China's 1979 War with Vietnam: A Reassessment*

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ABSTRACT This article attempts to reveal China's own perceptions of the 1979 war with Vietnam. It includes China's historical relations with Vietnam and their influence on Beijing's approach towards the war, as well as the role of Deng Xiaoping, Chinese military strategy and preparations for the attack. It shows how Beijing's approach to warfare has a distinctive set of Chinese characteristics: calculating when and how to use military power, the underlying aim during the war, and the basis upon which success was evaluated. The article reviews the repercussions of the conflict, both politically and militarily, and lessons learned as seen by Chinese themselves.

In early 1979 China invaded Vietnam, in the words of the Chinese leadership, to "teach Vietnam a lesson" it would not soon forget. Despite Beijing's victory claim, existing scholarship generally agrees that the war did not proceed as well as China had expected and that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) performed poorly in the conflict. It was China, not Vietnam, which actually received the lesson.[1] China's documentation on the war remains highly classified and the information available is not only fragmentary and biased, but also of questionable truth. There are few English language accounts and much of what does exist is full of speculation and inaccuracies, supported by Hong Kong and Taiwan gossip. Now, however, Beijing's control of information appears to be slackening. Many internally circulated materials concerning the PLA's performance and experiences in the 1979 war have reached American libraries and become accessible for use on the internet. In addition, memoirs by high-ranking military officers have become available.[2]

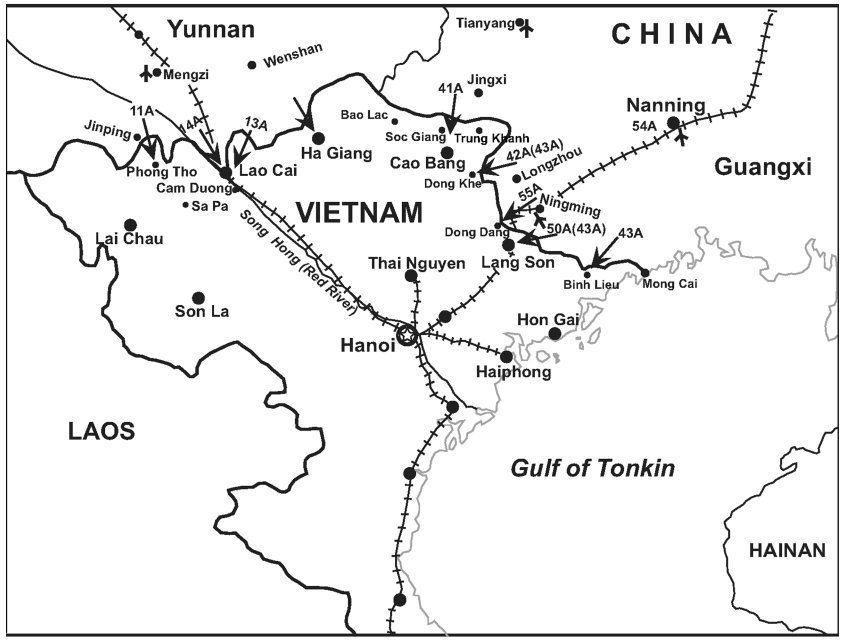
* I greatly benefited from comments and suggestions by Nick Sarantakes, Andrew Scobell, Toshi Yoshihara and Zhai Qiang. The views expressed in this article are mine and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Air Force, the Department of Defense or the US government.

1. Gerald Segal, *Defending China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 211–227; Nayan Chanda, *Brother Enemy: the War after the War* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986); King C. Chen, *China's War with Vietnam, 1979* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1987); Steven J. Hood, *Dragons Entangled: Indochina and the China-Vietnam War* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1992); Bruce Elleman, *Modern Chinese Warfare, 1785–1989* (London: Routedge, 2001), ch. 17.

2. For example, internal documents compiled by the General Office of the General Political Department, *ZhongYue bianjing ziwei huanji zuozhan zhengzhi gongzuo jingyan xuanbian* (*Compilation of Materials on Political Work and Experience in the Counterattack in Self-defence on the China–Vietnamese Border*), 2 vols. (Beijing: Published by the compiler, 1980), hereafter ZGJX; internal documents compiled by the Guangzhou Military Region Forward Political Department Cadre Section, *ZhongYue bianjing ziwei huanji zuozhan ganbu gongzuo ziliao huibian* (*Compilation of Materials on Cadre Work in the Counterattack in Self-defence on the China–Vietnamese Border*) (Guangzhou: Published by the compiler, 1979), hereafter GGZH; Chinese internet sites contain documents, memoirs, personal

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This article attempts to reveal China's own perceptions of the 1979 war with Vietnam based on an examination of primary source materials and the research of leading scholars. It starts with a discussion of China's historical relations with Vietnam and their influence on Beijing's approach towards the war, as well as Deng Xiaoping's role. It then examines the PLA's role, including Chinese military strategy and preparations for the attack and the PLA's own views of military operations. It finally reviews the repercussions of the conflict, both politically and militarily, and lessons learned as seen by Chinese themselves. The article expounds on Beijing's approach to warfare, showing a distinctive set of Chinese characteristics: the Beijing leadership did not hesitate to use force after carefully calculating when and how to use military power; the underlying aim of the PLA was to seize and maintain the operational initiative; and the primary basis on which the Chinese evaluated military success was geopolitical rather than operational performance.[3] The PLA

footnote continued

recollections and excerpts from Chinese publications regarding the 1979 war with Vietnam. Many are reports on object-lesson battles by individual units. The most useful is "Zhongyue zhanzheng beiwanglu" ("Memorandums of Sino-Vietnam War") available at: http://jngs.3322. org/mymemo/war79/part_1.htm, hereafter ZZB. The most notable ones are Zhou Deli's memoirs and recollections of Xu Shiyou and his role in the war with Vietnam: *Yi ge gaoji canmouzhang de zishu* (*Personal Recollections of a High-ranking Chief of Staff*) (Nanjing: Nanjing Press, 1992), and *Xu Shiyou di zuihou yizhan* (*The Last Battle of Xu Shiyou*) (Nanjing: Jiangsu People Press, 1990).

3. On these three findings, see Andrew Scobell, "Is there a Chinese way of war?" *Parameters*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (Spring 2005), pp. 118–121.

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was roughly handled by the Vietnamese, but accomplished Beijing's strategic goals, diverting Vietnam's attention to the new military pressure on its northern border which undercut Vietnam's adventurism in South-East Asia. Yet the PLA has failed to disassociate lessons learned from the conflict from outdated military philosophy and tradition, which may restrict its modernization and transformation.

A Historical-cultural Perspective

Beijing and Hanoi had been close allies since the first Indo-China war in the early 1950s. Why then did the People's Republic of China decide to go to war with the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in late 1978? Beijing's reasons apparently included Hanoi's hegemonistic "imperial dreams" in South-East Asia; violation of China's borders and the subsequent incursion into Chinese territory; mistreatment of ethnic Chinese living in Vietnam; and Vietnamese intimacy with the Soviet Union which was extending its sphere of influence into South-East Asia.[4] Observers at the time and several later studies claim that Beijing's *bona fide* objectives were to divert Hanoi's military pressure from Cambodia and tie down its forces on a second front.[5] Robert Ross contends that Beijing's use of military force against Vietnam was not just a response to Hanoi's aggression in Indo-China but also a response to Vietnamese co-operation with Soviet encirclement of China from South-East Asia.[6] Other studies argue that China's invasion of Vietnam intended to discredit the Soviet Union as a reliable ally in case of crisis.[7]

In his study of Beijing's relationship with Vietnam prior to Hanoi's victory in 1975, Zhai Qiang concludes that "realpolitik was not the only language spoken" by Chinese leaders on international relations. Although they proclaimed themselves Marxist and Leninist internationalists, they fully inherited China's historical legacy: a Sino-centric view of world, which regarded small nations on China's periphery, including Vietnam, as inferior and within the orbit of China's influence. On the other hand, "historical pride and cultural sensitivity" was a major factor that influenced the Vietnamese attitude towards China. Throughout their history, the Vietnamese were fond of borrowing and adapting Chinese civilization and institutions for their own use, while remaining adamant about preserving their independence and cultural heritage. They sought China's help when they were internally weak and were hostile when they

4. *Renmin ribao* (*People's Daily*), 19 March 1979. For English, see *Beijing Review*, 23 March 1979.

