoid involvement leave them both facing border threats and insurgencies. Though unwilling, they were inexorably drawn into the neighbors' bloody fray. For ASEAN as an entity, the sudden appearance of commonly agreed upon and opposed hegemonic nation in Vietnam had some positive effects. The group progressed toward cohesive political and economic community more rapidly than expected.⁹⁷ This would offer two long-term results. First, the Southeast Asian economic boom and rise of the "mini-tigers," and second, replacement of Vietnam in the late 1990s with a much larger and more menacing regional hegemonic nation in a resurgent China.

For Vietnam, the Third Indochina Conflict was initially judged a success. Good performance on the battlefield had certainly rendered the desired operational level results: no imposed withdrawal of forces from Cambodia or Laos, state survival and territorial integrity. But, viewed in the strategic sense, even in 1979 and certainly post-1989 (beginning of the collapse

of the USSR), Vietnam must be judged a clear loser from this war. First, by pursuing the course that led to the war, Vietnam became more completely linked with the USSR than it desired to be with any outside power. It lost the prized, traditional balance of influence between China and distant powers (like the USSR or the US).⁹⁸ Thus Vietnam, like Cuba, paid more dearly than most with the Soviet Union's collapse. Secondly, Vietnam achieved none of its aims or issues with China. From the border issue itself, to the Gulf of Tonkin territorial waters and fishing rights, to the Spratly Islands, progress was delayed for 20 years. Third, Vietnam was internationally branded as a regional threat (and Soviet client) losing critical aid from Australia, Japan, Sweden, Denmark, as well as Chinese oil. The result was a cumulative devastating, long-term economic effect. Finally the strain and drain of 1979 and its aftermath on Vietnamese domestic affairs cannot be underestimated, "for Vietnam, the price of fighting two wars in a period of three months was high. The economy along the Chinese border was devastated."⁹⁹ The general mobilization ordered in Vietnam on March 5, 1979 marked the beginning of a significant military build-up that often came at a high national economic and social cost.¹⁰⁰

China emerged from the Third Indochina Conflict with at best mixed results. The regional conflict management successes of an improved strategic position vis-à-vis the USSR, establishment of diplomatic ties with the US, and regionally, the "punishment" of Vietnam, must certainly be tempered by other results. China's battlefield and military results cannot be categorized as a success, with clear deficiencies identified in modern warfighting doctrine, combat performance and material. China's demands for Vietnamese change of behavior – whether that was withdrawal from Cambodia, linkage to the USSR, or border/territorial disagreements – rendered no near or midterm positive results. Accordingly, China added her southern border to her other security areas of concern: Taiwan and the Sino-Soviet border. Finally, if China sought to counter Soviet influence within its sphere of interest, specifically in Southeast Asia, the events of 1979 had the complete opposite effect - only amplifying and accelerating the presence of the USSR. Soviet Army and air advisors became prevalent throughout Indochina (Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia), a significant Soviet naval presence was semi-permanently established in Camh Ranh Bay, and the Warsaw Pact's Council for Economic Mutual Assistance (COMECON) economic influence became vital to Vietnam.¹⁰¹ On all these counts, China could take no solace, in spite of its eventual overall success in the conflict. Where it could take solace was in its long-term economic outlook, which remained the primary of its "Four Modernizations," to the detriment of military modernization needs in the 1980s.¹⁰²

EFFECTS - PLA MODERNIZATION AT THE END OF 20TH CENTURY

From this short, violent and secretive little war the world drew a number (and sometimes contradictory) of conclusions about the PRC's military abilities. The PLA was alternately bold and tenacious in its pursuit of its strategic objectives and yet backward in doctrine and tactics, command and control, logistics and especially in equipment. A clear case in point was the PLAAF's performance: "The decision not to commit Chinese Communist air units to air combat or troop support was a consequence of...a clear recognition of the inferiority of PLAAF air combat and ground support equipment in addition to the political constraints and general strategic concerns of the PRC." This also makes it equally clear that small regional air forces, supported by reasonably sophisticated air defenses (such as Japan, Taiwan, Thailand, etc...) were not threatened by the PLAAF of the 1980s and 90s, let alone the USSR western air forces.¹⁰³ Indeed in the aftermath of the war, visitors to China's military heard clear PRC interest in acquiring a limited number of modern US high technology weapons if they were offered.¹⁰⁴