5. Harlan W. Jencks, "China's 'punitive' war on Vietnam: a military assessment," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 19, No. 8, (August 1979), pp. 802–803; Hood, *Dragons Entangled,* pp. 50–57; Segal, *Defending China*, pp. 213–14; Carlyle A. Thayer, "Security issues in Southeast Asia: the Third Indochina War," paper delivered at Conference on Security and Arms Control in North Pacific, Canberra, ACT, 12–14 August 1987.

6. Robert S. Ross, *The Indochina Tangle: China's Vietnam Policy, 1975–1979* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 253.

7. Thayer, "Security issues in Southeast Asia." Elleman, *Modern Chinese Warfare*, p. 285.

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were unified and free from external aggression.[8] Reciprocal historical images held by the leaders and peoples of the two countries regarding the China–Vietnam relationship apparently played a significant role in Beijing's decision to wage a punitive strike against Vietnam.

Since the early 1950s China had been a strong political and military supporter of Hanoi, helping Vietnam in its revolutionary struggle against the French and defeat of the American aggressors. Current studies show that China's policy towards Hanoi during the first two Indo-China wars was guided by manifold considerations ranging from historical tradition to revolutionary ideology and national security. Throughout, however, the Chinese sense of superiority dominated their perception of their relationship with Vietnam.[9] Although Chinese leaders made repeated statements that Vietnamese should be treated as "equal," Chen Jian observes that such rhetoric itself reflected their strong belief that "they had occupied a position from which to dictate the values and codes of behavior that would dominate their relations with their neighbors."[10] Beijing claimed that it had never imposed political and economic conditions on its huge military and material aid to Hanoi. It wanted Hanoi to recognize China's leading role in the national liberation movement in the region and the world. This Chinese attitude was irritating for the Vietnamese, who were especially sensitive about their problematic past with China. Despite Beijing and Hanoi calling each other "brotherly comrades" at the time, the undertone was the Vietnamese growing aversion to China's modern version of their relationship.[11]

A review of Chinese literature concerning the 1979 war reveals that reports of Vietnam's misbehaviour towards China since 1975 had further wounded the Chinese sense of superiority. The Vietnamese central leadership adopted a policy that would regard American imperialism as a long-term enemy, but China as the "most direct, dangerous enemy," and a "new perspective foe" that Vietnam should prepare to fight.[12] In response, the General Political Directorate of the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) urged the Vietnamese armed forces to take an offensive strategy against China, actively attacking and counterattacking the enemy within and beyond the territory of Vietnam, and turning the border regions into an anti-China front.[13] Vietnamese contempt for the PLA and

8. Qiang Zhai, *China and The Vietnam Wars, 1950–1975* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), pp. 6, 219.

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

10. Chen Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), p. 237.

11. Also see Xiaoming Zhang, "China's involvement in Laos during the Vietnam War, 1963–1975," *The Journal of Military History*, No. 66 (October 2002), pp. 1141–66.

12. Wang Taiping (ed.), *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo waijiaoshi* (*Diplomatic History of the People's Republic of China*) (Beijing: World Knowledge Press, 1999), p. 68.

13. Han Huanzhi, *Dangdai Zhongguo jundui de junshi gongzuo* (*Contemporary China's Military Affairs*), Vol. 1, (Beijing: Social Science Press, 1988), pp. 559–560.

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overconfidence in their own military power also served as a catalyst prompting the Chinese military to take action. The PAVN's battle-hardened forces had fought almost continuously for decades and could claim victory over two major Western powers, while Vietnamese specialists considered the PLA to have low combat capability and poor morale. The PAVN was especially proud of its Russian-made weapons and captured American equipment, which, according to the Vietnamese news media, were far superior to anything possessed by the PLA.[14]

For over two decades, China had provided Hanoi with $20 billion assistance, more than any other country. When Vietnam began to force the repatriation of ethnic Chinese in North Vietnam and increased violation of Chinese territory on the border, many Chinese thought that Hanoi was ungrateful for this aid and sacrifice. There was a public outpouring of anger against Vietnam.[15] Those who had assisted the Vietnamese communists in their wars against the French and Americans felt particularly betrayed and were eager to "teach Vietnam a lesson." Among them was Deng Xiaoping, vice-premier and chief of the PLA General Staff, whose annoyance with Vietnam's ungracious attitude towards China's aid can be traced back to the mid-1960s.[16] As animosity between the two countries intensified in the late 1970s, he became increasingly sentimental, even once calling Vietnam the *wangbadan* (literally "tortoise eggs" but can be translated as s.o.b.) in front of a foreign leader.[17] Military theorists generally concur that "given the hostile intention on both sides, passion and hatred … animate" belligerency.[18] Vietnamese insolence along with the ever-increasing border clashes and the ongoing exodus of Chinese residents generated high emotion among Chinese political and military leaders, and consideration of the use of force.

China's Initial Move towards War

There is still no solid documentation of when and how Beijing made the decision for military action against Vietnam. Nayan Chanda, long-time South-East Asia correspondent for the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, reports with few details that the Chinese leadership made the decision to "teach Vietnam a lesson" for its "ungrateful and arrogant" behaviour at a Politburo weekly meeting in early July 1978. He, however,

14. Henry J. Kenny, "Vietnamese perceptions of the 1979 war with China," in Mark A. Ryan, David M. Finkelstein and Michael A. McDevitt (eds.), *Chinese Warfighting: The PLA Experience since 1949* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2003), p. 228.

15. Guo Ming (ed.), *ZhongYue guanxi yanbian sishi nian* (*A 40-Year Development of the China–Vietnam Relationship*) (Nanning: Guangxi People Press, 1992), p. 106.

16. See Arne Odd Westad *et al*. (eds.), "77 conversations between Chinese and foreign leaders on the wars in Indochina, 1964–1977," *Cold War International History project*, Working Paper 22 (Washington DC: Woodrow Wilson Center, 1998), pp. 94–98, and pp. 194–95.

17. Lee Kuan Yew, *From the Third World to First: The Singapore Story: 1965–2000* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), p. 595.

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

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deems that it was at this meeting that the Chinese leadership "convincingly" associated their decision to take military action as a move "to weaken the Soviet position in the Third World."[19] New Chinese sources suggest that contemplation of a military response to the crisis between China and Vietnam was a slow process; no decision was reached until much later. Moreover, the action was initially considered as a localized inter-state conflict rather than as part of China's global anti-hegemonic strategy. During the initial years of the post-Mao era, Beijing employed a consensual leadership style that usually involved a prolonged process of informal consultations among senior leaders and subordinates, including lower-level governmental and military officers responsible for the matter, before a final decision.

Zhou Deli, chief of staff of the Guangzhou Military Region, recalled that, in September 1978, a meeting on "how to deal with our territory occupied by the Vietnamese forces" was held in the PLA General Staff Department.[20] The initial focus was on the border conflict, which had been perceived as a major source of the current escalation of tension between the two countries since 1976.[21] A tentative proposal recommended a small-scale operation against one Vietnamese regional regiment at Trung Khanh, a border county adjacent to Guangxi province. However, following a review of updated intelligence advising of a forthcoming Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, the majority of the participants argued that any military action to be taken must have a significant impact on Hanoi and the situation in South-East Asia. They recommended a strike on a regular Vietnamese army unit in a larger geographic area.[22] Although the meeting ended without any specific decision, it set the tone of China's eventual war plan against Hanoi, and possibly was the first evidence of an association of military action on Vietnam's northern border with its aggression in South-East Asia.

Nevertheless, a large-scale military operation against Vietnam risked repercussions for China's international image in the region and the world. Deng Xiaoping's scheduled official visit to Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore in early November provided the opportunity to seek the support of these countries for China's Vietnam policy. During his trip, Deng impressed upon his foreign hosts that China would use force against Vietnamese aggression if Vietnam attacked Cambodia.[23] At home, the media were full of editorials and commentaries condemning

19. Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, p. 261.

20. The meeting was chaired by Zhang Caiqian, deputy chief of the general staff, with participation of staff officers from the General Staff's operation and intelligence departments as well as those from the Guangzhou and Kunming Military Regions. Zhou Deli, *Personal Recollections*, pp. 239–240.