The PRC leadership not only heard these conclusions but also often shared them, while still proclaiming the appropriateness and overall success of their limited war with Vietnam. Their review of the campaign led the PRC and PLA leadership to pursue correction in the areas of doctrine and tactics, organizational structure, equipment and training. By 1985 the exclusive use of the national concept of "People's War" and defense using national depth and guerilla war, was largely, though not exclusively, supplanted with a doctrine for "active defense" requiring mature combined arms tactics with a strong offensive and professional logistics capabilities.¹⁰⁵ In the area of organizational change, the PLA's 1980's drive to create true combined arms organizations, was routinely stalled by lack of modern equipment and resistance from older senior officers. Only towards the end of the 1980s did the PLA institute an age based retirement system and re-implement a comprehensive rank structure for officers and NCOs.¹⁰⁶

Amongst the "Four Modernizations" described by national policy, military modernization was always secondary to economic modernization and often the political needs of the Communist Party as well. Therefore, the very clear equipment deficiencies of the PLA, PLAAF and the PLAN during the Vietnam campaign were not comprehensively addressed and only began to improve on a large scale following the achievement of some national economic successes in the 1990s. The insufficiency of modern equipment had degraded full combined arms tactics, along with organizational and training development in the 1980s. In that decade it was in the area of education and training that the PLA made noteworthy advances. These included reinvigoration of professional military academies for officer candidates and

commanders while senior officers were schooled at the University of Defense of the People's Liberation Army. In these schools, as well as in the field, new doctrine, tactics and organization were introduced and studied.¹⁰⁷

IMPLICATIONS - ECHOES IN PRC MILITARY OF 21ST CENTURY

Today it is apparent Communist China truly began its first serious evolution of national military doctrine beyond Mao's strategy of "People's War" following the PRC's "self-defense counterattack" of 1979.¹⁰⁸ This marks a clear departure point for 25 years of the PLA's commitment to evolution in military thought. Now, in the year 2001, the evolution seems poised to continue to incorporate the realities of the ongoing Revolution in Military affairs. Today concepts of preemptive "strategic attack" and "rapid war and rapid resolution," have now joined the lexicon of Chinese military strategy, in attempt to leverage the PRC's advancements in cruise missiles, space technology, and information warfare. It seems equally clear the PRC seeks a "beyond regional" role in the present-world geostrategic situation.¹⁰⁹

Yet, even as China's military enters the 21st century, building its intellectual institutions upon such foundation stones as Mao's tightly-constrained ideology for military men along with Deng Xiaoping's more recent focus on defensive modernization within constrained resources, the effects of the sizable, sustained land combat with Vietnam in 1979 remain a key element. Swirling through the decision making surrounding what kind of 21st century army China should build, the results of 1979 are as important as the major events of the 1990's, such as the break-up of the USSR, the rise of China economically, and the much studied campaigns of the 1991 Gulf War, the 1996 Taiwan crisis, and the 1999 Kosovo conflict.¹¹⁰

China's perception of itself relative to the acknowledged superpowers of the late 1970s and early 1980s still matters greatly. The frustrations over their inability in 1979 to counteract Vietnamese airpower and air defense of Soviet manufacture or the Soviet naval task force have simply been updated and amplified in the Taiwan crisis of 1996 and the Chinese Embassy bombing in Belgrade. Today's very evident national desire for great power or superpower status also has strong roots in February-March 1979.¹¹¹

Perhaps a more important question is, over the next fifty years, what is the most likely framework in which a future Chinese military strategy of preemptive, strategic attack might be played out? It is neither the exclusively defensive "People's War" school of thought nor the too futuristic Revolution in Military Affairs or "RMA War" school.¹¹² Rather the most likely framework is the "limited or local war school," precisely akin to that conducted in 1979, that covers both the broadest possible range of war scenarios and meets the small-to-medium-scale

wars that many Chinese strategic thinkers view as inevitable in the Asia-Pacific region.¹¹³ Continued study and analysis of China's 1979 campaign of limited war against Vietnam for sharply defined strategic objectives, is prudent for modern military students of war.