21. According to the author of Wang Shangrong's biography, one major issue the General Staff Department had to deal with routinely was the border conflict between China and Vietnam after 1976. Luo Yuansheng, *Baizhan jiangxing Wang Shangrong* (*The Biography of General Wang Shangrong*) (Beijing: PLA Art Press, 1999), pp. 375–77.

22. Zhou Deli, *Personal Recollections*, pp. 239–243.

23. Lee Kuan Yew, *The Singapore Story*, p. 601.

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Vietnamese encroachment upon China's territory and warning of possible retaliation.[24]

On 23 November the General Staff convened another meeting at which a new scheme of war was deliberated. Taking into consideration the earlier recommendations, the General Staff broadened the scope and duration of operations. The plans made all major Vietnamese military positions and cities across the Guangxi and Yunnan borders targets for attacks, anticipating that this would deter Vietnamese aggression. Again, some felt that these operations did not go far enough as they were still limited to a remote area and posed no immediate threat to Hanoi. However they voiced no dissent, assuming the central leadership had given the matter meticulous consideration. The meeting designated the campaign to be carried out by the Guangzhou and Kunming Military Regions.[25] It also recommended the transfer of the PLA's strategic reserves, a total of four armies and one division, from the Wuhan and Chengdu Military Regions to reinforce the Guangxi and Yunnan fronts.[26]

On 7 December the Central Military Commission (CMC) convened a meeting, which allegedly lasted four to five hours, and decided to launch a limited war on China's southern border to "hit back" at Vietnam.[27] The next day it issued an order commending the Guangzhou and Kunming Military Regions to conduct the military campaign with all troops to be ready for action by 10 January 1979. The instructions specified that the war would be strictly limited, conducted within 50 kilometres from the border and lasting two weeks. It then emphasized the core tenets of the PLA's traditional operation doctrine requiring the two regional commands to "concentrate a superior force to envelope the enemy forces from flanks, to destroy the enemy forces one by one with quick-decision battles of annihilation, and then to withdraw immediately."[28] The timing of this order suggests that China was responding to the forthcoming Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, but by mounting a major military campaign even before Vietnamese forces crossed the Mekong was also reacting to several years of exasperation caused by Vietnam's ungrateful behaviour.

Deng Xiaoping Makes the Decision

Although the Chinese war machine was primed in early December, no definite date for strikes had yet been determined. Earlier studies

24. For example, see China News Agency's commentary on 27 October, *Beijing Review*, No. 44 (3 November 1978), pp. 25–26; Reports, *Beijing Review*, No. 45 (10 November 1978), pp. 20–22; *People's Daily* editorial on 10 November, *Beijing Review*, No. 46 (17 November 1978), pp. 26–27.

25. Zhou Deli, *Personal Recollections*, pp. 244–45.

26. They were the 43rd, 54th Armies, and 58th division of the 20th Army from the former and the 13th and 50th Armies from the latter. This information is based on fragmentary unit history available on the website of ZZB.

27. Min Li, *ZhongYue zhanzheng shinian* (*Ten Years of Sino-Vietnam War*) (Chengdu: Sichuan University Press, 1993), p. 15.

28. Zhou Deli, *Personal Recollections*, p. 246; Han Huaizhi, *Contemporary China's Military Affairs*, Vol. 1, pp. 663–678.

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speculated that Beijing's war decision was made at the Central Work Conference between 10 November and 15 December 1978.[29] In fact, this meeting, called to consider an economic reform agenda for the next ten years, ended up addressing the legacies of the Cultural Revolution. It is still unclear whether there was a significant discussion on the Indo-China situation.[30] The meeting, however, did consolidate Deng Xiaoping's position in the central leadership, enabling him, though only one of five deputy chairs of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and chief of the General Staff, to be the decision maker on Vietnam.

At a CMC conference on New Year's Eve, Deng formally proposed a punitive war against Vietnam. All participants, including Hua Guofeng, chairman of the CCP, were reportedly in support of this proposal. At the meeting, Deng appointed Xu Shiyou to command operations from Guangxi in the east,[31] and Yang Dezhi, commander of the Wuhan Military Region, to command operations from Yunnan in the west, sidestepping Wang Bicheng, commander of the Kunming Military Region.[32] Apparently concerned about the change of command on the eve of the war, Deng subsequently sent two of his deputy chiefs to Kunming to supervise the transition and war preparations. Without a centralized command, two military regions would carry out the war independently with almost no co-ordination or collaboration. The meeting also reiterated that the invasion must be swift and all troops must be pulled back after achieving the operational objectives.[33]

Current writings suggest that some Chinese leaders did oppose an attack on Vietnam, but they disagree on which leaders and what form the opposition took.[34] As Deng Xiaoping was the chief architect of the scheme, it is unlikely that anyone would challenge his decision given his senior and prestigious status in the Party. Deng's control of the General Staff provided him with a convenient channel to set China's military machine in motion before the central leadership had made a formal decision. Acting like Mao, Deng privately consulted trusted associates before making a decision, and only then took his decision for formal endorsement by the Politburo. One of his closest associates was Chen

29. Chen, *China's War*, pp. 85–86.

30. Sun Dali, "A turning point in the history of new China," in Lin Zhijian (ed.), *Xin Zhongguo yaoshi shuping* (*Review of Important Events of New China*) (Beijing: CCP History Press, 1994), pp. 476–500.

31. Jin Ye, Hu Juchen and Hu Zhaocai, *Baizhan jiangxing Xu Shiyou* (*Biography of General Xu Shiyou*) (Beijing: PLA Art Press, 1999), p. 332; Wang Xuan, *Mao Zedong zhi jian – minjiang zhixing Xu Shiyou* (*The Sword of Mao Zedong: A Star General Xu Shiyou*) (Nanjing: Jiangsu People Press, 1996), p. 132.

32. It was rumoured that this change of commandership was partially because of a bad personal relationship between Xu and Wang when the latter, the deputy commander of the former in Nanjing Military Region, had openly joined the local opposition political faction against Xu during the Cultural Revolution in 1966.

33. "Lecture notes on the 1979 counterattack in self-defence on the Sino-Vietnamese border," which has no author but appears accurate in details in ZZB.

34. Chen, *China's War*, pp. 85–87; Ross, *Indochina Tangle*, pp. 230–31; Andrew Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force: Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 130–32.

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Yun, another deputy chair of the CCP and an old guard of the Party, who allegedly made substantial contributions to the Vietnam war decision.[35]

There were several major concerns: whether the Soviet Union would respond with reprisal attacks from the north to force China to fight a two-front war; whether the United States would take the opportunity to profit from the situation; how world opinion would react; and whether war with Vietnam would impede China's new agenda for economic modernization.[36] The most worrying obstacle was the Soviet reaction. According to intelligence analysis by the General Staff, Moscow would have three military options in response to the invasion: a massive armed incursion including a direct attack on Beijing; instigation of the armed ethnic minority personnel, who were exiled in the Soviet Union, to attack China's outposts in Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia; or use of skirmishes to mount border tensions between the two countries. However, as the Soviet Union did not have adequate forces to conduct any large military operations against China immediately, Chinese leaders, particularly Deng, were convinced that a defensive, limited and brief military action against Vietnam would not provoke Moscow's intervention and an international outrage.[37] The two previous border conflicts, with the Indians in 1962 and the Soviets in 1969, corroborated this calculation. The desire for a short war also helped subdue domestic opposition and justify Beijing's policy choice. Nevertheless, Chinese leaders could not lower their guard, and simultaneously ordered troops in the northern and north-western military regions to step up combat readiness for possible Soviet strikes.[38]

The New Year's Eve meeting deferred the timing of military action. Western analysts argue that Beijing was still constrained by concern about international reaction. Deng's scheduled trips to the United States and Japan were thus arranged to "test the waters."[39] However, those intimately associated with Deng suggest that potential international backlash would not deter him because he would yield to nothing once he had made up his mind.[40] Chinese leaders were more worried about whether their forces had enough time to make adequate preparations for the invasion. Chinese soldiers had not engaged in any war for a long period, while many of them could not comprehend going to war against a

35. Chen not only supported Deng's decision but also made certain recommendations on how to operate. Zhu Jiamu, *Chen Yun nianpu* (*A Chronicle of Chen Yun's Life, 1905–1995*) Vol. 2 (Beijing: Central Document Press, 2000), pp. 235–36.

36. Zhou Deli, *The Last Battle*, p. 16.

37. The Chinese military calculated the Russians would take 14 days or even longer to make a military response; by then China would have achieved its war objectives.

38. Min Li, *Ten Years of Sino-Vietnam War*, pp. 15–17. Jin Ye, Hu Juchen and Hu Zhaocai, *Xu Shiyou,* p. 332; Zhang Weiming, Jin Hui and Zhang Huisheng, *ZhongYue zhanzheng milu* (*The Secret Account of the China–Vietnam War*) (Hong Kong: Tiandi Books, 1993), pp. 27–28.

39. Segal, *Defending China*, p. 214.

40. Many of his subordinates have recalled that Deng would not change his mind once he had thought it through and made his decision. For example, see Chen Zaidao, *Chen Zaidao huiyilu* (*Chen Zaidao's Memoirs*) (Beijing: PLA Press, 1991), p. 462.

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traditional ally and a small neighbouring state.[41] Shortly after the New Year's Eve meeting, Deng sent Yang Yong, deputy chief of the General Staff, and Zhang Zhen, director of the General Logistic Department, to Yunnan and Guangxi respectively to inspect troops' combat conditions. Appalled by their lack of readiness, Zhang immediately recommended the postponement of the war for a month. He later recalled that the CMC agreed to push back the counteroffensives until the middle of February.[42] Yang made his report, along with suggestions on the war plan, on 22 January at Deng's home in the presence of the chief leaders of the CMC.[43] It is likely to have been at this gathering that the Chinese leadership reaffirmed the war decision and determined a time frame for D-day. The next day, the General Staff held a meeting at which the war plan was finalized and troops were ordered to be ready for action by 15 February.[44] In order to prevent the situation becoming out of control, the central leadership specifically required Xu Shiyou to stop military operations and pull his troops back after the seizure of Lang Son and Cao Bang, two major Vietnamese cities on the border.[45]

On 11 February 1979, two days after Deng Xiaoping returned to Beijing from his trip to the United States and Japan, an enlarged Politburo conference was convened. Deng articulated the basic rationale for the attack on Vietnam, and subsequently a go-ahead order to launch attacks on Vietnam on 17 February was issued to the local military commanders in Guangxi and Yunnan.[46] This was the day that third-party observers had long anticipated. They speculated, plausibly, that the timing of a strike might be closely related to weather factors: it would be unfavourable to conduct military operations in the rainy season, usually beginning in April, or to attack too early when the Soviet armed forces could cross the frozen rivers along the China–Soviet border.[47] Deng and other Chinese leaders had already carefully calculated all possible ramifications once their troops crossed the Vietnam border. They limited the scope, time and space for the war and labelled it a "self defensive counterattack," attempting to reduce any negative reactions at home and abroad.[48] Once the war started, however, Deng, while paying close attention to what was going on, gave few specific instructions and orders (in contrast to Mao Zedong's leadership style).[49]

41. ZGJX, Vol. 1, pp. 2–19.

42. Zhang Zhen, *Zhang Zhen huiyilu* (*Zhang Zhen's Memoirs*) (Beijing: PLA Press, 2003), pp. 170–71.

43. They were Xu Xiangqian, Nei Rongzhen and Geng Biao. Jiang Feng *et al*., *Yang Yong jiangjun zhuan* (*Biography of General Yang Yong*) (Beijing: PLA Press, 1991), p. 495.

44. Zhou Deli, *Personal Recollections*, p. 257.

45. Zhang Zhen, *Memoirs*, p. 166.

46. Zhou Deli, *Personal Recollections*, pp. 259–260; Jiang Feng *et al*., *Yang Yong*, pp. 496–97.

47. Jencks, "China's 'punitive' war," pp. 804–805; Herbert Yee, "The Sino-Vietnamese border war" in *China Report*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (January–February 1980), p. 22.

48. According to Zhou Deli, the name of the operations was chosen at the 23 January meeting. Zhou Deli, *Personal Recollections*, p. 258.

49. Luo Yuansheng, *Wang Shangrong*, p. 378.

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Strategy, Objectives and Preparations

Gerald Segal claims that China's prime motive for attacking Vietnam was to check Vietnamese ambition and aggression in South-East Asia and their threat to Chinese national security, as well as to expose Soviet weakness. But poor political calculation meant that Chinese leaders had put themselves in the difficult position of creating a strategy to punish Vietnam and they never stood a chance of success.[50] China's clearly stated desire to "teach Vietnam a lesson" conveyed its foremost war objective to be "an act of revenge."[51] From the outset, Beijing limited the objectives and the conduct of the war not to go beyond a bilateral border conflict. The military leadership of Guangzhou and Kunming was required to come up with an operational strategy that would not only accomplish the objective of punishment, but also limit hostilities in time and space.

The real question for local Chinese military planners was to what extent the objective of teaching Vietnam a lesson could be achieved or measured. The conventional wisdom of the PLA always lays special stress on annihilation of enemy vital forces (*yousheng liliang*). One of the PLA's operational traditions is the employment of an absolute superior force to ensure victory. By mid-January 1979 more than one-quarter of the PLA's field armies were assembled at the China–Vietnam border, a total of more than 320,000 troops. Drawing from his own combat experience and based on the operational and tactic style the PLA had developed in the past, Xu Shiyou responded to the central leadership's war requirements with an approach known as *niudao shaji* (using a butcher's knife to kill a chick). The conduct of this engagement encompassed three basic elements: strikes must concentrate on the vital parts of the enemy's defence, but not on the enemy's strong point; overwhelming force and firepower should be used to smash the enemy defence at the point of engagement; attacking troops must move as quickly as possible to go deep, and strike all the way into the heart of the enemy. In this way, Xu expected his forces to cut the enemy defences into pieces, break opponent resistance, and then annihilate the opposition.[52]

In the light of these principles, the Guangzhou and Kunming Military Regions developed their respective war plans with an emphasis on the destruction of Vietnamese regular divisions on the Chinese border. The war would be fought in two stages. During the first stage, a two-pronged offensive would be mounted against Cao Bang and Lao Cai, to encircle two Vietnamese divisions there and to destroy them, while launching a simultaneous attack on Dong Dang to confuse Hanoi about China's war objective. Then, the PLA forces in Guangxi would concentrate on attacking Lang Son, while their counterparts in Yunnan would attempt to engage one Vietnamese division in the Sa Pa area. A total of eight PLA armies would be involved immediately, with one kept in reserve.

50. Segal, *Defending China*, pp. 213–17.
51. Ross, *Indochina Tangle*, p. 224.
52. Zhou Deli, *The Last Battle,* pp. 123–24.

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Beijing had also laid out a strategy for when and how the air force should be employed. The PLA Air Force would commit 18 air regiments plus six additional flying groups to prepare to assist the ground operations. To avoid escalating the conflict, the CMC confined the use of airpower within China's own territory, while ordering the air force units to prepare support for ground operations "if necessary," though without giving a clear definition of what or when a "necessary" situation might be. The order stipulated that any operations outside China's airspace must be authorized by the CMC. Based on this principle, the strategy required all air units to stand in combat readiness for air defence and ground support, and meanwhile to fly as many sorties as possible over the border airspace when the ground assaults started in order to deter the Vietnamese air force from taking action against China. Air command and control personnel and tactical control parties were sent to the forward command posts of the Guangzhou and Kunming Military Regions, army headquarters and several ground force divisions that would assume the main attack missions.[53]

From late December 1978 throughout January 1979, Chinese troops rushed into combat training and exercises. Since many of them were new recruits who had been engaged in agricultural production for a long time, such a frantic last-minute effort was, though helpful, definitely insufficient. Training was largely concentrated on basic soldier skills such as shooting and grenade throwing, with few units able to carry out any meaningful tactical training or exercise at regiment and division levels. Many officers reported that they were unsure about the fighting capability of their troops. In the end, the PLA troops designated for invasion were poorly trained and inadequately prepared for a modern war against Vietnam's forces, whose combat experience earned in 25 years of war preceding this conflict appeared to have been overlooked.[54]

Despite urgent need for training, the PLA continued its military tradition, using political indoctrination to raise morale and improve combat efficiency. A propaganda machine was set in motion to persuade soldiers that the central leadership's decision for war was necessary and just. Vietnam had degenerated into the "Cuba of the East," the "hooligans of Asia" and the "running dogs of the Soviet Union," trying to pursue its expansionist ambitions. The political ideology of Marxism, although shared by the two countries, did not prevent China from launching self-defence actions against a neighbouring small state when paramount national interests were involved. Lectures, accusation meetings, and

53. Zhang Zhizhi, "Air Force troops in the self defensive counterattacks against Vietnam," in Political Department of the Air Force (ed.), *Lantian zhi lu* (*The Road to the Blue Sky*) (Beijing: Political Department of the Air Force, 1992), pp. 350–52; Wang Hai, *Wang Hai shangjiang: Wo de zhandou shengya* (*General Wang Hai: My Combat Career*) (Beijing: Central Document Press, 2000), pp. 337–38

54. For example, the 13th Army, designated as the main striking force in Yunnan, had to fill 70 companies with 15,381 additional soldiers, of which 11,874 were new recruits. "The combat history of the 13th Army during the self defensive counterattacks against Vietnam," in ZZB. Also see Zhou Deli, *The Last Battle,* pp. 63–64, 67–71. Zhang Zhen, *Memoirs*, p. 170.