CONCLUSION

Rather than the global strategic environments of USSR-PRC competition or superpower interaction, the Sino-Vietnam war of 1979 primarily grew out of the unique dynamics of the regional strategic environment. The Chinese regional strategy of containing Vietnamese expansion in Southeast Asia (as well as USSR global aspirations) first guided the PRC leadership to select a military response, and then carefully bounded and defined the limits of that military action within specific regional political constraints and limitations. This campaign ultimately achieved the intended regional political objective of punishing Vietnam, but the lack of conclusive battlefield success by the PLA cost the PRC prestige and negotiation leverage. Chinese inadequacies at the operational/joint level of war and offensive tactical organization, doctrine and especially material, has led many to disregard this event as worthy of routine study by western militaries. This approach fails to recognize the Third Indochina Conflict as a recent and overall successful instance of Chinese management of regional conflict and strategic campaigning. The stages of China's responses, the integrated use of all elements of national power, and the close alignment of national strategic goals with the military operational methods and end states, all mark this a highly effective display of military strategic campaigning in limited warfare. Further, the results of the Third Indochina War have continued to be an important experiential foundation and provided momentum for many of China's plans and programs surrounding the military modernization efforts of the late 1980s and the 1990s. Indeed even in today's discussions of evolving 21st century military technology and methods of warfare the lessons of the Third Indochina Conflict continue to echo in China's internal debate.

Word Count: 10,856

ENDNOTES

- ¹ David W. Elliott ed., The Third Indochina conflict (Boulder, Co: Westview Press, 1981), 1.
- ² Ibid., 4.
- ³ Steven J. Hood, Dragons Entangled: Indochina and the China- Vietnam War. (Armark, NY: East Gate Book, 1992), 8, 12 and 14-16. Hood provides excellent review of the four principal periods describing Sino-Vietnamese history through the 19th century.
- ⁴ Ibid., 19 and Robert S. Ross, The Indochina Tangle: China's Vietnam Policy, 1975-1979, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 19.
- ⁵ Gareth Porter, "Vietnamese Policy and the Indochina Crisis," In The Third Indochina Conflict, ed. David W. P. Elliot (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1981), 76.
- ⁶ Edward W. Ross, "Chinese Conflict Management," Military Review Vol LX, No 1 (January 1980), 17-18.
- ⁷ Douglas Pike, "Communist vs. Communist in Southeast Asia," International Security Vol 4, No 1 (Summer 1979), 32-34.
- ⁸ Robert G. Sutter, "China's Strategy Toward Vietnam and Its Implications for the United States," In The Third Indochina Conflict, ed. David W. P. Elliot (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1981), 168-170.
- ⁹ Hood, The author spends most of Chapter 5 and 6 reviewing these regional causes in effective detail.
- ¹⁰ Table 1- compilation of sources is explained by this legend: *=Chen, # = O'Ballance, %= Heder or Porter (in Elliot), \$ Ross,(Le Daun visit)150.
- ¹¹ Stephen P. Heder, "The Kampuchean-Vietnamese Conflict," In The Third Indochina Conflict, ed. David W. P. Elliot (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1981), 27. Nearly in parallel to the US Mayaguez incident of May 1975, Khmer Rouge forces seized a Vietnamese oil rig and the small island of Tou Chau. Vietnamese later responded by attacking the Cambodian patrol boat base and seizing the island of Poulo Wai.
- ¹² Ibid., 40-42. Like the Chinese Communist Party did to the Vietnamese Communist Party in 1954, Ho Chi Minh abandoned the Cambodian communist movement at the Geneva talks. Additionally in September 1975 many of the Cambodian communist cadre trained by Vietnam during the "American" war were purged by Pol Pot, whose xenophobic nationalism included a historical distrust of Vietnamese intentions for domination. This manifested itself in a Vietnamese fundamental principle for a "socialist solidarity bloc" and a Khmer Rouge position that rejected the fundamental principle and the bloc.
- ¹³ Ibid., 34. Many of these 1977 Khmer raids were against border provinces, such as Tay Ninh, in southern Vietnam, as well as the Mekong Delta area. These were regions undergoing a painful integration process with the communist victors from the north.

¹⁴ Ibid., 42-44.

¹⁵ Ibid., 49-50 and Hood 50-52 that indicates the supplies included weaponry, air defense radar and a military rail survey team.

¹⁶ Hood, 45.

¹⁷ Robert Ross, 156 and William S. Turley and Jeffery Race, "The Third Indochina War," Foreign Policy No 38 (Spring 1980): 101.

¹⁸ Edgar O'Ballance, "Chinese Crime and Punishment: Kampuchea and Vietnam 1978-79," Marine Corps Gazette Vol 65, No 3 (March 1981): 41.

¹⁹ Robert Ross, 208-209 and Heder, 58. The sum of the Soviet delivered arms and supplies delivered in 1978 were clearly beyond the needs commensurate with Vietnam's ongoing border clashes with Cambodia.