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photograph and material evidence exhibits served to instil patriotism and hatred towards the enemy. At least they offered an apparently valid explanation for the ordinary and less-educated Chinese soldiers of why China should launch military attacks on Vietnam, a brotherly, comradely country for so long.

The Military Campaign

The PLA's self-defensive counterattacks were carried out in three stages. The first was from 17 to 25 February, during which the Chinese forces smashed the Vietnamese first line resistance and captured the provincial capitals of Cao Bang and Lao Cai, and the key border towns of Cam Duong and Dong Dang, the gateway to Lang Son. The second stage was a campaign against Lang Son and its surrounding areas in the east, and Sa Pa and Phong Tho in the north-west, from 26 February to 5 March. The final stage was a further effort to pacify the remnant enemy forces while demolishing military installations in the border region with China prior to a complete withdrawal by 16 March. The military operations were conducted inside Vietnamese territory along the border stretching for 900 kilometres from east to west. For 30 days, Chinese forces fought the bloodiest battles since the Korean War; subsequently it became a watershed for the PLA.

China's attack caught Hanoi off-guard. Vietnamese intelligence apparently failed to get the Hanoi leadership to prepare for a Chinese invasion. Despite Beijing's saber-rattling for several months, Vietnamese leaders could not believe "a fraternal socialist country" would ever attack it. When massive numbers of Chinese troops crossed the border, Premier Pham Van Dong and Chief of the PAVN General Staff Van Tien Dung were visiting Phnom Penh. The broad manner of the PLA assaults also confused the Vietnamese high command from identifying the main axis of the invasion forces and the real objectives of the attack.[55] While making an urgent request for Moscow to fulfil its obligations according the newly signed treaty of friendship and co-operation between their two countries, Hanoi's immediate response was "to improvise, to throw up whatever resistance might delay the Chinese advance."[56] The major battles were fought around the border towns of Soc Giang, Dong He, Dong Dang, Cao Bang, Lao Cai and Cam Duong, involving tunnel-by-tunnel and hill-by-hill fighting. Both sides demonstrated a willingness to press the attack and counterattack in spite of heavy casualties. By 20 February, Soviet advisers concluded that the Vietnamese unco-ordinated and guerrilla-type defence would not be able to stop the Chinese forces from advancing. A recommendation was made to airlift an army (30,000 troops) immediately from Cambodia to reinforce the defence between

55. According to one Vietnamese senior diplomat, Hanoi anticipated the Chinese invasion, but not on such a large scale and in such force. Kenny, "Vietnamese perception," pp. 221, 228.

56. Douglas Pike, *PAVN: People's Army of Vietnam* (Novado, CA: Presidio, 1986), p. 264.

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Lang Son and Hanoi. Soviet sources indicate that their advisers made great efforts to find the Vietnamese leader and persuade him to act.[57] Without understanding Beijing's war objectives, Hanoi appeared slow in response to the fast-changing situation in the battlefield.

Despite the PLA's initial breakthrough, the terrain, particularly the lack of roads, and vicious resistance from Vietnamese regular forces, regional security units and militias, soon presented Chinese troops an unexpected combat situation, which unveiled many weaknesses and inefficiencies of the PLA in command, communication and logistics. Most of the problems were inherent in the PLA tradition. On several occasions, the Chinese front command urged direct air support when the ground assaults encountered intense opposition from the Vietnamese. The General Staff refused to grant such permission, instead ordering them to rely exclusively on artillery for fire support.[58] The PLA and its generals were born out of an institutional tradition that was accustomed to fight infantry warfare with artillery firepower and numerical superiority. "The spirit of the bayonet" continued to prevail. As a result, the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War was deadly and atrocious on the ground.

The success of the PLA's punitive invasion depended upon tactics of penetration, flank and envelopment of Cao Bang. The two deep-strike divisions, however, failed to reach their destinations within 24 hours. The mountainous terrain, with thick jungle and no roads, and ambushes by Vietnamese local forces and militias, created surprising difficulties for Chinese troops. Their delay forced Xu Shiyou to hold back an immediate attack on Cao Bang, even though one army under the command of a deputy, Wu Zhong, had already closed in on the city from east and south.[59] However, an ongoing investigation of his political affiliation in the Cultural Revolution suspended Wu's commanding position in the midst of the campaign. In a cable on 20 February, Xu reiterated the earlier assignment that the campaign would continue under the command of his other deputy, even though the latter and his troops remained battling their way to Cao Bang from the north. Not until three days later did Xu and his staff officers come to realize that the city was defended only by a small number of Vietnamese troops screening their headquarters and the provincial government from retreat. He then ordered assaults on the city, which the Chinese forces took after several hours of fighting.[60]

The belated takeover of Cao Bang upset the PLA's original campaign plan, which was designed to seek swift and decisive engagements. The Vietnamese forces dispersed into company- and platoon-sized units, hiding in the mountains, forests and caves, and continuing to launch

57. This information is based on a translated article in Chinese entitled "Welcomed by Vietnam with flowers," which originally appeared in the Russian "Red Star Paper" on 16 January 2001, currently available at http://www.cmilitary.com/articleReader.php?idx = 83458.

58. Jiang Feng, *et al.*, *Yang Yong*, p. 497.

59. Zhou Deli, *The Last Battle*, pp. 158–59.

60. Qu Aiguo, *Baizhan jiangxing Wu Zhong* (*The Biography of General Wu Zhong*) (Beijing: PLA Art Press, 2000), pp. 431–448.

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counterattacks. The relentless resistance by Vietnamese soldiers and militias forced the Chinese to revise their operational tactics, dividing troops into battalion- and company-sized formations to engage in search and destroy operations in the Cao Bang, Tra Linh, Trung Khang and Guang Hoa areas. New tactics included roads blocks, combing hills, searching caves, torching the ground and tunnel explosions.[61] Fierce engagements continued and hundreds of Vietnamese soldiers and civilians were killed. It was not until 6 March that captured Vietnamese documents seemed to indicate that the PAVN division assigned to defend Cao Bang had been defeated. Without that, the PLA's heavy losses during the first stage would have meant that the operation looked much less successful.[62]

Beijing became increasingly worried about the progress of the war, pressing the field commander in Guangxi to commence the decisive battle for Lang Son, a gateway shielding Hanoi from the north, as soon as possible.[63] Apparently unsatisfied with what had happened at Cao Bang, Xu reorganized the operation plan and urged his troops to be more forceful against Lang Son. Six Chinese divisions were involved in this decisive battle, which began on 27 February, preceded by a massive bombardment. After fierce battles, Chinese forces first secured their control over most of the surrounding high ground and then captured the northern part of the city on 2 March, which was the scheduled date to halt the military operations. Because Hanoi's propaganda machine refused to acknowledge the Vietnamese defeat in Lang Son, Xu decided to continue the operation, pushing his troops across the Ky Cung River, which separates the city of Lang Son into northern and southern districts, taking the entire city, and then advancing further south to create a military posture to threat Hanoi.[64] Although Beijing endorsed Xu's decision, it announced withdrawal on 5 March, immediately after Chinese troops occupied the southern part of Lang Son, claiming that they had attained their war goals.

Assessing China's War with Vietnam

China's war with Vietnam in 1979 was the largest military operation that the PLA had initiated since the Korean War. Based on Mao Zedong's strategy that "in every battle, concentrate an absolute superior force against the enemy," Beijing deployed nine regular armies along with special and local units, amounting to more than 300,000 troops, to conduct a war of punishment against Vietnam for one month. Air Force fighter units flew 8,500 sorties in air patrol missions, while transport and helicopter units made 228 sorties in airlift missions[65]; the Navy

61. Evidently unprepared for such operations, the PLA General Logistic Department flung flamethrowers into the battles in the midst of the war. Zhang Zhen, *Memoirs*, p. 172.
62. Zhou Deli, *The Last Battle*, pp. 176–77.
63. Zhou Deli, *Personal Recollections*, p. 281.
64. Zhou Deli, *The Last Battle*, p. 222. Han Huaizhi, *Contemporary China's Military Affairs*, Vol. 1, p. 669.
65. Zhang Zhizhi, "Air Force troops," p. 353.

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dispatched a task force (consisting of two missile frigates and three squadrons of missile and torpedo fast attack craft) to Xisha Islands (Paracel) to prepare for Soviet naval intervention. In addition, Guangxi and Yunnan provinces mobilized tens of thousands of militias and labourers to support these military operations.[66] During the conflict, Chinese forces captured three Vietnamese provincial capitals and more than a dozen border cities and county towns, claiming to have killed and wounded 57,000 Vietnamese troops and severely damaged four regular divisions and ten other regiments along with the capture of a large amount of weaponry. Beijing asserted that the 1979 war against Vietnam ended with China's victory.[67]

Most contemporary studies, however, note that Vietnam "had indeed outperformed" the Chinese forces on the battlefield because of the PLA's problems in operations and reported heavy casualties.[68] Hanoi claimed that only militia and local forces were committed to the conflict, and employed no defensive tactics but attacked constantly against the Chinese invaders. They lost Lang Son and other cities only after inflicting enormous casualties on the Chinese forces.[69] Hanoi Radio at the time announced that the Vietnamese had killed and wounded 42,000 Chinese troops.[70] Few Vietnamese records have been available to researchers about their performance and losses in the conflict other than information posted by individuals in cyberspace, which contrarily indicate substantial involvement by PAVN regular forces and heavier casualties.[71] A reassessment of China's war with Vietnam relying solely on Chinese sources is one-sided but can be illuminating.

One approach to the evaluation of China's gains and losses is to concentrate on casualties. Beijing initially acknowledged that 20,000 Chinese soldiers were either killed or wounded in the border conflict with Vietnam.[72] Existing scholarship tends towards an estimate of as many as 25,000 PLA killed in action and another 37,000 wounded.[73] Recently available Chinese sources categorize the PLA's losses as 6,900 dead and

66. ZGJX, Vol. 1, pp. 363–65. Wang Dinglie, *Dangdai Zhongguo kongjun* (*Contemporary China's Air Force*) (Beijing: Social Science Press, 1989), p. 638.

67. The PLA's victory claims include the destruction of 340 pieces of artillery, 45 tanks and some 480 trucks, and the capture of 840 pieces of artillery and more than 11,000 pieces of small arms along with many other types of military equipment. Min Li, *Ten Years of Sino-Vietnam War*, p. 65. Also see "Lecture notes on the 1979 counterattack in self-defence," in ZZB.

68. Kenny, "Vietnamese perceptions," p. 231; Chen, *China's War*, p. 113.

69. Christopher E. Goscha (trans.), "Comrade B on the plot of the reactionary Chinese clique against Vietnam," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center), Nos. 12–13, (Autumn/Winter 2001), p. 279. Also see Kenny, "Vietnamese perceptions," p. 230.

70. *Radio Hanoi*, domestic service, 4 March 1979, in FBIS, 5 March 1979, Vietnam, p. K25. Vietnamese estimates of Chinese casualties are 25,000 killed and another 50,000 wounded. Kenny, "Vietnamese perceptions," p. 235.

71. Kenny, "Vietnamese perceptions," pp. 217–236. The fragmentary accounts of Vietnamese involvement in the conflict are available at: http://www.china-defense.com/forum/index.php?showtopic=2016&hl=1979+war+with+Vietnam.

72. AFP (Hong Kong), 2 May 1979, in FBIS, 3 May 1979, PRC, p. E1.

73. Chen, *China's War*, pp. 113–14. Chen's statistics on PLA casualties have been widely cited as a legitimate source of many Western studies.

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some 15,000 injured, giving a total of 21,900 casualties from an invasion force of more than 300,000. China's casualties in such a short war were significantly high in any case, continuing to indicate one of the enduring characteristics of PLA's tactical and operational style: a willingness to absorb heavy losses when deemed necessary.[74] Chinese leaders consider casualties to be a relatively unimportant criterion for weighing military success as long as they believe the overall strategic situation was in their grasp and control.[75]

From a Chinese perspective, the 1979 war with Vietnam was a deliberately orchestrated military response to Vietnamese policy towards China and its expansion in South-East Asia as well as Soviet global aspirations.[76] Although this campaign revealed the PLA's deficiencies in modern doctrine and tactics, from beginning to end, China held fast to the initiative and tempo of the conflict. Beijing surprised Hanoi not only by waging massive attacks, but also by its quick withdrawal without becoming bogged down in Vietnam.[77] Its gauge of the Soviet response to the invasion also succeeded in exposing Moscow's inability or unwillingness to back Vietnam. Vietnam's reliance on the Soviet Union for security was clearly a disappointing experience. What eventually turned even more critical is that the 1979 war was the beginning of Beijing's policy of "bleeding" Vietnam in an effort to contain Hanoi's expansion in South-East Asia. A Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia following China's attack was desirable for the Chinese leadership, but they never anticipated an immediate withdrawal. China still commanded a strategic option by maintaining military pressure on Vietnam that included the constant verbal threat of a second attack, and occasionally intensified artillery shelling and major border battles for almost an entire decade during the 1980s.[78] One study of the early 1990s concludes: "The war was most successful when seen as a tactic in China's strategy of a protracted war of attrition."[79]

74. An internal record shows that 10,202 wounded soldiers were having received treatment in 17 hospitals in the Guangzhou Military Region. *Dui Yue zhiwei huanji zuozhang weiqin baozhang jinglian zhiliao huibian* (*Compilation of Materials on the Experience of Medical Services in the Counterattack in Self-defence Against Vietnam*) compiled by the Medical Section of the Department of Logistics of the Guangzhou Military Region (no place of publication and published by the compiler, 1979). Several unofficial Chinese sources also reveal that the casualties were lighter in Yunnan with 2,812 killed and 5,074 wounded. Cited from "Lecture notes on the 1979 counterattack in self-defence," in ZZB.

75. Ron Christman, "How Beijing evaluates military campaigns: an initial assessment," in Laurie Burkitt *et al.* (eds.), *The Lessons of History: The Chinese People's Liberation Army at 75* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2003), pp. 253–292.

76. Ross, *Indochina Tangle,* pp. 223–237; Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force,* pp. 135–36.

77. Allegedly, Hanoi planned to use four divisions to launch a counteroffensive at Lang Son on 7 March 1979, but never carried it out because the withdrawal of the PLA.

78. Since 1979, there have been at least six major border clashes between China and Vietnam (July 1980, May 1981, April 1983, April–July 1984, June 1985 and December 1986–January 1987).

79. For example, see Annie Gilks, *The Breakdown of the Sino-Vietnamese Alliance, 1970–1979* (Berkeley, CA: Institute of East Asian Studies University of California, 1992), p. 233.