²⁰ Hood, 47-49. Also Chen 35-36 outlines the Radio Hanoi announcement of KNUFNS.

²¹ O'Ballance, pg 41

²² Turley and Race, 102.

²³ Hood, 50.

²⁴ Turley and Race, 103 and King C. Chen, *China's War with Vietnam, 1979*, (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1987), 85.

²⁵ Charles R. Nelson, "The Sino-Viet War: Causes, Conduct and Consequences," Parameters Vol IX, No 3 (September 1979): 24.

²⁶ Edward Ross, 18. Also Chen 75,76 and Tables on 78,79 indicates the neat parallel of Deng Xiaoping's second rehabilitation in July 1977 and the complete interplay of Third Indochina conflict key events. It is small wonder the conflict is sometimes referred to as "Deng's War." At the November Central Working Conference and the Plenum Xiaoping had promoted or fully restored nine full members to the Central Committee providing him a decisive voting margin. In many ways this was the final act of 18 months of the post-Gang of Four leadership struggle between Chairman Hua Guofeng and Deng Xiaoping.

²⁷ Edward Ross, 19 and Chen, 76. Based on the November 1978 Working Conference analysis the PRC determined U.S. President Jimmy Carter's ceremony for signatures date of 1 January 1979 would be too late (too close to possible punitive military action against Vietnam) and so a request to accelerate the date was made to Washington, and granted. The 15 December 1978 Normalized Relations between the PRC and the U.S. further strengthened Xiaoping's hand for the upcoming Plenum and China's position on both a global (USSR) and regional basis (Vietnam and Indochina in general).

²⁸ O' Ballance, 40. Subsequently Xiaoping was able to issue final warnings Vietnam and reject various last minute Vietnamese overtures as well.

²⁹ Robert Ross, 210 and Chen, 86. Also in practical military terms the growing presence of the Soviet navy in the regional waters could hinder sea movement and re-supply and quickly lead to undesired escalation and confrontation with the USSR.

³⁰ Edward Ross, 20.

³¹ Ibid., 21.

³² Harlan W. Jenks, "China's "Punitive" War on Vietnam: A Military Assessment," Asian Survey Vol XIX, No 8 (August 1979), 805.

³³ Chen, 91, 94.

³⁴ Ibid., 88.

³⁵ Chen, 103 for Chinese sea, air and land operating forces around Hainan and on Xisha islands. See 93 for decision not to use Chinese naval forces in the conflict.

³⁶ J.J. Haggerty, Colonel, "The Chinese-Vietnam Border War of 1979," Army Quarterly and Defence Journal Vol 109, No 3 (July 1979): 270.

³⁷ O' Ballance, 42 and Jenks, 803.

³⁸ Haggerty, 266.

³⁹ James A. Linder, Rear Admiral (Ret) and Dr. A. James Gregor, "The Chinese Communist Air Force in the "Punitive" War against Vietnam," Air University Review Vol XXXII, No 6 (September-October 1981): 73.

⁴⁰ Harvey W. Nelsen, The Chinese Military System - an Organizational Study of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (2nd edition), (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1981), for main force infantry reputation see 115, for militia see 182.

⁴¹ Ibid., for PLAAF see 159-162 and 166-167, for PLAN see 170-171.

⁴² Gerald H. Corr, The Chinese Red Army - Campaigns and Politics Since 1949, (New York: Schocken Books, 1974) 141-157 and Chen, 70, 73.

⁴³ Chen, 102.

⁴⁴ Jenks, 805-806.

⁴⁵ Chen, 100-104 and Jenks, 805-806.

⁴⁶ Nelson, 24.

⁴⁷ Chen, 103.

⁴⁸ O' Ballance, 43 and 45.

⁴⁹ Table 2, various sources for these facts are acknowledged using the following legend:
Sources - *O' Ballance, 41-42; #Chen, - 100-104; %Linder and Gregor, 72-74; ^ Ross, 17.

⁵⁰ Jenks, 804-805.

⁵¹ Nelson, 26.

⁵² Turley and Race, 102-103.

⁵³ Ibid., 104.

⁵⁴ Nelson, 26.

⁵⁵ Jenks, 803.

⁵⁶ O' Ballance, 45.

⁵⁷ Hood, 47-48 and Robert Ross, 251.

⁵⁸ .Nelson, 26.

⁵⁹ Jenks, 802 and Nelson,26.

⁶⁰ Chen, pg 106.