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Similarly, the war did not produce significant international consequences for China. The use of military force against Vietnam raised the suspicions of Indonesia and Malaysia, who were always wary of China's influence in the region. The Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia, that threatened Thailand, enabled the continuing growth of the strong opposition coalition by ASEAN countries against Vietnam.[80] Regarding the Sino-US relationship, China's punitive invasion appeared particularly successful. Whereas Washington had publicly condemned both Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia and China's invasion of Vietnam, it did share China's interest in containing Soviet influence in South-East Asia. Beijing's willingness to use force, regardless of whatever casualties it suffered, made China "a valuable deterrent" to Soviet-Vietnamese expansionism; Washington continued to seek a close relationship with China to counterbalance the Soviet Union.[81]

The Vietnamese leadership never seemed to act in comprehension of China's strategy and war objectives, but persistently maintained the 1979 invasion to be a prelude of Beijing's long-term scheme of infringing on Vietnamese sovereignty and independence.[82] After China's announcement of withdrawal on 5 March, Hanoi called for a nationwide general mobilization for the war while instigating the construction of defensive positions in and around Hanoi. By the end of May, the PLA had demobilized to normal status.[83] Vietnam, however, continued to be on guard, maintaining large numbers of troops along its northern border facing China at a time when its economy was "in a worse state than at any time since 1975."[84] As a result, Hanoi's attempts to fight two wars simultaneously, one in Cambodia and one on its northern border, apparently came at a high national economic and social cost, absorbing Hanoi's effort to modernize its economy, and, more importantly, undermining its geopolitical ambitions. The Vietnamese leadership, however, failed to grasp the gravity of the situation and continued the dependence of their country on the Soviet Union until its collapse in 1991. If there are any lessons that the Vietnamese should draw from the 1979 war with China, it is that Vietnam, as one Vietnamese general later remarked, "must learn how to live with our big neighbor."[85]

Regarding the question of why China was anxious to use calibrated force against Vietnam in 1979, the analysis here is consistent with the assertion by other studies that perceived threats to territorial integrity and sovereignty are particularly important to Beijing, enough to expand PLA responsibilities well beyond defence against attack.[86] Territorial disputes

80. Chen, *China's War*, p. 135.
81. Ross, *Indochina Tangle*, pp. 234–35.
82. Kenny, "Vietnamese perceptions," pp. 234–35; Pike, *PAVN*, pp. 265–66.
83. "A notice of the forward command of the Guangzhou Military Region on the forces involved in the war to return to normal status," GGZH, p. 49.
84. Carlyle A. Thayer, *The Vietnam People's Army under Doi Moi* (Singapore: Institute of South-East Asian Studies, 1994), pp. 11–12.
85. Kenny, "Vietnamese perceptions," p. 236.
86. See, for example, Allen S. Whiting, "The PLA and China's threat perceptions," *The China Quarterly*, No. 146 (June 1996), pp. 596–615; Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force*, p. 193.

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and border tension were ostensibly triggering elements to prompt Beijing to consider use of force against its southern neighbour, while the upsurge of emotional nationalism tended to reinforce a Chinese mentality that some kind of punishment on a traitorous erstwhile ally that had turned against China was required. This sentiment also played a significant role in bringing a broad consensus among Chinese political and military leaders to support Deng, the central player in making the decisions to deploy the military against Vietnam. On the issues of territorial sovereignty, which always raises the emotions of the Chinese, the military view seemed to be the determining factor in decisions to initiate actual hostilities. The September staff meeting, from providing recommendations for the central leadership to deal with the deteriorating relations between China and Vietnam, was the starting point of a major military operation. The military's analysis of Soviet reaction also helped clear up any misgivings for risk-taking, if any existed. The military nevertheless subjected themselves to the desires of the central leadership. Once the decision was made to wage a punitive invasion of Vietnam, PLA generals were eager to undertake their missions with preference to employment of maximum force.

Lessons Learned

Notwithstanding China's strategic success, several critical questions remain to be addressed, such as how the PLA perceived its performance in Vietnam, what lessons it learned from the campaign, and to what degree this experience affected PLA thinking about its future. As part of the PLA's tradition, all troops involved in the conflict were ordered to write summaries of their combat experience. In retrospect, the PLA leadership found itself in a contradictory position. While claiming that China won the war, they had to acknowledge the high costs the PLA had paid. In the view of the PLA leadership, an impartial evaluation of PLA deficiencies was imperative. However, they worried about a propensity for over-assessing the Vietnamese military capabilities and performance.[87] In due course, their national pride and cultural prejudice inevitably prevented them from making candid conclusions of the PLA's experience in the war, which can be synthesized into six themes.

The first focused on a traditional PLA maxim that any correct military decision and strategy must draw on a good grasp of the situation in all its aspects. The 1979 war showed that the PLA paid scant attention to the combat doctrine and tactics of the PAVN before the war. As a result, the Chinese military underestimated the fighting ability of its opponents. Possible from fear of giving too much credit to the Vietnamese military, the PLA literature concludes that the enemy's regular forces lacked persistency in offence and defence and had few co-ordinated operations, but did concede that the Vietnamese guerrilla-type tactics, sappers and

87. Luo Yuansheng, *Wang Shangrong*, p. 382.

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militias were surprisingly successful in keeping the Chinese forces off balance as they were anxiously seeking decisive battles with the main forces of the PAVN in a lighting war.[88] A US officer once summarized the American experience in the Vietnam War, noting that it was impossible "to penetrate, flank, or envelop" the Vietnamese fortified positions "without taking extremely heavy casualties."[89] The PLA's tactics of pushing its infantrymen into close massed combat with their opponents and its acceptance of high human losses may help explain why the Chinese made these assertions about the Vietnamese army's incompetence at defending its positions.[90]

Unexpected difficulties in the operation led the Chinese to draw a second lesson from the conflict involving intelligence and planning. Long-standing lack of information about a traditional ally presented a major challenge to Chinese war planning and operations. The PLA's assessment of the geography and terrain of northern Vietnam often relied on outdated maps and geographic information, while its reconnaissance capability was limited in the battlefield.[91] One major failure of the Chinese military was failing to consider the huge quantity of the militia forces in its calculation of Vietnamese military strength. The PLA experience showed that the Vietnamese militia put up more relentless resistance and made more surprise raids on the invading forces than the PAVN regulars. The PLA planners initially thought they had assembled an overwhelming force of 8:1 against the Vietnamese forces. There were 40,000 to 50,000 militias in the Cao Bang area alone, which significantly altered the force ratio to 2:1. During the campaign, the PLA never appeared able to maintain the force superiority to deliver a knock-out strike. The operation also demonstrates how difficult it is to carry out military operations in a foreign country if the local populace is mobilized to resist.[92]

The conflict with Vietnam enabled the PLA to draw a third lesson about its warfighting capabilities. It was the first time that the PLA leadership conducted combined arms operations with tanks and artillery in support of infantry attacks, while assembling a air and naval forces to provide cover. Backwardness in doctrine and tactics prevented the Chinese forces from carrying out a real co-ordinated operation. While Beijing's political constraints and outdated military thinking proscribed the commitment of air forces to support operations, ground forces also demonstrated poor performance between infantry, tank and artillery units to carry out full combined arms tactics. A clear example was that the

88. Zhou Deli, *Personal Recollections*, pp. 287–290.

89. Michael Lee Lanning and Dan Cragg, *Inside the VC and the NVA: The Real Story of North Vietnam's Armed Forces* (New York: Ivy Books, 1992), p. 208.

90. Western analysts generally believe that these units of the PAVN, filled up with veterans of the long war in the south, proved to be battlewise and highly skilled in guerrilla-war tactics. Recent Vietnamese sources indicate that they were recruits, and only joined the army in June 1978. See n. 71.

91. The maps the PLA used were 1:100,000 scale, printed in 1965 based on the 1938 French edition, giving little detailed information. As a result, PLA forces often got lost during their march in North Vietnamese hill country.

92. Zhou Deli, *Personal Recollections*, pp. 294–95.

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infantry had never trained with adequate knowledge of how to manoeuvre with tank units. Infantry soldiers, who fastened themselves to the top of tanks with ropes to prevent themselves from falling off on the march, were stuck when fired upon by the enemy. On the other hand, tank units, which often operated without infantry support and direct communication between the two parties, suffered many unexpected damages and losses.[93] The 1979 war experience taught the PLA valuable lessons in combined arms skills.