⁶¹ Jenks, – on provincial capitals and 50 kilometer limitation 809, on scorched earth of installations 802.

⁶² Nelson, 26.

⁶³ Chen, 109 - citing New York Times February 20, 1979 article.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 107.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 107-108.

⁶⁶ O'Ballance, 42.

⁶⁷ Edward Ross, 22.

⁶⁸ Chen ,108.

⁶⁹ Haggerty, 267 on Asian news sources and Chen, 113 on lack of reliable and objective historical data.

⁷⁰ Chen, 108 and Haggerty, 267.

⁷¹ Edward Ross, 22 - citing a key LA Times article.

⁷² Linder and Greg, 73 the authors go so far as to describe the PLAAF's use as "cosmetic."

⁷³ Ibid., 72-73.

⁷⁴ Chen, 109-110 citing news articles covering the war's developments.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 108.

⁷⁶ Edward Ross, 22.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 23 - Kyodo News Service cited in from San Francisco Chronicle 27 February 1979.

⁷⁸ Chen, 110.

⁷⁹ O'Ballance, 43 and Chen, 103, 111, 114. There is still considerable conflicting information on disposition and timings of Vietnamese regular force division movements. I have taken the later published and more scholarly work of Dr. Chen as the basis for most of my depiction of these facts.

⁸⁰ Chen, 110

⁸¹ Jenks, 811.

⁸² Chen, 110 and Jenks, 811. Chen discusses the tough fighting for hills #417, #473, #556, #568, #608 and #800 28 February-2 March 1979.

⁸³ Jenks, 811.

⁸⁴ Jenks, 809 and Chen, 111.

⁸⁵ Chen, 110.

⁸⁶ Haggerty, 270.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 270.

⁸⁸ Chen, 111.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 111.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 112-113.

⁹¹ O' Balance, 43.

⁹² Ibid., 45.

⁹³ Chen, 114 – provides the best available assessment of the conflicting casualty figures offered by China and Vietnam.

⁹⁴ Elliot, 246.

⁹⁵ O'Ballance, 45.

⁹⁶ Michael Richardson, "Eyewitness at the Dragon's Mouth," Pacific Defence Reporter Vol IX, No 12 (June 1983): 41-42 and Turley and Race, 104 and 111 - on Chinese encouraged dissidence in Vietnam and Laos; and Chen, 146 - on the December 1984 and April 1985 border clashes.

⁹⁷ Turley and Race, 107-108.

⁹⁸ Hood, 37.

⁹⁹ Nelson, 27-28.

¹⁰⁰ Nelson, 27-28 and Chen, 143-144 - these costs included draft resistance and, for the first time, large numbers of Vietnamese ethnic (vice Chinese and other minorities) refugees "of choice."

¹⁰¹ Hood, 46.

¹⁰² Nelsen, 222-223. Nelsen's "Epilogue to the Second Edition" ably outlines Zhou Enlai's 1975 introduction and approval by the Politburo of a 25-year modernization effort for China. This famous initiative called the "Four Modernizations" initially prioritized China's modernizations effort as: agriculture, then industry, then military and finally science and technology. In 1981 Nelsen was able to confirm that further debate amongst the PRC leadership had shifted these priorities once more, creating a compromise which placed military modernization fourth among the four, but also resourced selected acquisition of Western military technology to address the PLA's relative backwardness in weaponry (especially vis-à-vis the USSR).

¹⁰³ Linder and Greg, 73-74.

¹⁰⁴ Ginsburgh, pg 44.

¹⁰⁵ Jer Donald Get, Major, "Lessons Learned in Vietnam: PLA," Military Review Vol LXVII, No 7(July 1987): 23.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 22, 24, 26.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 26-27.

¹⁰⁸ Chen, 147. Chen cites Deng Xiaoping's September 1981 speech calling for modernized armed forces and doctrine, the first such call in 23 years.

¹⁰⁹ James R. Lilley, "Introduction," In People's Liberation Army After Next, ed. Susan M. Puska, (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2000), 7-8.

¹¹⁰ Andrew Scobell, Chinese Army Building in the Era of Jiang Zemin, (Carlisle, PA. Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2000), 13.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 23-24.

¹¹² Michael Pillsbury, "PLA Capabilities in the 21st Century: How Does China Assess its Future Security Needs?" In The Chinese Armed Forces in the 21st Century, ed Larry M. Wortzel (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 1999), 111-116.

¹¹³ Scobell, 11.

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