The fourth lesson was the issue of command and control that derived largely from the PLA's traditions and culture. Personal relationships between commanding officers and troops, which had been cultivated in the past, still mattered to the PLA. As interpersonal relationships were more important than institutional ones, it is not surprising that the leaders of the Guangzhou Military Region later acknowledged that they felt uncomfortable commanding the troops transferred from the Wuhan and Chengdu Military Regions during the campaign.[94] These leaders also received many complaints from rank-and-filers about Xu's leadership style because he had not previously commanded them. The PLA's problems of command were compounded by lack of combat-experienced officers. Despite sending higher-ranking officers, who were war veterans, to lower-level troop units to help with command, PLA operations remained frustrated by the inability of lower-ranking officers to make independent judgements and co-ordinate operations at critical moments. Nevertheless, the 1979 war with Vietnam baptized a young generation of army cadres on the battlefield, and today many of them are serving in high PLA positions.[95]

The PLA lacked enough of a modern logistic supply system and structure to support a fast-moving, distant, offensive action. The operational statistics suggest that the average daily consumption of ammunition and fuel was 700 tons in each category.[96] Logistic operations were a major area for the PLA to draw lessons. Without adequate storage and transportation facilities, both the Guangzhou and Kunming Military Regions had to put together a supply system, which never functioned smoothly and efficiently. Considerable quantities of supplies were lost due either to poor management or to Vietnamese sabotage. As their forces advanced deeper into Vietnamese territory, logistic officers also found it hard to keep the communication lines open without diverting a large number of forces to protect them. The PLA concluded that it is essential to create a transportation command to deal with the problems its troops

93. According to Chinese sources, PLA tank units experienced the most losses in the first four days of combat, accounting for 87% of total combat damages, but most were repairable. At the end of the war only 44 tanks and armed vehicles were total losses, cited from ZZB.

94. Zhou Deli, *Personal Recollections*, pp. 287–88.

95. One major problem, as the former chief of staff of the Guangzhou Military Region pointed out, was that some lower-ranking officers had a poor understanding of topography and map-reading and could only rely on instructions from their superiors. *Ibid*. p. 289.

96. *Ibid*. p. 298.

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encountered in the operations.[97] This experience appears still relevant in today's China when the former vice-commander of the PLA National Defence University spoke at a symposium on "control of communication" in 2002.[98]

The last lesson was an interpretation of how the old doctrine of people's war applied to a conflict fought beyond China's borders. One principle of the people's war doctrine is the mobilization of the common people to support the war. The 1979 war experience showed that it was almost impossible for huge PLA forces to operate outside the country without whipping up popular support for the war at home. Beijing's propaganda machines aroused public patriotism and pride in Chinese soldiers. Strong expressions of patriotism helped the PLA get direct support for the operations from the people living in two border provinces. In Guangxi province alone, more than 215,000 local residents were mobilized to serve as stretch-bearers, security guards and porters to carry supplies to the front; and over 26,000 militia members from the border region were actually involved in direct combat activities. The PLA at the time had a hodgepodge of a supply system that required every unit to be self-sufficient in "retail logistics," the supply system on the battlefield.[99] Local governments made things easy for troops by simplifying requisition procedures, which helped them receive adequate material and fresh food in the shortest possible time. Such an experience persuaded the PLA leadership that mobilization of local governments and civilians to support a war was still the key to victory.[100]

These lessons learned from the 1979 war with Vietnam may not be coherent, comprehensive and fully objective because the PLA does not evaluate its success in a military operation on the basis of the operational outcome but rather on the basis of the impact of the conflict on the overall situation. Deeply influenced by Mao's teaching that war is fundamentally a political undertaking, as long as China could claim to be successful in achieving its strategic and military objectives, the PLA would consider the problems resulting from tactical failures as secondary. This is also why these lessons vary significantly from those in Western studies, which are informative and correct to some extent, yet appear a little excessive by stretching their limited sources for conclusions on an extremely complicated subject.[101] PLA studies consider the Cultural Revolution

97. Xu Guangyi, *Dangdai Zhongguo jundui de houqin gongzuo* (*Contemporary China's Armed Forces Logistics*) (Beijing: Social Science Press, 1990), p. 178; Zhang Zhen, *Memoirs*, p. 172.

98. Chen Zuhua and Liu Changli, "Summary of the symposium on control of communication," *Zhongguo junshi kexue* (*China Military Science*), Vol. 15, No. 1 (2002), pp. 145–48.

99. PLA troops had to purchase daily supplies by themselves at local markets.

100. Zhou Deli, *Personal Recollections*, pp. 300–301.

101. For example, Edward C. O'Dowd and John F. Corbett, Jr., "The 1979 Chinese campaign in Vietnam: lessons learned," in Laurie Burkitt *et al.*, *The Lessons of History,* pp. 353–371, study lessons learned by the PLA based on only two sources: one is a *summary* of the role played by the students of the Guangzhou Military Region's infantry school in the war and the other is a *brief* analysis of the 1979 campaign by the researchers of the Military Science Academy.

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(1966–76) to be the detrimental factor that undermined the PLA's fine traditions, and as a result, the Chinese forces performed poorly in the war. Lessons the PLA learned focus more on the tactical level of war with the emphasis on command and control, co-ordination between troops, force structure and weaponry rather than on the strategic and doctrinal philosophy. During its evaluation of the 1979 war experience, the PLA appeared to make no attempt to hide or overlook its own deficiencies and problems at the time; it nevertheless failed to take into account its own erroneous military thinking and traditions.[102]

Western studies associate the PLA's Vietnam lessons with the Chinese leadership's 1985 re-evaluation of the nature of modern war and threats facing China, and subsequent efforts to streamline and professionalize the PLA throughout the 1980s.[103] The PLA's Vietnam lessons and the continuing flare-ups on the China–Vietnam border throughout the 1980s might have helped the Chinese leadership to make the strategic transition from emphasis on preparation for fighting total war to preparation for limited and local war as the trend of the times.[104] Few efforts were made during the transformation of the PLA into a modern force in the 1980s to correct its flawed military thinking, which always downplayed the role of airpower. As a result, if there is anything that the PLA still seems to be not honest about, it is the lessons of air superiority or close air support. PLA literature and textbooks continue to cite the Chinese air force's "deterrent capability" as the primary reason the Vietnamese Air Force did not become involved in the conflict.[105] Marshal Ye Jianying even ridiculously commented that China's phony air operations in the war against Vietnam were an "ingenious way of employing the air force."[106] Such a remark demonstrates nothing but the Chinese leadership's failure to appreciate the critical role of airpower in modern warfare.

Nevertheless, an overview of the PLA's experience in the 1979 war with Vietnam provides useful insights into how Chinese leaders approached matters of war and strategy, which are consistent with the findings of other existing studies.[107] First, Chinese leaders were deliberative and calculating on when and how military power was to be used, but did not hesitate from going to war once they had decided China's national

102. The Military History Department of Military Science Academy, *Zhongguo renmin jiefangjun de qishi nian* (*The 70 Years of the People's Liberation Army of China*) (Beijing: Military Science Press, 1997), p. 613.

103. David Shambaugh, "China's military in transition: politics, professionalism, procurement and power projection," *The China Quarterly*, No. 146 (June 1996), p. 279.

104. Li Nan, "The PLA's evolving warfighting doctrine, strategy and tactics, 1985–1995: a Chinese perspective," and Paul H. B. Godwin, "From continent to periphery: PLA doctrine, strategy and capabilities towards 2000," *The China Quarterly*, No. 146 (June 1996), pp. 443–487.

105. Liu Guoyu, *Zhongguo renmin jiefangjun zhanshi jiaocheng* (*Textbook of PLA Fighting History*) (Beijing: Military Science Press, 2000), p. 235.

106. Zhang Zhizhi, "Air Force troops," pp. 355–56.

107. These studies are Elleman's *Modern Chinese Warfare*, Scobell's *China's Use of Force*, Ryan, Finkelstein and McDevitt's *Chinese Warfighting*, Mark Burles and Abram Shulsky's *Patterns in China's Use of Force: Evidence from History and Doctrinal Writings* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2000), and Allen Whiting, "China's use of Force, 1950–95, and Taiwan," *International Security*, No. 26 (Autumn 2001), pp. 103–130.

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interests were at risk or at stake. Secondly, the PLA demonstrated a preference for the seizure and maintenance of operational initiative by deploying a superior force. Thirdly, the Chinese sense of military victory lay more in their evaluation of the geopolitical outcomes than in their judgement of operational performance on the battlefield. Since the 1979 war with Vietnam, the PLA has undertaken sweeping revisions in defence doctrine, command and control, operational tactics, and force structure, while the world of military operations has transformed significantly since the 1979 war. Today, no one will expect the Chinese armed forces to repeat what they did in the border war with Vietnam. From a historical perspective, the distinct set of Chinese characteristics revealed in the 1979 war with Vietnam may remain relevant to the Chinese military institution and to observers' understanding of the Chinese approach to employing military power not only in the past but also at present and in the future.

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